

Notes of Meeting to discuss Heritage issues relating to Site H3 – Top Croft - Chicheley Road

7th January 2022

Present: David Blandamer (DB), Senior Urban Designer; Nick Crank (NC), Senior Archaeological Officer; Martin Ellison (ME), Senior Conservation Officer; Simon Peart (SP), Conservation and Archaeology Manager; Helen Beauchamp (HB), Chairwoman NCNPSG; Steve Garner (SG) Chairman NCPC; Nic Sadeghi (NS), Vice Chairman NCNPSG.

The meeting was called following concerns raised by officers in Milton Keynes Council's Conservation and Archaeology Department in response to the pre-submission version of the North Crawley Neighbourhood Plan (NCNP). These concerns relate to site H3, also known as Top Croft, on Chicheley Road. The site is close to Moat Farm, a Grade 2 listed building and also the site of a scheduled Ancient Monument.

SP opened the meeting by explaining that he and his fellow officers (NC & ME) had been asked to look at the potential site allocations in the NCNP. Having looked at the site and surroundings, they felt that there was a need to provide some professional, technical advice regarding the allocation at site H3.

It is apparent that site H3 falls within the setting and contributes to the significance of the grade 2 listed building and scheduled ancient monument sited at Moat Farm. They are agreed that a standard development would not be appropriate on this site, however, there is the possibility that a sympathetic development on this site could make a positive contribution to the rural edge of the village, while also responding to the context of its heritage setting.

There needs to be a proper assessment of the setting of the listed building and scheduled ancient monument, in particular identifying what contributes to its setting, which aspects are important and therefore which aspects contribute to its significance.

When that assessment happens depends on what is required from the Neighbourhood Plan. If the allocation policy outlines the context of the site and the need for a sympathetic design that would be fine but if you want to include a stated number of dwellings and include an indicative design then an assessment is required to support those more detailed aspects. It is important to provide an assessment of what is appropriate, in terms of density, height of buildings, materials used, landscaping etc, within the context of the site.

If this site is allocated, the officers would like to see plans for development that indicate lower density, lower height and are sympathetic to the edge of village location and sympathetic to the heritage context. Topography is important, the site rises up to North Crawley and slopes up to the footpath. There are a lot of important design considerations.

The final NP document needs to assert that acceptable development must respond to the specific context of this site.

HB explained that many of the concerns raised have been addressed by the Steering Group (SG) in meetings with the land representative. The density, height of buildings and rural, edge of village setting have all been raised as important considerations when planning for development on this site. The AECOM report suggested that the site was suitable for 30 dwellings, we have stated that the site is suitable for 15 to 20 dwellings. The original indicative plans allocated 15 dwellings, we increased this following discussions with the landowners' representative and their design consultant who felt

that the indicative plans did not provide a financially viable proposition and were concerned that they would not be able to attract a developer.

We have stated in the policy that 1 and 1.5 storey dwellings will be acceptable. Landscaping and strengthening hedgerows is stated, as is protecting and enhancing the wildlife area at the southern edge of the site. We have stated that the lower part of the field, Bottom Croft, should not be developed in order to protect the setting of Moat Farm and also to protect Little Crawley from coalescence. This area will act as a buffer to prevent further development north.

HB explained that the SG has considered all available sites in the village. 15 sites were put forward and assessed by the SG and by AECOM. Many of them do not have suitable access and would not be supported by the highways department and so the sites that we have arrived at are the only suitable sites available. Site H3 is important to the village if we are to achieve a quantum of smaller, lower cost and affordable housing that residents have indicated is required.

SP asserted that allocations must respond to context. The Council has a statutory duty to respond to heritage issues, a lot of weight is given to this in planning applications and so we must make sure at an early stage that the allocation not only responds to the character of the village but also to the specific context of the immediate setting.

HB asked about the timing of the heritage assessments. The SG was under the impression that this was the responsibility of the developer at the application stage.

SP advised that the NP should not be open to challenge later, at the planning application stage, where a developer could interpret wording that is too vague or use an indicative design as a potential outline plan and put more weight on an indicative plan than was intended. If an indicative plan is included as part of the NP then it must be backed up by a heritage assessment that makes clear what is appropriate in this context. The purpose of the indicative plan is simply to indicate that the site is potentially viable, it does not provide an outline design.

ME noted that one of the key aspects of the site that should not be compromised is the way that the church dominates the landscape. Anything that distracts the eye from the dominance of the church would be less welcome. Materials should be considered to reflect the Moat Farm site, for example, dark stained weatherboarding and tiling to reflect the design of the converted barn would be welcomed. There is the potential to lose the rural edge to the village from loss of hedgerow and inappropriate designs around the visibility splays and so plans must include efforts to prevent the urbanising effect of new development, strengthen hedgerows etc.

HB welcomed the emphasis on vernacular materials. With regard to avoiding urbanisation, she explained that the policy states that applications should be supported by landscape plans that demonstrate how the rural edge of the village will be respected.

SG observed that the setting of Moat Farm has changed over the years, with large agricultural buildings screening the listed building and ancient monument from view on all sides except for a narrow view from the east. He questioned the lack of heritage concern expressed at the time of the applications for 76 and 15 dwellings on the field south of Moat Farm. NC explained that a heritage objection was submitted but not referred to as a reason for rejection in the appeal document. SG queried how the H3 allocation for such a small development, on someone else's land and across the road from the Moat Farm site, should be prevented given the context of previous building and applications on the site.

SP explained that the farm and its surroundings will change over time, as many farm buildings are transitory, they do not need planning permission and so cannot be controlled in the same way that more permanent dwellings can be. In the context of this allocation, the team are offering advice as to how to plan for the long term for the village in a way that protects as far as possible its important heritage and landscape features.

NS commented that we appear to be singing from the same hymn sheet. It is encouraging to hear that the site is not being rejected by the conservation and archaeology team and the comments made appear to support the stance taken by the SG. NS asked whether the team had a view on the number of dwellings that might be appropriate on the site.

SP emphasised that the key aim is to ensure that the NP has a meaningful policy to ensure that this development is specifically designed for this site and the context. SP will have a more detailed look with ME at the indicative designs and the design code documents and come back with a view on the site density.

Key issues are to ensure that it is clear that the indicative designs are just that and any application must be based on a proper assessment.

SG emphasised that whatever decision we arrive at must reflect the wishes of residents and also ensure that the site is viable to ensure that the allocation can be fulfilled.

SP agreed that while they are asserting the view of the conservation and archaeology department, which is supported by law, they recognise that the site must be attractive to a developer and it is important that the NP is able to be fulfilled.

NC advised strengthening the wording in the Design Guides document to ensure that the heritage context is prominent and ensuring that policy H3 includes the scheduled ancient monument.

SP outlined the actions to support the SG and provide specific and focused advice.

NS emphasised that timing of responses is important, it would be easy to lose momentum with residents if there is a delay in completing the consultation process.

HB thanked the team for a positive and constructive meeting.

Actions

SP and ME will assess the design codes information and provide comment and advice – by 21st Jan

HB will await advice before reviewing the wording of the policy and preamble in the NP and also the strategies and key features in the Design Guide, to reflect some of the issues raised – in particular to ensure that a focus on the heritage context is explicit.

HB to send original indicative designs to the team – 7th Jan.