



Minutes of an Extraordinary Meeting of the Planning Committee

Held at The Grange, Nutholt Lane, Ely, CB7 4EE at 2:00pm on
Wednesday 13 August 2024

Present:

Cllr David Brown
Cllr Lavinia Edwards
Cllr Julia Huffer (substitute for Cllr Martin Goodearl)
Cllr Bill Hunt (Chair)
Cllr James Lay
Cllr Alan Sharp (substitute for Cllr Christine Ambrose-Smith)
Cllr John Trapp
Cllr Ross Trent
Cllr Christine Whelan
Cllr Gareth Wilson

Officers:

Maggie Camp – Director, Legal
Catherine Looper, Planning Team Leader
Leah Mickleborough, Interim Senior Democratic Services Officer
Yole Milani Medieros, Planning Consultant
David Morren, Interim Planning Manager
Cameron Overton, Trainee Democratic Services Officer
Amy Robinson, Senior Ecologist
Karen See, Senior Environmental Health Officer
Christopher Smith, Environmental Health Officer

In attendance:

Dr Richard Brixey, Applicant
Alan Cunningham, Agent
County Cllr Mark Goldsack
Town Cllr Keith Horgan
Town Cllr Alec Jones
Annabelle Le Lohe, Agent
Tom Kershaw, Agent
David Parke, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Clinical Commissioning Group (for the applicant)
Richard Seamark, Agent
Ashley Seymour, Agent
Khalid Shaban, Agent
Jez Tuttle, Cambridgeshire County Council (Transport Assessment Team)
Cllr Lucius Vellacott

Louisa Wood, Applicant

In attendance for agenda item 4 only:

Ben Corne, Environment Agency

Phil Duff, Objector

Sarah Fairhurst, Objector

Shane Luck, Cambridgeshire County Council (Local Highways Authority)

Harry Pickford, Cambridgeshire County Council (Lead Local Flood Authority)

Liam Robson, Environment Agency

Hamish Ross, Objector

13 other members of the public

Lucy Flintham – Development Services Office Team Leader

Melanie Wright – Communications Officer

24. Apologies and substitutions

Apologies for absence were received from Cllrs Christine Ambrose-Smith, Chika Akinwale and Martin Goodearl

Cllrs Julia Huffer and Alan Sharp were attending as substitutes.

25. Declarations of interest

Councillor Chrstine Whelan declared that she was a former member of Mereside Patient Participation Group but would be remaining in the meeting room and voting.

Councillors Alan Sharp and Bill Hunt declared that they were members of Cambridgeshire County Council, the owners of This Land Development Ltd (applicant, agenda item 4) and This Land Ltd (joint applicant, agenda item 5). Councillor Sharp confirmed that he was not part of This Land Ltd, whilst Cllr Hunt confirmed that similarly, he was not part of This Land Ltd and had not taken part in decision making at the County Council in relation to This Land, and therefore would be participating.

A member of the public raised a point of order regarding members participation in the committee when they are also members of the County Council, given this could give rise to a conflict of interest. The Chair confirmed that both he and Councillor Sharp had set out their positions as County Councillors. He had taken advice on his position and would be approaching all matters with an open mind.

26. Chairman's announcements

To assist members of the public present in the room, the Chair introduced those present at the meeting and explained that given the significance of the applications before the Committee, he had agreed to extend public speaking to 10 minutes per category of speaker. Given the range of matters that may be covered by the Committee, he requested that questions and responses be kept succinct.

27. 19/01600/ESO – Soham Gateway

Catherine Looper, Planning Team Leader, reminded the Committee of the updates that had been published on Friday, 9 August. Following the completion of the report before the Committee (reference Z48), the inspector had published their report on the Soham and Barway Neighbourhood Plan. The amendments have been accepted by both Soham Town Council and East Cambridgeshire District Council, and so the Neighbourhood Plan will proceed to referendum. This meant that the Planning Committee was obliged to have regard to the neighbourhood plan in its decision making, however in officers view, the changes to the plan were not so significant to materially impact the assessment of either application as detailed in the officer reports for agenda items 4 and 5.

