

Alton Society's Response to the Miller Homes Plans Exhibited on the 23rd March 2018
(Land East of Selborne Road)

1. Appraisal of the Design and Layout

This is a very exposed hillside location on the southern edge of Alton, and overlooking an important gateway to the town. We were very disappointed therefore to be confronted with a scheme that is populated with densely packed dwellings, spreading uniformly throughout the site, and appearing to show little respect for its location.

The Alton Neighbourhood Plan (NP) demands that future housing developments in and around Alton respect the character of the town and surrounding countryside. The Joint Core Strategy (CP20) says that any housing development must protect and enhance local distinctiveness and 'sense of place'. These proposals fail to do that. There is no sense of place, or distinctiveness, no focal points or discernible features, and the house designs are devoid of any meaningful variation. What we see, sadly, are off-the-shelf "potato-stamp" designs, with nothing that marks them out as respecting the town and its surrounding countryside. A fake gable vent here, or a false GRP chimney-stack there seems to be the best we should expect.

Again, DE2 of the NP states "quality innovative design will be encouraged where appropriate". And has guidance been sought from the Alton Town Design Statement? – this makes it clear that new development should enhance as well as respect the character of a particular area, instead of which we see copies of the developments at Anstey Road and in Four Marks – indeed your display material highlights these as examples of what we should expect. A far more useful reference point would be the distinctiveness of Butts Rd, and the cottages in nearby Whitedown Lane.

And why have flats been designed to look like houses? Surely we can aspire to some choice of style to mitigate the anodyne designs that we now see blighting our countryside?

2. Detail

- a. Access Road: The single access road that snakes its way through the site, and ending in a series of cul de sacs, appears to us to be extremely vulnerable, not just in terms of volumes of traffic serving such a large estate (and the inherent road safety risks), but also the risk of blockage in the event of emergencies. Are the Highways Authority, and the emergency services, happy with this arrangement?

There also seems some doubt about whether the road will be adopted. Are you able to clarify this?

- b. Housing Mix: Despite the mix of housing and apartment sizes, the plans are still largely dominated by 3 and 4 bedroom houses. Alton still has a critical need for 1 and 2 bedroom units, and the proposed mix does little to help meet this need. (Less than 15% are flats). The provision of only 20% affordable homes (approved at outline stage) instead of the normal minimum of 40% makes this even more critical.
- c. Open Space: There is a small area of semi-public open space situated on raised ground on the NE corner of the site. The SW half of the site has no discernible open space except the existing and retained wooded area running along the southern boundary. This left-over green space which is ..."retained to mitigate the extent of visibility..." may provide a useful buffer zone but does not give any viable public space and may prove to be difficult to maintain or police. A development of this size must accommodate easily accessible

recreational space for all families. Critically, for an estate of 249 houses, there does not seem to be any provision for children's play areas.

- d. Skyline Impact: The Design Policies of the NP (DE1) specifies “proposals must show how [development proposals] have responded positively to key views and gateways”. The topography of this site was always going to raise sensitive issues, given its high hill-side location, but the plans seem to do little if anything to mitigate this. For example, at the NW and NE corners you have included dwellings that will have a severe impact on the skyline:
- i. In the north-west corner a tall three-storey block of flats and 2.5 storey houses have been positioned on rising ground, and in the case of the apartment block extremely close to the Watercress Line. These will have a seriously detrimental impact on the views from the entire Butts Green Conservation Area, and beyond. Please reconsider this.
 - ii. You state that “public open space has been positioned at the highest point of the site”. We believe this statement is incorrect. In the NE corner, adjacent to Borovere Lane, there are 6 dwellings positioned at the very highest point of the site (over the 135 metre contour). This area demands a total rethink, and we ask that you consider extending the open space into this corner, thus affording some protection to the distant views into the site.

It is significant that The Society – together with a number of local residents – have identified these issues largely through our/their own research, due to the difficulty in finding any contoured maps amongst your display material. This seems an extraordinary omission, given the steeply sloping topography of the site. Can someone explain this?

Also it seems odd that the ‘section’ diagrams (limited to 5 in number) appear not to include any that illustrate the views into the northern edges of the site. Why is this?

- e. Impact on Adjacent Dwellings: There are a number of issues here. The following list is by no means exhaustive - you will no doubt have heard from many residents individually:
- i. The same blocks (referred to in d.i. above) will impact residents of Lincoln Green, the other side of the Watercress Line. It seems that the original plans (ref the Design Statement in 2014) included an ‘accent’ building much further away from the border with the Watercress Line.
 - ii. There is considerable concern over the possibility of smoke pollution from the Mid Hants Railway affecting the proposed flats and houses to the NW corner of the site. How will this be addressed?
 - iii. There are a number of dwellings located on the northern and north-eastern edges of the site which threaten to have an overbearing affect on existing homes. Two notable examples:
 - a) Plot 107- very close to, and overlooking, a bungalow in Borovere Lane.
 - b) The houses positioned to the west of the proposed open space, adjacent to Ings Close, Greenacre Close and Berehurst. In fact we understand that one resident of Berehurst has been offered the transfer of a strip of land along the northern border to afford residents some protection, once planning approval has been obtained. I trust that this offer still stands?
Have you considered bungalows in these vicinities instead, to mitigate the impact?
- f. Parking: Whilst we are pleased to note that the allocation of spaces conforms to policy TR5 of the Neighbourhood Plan, the visitor spaces seem poorly located. They appear in uneven clusters, with many situated well beyond reasonable walking distance, especially from the houses in the southeast area of the site.

- g. Recycling: We could not see any provision for recycling and refuse bins or cycle storage, but presumably these will become evident in the planning application?.
- h. Sustainability: The lack of any energy infrastructure is disturbing, especially given the potential economies of scale in a development this size. The Housing policies in the NP require “the highest environmental and energy conservation standards”, instead of which we see a scheme which aims simply to comply with the Building Regulations minimum requirements. This is not good enough. Indeed the plans fail to comply even with the EHDC’s own energy strategy. There are no solar panels in evidence, and yet to retrofit these is far more expensive than putting them in at the outset.

Can we make a positive suggestion? – that you might at least consider building a small number, say perhaps five to ten, low energy eco-houses with features such as higher levels of insulation, PV solar panels, fresh air recycling, heat recovery mechanical ventilation, low temperature under-floor heating, triple glazing, etc.? Yes, these might be slightly more expensive but studies have shown that there are people out there who are prepared to pay the extra. Examples include the Staiths Southbank in Gateshead (2005) built by Taylor Wimpey or Oxley Woods, low carbon housing also by Taylor Wimpey. We hope you will give this serious consideration.

Finally, in order to address some of these concerns we would ask you to consider:

1. An opportunity for us to meet with your design team to work through some of the issues, and
2. A meeting with local residents most affected (ref. e above), at the most critical points around the periphery of the site.

Again, we hope you will give this serious consideration. Whilst we understand you are working to a tight timescale, we only have one chance to get this right.

Rod Eckles
Chairman – Built Environment Group
