

REPORT TO THE NORTHERN AREA PLANNING COMMITTEE

Date of Meeting	11 August 2010		
Application Number	N.09.01999.FUL		
Site Address	Almshouses, Lacock Road, Corsham, Wiltshire, SN13 9HF		
Proposal	Erection of Building to Form Nine One Bedroom Dwellings for Occupation by Persons with Special Housing Needs		
Applicant	The Lady Hungerford Charity		
Town/Parish Council	Corsham		
Electoral Division	Corsham Town	Unitary Member	Peter Davis
Grid Ref	387319 170161		
Type of application	Full Application		
Case Officer	Judy Enticknap	01249 706 660	Judy.enticknap@wiltshire.gov.uk

Reason for the application being considered by Committee

This application has been submitted to the Committee at the request of Councillor Peter Davis who asks members to assess the proposal in respect of the scale of development, visual impact on surrounding area, relationship to neighbouring properties, design (bulk height, general appearance), environmental/highway impact and car parking.

1. Purpose of Report

To consider the above application and to recommend that the application be referred to the Secretary of State as a departure from Policy H7, with a resolution to PERMIT subject to a S106 Agreement in respect of the Housing requirements and Open Space contribution and appropriate conditions.

The Town Council objects to the application. 92 letters of objection and 46 letters of support were received along with a petition objecting to the proposal with 1036 signatures.

2. Main Issues

This application was initially for 12 no units of housing for people with special housing needs, but has been reduced to provide 9 units. The accommodation would be provided in a single building, set within the curtilage of the Grade I listed Hungerford Almshouses and associated Grade II listed Parish Room. The site lies within Corsham Conservation Area, but outside the Corsham Settlement framework. The main issues to consider are as follows:

- Impact on the setting of the listed buildings and conservation area
- Implications for Housing Policy H7
- Affect on residential amenity of existing properties
- Loss of Trees
- Affect on traffic and parking
- Open Space Contribution

3. Site Description and Proposal:

The Lady Margaret Hungerford Almshouses are a 17th century Grade I listed building, of 2 storeys and attics constructed in stone rubble with stone tiled roofs and dressed stone surrounds to openings. It has an 'L'-plan. The almshouse range runs east, facing north to Lacock Road and presents a series of 7 coped gables with moulded window surrounds. The main frontage is to Pound Pill and comprises the Warden's House to left and schoolroom to the right. At its centre is the fine gabled entrance porch with arms and inscription, and surmounted by a timber cupula with a lead cap. To the right, the schoolroom has 2 dormer gables with two large leaded elliptical-arched 2-light windows below, and a similar window and gable dormer in the south elevation. The rear elevations are much less elaborately detailed. The almshouse range has 6 chimney gables and 3 groups of three 2-light first floor windows. At ground floor level a full-length pentice supported on timber posts, returns slightly at the rear of the Warden's House. Attached to the lean-to are a series of small walled private yard areas for the use of the occupants of each almshouse. To the east there is a small communal privy (currently used as laundry room).

The Parish Room, which is Grade II listed, was constructed further along Pound Pill in the later 17th century as an outbuilding to the Hungerford Almshouses (housing livestock). The gabled dormers and mullioned windows, and central chimney gable with diagonal shafts to the rear (east elevation) reflect those to the Almshouses, although generally detailing is less elaborate.

A rubble stone wall, with timber entrance gates, has been constructed between the southwest corner of the Warden's House/Schoolroom and the northwest corner of the Parish Room.

The almshouse range has been in continuous use for its original purpose since it was erected, in the mid 17th century and currently provides 11 units of affordable accommodation, with the Warden's House providing another 2-person unit. The Parish Room was converted to provide four additional flats approximately 10 years ago.

Externally, there has been virtually no change to the original buildings. The garden area to the south of the Almshouses, and extending mid-way along the west elevation of the Parish Room, remains undeveloped; it is mainly laid to grass, but contains a mature Liriodendron tree and other mature fruit trees and shrubs. The west boundary of the garden area is defined by a natural stone wall. From the South east corner, the south boundary is defined for most of its length by hedgerow planting. There is a further plot of land extending southwards from the hedgerow line, adjacent and parallel to Pound Pill, which includes the land on which the Parish Rooms stand, and which is largely enclosed by stone walls, but which formerly gave access to further land to the south. Maps of C19 date show all the boundaries which define the application site as existing (although the south west corner is now occupied by a garage associated with a house to the south). At that time the land to the south and east was open fields. There has been ad-hoc development in the C20, and neighbouring sites immediately to the south and east are now occupied by two C20 detached dwellings in large gardens (Amberley and Gatesgarth respectively).

