

Cambridge Road, Stretham,

Application number: 24/01135/OUM

Description: Outline planning application for the erection of up to 126 homes with associated access, parking and landscaping – all matters reserved except for means of access.

The proposal is for the delivery of 126 affordable homes on land to the west of Cambridge Road, just outside the village of Stretham. The site area is 8.26 hectares. Land at this site currently benefits from planning permission as follows:

- A smaller parcel of land, fronting Cambridge Road has consent for the delivery of 19 affordable dwellings for rent and intermediate housing. The consent is subject to S106 Agreement that secures the affordable housing units. This was consented via appeal on 22 August 2023.
- Permission granted 28 November 2023 for the erection of 38 Affordable Homes on a site area of 3 hectares. The consent is subject to S106 Agreement that secures the affordable housing units.
- Permission granted 5 December 2023 on a site area of 5.18 hectares for the erection of up to 83 Affordable Homes with associated access, parking and landscaping – all matters reserved except for means of access. The consent is subject to S106 Agreement that secures the affordable housing units.

Planning policy response:

The relevant planning policy context to this application is:

East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015

- Policy GROWTH 2 ‘Locational Strategy’. In terms of its relevance to Stretham, this policy states that ‘limited development will take place in villages which have a defined development envelope, thereby helping to support local services, shops and community needs’. This policy also states that development will be strictly controlled outside defined development envelopes, providing a list of exceptional circumstances including affordable housing exception sites in line with Policy HOU 4.
- Policy HOU 4 ‘Affordable housing exception sites’. This policy supports the delivery of exception sites on sites outside of settlement boundaries subject to six criteria including

- ‘there is an identified local need which cannot be met on available sites within the development envelope (including allocation sites), or sites which are part of community-led development’
- ‘the scale of the scheme is appropriate to the location and to the level of identified local affordable housing need’.

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2024

- Paragraph 15 states the ‘plannings system should be genuinely plan-led’.
- Paragraph 82 applies to rural areas. It states that planning policies and decisions should be responsive to local circumstances and support housing development that reflect local needs and that ‘local planning authorities should support opportunities to bring forward rural exception sites that will provide affordable housing to meet identified local needs’ and consider whether allowing some market housing on these sites would help facilitate this.
- The glossary to the NPPF 2024 defines rural exception sites as ‘small sites used for affordable housing in perpetuity where sites would not normally be used for housing. Rural exception sites seek to address the needs of the local community by accommodating households who are either current residents or have an existing family or employment connection etc...’

Appropriate size of a rural exception site

Whilst national policy does not define a maximum site size for what could qualify as a ‘small site’, the site size of 8.26 hectares is exceptionally large and the strategic policy team is not aware of any other examples where a site of this size could qualify as a rural exception site.

The NPPF 2024 also supports the development of exception sites for ‘community-led development’ on sites that would not otherwise be suitable as rural exceptions sites. The NPPF 2024 does not state that a community-led development exception site needs to be small, suggesting a more flexible approach can be taken, given that the scheme would be driven by the community. However, even with this type of exception site footnote 36 states:

‘Community-led development exception sites should not be larger than one hectare in size or exceed 5% of the size of the existing settlement, unless specific provision to exceed these limits is made in the development plan’

On site area alone, describing this site as a rural exception site is unusual. It is acknowledged, that the principle of delivering a rural exception site on a site area of 8.26 hectares may have been through the existing consent.

Appropriateness of the scale of the scheme

Overall dwelling stock in Stretham parish, ward and district. As at the 2021 Census, the parish of Stretham had 2,100 residents and 890 households¹. The district was home to 87,800 people and 37,200 households.

As at the Census 2021, Stretham parish was home to under 2.5 % of the district's population and under 2.5% of the district's households.

Stretham ward covers a larger area than the parish. It comprises the villages of Witchford, Little Thetford, Wilburton and Stretham. The Census 2021 records Stretham ward as having 6,600 people and 2,800 households. Stretham ward is therefore home to 7.5% of the district's population and the district's total dwellings.

Were this scheme to come forward, and based on the 2021 Census data, the additional 126 affordable homes would increase households in the parish by 14% and increase households in Stretham ward by 4.5%.

