

The Promise of Affordable Housing

Don't fall for the great 'affordable housing' myth

Would a carte blanche to Dunsfold Park Ltd to do what it wants to the old Dunsfold Aerodrome site be nothing but bad news? Of course not. The problems caused by using the unsuitable Stovolds Hill and Three Compasses accesses to the site would probably be fixed (at the expense of another 3,000 or so cars on already overloaded roads). True, it could be alleviated a lot more cheaply and simply just by building a new access road onto the A281 without building any homes, let alone 2,600 of them.

But the fact remains. Dunsfold Park Ltd. will promise to bring great benefits alongside the battalions of bulldozers. Let's take a good look at them before we leap at the prospect, though, because gifts like these may well be a little illusory. Consider, for example, the notion of 'affordable housing' which Dunsfold Park Ltd says it anticipates will account for 19 to 23 per cent of all the homes they want to build on the site. (Note: This is already far lower than current or proposed policy requires)

How could anyone object to 'affordable housing'? Wouldn't it be great if Dunsfold Park actually made it easier for local people to get on the home owning ladder in the area where they were born? Possibly. But before you get too excited, take a deep breath and prepare yourself for a few surprises. Because this, like so many high-flown Dunsfold Park promises, is not the generous offer it seems.

'Affordable housing' is one of those phrases that politicians trot out to silence people. It's like kissing babies. How can anyone possibly stand up and say it's a bad thing? With great difficulty, or so Dunsfold Park and its banner-wavers will hope.

Before you fall for this line, though, it's worth discovering exactly what is on the table here, and what it might mean for those keen to find a home in Waverley at a price they can manage. In truth, they're likely to be very, very disappointed.

The first thing to understand is that Dunsfold Park's promise to make 19% to 23% of its new housing stock 'affordable' does not stem from generosity on the part of Jim McAllister. All new housing developments of any size must contain affordable housing in order to win planning permission these days and the proportion proposed is far less than that contemplated by the present and emerging regional plans. The Surrey Structure Plan requires 40% of new housing provision in the County to be affordable. The current draft of the South East Plan identifies an overall regional target of 25% of all new housing being social rented and 10-15% being other forms of affordable housing. All new housing developments, have to contain affordable housing to get planning permission; this is not some generous gift to locals from Dunsfold Park Ltd.

So who gets these homes and what exactly are they? Well, not people looking to get a leg up on the private property ladder, usually anyway. 'Affordable housing' is normally old-fashioned council housing under another name — publicly funded housing stock rented out, on the basis of need, to people on the council waiting list, at rents that are always controlled and usually subsidised too. In London about sixty to seventy per cent of tenants for this kind of housing are partially or wholly dependent on housing benefit and income support or pensions. The figure may not be so high in Waverley, but the message is still the same. Affordable housing is for the most needy in society, such as families desperate to get out of difficult estates.

The chances are some, if not most of it, would go to existing council house tenants in difficult areas, to rehouse overcrowded families who need larger accommodation, or this country's burgeoning asylum seeker and economic migrant population. These people have every right to expect somewhere to live. But whether people so poor they probably can't afford a car would really want to be on a rural housing estate marooned between Guildford and Horsham, with no shops in walking distance, and doubtless no decent public transport either (despite promises of a new bus service), is a matter of conjecture.

If you live in Waverley, have a job and the money to get on the property ladder elsewhere in the area, at lower prices in less popular parts of the district, you will not, of course, even go on this list.

A growing proportion of new social housing tenants in London come from vulnerable and socially marginalised groups — such as those with mental health problems and young people leaving care homes. It would be hard to provide the extra support services these people need in the middle of nowhere as well.

That said, some affordable housing can offer a kind of home ownership. There are a variety of schemes whereby housing associations will share ownership with the buyer. That could let people get onto the property ladder — but it is an open market scheme that anybody will be able to take advantage of. Waverley locals will be in competition with everyone else, including people moving down from London looking for somewhere (in London terms) cheap and nice to live.

Most affordable housing developed in Waverley is built by Housing Associations either on their own or in partnership with

a developer. The housing can be either in the form of rented accommodation or as part of a New Government scheme called 'New Build HomeBuy'. In addition some shared ownership schemes because of the way they have been funded are specifically for people who are 'key workers'. Where rented homes are being built by a Housing Association in Waverley they will be let to people on the Council waiting or transfer list. In certain circumstances preference will be given to letting the homes to people who live in the village in which the affordable housing is built or who have a strong local connection.

