

Design Comments

Reference no:	20/03105/FUL
Proposal:	Construction of a single storey dwelling
Site Address:	Mill Farm, Fowlmere Road, Fowlmere, SG8 6EZ
Case Officer:	Jane Rodens

Summary:

The design of the proposed dwelling is considered to be of an exceptional quality, it is truly outstanding and would reflect the highest standards in architecture, help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas. The proposals would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area, meeting the objectives of Paragraph 79e of the *'National Planning Policy Framework'* (2019) and Policies HQ/1 (Design Principles) and H/15 (Countryside Dwellings of Exceptional Quality) of the *'South Cambridgeshire Local Plan'* (2018).

It is recommended that the application is approved subject to conditions.

Relevant design policies:

'National Planning Policy Framework' (2019) (NPPF)

Paragraph 79 - Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

- a) there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside;
- b) the development would represent the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets;
- c) the development would re-use redundant or disused buildings and enhance its immediate setting;
- d) the development would involve the subdivision of an existing residential dwelling; or
- e) the design is of exceptional quality, in that it:
 - is truly outstanding or innovative, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas; and
 - would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.

Paragraph 124 - The creation of high-quality buildings and places is fundamental to what the planning and development process should achieve. Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities. Being clear about design expectations, and how these will be tested, is essential for achieving this. So too is effective engagement between applicants, communities, local planning authorities and other interests throughout the process.

Paragraph 127 - Planning policies and decisions should ensure that developments:

- a) will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development;
- b) are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping;
- c) are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built

environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities);

d) establish or maintain a strong sense of place, using the arrangement of streets, spaces, building types and materials to create attractive, welcoming and distinctive places to live, work and visit;

e) optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development (including green and other public space) and support local facilities and transport networks; and

f) create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible and which promote health and well-being, with a high standard of amenity for existing and future users; and where crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine the quality of life or community cohesion and resilience.

Paragraph 128 - Design quality should be considered throughout the evolution and assessment of individual proposals. Early discussion between applicants, the local planning authority and local community about the design and style of emerging schemes is important for clarifying expectations and reconciling local and commercial interests. Applicants should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot.

Paragraph 129 - Local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for Life. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes, and are particularly important for significant projects such as large scale housing and mixed use developments. In assessing applications, local planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels.

Paragraph 130 - Permission should be refused for development of poor design that fails to take the opportunities available for improving the character and quality of an area and the way it functions, taking into account any local design standards or style guides in plans or supplementary planning documents. Conversely, where the design of a development accords with clear expectations in plan policies, design should not be used by the decision-maker as a valid reason to object to development. Local planning authorities should also seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).

Paragraph 131 - In determining applications, great weight should be given to outstanding or innovative designs which promote high levels of sustainability, or help raise the standard of design more generally in an area, so long as they fit in with the overall form and layout of their surroundings.

'South Cambridgeshire Local Plan' (2018)

Policy H/15 Countryside Dwellings of Exceptional Quality

Outside the Green Belt, single new bespoke dwellings of exceptional quality will be permitted in the countryside providing all of the following criteria are met: a) The dwelling would reflect the highest standards in architecture, being recognised as truly outstanding

or innovative; b) The dwelling would significantly enhance its mediate setting; c) The nature and size of the site, and the design of the dwelling, its landscaping and location on site are sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area and to wider views; d) That there are no existing dwellings on the site capable of being replaced under Policy H/14.