Yole Milani Medeiros, Planning Consultant, presented the application to the Committee. In doing so, she reminded members that this was an outline application to guide the reserved matters, which would be subject to separate applications, and confirmed to members which matters they were determining at this stage.

The Committee were informed that one further letter of representation had been received since the agenda publication, however this did not alter the recommendations within the Committee report.

The main considerations for the application were deemed to be:

- **Principle of development** – It was confirmed that the site was included as part of the allocation SOH3, and officers confirmed how the proposals aligned to the local plan policy.
- **Flood risk and drainage** – as the site was at risk of flooding, a surface water drainage strategy had been agreed by all parties
- **Highways access and movement** – a new roundabout was proposed from the A142 to provide site access. The local highways authority had accepted the proposals, subject to conditions
- **Green Infrastructure and landscape** –The officer explained that a landscape management plan would be required, and whilst the general arrangements were accepted, soft and hard landscaping and tree planting would require re-submission
- **Biodiversity and trees** – there was the potential for a biodiversity net gain of 10%, but this fell short of the 20% required by the neighbourhood plan. Concerns regarding the impact of domestic pets and potential mitigation would be secured through conditions.

- **Housing mix** – Officers confirmed that at this stage, the housing mix was not fixed. The proposed level of affordable housing was 20%, which was below the 30% that the local plan aimed for, however there would be review mechanisms established at each stage of the reserved matters applications to confirm whether the affordable housing levels could be increased.
- **Design, character and density** – Officers explained that the site had been designed to protect views of St Andrews Church, with higher elevations proposed towards the middle of the site.
- **Residential amenity** – The site is allocated in the local plan. Officers confirmed that the layout and scale of development is not fully defined at the outline stage.
- **Historic environment** – Officers reiterated the protection of the views of the Church, however there are no impacts on locally listed buildings.
- **Energy and sustainability** – It was expected the development would meet the local carbon reduction targets in the local plan, however a sustainability and energy statement would be submitted at each stage of reserved matters.
- **Infrastructure and s.106 agreement** – Officers set out the proposed requirements within the s.106 agreement, as identified in the report.

In summary, officers were proposing approval of the application, subject to the conditions and s.106 agreement obligations set out in the report and the update sheet circulated.

Hamish Ross, objector, addressed the committee, accompanied by Phil Duff and Sarah Fairhurst.

Mr Ross set out that this was the site represented a unique, historic environment of importance, with a site of special scientific interest in close vicinity to the application. He outlined the concerns raised by both the local wildlife trust and the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), that the development did not comply with the landscape guidance within policy GROWTH 3. The Soham Town Commons are recognised as a strategic green infrastructure, so permission should only be given where there is a need for development which significantly outweighs the negative impact on the infrastructure as expected by policy COM 5. The Soham Vision within the local plan makes clear the need to protect the Commons.

Mr Ross explained that an independent noise consultant had raised concerns regarding the information submitted by the applicant, and the Council's assessment of this, which the consultant believed was fundamentally flawed. He highlighted that on similar sites significant mitigation had been required because of the noise assessments and queried why the same mitigation was not required for this application. Given the flaws in the noise assessments, he queried whether the outline application should be allowed.

Mr Ross returned to the concerns of CPRE, who had raised that the loss of open space was unacceptable and the impact on the historic landscape, ecology and protected species may not be truly understood.

The site is located within flood zones, and Mr Ross highlighted local experiences which appeared different to the applicant's statement, and in particular residents who are unable to obtain home insurance to cover floods. For other residents there would be a loss of view which impacted their residential amenity, and the sewerage system was already struggling to cope.

It was explained that Brewhouse Lane is a narrow, residential street and the proposed highways links were not reflective of the Soham Vision.

Concluding, Mr Ross raised a recent appeal case in Haddenham, which the same developer had lost, due to the development's impact and design, which he believed set precedent to reject this application on similar grounds. He felt that the proposals overall did not offer the Gateway scheme envisaged and set out the significant local opposition to the proposed scheme.

The Chair invited members to ask questions of the objectors. Cllr Trapp requested further information about the noise mitigation required at a site further to the South of the current proposals and how close this was to a roundabout. In response, it was confirmed the other site is not close to a roundabout and that the location of the roundabout on the current site could create a higher noise environment.

