

**Housing Strategy and Development Team
Housing Services
Planning Application Comments**

Planning Application Number: 19/01036/HYBRID

Location: Bicester Eco Town Exemplar Site Phase 2, Charlotte Avenue, Bicester

Planning Officer: Caroline Ford

Date of Comments: 27/11/2019

Comments by: Frances Evans

Comments:

This revised application proposes a reduced number of residential units from 38 to 16, of which 100% will be affordable rented housing with rents capped at Local Housing Allowance (LHA) levels to ensure they are a more affordable housing option. The current CDC Local Plan affordable housing policy requires 30% of units on this site to be provided as affordable housing. Therefore 11 of the 16 units would be considered as additional to the policy requirement. There is a continuing need for affordable housing in Bicester and these units will contribute towards meeting a proportion of the housing need, including the housing needs of teachers and staff working in the local schools, health and care workers, people working in the growing businesses in and around the Eco Town Exemplar Site, and other households who are receiving limited incomes and need an affordable housing option that they are unable to source in the private rented sector etc.

Whilst we can support the provision of affordable rent capped at LHA levels, Social Rent would be the preferred tenure as this is the most affordable option for many households on the Council's Housing Register. The developer has confirmed that subject to available grant funding, the affordable homes on this site could be provided as Social Rent tenure. This would provide an alternative form of rented affordable housing to that already provided on this phase of the development. There is an opportunity to secure the additional rented affordable homes via Oxfordshire Growth Deal and other funding sources, as there will be no opportunity of cross-subsidy from the sale of market residential units on the site itself.

We would usually expect to see 70:30 split of rent and intermediate tenure mix in line with CDC affordable housing planning policies. However, it is difficult for landlords to let and manage mixed tenure flats in one block. This is particularly significant in relation to setting and agreeing service charges. Therefore, it is considered an appropriate approach on this occasion to have the whole scheme as rented tenure.

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Property Mix

The current proposals set out a mix of 10 x 2 bed (4 person) flats at 70 – 72 SqM and 6 x 1-bedroom (2-person) flats at around 54 SqM. These unit sizes fall within the Nationally Described Space Standards and therefore meet size requirements as set out in CDC Developer Contributions SPD. There is some concern about a higher number of two-bedroom flats being provided when the greater need is for one-bedroom flats. However, if the scheme was changed to provide more 1-bed flats, this would likely increase the number of residential units on the site which would also have other planning impacts. The current proposal for a mix of 1 and 2-bed flats will meet a housing need and it is helpful that the developer has agreed to work with Cherwell DC to develop and agree a Local Lettings Plan to ensure that the units (when completed) will provide for a range of households and will be let and managed appropriately. This is particularly important when managing the likelihood of several affordable homes for rent all being completed and made ready for occupation at the same time.

It is also noted that whilst we would usually require a minimum of 1 parking space per 1-bed unit and two parking spaces for the 2-bed units, the wider development presents options for more affordable modes of transport across the site and beyond, including access to public transport, electric cycles etc. Given this is an exemplar scheme and there is a focus/ importance of reducing carbon impact in the area wherever possible (there will be some impact from visitors to the commercial unit below), it is considered acceptable to provide 1 parking space (by permit) per affordable unit along with accessible parking spaces and additional cycle space on this scheme. However, I would like to emphasise that this does not set a precedence for general acceptance of this principle to be applied across affordable housing on all sites.

We would usually expect around 50% of the affordable rented units to meet the requirements of Building Regulation M4(2) Category 2: Accessible and adaptable dwellings where this is appropriate. Normally, any units that are ground floor level should be included in this requirement so that they may be easily adapted to meet the needs of a disabled occupier however as the residential units are on the first floor and above, the proposed lift within the scheme (ref- Design and Access Statement) would support improved access to the flats when installed.

It is encouraging that whilst the proposals include commercial/other class uses on the ground floor and residential above, there are additional measures planned (see Acoustic Strategy Report) to minimise noise impact through the fabric and construction of the building, and also a proposal to develop a Noise Management Plan in partnership with Cherwell District Council and interested parties. Such measures will be to the benefit of future tenants of the scheme and to the occupiers of other residential properties close by.