

Cornhill Parish Council

Report on a Public Meeting held on Monday, 18th November 2013, at Cornhill Village Hall

Present: Cornhill Parish Councillors: William Carrington (Chairman), Mick Plunkett, David Buckle, Marie Gillespie and Claudio Rickard.
County Cllr. Dougie Watkin, 20 Cornhill residents
Andrew Drury and Caryn Innes (Four Housing)

Apologies for absence were received from Cllr. Anthony Jewels.

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that when Cornhill School closed a couple of years ago, the Parish Council was told by the County Councillor that it would be moth-balled for three years. However, it was subsequently put on the market by NCC, and attracted interest from a private developer who intended to pass it on to a housing association, subject to there being a need.

The Parish Council heard from Four Housing on 8th October 2013 that they are considering developing the site for affordable housing and that they intend to hold a drop-in event before the end of the month. The Chairman of the Parish Council responded immediately to this communication, in view of the short notice given, and learnt that the event was to be arranged for 24th October. Following this event, he stated that Cornhill now needs to know what stage Four Housing's negotiations/plans have reached.

County Cllr. Dougie Watkin explained that the reason the school was closed was that it could not be filled. A public meeting and consultation had been held, and it was made clear that the building would be left until the village came up with a future use. He said that NCC had pointed out that it could be made available for social housing. A survey had taken place in the village which produced some good ideas, but nothing was decided, assuming there would be a three year period during which further consultations and discussions could be carried out in the village.

The Chairman pointed out that if the property had been put on the market by private treaty, it could have been sold to a private individual. No guide price had been given. In fact, it was mentioned later in the meeting that a resident business owner had submitted a substantial offer for the property, but this appeared to have been ignored.

Andrew Drury was asked to respond, and explained that Four Housing is a charitable organisation which took over the social housing previously owned by Berwick District Council. When asked the difference between social and affordable housing, he replied that there is no difference.

Four Housing's involvement with the School came through a private developer, Partner Construction. This organisation, building contractors working in partnership with local authorities, constructs houses to order when they have someone lined up to buy them. Plans were drawn up for 24 dwellings of 2 and 3 bedroom houses (no bungalows). Four Housing said there is a need for social housing in the area, but that 24 might be too many.

Mr. Drury said that it was very early on in the process. No contract to buy the land had been signed. A bid has been accepted, but no contract drawn up. Four Housing needs to be sure that this is a viable scheme; if there turns out not to be a need for housing, no dwellings will be built.

The results of the survey carried out by Four Housing at the drop-in session at the Collingwood Arms had not yet been collated, nor is the number of people who attended available. If the results of this survey produce a need for housing, Four Housing would consider getting back to Partner Construction and going through the process of applying for planning permission, etc. Mr. Drury emphasised that there are no done deals at this stage.

The discussion was then thrown open to the floor.

Peter Pitman said that 24 houses were too many and it would be a pity to knock down the building. Richard Palmer said it would depend on the site density, referring to the large number of houses planned for the Rickerby's site. This application had been withdrawn.

Mr. Drury stated that if another application were to be considered for the school site, Four Housing would not compete, and he was informed that since this meeting was called, an application for seven affordable houses had been submitted to the Planning Office on another site in Cornhill.

Peter Pitman asked how the need for social housing is calculated. He was told that local people and their relatives or people connected with them would be given first choice, then people from surrounding areas, and lastly people from the wider area. Each group is given four weeks to apply resulting in a cascading effect.

There was concern that the County Council does not take village cohesion into account, and that the village fraternity is likely to be upset. Four Housing stated that the grant for housing has gone down over the years and they would not build houses where no one wants to live.

Asked how many people are needing homes, the meeting was told that there is no longer a waiting list. The homeless get priority. Four Housing currently has 21 properties in the village. This number has been reduced by half from 42 due to the right to purchase. According to a recent Northumberland Homefinder publication, only two people were bidding for the last three-bedroom houses which became available. Due to the bedroom tax, two-bedroom houses appear to be more popular.

Three questions were then asked:

1. Do you dislike affordable housing and wish the school to be retained? **12 in favour**
2. Don't mind losing the school, but not developed for housing? **6 in favour**
3. Would you like housing, but not affordable? **2 in favour**

Questions asked of Four Housing:

Would it be possible to have 12 affordable houses with a smaller school, catering for say, 30 pupils?

Answer: this would be the County Council's decision. Four Housing quite like this idea, but do not know whether the school could be re-opened.

Question: what about the access to the site?

Answer: this has not yet been worked out, as the number of houses would be taken into account.

Question: would there be a specification for the sort of houses people would need?

Answer: would be happy to have design consultations within reason.

Question: what is the rent for a two-bedroom house?

Answer: £77.00 per week.

It was pointed out by the audience that the number of children in the Cornhill area is increasing, but there is no school or employment for young families who might come in. Four Housing stated there are hidden households, ie. children still living with parents.

Veronica Sheldrick: what about assisted living for old people?

Answer: No funds available and rent charges would go up. However, independent living is preferable, and suggest a mix of housing with old people's bungalows.

The Chairman brought the meeting to a close and thanked Andrew and Caryn for their attendance and input. Cllr. Watkin was asked to keep the Parish Council informed and agreed to do this.