

# MEMORANDUM

To: Tom Rea  
Area Planning Officer

From: Martin Lawrence  
Strategic Housing Manager

Your Ref: 24/02173/FP

Date: 13 November 2024

**Full Planning Permission: Change of use from care home (use class C2) to supported hostel accommodation (sui generis) and provision of additional car parking, refuse/recycling store and cycle storage  
Anderson House, Florence Street, Hitchin, Hertfordshire, SG5 1RA.  
Application ref: 24/02173/FP**

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Dear Tom,

Thank you for your memo of 21 October 2024 in respect of the above application for full planning permission for a change of use from a care home to supported housing hostel accommodation.

A report was presented to North Herts District Council Housing Services Committee in December 1979 for approval to seek planning permission for 39 Category 2 elderly persons housing units and two warden's houses on the site.

The scheme was to be built on land which was part of a Clearance Area and additional land purchased under a Compulsory Purchase Order and the application was granted on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1980. Another application to build 47 flats was granted on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1981. The properties were built in 1985.

The Council transferred their housing stock in March 2003 to North Hertfordshire Homes, now known as settle Housing Group, who continued to use the accommodation as social housing for elderly occupants. As the Council no longer owns any housing of its own, it works in partnership with registered providers (formerly known as housing associations) to help meet the housing needs of the District.

settle recently advised the flats at Anderson House were provided as flexicare accommodation but have low demand and no longer met required standards for elderly residents in receipt of care. The flats are far smaller than new build flats for this client group, with the dimensions of corridors and rooms no longer compatible for mobility devices, nor the space needed to deliver personal care.

Elderly residents from Anderson House have been decanted over the past few years to homes that met their housing and care needs. We understand that when the building had been completely vacated, it was then occupied by 'live in guardians'. settle also advised the building required significant investment over coming years and subsequently decided to offer it for sale, agreeing terms with One YMCA.

One YMCA is a Registered Provider and a registered charity; in its planning application, it proposes to convert the existing building from elderly persons accommodation to hostel use for the provision of supported accommodation for single homeless people (and some couples) including rough sleepers. This will include a specialist young service provision for 18–25-year-olds. The aim of the proposed service is to support its residents to lead independent lives, including eventual resettlement into their own accommodation.

The proposals for the hostel include the retention of communal areas including reception area, laundry, kitchen and dining area, staff offices and two lounge areas; one for young adults (18 -25 year olds) and one for adults above 25 years of age.

Counselling spaces will be added to provide support to residents to promote health and wellbeing and training opportunities/activities that will support residents and prepare them for independent living.

The accommodation will comprise a mix of individual one-bedroom flats and shared two-bedroom flats by converting the living room in some flats. Kitchens will be retained in the one-bedroom units, being closed off in the shared double occupancy flats.

The services provided by One YMCA include not only emergency accommodation, but crucially the provision of a "pathway" out of homelessness including support and independent living skills to prevent homelessness recurring. The service will be staffed 24/7 by a number of Specialist Supported Housing Managers/Workers and Complex Needs Specialists in order to provide the right level of support for each resident.

The Council were invited by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) to bid for funding provided by its Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme (SHAP) as it was identified that we have a high need for more provision for vulnerable young people (aged 18-25) who are at risk of or are experiencing homelessness or rough sleeping. This bid – submitted in partnership with One YMCA, Helping Herts Homeless and Herts County Council - was successful and part of the proposed hostel provision will deliver 24 units of accommodation and support for this client group.

The Council's bid to the Single Homelessness Accommodation Programme identified a cohort of vulnerable young people, over 75% of whom had multiple support needs. A third (33%) have experienced some form of abuse, just under a third (29%) have a learning disability, a quarter (25%) have a history of offending and nearly a quarter (21%) are care leavers. Almost half of this 18-25 cohort have previously approached the Council for homelessness assistance and 29% have been evicted from arranged accommodation or have been refused accommodation placements due to accommodation not being suitable for support needs and/ or inappropriate behaviour often because of unmet support needs.

