

BRECKLAND COUNCIL

DEVELOPMENT CONTROL COMMITTEE – 13TH JULY 2009

REPORT OF THE DEPUTY CHIEF EXECUTIVE

(Author: Nick Moys, Principal Planning Officer (Major Projects))

SWAFFHAM: PROPOSED RETIREMENT VILLAGE, HIGHFEILD HOUSE, LYNN ROAD

APPLICANT: Mr J Ball

REFERENCE: 3PL/2009/0331/F

SUMMARY – This report concerns a proposal for a ‘retirement village’ on land at Lynn Road, Swaffham. It is recommended that planning permission is granted subject to conditions and a legal agreement.

1. INTRODUCTION

This report concerns a planning application for a ‘retirement village’ on the edge of Swaffham. The proposed development would comprise a 45 bedroom residential care/nursing home and 13 assisted living units, set in landscaped grounds. The care home would be accommodated in a series of interconnected 2-storey blocks. The assisted living units would be provided in two separate blocks with nine 1½ storey cottages and four single storey units. A new access would be created on Lynn Road, and an existing footway on Lynn Road would be extended up to the site.

The application is supported by a Design & Access Statement, an Arboricultural Assessment Report and a Contamination Desk Study. A section 106 agreement which would limit the occupation of the assisted living units is under preparation.

The site is located on the western edge of Swaffham and is currently occupied by a large detached house set in grounds. This house would be demolished to make way for the proposed development. The site extends to 0.97 hectares in total. The site is adjoined by residential development and a touring caravan site.

2. KEY DECISION

This is not a key decision.

3. COUNCIL PRIORITIES

The following Council priorities are relevant to this report:

- A safe and healthy environment
- A well planned place to live and work

4. POLICY

National planning policy set out in PPS 1, PPS 7 and PPG 13 is relevant to the application. The application site lies just outside the Settlement Boundary for Swaffham, as defined in the Local Plan.

5. PLANNING HISTORY

Planning permission was granted for the erection of a dwelling in 1991.

6. CONSULTATIONS

Swaffham Town Council has raised no objection to the application.

The Highway Authority has raised no objection to the application subject to conditions relating to access construction, parking and off-site footway improvements.

The Environment Agency has raised no objection subject to conditions relating to ground contamination and surface water drainage.

NHS Norfolk has raised concerns about the lack of consultation with local GPs in relation to the level of medical support available to the development.

Norfolk County Council Adult Social Services have indicated that the Swaffham area is generally well provided with residential and nursing care places, though there is a shortage of housing with care. Whilst no objection is raised to the application, a preference is expressed for a scheme with a higher proportion of assisted living units.

Norfolk Police have commented on the importance of natural surveillance and lighting.

The Council's Planning Policy Officer has indicated that the proposed care home would not conflict with existing policies. The proposed retirement dwellings would, however, conflict with Local Plan Policy HOU.6 unless their occupancy was restricted.

The Council's Tree & Countryside Officer has raised no objection to the proposals subject to conditions relating to tree protection and landscaping.

Letters of objection have been received from 3 GP practices in Swaffham. The objections raised concern the effects of increased workload resulting from the development on existing medical practices and services. Concerns have also been raised by the owner of the adjacent caravan site relating to potential noise and disturbance and loss of tree screening.

7. ASSESSMENT

The principal planning issues raised by the proposed development relate to: i) the planning policy matters, particularly in relation to development outside settlement boundaries, ii) the impact of the development on its surroundings, and iii) the effects on local medical services.

Policy

There are no planning policies at a local or national level which relate specifically to residential care homes. It is necessary therefore to consider this element of the proposal in the context of general policies relating to development in rural areas. National planning policy, as set out in PPS 1 and PPS 7, indicates that planning decisions should be underpinned by the principles of sustainable development. To this end, development in rural areas should be focused in or near to local service centres where employment, housing and other facilities can be provided close together. Priority should be given to the re-use of brownfield sites and to locations with access to range of transport options, including walking and cycling.