Councillor Trapp also sought clarity on the flood insurance issues experienced by local residents. It was confirmed that the objectors do not have specific details of the number of residents affected but gave examples of those that had been impacted by this issue.

The Chair queried the figures on the number of homes used by the objectors in their statement. Mr Ross confirmed that he had meant 540 homes, which was the maximum proposed by this application, but regardless of the number, his arguments against the application remained the same.

The Chair invited the applicant to speak.

Richard Seamark, agent for the applicant, thanked officers for bringing the application forward. He set out that the applicant had made a number of changes since the application was first submitted in 2019. The changes had been subject to consultation and significant public scrutiny, so that now, no technical objections to the proposals remained.

He outlined what the application would include, and how he felt it complied with policy SOH3. A roundabout access from the A142 had been included, with provision for future access to the other sites included in the local plan allocation. The highways authority considered that a single point of access to the site was acceptable, but the applicant had provided a secondary access through Brewhouse Lane as part of the medical centre development.

The open space included in the development was in line with the policy requirement. The biodiversity net gain assessment demonstrated a potential

for 10%, which had been reviewed by the county wildlife trust, Natural England and the county biologist. Whilst a detailed plan would need to be developed, the financial contributions required by the s.106 agreement could help to enhance the Town Commons.

He recognised that this was the biggest scheme in Soham since 2015 and set out the levels of consultation undertaken. He felt that the development would provide social and economic benefit to the Town, most notably through provision of the medical centre, jobs, houses, open space and the CIL and s.106 contributions.

Louisa Wood, Chief Operating Officer for Mereside Medical (joint applicant for agenda item 5), who operate Staploe Medical Centre in Soham, spoke in relation to the importance of the new medical centre proposed.

She explained that the practice had spent 13 years seeking a new location for the medical centre due to the growing population and regulatory constraints. The only viable option available is for a new facility, in a new location, and that development of the medical centre is contingent on the Eastern Gateway development. Any delays in the planning process would have a direct impact on service delivery; at present, the services the medical centre can provide are limited. The medical centre development had broad support from local parishes and other partners.

Councillor Sharp queried why the medical centre development was contingent on the Eastern Gateway, and whether the access into Brewhouse Lane was a separate issue to construction of the medical centre.

In response, Louisa Wood confirmed that the land allocation for the new medical centre was within the Eastern Gateway development, and there has been no other suitable site found. The land would only be available for a medical centre if the Eastern Gateway receives permission.

Councillor Trapp referenced his concern that the medical centre was contingent on the Eastern Gateway development and considered whether it might be possible to build a centre in another local village. He then asked whether the self-build plots will be serviced, whether there will be a significant increase in traffic through Brewhouse Lane, and why different noise mitigation was required on other sites.

Richard Seamark confirmed that the self-build plots would be serviced, and that the reason for the difference in noise mitigation was due to the position of the houses on the site compared to other sites. The proposals were that the houses would sit at least 68 metres back from the road, and that the traffic speed, and therefore noise, would be lower due to calming measures.

The Interim Planning Manager reminded members that the proposals were at outline stage, and noise mitigation for properties would be fully considered at the reserved matters stage.

Councillor Trapp noted that the Local Plan envisaged 30% affordable housing. He asked why the site was only able to deliver 20%, when it included high density housing.

The Chair reminded the Committee that the level of contributions and infrastructure requirements were set out in the committee report. This was confirmed by Richard Seamark, who explained due to the infrastructure and contribution requirements, 20% is the viable affordable housing provision, which had been confirmed by a viability assessment.

Councillor Lay sought clarity on the affordable housing mix, which was confirmed as 78% affordable rental and 22% shared ownership.

The Chair invited Town Councillors Alec Jones and Keith Horgan to address the Committee.

Cllr Jones set out that there had been many concerns and objectors to the application and that the Town Council's view was that the proposals failed to address the concerns. Whilst many issues were to be resolved at the reserved matters stage, the Town Council's experience of this on past applications had not been positive.

