Opening Statement to the Planning Inspector: Farm View (Appeal Ref: 6006971)

Speaker: Councillor Steven McCormick

Capacity: County Councillor (Epsom Town & Downs Division), Borough Councillor (Woodcote & Langley Vale Ward), Chair of Epsom Downs Conservators, Member of the Training Grounds Management Board (TGMB), Former Chair of Planning Committee, and Former Chair of Licensing & Planning Policy Committee.

1. Representative Capacity, Credentials, and Local Stewardship

- **Statutory Role & Standing:** Inspector, I address this Inquiry today in my representative capacity as the Surrey County Councillor for this division and the Borough Councillor for Woodcote and Langley Vale.

- **Custodianship of the Downs:** I also speak as the **Chair of the Epsom Downs Conservators**—the statutory body charged with preserving the integrity and ecology of the Downs—and as an active member of the **Training Grounds Management Board (TGMB)**.

- **On-the-Ground Evidence:** My perspective is rooted in direct, hands-on experience, not theoretical desktop modelling. Nearly every weekend, I am on the Downs with my camera as a photographer, working alongside exercise riders, trainers, The Jockey Club, and our dedicated Downskeepers. I know the physical pinch points of this rural highway network, and the daily friction between road traffic and equine movements.

- **Policy Pedigree:** I have been deeply engaged in local plan-making throughout my elected service. I previously chaired the Licensing and Planning Policy Committee that oversaw the evidence base, spatial strategy, and public consultation for the Regulation 18 Local Plan. I understand intimately why specific parcels were considered, and why this sensitive site was deliberately, soundly, and systematically excluded from allocation.

2. Stepping Down from the Planning Chair: Preserving Due Process

- **Action to Protect Integrity:** When this outline application (Ref: 25/00846/OUT) came before the Planning Committee on **26 February 2026**, I was the sitting Chair of Planning.

- **Strict Adherence to Standards:** To ensure absolute propriety, procedural transparency, and compliance with the Member Code of Conduct, I voluntarily stepped down from the Chair, stepped away from the Committee table, and registered to speak solely as a ward and division representative.

- **An Evidentially Contradictory Recommendation:** I took that extraordinary step because I believed the recommendation, in my view, before the Committee stood in fundamental conflict with the Council's own strategic evidence base.

- **The Policy Contradiction:** Just prior to that meeting, the Council's legal and technical team formally submitted a Green Belt Topic Paper to the Local Plan Examination confirming that Farm View fails the Calverton Test, causes severe and unmitigable Green Belt harm, and must remain protected. The subsequent attempt in the officer report to contrive a "Grey Belt" label for this parcel—despite its high Green Belt performance and designated SNCI status—was evidentially unsustainable. My role was to place that corporate policy conflict clearly on the official record.

3. The "Racehorse Corridor," Agent of Change, & Unenforceable Conditions

- **The High-Performance Network:** I coined the phrase **"Racehorse Corridor"** because that is precisely what these ancient tracks, horse walks, and rural roads form. They are not recreational footpaths; they represent the active, high-performance arterial network of an internationally renowned training centre.

- **Daily Road Conflict:** On these local roads, we witness daily friction caused by motorists lacking patience. Thoroughbreds are not machines—they are 500-kilogram elite animal athletes with an acute, hyper-sensitive flight response. Revving engines, aggressive overtaking, and drivers blocking equestrian crossings create acute operational danger.

- **The "Airport Syndrome":** Introducing 110 suburban households onto this agricultural buffer will inevitably replicate the classic planning dilemma: people moving next to an active airfield and subsequently lodging formal complaints about aircraft noise. Residents unfamiliar with equine protocol will inevitably object to early-morning training movements from 5:30 AM, horse walks crossing road access points, traffic delays behind strings, and manure on the highway.

- **Breach of the Agent of Change NDMP:** National policy is explicit under the statutory **Agent of Change** principle: existing, lawful businesses and facilities should not have unreasonable restrictions placed on them as a result of development permitted after they were established. The applicant cannot soundproof an active racehorse walk, nor can they engineer away an animal's flight instinct. Permitting 110 homes directly breaches national policy by exposing an irreplaceable industry to inevitable operational curbs and community conflict.

