



Lewes District Council

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Dear Paul Samrah

I was interested to receive your letter of 29 July, asking me as a councillor to “use my influence” to help all sides move together over the Falmer stadium. In general, I am very keen for all sides to work together, especially after a bruising debate, so support the principle of your call. But if the stadium does go ahead (and I’m writing before Falmer Parish Council has decided whether it will appeal or not), I feel the football club has the lion’s share of the responsibility for building bridges after the planning process.

I should perhaps say that I am a sports journalist by profession. I have had the privilege of reporting from many of the world’s greatest sporting arenas (mostly tennis), and I have even reported from Withean for ITV. I am therefore a natural supporter of a stadium for the Albion, yet have fully backed Lewes District Council’s objections to it. This is because, as the first two planning inspectors recognised, Falmer is an utterly inappropriate place for a stadium on several grounds. And I was only willing to give my vote to not appealing against Hazel Blears’ ruling of 24 July on condition that LDC had a major PR operation to explain why we are so concerned about the implications for both Falmer and the vulnerability of sites supposedly under the highest level of environmental protection.

One of the comments that has been made since 24 July by stadium advocates is that the club has been through the longest-ever planning process, involving three public enquiries and three ministerial reviews. Such comments have been made with the energy that the stadium was somehow a right, and the club has been dragged through the mire over its application. I would beg to differ. For most applications, the result of the second public enquiry would have been the end of the line, as the inspector was unequivocal in his rejection of the suitability of Falmer, even more so than the first had been. The fact that the Albion continued to press for Falmer and has ultimately succeeded suggests there was a degree of party-political interference in the planning system that leaves a very bad taste in the mouth. I therefore have absolutely no sympathy with the view that the club has been unfairly dragged through an extended planning process – the club should consider itself very lucky to have had friends in high places who have been willing to sacrifice aspects of environmental protection in return for giving this stadium the green light.

If you are serious about wanting the parties involved to “grasp the opportunity to work together”, may I suggest you impress on the club the need to set in motion an action plan



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that will reassure the residents of Falmer that their life will not be made miserable by the imposition of this stadium on their village? Fears they have that on match days the village will get invaded by people whose respect for residents' rights and needs will not be paramount are, in my view, well-founded, and you will not build your consensus if Falmer is left to cope in whatever way it can. I note what you say about your residents' liaison committee in Withdean, and maybe this is a model. As a Lewes District Councillor, I would certainly hope that any action to protect the residents of Falmer is taken with some communication with LDC.

I offer these comments in the constructive spirit in which you said you hoped all parties would proceed. But I stress my view that the ball is largely in the club's half of the field.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chris Bowers', written in a cursive style.

Chris Bowers