

An Unsustainable Proposal: Comments on the Try Homes Proposed main building on the Champion House site

Prepared for Champion Concerns, 13th July

Summary: We have considered the Try Homes proposed main building in some detail. Our investigations, which have been informed by someone with years of experience of local government housing issues, are that the main building fails to meet reasonable sustainability requirements both because of its design and its size.

Background. We are in no way opposed to a development on the Champion House site. Neither do we have an issue with the guideline that developments apart from those below 20 units should in general for around 50% of the new homes to be allocated to affordable housing schemes. We believe that the development of the Champion House site is a real opportunity to show how a mixed development can be designed and built to a high standard. Doing so would make it possible to develop a site that:

1. provides families in housing need with an environment that will enable them to escape the “revolving doors” cycle of moving from one situation to another without ever resolving their problems;
2. respects the character of the Spring Grove Conservation Area;
3. produces a development to a scale and design that is acceptable to local residents.

This proposed design is fundamentally flawed. We do not believe that it is possible to adjust the design proposed to make it acceptable. It is inherently flawed in terms of scale and design.

The scale of the building is such that it would produce a sufficient concentration of families requiring help which would in its turn be likely to create a ‘problem environment’. This would set a tone for the whole development (main block at least). This could, in turn, make the development increasingly unattractive for the residents in shared ownership and private housing.

The design of the building is such that families with a variety of housing, social, educational and medical needs are ghettoised from the start. They have all been placed in the main apse This will directly contribute to a feeling of isolation and exclusion. We can think of no more likely way to make these families feel that they have been set up to fail. The flats in the apse are connected by a single long corridor on each level. This would be an obvious focal point for various sources of trouble. Because of this such designs have long since been abandoned by those concerned to provide good quality social housing¹. We are concerned that this ghettoising effect is reinforced by placing the part ownership housing in the blocks connecting across the apse. Indeed the guidelines for social housing development should aim to:

- provide housing accommodation suitable for the intended need-group, set in a safe, secure and visually attractive environment;
- Contribute to policies on sustainability, regeneration strategies, and a stable and balanced community;
- Cater, as far as possible, for tenants’ present and future needs by the provision of lifetime homes to ensure the home is flexible, adaptable and accessible;
- Provide a user-friendly quality product of sufficient size, and with account taken of arrangement, safety and security, energy efficiency, fittings and equipment, construction etc, that will aim to deliver tenant satisfaction, and pride and participation in the care of the dwelling and its environs; and
- Strike an appropriate balance between the capital and maintenance costs of various design solutions and use of construction materials.

¹ Building for Life, Criteria: <http://www.cabe.org.uk/buildingforlife.aspx?contentitemid=384&aspectid=15>

It is extremely likely that a concentration of rental (social) housing provision (60 homes) and shared ownership (49 homes) in one clearly defined area of the development would result in a significant level of problems and inter-neighbour friction.

To add to all this the developer has stated variously that “most” or, more vaguely, a “proportion” of the homes will be built to lifetime standards. This concerns us on two grounds. The first is that according to the London Plan and other guidelines *all* new homes should be built to lifetime standards. The second is that the developer has provided no information as to *which* homes will be built to these standards and which will not. It is our concern that it is only the private housing that will be built to lifetime standards and the social housing (possibly along with the shared-ownership housing) that will not.

The feeling of being “dumped” of families that are already struggling with their problems will thus be increased by being placed clearly apart and having homes built to significantly lower standards. It is our view that this is a perfect recipe for a sink estate. This will not serve the needs of those who are in most need of help. It will disrupt the social life of the area with its well-established family housing in a friendly neighbourhood. It will lead to such a concentration of problems in a small area that the high-level of management required would almost certainly not be available. The great danger is, of course, that once these problems get beyond a certain threshold they become unmanageable as past experience of housing estates all over the country have shown. To repeat, placing a large number of families requiring various forms of support into one section of a large building seems very likely to reach a threshold at which the problems of individual families will interfere with the lives of others. When this happens a downward spiral can set in as is well known from housing developments around the country.

Because of the problems outlined we feel that it is a virtual certainty that the private accommodation (and even the part-ownership homes) would become so unattractive that properties would remain empty for long periods. This would drive prices down inviting speculative landlords to buy the properties thereby increasing the likelihood of even more of the properties being occupied by a transient population of residents with no commitment to the area. We see this as turning into a housing disaster and at the very least being a development which would do tremendous harm to the quality of life in the vicinity of the development.