He referred to the comments that had been submitted by the Town Council which was included in the report before Committee. This included the desire for 30% affordable housing, and that the level of social rent was below that set out in the neighbourhood plan, which was important in an area with a low wage economy. The Town Council had also raised concern about the accuracy of public rights of way information provided, the lack of genuine connection to the town and the desire for a new transport survey to be undertaken. Whilst the Town Council recognised that the Lead Local Flood Authority and Environment Agency had removed their objection through conditions, there was still concern locally over the potential for flooding and the need for robust technical solutions to avoid this.

He highlighted that the Soham and Barway Neighbourhood Plan expected 20% biodiversity net gain, not the 10% proposed, and emphasised the importance of the Town Commons, a key part of Soham's identity, and concern over their potential deterioration and the problems that could be caused by domestic pets.

Cllr Horgan confirmed that the statement provided by Cllr Jones had been agreed by the Town Council.

Councillor Trapp asked the Town Councillors if they had concerns about the potential for additional traffic on Brewhouse Lane.

Cllr Horgan referred to inconsistency between the applicant's view that there would be a 3.5% increase in traffic, and the local highways authority that there could be a 10% increase in traffic. He was not clear if this issue was resolved.

Following on, Councillor Trapp queried whether there could be a risk that Brewhouse Lane became a cut-through from the Town to the A142. In response, Cllr Horgan re-iterated there appeared to be some discrepancies in the experts view over transport flows as explained previously.

As an additional question, Councillor Trapp asked whether the site will generate employment in Soham, or will the new residents commute away from the Town.

Cllr Horgan confirmed he could only speculate in responding. He understood the plan was to use local constructors to undertake the development, and that the proposals included employment use which would create work, but it was not clear this would create a significant difference to Soham employment.

Councillor Sharp asked the Town Councillors for their view on traffic congestion at pick-up and drop-off times around local primary schools. Cllr Jones indicated that there is congestion at these times both outside the schools and in side roads, and the potential development could exacerbate this.

Leading from this question, Councillor Huffer queried which school students from the new development would attend. Cllr Horgan indicated that he understood there was capacity at the local primary schools, as The Weatheralls Primary School had been reducing its intake. He confirmed that the future of the school was not under threat because of this.

Councillor Lucius Vellacott, Ward Councillor for Soham South, addressed the Committee. He noted the significant of the applications and had met with both applicants and objectors separately to understand the issues involved.

In terms of highways, he noted that those accessing the medical centre from outside Soham would be able to use the A142 access moving forwards, but he sought more clarity on the volume of traffic due to the link to the medical centre through Brewhouse Lane.

He recognised the special nature of the Commons and noted that the proposal included contributions for the Commons. He believed that the proposals included significant benefits for the town including infrastructure funding, school contribution, safety improvements on the A142 and it would facilitate a new medical centre. He recognised that accepting the proposals would help mitigate future issues if the Council failed to meet its housing targets and it was the only way to deliver the new medical centre.

Overall, Councillor Vellacott felt there needed to be a degree of pragmatism on the application; there was much needed improvements required in Soham, and this application could help to deliver it. He encouraged the Committee to focus on the material planning considerations in reaching their conclusions.

The Chair asked Councillor Vellacott his thoughts on the potential for building the new medical centre at other sites such as Chippenham, and the impacts

on transport that would arise. In response, Councillor Vellacott confirmed his understanding was the medical centre had looked at many options, and this was the only proposal that the NHS supported and could deliver the latest facilities.

Councillor Trapp raised a point of explanation that he had previously sought clarity on whether it would be possible to build a satellite medical facility elsewhere, not to build the whole facility elsewhere. Councillor Vellacott urged caution regarding speculation on other sites as ultimately the proposals before the Committee are the only ones available and approved by the NHS.

The Chair invited Louisa Wood to address the Committee regarding the option of other sites. She reiterated Councillor Vellacott's view that this would be speculative. The medical centre had considered other branches elsewhere but it is not as cost effective to run multiple locations, and the only viable option is the one proposed.

County Councillor Mark Goldsack addressed the Committee. He reminded members of the history of the proposals on the site, which pre-dated the current local plan. The 2015 local plan included the site as part of the overall allocation within Soham to meet the Town's housing needs.

He was aware that both The Shade and Weatheralls Primary Schools had capacity with the potential to grow and confirmed that traffic could be busy around school times. The Town had a new train service and improved bus services to support its growth, but the medical centre was struggling, and residents had to go out of the area for services that could be delivered through the new medical centre. He recognised that there were still highways issues to resolve, especially how the traffic flows will change as a result of the development.