The site lies within Corsham Conservation Area. The Almshouses dominate the view from South Place, at the end of south drive of Corsham Court (as well as views towards the junction of Lacock Road and Pound Pill). There is no view into the site from Lacock Road, and only a limited view into the site from Pound Pill, which is virtually lost when the entrance gates are closed. There are long-distance glimpses from further south along Pound Pill across residential gardens.

4. Relevant Planning History		
Application Number	Proposal	Decision
94.2328 and 94.2329	Internal Alterations; Alterations to convert Parish Room to 4 no dwellings	Approved

5. Proposal

The proposal is to construct a building to provide single-person units of low-cost housing, along the south boundary of the garden area. The original proposal was for 12 units, in a building constructed of natural rubblestone with cast stone dressings and oak windows, and a lead roof. Officers asked for amendments to address neighbour issues and concerns in respect of the proposed use of non-traditional materials. The revised scheme has been reduced to provide 9 units, and with natural stone dressings to all openings in place of the previously-proposed cast stone.

The accommodation would be provided in a single long range opposite the almshouses, set so that the north elevation aligns with the northernmost wall of the Parish Room. The width of the range would be slightly lower than the principal almshouse range, but the eave and ridge are set lower. The building would provide 3 flats with wheelchair access at ground floor level. Above these 6 units would each have principal living spaces at 1st floor level, with bed and bathrooms in the roofspace; these upper spaces would be lit and ventilated via glazed louvres, set in plane with the roof covering. Access to the ground-floor flats would be via a C21st "pentice", reflecting the historic detail to the almshouses. Access to the upper floor flats would be via external stairs set against the end gables, with an open 1st floor corridor to the south elevation. To avoid overlooking to the south (Amberley) and west (Parish Rooms), the existing hedgerow would be strengthened, and timber screening has been introduced to the walkway and external stairs.

The site plan identifies 2 car park spaces which would be available for disabled drivers, and an area for bicycles/waste storage between the SW corner of the building and Amberly's garage.

Documentation supporting the revised application includes the Planning Design and Access statement, which sets out the design approach and shows how the scheme has been developed to take account of the special significance of the site. Whilst this makes reference to the new PPS5, the agent was also asked to provide further information as required under PPS5 in relation to the significance of the Heritage Asset, and why the proposal is considered to be acceptable in terms of its impact. This has been provided. It acknowledges the high significance of the Almshouses and analyses the proposals in the context of policies HE7.2 (significance); HE7.4 (desirability of sustaining or enhancing significance); HE7.5 (effect of new development); HE9.4 (public benefit) and HE10.1 (setting). It also considers the proposal in the context of the Development Plan Policies and the Corsham Conservation Area Statement. It concludes that the proposals would have the following benefits:

- enhance the setting of the listed buildings and the conservation area by shielding views to the south and east.
- provide a new high quality building which would respect its historic neighbours
- provide public benefit in the form of social housing, and help secure in perpetuity the use of the site and historic buildings, in their original uses.

Currently the almshouses provide 11 units of affordable housing. The proposal (as amended) would provide 9 additional units, which would be available for single people who are unable to provide themselves with housing through the open market, and who do not qualify for social housing from any other source; 3 of the units would provide units of disabled accommodation. It is argued that this form of accommodation cannot be provided within the Almshouses without causing harm to their special character. The Trust's charitable scheme limits use of the site for people with a connection to Corsham, and the Trustees have advised that they have no land elsewhere that could be developed instead of the application site.

