Fernhurst – Former Syngenta Site

The following alternative uses have been considered for the site, but for the reasons set out all have been rejected as unlikely to be unfeasible.

**Educational use**

Comer Homes has another site in Oxfordshire which is a former boarding school. This closed in 1997. This site is similar to Syngenta as it is also in a rural location on the edge of the nearest settlement, in that case Wallingford.

Following its closure in 1997 the site has been considered for reuse by several residential schools, however, discussions have always faltered. The principal reason given is the high cost of refurbishment and redevelopment needed to provide reasonable facilities, and more economically viable sites have been pursued instead. The buildings at Fernhurst are not suitable for educational use without significant refurbishment and the cost of refurbishment is likely to prevent educational establishments from pursuing this site. They are more likely to pursue more economically viable and central sites as was the case with the site in Oxfordshire.

Savills is not aware of any educational requirements in the area.

**Hotel:**

The hotel market is generally poor at the moment.

Savills’ Hotel Team has advised that hotels are rarely being built outside cities and towns at all due to lack of available funding and there is no market for hotels in these locations at all. Government policies do not encourage hotels in out of town locations. It was acknowledged at the last Working Group that large chain hotels will not be interested in this site. We understand that another Member of the ‘Working Group’ is following this up with some contacts to test whether there is a market for a hotel of any type in the area.

There is the potential to include some serviced apartments.

**Offices / Employment Space**

The entire site would not be suitable for office development. It is too remote from the main office locations in the surrounding areas of Guildford and Aldershot. It is unlikely that an office use would come forward for all of the site for this reason and also due to the costs associated with refurbishment / redevelopment. Other institutional uses were found unlikely to come forward.

There is no real appetite in government guidance for significant offices to be on sites like this outside of town centres.

There is no ICI type occupier on the horizon and most large companies are downsizing their operations due to working efficiencies i.e. work at home, IT conferencing.

Our last survey (2010) showed that there was at least 195,894 sq ft of industrial-related property within the market available for take up. In addition three major speculative developments were being marketed. Two of these offered 569,764 sq ft of industrial space and the third offered 43 acres.

Savills survey concluded that:

‘The letting potential of the building as a single lot, in its current condition, is low as a result of the significant amount of space available. Location is also a factor and the need for some inward investment. It is likely that, considering the location, the level of rents achievable and the required amount of management for the current site would not justify the expected level of expenditure required to create a property that is attractive to tenants and will see the building let within a credible timeframe (12 months). Overall, there is a catch-22
The site, in its current condition, will continue to deteriorate and will be very difficult to let. To improve the likelihood of letting the space even if there were demand, would require expenditure over and above the rents achievable.

This report will be updated to accompany any planning application.

The NPPF March 2012 (paragraph 22) states that:

‘Planning policies should avoid the long term protection of sites allocated for employment use where there is no reasonable prospect of a site being used for that purpose. Land allocations should be regularly reviewed. Where there is no reasonable prospect of a site being used for the allocated employment use, applications for alternative uses of land or buildings should be treated on their merits having regard to market signals and the relative need for different land uses to support sustainable local communities.’

The draft Development Brief for the site, which was circulated on 16th May 2012, states that:

‘The Report [Chichester Employment Land Review] states that viability testing in the market would conclude that the property is not capable for being let for the reasons stated above. There is no demand in the locality of the District for this volume of space and the preference is to be located in the regional centres.

New business parks and employment centres are focussed on the edge of major town and cities to offer better access to the work force and meet other criteria associated with government led policies on sustainability and carbon reduction. Out of town facilities such as this are now beyond their intended and alternative use and unviable for multi-occupancy which requires a change of use.

A development solution involving a mix of uses including housing with some employment floorspace therefore represents the most appropriate solution for the site.

Employment / business uses could be located to the western edge of the site adjacent to the current employment site at Longfield House or as an extension to this. This building would be the only one suitable for retention, as it is considered that the remaining buildings are unsuitable for conversion or retention for other uses, therefore the remainder of the site should be cleared of all buildings and hardstanding.’ (Paragraphs 1.18 to 1.21)

The findings in the Development Brief support the conclusions drawn by Savills in their assessment.

We have looked at small employment units on the site and this could work in limited quantities. There is no case for this to be across the whole site. Housing could cross subsidise these lower value uses. We are looking at housing on the site as part of a mixed use development.

Comer Homes would like Aspinalls to remain on the site and are committed to providing additional floorspace for them to expand if this is agreeable to them.

It is envisaged that the Longfield site will be expanded to provide additional employment space. There is also potential for some additional employment floorspace within a mixed use proposal (although would probably not come forward on its own).

**Care home / assisted living**

Savills Health Care Team has advised that in terms of other residential institutions such as a nursing home / care home, the site in its entirety is too large to be of interest to a care home operator. The standard model is for a single building with 60-80 beds. The rest of the site would not be required. Alternative uses would therefore need to be found and it would be difficult to find any which are compatible with nursing homes.

The site is too remote from the village for care homes / assisted living to be desirable and no one will take this site on for these uses. Furthermore Linden Homes has just developed Wisper's Park, ‘a community of fine
living for people aged 60 and over’, in Haslemere. There is also a separate residential Care Home in Wispers Park with its own medical and nursing facilities. The feedback forwarded from Blue Cedar Homes corroborates this conclusion.

We are not proposing warden controlled housing but are looking at flats and houses designed with downsizing in mind, designed to highly accessible standards.

**Supermarket**

We have looked at a supermarket or other retail development but do not think that it is appropriate for this location, and again it is not a use encouraged by the government in this location. Small scale retail facilities could compete with what exists in the village.

The following uses are considered appropriate for the site:

**Mixed use redevelopment including residential**

The residential redevelopment of the site is considered to be the most appropriate use, as part of a mixed use development (see also Offices / Employment Space above). It is a use for which there is significant demand and we can anticipate the new residential units to be saleable. The precise mix of housing is yet to be determined but will be based upon assessment of demand.

Residential development also enables and requires the improvement of the landscape setting. The long term management of the site can be guaranteed via the formation of a management company (funded by an annual management charge).

Comer Homes is also committed to rectifying the current situation with regards to utilities, in particular in respect of water. The full details will be contained within any planning application, but the intention is that once planning permission is granted the water mains will be relocated off site and signed over to the utility company.

**National Park Facilities**

There is the potential to include some facilities for the National Park, for example a visitor centre, which could be partly subsidised by the residential use.