



Knowle, Dorridge and Bentley Heath (KDBH)

Neighbourhood Forum

Response to Planning Application PL/2020/01993/PPFL

Wyndley Garden Centre, Warwick Road, Knowle, Solihull, B93 0DX

‘Demolition of the existing garden centre and associated buildings, and the erection of an extra care facility (Use Class C2) comprising: a village care centre; 39 No. one and two bedroom care suites; 46 No. one and two bedroom care apartments; and associated works, including car parking, access, landscaping and associated engineering works.’

FAO Becky Matravers, Case Officer

1. Introduction

The Knowle Dorridge and Bentley Heath (KDBH) Neighbourhood Forum objects to this application for the reasons explained below.

The KDBH Neighbourhood Plan (NP) was ‘made’ in April 2019 following a huge local effort taking over 4 years to come to fruition. The NP covers a population of over 20,000 and was supported at Referendum by over 96% of residents on a 36% turnout. The NP had its origins mainly in local concerns about, inter alia, the Council’s proposals for the removal of large swathes of Green Belt land around our villages to build over 1,000 new homes.

The NP is now part of the development plan for Solihull and planning applications should be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In this case, the KDBH Neighbourhood Forum (the Forum) strongly contends that the application does not accord with either the Council’s Local Plan or the KDBH Neighbourhood Plan policies; and that the material considerations argued by the applicant do not outweigh development plan policies.

In the sections below, we set out the specific areas where the applicants have failed to give due consideration to NP policies - the most relevant being VC1, D1 and H3.

The Forum therefore requests that the Council refuse this application. We trust that the Council will support our NP policies and demonstrate that our community does indeed have direct power to shape development in our Area.

2. Detailed Observations and Objections

The current Wyndley Garden Centre is a popular and much appreciated local asset. The loss of the nearby Wyevale centre at Eastcote, and another smaller centre at Hampton Road, mean that, apart from one very small centre near Gate Lane, this is now the only facility in the area offering such services. The Council’s Local Plan proposals could see the current population of 20,000 significantly expanded, and loss of this site would mean a sizable population of residents necessarily travelling outside the area to access garden centre related goods and services.



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2.1 Policy H3 Housing Mix

Policy H3 of the NP supports provision of specialist accommodation for the elderly ***'where it meets an evidenced need and complies with relevant Plan and Solihull Plan policies.'*** While the NP acknowledges a need for more specialist elderly accommodation, this proposal does not comply either with the Solihull Local Plan or the NP (VC1) Green Belt policies; nor with NP Policy D1 Design.

2.2 Policy VC1: Green Belt and Landscape

This policy reflects national and local policies protecting the Green Belt (GB) from inappropriate development. The policy goes on to state that *'any new development must be in harmony with the rural character of the village's surroundings and sit well in the landscape.'* The Forum considers that the proposed development does not accord with GB policies and is not in harmony with its rural surroundings and landscape.

Garden centres grew up from nurseries which were considered to be appropriate use in the GB as they had agricultural connections and were generally not intrusive. The current garden centre site contains two single storey glasshouses and open plant sales areas set back behind an open car park area, none of which are unduly intrusive in the GB.

In contrast, the proposed development is clearly inappropriate development that will cause significant harm to the GB - in particular by its impact on openness and by introducing built development into the GB to the east of the Warwick Rd. This area of GB is characterised by isolated built development and is regarded as highly performing in the Council's GB assessments supporting its Local Plan Review. It forms part of Refined Parcel 38 of the Council's GB review with an overall score of 9. Parcel 38 scores a maximum 3 for Purposes 3 and 4 of GB purposes, namely the protection of countryside from encroachment and preserving the setting of historic towns.

The impact on openness will also be substantial, as demonstrated by our comments on the design of the scheme set out below. The scheme will not be in harmony with its rural setting; for the applicants to suggest that the development will have no more impact on openness than the existing garden centre is patently incorrect.

The applicants set out matters - including housing need, health benefits, employment and sustainable location - as very special circumstances (vsc) that outweigh harm to the GB. They argue that the urgent need for specialist (care home) accommodation for the elderly, the lack of non-green belt sites Borough wide for such uses and job creation constitute vsc. The applicants indicate that the Council has agreed such need has amounted to vsc elsewhere in the Borough, leading to approval in a GB location. However, each application must be assessed on its merits and in this case the following considerations need to be taken into account.

The applicant refers to providing employment as one of the vsc. Since unemployment in south Solihull is well below the West Midlands and England average, the Forum does not consider this to be a vsc.

The Forum does not accept that the need for this type of development constitutes vsc in this case, as the need for such provision is not so urgent or exceptional as to outweigh harm to the GB.



2.3 Housing Need

The Council has a duty under the National Planning framework (NPPF) to assess and allocate land to meet housing needs for all groups, including the elderly. It is doing this through its Local Plan Review (LPR), which includes proposed large scale releases of GB land around KDBH to meet a disproportionately large share of the Borough-wide need. The Forum expects all such needs, including specialist accommodation for the elderly, to be met within such allocations when they have been tested and endorsed by an Independent Inspector. The need is therefore being addressed through the planning led system, and the Council has not seen the need to promote this site as an allocation. In these circumstances, the Forum believes there is no vsc argument that supports the need to release this land.

