

Central Bedfordshire Council

Executive

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Future Use of the Houghton Lodge Site, Ampthill

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This report relates to a decision that is Key

Purpose of this report

1. To seek direction on the future use of the Houghton Lodge site, Ampthill.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Executive is asked to:

1. **Provide direction for the future use of the Houghton Lodge Site, Ampthill. Specifically, providing direction to officers to:**
 - **bring forward a scheme to deliver high-quality downsizer accommodation for older people on the site;**
 - **to explore other sites where the Council is intervening in the housing market, to consider the overall provision of affordable housing in the area; and**
 - **to demolish buildings on the site once it is vacated to mitigate revenue expenditure and minimise opportunities for unauthorised use.**

Overview and Scrutiny Comments/Recommendations

2. This report will be reviewed by the Corporate Resources Overview and Scrutiny Committee on the 31st of January and comments from the Committee will be set out at Appendix B.

Background

3. Central Bedfordshire Council (the Council) owns the freehold of the site at Houghton Lodge, Ampthill, as shown edged red on the plan in Appendix A. The site is located to the east of Flitwick Road and accessed from Houghton Close, off Oliver Street.
4. The site comprises a range of buildings, including houses, a bungalow, office buildings, garages and parking areas occupied for a mix of uses by the Council, including the Music Service, Emergency Duty Team and Adult Social Care (including Passenger Transport).
5. Staff will be relocated to Priory House, Watling House and the Northern Depot as set out in the Corporate Accommodation Plan and Quadrant Accommodation Plan. The move is underway and targeted for completion by May 2019.
6. The wider site includes Ampthill Library (coloured green on the plan in Appendix A), owned and occupied by the Council, together with the Lavender Court extra care development (coloured red on the plan in Appendix A), the freehold of which is owned by the Council but subject to a 125 year lease (102 years remaining) to Hanover Housing Association. These properties are accessed from Flitwick Road and are outside of the scope of the sale.
7. The site includes Ampthill Day Centre, operated by the Council, which was subject to a public consultation on its future. The consultation closed on 12th November 2018. The future of the Centre was considered at the Executive meeting on 4th December 2018 and it was resolved that the Day Centre will close and the service relocate to Silsoe Horticultural centre and other community facilities in the local area.
8. The site also includes a bungalow which is subject to a lease to Aragon Housing Association providing supported accommodation for disabled persons. Options are currently being reviewed to assess the suitability of the accommodation and the best provision for the individuals concerned.
9. Part of the site includes a licence for land used by the Saplings Preschool, which now operates from the Firs Lower School but have not yet surrendered the licence. The Preschool has received consent for the construction of a replacement building on the playing fields at the Firs Lower School. The target is for the preschool to be operational for September 2019.
10. The site is accessed via Houghton Close, which is shared with a number of NHS users including three GP practices and an Ambulance Station.

Options for consideration

11. This paper is brought forward following the direction set out in the Corporate Accommodation Plan (adopted by Executive in 2016) and the Quadrant Accommodation Plan (adopted by Executive in 2018) to “close the offices at Houghton Lodge as they are no longer fit for purpose and do not provide value for money. The site has been identified as having better value uses through redevelopment. Staff to be relocated to other CBC office locations”.
12. Access to decent housing is fundamental to improving life chances and reducing dependency on wider social support systems. In Central Bedfordshire there is a shortfall between the demand for, and supply of new affordable homes, and in specific specialist tenures especially the provision of homes for older people.
13. The Council is seeking to increase the supply of homes in the Flitwick/Amphill area, bringing forward a multi-function scheme focussing on providing accommodation for those over 55 on the former Flitwick Leisure Centre site, Steppingley Road, Flitwick. This scheme is expected to deliver a care home for older people, short term care for adults with Learning Disabilities, housing-with-care, wheelchair standard houses and downsizer dwellings.
14. Pre-application Planning Advice was obtained for the Houghton Lodge site earlier in 2018 which supported the principle of residential development, subject to providing justification regarding the loss of the facilities currently on site and a layout to provide a buffer to the adjacent listed building.
15. Based on work the Council is undertaking to consider its approach to Housing Delivery, feedback from residents through the recent consultation on the future day offer in Amphill, and the Councils Medium Term Finance Plan, the following factors were drivers when considering options for the site:
 - a. This is the only sizeable development site likely to come forward in the Amphill for the foreseeable future.
 - b. The housing need of specific group(s) of people.
 - c. Community need and benefit.
 - d. Delivery of capital receipt to meet the Council’s Medium-Term Financial Plan (MTFP) target.
16. Based on these drivers the following were considered:

a). Taking control of the type and tenure of housing delivered to meet specific need, and what that need is.

