

MID SUFFOLK DISTRICT COUNCIL

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| TO: Cabinet | REPORT NUMBER: MCa/23/9 |
| FROM: Cllr Richard Winch Cabinet Member for Housing and Property | DATE OF MEETING: 8 August 2023 |
| OFFICER: Holly Brett, Corporate Manager The Councils' Companies | KEY DECISION REF NO. N/A |

ELMSWELL EXEMPLAR HOUSING SCHEME

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides an update of the work carried out to date to establish whether an exemplar low carbon housing scheme could be delivered on the Housing Revenue Account land at Church Road, Elmswell
- 1.2 This matter was originally considered by cabinet in November 2022 and subsequently reviewed by O&S in January 2023. O&S determined that the original decision should be reconsidered by cabinet. This report reviews the options available and recommends option 3 is progressed which is to defer any further progress of this scheme until Part 2 of the Joint Local Plan is progressed. This will provide the opportunity for the site to be considered as part of the wider planning process which will include extensive consultation.
- 1.3 The Council aspires to deliver an exemplar housing scheme and will continue to review opportunities across the district.

2. OPTIONS CONSIDERED

The options that have been considered are: -

- 2.1 **Option 1 – Confirm and progress the original recommendation from the November 2022 Cabinet report to appoint Mid Suffolk Growth Limited (MSGL) to deliver a market and affordable housing scheme.**

Initial design and feasibility work has been undertaken by the design team within MSGL to establish whether an exemplar low carbon scheme could be delivered on the site at Church Road in Elmswell. MSGL were provided with a brief from Housing seeking an updated view on a previous masterplan for the site, to bring the design in line with the Council's aspirations for exemplar low carbon homes and sustainable place making through the Council's own developments.

The initial design work has concluded that an exemplar scheme (Passivhaus or equivalent standard) of circa 50 homes is achievable and would deliver new affordable and market housing that delivers on the Councils new design guide and specification, providing high quality sustainable new homes for residents. Elmswell is a sustainable location with amenities and facilities as well as good rail and road links. This is a large site, so it is appropriate to have a balance of tenures, using affordable

rented, affordable home ownership properties and market homes to deliver a sustainable scheme and community.

By entering into a Development Agreement with MSGL to deliver the scheme the Council would have access to the technical and professional design team required to progress the scheme through design, planning and ultimately to delivery.

The scheme would be funded partly through the General Fund (GF) and partly through the Housing Revenue Account (HRA).

There is £7m within the GF MTFs capital programme for the market housing element of the scheme, and £7m within the HRA capital programme for the affordable homes.

The market homes would be profit generating which would enable those funds to be reinvested across the district, it is anticipated the market homes would deliver circa 5% profit overall.

The affordable homes would be delivered in line with the updated Affordable Housing Strategy.

MSGL was set up to enable the Council to deliver more new housing in line with the aspirations of the Council of the type of new homes they wish to deliver, in this case an exemplar low carbon scheme. Other partners may not wish to develop this scheme to this high standard, favouring a higher profit margin, so MSGL is the preferred delivery option for this scheme.

The current high-level design would be reviewed in line with the responses received from the initial engagement event to address concerns relating to density, design and the provision of more open space. Further community engagement would be undertaken as the design evolved.

Appendix A shows the site location.

Appendix B shows the artist impression of how the site could look once completed.

2.2 Option 2 – Disposal of the Land

This land is owned by the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and therefore it has a primary function to deliver new homes.

In some circumstances HRA land can be disposed of on the open market, this may need to be approved by the Secretary of State.

Land would have to be defined as being “surplus” meaning that it is not required to deliver more homes or is not capable of delivering homes.

As the land is suitable for housing, and in an area that has demand for new homes, the land is not deemed to be surplus, and therefore it is not appropriate to dispose of the land at the current time.

Should the Council wish to dispose of the site to generate a capital receipt, the anticipated highest value would be for residential development. A capital receipt from this site could be used to deliver housing elsewhere in the District, however this is unlikely to result in an exemplar scheme being delivered on this site and is unlikely

to deliver the desired outcomes for the site. Further work would be required to establish whether a sale of the land would be achievable.

