

Alton Society's Comments on LESR Reserved Matters Application Ref: 30021/065

We are pleased to see the positive steps taken in response to the public consultation held in March, especially:

- The scaling back of some of the more obtrusive buildings along the northern edge of the site, and limiting the height of these buildings to two stories; and
- The enhanced landscaping.

We are also pleased to see a better spread of visitor parking throughout the site.

These improvements are all very much to be welcomed. However, we are very disappointed with the developer's failure to address some of the more fundamental problems:-

1. Layout / Design: Despite the very modest reduction in number of dwellings, the scheme is still populated with densely packed buildings, spreading rather 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) stipulates that any housing development must protect and enhance local distinctiveness and 'sense of place'. These proposals fail to do that. Despite the claims made in the Planning Design and Access Statement (DAS) 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 from Miller Homes is more off-the-shelf "potato-stamp" designs, with nothing that marks them out as respecting the town and its surrounding countryside.

DE2 of the NP states "quality innovative design will be encouraged where appropriate". Nothing could be more "appropriate" than development at this hugely sensitive gateway location. We are particularly concerned not see any reference to the Alton Town Design Statement (ATDS) in which the design guidelines (Section 4) represent a material planning consideration, as made very clear in the NP. As in the JCC (see above), Section 4.2 states "New development should generally enhance as well as respect the character of particular areas". We see no serious attempt to respect the existing built environment, for example the distinctiveness of Butts Road, or the cottages in Whitedown Lane.

In the Architectural Overview (Section 5), 5.7 points to the need to "take cues from good local examples" for details such as eaves, windows, porches. Again, The Butts 19th century houses should give a lead on design. We see no sign of this.

Furthermore, we fail to see how the addition of false plastic chimney stacks, devoid of any meaningful function and scattered haphazardly across the site, contributes towards "quality innovative design".

2. Access Road: Whilst we do appreciate the constraints of the site's topography, the single "spine" road 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, especially given that all the smaller roads leading from this are cul de sacs. (The Private Car Vehicle Tracking chart confirms this). We can see no evidence that the Highways Authority, and the emergency services, are happy with this arrangement. Similarly, there is no evidence that the road will be adopted.
3. Housing Mix: There appears to have been no real attempt to compensate for the deplorable decision to limit the number of affordable homes to 20%, and the fact that only 14% of the dwellings are flats ignores Alton's critical need for more small (1 and 2 bedroom) units.
4. Open Space: Despite the enhanced green buffer zone on along the southern edge, there is still no meaningful open space serving the south-western area of the site. A development of this size must accommodate easily accessible recreational space for all families. Critically, for an estate of 243 homes, there does not seem to be any provision for play areas for small children. Whatever the merits of the proposed "informal play area" in the NE corner it is far too remote for families in the SW corner – way down the hill. This surely must be addressed as a matter of priority.
5. Skyline: Notwithstanding the scaling back of the tall buildings near the northern edge of the site, you state that "public open space has been positioned at the highest point of the site", but it is still the case that a number of dwellings (in the NE corner) occupy the very highest point. We would repeat our request for these to be switched with the designated open space, thus affording more protection to the distant views into the site.

As a general point, there seems nothing in the DAS to clearly indicate the contours, or any clear impression of the visual impact of the development in terms of views into the site. This is a serious omission.

6. Sustainability: Once again, the lack of any energy infrastructure is very 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 EHDC's own energy strategy. ES1, ES2, ES3, ES4 are all relevant to new developments such as this, which should aim to increase the amount of renewable energy generation, reduce energy usage and heat requirement. At the very least customers should be offered solar panels at the outset, providing cheaper power whilst reducing carbon emissions. Leaving house-owners to retrofit these is far more expensive than installing them at the outset.

We are also disappointed that our request for you to consider building a small number (5 to 10) of innovative, low energy eco-houses has so far been ignored. We believe that such inclusion would alleviate to some extent the lack of design diversity so evident in the current proposals.

For all the above reasons we OBJECT to this application in its current form.

Finally, we note that HCC have demanded a S106 contribution of £5M to fund the additional primary and secondary school places deemed necessary as a result of this and the Treloar Hospital site developments. We regard it as absolutely crucial that these demands are satisfied if this application is to proceed.

Rod Eckles

Chairman – Built Environment Group

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