Reasons recommended:

- Taking control of the type and tenure of housing developed on the Houghton Lodge site will enable targeted provision of accommodation to meet specific housing need.
- Whilst there is evidence of housing need for 16-35 year olds, this evidence is only available in relation to social housing, not market need. This broader evidence is to follow in a Council Housing Enabling Strategy.

- Higher land and development costs in Ampthill make delivery of homes for younger working-age population and young families prohibitive, as they will be too expensive to be affordable.
- High-quality downsizer homes for older people are not being delivered by the market. Increasing the supply of downsizer homes will subsequently increase the supply of available homes across the area.
- Taking control enables the Council to explore synergies between future use and the existing Lavender Court extra care development.

b). Explore the overall provision of affordable housing in the area in the context of other sites where the Councils is intervening in the housing market.

Reasons recommended:

- The Council is already influencing housing delivery in Flitwick, the same 'housing area' as Ampthill, to deliver a scheme that will provide greater than policy levels of affordable housing than required by planning policy.
- Consideration of the overall affordable housing provision in the area may present an opportunity for best value whilst meeting the accommodation needs for older people.

c). Providing community space or additional car parking on the site beyond that required by the Planning Authority.

Reasons discounted:

- During the consultation on the future of the day offer in Ampthill, local concern was raised for the 'loss of a community facility'. It is also recognised that in its current configuration there is traffic congestion and pressure on on-street parking in Houghton close and nearby in Oliver street. These issues are acknowledged.
- Justification for loss of existing community facilities on the site and provision of adequate parking will be a material planning consideration for any future development, but these are not considered the principle outcome the Council wishes to achieve on the site.

d). Market sale

Reasons not recommended:

- Whilst this option is low risk, low cost and could deliver a significant capital receipt, this option has been discounted because the market is not delivering downsizer homes for older people. Therefore, a market sale would not enable the Council to directly control how the Houghton Lodge site is developed to meet need.

Reason/s for decision

17. To provide a direction for the future use of the Houghton Lodge site.

Council Priorities

18. The proposed action supports the following Council priorities:

- Enhancing Central Bedfordshire
- A more efficient and responsive council

Corporate Implications

Legal Implications

19. This report is seeking direction so there are no direct legal implications arising at this stage. However, the following statutory provisions provide the Council with the power of sale or redevelopment in respect of the site.
20. Section 123 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides that the Council may dispose of any of their land as they choose but, except in the case of a short tenancy, the consent of the Secretary of State is required if it is intended to dispose of land at less than the best consideration that can reasonably be obtained. A failure to obtain ministerial consent under this section may make an agreement for the disposal of land ultra vires. If the land is open space within the meaning of the Town and Country Planning Act, the disposal is subject to the requirements in subsection (2A).
21. Section 2 of the Local Authorities (Land) Act 1963 confers power upon local authorities to erect buildings and to construct or carry out works for the benefit or improvement of their area.
22. LGSS Law have been instructed to prepare a report on title as part of the initial due diligence work on the land and buildings.

Financial and Risk Implications

23. This paper is seeking direction. There are no specific financial implications arising at this stage that are of a level to require Executive approval.
24. Subsequent proposals arising from the direction set by Executive will require a detailed financial appraisal which will consider total cost taking account of delivery method, demolition, planning application and legal fees. These will be brought forward following the methodology set out in the Council's constitution and financial regulations.
25. It should be noted that vacation and demolition of the site will ensure that the revenue MTFP efficiency associated with the site can be met.

Equalities Implications

26. The Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation.

27. This scheme will provide additional housing within Central Bedfordshire.

Conclusion and next Steps

28. Vacation of the Houghton Lodge site presents an opportunity to consider and shape the future of the site to deliver the most benefit for local residents. It is the only sizeable development site likely to come forward in the Ampthill area for the foreseeable future.
29. Access to decent housing is fundamental to improving life chances and reducing dependency on wider social support systems. In Central Bedfordshire there is a shortfall between the demand for, and supply of new affordable homes, and in specific specialist tenures especially the provision of homes for older people.
30. High-quality downsizer homes for older people are not being delivered by the market. The Council increasing supply will subsequently increase the supply of available homes across the area.
31. Next steps are to engage the Planning Authority on the direction agreed by Executive, carry-out a detailed financial appraisal and consider the most effective delivery method available to the Council. Proposals can then be brought forward following the methodology set out in the Council's constitution and financial regulations.
32. In addition, following the move of staff in May 2019, the buildings on site will be demolished to mitigate the Council's revenue expenditure on repairs, maintenance and security and to minimise the opportunities for unauthorised use and anti-social behaviour.

Appendices

- Appendix A: Plan of Houghton Lodge, Ampthill
Appendix B: Overview and Scrutiny Comments