He believed that the need for housing was significant and there was a particular shortage of affordable housing, with young people moving out due to the costs of housing. The Town needed houses to help with the vibrancy of the local community. The style of the development proposed, in his view, was better than unplanned development and on balance, he was supportive of it due to the potential benefits that could arise, whilst recognising the local concerns.

Councillor Whelan raised that whilst the primary schools may have capacity, the situation with the secondary school had not been explained. She also raised whether it would be families with older children or younger children moving on to the site.

In response, Cllr Goldsack confirmed that there was capacity within Soham Village College, the secondary school. He could not know who would move on to the development, but there had been migration of families from Cambridge to other towns in the County due to house prices. Cambridgeshire County Councils had algorithms to calculate the expected numbers of children as a result of housing development. He also mentioned the potential that with

improvements in rights of way, there may be an increase in children walking to school although inevitably some parents would still drive their children.

The Planning Consultant reminded members of the contributions required from the developer for primary, secondary and early years education, which will depend on the number of houses ultimately built. The site was not on the commons, and as it was allocated within the Local Plan, could not be refused on the grounds of the allocation.

The Interim Planning Manager raised the matter of the planning appeal at Haddenham, referenced by the objectors. In that case, the proposed development sat outside the development boundary, which was the primary reason for refusal. The current proposals are within the development boundary, and so materially different to the Haddenham case.

Councillor Huffer sought clarification on the gap between the current properties on Brewhouse Lane and the proposed development, which was shown to the Committee on site plans. She then asked the Lead Local Flood Authority on how the risk of flooding would be mitigated on site.

Harry Pickford, Cambridgeshire County Council, referenced the drainage strategy and that there were concentrated areas of risk on the site. The details of how flood risk would be addressed would come forward at the reserved matters stage. There would be attenuation and swales to discharge into the water courses, the approach to which had been agreed with the Internal Drainage Board and there was potential that this would reduce the peak rates of water leaving the site. Based on the information provided to the County Council, he was confident the development would not cause flooding.

Turning to the concerns raised about Brewhouse Lane, Councillor Huffer asked the Transport team what could be done to address risks at this access point.

Jez Tuttle, Cambridgeshire County Council, confirmed that they had reviewed the walking and cycling routes, and evaluated the traffic movements. The 10% potential increase in traffic through Brewhouse Lane referenced previously by Cllr Horgan had been agreed with the applicant, and the traffic assessment was based upon this figure. He had reviewed the junction and studied data, which, taking into account national guidance, indicated that there was no grounds for objection albeit a dropped crossing for pedestrians would be provided.

Councillor Lay returned to the issue of the 20% affordable housing and how this complied with the Council's planning policy which expected 30%. The Interim Planning Manager confirmed that the local plan allowed variation from the 30% where it is suitable to do so, based on the viability of the site. He emphasised the review mechanism which would allow the Council to re-evaluate viability as the reserved matters applications came forward and to increase the volume of affordable housing if achievable.

Councillor Sharp raised concern that the proposed traffic calming measures would prevent bus access to the site. He noted that the train station would be between 1-1.5km from the site, and there may be residents who would have to use a taxi if there were no buses available.

The Planning Consultant explained that at this stage, bus routing was not planned for the site, however changes could be made through the s.278 highways agreement to the traffic calming which would allow for bus access. Shane Luck, Cambridgeshire County Council, confirmed that the infrastructure could be redesigned to support bus routing, but that the present transport strategy for the site did not require bus provision.

Councillor Sharp noted his ongoing concern this may not align to the emerging Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Combined Authority bus strategy and the importance of considering public transport. He went on to query what work highways had undertaken to review the capacity of the traffic network on the A142.

Jez Tuttle confirmed the traffic assessment reviewed junctions to the north and south of the site on the A142. Funding contributions had been requested that, alongside funding from other planning applications, would be used to increase capacity for the junctions on the A142.