Another design feature which we would like to question is that, for the development as a whole, most of the units have a single room to function as a living room, dining room and kitchen. For these units there is only one room apart from the bedroom(s) for social activity. This reduces the opportunities for quiet private activity. This problem is compounded by the non-provision of storage spaces (cupboards etc) meaning that bedrooms which are often already small will be further reduced by the need for storage furniture (e.g. cupboards, drawers).

Day-to-day problems. More generally we were surprised by the lack of detail in the application papers about many key aspects of the design which concern day-to-day living. Thus the papers do not show where the refuse collection points are or give any indication of how residents would handle their refuse. Furthermore, what are the plans to encourage environmentally sensitive waste disposal? Not only do the application papers tell us almost nothing but when we spoke to the architect and Try Homes representatives at the exhibition on the development held on 10th July 2006 we found that they were unable to answer our questions. Beyond that they didn't think that it was important to do so. They felt that it was enough to say “these matters will all be dealt with when the application is approved”.

If we are right in believing that the scale and design of this development would result in an unsustainable level of social problems then it is not difficult to imagine further consequence for the life of all the residents. We just have to think of the possible/likely problems in the semi-basement car park. With so much housing for families with significant problems it is not difficult to imagine cars being vandalised in the car park. It would only require one or two such incidents. Then what? How would other residents react? How would the area be controlled? Clearly providing cameras would not suffice to identify those responsible.

Provision of services. Another major issue concerns the provision of services such as health, education and social services. There is virtually nothing on this in the developer's application papers. When the developer's representatives were questioned on this at the 10th July exhibition they were unable to answer any detailed questions. They were asked “Where is the nearest doctor and are their lists full?”, “Where are

the nearest schools and how many places have they got?”, “Where is the nearest social service provision?”. In each case the answer was “I don’t know”. This was a perfect illustration, if such were needed, of the lack of concern of the developer for the residents who will eventually live in the accommodation. Evidence collected has clearly shown that support of such households is critical. Without such support, households will quickly fall into patterns of anti social behaviour and eventual breakdown resulting in being made homeless through eviction or abandonment².

A clear illustration of the developer’s approach to the needs of the future residents of the development was given at the 10th July exhibition by Mr Tilley from Try Homes. When he was asked if the courtyards to the main building could reasonably be considered as publicly accessible open space he replied in the affirmative. When he was further asked how he thought the residents living in housing and flats around the courtyard would feel about groups of people, with nothing to do with the estate, wandering around in their courtyard he replied “They would have bought their home knowing the conditions so it must be acceptable to them”! It is difficult to find words for the lack of concern for high quality living standards that this remark implies. It should be added that this remark referred to residents in the privately owned part of the block.

Another approach is possible. We have argued that the scale and design of the development will result in homes that do not provide for housing needs in a sustainable way and which will result in significant harm to the Spring Grove Conservation Area. We are genuinely saddened by this because we want to see a development of high quality housing on the site such that the conservation area is enhanced and which would make a significant contribution to housing needs of various sorts.

In order to achieve the positive outcomes that we believe is possible it will be necessary to change the design concept and to reduce the scale of the development. Having discussed the proposals with residents, housing experts, and an architect specialising in conservation areas we are convinced that the key to a successful development is one which is based on far smaller units than the main block proposed. The predominant form of home around the site is 2/3 storey detached and semi-detached family houses. There are also a number of blocks of flats but these are all extremely modest in scale (mostly 6 to 12 flats in a block). Taking all the various factors into consideration it seems to us that re-scaling and redesigning the development should make it possible to accommodate about up to 95 homes on the site (depending on the details of the design). Even this more modest development, it should be pointed out, would lead to a very significant population increase in the area and would not be without significant problems.

From this and the need to enhance the area by breaking up the skyline and restoring a little of the openness envisaged in the original Davies plan we suggest that the site could accommodate some blocks of flats on the scale on those around the site along with family homes in the form of detached and semi-detached housing. It might even be possible to build a modest terrace. Such an approach would make it possible to avoid the problems we have argued are bound to result from the Try Homes proposals. We would propose further that the site should accommodate a building from where medical and social workers could work thereby giving immediate access to services to the residents on the estate in need of a high level of help.

Building in the manner we propose would make it possible to provide a sustainable solution to the problems we listed at the beginning of this paper. Such a development would not be entirely free from some of the problems we have discussed but, we believe, it would be possible to handle them in a sustainable way. The reduced scale and the smaller blocks of housing units we propose would also make it possible to design the buildings so that the visual amenity of a very attractive street is not harmed. A redesign and a re-scaling along the lines we propose would make it possible to provide sustainable solutions in line with the three points with which we began this paper.

2 Barker Review 2003. Sustainable Communities – Settled Homes: Changing Lives – ODPM 2005