- **The Fallacy of Planning Conditions:** The appellant will no doubt argue that these conflicts can be managed through planning conditions or a Travel Management Plan. But under national policy, planning conditions must be enforceable, precise, and reasonable. You cannot place a planning condition on a spooked 500kg horse running for home, nor can you condition a morning commuter not to be impatient on a public highway. The conflict is biological, operational, and permanent; it cannot be conditioned away. Where conflict cannot be mitigated, national policy directs that development must not be permitted.

4. Cumulative Cross-Border Traffic: Headley Court & "Severe" Harm

- **The Flaw of Isolated Assessment:** The appellant's highway evidence assesses this site in a vacuum, arguing that trip generation from 110 units is negligible. However, national policy demands an assessment of **residual cumulative impact**.

- **The Scale Over the Hill:** Directly over the boundary in Mole Valley, major redevelopments at **Headley Court** have approved **over 200 new homes and units**—comprising **70 residential dwellings** on the western parcel and a **139-unit specialist retirement village** at the Mansion House site.

- **The Shared Rural Funnel:** Where does that cross-border traffic head when accessing Epsom railway station, local schools, or the wider strategic network? It pours straight down **Headley Road and Langley Vale Road**—the exact narrow, unlit, rural lanes bordering Farm View and bisecting our active gallops and horse crossings.

- **Threshold of Severe Impact:** Peak morning commuter movements from Headley Court coincide directly with the critical 06:30 to 12:00 AM Monday to Saturday and 06:30am to 09:30am on Sundays, training strings. Pouring hundreds of additional daily vehicular trips from Farm View on top of the 209 approved units at Headley Court easily crosses the national threshold of **severe residual cumulative impact** on a rural network devoid of safe active travel alternatives.

5. Empirical Safety Evidence: Official TGMB Incident Logs

- **Addressing the "No Evidence" Assertion:** The inquiry bundle contains assertions that there is "no substantive empirical evidence" of safety risks to the equestrian sector. As a member of the TGMB, I directly refute that assertion with official, recorded data.

- **The Reality of Fatalities:** Between 2023 and 2026, the TGMB accident logs record **ten horse fatalities** on the Downs—animals euthanized after catastrophic injuries, including fracturing limbs on tracks, crashing through rails, and bolting into timber.

- **High-Risk Road Network Incursions:** While our Downskeepers and The Jockey Club act with exemplary speed to contain incidents, escapes into the highway network do occur:

    - In **November 2023**, an unseated horse made for home and collided directly with a vehicle at a crossing.

    - In **October 2023**, a loose horse escaped into the public realm, reaching the Tattenham Corner shopping parade.

    - In **July 2024**, two loose horses gained access to the highway network and travelled miles down the road before being secured near Dorking Road.

- **The Instinct to Bolt Home:** When an animal spooks and unseats its rider, its evolutionary response is to bolt blind and "run for home." Funnelling significant additional vehicular traffic directly across their homebound return routes turns these rare exceptions into high-probability points of catastrophic collision.

6. Economic Pillar: The Coast to Capital Report & "Anchor Institution" Status

- **A £63.2 Million Anchor Institution:** Inspector, we are not defending an abstract cultural sentiment; we are defending a quantified economic powerhouse. An independent study commissioned by **The Jockey Club and prepared by Coast to Capital** confirms that Epsom Downs generates **£63,225,000 annually** in total economic impact.

- **The Core Breakdown of Value:**

    - **£56.18 million** in commercial impact—including £4.79m spent annually in local Epsom pubs, restaurants, and shops, and £4.69m in local hotels.

    - **£2.91 million** generated directly by the 250-acre training grounds, supporting 10 active trainers, 135–145 horses in training each month, and 52 full-time stable and grounds staff.

    - **£1.52 million** paid annually into public finances, including **£512,000 in business rates** directly benefiting local government services.

- **Hyper-Specialisation & The Anchor Ripple Effect:** The Coast to Capital report formally designates Epsom Downs as an **"Anchor Institution"**. In Epsom & Ewell, sports activities including racehorse training and stables are **130% more concentrated than the national average**—a Location Quotient of 2.3. The report explicitly cautions that this economic ecosystem is fragile and that growth can be thrown into reverse by an unsupportive operating environment. If this anchor institution is compromised by unmitigated encroachment, the ripple effects will damage our local supply chain of vets, farriers, feed merchants, and hospitality businesses across East Surrey.

