

Open Letter from Blue Living

24th April 2009

Blue Living's Outline Planning Application for Pincents Hill is in the final stages of preparation, and in advance of its submission we would like to reiterate our commitment to a series of important principles and features that will ensure it is a highly sensitive and appropriate form of development which gives rise to a strong and vibrant community. We firmly believe that our proposals offer widespread benefits for existing residents of Calcot and Tilehurst and contribute to the future of the area by providing new facilities and services, improving local infrastructure and enhancing access to the outdoors.

We first discussed the scheme publicly in September last year at the Pincents Hill Design Enquiry which was held at the Calcot Centre over five days and attended by several hundred stakeholders including local residents, community groups and businesses. Design workshops of this sort held early in the process of preparing development proposals - while inherently controversial and difficult - are increasingly being regarded as best practice and as a process are supported by the main political parties. Many development proposals still attempt to sneak in under the radar of general public scrutiny; our process has been an open and proper one and we fully intend that it will remain so.

Since the Design Enquiry we have continued to refine our development proposals through discussions with West Berkshire Council (in particular the local planning authority) and other statutory stakeholders as well as the Pincents Hill Liaison Panel, local community groups and through individual discussions with local residents. We have also published a newsletter and placed information on an open access website.

Over the course of this process, a number of issues and concerns have been raised. Two public meetings have been held by interested groups, several press articles have covered reaction to our proposals and a number of local politicians have publicly declared their views.

The purpose of this letter is to respond as specifically as possible to issues that have been raised, to correct inaccurate or misleading information that has in some instances formed the basis of debate and to explain the actions that Blue Living is taking to address legitimate concerns. These will be covered in greater detail, and validated thoroughly by the necessary documentation put forward in the Outline Planning Application. The application is a public document and will be made available by the local authority who will coordinate comments and views. It will also be made available on Blue Living's own web site.

Context: the need for development

There is a pressing nationwide need for housing. Affordable housing for young people, homes for new families, key workers and the elderly are all increasingly urgent priorities. Berkshire is no exception: DTZ's study of housing need estimated there to be a newly arising annual need for 670 dwellings to 2026 alongside a current undersupply of 3,050 dwellings. This includes significant demand in West Berkshire, and much of this is in the east of the district.

In response to this need, the Secretary of State's proposed modifications to the draft Regional Spatial Strategy for the South East (the South East Plan) have set West Berkshire a minimum requirement of delivering 10,500 new homes by 2026. Whilst there is debate about where and how this might be achieved, the need cannot be ignored or remain unmet.

West Berkshire Council will shortly begin consultation on its draft LDF Core Strategy Preferred Options which sets out options for meeting the housing requirement in the east of the district, and which includes among others the Pincents Hill site.

Pincents Hill: a sustainable urban extension

We are convinced that the creation of a high-quality, compact and environmentally sensitive urban extension to Reading at Pincents Hill is one of the most appropriate means by which the local housing requirement can be responsibly and credibly met and that this presents a compelling alternative to urban sprawl or piecemeal development.

Our planning application will be for 750 homes. Of these, 35% (over 250 homes) will be affordable, in excess of the council's requirement of 30%. These will benefit families on lower incomes, elderly people and younger families starting out in life. In addition, proposals for Pincents Hill will bring tangible benefits to the local economy through provision of local jobs and opportunities and support for small, local businesses.

The development that we are proposing at Pincents Hill is not 'urban sprawl'. Our proposals are for a very carefully planned and designed urban extension to Reading: a new neighbourhood which is physically, socially and economically integrated with the local area and supported by appropriate infrastructure, services and facilities. The development will be physically connected to Calcot, Tilehurst and West Reading and will provide a clear and definitive boundary with the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty defined by Pincents Lane to the west.

We understand why there is scepticism and concern about development. We have said before that housing developers in this country do not have a good track record. Why would people trust developers? Housing development has often been ill-conceived, badly planned, poorly delivered, environmentally destructive and lacking supporting infrastructure. For many years developers have not volunteered or been required to design proper places or build homes that will stand the test of time. They have not sought to provide essential services for education, health and leisure locally or design streets and manage car traffic and congestion in ways that allow for humane

environments in which children can safely play and where people can happily walk, cycle and use public transport to access the services they need.

In this context it is no surprise that an annual survey on public attitudes in the UK to development, the Saint Index (www.thesaintreport.com), reported earlier this year that 85% of people in Britain did not want more development in their local area - a statistic borne out by the local Conservative group's recent survey of Tilehurst residents.

Blue Living was established specifically to undertake development differently. Its ethos and approach to creating communities is not the same as most other developers and housebuilders. We believe that public engagement early in the planning process is vital to creating an integrated community, as is community participation and stewardship throughout the delivery phases. We believe that sustainability is not just about meeting energy reduction and carbon targets - however important these might be - but it is also about the way people live, interact and form community, move around, source their food and meet daily needs. We aim to make healthier and more environmentally sustainable lifestyles easier and far more appealing to all by providing the facilities and services that make them possible.

