

Notes of virtual (Zoom) public meeting held to discuss the planning application for Merfield/The Mead (planning ref: 2020/1686/OTS) on 16 September 2020

Present: Cllr Peter Travis (Chairman), Cllr Ann Edney, Cllr Elaine Butler, Cllr Steve Eyles, Cllr Barbi Lund (District Councillor), Hugh Williams (PC Clerk) and 20 parishioners

Peter Travis opened the meeting saying that the planning application had been submitted to Mendip and there was now a deadline of 1st October for the public to comment to Mendip on it. The PC had been given an extension until 8th October for comments. A special Parish Council (PC) meeting was to be held on 21st September at which the PC would agree its response.

Steve Eyles reported that a meeting with David James and Ashford Homes had been held on the previous day at which both apologised that the application had been submitted prior to this meeting as they had agreed to meet Councillors to discuss issues prior to submission. Councillors had been disappointed with the plans which were unimaginative and had asked if the application could be withdrawn; this would not be done and Ashford Homes thought sufficient time for comment was available. Although David James (DJ) had wanted 50% affordable and elderly housing, the plan only had 41% made up of 30% affordable and 11% for elderly. DJ thought the plans would add value to Rode and meet its requirements, but he did add that he would, if the PC agreed, push to increase the elderly housing to 20%. DJ and Ashford were both willing to meet with parishioners to discuss the plans. They agreed to continue to consult over the plans and DJ said he had not yet signed over the land to Ashford Homes. A commitment that no further development would take place beyond this.

Parishioners said that these plans were far removed from the small development (approx. 6 houses) which had been proposed as a possible development near Merfield in the Rode Neighbourhood Plan (NP). This current development site had been rejected by the village during the NP process. This new development was not considered to be suitable for the elderly (the only housing need identified within the NP) because it was too far from facilities. Concerns were expressed over the access to the site with increased traffic at The Mead/Straight Lane junction, which is itself a partially blind junction. It was noted that the foul drainage went to the far corner of the site and had to be pumped back into the existing sewers, there were questions over the capacity of sewers in Rode already and parishioners requested that Wessex Water be approached for their views on this, especially as extra capacity would already be required for the Church Farm development.

The tree survey appeared to be flawed in that long life was being assumed for the trees along The Mead; one blew down in April 2019 and others are coming to the end of their lives, often shedding branches in high winds.

Peter Travis asked, out of interest, all present if anyone was in favour of the development, no one was.

A parishioner said that parishioners should write thoughtful well referenced letters to Mendip, including the planning application, and making a strong case for their objections; these should include the building on a green field site outside the village boundary which was highly visible across the Frome valley. The access roads to the site, Straight Lane and Crooked Lane, were both effectively single-track rural lanes not suitable for any increase in traffic.

Points were made that this was the historic end of the village, Merfield Lodge itself was a landmark building and there were three other (apart from Merfield House) Grade II* listed buildings near the development.

Concerns over wildlife at the proposed development site were expressed and this was a route that bats used. There was disappointment that the application had been put in before the ongoing bat survey had been completed (probably in October).

The PC was asked to take note of the survey that had been conducted which had shown 90% of the 230 replies rejecting the proposal to build on this site.

Parishioners expressed concerns over the increase in traffic, particularly at The Mead/Straight Lane junction which was itself a difficult junction. The meeting was told that construction traffic would be accessing the site from the Straight Lane direction and not coming through the village. This was questioned as this, Parkgate Lane and Crooked Lane were all narrow and it would be unlikely that if lorries used these initially, they would soon revert to approaching through the village. The Chairman said that the PC had already employed a Traffic Consultant to provide data on traffic in Rode and he would now be including this development in his study.

Cllr Lund pointed out that once outline planning application had been submitted it would be difficult to make any major changes to it. Disappointment was expressed that this application had been submitted before the Inspector's Hearings on the Mendip Local Plan Part 2 had been held as these would be considering whether the extra 505 houses proposed for NE Mendip should actually be in this area.

Parishioners asked if Mendip could be asked to not make a decision on this until after the Inspector's Hearings; the Hearings had been delayed, why could this application not be delayed? A case could be put that this was the wrong time to make a decision while the Hearings were ongoing, especially as this application was very different to the proposal in the Rode Neighbourhood Plan.

A question was raised that if the PC rejected the application and Mendip approved it, would Cllr Lund take it to the Planning Board – she said she would as she represented the village.

A question was raised as to whether anything more than letters and emails to Mendip could be done – maybe publicity could be sought via newspapers/radio/TV?

It was thought construction traffic issues would not prevent the planning being approved and that emphasis should be made on the heritage issues.

The local MP, David Warburton, had expressed concerns over the Inspector's call for extra housing development in NE Mendip, and his letter could be used in comments to Mendip. It would also be a good idea to copy our MP any comments about The Mead development that were sent to Mendip.