HomeBuy is a government-funded programme, which aims to help people buy a property who would not be able to do so on the open market, and to help people who wish to rent but cannot afford market rents. In Surrey HomeBuy is run by Thames Valley Housing Association.

The Government has said that the following people are a priority to be helped:

- Existing social tenants (if you are a council or housing association tenant)
- People on the housing waiting list (e.g. the council waiting list)
- Public sector key workers
- Other priority groups that are recommended by the Regional Housing Board

The first flavour of HomeBuy is 'Open Market HomeBuy'. This offers an equity loan so that you can purchase a property of your own choice from the open market as long as it meets certain requirements. You must be able to purchase via a mortgage approximately 75% of the value of the property. The remaining 25% is funded through an equity loan with no interest to pay on the loan. The loan is repayable at market value when the property is eventually resold. This scheme is mainly for key workers. This scheme is being looked at by the Government and may be changed very shortly. When details of the changes are available this web page will be updated.

Finally, there is also 'New Build Discounted Rent'. This offers new homes to rent at a level, which is lower than the current market rent. (The rent is normally 20% cheaper than current market rents) This scheme is only available to key workers. In certain circumstances (for example if the scheme is in a small village and was built as a 'rural exception site') preference will be given to letting the homes to people who live in the village or who have a strong local connection.

Under this sort of arrangement you get points for the amount of time you have lived locally, for family ties, and job links. But if the accommodation is rented it will still be allocated on the basis of 'need'. And if it's part ownership you will only be allowed to sell it on to another local, which will depress the price, perhaps substantially. What's more – if affordable home ownership is tied to being employed on the site, what happens when you want to look for a new job, or the company you work for folds? Would you really want to risk that kind of restriction if you could buy a property without any chains around it just a few miles up the road in Guildford – and sell on the open market? Probably not.

In reality it would be very difficult to skew any new housing so that it benefited locals more than others.

The plain truth is that all schemes like these, including those aimed at 'key workers' such as teachers and nurses, are struggling to find buyers, because the homes can usually only be sold on to other key workers. Most of us want to see property as a form of saving as well as a way of putting a roof over our heads, which is why the housing market continues in the daft upward spiral we have seen for years.

There is, though, one part of the country where house sales may in future be restricted to locals. That is in the Lake District, where the existence of the National Park could give planners the opportunity to use more stringent rules than elsewhere, and place stringent restrictions on the sale of properties to wealthy distant owners who simply want a cottage for the weekend. National Parks and AONBs share similar status these days, though given that Dunsfold Park Ltd. want to ignore the planning restrictions surrounding our own AONB one should not, naturally, expect them to go down this route.

There are locals-only schemes planned for the Lake District though – but only because the area has a special planning status.

We suspect that, in the months to come, we will receive a number of tantalising goodies waved in our faces like this. There is already mention of a Church and Primary School (the generosity of panting property developers surely knows no bounds). Some may be worthwhile; given the environmental and social cost of this development one would hope so. But all need the cold, clear light of scrutiny cast upon them, because weasel phrases like 'affordable housing' often disguise uncomfortable truths.

And all will, we suspect, be unrelated to the scheme itself. Dunsfold Park Ltd does not need a New Town development to

build a new access road onto the A281 or to redevelop the existing Business Park to provide the jobs that it can create.

So yes, Dunsfold Park Ltd. would put aside a percentage of any housing it builds for 'affordable housing' because it simply has no choice. The truth is, though, that the chances of it being made available to anyone local struggling to get onto the property ladder in Waverley or hoping for a council home in the area are not great. Communities need a range of housing; no-one in existing council or housing association homes ought to feel stigmatised because they aren't part of the gold mine culture of private ownership. If anything, they have the right to feel marginalised as homeowners see their equity grow far more quickly than anyone who simply wants to rent for whatever reason.

But to believe this form of 'affordable housing' offers some kind of solution to these problems in terms of the existing local population of the surrounding villages is until someone comes up with hard facts to prove otherwise wishful thinking. What we need are small developments of affordable housing in the villages for villagers and those with local connections, such as the excellent schemes in Dunsfold at Nugent's Close and the new proposed development at the rear of the Winn Hall. You may wish to point this out the next time someone cites "affordable housing" as one reason why Dunsfold Park should get its way.

This article originally appeared on the "Save Wye" (www.save-wye.org) campaign website and has been modified with kind permission of the Save Wye campaign team