

CABINET (HOUSING) COMMITTEE

18 September 2013

AUTHORISATION TO PROGRESS AFFORDABLE HOUSING SCHEME:
WESTMAN ROAD, WEEKE

REPORT OF THE HEAD OF NEW HOMES DELIVERY

Contact Officer: Debbie Rhodes Tel No: 01962 848 368
drhodes@winchester.gov.uk

RECENT REFERENCES:

PER216 - Council House New Build Programme and additional Staffing Requirements – 11 June 2013

CAB2485(HD) - Appropriation of Land at Westman Road, Weeke – 22 May 2013

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

This report seeks approval to prepare and submit a planning application to develop land for the erection of twelve Winchester City Council Houses at Garage Court and informal open space land on Westman Road, Weeke, Winchester. The site is accessed between numbers 4 and 6 Westman Road. Improvements to Dean Park, Stockbridge Road, Winchester are proposed as mitigation for the loss of open space.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- 1 That the Head of New Homes Delivery be authorised to prepare and submit planning applications to develop Council Homes at Westman Road, Weeke.
- 2 That the Head of New Homes Delivery be authorised to amend proposals, if necessary, to prepare the schemes for planning application submission.

- 3 That the Head of New Homes Delivery, in conjunction with the Head of Legal Services, be authorised to take necessary actions to resolve any legal issues that may arise to allow the development of the site for new homes.
- 4 That the Head of New Homes Delivery be authorised to take necessary actions to comply with any planning requirements.

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DETAIL:

1 Introduction

- 1.1 The site has been identified in the Council's new homes development programme as a potential site for Council homes. The site is a garage court comprising 22 garages and an area of informal open space land on Westman Road accessed between number 4 and 6 Westman Road. The open space is secluded and not well used.
- 1.2 Of the 22 garages, 10 are currently vacant. Eight are let to people in the Weeke area and 4 to people outside Weeke.

2 Proposal

- 2.1 The proposal is for 12 affordable homes with a mix of family houses and homes for downsizers, together with improvements to Dean Park, Stockbridge Road as mitigation for the loss of open space. The scheme will comprise, for families: 1 x four bedroom/seven person house, 6 x three bedroom/five person houses and for downsizers: 3 x two bedroom/four person houses and 2 x two bedroom bungalows. Both the family and the downsizing units incorporate flexible arrangements for living spaces and bedrooms.
- 2.2 The improvements proposed to Dean Park comprise the provision of an external gym and provision of two combined football and basketball posts. In addition, the boundary onto Stockbridge Road will be opened up to improve safety and visibility of the Park from the Weeke area.

3 Consultation

- 3.1 Ward Members have been consulted regularly and kept informed of plans for development. They have been involved in the consultation events as set out below, and a number of separate meetings have been held with them to discuss their views, as well as regular email contact. Their suggestions and comments have been incorporated into proposals as far as possible.
- 3.2 Council officers and the architect met with a focus group of applicants on the waiting list who wish to downsize to smaller accommodation in Weeke, together with Ward members. The group discussed design

features that they would like in a new home. The comments were subsequently discussed by the design team and incorporated where possible into the design of the scheme.

- 3.3 TACT have been consulted as part of the pre-application consultation exercise. They have confirmed that they fully support the principle of development. Further consultation will take place when the proposals have been amended.
- 3.4 A public exhibition of the initial plans took place on 6 June 2013, attended by Council officers, the architects and agent. 850 invitations to the event were sent out to local residents and applicants on the housing register with a local connection to Weeke. Initial designs and layouts of the housing scheme were displayed, together with possible options for open space improvements to mitigate for the loss of the open space at Westman Road. The event was attended by 71 people. 12 provided written comments, of which seven were supportive, four provided suggestions for improvement and one objected. Issues raised at the event were discussed by the design team and have been incorporated where possible.
- 3.5 In addition, a consultation was undertaken with pupils at Henry Beaufort School in Harestock. A brief explanation was provided about the project. Options were suggested for improvements to another area of open space in the area as mitigation for the loss of Westman Road and pupils were asked to vote for their first and second choices. Pupils expressed clear preference for improvements to Dean Park: the majority of girls opted for an outside gym; most boys chose football and basket ball nets.
- 3.6 A flyer setting out the revised proposals for the affordable homes, together with proposals for the improvements to Dean Park will be circulated widely in mid September and the drawings will be placed on the Council's webpage for Westman Road.
- 3.7 There will be a further opportunity for all parties to comment on the proposals as part of the planning process.

