



NAPTON ON THE HILL PARISH COUNCIL

Fells Lane Self Build Design Codes – comments/feedback April 21

BACKGROUND

Following an invitation by John Acres to participate in a pre-planning consultation exercise, a small village group was set up to provide, without prejudice, comments to the parish council on a draft Design Code for a self-build scheme off Fell's Lane in Napton. The Design Code is expected to form part of a planning application for an 11/12 unit scheme by the developer Noralle.

The group has had a couple of online meetings with John Acres and received a 2nd draft of a Design Code prepared by Acres Land & Planning Ltd. The group had concentrated on looking at how policies within the Napton NDP are relevant to the proposed development of the site off Fell's Lane for self-build/ custom build scheme, as well as pointing out the importance of any development to be sustainable and future proof in terms of meeting government targets for new housing to be zero carbon ready by 2025.

INTRODUCTION

The site off Fell's Lane falls outside the BUAP for Napton and also lies within the Ironstone Hillside Fringe Special Landscape Area so there has to be a very good reason to support its development. The site forms part of the draft Site Allocation Plan (SCB6) and the proposal being put forward is for a scheme of 11/12 self-build plots on a site of 0.8ha (14/15 units per hectare). Self-build can be supported as an exception for development outside the BUAP and it is possible to develop within the SLA if it can be demonstrated that there will be no harm caused. The parish council therefore needs to consider whether the current proposals warrant being an exception.

The draft Design Code refers to certain policies within the SDC Core Strategy that are deemed to be most relevant to it. These are given as:-

- Policy CS1 Sustainable development
- Policy CS2 Climate Change and Sustainable Construction
- Policy CS5 Landscape
- Policy CS9 Design & Distinctiveness
- Policy CS12 Special Landscape Areas

It is important to fully understand, therefore, how the proposal aims to comply with these policies as well as those within the emerging Napton Neighbourhood Development Plan (NNDP) including, within that, the Napton Character Assessment, which is intended to help inform design and planning decisions. Subject to the referendum result in May, the NNDP will, thereafter, form part of the formal planning decision making process and, as an emerging document, already carries some weight. Within the NNDP the most relevant policies that need to be considered by the developer are:-

NDP Policy 3 Self-Build and Custom Housebuilding

NDP Policy 6 Environmental Quality

NDP Policy 11 Open Countryside

NDP Policy 12 Trees and hedgerows

NDP Important View

NDP Housing Needs Survey

In addition to this there are other SDC planning documents that are relevant to this development, including:-

SDC Development Requirements Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) (incorporating Part V: Climate change Adaptation and Mitigation) July 2020.

If the principle of developing this site is to be approved it is also important to recognise the key features of the site that could influence how it should be taken forward:-

- It falls within the Ironstone Hillside fringe Special Landscape area
- It falls outside Napton BUAP
- Land use is currently agricultural, with part occupied by agricultural related structures and artefacts. Part of this area, closest to Dog Lane, has also been used in recent times as a building compound and not fully reinstated. Part of the site, facing outwards from the village, is open grassland, pastural in character.
- Located on the rural eastern edge of the village and can be seen above the mature hedge line on the approach to the village from Priors Marston Road/ Sports Field.
- Located adjacent to Fells Lane, an important green lane that links the upper and lower parts of the village, as well as providing a safe pedestrian route to the sports field.
- Located to the south east of the new housing estate, Quincy Meadows, and within the visual corridor that links the upper part of the village from Vicarage Road, through Quincy Meadows, to open countryside beyond (the SLA).
- Located on a similar level to the most of the village facilities (school, shop, pub/ social club, green, village hall). The Sports Field is close by, accessed half way up Fell's Lane, with the Church and Arc School further up the hillside.
- The site is bound on 3.5 sides by mature hedgerows that are currently protected by the fact that they form part of an agricultural holding. Hedges within domestic gardens do not enjoy the same level of protection.

The point of this exercise now is to comment on a Design Code, without prejudice, seen without any further background planning information, including neither the planning

statement, nor design and access statement. The only plan seen is that included within the draft Design Code.

COMMENTS ON DRAFT DESIGN CODE

The draft Design Code leaves out, or skirts over, a lot of topics/ guidance that one might normally expect to be covered in such a document; it is very much open to interpretation by the eventual self-build plot purchaser rather than being specific on anything. Words such as 'encourage' and 'may', rather than 'should' or 'will' are used. Therefore, even to a well-intentioned plot purchaser the guidance is not clear and it is questionable how useful it would be in speeding up the planning process, leaving so much as it does to the consideration of individual planning applications as they come forward. Such a style of open interpretation will no doubt be attractive to some buyers and certainly would help the developer, as there would be very little restriction (or encumbrance) then on the sale of each individual plot. However, it is important for this site, being one that is highly sensitive, that these issues are addressed now rather than left to chance later. Main areas of concern in this regard relate to:-

No proposed housing mix.

