

HOBURNE PLANNING ENQUIRY

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THE four-day planning inquiry at Christchurch Town Hall, over the applications submitted by Hoburne Development Company Ltd., for a low-cost housing development on 99 acres of land at Hoburne Farm, concluded on Friday last week. The appellants' opening remarks by Mr. David Adamson, acting for Hoburne Developments, and his first witness, architect Mr. J. E. Blight, were reported last week in the "A. and T.". The remainder of the hearing is reported this week, carrying on with the witnesses for appellants, and then the case for the Council and objectors.

Second witness for the appellants, Mr. John Edwards, a partner in Elliott and Green, the firm of estate agents with a branch in Christchurch, said it was particularly noteworthy that the appeal site was within a very short distance of the industrial area of Christchurch. This is adjacent to Somerford Road on the opposite side of the Somerford roundabout lying immediately to the west of the site. "This industrial area has recently been the subject of some expansion on the old airfield site to the south of Somerford Road, and further industrial land is available for development in this location. The appeal site, therefore, is very favourably situated to provide housing close to a major source of employment."

Mr. Edwards went on: "I have, over the last fifteen months, discussed house purchase with a number of potential first-time buyers. In that period, a few houses were available below £10,000 and a larger number available between £10,000 and £11,000, particularly in the earlier part of that period. Until recently, prices of such houses had not significantly changed over the last three years and, if anything, had tended to decline from the previous peak. Over the same period of three years, earnings, despite restriction, had risen significantly".

"As a result", said Mr. Edwards, "a new young purchaser was coming in to the market, as Building Society funds became more readily available, who could not have contemplated house purchase three years ago and thus could only look to the public sector to fulfil his housing requirements. With the hardening of house prices and the shortening supply of houses coming on to the market, the opportunities for such purchases are rapidly dwindling unless the supply for the lower priced houses can be increased substantially by new development."

Referring to three low cost housing scheme elsewhere in the Borough, Mr. Edwards said that Mariners Reach at Mundeford, and the Priory View Road and Fairlawn Park projects, both at Burton, taken as a whole, comprise a total of 314 units to sell at modest or low prices. "Few, in my view, however, will be available to sell at prices fully comparable with those proposed at Hoburne Farm," said Mr. Edwards. Furthermore, the total number is not sufficient to cope with the demand which I believe exists for low-cost housing."

In conclusion, Mr. Edwards pointed out that the selling prices proposed at Hoburne fall within a range of £7,950 — £10,500, and all except one house-type fall below £10,000. A large number of the proposed houses would, therefore, come within the capability of a household with a single wage earner at the national average level, given favourable consideration by a Building Society, asserted Mr Edwards. "If the development proposals are approved, the 36 acres allocated for low-cost housing could make approximately 430 dwellings within the capability I have quoted."

He finished by saying: The opportunities by this site are probably unique in this area. I believe that, in the Christchurch area, a combination of the land cost element and current building costs ensure that selling prices of new dwellings to show even a modest

economic return will normally exceed £10,000 and house prices available in the resale market are mainly in excess of £11,000. With satisfactory arrangements to exclude speculation and encourage younger and first time purchasers, the low cost dwellings proposed will provide a much needed and substantial addition to the housing stock in this price range, and play a part in relieving some of the pressure on housing at this level. This would include a measure of relief in the demand on the public sector in making houses available to some of those on the Local Authority waiting list, with average earnings, to whom houses are not readily available to purchase at present.

Employment Question

Cross-examined by Mr. Norman Wise, counsel acting for the local authority, Mr. Edwards conceded that a major source of local employment, R.S.R.E. (formerly S.R.D.E.), is being phased out, pending closure in about two years' time. He agreed that a large number of jobs would be lost and that young people will lose an opportunity for easily accessible employment. Asked if he thought the land should be preserved for agricultural use, or indeed if the appellants had ever considered such a use for Hoburne, Mr. Edwards said the matter was "simply a question of economics."

Traffic

Called as witness to deal with traffic aspects of the proposed Development, Mr. Robert Foreman said that two main factors must be taken into consideration when looking at the problems of vehicular access.

On the question of use, with particular reference to access for emergency service vehicles, Mr. Foreman said that he agreed with officers from the County Highways Department that the section of the estate road from Hoburne Lane, north-west, to the point where the ring road diverges, should be a dual carriageway. "This provides an alternative access for emergency vehicles should one carriageway become blocked in any way." From that point onwards there is an alternative route either way round the ring road, said Mr. Foreman.

In terms of capacity, the flow generated by the development will be about 420 vehicles in the peak hour, and since it will be distributed on both directions of the ring road, "it is well within the capacity of both the single carriageway and dual carriageway."