4 Appropriation and Further Consultation

- 4.1 The Head of New Homes Delivery was given authority to commence the appropriation process through the advertising of land at Westman Road in May 2013. The Council published a notice in accordance with S122 of the Local Government Act 1972 advertising the Council's proposed intention to appropriate the land for planning purposes.
- 4.2 Subsequent legal advice concluded that the legal appropriation of the land was not required. However, the exercise enabled the proposal to build on the land to be more widely advertised. In addition to the legal notices displayed on the site and on Stoney Lane, the notice was

placed on the New Homes Delivery webpage and a local resident highlighted it on Facebook.

- 4.3 The Council received 26 responses objecting to the appropriation. Of these 26, 17 were set out in a standard letter. Letters were received from 20 individual addresses as 6 households sent more than one letter.
- 4.4 In addition 37 letters or emails were received, objecting to the development. Of these 37, 30 had used a letter template available on the Facebook page, where they added in the reasons for their objections. The most frequent reason for objection was the loss of the open space. The letters / emails were received from 26 individual addresses, so 11 households sent more than one letter / email.
- 4.5 A petition of 232 names objecting to the development of the land was also received.
- 4.6 The Facebook page set up by a local resident called 'Please don't build on our park' received a mixture of comments. Many 'liked' the page but others suggested that the park should not be protected from development, with comments including 'a green area is only of use (to) people if it is safe to use, which that area has never been' and 'By the sound of it, not one of us mums would be happy for our children to play there. It's too isolated'. There was also reference to dog mess which meant parents did not want their children to play there.

5 Conclusions on Consultation Responses

- 5.1 The area of useable open space at Westman Road (within the wire fence erected to prevent balls straying into neighbours gardens) is 0.26 hectares or 0.65 acres in total. Since June 2013, 39 officer visits have been made to the open space to monitor its use. The visits have been made at different times of the day and have usually been made in fine weather conditions. On only 4 occasions has activity been noted: on 3 occasions a single dog walker and on 1 occasion a small group of 3 boys playing basketball. The period of visits includes the school summer holidays.
- 5.2 The improvements proposed for Dean Park to mitigate for the loss of Westman Road are: the provision of an open air gym; and the provision of a pair of combined football and basketball goals, together with some work to the hedge boundary on Stockbridge Road to improve safety and visibility from Weeke. These improvements reflect the preferences of pupils consulted at Henry Beaufort School and provide more equipment than that which is currently provided at Westman Road, a single football post and single basketball post. Dean Park is a well used park with natural surveillance. It currently consists of a younger children's play ground and a large grassed area. The proposed improvements will provide for the needs of teenagers, a key

action point in the St Barnabas and Harestock Community Plan, which says 'Improve the open space and play areas, particularly those that would serve the teenage community'.

- 5.3 The Local Plan policy CP7 suggests that open space should not be developed unless either alternative facilities will be provided and are at least as accessible to current and potential new users, and at least equivalent in terms of size, usefulness, attractiveness and quality; or the benefit of the development to the community outweighs the harm caused by the loss of the facility. Both these requirements are met. The proposed improvements to Dean Park provide more accessible, useful and attractive facilities than Westman Road. The proposed housing development, which is 100% affordable housing for people with a local connection to Weeke, is of more benefit to the Weeke community than an area of open space which is rarely used.
- 5.4 In addition, the saved policies from the Winchester District Local Plan Review 2006, RT.1 and RT.2 apply to this site. RT.2 provides that development is not permitted where it would result in the loss of recreational value, although it is arguable that the alternative facilities proposed mean that there is no loss in recreational value here. Policy RT.1 provides that development of buildings is not to be permitted within open areas with an important amenity value. This is to protect such sites from development which would compromise the roles these sites play in defining the character of the town. It may be possible to grant permission for development which is contrary to Policy RT.1 where material considerations (such as the benefits the scheme would bring) make this appropriate.

