

Report by Guestling Parish Council Affordable Housing Working Group

Background

The Working Group was established to engage with all key stakeholders regards proposals for any affordable housing developments within or closely adjacent to Guestling Parish and to provide advice, comments and recommendations to the full council.

The reason for establishing the Working Group arose out of the proposal to develop a site referred to as 'Land behind Fairview'. The site lies on the extreme edge of the Guestling parish boundary with Pett parish and in the heart of Pett village and had been suggested as being suitable for affordable housing. As at September 2023 GPC did not have a full understanding of the history of the proposal, what decisions, if any, had been made about a proposed development, the involvement of various bodies, the views of other parish councils or the status and involvement of a proposed Community Land Trust. The lack of clarity and perceived lack of information was having an unsettling effect on a number of local residents and placed GPC in a difficult position in not being able to answer questions raised by residents.

GPC has an involvement in the matter in that it initially supported a Housing Needs Survey undertaken by the Sussex Community Housing Hub in 2021. The council fully supports the principal of affordable housing as an essential part of the strategy to address housing need.

Furthermore, under the current Rother District Council Local Plan, Policy DHG2 states that one of the six criteria that must be met for planning permission to be granted for small scale residential development outside the development boundary designed to meet a rural need for local affordable housing is the support of the parish council.

Consultees

To gather information the working party met with: Tom Warder, Community Led Housing manager & Interim CEO at Sussex Community Housing Hub [SCHH], Graeme Quinnell, Housing Enabling & Development Officer at Rother District Council [RDC] and Rodney Buse, chair of Marsham Community Land Trust [MCLT] and we are grateful to all three for their cooperation. We also met with representatives of Pett and Fairlight Parish Councils and notes of all our meetings are published on the GPC website. The Working Group also received written comments from 11 residents and met with 5 of those.

Remit of the Working Group

The remit of the Working Group is to consider in general the potential to develop affordable housing within or close to the parish and whether a case is sufficiently and properly made out for such development. The consideration of any particular site and forming a view as to whether any particular site is suitable for development is a planning issue and is not within the scope of our consideration at this time.

Findings

A Housing Needs Survey of Guestling & Pett Parishes was undertaken and published in 2021. We are advised that the results of these surveys are regarded as remaining valid for a period of 5 years. While we acknowledge the experience and expertise of those at SCHH who undertook the survey we note that all the census, house price and income data referred to in the report is

now several years old [the census data is over 10 years old and the 2021 census information is now available] and in the intervening period the UK has experienced a significant period of low economic growth, high inflation, significant increases in bank interest rates and an energy crisis as well as the aftermath of the 2020 COVID lockdowns.

We also note that the Housing Needs Survey only covered the parishes of Guestling and Pett whereas the now formally constituted Marsham CLT also covers the parish of Fairlight.

We recognise that for reasons largely beyond its control the progress made by MCLT has been slow. While we acknowledge the commitments expressed by both MCLT and RDC to holding full consultation with residents about any proposed development scheme, the perception is that little information has been or is being shared with residents. This has been unfortunate and unhelpful.

We have been advised that as part of the development of a new Local Plan, RDC is committed to looking at other locations within the three parishes that may also be suitable rural exception sites for affordable housing. As such we are told that no decisions has been made about the Fairview site.

We also note that in the draft (Regulation 18) Local Plan 2020-2040 for Rother which is currently out for public consultation it is proposed that policy DHG2 is replaced with policy HOU5. The effect of this change is that “the former requirement for schemes to be supported or initiated by the Parish Council is removed and replaced with criteria (iv), a requirement to demonstrate that there has been meaningful community engagement throughout the development process and the benefits of the development to the village/parish are clearly defined. This change will enable rural exception sites to be brought forward by a wider range of groups and individuals, supporting the delivery of more affordable homes in rural locations where these cannot be accommodated within development boundaries.”

Recommendation

For GPC to support the development of a site for affordable housing in or near the parish it should require further evidence to corroborate the finding of the 2021 Housing Needs Survey so it can be confident that the need for affordable housing in the parishes is clearly demonstrated. In particular, it should be provided with the eligibility criteria for qualifying for affordable housing within the area as well as the application form to be used. The parish council should also see the responses [suitably anonymised] received via the application forms.

So far there has been no information given to us to show what the potential housing mix will be. Similarly, we have no information on the likely rental or cost of shared ownership. Without this information it is impossible to understand whether this particular scheme will actually meet the housing needs that have been identified. If there is to be a shared ownership component then details of length of lease, share of repair and maintenance, responsibility for building defects and so on must be published if the Parish Council is to be in a position to take a view.

GPC should also be satisfied that proper public consultation is conducted by RDC and MCLT. We believe that there are two stages of public consultation that should be undertaken: the first around the concept of affordable housing and the aims and objectives in promoting such a scheme and only after that the consultation that precedes the making of a planning application where the design ideas are described, and public views gathered. We have seen little evidence of either. At all stages of the process, we would expect information and updates are publicised in a timely manner through multiple channels including the website that MCLT are proposing to launch.

In the opinion of the Working Group, Guestling Parish Council is not in a position to support the proposition under policy DGH2 and can see little evidence that consultation required by draft policy HOU5 has been carried out. The Working Group therefore recommends that Guestling Parish Council reserves its position at this time.

May 2024