In conclusion, Mr. Foreman summed up the traffic implications as a result of such a development, saying that, in his opinion, "the emergency access has been adequately provided for, and is to the satisfaction of the County Surveyor. There is trivial inconvenience to some drivers which can be ignored, and similarly the development will integrate by taking its access from a road which already serves residential development. The principles of the development access follow (to a much smaller scale) those of the Woosehill proposals (a scheme in Berkshire), already accepted by the Department

"In my view, therefore there can be no highway reason for the refusal of permission to develop the appeal site, particularly since the highway questions have been agreed by the County Surveyor."

Influence by vocal minority

Speaking at the inquiry on the first day of the hearing, several individuals presented their statements, as they would be unable to attend on the next day.

Highcliffe resident, Col. Maurice Menage, in support of the application, said that objections to the proposed development are based on the local authority's uncertainty on which way to go. "After much to-ing and fro-ing in the committee stages the decision to oppose the planning application in open Council was narrowly defeated after a recorded voting procedure. It is my personal opinion that certain councillors were influenced by the pressure being exercised by vocal pressure groups.

"In the event, the Council were acting inconsistently in overall policy, when considering that just, previously, they had overridden the wishes of the electorate who, in a form of referendum initiated by the County Council Authorities, had voted for 'Restriction' in the matter of the South-East Dorset Structure Plan. The Council arbitrarily opted for 'Trend'. Here, when confronted with a quite normal development plan (with 'Trend' guidelines), the same councillors backpedalled and reverted to 'Restriction'."

A second reason for the Council's opposition, suggested Col. Menage, was the feeling of the Highcliffe Citizens' Association and submissions of petitions by objectors, who represented only the personal feelings of residents living on the periphery of the site and others influenced by emotional appeals prepared to lend a sympathetic ear.

"When considering the total of the electorate within the two relevant Wards (approximately 8,500), the members of Highcliffe Citizens' Association who attend meetings and the petitioners are in a minority. I submit the 'silent majority' prefer to express no intentions one way or the other—many would support the proposals, a greater number couldn't care less.

Amplifying his support for the appellants, Col. Menage went on: "I believe the proposals submitted by the developers are reasonable and imaginative, and are in keeping with future requirements of the area generally. The main objections are based on specious submissions. The external services (roads, water, sewerage, electricity, telephones) can be met under existing provisions and have received tacit blessing from the County Authorities. Possible future provision for schools has been catered for, and the proposed plans cover adequate open spaces and play areas, and provision has been made for tentative planning for an old peoples' home and the youth centre.

"In this predominantly retirement conurbation, there is a need for attracting younger people, many of whom would contribute to the present shortfall in the fields of employment for nursing, shop assistants and private domestic requirements. The proposals should attract such people because of low-priced housing within the compass of reasonable mortgage facilities,

"The site, whilst possibly capable of development for farming and agricultural purposes, at present is not an attractive proposition environmentally.

"In my submission, the planning proposals sent in by the Hoburne Development Company Ltd., who have bent over backwards to meet the seemingly unending requirements of the local Authority, present a public need and service and will enhance the landscape and outlook from all angles.

"Here is a chance to be charitable, to forget local prejudices, and to enable less fortunate citizens to enjoy being house owners, and to live in this delightful part of England!"

"Developers' Paradise"

Prior to the Council putting their case, first to speak against the plan was local resident, Mr. D. E. Bennett, of Manning Avenue, Highcliffe, who recalled that the Inspector at the last inquiry expressed doubts that much of the land scheduled for early housing development was in many cases not well situated in relation to the Somerford Industrial Estate. The appeal site, in this case, was immediately available, but Mr. Bennett queried the

last Inspector's comments, saying that "up the road at Burton, they had last year started building 600 houses". Just five miles away at Stem Lane, New Milton, said Mr. Bennett, another five hundred houses were being built, and that before 1981 a further one thousand homes would be constructed, with the possibility even more. This, in effect, would add eight or nine thousand people to the population to be catered for by the already overcrowded services.

"It seems inconceivable that we should even think of building so many homes, before a by-pass road has been built for New Milton and Highcliffe, and also the trunk road along the back of Barrack Road (Christchurch)." Mr. Bennett went on: "You might say this area has been a developers' paradise", but it was time to call a halt. The population of Highcliffe had doubled since 1960.

Refuting the suggestion that vocal pressure groups were solely responsible for some of the councillors actions, Mr. Bennett said it was public pressure as a whole, from a wide spectrum of the community, who were against Hoburne's plans. Recreational purposes would be the ideal solution for an area such as the appeal site, suggested Mr. Bennett, for Dorset as a County has a record for building more houses than any other county authority in the South of England. From 1972 to 1974 the average was five to six thousand dwellings per year, he said.