6 Garages

- 6.1 Of the 22 garages, only 12 are currently let on licence. All of the licensees have been consulted about the proposals. They have been informed about alternative options to rent a garage in Weeke. Priority for alternative garages will be offered to the licensees who live in Weeke and use the garage for a vehicle rather than general storage. If the proposal goes ahead, the licensees will be given reasonable notice to vacate and the offer of an alternative garage will be made again.

7 Planning issues

- 7.1 The Council's Planning Management Team has offered positive pre-application guidance as part of the preparation of the draft plans and the designs have taken account of comments made by planning and urban design officers. The response from the Planning Management Team to the proposal has been very positive.

8 Conclusions.

- 8.1 Officers have carefully considered the responses to all the consultation exercises which have been undertaken. It is considered that the site

offers an opportunity to provide much-needed affordable housing, and the proposed improvements to Dean Park will substantially offset any loss in the quantity and quality of open space which the site currently provides. In addition, the garage licensees who use the garage for a vehicle will be offered an alternative garage in the area.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

9 SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY AND CHANGE PLANS (RELEVANCE TO):

- 9.1 Developing new homes is a key priority for the Council as it seeks to promote active communities: 'to support local people in accessing high quality and affordable housing which meet their needs'. It also facilitates the District's economic prosperity.

10 RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:

- 10.1 When the revised development programme was approved by Cabinet (Housing Delivery) on 22 May 2013, the indicative cost for the scheme was £1,140,000. The latest estimated capital costs are £2.04 million, which requires an increase in the capital budget provision of £900,000. The variation is due to an increase in the number of dwellings from 10 to 12 and enhanced Code for Sustainable Homes levels. How these changes in costs will be accommodated will be considered as part of the full review of the capital programme submitted to Cabinet in November 2013.
- 10.2 The initial financial appraisal summary contained in Exempt Appendix 1a shows that Westman Road passes the proposed viability test as set out in the Development Strategy.
- 10.3 It is important to note that actual costs of the scheme will only be known once tenders have been received. This will also inform final rent levels, currently set at 80% of open market rents and detailed scheme financing, which will be determined in accordance with principles established in the Council's Housing Development Strategy. The unit costs and compliance with the viability tests will be reassessed when this information is available. Details will be brought back to Members for consideration before build contracts are entered into.
- 10.4 At this stage, formal approval to proceed with the scheme under Financial Procedure Rule 6.4 is not being sought. This will be done when tenders have been received. However it would be prudent to increase the sum allocated in the development programme in line with the latest capital budget requirements set out in paragraph 10.1.

11 RISK MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- 11.1 The Council wants to develop and deliver an ambitious programme for the building of new council houses. Building homes involves significant risks. This is why market developers and investors demand high returns in reward for that risk. Risks lie in delays arising from inadequate resourcing, abnormal costs, unnecessarily bureaucratic procedures, local opposition, planning objections and a weakening of political commitment. It is important that risk is carefully managed.
- 11.2 At a high level, risk management is carried out by ensuring that proposals have a strategic fit with the Housing Development Strategy, particularly with respect to viability. The Council's corporate project and risk management processes will be used to mitigate detailed risk and ensure that projects are progressed in a logical sequence to ensure that the Council is not overexposed to risk. It is important to note that it is rare for risk to be totally removed.
- 11.3 Exempt Appendix 1 includes details of headline risks specific to the scheme.

APPENDICES:

EXEMPT Appendix 1 – Westman Road – Viability and Risks