As the site lies outside the settlement framework, officers asked the agent to provide further information to demonstrate the need for affordable housing in Corsham, and also to undertake a sequential survey to justify why the application can be considered a rural exception site. Two additional reports have been submitted:

1. A Housing Need and Supply Assessment

This makes reference to the last housing needs survey which was commissioned by NWDC in 2005, and which indicated a gross annual affordable housing need for one bedroom dwellings in Corsham of 110 units. The report updates this to take account of recent housing supply and affordability, and concludes that there is an annual shortfall of 75 units which cannot be addressed by increasing the percentage of affordable housing achieved through planning gain. A comparison with other communities in the former District of North Wiltshire has been made, taking account of national indices of deprivation for access to housing which indicates that, of the 85 areas in North Wiltshire District, only 29 have a worse ranking.

2. The Assessment of Alternative Development Sites in the framework boundary for Corsham. This has been undertaken in 2 parts:

- i) Based on Policy H5 of the Local Plan, which requires affordable housing provision on sites exceeding 14 units or where the site exceeds 0.5ha; and in the context of Wiltshire Council's Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). This identified 2 sites within the settlement framework which would potentially produce 17 units of affordable housing. There is one current approval with a S106 Contribution from smaller sites.
- ii) Assessment based on the current open market value of sites and of one-person units, and taking account of current planning policy and Central Government Guidance on housing densities. It concluded there was potentially one current planning permission within the settlement framework area which could provide a single 1 bedroom flat for a person in housing need. Following a recent approval for 2 dwellings at Pickwick, the land was sold for a value exceeding £300,000, and recent asking prices for one bedroomed flats in Corsham ranged between £85,950 and £139,950. The current scheme would not be comparable because the Trustees would not have to meet the acquisition costs for the land.

Corsham Estate has sent a representation objecting to the proposal, and advising that the Estate has offered the Trustees an alternative site within the Settlement Framework which they consider could accommodate 12 single –person units. The land is currently used as allotments, and the Estate has advised that it would replace the lost allotments on a site off Lacock Road. Officers asked the agent to explain why this offer was not acceptable to Trustees, and they have responded that:

- i) The Estate's proposed contractual arrangement would preclude further affordable housing on the existing site. Trustees feel that by limiting use of the assets this way, they would be failing in their duty to provide affordable housing for people connected with Corsham; and also doubt if the Charity Commissioners would give approval.
- ii) They question whether planning permission would be given for the alternative site (issues raised include effect on conservation area, difficult access to site from Grove Road, and loss of trees).
- iii) Additionally, both the Trustees and their agent argue that their surveys demonstrate that the present planning process is unable to provide sufficient 1-person units to meet the identified need in Corsham. They argue that each site should be considered on its merits, and that both the sites should come forward for development to meet demonstrable housing need.

They acknowledge the need for a S106 Agreement if Permission is granted, in order to ensure that the dwellings remain affordable in perpetuity, and that this may include a nominations agreement with the Council, and management details.

An arboriculturalist's report has also been submitted. This indicates removal of a mature cherry and a smaller fruit tree and pruning (including root pruning) of the Liriodendron.

6. Consultations

English Heritage: In relation to the original scheme, considered that the proposed scheme would not have an adverse effect on the setting of the listed buildings. They noted that whilst the building has greater depth than the almshouses the eaves line is lower and overall height similar to the host building. It has a more domestic scale and proportions, and although the architectural emphasis is more horizontal with less architectural emphasis it would not dominate the existing and accords with the architectural hierarchy on the site. At detailed level they considered it necessary to use natural stone dressings, and to clarify detailing to the rear first floor open corridor. They point out that lead is not traditionally used for major roof slopes on residential buildings, but appreciate that it may be appropriate as the roof design includes rooflights and louvres; and do not consider it will have a negative impact on the overall design and context.

In relation to the revised scheme they note the change from 12 to 9 units to take account of neighbour issues; and that since submission of original proposals PPG15 has been replaced with PPS5, of which policies HE7.5, HE9.5 and HE10 are particularly relevant to this application. In this context, they note that the Almshouses are highly significant, and that considerable significance of the site lies in its aesthetic and evidential value (ie the design and fabric of the building). The most prominent and important views are of the street frontages. The rear façade is less visually prominent, although visible from neighbouring properties and there appears to be no significance to the existing south boundary of the site. They are of the view that a building of the size and scale proposed in this location will not have an adverse impact on the setting of the heritage asset, (the Almshouses and parish rooms). Whilst it would form an enclosure to the rear, this could have the benefit of forming a quadrangle arrangement with central communal garden; and would create a more formal architectural arrangement with the neighbouring Amberley House. There would be a benefit of perpetuating the historic use of the site for social housing. Their previous comments on the design approach are unchanged, and on the basis that the building would be constructed in natural stone, they consider that the design is appropriate.