Community facilities and services

Throughout our consultation to date, we have heard concerns about local services and facilities, both current provision and the impact of new development. Through our own analysis, assessment of local views and discussion with the Pincents Hill Liaison Panel, we have tested and refined the services and facilities we propose to offer via our plans for Pincents Hill. These will serve new residents and existing residents in the local area while complementing the facilities and services that already exist locally.

As a result of the above, our proposals include:

- A new, state of the art healthcare centre with space for a GP surgery and dentist, alongside complementary health services.
- A new library and interactive children's library.
- A Business and Community Forum offering flexible serviced working and meeting spaces for small local businesses and home workers. It would also provide space for local groups and existing community projects.
- A nursery / crèche.
- A small number of shops to meet daily local needs (for example a newsagent, grocers, a cafe, pub and restaurant).
- A spa and gym facility with public membership.
- A small, quality hotel with publicly available restaurant and business facilities.

- We will make a financial contribution to secondary education. A contribution to primary education will be made by either supporting existing schools or by building a new school subject to detailed discussions with the Council, local schools and governors to determine the best way to move forward.
- Provision for young people: we understand that there is a need for facilities for young people in the area. We have begun discussion with local providers of services for young people to determine how our proposals will help to meet this need. We will engage young people in the process of planning and designing youth facilities at the detailed planning stages.

We will continue to debate how best to ensure the optimal range of local facilities and to do what we can to support current, more established community resources and programmes.

Open space

Concern has been raised by local residents about the potential loss of open space. Given that local people use the public footpath for walking and jogging, this concern is understandable, and existing rights of way will continue to be protected. However we would emphasise again that the land is privately owned and there is no public right of access other than the footpath. Any other use of the land at present informal and unofficial.

In an area already blessed with useable open space our proposals for Pincents Hill will provide significant increase in the quantity and quality of public open space and will greatly improve access to the countryside for local people via a network of new paths and cycle routes. Over one fifth of the development area will become public open space and in addition to this we plan to make a large amount of land lying in the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty to the north of Pincents Lane open for managed public access.

At Pincents Hill, places for exercise, play, relaxation, nature and food growing will enable new and existing residents vastly improved opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.

Specifically, our proposals include:

- Five local play areas for children and families.
- Two public squares, creating areas for meeting, markets and communal activities. These will both be landscaped with places to sit. One of these will be located around the retained oak trees at the heart of the site.
- A new, large and attractive community park with a range of landscaped and wooded areas.
- A newly planted linear woodland park linking the copses lying east and north of Pincents Hill and providing a 'green corridor' for wildlife.

- On land north of Pincents Lane, a new community farm consisting of areas for vegetable growing, allotments and a community orchard. These, along with woodland lying north of Pincents Lane will be made publicly accessible via a series of new walking and jogging routes along with nature-watching facilities.

Transport

Existing congestion in the local area and fear of increased traffic due to development at Pincents Hill has emerged as a primary area of concern for many local residents.

In accordance with statutory requirements, the Blue Living Outline Planning Application will contain a series of evidence-based documents which address transport issues in detail, most notably the Transportation Assessment Report. This is based on data collected over many months regarding flows of traffic across the local area, at different times of day and week. This data, along with data showing traffic flows generated by development at Pincents Hill have been computer modelled to determine the impact of proposals on the highway network. The detailed results of these investigations, along with the specific improvements to roads and junctions that we are proposing as part of our application, will be set out fully in the outline planning application.

We should note here that no mitigation or improvement measures associated with our development at Pincents Hill will solve existing local transport issues in isolation and that even without development here, these are predicted to become worse in the coming years. We understand that the Council is in the process of considering how best to make provision for long-term improvements to the local highway network and we will make a significant financial contribution towards the required works.

Moreover, our proposals incorporate significant investment in measures that will reduce car dependence and that will benefit new and existing residents.

These include:

- Bus stops within three minutes of every home.
- Improvement of the number 18 bus to Reading to a 15 to 20 minute frequency.
- Upgrade of the existing cycle and pedestrian route to Theale station to allow easy access to train travel.
- Improved links to existing bus services at Sainsburys
- A substantial and well managed car club that will allow new residents and people who already live in the area to hire a car by the hour. For many users, this will be a cheaper alternative to owning a car.