The scheme will provide medium-high support in self-contained accommodation in a psychologically informed environment that offers a safe space for young people facing multiple disadvantages and with a range of complex needs. Wraparound tailored support by onsite staff will be required to support residents along the pathway, including help with accessing and engaging with external specialist support.

Progression along the pathway is important and the scheme will act as a feeder site to other stepdown/move-on units so residents are able to move towards independent living.

The other 62 units will help meet the wider accommodation and support needs of single homeless people, including some couples. The current District provision for this client group is extremely limited. One YMCA currently provides single homeless accommodation services at two sites in the district. The first, at the Sanctuary, Hitchin, accommodates only 4/5 people and the building is in very poor condition. The second, at 20 High Street, Baldock has 18 rooms, however this only has temporary planning permission, until December 2025. Keystage Housing operates a 21-room scheme at the former Lord Lister hotel in Hitchin, however the Council's access to these units is due to end in 2031.

The provision of accommodation-based support services for single homeless people has been long term challenge for the Council, as highlighted in successive Housing Strategies. The current Sanctuary site in Hitchin received planning consent over 10 years ago, however this scheme remained undelivered. Since then, options have been limited by a scarcity of local sites for development. Another planning application for a site in Protea Way, Letchworth received planning permission for a 40-bed hostel in February 2021, however this permission has now lapsed and there is no sign of any appetite to deliver a scheme here.

Existing single young person's provision in the district consists of one scheme of accommodation-based support for 15 residents (aged 18-25 years), comprising of six flats with shared bathrooms and kitchens. The scheme is commissioned by Herts County Council and caters for young people across the county, not just North Herts. A waiting list operates for the scheme, with currently six young people from North Herts on it. Due to the shared facilities and communal nature of the scheme, it is not suitable for young people with complex needs, or those with a serious offending history.

Paragraph 63 of the National Planning Policy Framework says "Within this context of establishing need, the size, type and tenure of housing needed for different groups in the community should be assessed and reflected in planning policies. These groups should include (but are not limited to) those who require affordable housing; families with children; older people (including those who require retirement housing, housing-with-care and care homes); students; people with disabilities; service families; travellers; people who rent their homes and people wishing to commission or build their own homes".

The Council has a statutory duty to secure accommodation for unintentionally homeless households who are in priority need and are legally required to work with people to prevent and relieve homelessness. As the Council no longer owns any housing stock, it is reliant on registered providers to help it meet local housing need.

The Council has a duty to review homelessness in the district and to formulate a homelessness strategy based on the results of that review. The Council's strategy for preventing and managing homelessness is incorporated within the Council's Housing Strategy for 2024-2029 [NHC Housing Strategy 2024-2029 0.pdf](#).

The previous government's strategy setting out how the government and its partners will end rough sleeping for good was published in September 2022.

The provision of this accommodation would assist in meeting the government's aim and specifically help the Council to meet one of its key priorities to increase provision of good quality accommodation and support for homeless people facing multiple disadvantages, including people sleeping rough. This includes single homeless people, especially young people who face issues securing decent suitable accommodation providing support.

The 2016 Stevenage and North Hertfordshire Strategic Housing Market Assessment (SHMA) update identified a need for additional accommodation for single homeless people with support needs, people in need due to alcohol misuse and people with mental health problems. The latter two groups being a primary reason for homelessness.

There is a great need in the district for this type of accommodation; the SHMA indicates that the number of vulnerable people is expected to grow over the period of the emerging Local Plan. By 2031 in Stevenage and North Herts there will be approximately 360 (220 North Herts.) single homeless people with support needs, 740 (440 North Herts.) people aged 18-64 in need due to alcohol misuse and a further 470 (290) people aged 18-64 in need due to poor mental health.

