

Thamesfield Retirement Village
Appeal Reference APP/6011062
Wokingham Borough Council Planning Application Number 243125

Dear Case Officer,

My name is John Sharman and I live at 8 Remenham Row. I am also a retired Chartered Surveyor.

I submitted objections to the original planning application made by Retirement Villages Group and was pleased when Wokingham Borough Council refused planning permission. Having now read the Appellant's Statement of Case, I remain firmly of the view that the proposal would cause significant harm, and I wish to comment on a number of points raised in the appeal.

Having spent my professional career assessing buildings and their relationship with neighbouring properties, I am particularly concerned that the appellant consistently understates the impact this development would have on both Remenham Row and existing residents of Thamesfield.

Paragraph 6.2.5

The appellant concludes that the proposal would not have a significant effect on Remenham Row. In my opinion, this conclusion is wholly at odds with the physical reality of the site.

My wife and I moved to Remenham Row approximately eighteen months ago because it is a quiet and attractive retirement development consisting of just twelve properties. One of its greatest qualities is the open and peaceful environment.

There is no road or meaningful separation between Remenham Row and Thamesfield. Our homes are separated only by front gardens, a gravel pathway, a narrow flower border and the boundary wall. The existing building beyond that wall is only single storey and has very little visual presence.

The proposal would replace that modest building with a substantial three-storey apartment block. In terms of scale, bulk and height, the difference is dramatic. The new building would inevitably dominate the outlook from Remenham Row and create an overbearing relationship that simply does not exist today.

I am equally concerned about the practical implications of constructing a development of this size immediately adjacent to a retirement community. The prolonged noise, vibration, dust and general disruption associated with demolition and construction would have a serious impact upon elderly residents. This would not be a short-term inconvenience but a lengthy period of disturbance affecting people's daily lives.

I also note that the Council's Planning Officer did not visit Remenham Row before initially recommending approval. Only after residents requested a site visit did he inspect the relationship between the two sites, by which time his report had already been published. In my view, this illustrates the importance of seeing the proposal from the neighbouring properties before drawing conclusions regarding its impact.

Paragraph 6.2.9

The appellant refers to "substantial built form" already existing adjacent to Remenham Row.

I do not consider that statement to be an accurate description of the site.

The existing building adjoining the boundary is a low single-storey structure that is barely visible above the wall. It bears no comparison whatsoever with the scale of the proposed three-storey development.

The appellant also refers to another three-storey building elsewhere within Thamesfield. However, that building is located well away from the Remenham Row boundary and does not adversely affect neighbouring properties. It is therefore not an appropriate comparison and cannot reasonably be used to justify this proposal.

Paragraph 6.2.10

The appellant suggests that neighbouring properties would view the proposed building only at an angle.

That is not an accurate representation of the relationship between the proposed building and Remenham Row. The development would sit directly opposite properties 2 to 5 and, at certain points, would be closer to the boundary wall than the existing building. Those residents would experience the greatest impact.

I am also concerned that the proposal would adversely affect existing Thamesfield residents.

From the information submitted, it appears that the covered walkway linking parts of the village would be removed. For retirement accommodation, covered access between residential accommodation and communal facilities is an important feature, particularly during periods of poor weather. Removing that facility seems contrary to the purpose of providing accommodation designed for older residents.

The submitted daylight information also indicates that nine existing apartments would fail to achieve the normally accepted daylight standards, with some losing in excess of forty per cent of the daylight they currently receive.

Furthermore, Flats 9 and 10 would have principal habitable room windows facing a new three-storey building at a distance of less than eight metres. I understand these to be the primary outlook from those apartments rather than secondary windows. Such a close relationship would inevitably create an oppressive outlook and materially reduce the quality of accommodation enjoyed by existing residents.

It is difficult to reconcile these impacts with the stated objective of improving retirement living.

Paragraph 6.2.12 – 6.12.16

The photograph of Remenham Row included within the Appellant's Statement does not show the cottages that would be most directly affected by the proposed development.

Consequently, it does not provide an accurate appreciation of the relationship between the proposed building and the neighbouring properties that would experience the greatest harm.

The Appellant assesses the relationship between the proposed development and the dwellings at Remenham Row as a front-to-front relationship for the purposes of applying the Borough Design Guide. This is not an accurate interpretation of the physical characteristics of the site.

Remenham Row is a private retirement development, and there is no public highway, footpath or other publicly accessible space separating it from the Thamesfield site. The only intervening features are residents' front gardens, a gravel pathway, the boundary planting and the boundary wall. As a consequence, residents enjoy a level of privacy that is quite different from that normally experienced where dwellings are separated by a public street. The relationship more closely resembles that of a back-to-back arrangement, where a greater degree of privacy would reasonably be expected.

The Borough Design Guide recommends a minimum separation distance of 30 metres in such circumstances. The Appellant's own assessment, contained within Table 2 at paragraph 6.2.14, confirms that the proposed development falls materially short of this guidance, with separation distances ranging from 21.4 metres to 26 metres.

The purpose of these recommended standards is clearly stated within the Design Guide: to safeguard residential amenity by maintaining privacy and avoiding an overbearing sense of enclosure. The proposal fails to satisfy either objective. Owing to its scale, massing, height and proximity to the boundary, the development would have a significant adverse effect on the living conditions of the neighbouring residents at Remenham Row.

The Appellant goes on to suggest that, even if the relationship were assessed as back-to-back, the resulting harm would be only minor. Having considered the proposal and its relationship with the adjoining properties, that conclusion is not supported by the physical circumstances of the site.

Paragraph 6.2.18

I also disagree with the appellant's assessment of the boundary treatment.

The proposed building would, in places, be positioned closer to the boundary wall than the existing building. During the planning process, Retirement Villages Group acknowledged in writing that there would be insufficient space to accommodate additional planting between the building and the boundary wall.

Against that background, I was surprised to see the "Illustrative Master Plan Rev B" depicting what appears to be a substantial belt of trees along the boundary with Remenham Row.

This does not reflect the site as it currently exists. There are only a small number of medium-sized trees, and they would provide very limited screening of a building of this scale.

In my opinion, the illustration gives a misleading impression of the degree of screening that would be available and understates the visual impact of the development when viewed from Remenham Row.

Paragraph 6.2.20

The appellant concludes that the proposal would not have an unacceptable impact on neighbouring amenity. I cannot agree.

The proposed building would become the dominant feature when viewed from Remenham Row and would fundamentally alter the character of our small retirement community.

It is not only the cottages directly opposite the development that would be affected. The building would tower above the estate and significantly alter its overall appearance.

I am also concerned about the effect on our communal gardens. One of the attractions of Remenham Row is the quality of its landscaped setting, which is carefully maintained throughout the year. The increased height and mass of the proposed building would reduce daylight reaching parts of the gardens and flower beds. Our gardener has advised that this would inevitably affect the health and growth of many of the existing plants.

In my opinion, the cumulative effect of the proposal has been consistently underestimated throughout the appellant's submission.

For these reasons, I strongly support Wokingham Borough Council's decision to refuse planning permission and respectfully request that the appeal be dismissed.

Finally, I would encourage you to visit Remenham Row before determining the appeal. Viewing the proposal from the neighbouring properties provides an immediate understanding of the relationship between the sites and the significant impact that this development would have upon both neighbouring residents and the wider character of this small retirement community.

Yours faithfully,

H J Sharman FRICS

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