

Proof of Evidence

Mr Steve Collins

Section 78 Appeal by Headlands Way Limited

Land North of Chiswell Green Lane, Chiswell Green, St Albans AL2

Planning Inspectorate Ref: APP/B1930/W/22/3312277

LPA Ref: 5/2021/3194

Personal Introduction

1. My name is Steve Collins. I am a former world boxing champion and have lived at St Stephens' Farm for over 20 years. For the record, I have never sought to sell my land. I have had many offers over the years, but refused them all. I am fortunate enough that I do not have to sell and have never been motivated to sell. Selling is not on my agenda.
2. As the owner of the Appeal Site and, effectively, the Appellant, I wanted to say a few words to explain my personal motivation in bringing forward the Appeal scheme - what I am proposing, and why I am proposing it.
3. However, whilst I know a great deal about boxing, I know very little about the technicalities of the planning system and so, just as I used to have my seconds around to support me in the ring, I have surrounded myself with the right experts for this Appeal – they are my seconds for this Inquiry.

The Motivation

4. In 2019/20, the global Covid-19 pandemic reached the UK and we all witnessed, first-hand, our nation come to screeching halt. The message was: *“Stay at home. Protect the NHS. Save Lives.”*
5. Although I am a former world champion boxer, that counted for nothing. I was just as exposed and vulnerable as any of my neighbours. I am not ashamed to say that the early days of the pandemic were frightening. I am used to weighing

up my opponent before knocking him out. But this was different. This was an invisible and unknown enemy.

6. Households gathered around television screens to watch and listen to Professor Whitty's urgent public information addresses. The TV became the critical communication tool and through it we all watched, in real-time, our nations' modern heroes mobilise on our behalf.
7. The military repatriated loved ones trapped overseas. They built, at pace, the Nightingale Hospitals. Incredibly, from scratch they set up swabbing centres across the UK. Other Government Agencies scaled up operations too, and both Local and National Government put in place responses to support and protect society.
8. We watched in awe as the NHS moved onto something akin to a war footing. The NHS was our front line. Although ill-equipped and fighting an unknown, unseen enemy, they stepped up nonetheless; working tirelessly and learning as they went along, mending to make do. We saw nurses using bin liners as PPE. Many could not return home for fear of transmission of the virus and, sadly, many paid the ultimate price. There was no vaccine at the start.
9. All non-essential work was halted and furlough was introduced. However, our Key Workers worked single-mindedly, focused on the essential needs of society. Pharmacies remained open. Firefighters remained on duty. The full blue light service was maintained. Teachers opened schools to support children whose parents were working in essential services on our behalf. Others delivered teaching on-line. Local Government mobilised to support the local community during this desperate time of need.
10. It was because of this that our communities did not crumble despite what was, essentially, a national curfew. Our Key Workers continued to provide the essential local services upon which we all depend; the services which underpin society, keep us safe, keep us secure, and must be there to be relied upon in our hour of need.

11. I know first-hand that talk is cheap and it is actions that matter. It was not words that protected the NHS or saved lives, built our Nightingale Hospitals, ran the Hospital Wards, or worked tirelessly in the Intensive Care Units. It was not words that developed Covid-19 tests, swabbed the nation, and developed a vaccine. None of this happened accidentally. It was accomplished by the unselfish actions of our Key Workers.
12. And so, in 2020, I was one of the many millions who stood outside on a Thursday evening and clapped, banged pans, and made a big noise - all to show our collective support for essential local workers. That was all many of us could do to show our national appreciation for local heroes.
13. However, as the vaccines rolled out and the Country started to open up once more, I reflected on our Key Workers how I might be able to provide practical, long-term, support and recognition for them. I love this Country, it has been very good to me, and I have always wanted to play my part.
14. Being a former world champion boxer, I understand about hard work, dedication, and commitment, and how much this matters. And if the hard work, dedication, and commitment of Key Workers has always really mattered, the pandemic brought that home to all of us in ways which many of us will never forget and none of us ever should. That is why I wanted the nation's clapping, my clapping, to count for something. And so I decided to make a difference; I decided it was time for action.

Action Not Words: The Proposal

15. Nearly everyone I speak to wants to own their own home. However, in St Albans many Key Workers do not earn enough to buy a house or a flat. That is why I wanted to build houses and apartments on my own private land, at St Stephens Farm, and not only dedicate them exclusively for local Key Workers and military personnel but discount them so that they were affordable to many who could not otherwise buy here.
16. To these ends, I found myself a Planning Agent to get the ball rolling. My Agent told me that the idea of delivering a new housing to support those who have

served so bravely was not new; apparently. in 1919, following the Great War, Dr Christopher Addison, the first Housing Minister, drove through a policy called “*Homes fit for Heroes*”. Those homes, my Agent told me, were affectionately referred to as “*Addison Homes*” – large, new, social houses on spacious estates.