Tenure mix in Stretham parish and district. At the time of the Census 2021, of the 890 households in Stretham parish, nearly 15% live in socially rented homes, nearly 12% lived in privately rented homes with the remaining owning their own properties. This is a profile not too dissimilar to the local authority demographic profile although the district average records a higher proportion of households in privately rented properties (16.5%).

The number of households living in affordable/social rented properties in Stretham was recorded as 132 in the Census 2021 and the number of households living in shared ownership properties is recorded as 20. An increase of 126 affordable units would increase the existing stock of affordable units by 83% and result in a total of 278 households living in affordable housing.

As a proportion of all households in Stretham parish, existing households in affordable housing tenures equates to 17% of all households. This proposed scheme would result in the proportion of households living in affordable tenures comprising 27% of all households (calculated to be 1,016 households were the scheme to be built and all dwellings occupied).

It is uncertain what the proposed tenure would be on the 126 unit scheme were it to be permitted and built out. The most recently permitted scheme requires a 50:50 split between rent and intermediate tenures. Were the same split to be applied to this proposal, this would result in a further 63 affordable/social rented properties, resulting then in an overall 195 (132 + 63) households living in affordable/social rented

¹ Completions figures published in ECDC AMR reports show 13 dwellings were completed 2021 to March 2024, indicating a small increase in the number of households in the parish since the 2021 Census.

properties. Assuming a total number of households of 1,016 (existing households plus 126), the proposed scheme would then result in 19% of households in the parish living in social/affordable rented properties.

Proportionally this would result in a concentration of affordable/socially rented properties notably higher than the local authority average (14.5%) and higher than averages in the three main settlements in the district Ely (14.3%), Soham (16.2%) and Littleport (18.1%).

Proportions of affordable/social rented properties in these conurbations are approaching those typically found in urban areas:

- City of Cambridge (where nearly 23% of households are in socially rented properties)
- Birmingham (where 23.5 % of households are in socially rented properties)

Source: [Tenure of household - Census Maps, ONS](#)²

Delivering affordable housing in East Cambridgeshire District

The annual monitoring reports published by the local planning authority record the number of affordable homes delivered across the district every year.

The majority of affordable housing that is delivered in the district is delivered as part of open market developments, the requirement for which is triggered by Local Plan Policy HOU 3 'Affordable housing provision'.

This ensures that the overall quantity of affordable housing is delivered in line with the spatial strategy set out in the 2015 Local Plan as per Policy GROWTH 2 'Locational Strategy' thereby ensuring the housing is directed to the most sustainable places in the district; those providing a focus for jobs, shops, services and choices in terms of sustainable travel.

Affordable housing delivered in villages as part of rural exceptions sites is an important component of the overall supply in the district because it is targeted towards meeting specific affordable housing needs within rural areas and on sites where development would normally not be permitted. Rural exception sites help to sustain rural communities and it is not the function of rural exception site housing to either meet needs not in the locality or to meet needs that arise within non-rural areas.

Furthermore, an oversupply of affordable housing in a rural community would, in practice, run the risk of future households who are in affordable housing need,

² www.ons.gov.uk/census/maps/choropleth/housing/tenure-of-household/hh-tenure-5a/rented-social-rented/?ew=K04000001

potentially vulnerable households, being relocated away from more sustainable locations close to shops, services, schools, places of employment, better public transport links etc.

Summary

Whilst it is recognised permissions are already in place for the delivery of a rural exception site on this site, the scale set out in this current scheme is not appropriate for the location. The proposal conflicts with Policies GROWTH 2 'Locational Strategy' and HOU 4 'Affordable housing exception sites' in the Local Plan and is not appropriate when having regard to national policy, specifically paragraph 82.

Neither is the proposal appropriate having regard to paragraph 15 of the NPPF which is clear the planning system should be genuinely plan-led. To allow development of this scale in this location would establish an unwelcome precedent and create uncertainty with respect to other locations in other villages throughout the district.

East Cambridgeshire District has an up-to-date Local Plan and maintains a 5 year land supply. Having considered the proposal, there do not appear to be material considerations that would justify a departure from the Local Plan.

Comment prepared by Senior Strategic Planning Officer, 14 March 2025