Corsham Town Council: Objects – proposal is overlarge of inappropriate design; it would be detrimental to setting of the Grade I listed building and neighbouring properties. It would be contrary to PPS5; and to policies C3, H8, HE1, HE3, HE4 in the North Wilts Local Plan 2011.

Housing and Social Inclusion Officer: Supports the Proposal. Records show there are 208 single people in housing need in Corsham; 43 have a local connection. The scheme would be managed by the Trust with a nominations agreement and rents are affordable. The proposed mix and quality standards meet both the Council's needs and requirements of the Housing Communities Agency (HCA). She confirms her view that the supplementary reports demonstrate a need for the proposed accommodation.

Landscape Officer: Advises that the Liriodendron has limited visual amenity value and some defects, so it would be inappropriate to protect it with a TPO. She suggests that a condition to protect it during construction works would be appropriate.

County Archaeologist: Has no comments

Highways: Based on the specific nature of the residential use and its favourable location in relation to local facilities, no objections.

7. Publicity

The application was advertised by site notice, press advert and neighbour consultation. Following submission of the revised scheme all people who made representations on the original proposal were notified by letter of the revised plans.

A nett response was received of 92 letters of objection and 46 letters of support. A petition objecting to the proposal, signed by 1036 people, was also received.

Summary of key relevant points raised:

OBJECTORS

- The development will cause serious harm to the significance of the Grade I Almshouses and site, altering historic layout of spaces. It will harm the conservation area and harm tourism.
- Any development will harm the setting of the LBs – the low density is important to the context and this will be lost.
- Proposal does not comply with standards set out in Corsham Conservation Area Statement, or the latest Government guidance set out in PPS5
- Design of building is poor – too large and overbearing, dull, devoid of embellishments, uses inappropriate materials, particularly the lead roofs; and the resulting collegiate form is not relevant to this site.
- Loss of trees (particularly the Lirodendron), the canopies of which are inaccurately plotted; and of the historic garden
- The proposal does not fit the site , and windows will be shaded by the landscape screening)
- The local community has not been adequately consulted – raising concerns re: public consultation and transparency.
- The site is outside the settlement framework, and Policy H7 is not relevant in this locality as Corsham is a town, not a village.
- The Trustees have been offered an alternative site within the settlement framework, which they have not seriously considered.
- It is not a sustainable development
- Loss of privacy and amenity to neighbours. Inadequate information provided re: height differential with neighbouring sites.
- Inadequate car parking
- No clear and convincing argument for the proposal

SUPPORTERS

- Design is carefully considered, elegant and sensitive to the setting of the LB's
- It is not a pastiche and will not be intrusive, except possibly to one neighbour until the hedge grows.
- There is a significant housing need in Corsham, particularly within the vulnerable community sector, which this development would help address.

8. Planning Considerations

A. Impact on the setting of the listed buildings and conservation area

The relevant local plan policy is HE4 DEVELOPMENT, DEMOLITION OR ALTERATIONS INVOLVING LISTED BUILDINGS which states

Development or alteration affecting a listed building will only be permitted where it preserves or enhances the building, its setting and any features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses.

Para 7.11 states: Where a planning application is made for development within the curtilage or vicinity of a listed building, the planning authority will take into account the effect of the proposal on the setting of the listed building.

Supplementary Planning Guidance is provided by the Corsham Conservation Area Statement (CCAS). In the townscape analysis, this recognises the importance of the Almshouses in views towards the site, but does not highlight any views into the site itself. It recommends avoidance of all but small scale development in the Lacock Road area and the preservation of important edge of town views. It also urges maintenance and appropriate usage of the almshouses. It also provides general guidance on the retention of important trees.

It is considered that on balance the proposed development satisfies these criteria.