2.3 Option 3 – Defer any further progress until Part 2 of The Joint Local Plan is progressed.

The land could support a low carbon exemplar scheme that would provide sustainable homes delivering a unique offer to the market in terms of high-quality low carbon homes for sale and for social/affordable housing. However, to enable the community to provide further feedback on this site and consider potential site outcomes or uses, this scheme could be held in abeyance until the completion of Part 2 of the Local Plan is progressed. This will provide the opportunity for the site to be considered as part of the wider planning process which will include extensive local consultation.

This approach would provide sufficient opportunity to democratically assess whether the site should be used for housing purposes to meet the housing needs in the district, or for an alternative use through consultation and engagement throughout the Local Plan timetable with all stakeholders.

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| 3. RECOMMENDATIONS |
| 3.1 That Cabinet approves option 3, to defer any further progress on this site until Part 2 of the Joint Local Plan is progressed |
| REASON FOR DECISION |
| To allow a formal process to assess the suitability of the site for a range of uses |

4. KEY INFORMATION

- 4.1 In 2018 the Council commissioned a high-level masterplan for the land at Church Road, in 2021 MSGL were appointed on a consultancy basis to review the existing masterplan, and establish whether an exemplar sustainable, low carbon scheme could be achieved that was viable.
- 4.2 This work was concluded in early 2022 and demonstrated that a fifty-unit scheme could be delivered that will showcase the Council's low carbon ambitions and would provide market leading new homes in the district that are truly sustainable.
- 4.3 The development would include areas of open space, biodiversity friendly planting areas, increased walking and cycling routes, rainwater collection, community gardens and will seek to integrate into the existing community by utilising the site characteristics and being respectful of the existing homes in the area.
- 4.4 The design would evolve as engagement with the local community, the local planning authority, and other key stakeholders progresses.

- 4.5 Mid Suffolk Growth Limited (MSGSL) was set up in 2019 with the purpose of increasing housing delivery in the district on behalf of the Council.
- 4.6 By entering into a Development Agreement with Mid Suffolk Growth Limited the Council will benefit from the expertise of the design and delivery team that has delivered a successful scheme at the Needham Market, former HQ site. The same structure was used on this scheme and delivered a high-quality market leading scheme that delivered financial returns to the Council, high quality market homes and new affordable housing for the council. The development that has been very well received.
- 4.7 Following the Cabinet decision, in November 2022, to progress with appointing Mid Suffolk Growth Ltd to deliver a scheme at Elmswell, the first stage of public engagement was undertaken in November 2022.
- 4.8 The engagement event was designed to enable residents and local stakeholders the opportunity to view the high-level plans that had been produced as the first part of the feasibility work.
- 4.9 The engagement event was well attended with circa 150 people attending. The feedback received from the event has been reviewed and the summary can be found at Appendix C
- 4.10 Following this event officers from MSDC and Suffolk County met with the Parish Council Clerk and Ward Members to discuss the PC's desire to deliver a new primary school on this site. The response from SCC following an MP's question on this is at Appendix D and summarises the position.
- 4.11 The decision made by Cabinet in November 2022 to progress with appointing Mid Suffolk Growth Ltd to progress the delivery of the scheme, was called in. Overview and Scrutiny Committee requested for the project to be returned to Cabinet before any further work is carried out for further discussion.
- 4.12 This land is within the HRA, its purpose is to deliver affordable housing and could form part of Mid Suffolks Affordable Housing Delivery Programme. Mid Suffolk District has limited land in its ownership that can deliver a scheme of this nature, this is why this site was identified in 2018 and the subsequent work undertaken to establish the feasibility of delivering low carbon homes. To deliver a high quality, low carbon scheme, economy of scale is needed, this also helps to offset the costs of the affordable housing against the cost of the market housing.
- 4.13 This site had an allocation in the previously published draft Joint Local Plan, this now has limited status. The Elmswell Neighbourhood Plan appears to include the site within the proposed settlement boundary. Site allocations will now be reviewed as part 2 of the plan adoption process and as such there will be an opportunity to review the suitability of this site for housing as part of the plan making process. This process provides significant opportunities for engagement with communities and key stakeholders.