Friars Cliff Residents' Association

For Friars Cliff Residents' Association, Mr. Ernest Grace, said that in both committee and general meetings, the association had unanimously decided to oppose the application, on the grounds that there was sufficient building land in Christchurch borough to last for another ten years.

1,000 signatures petition

Handing in a petition with over 1,000 signatures to the Inspector, local resident, Mr. Michael Silvester, of Westfield Gardens, Somerford, said that of the people he had canvassed, an average of 97 from every one hundred were against the application.

Council's Case

For the Borough Council, Planning Officer, Mr. David Pratley, called as witness by Mr. Norman Wise, said that after the first planning inquiry in July 1974, applications were again submitted to the Authority and the matter was considered on a number of occasions at both the Development Committee stage and in full Council. The protracted affair culminated in a decision at last November's Council meeting, when members adopted a resolution that the "development would inevitably result in a further burden on the already over-burdened local health, hospital, community and social services; the access provisions were inadequate; no legally enforceable means existed to ensure that a large proportion of the proposed properties would be available at exceptionally low prices for first-time buyers (as envisaged by the Inspector in his report to the Minister in connection with earlier appeals relating to the site); there was at the time no urgent need for low-cost housing, an adequate supply being available at other sites within the Borough, in the light of this, the desirability of retaining the land as a 'green lung' between Highcliffe and Christchurch, and thereby retaining land of good agricultural quality, outweighed any current housing need; and the proposed development would not be in accordance with the Dorset County Council's decision for trend growth for South-East Dorset"

Mr. Pratley went on to say: "It must be emphasised that Christchurch Borough have not merely deferred the proposal as being premature the proposal to develop Hoburne has to be seen in the wider setting of South-East Dorset (for which a Structure Plan is being prepared on the invitation of the Secretary of State) and adjacent areas in South-West Hampshire, especially Bransgore and New Milton.

"The Council believe it to be indisputable that the age structure of the conurbation and especially Christchurch is imbalanced towards the elderly, and that this situation creates serious strains on social facilities such as health and hospitals. Additional strains are imposed by the influx of summer visitors at a time when services are particularly stretched because of staff holidays. There is little prospect that funds and staff resources will dramatically improve in the foreseeable future and with a rising population it is likely that the situation will worsen."

Continuing his statement, Mr. Pratley said: "Clearly additional development at Hoburne (with a potential in the order of 600 dwellings and thus 2,600 bed spaces) would be likely to lead to even greater pressures, but it may be suggested that in this respect it would be no different to any other development. However, the Council does not accept this argument, believing that the appellants' proposal will bring unreasonable and insufficiently controllable pressures because by its very nature it is likely to be attractive to elderly persons wishing to acquire a home in South-East Dorset, because of its size, design and price. Secondly, it would be attractive because of its relative proximity to the sea and to the recognised retirement areas of Mudeford, Highcliffe and Friars Cliff."

Furthermore, said Mr. Pratley: "In their Land Policy Statement under the Community Land Act the Council had indicated that they intend to ensure that an increased proportion of the housing development is not merely suitable for young married couples, but that every effort will be made to reserve it for their occupation. This control is unlikely to be exercisable in the case of Hoburne as the site has been in the ownership of the appellants for many years and is thus not subject to the main provisions of the Community Land Act."

Pursuing his argument for the local authority, the Planning Officer commented: "The Council considers that development of this size warrants more than the single access proposed. Such an arrangement can be generally inconvenient to residents resulting as it would in considerable additional distances for the majority of vehicles serving properties on the site. The Council also believes that the proposed arrangement has social objections as it can create a sense of being different from the larger community. Some sense of being distinct and separate is desirable for groups of up to about 30 to 40 dwellings and for an entire community, but it is considered to be socially divisive if the attitude is held by a sizeable group of people who nevertheless ought to form part of a larger community. To overcome this tendency large developments should be well integrated into the larger pattern of traffic circulation.

"A further point is that the amount of noise and disturbance created in the vicinity of the access road is certain to be very considerable and this will inevitably affect adversely the amenities of the houses proposed nearby."

Open Space.

On the question of provision for open space within the development Mr. Pratley asserted: "In the view of the Council this development constitutes virtually a new neighbourhood, and under these circumstances the Council believes that greater open space provision should be made. A figure of 25 acres (not including small amenity and other areas integrated into the housing layouts) has been suggested."

No re-sale control?