Since 21st March 2010, Central Government advice is provided by Planning Policy Statement 5 – Planning and the Historic Environment. This sets out policies on matters which must be taken into account when considering proposals affecting a heritage asset or its setting. Proposals need to be justified, and an assessment made of their effect on the significance of the heritage asset. Policies HE7.2, HE7.5, HE9.4, HE 9.5 and HE10.1 are considered most relevant to this case. Officers concur with the views provided by English Heritage set out above, and additionally have the following comments in the context of PPS5:

Significance

“HE 7.2 In considering the impact of a proposal on any heritage asset, local planning authorities should take into account the particular nature of the significance of the heritage asset and the value that it holds for this and future generations. This understanding should be used by the local planning authority to avoid or minimise conflict between the heritage asset’s conservation and any aspect of the proposals.”

Officer response:

Clearly the Almshouses are of the highest significance, as is reflected by their Grade I status. The volume of representations which this application has engendered is indicative of the regard in which they are held locally.

New Development

“HE7.5 Local planning authorities should take into account the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to the character and local distinctiveness of the historic environment. The consideration of design should include scale, height, massing, alignment, materials and use.”

Officer response:

The proposed new building has been carefully considered within its historic context. Whilst it is a contemporary design, this has been informed by careful analysis of the heritage assets to which it relates in terms of proportions, scale, materials and design; and elements such as the pentice and rhythm of the openings on the almshouses are mirrored in the design of the front (north) elevation. It is not over-elaborate, and the quality of detailing will be critical, but it is felt that it relates well to the Grade I and II listed buildings visually and in terms of their hierarchical relationship. The architect was asked to try and lower the eave detail so that it matched that of the Parish Room, but is unable to make further reductions to the height. Whilst lead was not traditionally used for roofing subservient buildings, this choice of material enables the rooflights and louvres to be neatly detailed, and it is not considered inappropriate or too “heavy” on a contemporary building. It is concluded that the high quality of the design will make a positive and enduring contribution to the integrity of the historic group, and the settings of the listed buildings and the Conservation Area.

Public Benefit

“HE9.4 Where a proposal has a harmful impact on the significance of a designated heritage asset which is less than substantial harm, in all cases local planning authorities should:

(i) weigh the public benefit of the proposal (for example, that it helps to secure the optimum viable use of the heritage asset in the interests of its long-term conservation) against the harm; and

(ii) recognise that the greater the harm to the significance of the heritage asset the greater the justification will be needed for any loss.”

Officer response:

The loss of openness may be considered to cause some harm to the significance of the asset. However it is felt that this would be outweighed by the public benefit which derives from the additional low-cost units, which would help sustain the long-term use of the site for social housing and the viability of the Heritage assets affected by the proposals.

Effect on Conservation Area:

HE9.5 Not all elements of a World Heritage Site or Conservation Area will necessarily contribute to its significance. The policies in HE9.1 to HE9.4 and HE10 apply to those elements that do contribute to the significance. When considering proposals, local planning authorities should take into account the relative significance of the element affected and its contribution to the significance of the World Heritage Site or Conservation Area as a whole. Where an element does not positively contribute to its significance, local planning authorities should take into account the desirability of enhancing or better revealing the significance of the World Heritage Site or Conservation Area, including, where appropriate, through development of that element. This should be seen as part of the process of place-shaping.

Officer response:

The site is only publicly visible from Pound Pill above the c2m high boundary wall and also through the vehicular entrance. In addition, it is acknowledged that parts of the building are often open to the public. From the entrance you can also glimpse the gardens and houses immediately adjacent to the site, and these views will be replaced by a view to the new building, but it is considered that this will positively contribute to the significance of the conservation area. Loss of the fruit trees is acknowledged, however it is suggested that any adverse impacts could be addressed by new planting.

Setting

“HE10.1 When considering applications for development that affect the setting of a heritage asset, local planning authorities should treat favourably applications that preserve those elements of the setting that make a positive contribution to or better reveal the significance of the asset. When considering applications that do not do this, local planning authorities should weigh any such harm against the wider benefits of the application. The greater the negative impact on the significance of the heritage asset, the greater the benefits that will be needed to justify approval.”