5. LINKS TO CORPORATE PLAN

5.1 The development of land at Church Road supports the joint corporate plan by delivering new homes and supporting the low carbon agenda.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

6.1 There are no immediate financial implications of the recommended option.

7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

7.1 There are no immediate legal implications of the recommended option.

8. RISK MANAGEMENT

8.1 Key risks are set out below:

| Key Risk Description | Likelihood 1-4 | Impact 1-4 | Key Mitigation Measures | Risk Register and Reference* |
|---|-------------------|---------------|---|------------------------------|
| If we didn't explore fully the development options for the site, and other sites, the Council may not achieve the best economic, social and financial outcomes. | 2 | 2 | The recommended option will use the Local Plan process to determine the most appropriate use of the land at the current time. | MSGL Risk Register (H) |

**Name of risk register where risk is currently documented and being actively managed and it's reference number*

9. CONSULTATIONS

10. There has been engagement with the local community, key stakeholders and the planning authority. The feedback from the public engagement is summarised in appendix C.

11. EQUALITY ANALYSIS

11.1 Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) not required as there are no equality issues arising from the contents of this report and the recommendations.

12. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

12.1 The recommended option has no environmental implications.

13. APPENDICES

| Title | Location |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| (a) Site location plan | In report |
| (b) High Level site visuals | In report |
| (c) Engagement responses | In report |
| (d) SCC response | In report |

14. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

14.1 None

15. REPORT AUTHORS *Holly Brett Corporate Manager*

Appendix A- Site Location Plan



Appendix B-High level site visuals

4.8 Street View 2
See page 25 for location





Appendix C- Initial engagement summary

The initial consultation conducted at Elmswell provided residents and stakeholders the opportunity to comment on the proposed use of the site for housing development. The consultation saw 61 paper responses completed at the event, with the opportunity to follow up with postal and email responses too.

The consultation paperwork allowed participants to answer 4 questions and an opportunity to provide any further feedback which they deemed helpful or useful. The below commentary is a summary of the feedback received and the sentiment of this feedback.

Question 1 – *What type of housing do you think Elmswell needs?*

The consensus of answers to this question, was that there is no further housing needed in Elmswell either until the infrastructure of the village has been addressed or no further housing delivered at all. It's noted that there have been multiple new housing developments happening within the village and people were concerned about the impact this would have on local services.

A few respondents recognised the need for affordable housing and further rental options and the opportunity to purchase bungalows. Plus, the need for any development to have an agreement to be built for local people.

Question 2 – *Do you think building sustainable homes is important?*

The vast majority of people agreed that building sustainable homes is important but stressed that the proposed location was not the correct one for this type of development. The residents also expressed their disappointment that other developments which have taken place in the village haven't been more sustainably built.

Respondents also expressed that solar panels would be a great addition to any new homes and to ensure the homes were built in locations which captured the most amount of sunlight. Heat pumps were also mentioned as being a good addition to sustainable homes. A suggestion of a centralised heating system to improve the efficiency of the homes was given.

Question 3 – *Is there anything you want to tell us about?*

A few respondents expressed that this type of development was not suitable for a village style location rather more suitable for a town.

The lack of infrastructure was a key theme within the responses which suggested the need for more local amenities in the community such as a doctor surgery, dentist, post office, supermarket, better connectivity throughout the village, sustainable travel options (bus), primary care facilities, and a primary school. The current facility for doctors is oversubscribed and people find it difficult to get an appointment.

The increase in traffic congestion to School Road and Church Road, if the plans were to go ahead as this is a congested area of road network at present and would benefit from traffic calming measures as per suggestions made within the responses. There are increased lorry movements throughout the village which cause concern for some residents and have been described as dangerous. There were comments about the access points shown within the plans and how this would affect traffic flow. The church can become very busy and when events are happening here, cars can be parked on the road making it difficult to navigate.