Policy HQ/1 Design Principles

1. All new development must be of high-quality design, with a clear vision as to the positive contribution the development will make to its local and wider context. As appropriate to the scale and nature of the development, proposals must:
 - a) Preserve or enhance the character of the local urban and rural area and respond to its context in the wider landscape;
 - b) Conserve or enhance important natural and historic assets and their setting;
 - c) Include variety and interest within a coherent, place-responsive design, which is legible and creates a positive sense of place and identity whilst also responding to the local context and respecting local distinctiveness;
 - d) Be compatible with its location and appropriate in terms of scale, density, mass, form, siting, design, proportion, materials, texture and colour in relation to the surrounding area;
 - e) Deliver a strong visual relationship between buildings that comfortably define and enclose streets, squares and public places, creating interesting vistas, skylines, focal points and appropriately scaled landmarks along routes and around spaces;
 - f) Achieve a permeable development with ease of movement and access for all users and abilities, with user friendly and conveniently accessible streets and other routes both within the development and linking with its surroundings and existing and proposed facilities and services, focusing on delivering attractive and safe opportunities for walking, cycling, public transport and, where appropriate, horse riding;
 - g) Provide safe and convenient access for all users and abilities to public buildings and spaces, including those with limited mobility or those with other impairment such as of sight or hearing;
 - h) Ensure that car parking is integrated into the development in a convenient, accessible manner and does not dominate the development and its surroundings or cause safety issues;
 - i) Provide safe, secure, convenient and accessible provision for cycle parking and storage, facilities for waste management, recycling and collection in a manner that is appropriately integrated within the overall development;
 - j) Provide a harmonious integrated mix of uses both within the site and with its surroundings that contributes to the creation of inclusive communities providing the facilities and services to meet the needs of the community;
 - k) Ensure developments deliver flexibility that allows for future changes in needs and lifestyles, and adaptation to climate change;
 - l) Mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change on development through location, form, orientation, materials and design of buildings and spaces;
 - m) Include high quality landscaping and public spaces that integrate the development with its surroundings, having a clear definition between public and private space which provide opportunities for recreation, social interaction as well as support healthy lifestyles, biodiversity, sustainable drainage and climate change mitigation;
 - n) Protect the health and amenity of occupiers and surrounding uses from development that is overlooking, overbearing or results in a loss of daylight or development which would create unacceptable impacts such as noise, vibration, odour, emissions and dust;
 - o) Design-out crime and create an environment that is created for people that is and feels safe, and has a strong community focus.
2. Larger and more complex developments will be required to submit Masterplans and Design Codes to agree an overall vision and strategy for a development as a whole that

demonstrates a comprehensive and inclusive approach.

Design comments:

Site visits

A number of site visits were conducted by the Council's Principal Design Officer Bonnie Kwok during the pre-application period, with the last visit took place on 18 November 2020. She is familiar with the site and its surroundings.

Assessment approach

The application site is in a countryside location outside the development framework. From a design perspective, the key issue is therefore whether the proposed development can be justified as being in accordance with paragraph 79e of the NPPF which would justify a departure from the spatial strategy.

Paragraph 131 of the NPPF states that in determining applications, great weight should be given to outstanding or innovative designs which promote high levels of sustainability, or help to raise the standard of design more generally in an area, so long as they fit in with the overall form and layout of their surroundings.

Paragraph 129 of the NPPF states that Local Planning Authorities (LPAs) should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes. In assessing applications, LPAs should have regard to the outcome of these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels. In that respect, since early 2018, the applicant had committed to a series of Design Workshop with the Council's Principal Design Officer to explore various design options prior to submission. Parallel to this, the proposals also had the benefits of five independent design reviews by the independent design review body Design Enabling Panel (DEP), these meetings took place on 27 September 2018, 28 February 2019, 8 August 2019, 19 November 2020 and 17 December 2020.

At the fourth DEP meeting (19 November 2020), there was general agreement amongst the DEP panel members that the scheme was close to an endorsement, but it had not cleared that bar yet. The applicant was asked to provide further information in relation to the construction details of the proposed dwelling, and further information in following areas:

- 1) Sensitivity to the site topography
- 2) Element of surprise and theatre
- 3) Orientation and shading
- 4) Rigour, symmetry and simplicity
- 5) The winter garden and circulation
- 6) Mobility and Lifetime homes
- 7) Corten steel justification
- 8) Integration of water elements

The applicant provided additional information to the DEP following the fourth meeting. The information was reviewed by the DEP on 17 December 2020 (fifth design review). At that meeting, panel members assessed the following areas of the scheme:

- Access for maintenance of the roof areas
- Ventilation of void under suspended concrete floor
- Airtightness generally in relation to windows doors and rooflight
- Surface water drainage interception and filtration (Corten panel run-off and vehicles)

- Cold bridging from rainscreen through to metal frame wall system
- Location of penetrations through walls
- Access covers on horizontal surfaces

Panel members concluded that they were confident that the applicant, who is also an architect, will seek and can deliver the highest standards of design detail. The scheme has been considered by the DEP to have reached the standard required to satisfy Paragraph 79e of the 'National Planning Policy Framework' (2019), enshrined in Policy H/15 (Countryside Dwellings of Exceptional Quality) of the 'South Cambridgeshire Local Plan' (2018).

Panel members considered the importance of the cladding panels to provide a continuous Corten surface for the building façade, and recommended that a full-size trial panel be erected with the complete external wall build up detailing to demonstrate the robustness of the concept. This could be imposed as a condition on a planning approval.

