

**DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS
(Report by the Working Group)**

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 At their meeting held on 8th November 2011, the Overview and Scrutiny Panel (Environmental Well-Being) decided to establish a working group to examine concerns raised over the Loves Farm development in St Neots and to make recommendations to inform future developments. The Working Group comprised Councillors Mrs M Banerjee, I J Curtis, P M D Godfrey and G J Harlock. Ward Members for St Neots have also attended Working Group meetings. Councillor Mrs M Banerjee has acted as rapporteur.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The Panel's interest in the subject was prompted by the attendance of Councillors Mrs B E Boddington and R J West at a meeting to address Members on their concerns over the appearance of the Loves Farm development at St Neots. Councillors Mrs Boddington and West had been approached by residents owing to their membership of the Development Management Panel and the close proximity of their Ward to the area. The Panel's attention was drawn to the high density of the housing within the development and problems associated with it. Residents had complained about the poor appearance of the extremities of the development as well as the narrowness of the roads, the lack of footpaths and the absence of street names. The Panel acknowledged that there could often be tensions and differences in priorities between developers and the planning authority, but it was decided that there was a need not only to address the current problems but also to learn from them to inform the design stages of future developments.

3. EVIDENCE AND INVESTIGATIONS

- 3.1 The Working Group initially undertook an exercise to establish a comprehensive list of the matters that have been causing concern to residents at Loves Farm, St Neots. Local Members assisted the Working Group with this. Activities to familiarise Members with the Loves Farm site have also been undertaken.
- 3.2 The Head of Planning Services has provided Members with an overview of the Loves Farm site. The initial concept for Loves Farm had arisen from the 2002 Local Plan Alteration. The main application for development of the site was approved in April 2006 and the first Reserved Matters application for the primary infrastructure of the site was approved in June 2006. Considerable emphasis is attached to the fact that, in this instance, the planning process has delivered the infrastructure upfront. This is a positive achievement. Some of the main areas of residents' concerns are now addressed.

Access Routes

- 3.3 Access routes to and within the site have frequently been cited as matters that cause residents concerns. The initial outline proposal plan includes access routes. Many aspects of access routes are beyond the District Council's control. From the outset, the County Council has stated that the access route over the railway bridge is substandard and as such is only for use by emergency vehicles and buses. There does not appear to be any scope to change this position by making it available for general use. With regard to the absence of footpaths on some roads, the Movement Strategy makes clear that the integration of roads and footways is deliberate. Furthermore, a bridge, which will link the site to the railway station and the Town, should be delivered by Network Rail in 2014. It will be suitable for pedestrians and cyclists and will be Disability Discrimination Act compliant. This is considered to be a short timescale.

Housing Density

- 3.4 The density of housing at Loves Farm varies throughout the site between 30 to 50 houses per hectare. At the time the development was approved the Government required developers to construct sites having an average of 40 homes per hectare. This requirement has been met at Loves Farm.
- 3.5 There is a general perception that developers are able to circumvent planning requirements by requesting amendments once the principle of development has been approved. With this in mind the plans that were originally approved have been compared with what has actually been built. There is little deviation between the two. Moreover, there have not been any planning breaches at the site. Everything that has been built has received planning permission and there has not been any necessity to take enforcement action.

Affordable Housing

- 3.6 On the question of the prevalence of affordable housing on the site, the working group has learnt that the application granted in 2006 had stipulated that 29% of the development would be affordable housing. However, housing associations at that time had been allocated funds by the Government to purchase houses at market value, which has resulted in a higher level of affordable housing on the site. As a result of the fact that some of the issues raised relate specifically to affordable housing, the Head of Planning Services has arranged for Councillors Mrs Boddington and West to meet with Bedfordshire Pilgrims Housing Association to discuss the Councillors' concerns.

Other Matters

- 3.7 In addition to the matters referred to above, each of the detailed points identified during the initial stage of the study have been examined. They are listed together with comments by the Head of Planning and Housing Strategy in the Appendix hereto.

Benefits for Life Assessment

3.8 In order to obtain an objective assessment of Loves Farm from a planning perspective, during a site visit each Member of the Working Group has completed a 'building for life' assessment of the development. Building for Life is the national standard for well designed homes and neighbourhoods. The Council assesses all development sites and aims to achieve a score of at least ten out of twenty; a score of fourteen to fifteen being considered good (silver standard) and sixteen is very good (gold standard). On the basis of the assessments carried out by the Working Group in the course of the study, Loves Farm scored fifteen out of twenty (silver standard).

3.7 The areas that have been rated positively are:-

- the good mix of housing;
- the site exploits existing landscaping and topography, and
- the development feels safe with public spaces overlooked.

Those parts of the development that scored less well include:-

- car parking, and
- environmental impact.

4. FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

4.1 The next phase of Loves Farm will be developed at a lower density as the Government has relaxed density levels. This deals with one aspect of residents' concerns. However, there is still the question of the mix of dwellings. The Council has previously tried to influence the housing mix delivered on a given site but developers try to resist this because the optimum profit is obtained from a four bedroom detached house. The Working Group has supported the suggestion that the new Local Plan should be more orientated towards obtaining a mix of dwellings on new developments.

4.2 Further, on the type of accommodation that is built, it is recommended that the Decent Homes Standard, which is applicable to social housing, should be a driver for market housing.

4.3 Car parking is an issue at Loves Farm. It is the responsibility of Planning Officers to ensure that developers provide an appropriate level of parking spaces and this needs to be factored into planning applications. At the same time, highway design influences how and where people park their cars. The view has been expressed that Highways Officers do not appear to have residents' needs in mind when making recommendations of developments. It has, therefore, been suggested that Highways Officers should be invited to brief Members on their work.