The only reference to the size of each dwelling is that the expectation is that no house would be larger than 250sqm. Given that a standard 4-bed estate house is usually between, say, 105 – 135sqm (up to 170sqm as an exception) that suggests that there could be up to 11/12 6+-bed houses on this site. The housing mix should reflect the local housing need and if not that then it must reflect the demand that has been recorded on the SDC self-build register. There are 4 entries on the latter for Napton, with two of these requesting a 4-bed plot and the other two smaller. Across the whole, for the SDC area, there are only 30 out of 174 registrations (17%) for 4+-bed houses. Interestingly, under CS19 it states that the general housing needs mix should allow for 15-20% of 4/4+ houses. The Fells Lane site proposal would allow for 100% 4+-bed houses. Without strong justification for doing otherwise, a housing mix should be defined for Fells Lane and it should reflect local need, whether that is as defined by the NNDP Housing Survey, SDC Self-Build register or that stated within CS19, or an amalgamation of all of these.

Specifying a mix is important as without it, those people who are genuine self-builders and want a smaller unit, will simply be priced out of the market at this location, which is not fair and goes against why self-build sites outside the BUAP could be deemed to be an exception. Also, as the site provides good accessibility, being close by and on a similar level to local community facilities, it would be appropriate for the housing mix to include house types that are suitable for buyers with mobility issues, eg bungalows, Lifetime Homes compliance.

Limited design parameters

Are the restrictions on height, scale and location of structures within each plot sufficient to ensure that each plot can be delivered without being overly dominant or adversely impacting on its neighbours, within or outside of the site? Currently, within the draft Design Code, these parameters are given as:-

- 9m roof ridge line,

- 4m set back of main dwelling from front boundary, with freedom for 1.5m forward or backward of this line,
- 3m between units, 1.5m from the boundary,
- 35-40% plot ratio excluding permitted development rights. It should be noted that the generic house types shown on the site plan in the Design Code exceed this figure,
- 2.5-3 storey height,
- 10m buffer zone to Fell's Lane hedge line.

Without a specified housing mix and with limited parameters on what is acceptable in terms of height, scale and location, there could in theory be a development come forward of 11/12 houses, all 3 storeys high, all bituminous system flat roofed, with limited associated amenity space. It is doubtful that this is the developer's intention, nor is it likely to meet market demand, but unless the parameters are set to be able to offer appropriate control it is still a possibility. Given the very low proposed site density (14/15 units per hectare), there is no need for any housing unit to be taller than 2.5 storeys high and indeed there is certainly scope for including a number of bungalows and 1.5 storey units, to ensure a more mixed development is taken forward.

Some other design codes provide a development zone within each plot, which also defines the rear and side building lines as well as the front, which is important for managing problems of overlooking and overshadowing neighbouring properties. Can the eaves height also be set so as to ensure there are no 9m high flat roofs? Garages will need to be set back further than 4m from the boundary if carparking is also to be located between it and the back edge of the footpath.

No specified palette of materials

There is reference in the draft Design Code to the variety of housing within Napton, which is used as justification for not having any controls on the choice or use of materials. The only reference is that 'no strong primary colours' should be used but local stone, brick and even wood may be.

Whilst there is a lot of variety of housing within Napton, as described within the NNDP Character Assessment, it is also important to understand why that feature has not adversely impacted on the character of the village or its local distinctiveness. There are common themes that repeat which help to tie the village together, eg

- new housing is interspersed with historic buildings throughout the village and, therefore, does not dominate in terms of style, mass, form etc.,
- there is a limited palette of building materials, even on newer homes,
- housing is of a similar scale (predominantly 2-storey housing, with only a minority of 2-5/3-storey),
- Individually designed more modern housing (post 70s through to present day) has been restricted to infill plots or sites of no more than 4 houses (eg Dog Lane, School Hill, New Street, Southam Road),
- Gaps, views and green spaces within the village help to break down and soften the overall impact of both old and new development as does the layering and interesting roofscapes across the hillside settlement.

11/12 units on a prominent rural edge of village site calls for a design approach that mitigates the site from becoming too visually prominent and dominating the character of the village overall. Allowing a 'laissez faire' approach to each plot is therefore not appropriate. If the information is overly vague or open to interpretation within the Design Code, the question would be how consideration of the detailed planning application is then influenced by it? An appropriate palette of building and landscaping materials, sensitive to the overall rural character of Napton, therefore needs to be submitted for discussion with the parish council as a pre-requisite to any support being given for the scheme.

Other building design factors not sufficiently covered

Roofscape within Napton village is a significant factor given it is a hillside settlement and one that should be covered in greater detail within the Design Code.

Whilst innovation is to be encouraged it must be based on the characteristics of the built environment in the local area and have a beneficial purpose. Use of building forms and materials that are incongruous with the local area would need to be justified at detailed planning stage to demonstrate that they would not detract from the local environment (eg how to mitigate bright reflections off metal clad walls/ roofs, which may be a nuisance when first installed and viewed from above).

Views towards the site should be given priority over views out to ensure the visual corridor linking the upper parts of the village through Quincy Meadows to open countryside and the view of the rural edge of the village from Priors Marston Road, will be retained. An overly large tall structure on the corner to Fells Lane would be an inappropriate visual intrusion. Housing would be better set further back from northern hedge, and roofs within a specified buffer zones along sensitive boundaries to be lower than the main dwelling.

