

Homes set for refusal

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A BID for more housebuilding in the wooded grounds of a historic Northumberland mansion could be rejected amid claims it is simply an attempt to tackle serious financial losses on the flagship restoration project.

Developer Ho Sanderson is seeking the green light for another 30 luxury homes on the Hartford Hall Estate near Bedlington, where more than 60 houses and apartments have already been built and sold for up to £1m.

Permission was granted six years ago to convert the listed hall and outbuildings into 14 apartments and build 48 houses in the grounds, to save the imposing Georgian mansion from ruin. The project has resulted in Hartford Hall being removed from the English Heritage 'at risk' register of historic buildings.

Now Mr Sanderson wants permission for another 30 houses on the estate as further 'enabling development' to allow the completion of the multi-million-pound Hartford Hall project.

But his bid is being strongly opposed by families living on the estate, who claim the scheme is purely a money-making exercise aimed at tackling losses which have been incurred on the project.

Next week Wansbeck Council's regulatory committee will be recommended by officers to refuse his application for planning permission for the third and final phase of the Hartford Hall development.

In July, dozens of estate residents staged a demonstration in Bedlington outside an exhibition at which Hartford Hall Estate Ltd was seeking feedback on the latest building scheme.

Headlined Help Save Hartford Hall, the company's outline proposals include more houses, a sculpture park, birdwatching hides and a public path through woodland around the edge of the estate.

A report to Thursday's meeting of the council's regulatory committee says the consent granted in 2001 for housing development was intended to finance the restoration of Hartford Hall and other historic buildings, which has now been achieved. It says Mr Sanderson now claims that overruns in cost have resulted in the project generating a substantial deficit, and the additional 30 houses are proposed to help claw back some of the losses.

Planning officers say substantial works remain to be carried out on the estate in connection with the original permission, including improvements to the access junction and internal roads, provision of a play area and landscaping. They say the financial case made by Mr Sanderson for phase three of the scheme is 'wholly inadequate'.

"On the basis of the currently submitted information, it is not possible to allow the application as enabling development," adds the report. On that basis, the 30 homes should be rejected as inappropriate building in the open countryside, say officers.

Last night company director Christine Purdon declined to comment in advance of the meeting.

A Hartford Hall Estate spokesman said: "We are still in the process of providing additional financial information, which the council has requested, about this planning application."