Councillor Wilson thanked the highways team for attending. He raised concern that the roundabout on the A142 may encourage people to use the development to avoid traffic in Soham Town Centre. Jez Tuttle recognised this was possible but it was anticipated that the majority of vehicles will continue to use other routes, hence why contributions were required for junction capacity. Shane Luck confirmed the reserved matters will include internal road layout, which would be designed to make the option of transitioning through the site unattractive.

Councillor Trapp addressed the design of the roundabout on the A142, and how this would impact traffic flow. It was confirmed that other roundabouts were larger, as they had more points of access, and the design of the roundabout had been subject to a safety audit.

In addition, Councillor Trapp raised concerns about the affordability of the self-build housing, and what provisions were in place if the self-build plots were not sold. It was confirmed by the planning consultant that the Council's policies required the provision of self-build plots, but the Council could not control the value they were sold at. There would be provision within the s.106 to cover the eventuality that they could not be sold.

Councillor Trapp also raised concern about the scale of the other use development, and whether this was sufficient. The Planning Consultant confirmed the size of the proposed other uses and that the scale related to the need to avoid competition with the Town Centre.

In response to questions from Councillor Huffer, the Interim Planning Manager confirmed that the land was previously farmed. The Senior Ecologist explained that the risk of domestic pets to local wildlife would be addressed through the s.106 agreement, and mitigation measures could include safe zones, habitat restoration and mitigating increased nitrogen.

Regarding Councillor Huffer's question about the position of Anglia Water, the planning consultant confirmed that Anglia Water have a statutory duty to deal with water provision and sewerage on the site, and they had confirmed they have sufficient capacity to do so. At the invitation of the Chair, the applicant confirmed Anglia Water were satisfied, in part due to the proposal to include a new pumping station on the site.

Councillor Lay raised concern as to whether this site was needed if the authority had sufficient housing for the next 5 years. The Interim Planning Manager confirmed that this site was allocated in the local plan, and therefore was included in calculating the 5-year land supply. If this was not approved, then the 5-year land supply would be negatively impacted.

The Chair invited debate on the application.

Councillor Huffer indicated she had been concerned about making a decision on the application and recognised that many residents were opposed to it. However, the application included a broad range of contributions to be made, and if a similar application had come forward in other parts of the district, it could have made a big difference to local communities, who have experienced housing without the benefits it can bring. She indicated she was concerned about the existing junctions on the A142 and was hopeful that the new roundabout could increase road safety.

Councillor Huffer reminded members of the impact of not having a 5-year land supply, as it can mean housing development without the same level of benefit and can see the Council lose control over its planning process.

The Chair indicated that his views were similar to that of Councillor Huffer. He could see many benefits arising from the application including affordable housing, financial contributions for maintenance of the commons, sports facilities, education and libraries, as well as provision of community meeting space and open space land. He emphasised there was no building proposed on the Commons, and the potential for a safer link to the A142. He noted that his desire was to see 30% affordable housing but had to take into account the overall proposals available and noted the importance of the new medical centre. Overall, a lot of work had gone into the application and this was a pragmatic solution that offered many opportunities. With that in mind, he proposed to accept the officer recommendations.

Councillor Wilson seconded the Chair's proposal. He recognised the benefits of the scheme and was pleased with the biodiversity considerations being made on the site. The proposals were significantly better than many others he had seen.

Councillor Trapp indicated he could see reasons for and against the application. He noted the concerns raised by the Town Council, and the potential flooding risk. The financial contributions required meant that the proportion of affordable housing was lower, and the site was designed for cars with a lack of bus provision, which could cause problems at school times. He remained concerned with the affordability of the properties, and particularly the self-build plots. He recognised that the site was allocated in the local plan but was concerned it was ultimately not suitable.

Councillor Brown requested that the subsequent reserved matters applications were brought back to committee, which Councillors Lay and Sharp supported.

Councillor Sharp went on to raise his concerns with traffic, and how people would access the site and medical centre. He believed there was a missed opportunity to create connectivity to the railway station, and the additional traffic generated could create pressure on all junctions on the A142. He added his preference to ensure any education contributions stayed within Soham.

The Chair noted the point raised re traffic and hoped that as the application progressed, the situation over a bus service could be reviewed. He agreed with the proposal by Councillor Brown to bring reserved matters to the Committee and amended his proposal to include this; Councillor Wilson indicated his assent to this amendment.

