

STEEP PARISH COUNCIL



POTENTIAL AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT ON A SITE IN RIDGE COMMON LANE, STEEP

We have been contacted by a representative of HARAHA (the Hampshire Alliance for Rural Affordable Housing) to let us know that they are working with their development partner, Hyde Housing, on a potential planning application for nine units of affordable housing and two market-sale properties to be built on a site on the north side of Ridge Common Lane, approximately 100 yards from its junction with Stoner Hill and Church Road.

HARAHA is a partnership of rural housing enablers sponsored by a number of councils, including East Hampshire District Council. Its main aim is to increase the supply of affordable housing in the rural villages of Hampshire, to ensure local people are able to afford to live in the places where they were brought up, work, or have family connections, and in doing so to help strengthen rural communities. More information on HARAHA is available at www.harah.org.uk.

The project currently envisaged would be the largest development in Steep (outside the Bedales campus) for many years. Because of that, but particularly in view of the past controversy about affordable housing in Church Road, the Parish Council is committed to ensuring that the whole community is aware of this potential application, and in particular, that residents understand the likely timescale for the decision and the opportunities for individual views to be expressed.

Any application for the Ridge Common Lane site is first and foremost a matter for the site owner in conjunction with the developer, and will be subject to normal planning authority rules and processes. The final decision on any application would be made by South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA), taking account of views expressed by Steep Parish Council.

Because of the rural character of our village within the National Park and the location of the site in Ridge Common Lane, the development could only go ahead if it was classified by the SDNPA as a Rural Exception Site¹. This means that the developer must be able to demonstrate that it has carried out a thorough community consultation before making the planning application and that it has been reasonably responsive to the results of that consultation. The consultation may have a number of phases and the Parish Council will consider a commitment to putting the proposal to a village referendum as part of the process. The Parish Council would expect the result of such a referendum to carry significant weight in any final decision by the SDNPA.

BACKGROUND, THE ALLOTMENT SITE AND THE PARISH PLAN

Discussions about additional affordable housing in Steep go back nearly twenty years. These culminated in a project in 2005 to build a small development on the “allotment” site in the centre of Steep, adjacent to the Village Hall and opposite the end of Mill Lane. This proposal proved to be significantly controversial and also raised questions about the technical trust status of the land in question. Following a referendum which narrowly rejected the proposed project on this site, the Parish Council transferred the land to a newly established charity (now known as Steep In Need) with an independent set of trustees.

The subject of affordable housing (and housing development in general) was an important focus of the work on the Parish Plan (formally adopted in 2012). One of the twelve agreed priorities of that Parish Plan was to seek “a modest addition in the affordable housing stock, aimed principally at the elderly and young families with local connections”. There was very substantial support from the community for this aspiration, although it was recognised that great care would need to be exercised in finding a suitable location, selecting an appropriate design and developing a project which made sense financially.

Since the Parish Plan was adopted three years ago, no firm planning proposals have emerged and no potential sites have been identified.

During late 2014, the South Downs National Park launched an exercise calling for landowners throughout the Park to propose sites suitable for development (an exercise known as the Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment or SHLAA). Any sites volunteered in this way by private landowners were then assessed by the SDNPA team. The conclusion of that review, published in January this year, identified a small number of potential sites in Steep but none were assessed as suitable for development. The Ridge

¹ **Rural exception sites:** Development can only proceed outside the settlement boundary on sites that are classified as rural exception sites. These are small sites used for affordable housing in perpetuity where sites would not normally be used for housing. Rural exception sites seek to address the needs of the local community by accommodating households who are either current residents or have an existing family or employment connection. Small numbers of market homes may be allowed at the local authority’s discretion, for example where essential to enable the delivery of affordable units without grant funding.

(Source: National Planning Policy Framework issued by the Department of Communities and Local Government)

Common Lane plot was not considered as part of this process. At this time we are not aware of any other possible sites for affordable housing.

THE NEED

There have been a number of housing-needs surveys over the years, run by EHDC and the Parish Council, which have always indicated a significant level of demand for affordable housing in Steep. The number of eligible people who are actually registered with EHDC with local connections and wanting to live in Steep has fluctuated over time but usually at a level significantly higher than the number of units proposed here. The current demand level will need to be reassessed as part of the work on this project, but the demand is likely to exceed the nine units in question.

THE RIDGE COMMON LANE SITE

The proposed site is outside the existing settlement boundary (the designated area where the planning presumption would be in favour of new development), but is immediately adjacent to its western limit. The site is sloping and has some tree screening. Questions of access for vehicles; access for pedestrians; and comprehensive screening to minimise the landscape impact from the road and from the Hangers would all need to be worked up as part of the project. There is a belt of mature specimen trees on the site that would need to be preserved.

The current proposal is for nine affordable homes (expected to be four three-bed and five two-bed) and two market-sale private properties, to be situated between the affordable units and the existing houses on the corner of Ridge Common Lane and Stoner Hill. We are advised that these private dwellings are necessary to make the development financially viable.

Residents living in dwellings bordering the site would be directly affected by this proposal and that their concerns and views will need to be fully understood.

DESIGN

Hyde have appointed an architectural practice from Havant (PWP) for the project. We are advised that the architect is already sensitive to the community wishes as expressed in the Village Design Statement and the Parish Plan, and is committed to be as respectful as possible of the style characteristics of the village. Conscious of the Arts and Crafts heritage of Steep, it is likely that any design will attempt to reflect this. They hope that some degree of community choice in design will be possible if the proposal progresses to full consultation.

PARISH COUNCIL POSITION

At the meeting on 18th May, it was recommended to Councillors that they should indicate to Hyde their willingness to work with it on the many open questions about the project on this site, so that it could be brought to a final decision; and reiterate their commitment to encouraging Hyde to achieve the highest possible degree of community engagement on the project. This recommendation was based on:

- the established community consensus in favour of a modest addition to the stock of affordable housing in the parish, as evidenced by the Parish Plan;
- the lack of any other identified or foreseeable alternative sites (following the recent SHLAA survey);
- a continued need for affordable housing; and
- the fact that this site is immediately adjacent to the existing settlement boundary.

Councillors were reminded that the Parish Council's final position would depend on the specifics of any planning application actually submitted and, of course, on feedback from the community. Detailed questions of building density, massing, style, access and screening will all be vitally important matters for discussion, as will the tenure mix (how many properties are for rent and how many for shared ownership) and how the conditions about restricting the properties to those with local connections would be managed. To that extent, it should be recognised that a decision to work with Hyde at this stage does not commit the Council to support any final proposal.

After discussion, Councillors deferred decision on the recommendations, so that further enquiries could be made with SDNPA and Hampshire Highways about the general suitability of the site. An update on the land now owned by the Steep in Need charity next to the Village Hall in Church Road was also requested.

These matters will be further discussed at a special Parish Council meeting on 16th July, at 7.30pm in Steep Village Hall.