

Beenham Parish Affordable Housing Initiative

FAQ – 23rd November 2024

Since the publishing of the report of the Public Meeting of the 26th October, some people have raised questions and concerns about the initiative, especially how fast it appears to be travelling at and whether the sites that were identified most by attendees would be where the homes will most likely be built.

I understand how this can cause anxiety and worry, especially for those who live close to the identified sites and who weren't expecting to get to this stage so quickly. I apologise for any distress and uncertainty people may be feeling and for not making things clear enough.

In an attempt to clarify things and hopefully allay fears people may have; I have written this Frequently Asked Questions. I hope it covers everything, but if anyone is still unsure or has any further questions, please contact me at d.hancock@beenham-pc.gov.uk. I will answer anything I can, and if people want, to come and discuss this with you in person.

We completed the survey in good faith, but did not expect the initiative to identify sites so quickly, why has it?

We ran the survey, to establish if there is a need for affordable housing and if the community are in favour. The results of the survey showed that there is a definite need and that the community is in favour. Everything that follows relies on having potential sites identified, so we asked attendees at the meeting to identify some (they had a maximum of 3 selections).

The sites that have been identified, do the number of people who identified them mean anything at all? Are they the most likely to be developed?

These sites are nothing more than identified sites. Nothing more can be read into this; there are no priorities, none that are more likely than others to be built on, irrespective of the number of people who identified them. Any, or all of them, may be unsuitable or impossible when valid criteria are applied. We are already in the process of starting the formal assessment.

The sites identified are large, could the whole site have houses built on it?

Absolutely not. Anything to be built outside the settlement boundary will be in the North Wessex Down Natural Landscape (formerly AONB). There will be no commercial development and any development will be small.

*To allow a few affordable housing units built, planning legislation in 1991 created "Rural Exception Sites" for **very small developments** at the edge of existing rural settlements, so next to our settlement boundary. Rural Exception Sites have a low land value, because they cannot be used for commercial development.*

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FAQ – 23rd November 2024

They are outside of any development plans or housing targets of WBC. They are looked on favourably by the council and the North Wessex Downs Natural Landscape, when it comes to a planning application to build affordable housing.

How large could a development be?

Based on the identified need and the number of people who qualify for affordable housing, the number of units to be built are agreed. These developments are of typically between 4 and 10 units; a mixture of flats and houses for rent or shared ownership in perpetuity. There is no Right to Buy.

The footprint of the site is small. I would never want to say how large it will be as I am not a planner and we don't know the number of units but as an order of magnitude it could be; 30m x 30m, 40m x 40m depending on number of units. Half an acre would be 50m x 40m. I just want to help you understand the scale we are talking about not exact dimensions. Visual impact would be minimised as much as possible, again because of the location in the North Wessex Downs and the impact on residents.

What types of units would be built and would they only be available to local people?

We envisage that it will be a mixture of houses and flats for different number of occupants. These housing units will only be available to people who live in Beenham or who have a connection to Beenham and meet other eligibility criteria. These conditions will last in perpetuity, it will be affordable housing for local people. They will be rented – cheaper than private rents at market rates - or shared ownership. To re-iterate they are not eligible for Right to Buy

I've heard that West Berkshire Council (WBC) are involved, does this mean that we are looking to put a planning application in?

No we aren't. We have to go to WBC first but it does not indicate any level of advancement with sites; just basic first steps.

We are working with them to firstly initiate the process. They need to know that we have an affordable housing initiative where there is a definite need and support of the community.

The sites identified, are nothing more than identified, so secondly, we need WBC to assess identified sites and determine if they are feasible from a planning perspective – for example Transport and Highways, Environment and Ecology, there is a long list of criteria. If no sites get through this feasibility assessment the Affordable Housing initiative will not be able to go any further.

Beenham Parish Affordable Housing Initiative

FAQ – 23rd November 2024

Once feasible sites have been identified by WBC, what comes next?

The landowners of those sites will be approached to see if they will gift the land or sell it cheaply enough. The land will not sell at a premium because landowners would never be able to build on it except as a Rural Exception Site. Landowners are fully within their rights to refuse to sell or gift the land. If no landowners will sell or gift the land, then the initiative will stop.

There will be no compulsory purchase of land – guaranteed. To obtain a site, landowners must be prepared to gift the land or sell it cheaply.

Who builds the affordable housing units?

We need to get an organisation to build and manage the units. This could be a housing association such as Sovereign (now SVR) or others who specialise in Rural Affordable Housing to acquire the land. This will then have to go through normal planning processes at WBC to build the number of units identified, but Rural Exceptions sites are looked on favourably.

Any development must be carried out in a way that fits in with the feel of the village, reflects architectural styles, so is sensitively designed. The community plays a key role in this. North Wessex Downs must agree final proposals.

So, this will take quite a long time and may, in fact, not go ahead?

To be straight with everyone, where we are in the process today, we still have 2 make or break decisions ahead of us. They are binary decisions. We are dependent on:

- 1. Having sites that pass the necessary criteria so they are feasible to be built on.*
- 2. Landowners being prepared to gift the site or sell it very cheaply.*

This is a long process which will be measured in years if it gets all the way.

Will there be more public engagement?

We will continue to frequently keep update you and hold public meetings at key points in the process. The affordable housing must be for the community, devised by the community.

Please continue to raise any questions or concerns and I'd be happy to come and discuss this with any of you.