Assessment

In assessing the merits of the scheme, it would be important to assess it against the following criteria set out in Paragraph 79e of the NPPF:

1. *Is the design truly outstanding or innovative and represent the highest standards in architecture?*

The applicant is also the architect for the proposed dwelling, located on a site that is part of a site that adjoins his current home, which was also designed by the applicant. This house is of a high-quality minimalist design that reflects the design philosophy of Mies van der Rohe – Form follows function, responding well to the site context. The current proposal is personal to the applicant and his family, who own the site and who will occupy the new house should it be approved. The applicant and his family own and have restored and managed the application site since 2004. They have lived at the adjacent Mill Farm since 2006. Apart from having a good knowledge of the site, the applicant has also developed in-depth knowledge about ways of optimising the use of the various design components and technology in his current house to achieve best energy performance; this knowledge is then used to inform the design of the proposed dwelling.

As demonstrated in Volume One of the Design and Access Statement (DAS), the design has been through a series of design development, exploring how different built forms, based on classical architectural proportions, would respond to the site context, underpinned by the concept of achieving a minimalist modern design. There is evidence of rigour in the design evolution process.

The proposed house would form part of a small, slightly dispersed cluster of buildings which include the existing Mill Farm and Mill House. It is therefore not an isolated building, but an addition to the small cluster of buildings with a consistent modern architectural character.

The geometry of the proposed house and its landscape setting have been designed as one, this is apparent in: 1) the siting of the building just above the level of the wetland (as a bird hide would relate to a wetland within a nature reserve); 2) the alignment and design treatment of the building axes as they extend into the landscape; 3) the approach to the building along the drive; 4) the interfaces between the building and the landscape.

The approach and access to the house would provide an element of surprise. The rationale of introducing visitors and vehicles into the piazza via a curved access route

through the landscaped space is supported, as this would create an interesting spatial experience and a strong sense of arrival. The entrance through an enclosed courtyard would provide an element of enclosure which then leads to an open plan space with carefully framed views that provides further drama. The proposed ornamental pool in the piazza, rainwater collection from the building and the open water 'rill' in the landscape are linked into a single system and form a symbolic river across the site.

The built form and layout display rigour, symmetry and simplicity. The concept is essentially for a single entity incorporating all the essential amenities for a modern dwelling, expressed within a simple monolithic form. Officers welcome the clear expression of the house through the use of a unitary enclosure with a simple internal layout. Officers also welcome the use of simple construction methods and modern techniques to achieve a refined and considered piece of architecture.

The internal planning is well considered and clearly illustrates the concept of rooms set in a natural landscape. The plan of the dwelling is a simple symmetrical form which has been informed by the classical plan of the Villa Rotunda. The proposed central winter garden court relates well to the surrounding living spaces and would provide a pleasant amenity space; this 9m square space has its centre part being openable to the sky, a well-designed feature that has worked well in the applicant's current house. The proposed layout responds to the sun's movement around the building. The external colonnade and loggia are located on the South East and the South West elevations of the dwelling where the structure is able to contribute to solar shading while at the same time complementing the adjacent living spaces.

The design would provide a great level flexibility to the internal layout and allows it to be modified to meet the needs of the occupants, this is demonstrated through the Lifetime homes diagrams (16 criteria). All the primary living areas are planned as a single volume with freestanding furniture, book stacks and storage elements which may be re-arranged at will.

The scheme proposes the use of an environmental 'exergy' system, using data to control building environmental services. The system maximises the use of energy on site, giving and taking energy from the grid.

Officers consider the these design features, collectively, would create a design that is truly outstanding and innovative, and represents the highest standards in architecture.

2. Would the design significantly enhance its immediate setting?

The design would significantly enhance its immediate setting through both the design of the proposed house and the landscape scheme, which includes habitats and cultural landscape references.

The proposed house would enhance its immediate setting through the character and quality of its design, which is consistent with the character of the existing Mill Farm and Mill House, and the way it 'sits' in its immediate setting - a 'hide' overlooking the wetland habitats. The external structure and cladding will be fabricated in Corten steel which will oxidise naturally to form a rust brown patina. Its recyclability and low maintenance requirements are justified through the information provided in Volume 5 of the DAS. Officers agree that the rustic colours of the Corten would relate well to the landscape character. The cladding material would complement the architecture and would significantly enhance the site's immediate setting.

The landscape enhancement will be achieved through the overall design concept and through enrichment of the landscape drawing on natural and cultural references within the local area. The proposals include an area of wetland to encourage bio-diversity to enhance the wildlife habitat, consistent with the aims of the adjacent RSPB reserve. In addition, the proposals would also include an orchard and meadow to deliver a mosaic of diversity value for a sustainable development.

