

Briefing Note - Application PL/2021/04084

Loss of community facility (Block C)

Purpose of report

This briefing note provides Parish Councillors with an overview of:

- The principal planning issues arising from the proposed loss of the doctors' surgery/community facility element of the development.
- The reasoning set out within the Planning Officer's report.
- Potential areas where Wiltshire Councillors may wish to seek further clarification before determining the application.
- Potential mitigation measures that could be secured should Wiltshire Council ultimately decide to approve the development.

The purpose of this briefing is not necessarily to oppose the redevelopment of the site in principle. Rather, it is to help ensure that community-use opportunities have been fully explored before the permanent loss of a facility originally intended to form part of the wider Old Sarum development.

1. Background

The application proposes the conversion of the long-vacant premises originally intended for doctors' surgery and community uses into residential accommodation.

The Wiltshire Council Planning Officer's Report¹ concludes that:

- The premises have remained vacant for a significant period.
- Previous aspirations for healthcare provision have not materialised.
- Relevant service providers have not taken up the opportunity.
- There is insufficient evidence that the reserved use will come forward within a reasonable timeframe.
- The delivery of housing now attracts substantial planning weight.

The planning officer therefore considers the loss of the facility to be acceptable within the overall planning balance.

2. Why this issue matters

The Clerk recognises that Wiltshire Council may ultimately conclude that residential redevelopment represents the most appropriate use of the building. However, approval would permanently remove one of the last remaining opportunities within the original Old Sarum development framework to provide healthcare services, community meeting space, voluntary sector facilities, local public services, or flexible community accommodation.

¹ REPORT OUTLINE FOR AREA PLANNING COMMITTEES - Issued by Joe Richardson. Southern Area Planning Committee, Thursday 24 September 2026

Once converted to residential use, the opportunity to provide such facilities on this site is unlikely to return.

For this reason, Parish Councillors may wish to satisfy themselves that all realistic community-use opportunities have been thoroughly investigated before that opportunity is lost permanently. The Clerk cannot find any evidence on the planning portal of marketing of these units. There is evidence of marketing of the employment land which is also included in this application but not for these units.

3. A key question

The most important question this council could ask is “Has sufficient evidence been provided to demonstrate that the community use is no longer realistically deliverable?”

A building remaining vacant does not automatically demonstrate that no community demand exists. Members may reasonably wish to request evidence that all realistic opportunities have been thoroughly explored before a permanent loss is accepted.

3. Potential areas of further clarification

A. Marketing evidence

The Planning Officer's report refers to the long-term vacancy of the premises and the apparent absence of occupier interest. However, the report provides only limited detail regarding:

- marketing periods;
- marketing methods;
- asking rents;
- enquiries received;
- discussions with potential occupiers; and
- reasons why opportunities did not proceed.

Members may wish to seek clarification regarding what marketing activities have been undertaken during the previous 24-36 months, whether marketing specifically targeted community organisations, whether healthcare providers were approached directly; and whether local voluntary and charitable organisations were contacted.

B. Stakeholder engagement

Members may wish to seek clarification regarding what level, if any, engagement has taken place with:

- local community organisations;
- voluntary-sector groups;
- youth organisations;
- sports organisations;
- Wiltshire Council community teams; and
- NHS and Integrated Care Board representatives.

C. Viability assessment

The Planning Officer's report concludes that there is little realistic prospect of the premises being occupied for community purposes. Members may therefore wish to seek clarification regarding:

- what viability evidence has been submitted;
- whether any viability evidence has been independently reviewed;
- whether mixed-use occupation has been explored.

D. Retention of some community function

Members may wish to enquire whether any element of flexible community use could be retained within the final scheme, should Wiltshire Council conclude that complete retention of the original community facility is no longer justified.

Conclusion

The strongest planning concern arising from this element of the application remains the permanent loss of a facility originally intended to provide community and healthcare services to the growing Old Sarum area.

If members are satisfied that such uses are no longer realistically deliverable, then the planning balance may reasonably favour redevelopment for housing. However, before accepting that conclusion, members may wish to ensure that:

- Community demand has been thoroughly tested.
- Marketing evidence is robust.
- Alternative community solutions have been properly explored.

The concern is not specifically about retaining a doctor's surgery, which would be hard to argue for given the apparent responses from local surgeries. The concern is whether sufficient evidence has been provided to demonstrate that community uses generally have been fully explored and are no longer deliverable.