It was resolved with 7 votes in favour, 2 against and 1 abstention that:

That planning application ref 19/01600/ESO be APPROVED subject to the signing of the S106 Agreement, extension of time to cover the period in which the S106 is finalised, the draft conditions set out in paragraph 1.2 and appendix 1 of the report, with authority delegated to the Planning Manager and Director, Legal to make minor changes to the wording of the proposed conditions; to complete the S106; to issue the planning permission and for all reserved matters applications to be referred to the Committee for determination

28. 24/00146/FUM – Soham Medical Centre

Catherine Looper, Planning Team Leader, presented the report (Z49, previously circulated) which set out the proposals for a new medical centre in Soham. She confirmed that the report covered all material and relevant matters to the application.

The main considerations for the application were deemed to be:

- **Principle of development** – The proposed development is within the development envelope, and policy SOH3 expects the land to provide for a medical centre. The proposal complies with Soham and Barway Neighbourhood Plan policies 9 and 10

- **Residential amenity** – It is recognised that there will be an impact on amenity as a result of the development. The officers set out proposals included in conditions designed to reduce the impact, including operating hours and glazing to windows.
- **Visual Amenity** – Officers set out the design of the proposals, and that landscaping would be secured through condition
- **Highways, access and movement** – The officer confirmed the access through Brewhouse Lane until such time as the site could be accessed through the Eastern Gateway site, which was considered acceptable by the local highways authority. There was an under-provision of car parking and bicycle storage on the site, however it was recognised that this is an improvement on the current provision and the variety of appointment types reduces demand for parking. The cycle parking proposals are compliant with BREEAM standards, meaning that the proposals. On balance the proposals were considered acceptable.
- **Ecology, biodiversity and trees** – It was expected the development would deliver a biodiversity net gain of 21%. Conditions are proposed to support tree species, ecology enhancements and bat surveys.
- **Flood risk and drainage** – The site is within flood zone 1. There had been no objections from statutory bodies
- **Other matters** – to ensure compliance with policy ENV 4, a condition regarding sustainable building standards (BREEAM) was included.

In summary, the proposals were recommended for approval in line with the conditions included at appendix 1.

The Chair invited Louisa Wood, on behalf of the joint applicant, Mereside Medical, to address the Committee.

Ms Wood thanked the committee for the opportunity to bring forward the site, and introduced the team accompanying her who were working to develop the proposals.

Ms Wood outlined that the current site was built to serve a population of 13,000 residents but was now servicing 24,000. The current site has a detrimental impact on service provision, staff welfare and staff retention, and it is important to keep up with housing development across the area.

The new building had been designed following feedback from a range of consultations and to comply with excellent building standards. It will enable the surgery to double its consultation capacity, reinstate services and have two dedicated rooms for trainees. It was hoped this would improve the recruitment offer for staff.

Concerns were raised relating to the proposed condition for obscured glazing on the upper floor. Whilst this was not business critical, it can impact on staff wellbeing and as a result it was requested that the condition be amended for further assessment.

In conclusion, it was highlighted that a patient survey indicated a 90% support for the centre, as well as support from the parish and town councils locally and the Integrated Care Board. The site could be operational from 2027.

Councillor Wilson asked whether introducing the new facility in Soham could reduce the use of other sites by the practice, particularly that in Haddenham. It was confirmed by Dr Richard Brixey that there would be no desire to reduce the use of other sites. In response to a query regarding the provision of dentistry, Dr Brixey confirmed it was not proposed for the centre.

Councillor Trapp asked what would happen to the former site. Richard Seamark confirmed that there was no decision at this stage and options would be considered as it became free. Councillor Trapp asked further questions relating to whether there was provision for staff parking and disabled parking. It was confirmed by Louisa Wood that there were 7 disabled spaces, which was considered adequate, and staff parking would be managed on site.

Councillor Brown queried the level of staff numbers presently on the site, given it was expected to double. It was confirmed this is difficult to estimate as staff work across different sites; Mereside Medical currently employs 163 staff overall.

Councillor Sharp complimented the design of the proposals and asked how the highways layouts would change. In response, the Interim Planning Manager demonstrated the phasing of the road layouts as the construction road was built, the previous site demolished and the Eastern Gateway access provided.