In addition, the pandemic revealed a large, previously hidden cohort of single people (and some couples) in the district who are living unstable, often chaotic lives. Many are moving in and out of informal accommodation arrangements including enduring spells of 'sofa surfing' with friends or relatives or periods of rough sleeping and without stable housing, the cycles can be repeated over the course of many years.

The following table outlines the Council's legal duties to homeless households over recent years (the **bold** figures represent the number of single people – and some couples, without children – who approached the Council because they were homeless):

|  | 2019/20 | 2020/21 | 2021/22 | 2022/23 | 2023/24 | Q1&Q2<br>only<br>2024/25 |
|--|---------|---------|---------|---------|---------|--------------------------|
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|                                     |            |            |            |            |            |           |
|-------------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Households owed a prevention duty   | 275        | 229        | 194        | 175        | 207        | 98        |
| Households owed a relief duty       | 219        | 385        | 281        | 241        | 269        | 139       |
| <b>of which, single households</b>  | <b>170</b> | <b>322</b> | <b>217</b> | <b>168</b> | <b>178</b> | <b>94</b> |
| Households owed a main housing duty | 65         | 90         | 128        | 123        | 131        | 58        |
| <b>of which, single households</b>  | <b>14</b>  | <b>33</b>  | <b>53</b>  | <b>43</b>  | <b>43</b>  | <b>25</b> |

In addition, there is further demand, not reflected in the table above, from households who are not receiving or engaging with support from housing services. For example, each year the Council deals with over 1,000 “advice only” cases in addition to cases where a duty is owed. Many of these cases are people simply seeking advice about their housing situation but others are referrals from other public services (such as job centres, prisons, social services) where it is believed that a household might be homeless or at risk of homelessness. In 2023/24 over 100 single households were referred to the Council for assistance, all of whom were homeless on departure from institutions, of no fixed abode or rough sleeping. Whilst 60% were provided with advice (and did not go on to be owed a duty, including by choice, at that point in time), 40% failed to engage or respond to repeated attempts of contact.

The homeless households that the Council works with are also approaching with increasing support needs, including complex/multiple needs particularly mental and physical ill health and experience of abuse (including domestic abuse). Of the households to whom the Council owed a duty in 2023/24, 63% had one or more support needs – this compares with 51% of households in 2019/20.

Single people in temporary accommodation are amongst some of our most vulnerable clients. Of single people placed into temporary accommodation during 2023/24, two-thirds had two or more support needs. The most common support needs were: mental health problems (56%); physical ill health (42%); drug and/or alcohol dependency (25%); domestic abuse (22%); histories of repeat homelessness and/or rough sleeping (22%); learning disabilities (18%); and offending history (15%).

Almost half had approached from unsettled living arrangements (not including with friends and family) with one-quarter rough sleeping at the time or at some time in the past. 12% were homeless on departure from an institution such as prison or hospital. Since 2021, five single homeless clients whom the Council was working with have sadly died.

The increased demand for homelessness services has resulted in corresponding pressures on the district's already over-stretched supply of registered provider temporary accommodation. There are waiting lists in place and the Council is reliant on hotel placements to fulfil its legal duties and manage demand levels. Hotel placements are often outside of the district as many local hotels will no longer work with the Council as the needs of our clients exceed the service on offer from commercial hotels; although some outreach support is available, this cannot be effectively delivered in hotel settings.

As demonstrated, there is high housing need in North Hertfordshire for accommodation with comprehensive support for single homeless people and some couples. Due to the long-term instability in the supply of this valuable resource, we would ask that the following planning obligation/condition is considered to ensure that local people retain priority for the service:

***All vacancies - in perpetuity - should be offered to the Council only.***

In the highly unlikely event there are vacancies in the scheme and there is no demand from local people, the Council will consider appropriate reciprocal arrangements with other local authorities and/or providers in consultation with One YMCA.

I hope these comments are useful, but please contact me if I can provide any further information/assistance.

Kind regards,

Martin Lawrence  
Strategic Housing Manager