

CD 4.77.1

Proof of Evidence - Summary

Brian Parker BA (Hons) MSc MRTPI

The Planning Crisis in St Albans and the implications for Key Worker housing

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

March 2023



MRP Planning 10 Orient Close, St Albans, Hertfordshire AL1 1AJ

Personal Statement

I have a BA (Hons) in Geography and an MSc in Urban and Rural Planning and am a Chartered Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute. I am familiar with the St Albans District and its 1994 Local Plan and, since 2009, with the Council's attempts to adopt a new Local Plan.

This Proof of Evidence has been prepared and is given in accordance with the guidance of the RTPI's Code of Professional Conduct (Feb 2023) and I confirm that the views expressed are my genuine professional opinions.

Declaration of Interests:

Through my company, McPartland Planning Limited, I have funded the costs of the Application and Appeal and will benefit financially if outline permission is granted.

As stated on the Application Form, I am related to an employee of St Albans City and District Council.

Brian Parker

March 2023



Introduction

- 1.1 My name is Brian Parker. I have a BA (Hons) in Geography and an MSc in Urban and Rural Planning and I am a Chartered Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute. I am familiar with the St Albans District and its 1994 Local Plan and, since 2009, with the Council's attempts to adopt a new Local Plan.
- 1.2 My credentials are set out in my main Proof of Evidence which has been prepared and is given in accordance with the guidance of the RTPI's Code of Professional Conduct and I confirm that the views expressed are my genuine professional opinions.
- 1.3 This document is a Summary of my Proof which considers the chronic Planning Crisis in St Albans and the serious implications that crisis has for the housing of essential local workers.

The Proposal

- 1.4 Addison Park is named after Sir Christopher Addison, the country's first Health and Housing Minister who championed the "homes fit for heroes" policy after the First World War.
- 1.5 This unique scheme seeks to redress some of the serious imbalance caused by the Council's indifference to Key Workers who are, by definition, "essential for the balanced and sustainable development of the local community" (CD 4.77.2, Glossary). It does so by delivering up to 330 affordable homes exclusively for them, and by discounting each by at least a third (CD 4.21, p. 6).
- 1.6 The Indicative Proposed Site Layout, Rev. D shows how the Appeal Site might accommodate a development of up to 330 dwellings (see Fig. 1 below).



Fig. 1 Indicative Proposed Site Layout

- 1.7 The quantum and mix of dwellings may change at the Reserved Matters stage subject to discussions with the Council. However, the current indicative mix of house sizes informs the draft S106 Agreement (CD 4.69).
- 1.8 Access is a matter for approval and is set out in detail in the Transport Assessment (CD 4.26-4.28 and plans CD 4.29.1-4.29.5); Transport Assessment Addendum (CD 4.44 and Plans CD 4.45.1-4.45.4); and Travel Plan (CD 4.30-4.31).
- 1.9 The housing is for Key Workers as defined in the Council’s Affordable Housing Supplementary Planning Guidance (“SPG”) (CD 8.17 [5.12]), supplemented by military personnel to be consistent with:
- i. The definition of “essential local workers” in the NPPF¹; and

¹ Public sector employees who provide frontline services in areas including health, education and community safety – such as NHS staff, teachers, police, firefighters and military personnel, social care and childcare workers.

ii. The Council's adoption of the Armed Forces Covenant.

1.10 Crucially, because "essential local workers" is the only group of people identified in the NPPF's definition of "affordable housing", it follows that Addison Park will deliver: the right housing (affordable), for the right people (essential workers), in the right place (locally).

1.11 In other words, Addison Park is just the sort of solution that national policy says is needed.

The Planning Crisis in St Albans

1.12 The planning system comprises two separate but inter-related elements: Plan-making and decision-taking. St Albans Council is failing in both.

1.13 In respect of Plan-making, over the past two decades, the Council:

- i. Procrastinated whilst the absolute and relative affordability of housing has worsened significantly;
- ii. Rejected expert advice;
- iii. Twice failed to comply with the Duty to Co-operate;
- iv. Set housing targets and selected sites without fundamental evidence; and
- v. Even after the Covid Pandemic confirmed the enormous debt we owe to Key Workers, continued to ignore the affordable housing needs of essential local workers.

1.14 As long ago as 2004, the Council's Affordable Housing SPG identified a specific problem and the need for a solution (CD 8.17 [3.12-3.13]):

"There are growing difficulties in the provision of housing for workers on lower incomes necessary for the economic health of the County ...