An additional reason for the Council's attitude towards the development is that the appellants would appear to be enforcing sale at exceptionally low prices for first-time buyers. Mr. Pratley said that the Council considered there was no provision in the agreement to determine who purchased the dwellings, but thought that elderly people would find the development "particularly attractive". No buy-back clause was included which would give a measure of control over future occupation, and a prime factor in persuading the Inspector to submit a favourable report on the previous proposals for the site appeared to the Council to have been that it seemed conceivable that the houses might be offered "at exceptionally favourable prices". However, said Mr. Pratley, the clauses in the draft agreement to allow for increases in purchase price were linked to increases in construction costs, not to the prices of houses in the area. Whilst this might have been inevitable for the purposes of the agreement, it was undoubtedly true of the last two years that houses prices have risen more slowly than building costs. In the view of the Council this trend, which might reoccur, could well give rise to situations in which the calculations might not lead to "exceptionally favourable prices".

The availability of building land elsewhere in the South-East Dorset conurbation was an additional reason the Council put forward for opposing the application. In the case of Christchurch there was sufficient land committed for approximately 2,700 additional dwellings, "and the average building of 370 units per annum indicates sufficient land for a little under 7½ years with a possible revision to approximately nine years".

“Green lung”

Retaining a "green lung" between Christchurch and Highcliffe was considered a key issue by the Authority, who believe that the Borough "has to a considerable extent to thank these open spaces for being a generally pleasant place to live, and they therefore believe that there are worthwhile environmental merits in providing green wedges penetrating the urban area from surrounding countryside."

On the land's agricultural value, Mr. Pratley commented evidence was given at the last inquiry by an officer from the Ministry of Agriculture that the site contained an estimated ten acres of Grade 1 land, 60 — 65 acres of Grade 2, with the balance being Grade 3, and there appeared to be no reason why the land could not be farmed with considerable advantage. "The Council do not believe that these facts should be lightly disregarded especially in view of other points made in this statement", added Mr. Pratley.

Option for "trend"

Referring to the Council's decision to adopt a "trend" growth attitude towards the implications of the South-East Dorset Structure Plan, currently being prepared, Mr. Pratley said its compilation was on the basis of a continuation of the past population trends, indicative that sufficient land is already allocated in agreed development or policy plans to accommodate the housing needs of the area until the mid 1980's. "Unless there are exceptional circumstances, further permissions outside the present allocated areas will not, therefore, be granted before the Secretary of State has made his decision on the Structure Plan, and any subsequent application will be considered in the light of that decision and in the context of the preparation of local plans", said Mr. Pratley.

Supporting the Borough Planning Officer's contentions, Coun. Roger Street, witness for the local authority, said that the issue, in his opinion, was straightforward. The high quality

farmland between Highcliffe and Christchurch should be retained as a green lung, as "the vast majority of residents wish", otherwise it would be lost forever beneath a cheap, modern private housing development for which there was no real need. "Hoburne Farm should be left undisturbed," he said. "If ever our fellow citizens can be said to have made their wishes clear, then this is the case", he added.

Chairman of the Council's Development Committee, Coun. Austin Payne, said that Hoburne Developments had been responsible for extensive projects within the Borough which were well planned, of pleasing design and acceptable density, but their latest proposals fell somewhat short, he suggested. His committee and the Council as a whole agreed with the views of thousands of local residents that there was no requirement for "this type of mediocre development".

Highcliffe Citizens' Association

Major Godfrey Frank, chairman of the Highcliffe Citizens' Association, said that the 3,500 strong body he represented was not an angry and unreasonable group of militants "pursuing a keep out of my back yard policy." The Association commented, with reason, that they did not like the developer's proposals. Major Frank asked that a decision on the future of Hoburne be delayed until all the information from the South-East Dorset Structure Plan had been collated.

Friends of the Earth.

Horticulture, rather than housing was a more sensible use for the land, objector Dr. Hugh Walding, representing Friends of the Earth, told the inquiry. Speaking during the closing stages of the four-day hearing, Dr. Walding said that probably 1,500 tons of potatoes, worth about £500,000 retail, could be grown on the one hundred acre site. He pointed out that last year this country imported 90,000 tons of potatoes from India, a country where thousands were starving. Dr. Walding explained that potatoes were merely an example of what could be grown on the land. The one hundred acres is part of just four per cent of agricultural land in South-East Dorset of such high quality. Horticulture would be an ideal use, said Dr. Walding.

Farming unsuccessful.

In cross-examination, Mr. David Adamson put it to the witness that previous owners of the land had tried to farm it, but it had not proved economically viable. Dr. Walding said that despite the failures in the past, "food comes first." Further questioned by Mr Adamson, witness said he would rather see the land turned over to horticulture and have a "full belly and share a house with my parents" than have the land used for the proposed development.

On closing the inquiry, the Inspector visited the site, and a decision will be announced in due course.