Officer Response:

Historically, the views to the south and east were across open fields, and it is felt that the setting was harmed by the C20 development. Whilst the proposal will alter the setting to a courtyard form, it is felt this will make a positive contribution to the setting of the heritage asset

B. Housing Policy H7

As the site lies outside the Development Framework, the proposal needs to be considered in the context of Policy H7 which states:

As an exception to normal planning policies small affordable housing developments will be permitted within and adjoining the villages in the District provided that:

- i) There is a demonstrable local need for affordable housing which cannot otherwise be met; and**
- ii) The scheme must be capable of implementation and proper management to ensure that the benefits of the provision of affordable housing to meet local needs will be held in perpetuity.**

In this context, a recent appeal decision for affordable housing on an exception site in Cricklade is relevant. This appeal was dismissed by the Inspector. He noted that Policy H7 derives from PPS3, but this only provides for rural exception sites to villages, not towns; although this view may change in the context of the emerging Core Strategy for Wiltshire (and changes to planning guidance). He noted that the appeal application had not been supported by a recent housing needs survey, and considered that if housing were to be allowed outside the settlement framework there should be a strong and compelling argument for affordable housing which should be “targeted at a specific, local and serious problem”.

There are other exception sites which are less sensitive than the application site, and indeed the Pound Mead site which benefits from planning permission for 43 dwellings could deliver substantially more than the 13 affordable units required. Moreover, Corsham will be subject to housing allocation in the Spatial Plan, and this could resolve currently-identified housing need. However, In response to the supplementary housing reports submitted by the applicants, and taking advice from Housing officer, it is acknowledged that there is an on-going and unmet need for affordable housing for single people in Corsham which this application seeks to provide.

C. Affect on residential amenity of existing properties

Officers considered that the original scheme for 12 units was over-intensive development, which caused harm to residential amenity because of the proximity of the building to the Parish Rooms and dwelling to the south. In particular there were concerns of overlooking from the rear 1st floor walkway and west access stair. The reduced length of the revised scheme is considered to improve the relationship to these neighbouring dwellings. Whilst the range is very close to the boundary, given that it will be on the north side the loss of light to the south property (Amberley) is not considered to be an issue. Also, whilst the range will impact on their outlook the reduced length will reduce the overbearing impact. There is not considered to be any unreasonable harm to the amenity of Gatesgarth to the east; no habitable rooms would be overlooked, and the new development would be adjacent to the service part of the site rather than garden area. The proposed timber screens to the stairs and rear 1st floor open corridor have been designed to prevent overlooking.

D Affect of Proposal on Trees

In the Corsham Conservation Area Statement trees within the site are identified as significant, and the majority of these will remain. Where fruit trees are to be removed a landscape condition requiring replanting would be appropriate.

E Affect on traffic and parking

This is a town centre site, and the applicants are not required to provide additional parking. In order to comply with DDA requirements, an area for 2 disabled car parking spaces has been identified on the plan, and a condition is recommended to ensure these are properly marked out and retained for the use of disabled residents.

F Open Space Contribution

The agent has confirmed that, if it is considered necessary, the applicants are willing to make an open space contribution. This could form part of the S.106 Agreement.

10. Recommendation

The application be referred to the Secretary of State as a departure from Policy H7 of the North Wiltshire Local Plan 2011 with a resolution that the Application be permitted subject to:

- completion of a legal agreement to secure housing requirements and contribution to public open space
- appropriate conditions

for the following reason:

There is a strong and compelling argument for affordable housing of the type which would be provided by the proposed development, which justifies it being considered as an exception site within the open countryside, as a departure from Policy H7 in the North Wiltshire Local Plan 2011. The proposal is for a building of high quality design which is considered to take full account of the heritage asset and its setting, as required under Policy HE4 in the North Wiltshire Local Plan 2011 and Policies HE7.2, HE7.5, HE9.4, HE 9.5 and HE10.1 in PPS5.

Appendices:	None
Background Documents Used in the Preparation of this Report:	Drgs: 3006A, 3007A, 3008A, 4005A, 4006A, 4007C, 4008C, 4009A, 4010A, 4012B, 4013A – all received on 13.5.2010. Docs: 1.20, 1.26, 2.02, 2.07, 2.32, 3.04, 3.05, 4.01, 4.02, 4.03, 4.04, 4.05, 4.07, 4.08, 5.01, 6.02, 7.01