A strategy to provide affordable housing will increasingly have to address the provision of housing for these key workers.”

1.15 The SPG set out which employment categories qualify as Key Workers, namely: teachers, police officers, fire officers, health care workers in the NHS, social care workers, local authority staff and other groups that may be nominated by the Council’s Head of Housing. That definition, supplemented by military personnel, informs the “eligibility criteria” in the Section 106 Agreement.

1.16 The 2006 Housing Needs Survey Update defined what is meant by a ‘Key Worker’ (CD 4.77.2), i.e.:

“any person who directly provides services that are essential for the balanced and sustainable development of the local community and local economy, where recruitment or retention difficulties apply’ ..”

1.17 However, despite persistent warnings over housing affordability for vital members of the community, the Council has never even attempted to measure the affordable housing needs of essential local workers. The GL Hearn 2020 Housing Needs Assessment (CD 4.60) that is informing the next emerging Local Plan excludes them, too.

1.18 In March 2022, the Committee charged with drafting the next Plan, announced that the issue of Key Worker housing would be investigated and a Report published in September. However, no Report was published and the issue was dropped from the Committee’s Work Programme without explanation (CD 4.66-4.67).

1.19 Given the Council has never even attempted to measure the affordable housing needs of essential local workers, and quickly dropped its fleeting interest in the matter last year, it is a sad but undeniable fact that Key Workers will continue to be ignored.

1.20 In respect of decision-making, instead of the “positive and creative” approach required by National Policy (CD 7.1 [38]), the Council’s response to the Appeal Scheme has been wholly negative.

- 1.21 The Council’s immediate response to the Appeal application for affordable homes for Key Workers and military personnel, was to ask the Appellant to consider removing reference to Key Workers and military personnel (CD 4.41 [first email]).
- 1.22 The Council then sought to exclude Key Worker housing from the Section 106 Agreement for a scheme for Key Worker housing (CD 4.41 [second email]).
- 1.23 Furthermore, the Officer Report (CD 4.48) demonstrates that the Council gives more weight to schemes delivering far lower levels of affordable homes than the Appeal Scheme, and ranks Key Worker housing below all other forms of affordable housing. Neither approach is remotely supported by either national or local planning policy.
- 1.24 When, in a Plan-led system, a Local Planning Authority proves itself incapable of leading on planning, it is not only inevitable but desirable for other parties to deliver at least some of the homes its communities need through the Appeal process.

The Implications for Key Workers

- 1.25 The Council’s enduring, if inexplicable, indifference to Key Workers leaves many of them in a position in which their Combined Household Income is too great to qualify for social housing but not enough to buy their own home without help. Help which the Council has no intention of providing.
- 1.26 That’s because the Council’s focus is on securing affordable renting housing via developer contributions from schemes in which open-market homes dominate. It is an approach which will make matters worse because it will generate more and more pressure on local health, education, care and emergency services, whilst making no provision for the Key Workers needed to provide those services.

Addison Park – A Viable Model to Create a More Balanced Community

- 1.27 In stark contrast to the Council’s agenda, Addison Park will deliver “home ownership affordable houses”, explicitly and exclusively for the “essential local workers” that the Council ignores. The

homes will be a mix of First Homes, Discounted Market Sales Housing and Shared Ownership and all will be discounted by at least a third.

1.28 This is possible because Addison Park does not follow the traditional business model whereby an owner sells land to a national housebuilder who builds the houses and recoups its costs by selling the majority of them at the open market price. Because, the national housebuilder must pay for the land, pay for the build, make S106 contributions, and make a profit², the cost of the land they purchased, is reflected in the ultimate sale price of the dwellings.

1.29 However, because Mr Collins already owns the land and will commission the build of the houses direct, there is no need to include the land costs in the ultimate sale price. Hence, the house prices can be discounted by at least a third.

Conclusion

1.30 The Council's decision to define Key Workers in 2004 was deliberate and welcome.

1.31 The Council's decision not to measure the housing needs of Key Workers and to exclude them from its Plan-making process for the next two decades is also deliberate but inexplicable.

1.32 Given the fact local people rely on the services provided by these Key Workers, the Council's approach is unexplainable at any time: in the wake of the Covid Pandemic, however, it is unforgivable.

² Paragraph: 018 Reference ID: 10-018-20190509 of the PPG advises as follows with regard to the profit range to be taken into account in a Viability Assessment: "... 15-20% of gross development value (GDV) may be considered a suitable return to developers in order to establish the viability of plan policies."