

VILLAGERS HAVE A SAY IN THE FUTURE OF FAIR MILE

Proposals for new housing within an established village are always going to be controversial, often giving rise to an outburst of NIMBYism and opposition from local residents. While some villagers may be in favour of the plans, the community as a whole will usually have a number of shared concerns. What impact will the development have on the character of the village? Can local amenities cope with the extra demand? What about the increase in traffic on country roads?

In the south Oxfordshire village of Cholsey, residents have been given the opportunity to influence the redevelopment of Fair Mile Hospital, a former asylum located on the outskirts of the village. The community's involvement in the project began earlier this year with a series of workshops at the local primary and secondary schools and the village day centre. At the end of April, a Community Planning Weekend was organised by the site developers, Thomas Homes and Linden Homes, along with a team of architects, urban designers and community planners from John Thompson & Partners.

The aim of the weekend was to bring together local people and project stakeholders to create a shared vision and masterplan for Fair Mile, allowing residents to have a say in every aspect of the new scheme, from how it will look to its relationship with the village.

More than 250 people took part in the 2-day event which included a number of workshops and guided tours of the site. Participants also formed hands-on planning groups to discuss a wide range of issues including heritage and conservation, the image and identity of the new development, and how to integrate Fair Mile with Cholsey, both physically and socially.

During the discussions a key issue many people wanted to address was: "How do we stop this development being a separate village?" Another resident made an appeal on behalf of the village: "This is a rural community – please don't urbanise it."

Following its closure in 2003, Fair Mile Hospital was acquired by English Partnerships, the national regeneration agency set up to help the Government support high-quality, sustainable growth in England. One of 96 former NHS

hospital sites to be redeveloped into major housing schemes, Fair Mile occupies a 26 hectare Thames-side site with more than 300 sqft of buildings, many dating back to the late 1800s.

The developers assigned to work on the site have been given a challenging brief by English Partnerships. The principal aim is to create a sustainable mixed-use development that integrates with the village, rather than becoming a satellite community. In restoring and converting the old hospital buildings, Thomas Homes must meet English Partnership's national standards in construction efficiency, eco-friendly features and design quality. In addition, 40% of the new properties built by Linden Homes must be affordable housing.

Thomas Homes Director, Chris Brotherton is confident that his team has the skills and experience to meet the requirements of the brief and manage the complex conservation and listed building issues associated with this type of site: "Fair Mile is a prestigious site with tremendous significance, both locally and nationally. We are aiming to create an exemplar of sustainable development with a very high quality of design."

While people living in and around Cholsey remain concerned about the redevelopment of Fair Mile, involving them in the planning process has helped shift opinion and engender a more positive attitude towards the project. During the Community Planning Weekend, one villager referred to the new scheme as "a once in a lifetime opportunity" while another expressed the hope that Fair Mile "should be a place all residents and those who live nearby can be proud of".

Looking at the artist's impressions produced by John Thompson & Partners after the planning weekend, the vision for Fair Mile Hospital is starting to take shape. A series of summer forums will give local residents further opportunities to influence the scheme, and it is hoped that this consultative approach will result in a development that meets with wholesale approval. As one villager reminded the developers, "This is an exciting scheme, if you get it wrong the first time you're not going to get another chance!"