Question 4 – *What would you like to see included in any plans?*

Many responses mentioned the space having open spaces, a field, increased biodiversity, natural habitat, planning to encourage wildlife and dog walking areas.

It was also noted that a travel plan which looked at traffic modelling and a parking plan would be beneficial to see what impact increased car movements would have on the current road network. It was highlighted that the roads in this area already suffer with narrowing and this would cause more issues with increasing movements.

There were comments made about the housing density and how it is not in keeping with the surrounding houses, in terms of height. There were also comments expressing how the designs should be in keeping with the design landscape of the village.

Question 5 – *Feedback*

The village of Elmswell has seen rapid expansion in recent years and has had an uplift in population, many people have expressed concern of how this will impact the local infrastructure and amenities available to them.

There was feedback that there has been a lack of consultation with the residents and that this consultation should have been conducted at an earlier stage.

Within multiple responses from the consultation documents, there was a clear desire for a new primary school to be located within Elmswell, as there were concerns over the increased number of children within the village and the potential for children to have to attend schooling in other villages if the current school became oversubscribed.

The location of this proposal is seen as the only remaining green space within the village, which is well used by many residents and utilised for dog walking.

Appendix D- SCC response

“Thank you for your recent correspondence regarding primary education in Elmswell.

My officers have prepared the briefing set out below, which provides a rationale for the Council’s position around primary education in the area.

Pupil Places and Expansion

Growth from local housing developments in the village of Elmswell, meant that future forecasts for the school indicated that the school would exceed the existing 315 capacity by September 2022. A project to explore the possibilities to expand the school was undertaken and confirmed that it was possible to expand the school to 420 places (60 per year group) on the current site. This expansion project has gone through the planning approval processes, acquired the necessary Community Infrastructure Levy funding from Mid-Suffolk District Council, and is now being delivered on-site, and is due to be completed early this year. This expansion will meet the increased demand that is due to continue at the school over the next few years.

Opposition to Expansion

During the planning consultation, there was some local opposition to the expansion of the school on the current site. It was felt that the site was not large enough to expand beyond the current capacity due in part to a significant portion of the site being a tree-belt and deemed not usable by the school. However, the school has been very supportive of the project and confirmed that the tree-belt is used for ‘Forest School’ activities and is a part of its everyday curriculum offer. The project also offsets some loss of outdoor space by installing a Multi-Use Games Area (MUGA) that provides a space that can be used all year round, not just in good weather. The final project has been developed using the DfE Building Bulletin parameters for expanding a school which are followed to ensure appropriate and sufficient internal and external spaces are provided to pupils and staff. The school are extremely pleased with the project and local Councillors and Parish Councillors have been invited to visit the school to see the new facilities for themselves once completed.

Future School Places in Elmswell

As further growth is due in the village, SCC officers were keen to keep the discussions continuing with the local Suffolk County Councillor, District Councillors, and Parish Council, about what is next for Elmswell. A meeting was held on Friday 13th January 2023, to continue these discussions.

There is a possibility that pupil demand arising from further growth in the village may exceed that which the newly expanded school can accommodate. However, there are a large number of pupils who attend the existing school from out of catchment, and almost 1 in 3 primary age pupils who live in Elmswell seek a school place at other schools in the area, including the neighbouring village of Woolpit. Based on the data available to us at this point, SCC believe that the expanded school will be able to provide sufficient places to Elmswell pupils. We will continue to monitor this with the school as data on pupil forecasts and planned housing developments are updated.

Suffolk County Council has not been offered a site for a new school in Elmswell because it is not believed that a new school is required, unlike in Woolpit where a new site has been provided as part of a large

housing development enabling the creation of a new school and an increase primary school places in the area. It is the view of SCC that, having considered the data available, a further school in Elmswell would not be viable without significant additional demand arising.

As mentioned, we keep the situation under review as housing developments are reported and using our pupil number forecasts.

I hope this information is helpful to you in responding to your constituents.

Kind regards

Matthew”

Matthew Hicks

Leader of Suffolk County Council