7. Inherent Unsustainability & Failure of National Transport Gateways

- **Bottom 15th Percentile:** Surrey County Council, in its statutory role as County Highway Authority, has maintained a formal objection, classifying this hillside site in the bottom 15th percentile for accessibility nationally.

- **Physical & Topographical Isolation:** Langley Vale lacks the active travel infrastructure to support 110 car-dependent households. Accessing Epsom town centre and rail services requires navigating narrow, unlit, steep rural lanes without footways, crossing active equestrian paths.

- **Transitory Mitigation:** The appellant's proposed five-year bus subsidy is a short-term sticking plaster. Once that developer funding expires, the service ceases,

leaving over a hundred households entirely dependent on private cars across an already over-capacity rural road network.

8. The August 2026 NPPF, Development Plan Primacy, & Prematurity

- **The New Policy Architecture: Discarding the Old Tilted Balance:** Inspector, under the **August 2026 NPPF**, the old Paragraph 11(d) tilted balance framework is gone. National policy now establishes clear, location-based National Decision-Making Policies. The favourable balance under **Policy S4** applies strictly *within settlements*. Farm View is outside the settlement boundary, where development is tightly controlled under **Policy S5** and the Green Belt framework.

- **Failure Under Policy S5 (Outside Settlements):** Policy S5 only permits housing outside settlements in defined circumstances, such as Policy S5(1)(j) for unmet need. But that policy strictly requires that the development is **physically well-related to the settlement and that infrastructure can accommodate it**. In a location ranked in the bottom 15th percentile for accessibility, lacking pedestrian connectivity and facing a formal Highway Authority objection, Farm View cannot clear the Policy S5 threshold.

- **Failure of Policy GB7 (Green Belt & Grey Belt Gateway):** The appellant attempts to justify this proposal under **Policy GB7** by claiming "Grey Belt" status. But under the 2026 Framework and Annex E, Grey Belt requires an objective assessment:

    1. Farm View is **not** Grey Belt—the Council's Calverton assessment proved that it makes a strong contribution to three statutory Green Belt purposes (preventing sprawl, stopping coalescence, and safeguarding open countryside).

    2. Policy GB7 mandates that even qualifying Grey Belt land **must be in a sustainable location with particular regard to transport policies**. This site fails that test completely.

    3. The parcel is an active **Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI)** hosting the rare *Night Flowering Catchfly*. Because it fails Policy GB7, the proposal is inappropriate development in the Green Belt. No Very Special Circumstances exist to outweigh that harm.

- **Primacy of the Development Plan & Prematurity (Policy PM1):** Under Section 38(6) of the 2004 Act, determination must be made in accordance with the development plan. Yesterday, on 2 November 2026, the statutory consultation on the **Local Plan Main Modifications** officially opened. The plan meets the national tests for **prematurity**: it is at an advanced statutory stage, and approving 110 unallocated Green Belt homes predetermines the spatial distribution of growth. The Inspector's published modifications **deliberately exclude Farm View**.

Closing Summary & Formal Submission

Inspector, under the August 2026 planning framework, this appeal cannot succeed:

1. **Failure of National Decision-Making Policies:** Farm View is outside the settlement boundary. It fails the accessibility tests of **Policy S5** and fails the Green Belt and Grey Belt criteria of **Policy GB7**.

2. **Statutory Prematurity & Section 38(6):** The emerging Local Plan has reached Main Modifications yesterday without allocating this site. Approving it now violates the plan-led system.

3. **Severe Cumulative Highway Impact:** Adding 110 car-dependent homes to the 209 approved units at Headley Court overburdens narrow, unlit rural lanes, creating severe cumulative highway harm.

4. **Agent of Change Principle:** The operational realities of 500kg thoroughbreds bolting home cannot be conditioned away. Approving 110 homes places an unlawful burden on our training yards.

5. **Protecting a £63.2M Anchor Institution:** Coast to Capital has proven that racing generates £63.2 million annually and forms the economic backbone of our Borough. We cannot allow speculative encroachment to dismantle that heritage.

I respectfully request that you uphold the development plan, apply the August 2026 National Decision-Making Policies, and **dismiss this appeal**.