17. My Agent also confirmed that St Albans Council had defined what constitutes a Key Worker as long ago as 2004. Unlike the national policy definition, however, I was told that the St Albans’ definition did not include military personnel which disappointed me for two reasons: first, they, along with many other Key Workers, played an essential role in tackling the pandemic; and second, I am proud to serve this Country as a Reserve Junior Non-Commissioned Officer in the 15th Company Irish Guards. However, my Agent also advised me that the Council had signed a Military Covenant and, along with the national policy definition of “*essential local workers*”, that provided a route to make sure that military personnel could also be included.
18. My Agent also made it clear that whilst the household earnings of many Key Workers was too low to be able to afford to buy a home in St Albans (the open market prices around here have sky-rocketed), often those household earnings were too high for them to access social rented housing either. If a Key Worker household earns over the £69,608 limit, it seems, that household is excluded from accessing social rented homes in St Albans altogether.
19. If local Key Workers cannot afford to buy a home of their own in or around St Albans, and if they cannot access social rented housing either, then – to my mind, at least - something must be done. Otherwise, many Key Workers will feel compelled to move away when it is essential that those workers live locally, close to where the work, and in the same community as those they serve. And if they do move away, our local Hospitals and other essential services will become even more understaffed than they are already.
20. I feel privileged and honoured to be in a fortunate position to offer a partial solution to this – a route to affordable home ownership for many Key Worker households in that Catch-22 situation. I can do this because I already own the

land, and I do not need to sell it in order to ensure that discounted market homes are developed. That is in contrast to the usual business model in which, typically, a developer buys the land once planning permission is granted (often paying a very high price), and that land cost is included in the final sale price of the home. At St Stephens Farm, however, I own the land already. I do not have to, and will not, sell to a developer. And owning the land outright allows me to build affordable, discounted, home ownership houses and apartments for local Key Workers¹ in St Albans - the City they serve and in which they want to live - helping them on to a local property ladder which, otherwise, they could not afford to climb.

21. To be absolutely clear:
 - a. I will build quality housing that will be restricted to, and exclusively for, Key Workers as defined by the Council way back in 2004, plus military personnel; and
 - b. I will discount the homes on Addison Park by at least a third, making them affordable and accessible to many essential local workers and military personnel who would otherwise have to move away from St Albans to own a home.
22. If, for example, a property on Addison Park has an open market sale value of £600,000, it will be discounted by at least a third and made exclusively available to essential local Key Workers and military personnel for no more than £400,000. A £300,000 home would be discounted in the same way, reduced by a third and made available to essential workers for £200,000, saving £100,000. If the property is sold in the future, the sale will be restricted and offered exclusively to a local Key Worker, or military personnel, and the same level of discount will be applied. Addison Park will comply fully with all the planning rules and regulations.
23. This is not about maxing out profits; I am not interested in that. This is about doing right by those who did right by us. It is about actions not words. I am not

¹ And Military personnel.

remotely precious about the business model either; I expect, indeed I hope, to see this emulated across the Country, and especially in the most expensive parts of the UK where the need to make housing affordable to Key Workers is greatest.

24. Addison Park is the complete opposite of NIMBY-ism, which is just one of the reasons that I want it to look beautiful. Since I am not selling or moving from my land, this development will be in my own back yard. I do not want highly dense housing and insisted upon this with my Agent. I want plenty of space and light. I want the homes to be really well built and have nice, proper gardens. I will be ambling through Addison Park to the Three Hammers Pub, after all, and I want that stroll to be an enjoyable meander through an aesthetically pleasing, wonderful, environment. Unlike many schemes for affordable housing, these will be high-quality homes at a density that is right for Chiswell Green.
25. This leads me on to my proposal for a Memorial Park. I understand that the Secretary of State, Michael Gove MP, has recently started consulting on Memorial Parks to remember the efforts of many Key Workers during the pandemic. This is both welcome and refreshing and gets my complete backing. Indeed, my original application for Addison Park had already included a dedicated Memorial Park of the very type now envisaged and before Government had even suggested this.
26. I am passionate about celebrating the achievements of this great Country. I want all blue light, military and other essential services to be recognised and remembered. I applaud the Secretary of State for his commitment and look forward to working personally with his Department on the development of our own Memorial Park.

Conclusions

27. It is heart-breaking that many Key Workers, the very people we rely on to protect us and to care for us, are forced to move further and further away from where they call home. These are the professional, skilled, and highly motivated people that we clapped and stood outside our own homes for, in solidarity, during the early heights of the pandemic. They may not be the most vulnerable

in society, but they are certainly amongst the most valuable. And so they should be valued; they should be able to live locally, among the communities that they serve. However, currently, many cannot; or, if they can, will not be able to if and when their households expand.

28. A lot of Key Workers in and around St Albans find themselves in this position. St Albans is right up there with the most expensive parts of the UK. Many Key Workers cannot afford an open market home here, and yet are excluded from social rented housing as well. If a Key Worker household cannot access, locally, either social rented accommodation or home ownership at open market prices, they need an alternative. Something must be done.
29. And so Addison Park is about action over words; pragmatism over procrastination. It provides a partial solution, one that goes some way to bridge the huge gap that local essential workers face. It cannot fix everything, such is the scale of the problem in St Albans. However, it will fix things for around 330 Key Worker households and their families, outstripping by some considerable distance anything St Albans District Council has delivered since defining Key Workers in 2004.
30. Put shortly, Addison Park provides routes to affordable home ownership for 330 essential local worker households: *local homes for local heroes*.