4.4 The County Council can change proposed road layouts when they receive Section 38 approvals, regardless of recommendations by District Council Planning Officers. It is suggested that Section 38 plans are referred back to the District Council once they have been processed by the County Council.

4.5 Clarification is required as to who is responsible for bringing footpaths to an acceptable standard.

4.6 Generally, the importance of developing communities with residents' needs in mind has been highlighted. In the short term this view will be adopted towards the next phase of the Loves Farm development and other up and coming large developments. Thereafter, it should be a feature of the Design Guide.

4.7 Following discussions with the Urban Design, Trees and Landscape Team Leader on the findings of the Building for Life Assessment, four principal actions have been identified that will be implemented to deal with the concerns that have been raised. These are:-

a) More co-operation between the District Council as planning authority and other responsible authorities such as the County Highways Authority and the Environment Agency.

The Working Group will look at how greater co-operation will be achieved. It has also been suggested that greater co-operation with utility companies would be beneficial. Further to this, the County Council is now responsible for Sustainable Drainage Systems and the District Council is looking to tackle drainage issues; this needs to be done in conjunction with the County Council. Natural drainage solutions are being sought where possible. Meetings are already being held regarding the second phase of the Loves Farm development on all relevant matters.

b) Better targeted design policies to be included in the new Local Plan. Policies, for example, based upon parking standards (wider car parking dimensions), requirement for good or silver BFL standard before planning approval.

Attention is drawn to the 'Lifetime Home Standards', which have been introduced in London. It might be a targeted design policy in the new Local Plan. The possibility of using the 'Building for Life' assessments as a suitable standard for assessing planning applications has also been raised. If this strategy is adopted applicants will need to employ an accredited assessor. This approach could be used for small sections of large developments.

c) The production of an updated District Design Guide as part of the evidence base to underpin the new local plan.

Issues associated with the current Design Guide will be addressed in the new Local Plan.

d) More effective engagement with residents in neighbouring areas and with embryonic groups on large scale schemes as they are being developed.

Throughout the investigations the importance of engaging with the local community when development is planned has been stressed. In this respect, local Members need to be informed if developments deviate from what has been approved.

4.8 The Working Group is satisfied that the Council is undertaking significant steps to effectively deal with concerns raised over the Loves Farm

development and that lessons learnt from this site will influence the design of future developments.

APPENDIX

DESIGN PRINCIPLES FOR FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS WORKING GROUP SUMMARY OF ISSUES – **AND RESPONSES**

Infrastructure

- the lack of utility space – **only affordable houses are built to a minimum size standard, therefore they are bigger than market housing. Play areas will be delivered**
- the narrowness of roads – **this is a deliberate design feature to comply with the 20 mile per hour speed limit**
- the lack of footpaths – **this derives from the shared surface concept, which encourages all road users to share the space**
- the absence of street names and the problems this caused for emergency vehicles – **this was monitored on the site visit and not found to be a problem**
- Utilities not adopted – **this is a matter for the relevant statutory utility provider**
- delays in the provision of a community centre – **an application was due to be considered by the Development Management Panel in February/March 2012. The school was designed to have a community room**
- unadopted roads and associated traffic management problems – **the County Council will not adopt roads until they meet a specific standard**
- the railway bridge, which the County Council has designated as being structurally unsound for traffic – **it is not suitable for large scale traffic use and was never intended to be an access point.**
- the down-turn in demand for market housing has resulted in a change in the way the development of the site has progressed i.e. the types of housing that have been constructed – **the development concept has not changed**
- play areas are not in place because certain community trigger points have not been reached - **a MUGA is in place**
- street scene / tree planting – **planting of many trees has been proposed, some trees have already been planted**

Planning

- the process for approving variations to the original approved planning permission – the concept has not changed, the detail has. Most variations have been outside planning remits
- project management of the development – local authorities have little involvement on large scale building sites, HDC Building Control officers are not involved. The District Council's Community Manager and Bedfordshire Pilgrims have had a lot of involvement on site
- enforcement of terms of planning permissions – no enforcement has been necessary
- timing and delivery of facilities – this is always an issue but positive points have been noted such as early delivery of the School
- the density of housing within the development – the site was built to former government minimum requirements. The new Government Planning Policy Framework will set the requirements for the eastern expansion
- the mix of housing / where different types of housing have been located – this has been dictated by market forces. Social housing is filtered through the site
- the poor appearance of the development, its design and deterioration of the materials used in its construction – the site visit was used to assess the design and the results are reported above. The site level at the frontage of the development is above ground level so it is exaggerated. This will be partly ameliorated by development on the other side of the road. The design ethos was 'urban extension'. The Council has tried to have trees incorporated and County Council have agreed to this. This will not be the long term appearance
- S106 trigger points are only based on market and not social housing – this is inevitable as market housing provides the money for S106 provisions
- the positioning of residential garages has lead to excessive on-street parking – emphasis is placed on parking courts, there is a difficulty in enforcing habits. Provision has been made at the right level. Parked cars act as a good traffic calming measure. It is a deliberate policy elsewhere to use car ports rather than garages

Access

- the A428 – this is controlled by the Highways Agency
- general access problems – there will be further access issues to address with the Eastern Expansion; it is likely this will be via another roundabout off Cambridge Road. This is a very expensive road to work on due to its

position near the railway line and the river. Councillors are urged to lobby MPs regarding access

- traffic routing – previously covered through discussions
- mobility scooters are obstructed by lamp-posts in the middle of pavements – County Council determined the design, which intentionally creates shared surfaces
- footpath design / layout – County Council determined the design