When assessed against these policy criteria, the proposal scores well. Despite its location just outside the settlement boundary the site is close to Swaffham town centre, local services/facilities and established residential areas, and, subject to

proposed footway improvements, would be readily accessible. The scheme would provide for the development of a brownfield site, and would also provide benefits to the local economy through employment creation. Whilst the evidence of need currently available does not establish a clear case for the development, given the sustainable location of the development, it is not considered that this matter is conclusive. It is considered therefore the proposed care home would be acceptable in policy terms.

Turning to the proposed retirement dwellings, it should be noted that, in line with national policies, saved Local Plan Policy HOU.6 seeks generally to prevent new residential development on land outside settlement boundaries. As the application site lies outside the defined settlement boundary for Swaffham, the proposed retirement bungalows would conflict with this policy. There are, however, a number of factors which may justify an exception being made to policy in this situation. The bungalows are intended to provide a specialist form of assisted living accommodation for which there is an established need. The location of the bungalows adjacent to the proposed nursing home would enable residents to take advantage of a range of services/facilities, including nursing care, treatment rooms and meal services, whilst living independently. In addition, the current shortage of housing land supply across the District requires the Council to give favourable consideration to development outside settlement boundaries provided that certain criteria. Taking these factors into consideration, and subject to the completion of a legal agreement restricting the use of the retirement bungalows, it is considered that an exception to policy is justified.

Impact on surroundings

Planning policies seek to limit development outside settlements not only to promote sustainable development, but also to protect the character of the countryside for its intrinsic character. It is necessary therefore for careful consideration to be given to visual impact on surrounding rural landscape.

Due to its scale, the proposed development would inevitably have an impact on the character of the surrounding area, giving the site itself a much more built up appearance. However, this impact would be localised. The site has established tree screening to its boundaries which would be retained and supplemented as part of the proposals. The Arboricultural Assessment submitted in support of the application contains detailed proposals for the retention of existing trees and their protection during construction. It must also be acknowledged that the site currently has a rather domestic character, with mown lawns and well tended landscaping, which would mitigate to a degree the impact of the scheme on the rural character of the area. The design of the proposed building would also help to reduce the visual impact of the development, with its linked block form, broken roofline and variations in external materials, helping to reduce its apparent scale.

The design and layout of the proposed development would also help to limit its impact on neighbours. The scale of the building reduces to single storey to the rear to take account of existing bungalows to the north-east. Good separation distances and screening would also be maintained here. To the west, existing landscaping would be retained to mitigate the impact on the existing touring caravan site. Ample separation would be provided between the proposed retirement bungalows and the western boundary. Noise from construction work could have an adverse (if temporary) impact on the adjacent caravan site, and so it is recommended that a condition be attached any permission granted to limit construction working hours.

Effect on local services

Objections to the proposal have been raised by existing medical practices in the town. Concerns are expressed by local GPs about the increasing number of residential and nursing care beds in the area and the impact of this on local health services. It is suggested that further increases in new high-dependency patients will place an intolerable strain on local medical practices and put at risk the provision of services to other patients.

Whilst the concerns raised by local GPs warrant careful consideration, and can readily be understood, the issues are not straightforward from a planning point of view. Existing and emerging local policies seek generally to direct new development to market towns, like Swaffham, where local services/facilities can most readily be accessed. Against this background a rejection of the development on lack of community infrastructure grounds would be difficult to sustain. One option to address pressures created by new development would be to seek developer contributions to fund necessary improvements to local facilities. However, this can only be achieved where evidence-based adopted policy, including mechanisms for calculating contributions, are in place. Policy CP4 of the submitted Core Strategy deals in general terms with the provision and improvement of infrastructure, local services and community facilities. However, at this stage little weight can be given to this policy in advance of the EIP and subsequent Inspector's Report. It is anticipated that further policy and guidance, including in relation to developer contributions, will be developed in the future in consultation with the PCT.

8. RECOMMENDATION

Subject to the completion of the legal agreement restricting the occupation of the proposed retirement dwellings, it is recommended that planning permission be granted subject to conditions. Conditions to include external materials, levels, landscaping, tree protection, ground investigation, drainage, access/parking provision, off-site highway improvements, 10% renewable energy, lighting.

Should the legal agreement not be completed within the 13 week statutory determination period, it is recommended that permission should be refused on the grounds that the development would conflict with Local Plan Policy HOU.6.