

Statement on behalf of David James relating to proposed housing on Merfield Land
Rode Parish Council Meeting: 4th August 2020

My parents have asked me to read a statement on behalf of our family in relation to the proposed development on the field adjacent to The Mead. I do not intend to engage in further discussions or answer any questions at this stage, pending the planning application process. We will send a copy of this statement to the Parish Council clerk and request that it is put on the Parish Council website so that it can be openly viewed.

Some five years ago, my father was approached by Rode Parish Council with a view to ascertaining whether he might be willing to develop on Merfield land, including the field in question. Housing was suggested by the Parish Council, although my family, wishing to help address some of the issues around parking and road safety in the village centre, suggested building instead new premises for the village school, or possibly community health facilities with associated grounds and parking. This idea was rejected following a housing survey completed as part of the Neighbourhood Plan process: instead, the general desire in the village was for a residential development with a particular focus on provision for the elderly members of the community who wish to downsize and for affordable housing for younger people. Provision of care accommodation was also proposed for consideration.

My father, who is an engineer by profession and has been involved in project management throughout his career, was naturally interested in being involved in the scheme. He has therefore spent years in discussions with the Parish Council, County and District Councillors and the Mendip District Council Planning Policy team, eager to devise a scheme which addresses the governmental targets for provision of housing (and, indeed, MDC has a stated intention to consider this particular field for such development), whilst ensuring the interests of the village remain paramount. With encouragement from Parish Council members, he commissioned architects to develop a number of schemes from 9 to 67 units but we did not believe that they were appropriate for our site. Further, a market search of the leading Care Home market revealed that Rode was not suitable for them and so we abandoned that too and made the decision to focus on housing.

My father has selected, with great care and much research, a developer (Ashford Homes) whose reputation is excellent for the both the quality of their work and for their consideration for the neighbourhoods in which they operate. We are therefore now in a position where we have worked with a developer to begin to formulate a beautiful scheme which we believe addresses the needs of the village for the future. As owner of the field, my father is clearly in a strong position to ensure that the development is constructed, not merely for the developer's benefit, but with the interests of the village in mind. He could have simply sold the field to the highest bidder, but he was, and remains, keen to ensure that the development is of the highest quality and an asset to the village community.

We are therefore now at a point in the process where we propose to submit an outline planning application, the drawings and reports for which will, of course, be open to public scrutiny. As some Parish Council members are aware, our indicative plan was, in fact, available for circulation at the presentation on 17th July. However, it quickly became apparent

that the audience had been selected and was not a balanced and receptive environment for constructive discussion or detailed examination of the proposed scheme.

Having felt unable, through this orchestration of the meeting, to present as planned, we are left with no choice but simply to proceed formally to submitting an outline application. In advance of this, though, my father has asked me to mention certain points which have been raised by the community in relation to the proposed development, and he hopes this will reassure anyone in the village who has concerns about the proposed development. As you will appreciate, the aim is, through discussion, to finesse the outline proposals to the point of final agreement between the village, the authorities, the developer and ourselves:

1. In the spirit of the 2017 Neighbourhood Plan and to enable older people to downsize in the village and for the younger to stay in the village, we are proposing a proven selling “cascade system” that provides the opportunity for the elderly in the village to have, effectively, first refusal, with similar arrangements for local people in relation to the affordable housing on the site. We would propose that a significant percentage of the development should be made available to local residents on this basis (although the exact split would of course be subject to Mendip District Council requirements). The remaining dwellings are intended to be open market housing. We aim to ensure that there is integration of housing types and we would not favour, for example, the isolation of the affordable housing away from the open market dwellings. The idea is to reflect typical village life and we believe that to include such a scheme is exceedingly rare, setting a new standard and demonstrating the value of the relationship we have engendered with a “listening developer partner”.
2. In agreement with Mendip District Council, we will include a commitment to submitting a Construction Management Plan that, amongst other things, will specify the route construction traffic will have to take for access and egress of the site. Site traffic should not pass through the centre of the village. As you know, vehicular access for construction traffic is normally dealt with as one of the conditions of planning permission and is therefore subject to scrutiny by, and agreement with, Mendip District Council and other relevant authorities.

In the initial discussion with Highways and Transport Management Consultants, it is estimated, based on industry standards, that, typically, the development would generate an average of between 5 – 10 trips per hour. Based on the data collected by a Somerset County Council survey in November 2018, the average daily number of vehicles through the village was 724 per day over 7 days. This indicates that the number of vehicle trips generated by this development in Traffic Management terms is not considered significant. The Highways Authority will of course be considering the impact of any traffic movements relating to the development as part of the planning process, and a Transport Statement will be submitted as part of the outline application.