There is little detail about the common areas, which may be covered in the design and access statement, but it would also be useful to include it within this document as the two elements of the site (private/ public) impact on each other.

Sections on Environment, Sustainability & Energy needs to be strengthened

The draft Design Code makes reference to the protection of the rural character of Fells Lane and a 10m buffer zone. However, there is no mention of the other boundaries, which also benefit from richly diverse mature hedgerows. Given this is the rural edge of the village any encroachment outside of the BUAP needs to protect all of the hedges what would then define the new village BUAP boundary and the developer needs to provide a long-term management plan for these hedges to ensure the hedges are properly maintained and enhanced where necessary to fill any gaps that occur over time.

The draft Design Code makes reference to features that are not shown on the site plans included (pond, wildlife flower area). Where are these and are they for common enjoyment? How will health & safety (ref pond) be addressed?

The proposals need to include a Sustainability Statement to set out how these new houses will minimise their impact on the environment including measures to make them more future proof.

There is little set out on how sustainability and energy minimisation will be achieved. The commentary that is provided is aspirational only and could be too easily brushed aside by prospective self-build developers. The draft Design Code includes no new targets and seeks only to 'encourage' and 'promote' best environmental practice rather than require it. Proposed changes to the Building Regulations may not come through in a timescale that can influence development being planned now and this Design Code could step forward to ensure that this site in Napton is environmentally appropriate for the next 20/30 years. If the new targets, which have been set by the government, for carbon emission reduction (which exceed what can be achieved through current Building Regulations) are to be met by 2025/50, there is a moral duty, if not yet a legal obligation, for new developments to take sustainability issues very seriously. The Design Code should therefore set out more than aspirational statements but also include some tangible targets and standards that will enable the scheme to achieve the required reduction on carbon emissions and for all new housing to be zero carbon ready without having to rely on retro fit later down the line.

Of prime importance is that the homes adopt a 'fabric first' approach as a starting point. This means focussing on the energy performance of a home through the components that make up the building envelope i.e. the walls, floors, ceilings, windows, doors etc, before thinking about heating systems or renewable technologies like solar panels.

The 'fabric first' approach is to be recommended for lots of reasons:

- It is known to work.
- Improving building fabric can address issues such as mould and damp, and in turn the health and comfort of residents.
- It offers energy bill reductions and long term, predictable, bill security for householders.
- It helps with wider energy system management by reducing peak demand.

Passivhaus is based on the fabric first approach, combined with airtightness and all house mechanical ventilation. It is deemed to be the gold standard of low energy design, and in the absence of any other energy target set should be the standard applied to Fells Lane.

Any space heating requirement should be met by 'fossil fuel free' systems. These can be based on technology that is currently available and that is known to work – which will often mean a heat pump or other form of electrified heating.

Recommendations on domestic renewable generation options need to be carefully considered. Encouragement should be given, to those that have good sites, to add PVs etc and this should be widely possible at Fells Lane if orientation is considered sufficiently in each individual design.

To make the new houses more future proof they should also meet the Lifetime Homes standard. Lifetime Homes considers to adaptability of the building to allow for increased accessibility needs over time. Included within this are design features such as wider doorways and drives, level thresholds and incorporation of structural and service elements to enable easier future adaptation.

As well as the nuisance associated with the construction of these new homes (which may need to be mitigated through careful phasing as well as site management) how will noise and light pollution be controlled through the design decisions that will be taken by the self builders? Houses should offer very good sound insulation and external lighting should be designed to be low energy, time controlled and not overspill or shine into neighbouring properties, adversely affecting their amenity.

Traffic & Parking

Without a housing mix specified there is potential for up to 36 household + 5 visitor carparking spaces to be provided on this site (in reality if the houses are 6-bed that number could be significantly more). In addition, the WCC may require cars to be able to enter and leave each plot in a forward-facing direction. If dominance by cars is to be avoided, there needs to be more clarity on how parking can be achieved on each plot and how it may be controlled at the design stage, without every house frontage becoming a carpark. There is reference to marking the road outside the site to control traffic into the site (so Fells Lane does not have priority). Fells Lane, to stop it becoming a rat run in the future, needs more control than proposed. Would this be part of a S106 agreement?

Other Matters

Construction Phase Management

Without sight of any specific information it is thought that a construction phase plan should accompany the initial planning application in order to set out how disruption and nuisance associated with a multiple unit self-build site will be properly managed. On other self-build sites, there have been conditions placed on the sale of each plot that requires unit completion within a set period (eg 24 months) of the completion of sales contract. Through planning or the contract, it may also be possible to limit the erection of temporary buildings or caravans on site or occupation of a home prior to completion, in order to ensure the speedy completion of the site. How could such conditions be secured through planning?

Summary.

The Parish Council is grateful for having been given this opportunity to be consulted at an early stage on this proposed development off Fells Lane. It is hoped that by doing so its comments on the draft Design Code will be deemed to be a positive contribution, by the applicant, and therefore reflected in amendments to that document. It is also worth repeating that the comments now made are without prejudice prior to seeing the full planning application when that comes forward.