The Chair invited Councillors Alec Jones and Keith Horgan from the Town Council to speak. Cllr Horgan stressed the significance of a positive decision for the future of Soham and the surrounding district, and the Town Council was supportive of the application even though some members were opposed to the provision of housing on the Eastern Gateway site.

Cllr Horgan went on to demonstrate the level of support from local representatives and residents and highlighted that if the medical centre did not materialise, the existing surgery might have to close its books to new patients which would harm the ability of the Town to accommodate expansion, and impact on all new residents in the area. The application represented a significant milestone for the community to support better healthcare facilities.

As there were no questions for the Town Councillors, the Chair invited Councillor Lucius Vellacott, local ward member, to speak. Councillor Vellacott provided his unconditional support for the application. Community healthcare is at the heart of the Town's wellbeing, and the current facility is badly oversubscribed. The proposals provide, in his view, a beautiful setting, and the opportunity to use the latest technology. The proposals are in line with planning policy and it is the only meaningful application accepted by the NHS and that those who were against the Eastern Gateway development supported the medical centre.

To conclude, Councillor Vellacott felt the application must be approved to support the housing that had already been approved earlier in the meeting.

With no questions to Councillor Vellacott, County Councillor Mark Goldsack was invited to speak. Councillor Goldsack echoed the comments made by Councillor Vellacott. He wanted to pay tribute to the existing medical team, who are currently working to serve residents from inadequate facilities and this provides the opportunity to create a service for the whole of East Cambridgeshire.

Councillor Brown drew Councillor Goldsack's attention to the fact the existing facility was used to deliver anti-Covid vaccinations for a wider area. Councillor Goldsack felt this was a demonstration of what the team is capable of, and what they could achieve with the right facilities.

The Chair invited questions to officers. Councillor Lay raised the obscured glazing on the rear elevations of the first floor and felt that 50% obscured shading, as was present in some parts of the Council's offices, may provide a solution.

The Planning Team Leader highlighted that the issue of glazing was not straightforward. She highlighted the distance from the rear elevation of the building to nearby properties, and the potential for overlooking of gardens which could impact on personal privacy, which had been important in drawing up the proposed conditions. The Interim Planning Manager highlighted that members could seek to change the condition to require partial obscuring if they wished.

The Chair invited Louisa Wood to comment on the issue. She explained that it was important to the practice, as they cared about the work environment of staff and a view is important to that. Taking into account average heights, she suggested a compromise proposal of a clear window up to a height of 0.7m; a fully obscured window between 0.7m and 1.6m and a partially obscured window between 1.6m and 1.8m.

The Interim Planning Manager indicated that if members were supportive of this proposal, the recommendation could be revised to allow the applicant to formally submit this, and he be delegated authority to resolve this.

The Chair proposed that the officers recommendation be accepted, subject to the amendment set out by the Interim Planning Manager relating to glazing. This was seconded by Cllr Huffer.

Councillor Trapp asked whether there was provision for electric vehicle charging and photovoltaic panels on the roof. It was confirmed there was, and the whole approach was to achieve a net carbon zero site, with excellent building standards.

Councillor Wilson queried the speed of the build and whether this would have to be phased with the Eastern Gateway development. The Interim Planning Manager confirmed this was covered within the s.106 agreement, which would include requirements for site handover. It was in the interests of all parties to progress the medical centre development as soon as possible.

Louisa Wood was requested to recap the proposal for glazing, as stated above, and the Interim Planning Manager clarified the terms of the amendment to the proposal to ensure there was clarity on the vote.

It was resolved unanimously:

That planning application ref 24/00146/FUM be APPROVED subject to the recommended conditions listed in the report, with authority delegated to the Interim Planning Manager to amend condition 15, obscured glazing, subject to a proposal put forward by the applicant, and for an informative to be added to the conditions in respect of the proposals put to the Committee by the applicant, namely for obscured glazing to include clear glass up to a height of 0.7m; fully obscured glazing 0.7m-1.6m in height, and partially obscured glazing between 1.6m and 1.8m (with the pattern of obscured glazing to be agreed)

The meeting concluded at 5:38pm

Chairman.....

Date.....