3. Studies by independent highway consultants indicate that the most appropriate access to the site for future occupants would be via The Mead. There are proposals being drawn up to offer highways improvements for The Mead/Straight Lane junction.

Highways are statutory consultees and once the outline application is submitted, they will be able to assess the proposals fully to ensure they meet their highways standards. We will of course work with them to ensure those standards are met.

4. Parking provision would be fully catered for within the development and fully meet Somerset County Council Highways Standards. In fact, the site has been designed to incorporate some 3 parking spaces to each dwelling to ensure that the scheme is self-sufficient in terms of its parking provision without the need for casual parking on surrounding roads.
5. Our objectives for the layout of the site are to create as much green space and as many private amenity areas as possible, with a mixture of high quality housing with good-sized gardens which embraces the setting of its surroundings and integrates well within the village. We are already very pleased with the outline proposals, but they are, of course, subject to comment from the village and the approval of Mendip District Council. These comments will be reviewed collectively and used to inform later reserved matters application when aspects such as layout, scale, appearance and landscaping will be formally considered.
6. Included in our outline planning application will be the provision of a pedestrian footway from the site to the village centre in order to create a cohesive development, linked to the heart of the village. We are endeavouring to incorporate a post box, although this would be at Royal Mail's discretion.
7. Regarding visual intrusion, we propose to maintain the exceedingly strong ecological greenery screen between The Mead and the site, which for much of the time is almost a solid barrier. It will enhance, and not be detrimental to, The Mead. We will create similar planting between Merfield House and the site, ensuring no development creep to the South in the future.
8. In line with Mendip District Council policy, the development would incorporate measures and technology which are environmentally sustainable. Some of you may recall my father's stated ambition to install a mini-hydro scheme on the Scuttsbridge mill-race as his personal contribution to the sustainability of the development.

On a final note – and a more personal one- many of you will know why I am representing my father this evening. He has enjoyed the challenge of creating a proposed scheme which he believes recognizes the desires of the village and will be of real benefit to the community. He is dismayed and baffled that, recently, there has been such an aggressive and personally insulting reaction from certain residents of the village and even a very small minority of the Parish Council itself. Indeed, one of the most vocal opposers of the scheme has, in the past, actually approached my father to ask whether a plot on the Mead could be reserved! [**please see note below*]

My father's motivation in creating a scheme which is of real benefit to the village is genuine; hence his consideration throughout of views expressed to him by the local community and

his selection of a developer prepared to listen to, and adopt, certain commercially less viable options in order to create a better development for Rode. However, given our personal circumstances, and my own experience as a property lawyer, my personal feeling is that he should sell the land and step back from the aggravation which appears to have surfaced. This would clearly be hugely disappointing to him personally, after years of work, but it would also be almost inevitably detrimental to the village – and the development itself – because, once the land is sold, the negotiating power with any incoming developer (whose motivation would, of course, be profit, not local amenity) does not lie with a landowner and is reliant solely on the planning process.

Make no mistake, this scheme originates with the Parish Council, which was keen at the time to devise options to address external housing pressures and to ensure the village is not overrun. As things stand, my father remains eager to honour his commitment to the village when he was asked by the Parish Council five years ago to develop the scheme. He believes that, through his close working relationship with the developer, he can continue to influence the development to ensure it addresses the needs of the village, and he hopes that, on behalf of the village as a whole, the Parish Council will join him in working to achieve this. However, as I have mentioned, there are strong reasons for us to walk away from this, and my brothers and I will not be supportive of my parents' continued involvement in this scheme should they be subject to any further personal aggression. They are genuinely trying to do something good for the village and I would hope that the majority of the residents of Rode will know and understand that. Certainly, it would be a great shame should the negativity of a few result in my father stepping back from the development, potentially opening the door to a purely commercial and less sympathetic development being placed on the site. He firmly believes that, together, we can deliver a scheme which embellishes the village and sets the standard for others to admire.

Thank you for listening and we hope to work with you to develop this scheme through the planning process in due course.

**POST-MEETING ADDENDUM: after our representative left the meeting, we understand that there was some discussion relating to plot reservation, and would wish to clarify the position. There was never any question of freehold plots being available for sale within the curtilage of Merfield House and therefore all conversations we have had with members of the PC and the village in relation to individual 'plot reservation requests' have been solely in relation to the Mead land in question. For the record, there are no agreements in place to reserve any of the prospective plots.*