Dear Mr McFarlane

Pre application enquiry: Proposed redevelopment to form up to 36 sheltered apartments for the elderly including communal facilities, access, car parking and landscaping, Former Green Close Residential Care Home, Drakes Avenue, Sidford, Sidmouth

I thank you for the opportunity to discuss your proposals for the redevelopment of the former Green Close site in Sidford for a 36 unit retirement living development. I am sorry that you were not able to attend the meeting but nonetheless believe that this was a useful and helpful meeting. As agreed at that meeting I promised to provide a comprehensive written response to the proposal setting out in more detail the issues discussed.

Principle

The site is currently occupied by a now rather tired two storey brick building that formerly provided community care. Now sought to be released by Devon County Council, the redevelopment of the site for a sheltered housing development for the elderly appears a reasonably natural fit. Located within the built up area boundary for Sidmouth and with good access to a range of shops, services and facilities, including bus routes, the site occupies a sustainable location. As such it is my opinion that, subject to scale and design as well as addressing other constraints, the site is suitable for your proposed use.

Design and character

In terms of design the site has noticeable falls in level in both north/south and west/east directions. These changes in level provide both opportunities and challenges and I am pleased to see that attempts have been made to break up the massing of the built form as proposed; in particular the introduction of steps in the eaves and ridge height levels along the Drakes Avenue elevation. As discussed at the meeting however my preference would be to revisit this area and introduce either a further step or reposition the steps such that a break in form is read between units 26 and 27. Currently the area of building containing unit 26 stands significantly proud of the natural ground level and should be improved.

East Devon – an outstanding place

Chief Executive: Mark R Williams  Deputy Chief Executive: Richard Cohen
Implicit in my comments above is recognition that an L-shape plan form can work on the site. The development layout that you currently show allows two strong roadside frontages along both Sidford Road and Drakes Avenue which is encouraging. I recognise and support the approach that working with the levels in this configuration allows you to obtain third floor of accommodation on the inside flank of the L which essentially faces into the site.

I note that the draft elevation currently shows a traditional palette of materials, namely slate and red brick with cream brick detailing. In essence this is likely to be acceptable. However, in following a traditional building form and materials palette care would need to be taken to ensure the detailing is accurate (and respects the built form found locally) but more importantly that the colour and texture of the brick work is also considered. In the event of a successful application I would expect a need for the construction of a sample panel on site.

Taking the main elevations in turn, Drakes Avenue currently shows a lack of coherence in the various elements. Of the 5 projecting bays, only two are the same while there is also a varied assortment of detailing used on and around the windows. The introduction of dormer windows for unit 25 further adds to this piecemeal approach and therefore a more legible and coherent approach needs to be taken to this elevation.

Applicable to both this and the Sidford Road elevations is the form of the bay windows. Most projecting bays that are found locally take the form of the chamfered bay that is currently restricted to units 9, 27, and 32 and it appears unfortunate that such an attractive feature is so sparsely used. I would strongly encourage that this feature is explored further and used for other projecting bays, if possible.

On the Sidford Road elevation there is currently a strong rhythm within the main central section that helps to create a sense of place. However, windows serving the living areas appear disproportionately large for the scale of the elevation and a better void to solid ratio would be encouraged. Furthermore, the strength of the built form weakens significantly where unit 32 is proposed. While it is appropriate that the built form addresses and turns the corner at the Sidford Road/South Lawn junction, the transition between the main components on the Sidford Road elevation needs addressing.

Facing South Lawn, the use of the chamfered bay is attractive. However, this is then unfortunately diluted by the much plainer and larger gable that sits to the east. While significantly shorter, this nonetheless remains an important elevation and one which deserves careful consideration. In my opinion such care should also extend to the covered mobility vehicle housing which has the potential to appear as an 'add on' and clutter this elevation, particularly when it is read in conjunction with the glazing at the end of the corridors on both the ground and first floors which currently appears more like ventilation grills. This element of the detailed design should also be revisited.

Amenity
Generally it appears that the site layout has been designed to minimise overlooking of, and dominance upon, immediate neighbours. Having roads on three sides of the site certainly helps this but I would caution the proposed fenestration on the side gable facing 31 Drakes Avenue. While it might be possible that the lower ground floor windows could be screened by natural planting any windows serving unit 9 (at ground floor level) have the potential to cause overlooking. Whilst the window set furthest forward may be acceptable, the kitchen window causes more concern and it is my opinion that this should be repositioned to face to the rear.

Trees

During the meeting we discussed the retention of trees on site, more especially those in the south west and north east corners. I am pleased that it is your intention to retain these trees although I expressed caution, both in terms of the accuracy of their plotting on the submitted drawings and also the potential for shading of particular units that may arise and the resulting pressure to raise crown levels or undertake works to lop, top or fell them. In this regard, I would encourage a detailed assessment and justification to accompany any formal planning application. This should include a shadow cast assessment and a full arboricultural assessment in accordance with the provisions of British Standard 5837: 2012. If there is a need to fell any trees I would expect clear and detailed justification to be provided for such works.

BREEAM

Strategy 38 of the newly adopted East Devon Local Plan sets out an expectation that new development should, through a design and access statement, address issues of sustainable design and construction. In particular, there is an expectation within the Strategy that new development should aim for BREEAM 'Very Good' and I trust that this can considered within the development.

Obligations

At the meeting I raised the issue of obligations that would be necessary. While I note that your clients set out their intention to challenge these on viability grounds, I confirmed that I would include within this response the expected Section 106 contributions. In the event that the application is accompanied by a viability report we will first assess this within the team. However, in the event that it is considered necessary for us to seek an independent assessment by the District Valuer I would expect the additional costs incurred by the Council to be borne by the applicants. In addition and in light of a growing position nationally, I can confirm that we will treat any financial information that is submitted in confidence; however, in the event that a request is submitted under the Freedom of Information Act, it may be necessary to release part or all of the relevant information.

Affordable Housing

The policy expectation is that 50% of the development should be provided as affordable housing with the delivery of this being provided as onsite units. I can confirm that there is a substantial need for one and two bedroom units in Sidmouth with 24 people indicating that they would require accommodation suitable for age 60+. In response to your clients' indication that they would provide clear justification of their inability to secure the delivery of on-site affordable units, the equivalent off-site contribution as a commuted sum is calculated as £935,201.00. The
robustness of any evidence to justify the argument that such accommodation should be provided off-site will need to be clear and convincing in order for us to countenance such an approach.

Other requirements
The remaining contributions required revolve around habitat mitigation and public open space. In respect of habitat mitigation, this arises following the recognised pressures that occupiers of new development place on the European-designated heathland on Woodbury and surrounding commons. This is set out within South East Devon European Site Mitigation Strategy prepared by Footprint Ecology. In order to offset such harm a financial contribution of £625 per unit would be required.

Public open space is evidenced through the Open Space Study Review 2014 and the Playing Pitch Strategy 2015. Based on current identified needs in Sidmouth it is likely that a contribution of around £18,400.00 would be sought. This figure can be clarified and specific projects identified during the consideration of the application.

Conclusion
This response highlights a few areas of further design work that it is thought are required and sets out the contributions that would be sought in the event that an application is submitted and the proposed development considered to be acceptable. Overall, it is my opinion that the proposal has the potential to be an attractive and well considered development although I must caution that the views expressed within this letter are my personal thoughts and are not binding on the Authority and its determination of any formal application that is forthcoming. I trust that they are nonetheless of assistance.

Yours sincerely

James Brown
Principal Planning Officer
For Service Lead - Planning Strategy and Development Management