In addition to more established developments catering to the needs of the elderly - such as the Birchmere care home on the Warwick Road (68 places) and the facilities at Job's Close (34 places) - a number of other developments have been constructed in the KDBH Area over the last 5 years. These include:-

- two McCarthy and Stone developments (one in Knowle with 28 units; one in Bentley Heath with 51 units)
- a development at Knowle Gate (61 units, including specialist dementia care); and at Four Ashes (51 sheltered care units)
- a further 26 apartments for the elderly developed by Churchill are nearing completion in the centre of Knowle
- a Cinnamon Care Village at Eastcote with 30 retirement apartments and 50 en-suite rooms on the former Wyevale Garden Centre site at Eastcote, approximately 2 miles from the centre of Knowle, is also nearing completion.

In addition, specialist accommodation for the elderly is also being built elsewhere in Solihull. This includes the examples below, all of which within 3 - 6 miles of KDBH:-

- **Tanworth Court, Shirley:** A council-driven development that includes 60 places, 30 of which are affordable.
- **Fountains Care Home:** Barchester Healthcare will be opening this 80-place facility in the spring. It is based on the former home of Shirley Aquatics, on Stratford Rd Shirley, 3.5 miles from Dorridge.
- **Solihull Village, Shirley:** A retirement development providing 261 one and two-bed apartments. It is being built on the old Powergen site and will be opening in 2021.
- **Tudor Grange House:** Planning permission was granted last year to turn the historic property in Blossomfield Rd into a new facility for a 64-bed care home and 44 assisted living units.
- **Bythe Valley:** permission has been granted as part of this residential development for a large care facility of up to 250 beds. This site is only 3.5 miles from Dorridge centre.



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The extent of existing and proposed specialist development, both within and close to the KDBH Area, demonstrates that there is a good level of accommodation already available; and that any need for further local provision is not so urgent as to override the harm to the GB and should form part of the LPR led process. Given the large scale loss of GB in the KDBH Area that the Council is promoting in its LPR to meet overall housing need, it is essential that no more land than is absolutely necessary is lost to new development. It is entirely appropriate that changes to the GB to provide for all housing needs are made through the LPR led system - and not on an ad hoc basis.

2.4 Policy D1 Design

In terms of design, the applicant's proposed development has inappropriate scale and massing, is out of keeping with the local street scene and fails to preserve the character and appearance of the area, contrary to Policy D1 of the NP.

The existing garden centre is set well back from the road and is a low, single storey and predominantly glass structure. It in no way resembles the "large bulky warehouse" suggested by the applicants. The applicants' further assertion that the existing buildings have a significant effect on visual openness as a result of their very light colour is wholly disputed. The current garden centre sits well in the landscape and is not at all intrusive. The glasshouse at the rear is not visible at all from the road frontage, or even from within the garden centre itself. The proposed development, on the other hand, is set well forward of the existing structure and comprises two and three storey blocks of accommodation which will significantly adversely affect the openness of the GB in this location, contrary to policy VC1 of the NP as explained above. The applicants' claim that the overall effect of the development would have a neutral effect on the visual openness of the wider GB cannot be sustained.

The applicants use a methodology for calculating volume that incorporates all external floor-space, including open sales areas, multiplied by the height of surrounding fences. This methodology is clearly unacceptable, and was correctly rejected by the Council at the Wyevale Eastcote site. However, even the Council's apparent acceptance of using a 1.5 multiplier at the Eastcote site is not considered to be an accurate or robust way of calculating volume. The result is evident in the huge scale of development at Eastcote (now nearing completion) that is clearly far larger and significantly more intrusive into openness than the original garden centre. Applying the 1.5 multiplier methodology at this site leads to an increased volume from 28,499 cubic metres to 35,278, which the applicant asserts "*will have no greater impact on the openness of Green Belt*". The Forum neither understands nor accepts this conclusion. The volume, scale, massing and design of the application are totally unacceptable in this location and contrary to Policy D1.

With regard to the applicants' assertion that a care village reduces the load on the NHS, this can apply only if future residents of the care home all come from within the KDBH Area. Elderly residents who are attracted into the Area by the new development will inevitably add to the burden of a GP service which is already under severe pressure.



3. Conclusions

With regard to the very special circumstances required to overcome the presumption against development in the Green Belt, the inspector in the recent appeal at Oakes Farm in Solihull (a similar development) stated:

“for very special circumstances to exist, the other considerations would need to clearly outweigh the substantial harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, openness and purposes of the Green Belt”.

In other words, for the application to succeed, the overall balance would have to favour the applicants' case not just marginally, but decisively. Other considerations in this case do not decisively outweigh the harm to the Green Belt.

The Forum therefore concludes that this application conflicts with national, local and neighbourhood plan Green Belt policies, as well as Solihull and Neighbourhood Plan policies on design. We accordingly request that the application be refused.

Jane Aykroyd
Chair, Knowle Dorridge and Bentley Heath Neighbourhood Forum