3. *Would the design be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area?*

The design responds well to the site topography. The proposal shows a sensitive consideration of the building and site levels, the approach and setting of the house, elevational treatment, ancillary spaces and landscape.

The location for the building within the site is informed by the topography, the landscape characteristics, the ecology and the varying geology. The site selected for the proposed house is on the higher part of the land towards the Northern boundary and the principal stream of the River Shep (in Flood Zone 1), taking into account water levels.

The 'Hide' proposal is informed by the earlier design studies but also on the suggestion by the DEP, to discover an architectural form for the basic concept within the defining characteristics of the site and the local area. The site is wetland and chalkland adjoining the RSPB Nature Reserve and there is a clear correlation between the aims of a bird hide and the aspiration for a dwelling, placed within the natural landscape, where the occupants would be able to enjoy the panorama of the landscape.

As demonstrated in Volume 5 of the DAS, the landscape strategy would integrate the proposed house into the landscape and enhance the natural characteristics of the site. The landscape strategy proposes for nine zones is well considered and would create a design that is sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area:

Zone 1 Informal parkland and meadows.

Zone 2 New dwelling and domestic landscape.

Zone 3 River Shep banks. Unaltered except for a small number of new trees and shrubs along top of the bank.

Zone 4 Small copse to extend Nature Reserve and define corner of the site.

Zone 5 Scrapes to create wet grassland and seasonal standing water to give habitat diversification and enhance wetland setting to dwelling.

Zone 6 Ditch/rill to create area of open water for species diversification and to link dwelling to the landscape via a formal viewline.

Zone 7 Wet woodland, retained new planting and grassland mosaic.

Zone 8 Guilden Brook. Plans to conserve the chalk stream to improve the habitat for native wild trout and river bank diversity.

Zone 9 Access Lane on low embankment with grass verges

Conclusion

Officers are of the view that the proposal would be of an outstanding quality and of an innovative design, and would meet the needs of the user who is also the designer of the house. Unlike other Paragraph 79 houses that have received planning permission but was never built due to misalignment on cost and design intent, in this application, the applicant has given officers the confidence that the proposals are achievable, with the applicant showing previous experience of delivering high-quality design, and the commitment the applicant has given to developing the current proposals with officers and his team of specialists.

The conclusions of the independent design review body DEP, that the proposals have reached the standards required by Paragraph 79e of the NPPF, should be taken into account and be given significant weight in the consideration of this application, as per the objective of Paragraph 129 of the NPPF. In addition, great weight should be given to the outstanding and innovative design of the proposals as per the objectives of Paragraph 131 of the NPPF, thus justifying a departure from the spatial strategy in this instance.

Conditions

Should the scheme be approved, Officers recommend the following conditions:

Materials - No development shall take place above ground level, until details of all the materials for the external surfaces of building to be used in the construction of the development have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The details shall include the images, specifications and manufacturer of the materials. Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details. Reason: To ensure the external appearance of the development does not detract from the character and appearance of the area in accordance with Policy HQ/1 of the '*South Cambridgeshire Local Plan*' (2018).

Sample Panel - No development shall take place above ground level, until a sample Corten cladding panel of the dimensions 2.7m x 1m has been erected with the complete external wall build up detailing to demonstrate the robustness of the concept. The LPA shall be notified of the cladding panel and external wall build up once erected in order that an inspection can be carried out. This evidence shall then be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The approved sample panel is to be retained on site for the duration of the works for comparative purposes, and works will take place only in accordance with approved details. Reason: To ensure the external appearance of the development does not detract from the character and appearance of the area in accordance with Policy HQ/1 of the '*South Cambridgeshire Local Plan*' (2018).

Sculptures - Prior to the submission of external materials condition, the details of the proposed permanent sculptures located to the SE and SW of the site shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The proposed sculptures shall either be provided in accordance with the agreed details prior to the occupation of the dwelling or in accordance with an agreed alternative timescale being no later than one year post occupation of the dwelling. Reason - To ensure that the design of the sculptures is appropriate and would complement the house and the landscape in accordance with Policies HQ/1 and HQ/2 of the '*South Cambridgeshire Local Plan*' (2018).

Doors, Windows and Rooflights - No development shall take place above ground level, until details of all the doors, windows and rooflights to be used in the construction of the development have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The details shall include the images, specifications and manufacturer of the doors, windows and rooflights. Development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved details. Reason: To ensure the external appearance of the development does not detract from the character and appearance of the area in accordance with Policy HQ/1 of the '*South Cambridgeshire Local Plan*' (2018).

Dr. Bonnie Kwok, Principal Design Officer
8 March 2021