

19 July, 2020

“HOMES FOR NHS STAFF”: Proposed Residential Development by Community Health Partnerships (CHP) on the Former Site of Finchley Memorial Hospital

**Comments by THE FINCHLEY SOCIETY in response to public consultation by the developers**

The Finchley Society is of the view that this proposed development raises issues of concern in the following areas:

1. Development of the Communal Green Space,
2. Provision of affordable homes allocated to NHS staff,
3. Quality and acceptability of the proposed buildings and landscaping.

Development of the Communal Green Space

Between 2010 and 2013 the old Finchley Memorial Hospital was demolished and replaced with a new building on neighbouring land. The planning application submitted by NHS Barnet in 2009 for this development was unequivocal: the land occupied by the old Hospital would become a “Communal Green”. The new hospital was built on playing fields, but the preservation of the land of the former hospital as a Communal Green resulted in only a small net loss of open space across the whole site. This was an important element in the granting of planning permission.

The key question for public policy is whether land which was unambiguously dedicated to community use under a major planning permission can be built on within a few years. During 2008 and 2009 the developers conducted extensive consultations with the public and various authorities on the basis that the development would provide a Communal Green. No mention was made of the future construction of housing on this Communal Green.

If the Council were to grant this application, it would put in question the meaning and duration of commitments to provide communal amenities in developments, including those granted permission in the past and those to be considered in future. This would set a precedent that would make it very difficult for the public to assess the value of undertakings by developers and the Council to include a community benefit in any proposed developments.

The developers have cited in support of their scheme the Planning Brief produced by the Council for the Finchley Memorial Hospital site in 2007. However, this document does not offer such support:

- a. The Brief asserted that the use of the site for residential development could only be sanctioned if it was ‘enabling’ to the wider hospital project. Development could occur if this was essential for the financing of the new Hospital. The new Hospital has now been financed and residential development cannot be justified under these terms.
- b. Should development have been necessary to raise financing, the Brief specified “low density family houses” as appropriate to the character of the surrounding area. It stated that “flatted development is unlikely to be considered favourably”.
- c. The development covered by the Brief was completed in 2013. The Council granted planning permission for two developments on the land, in 2015 and 2017, that reflected its use for community purposes (neither development was completed). Hence the Brief can no longer be taken as fully relevant.

There is an overriding need to preserve green open space in the borough. In certain cases, the public may accept the loss of green space where an equivalent or greater amount of new space is made available, of a suitable type and in the right location. However, it is reasonable for the public to

object to the uncompensated loss of open green space that has been specifically designated for community use and has been in such use for over seven years.

#### Availability of the homes to NHS Staff

The developers' stated aim to provide housing for NHS staff is laudable. However, it is not clear to what extent the scheme will achieve this aim in a meaningful manner and hence whether its designation as "Homes for NHS Staff" is wholly accurate. NHS staff working in London, particularly those on the lower salary grades, find accommodation in the city unaffordable. The only homes in the development that address their needs are the 50% that will be marketed as "affordable". The homes to be made available at market rents are irrelevant to solving the problem of housing for such essential NHS staff.

It is unclear to what extent the 50% of homes that will be "affordable" will be reserved for NHS staff. Discussions with the developers have not yet yielded an unequivocal answer. NHS staff would appear to have priority when applying, but will not have exclusive use. While this could help NHS staff to access these affordable homes, it is not equivalent to dedicated housing such as that provided by nurses' accommodation.

One should also question the rationale for providing affordable housing for NHS workers in general at this location. Finchley Memorial Hospital is quite small and staff working there may not take up all of the affordable units. For staff working in many other hospitals, this could be a poor location from which to commute, given its PTAL rating of 2 to 3.

#### The quality and acceptability of the proposed development

The scale and type of development proposed has significant shortcomings. Principal among these are the following:

- The development of blocks of flats of four to six stories in this area is not appropriate. The site clearly lies within a context of two and three story traditional suburban houses. While the developer has attempted to limit the scale of the blocks along the street frontage, the massing is still excessive.
- The developer presents the scheme as retaining desirable access to green space between the blocks of flats for the wider community. This is not entirely credible. The green spaces proposed are narrow and will be overlooked by 4 and 6 story blocks. They do not offer an alternative to, or any compensation for, the loss of the present open space.
- The proposals do not provide for high-quality children's play areas. The proposed scattered incidental play facilities may not be well utilized and do not lend themselves to use by the local community. Observation suggests that families prefer good-sized enclosed playgrounds, where children can roam safely and socialize widely. The developers should consider building a large high-quality playground in an accessible location which would be available to the community.