- A restricted but realistic number of car parking spaces (800 spaces in total) will be provided. New residents will be incentivised to do without a vehicle where possible. Where necessary, management measures to prevent impact on neighbouring residential streets will be taken.
- Careful design of streets to manage traffic speed and ensure the safety of pedestrians and cyclists

Ecology

Extensive ecological surveys of the site have been undertaken over a full year - in accordance with official guidelines and professional best practice - to gain a full and detailed understanding of existing habitats and species in and around Pincents Hill. These have included surveys for breeding birds, bats, dormice and other mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. These surveys have followed best practice guidelines throughout and have occasionally been attended by interested local wildlife groups.

The ecology strategy follows the following principles:

1. Avoid - where possible, significant ecological impacts have been avoided in our designs
2. Mitigate - where impact has been impossible to avoid, these are to be mitigated for
3. Compensate - and where mitigation is not possible, compensation for the ecological impact is to be should be undertaken including with the provisoion of new, bespoke, habitat off-site.
4. Enhance - opportunities to bring ecological enhancement will be taken wherever possible

Our proposals include the following specific mitigation, compensation and enhancement measures in relation to species present in and around the site:

- Botany and habitats: existing ancient woodlands will be retained. A new woodland corridor comprising species currently found within the woodlands will be established. All veteran trees will be retained and hedgerows where possible. When the proposed new development is complete the area will enjoy much greater tree cover than before. Policies, plans and drawings included with the Planning Application will prove this.
- Bats: trees supporting bats will be retained; artificial bat boxes will be incorporated and a bat barn will be built. Foraging corridors will be retained and new ones established.
- Breeding birds: retention or replacement of habitat suitable for breeding and foraging birds, such as hedgerows and trees. New foraging areas will be established. Installation of nest boxes/sites and feeding stations.

- Invertebrates: retention of dead wood and creation of dead wood habitat areas; installation of invertebrate hibernation boxes.
- Dormice: retention of suitable habitat such as hedgerows along Pincents Lane; green corridors through the site to link Harefield Copse and Oliver's Copse woodlands.
- Badgers: habitat suitable for foraging badgers will be provided. As many setts within the development site as possible will be retained and any necessary sett closures will be carried out under licence from Natural England. Artificial badger setts will be constructed to the south and northwest of the site, to replace any setts requiring closure.

In addition to these, our proposals include other measures designed to make the area more rich in wildlife than it is at the moment. This will include green roof and wall planting, extensive tree planting throughout the development and encouragement of food growing and wildlife gardening at home. Planting will reflect needs of on-site species, providing fruit, nuts, flowers and nesting material.

Clean energy

Governments all over the world are debating steps to achieve a rapid transition to a very low carbon economy and society within 30 to 40 years. At a national and local level, reduction of carbon emissions is an increasingly important component of planning policy.

Pincents Hill will be a showpiece project and place which will demonstrate how we can both adapt to climate change that is already inevitable and help avoid further catastrophic carbon emissions. A high proportion of the energy used on site at Pincents Hill by homes and offices will be generated from on-site renewable sources; highly efficient homes will ensure low heating and electricity bills for residents; extensive tree planting and green roofs will cool the buildings during the hottest periods (while providing superb habitat) and emissions from car traffic will be reduced significantly by comparison to other neighbourhoods.

Moreover, with the investment we are proposing to make in local food production and supply (food accounts for around 20% of the average individual's carbon footprint) we can demonstrate how national and global targets really can be hit across the board in what will be a flagship scheme for West Berkshire and Reading.

Coding for quality and performance

Some people have asked - quite correctly - what guarantee there is that the fine-sounding ideas in the Pincents Hill proposal will ever be carried through into practice. The Outline Planning Application we submit will contain more plans, policies and principles than strictly necessary at this stage. This is to give some reassurance about the detail of what we are proposing. A Design and Performance Code will be prepared at detailed design stage which will define in some detail

how the overall place and each building will look and how they will perform in environmental and other ways. The Code should give everyone the confidence that we mean what we say and will be a companion to all future detailed applications that precede building work.

Long-term involvement

Blue Living's does not intend to exit from this project if an outline planning permission is obtained. We believe that many of the things that we are proposing at Pincents Hill require long-term vision, determination and commitment alongside ongoing management and investment. For this reason we intend to stay involved throughout the neighbourhood's delivery and afterwards.

We will work with many others to deliver the Pincents Hill development - affordable housing providers, investors, specialists in wildlife management and many more. But in addition, we know that our vision for Pincents Hill will only be delivered by working with the community - both the existing community and those who might live here in the future. This will include working with the community to plan the neighbourhood, its open spaces and community facilities at the detailed design stages and involving the community in operating and owning the development in the longer term.

More information

If you would like more information about our proposals, you can email questions to pincentshill@blueliving.co.uk, or write to Blue Living, 1 Albemarle Way, London EC1V 4JB.

You can also sign up to our mailing list to remain informed when the Outline Planning Application is submitted and to receive future updates. Please email pincentshill@blueliving.co.uk or phone 020 7549 2184 if you would like to sign up to this list.