

Inspector's green light for Grove Farm plans

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CAMPAIGNERS have been dealt a devastating blow after a government inspector ruled hundreds of homes can be built in the countryside.

They were celebrating in 2015 when Hart District Council's planning committee threw out an application by Berkeley to build 423 homes on fields at Grove Farm and Netherhouse Copse, between Fleet and Crookham Village.

But the developer returned a year later with what campaigners said was essentially a resubmitted application.

However, Hart's planning committee failed to determine the application and the developer appealed.

The issue was thrashed out before government planning inspector Kevin Gleeson during a six-day inquiry in July this year.

In a decision letter dated October 6, Mr Gleeson said he had decided to grant outline planning permission for the development.

The inspector said the decision rested on a number of criteria.

First, he found limited impact on the local gap between Fleet and Crookham Village.

"I conclude that the proposed development would not result in the physical or visual coalescence of neighbouring settlements or damage their separate identities by development within the Local Gap between Fleet/Church Crookham and Crookham Village," the decision letter states.

The inspector said he also found no grounds to reject the application based on highway safety and pointed out that most of the policies that the council relied upon for its defence were out of date.

In summary, he found

significant economic benefits, and that the potential harms would not outweigh those benefits.

Responding to the decision, the We Heart Hart campaign said: "This comes as a blow to those of us who oppose green field development, so our commiserations go to those most affected by this decision."

The campaign group added it was "early days to come to firm conclusions" but pointed out costs would be involved.

"The appeal decision doesn't talk about the costs of the appeal, but at the very least the council will have to meet its own costs," it added.

"These are likely to be of the order of £100,000.

"This is a self-inflicted wound as it was the council itself that failed to make a decision on the planning application.

"This left the developer with little choice but to appeal on the grounds of non-determination."