

**HERTFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

**COMMUNITY INFORMATION AND PROTECTION SELECT COMMITTEE**

**TUESDAY OCTOBER 30 2001 AT 10.30 AM**

Agenda Item No.

**3**

**REPLACEMENT OF ST ALBANS FIRE STATION -authorisation of a planning application for the relocation of the St Albans fire station and of the making and submission of a compulsory purchase order to acquire the land for this project**

Report of the Corporate Director (People and Property)

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Executive Member: Gerald Game

Local Member: Gill Gipps

**1. Purpose of Report**

To invite the comments of the Select Committee on a proposal from the Executive Member for Protection and Registration in connection with the relocation of St Albans Fire Station.

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 The Executive Member proposes that the County Council should submit an appropriate planning application, and make and submit a compulsory purchase order to achieve the provision of a new fire station on a site at Francis Bacon School, London Road, St Albans (see Plan 'A').
- 2.2 The existing St Albans Fire Station is located to the north of the city centre and to the east of Harpenden Road (Plan 'B').
- 2.3 The most recent Standards of Fire Cover Review in Hertfordshire was carried out in 1997 following the recommended Home Office methodology and indicated that an area south of the city could not be reached within the maximum attendance times.
- 2.4 The former Community Services Committee (March 28<sup>th</sup> 1999) agreed that the Chief Fire Officer apply to the Secretary of State for the relocation of the St Albans Fire Station to a new site "that would ensure attendance times in London Colney are met, while maintaining appropriate standards of cover for the remainder of the area."
- 2.5 A search area was identified by Fire and Rescue for the new location for the Fire Station and two potential sites were identified both in London Road, St Albans.

- 2.6 One of these, on part of the playing fields of Francis Bacon School, is considered to be the optimum location and the school governors have agreed in principle to sell the land to the County Council, subject to terms.
- 2.7 Negotiations on the value of the land to be acquired are continuing, and whilst the schools advisers have reduced their initial price, it is still well in excess of the County Council's valuation. Accordingly, it is recommended that the necessary steps be taken towards the acquisition of the land for the new fire station by compulsory purchase.
- 2.8 Since the proposed relocation site is within the Green Belt, Cabinet authorisation is required for the submission of a planning application for permission for the new fire station.

### **3. Conclusions**

- 3.1 The need to relocate the St Albans Fire Station arises from operational considerations and, in its proposed new location, attendance times will be met for London Colney, How Wood and adjacent areas.
- 3.2 Selection of the site followed a detailed search, and the school location best meets the requirements of accessibility, availability, size and location away from residential properties.
- 3.3 Acquisition of the new site by agreement is still being pursued, but the option for compulsory purchase should be available as a contingency measure in the event that negotiations fail.
- 3.4 Green Belt policy allows new build development in very special circumstances and it is considered that, on operational grounds, such circumstances apply in this case.
- 3.5 The Select Committee is invited to comment, on these issues and on the proposal set out in 2.1 above, to the Cabinet.

### **4. Background**

- 4.1 St Albans Fire Station is a two-pump full time crewed station occupying a 1.7 acre site in Harpenden Road, to the north of the city centre. The site is shared with the Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire Ambulance and Paramedic Service and also contains the Fire and Rescue Services 'B' Division headquarter offices.
- 4.2 The site is part of an 18 acre site acquired by the County Council in 1961 and known as the former Ariston Works site. This larger site contains Heathlands School (Hearing Impaired), the Pioneer Club and St Albans Judo Club and a 6 acre playing field.
- 4.3 Fire Authorities are required by the Home Office to keep the level of fire cover in their area under periodic review. Fire Service Circular No. 4/1985 sets out the recommended methodology for carrying out fire cover reviews and requires that,

where a review indicated that the recommended standards of provision are not being met, Fire Authorities take the necessary action to rectify that situation.

- 4.4 The last Standards of Fire Cover Review in Hertfordshire was carried out in 1997. In this, the built up areas of St Albans district were categorised within risk category 'C' (individual areas such as the abbey and city centre are in a higher category) for which the maximum attendance time laid down by the Home Office is 8 – 10 minutes for the first fire appliance. The theoretical attendance time exercise indicated that a large part of London Colney, How Wood and Frogmore areas could not be reached in the required time from any existing fire station in the mid-Hertfordshire area. This confirmed attendance time data from actual call-out situations.
- 4.5 Options to achieve improvement in fire cover for these areas were identified and evaluated and at their meeting on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1999, the then Community Services Committee agreed that the Chief Fire Officer apply to the Secretary of State for the relocation of St Albans Fire Station to a new site "that would ensure attendance times in London Colney are met, while maintaining appropriate standards of cover for the remainder of the area."
- 4.6 A search area for the new location was identified by the Fire and Rescue Service and a sequential analysis within the area focused on two sites in London Road, St Albans which best met the requirements of the Service. Both sites were in a Green Belt allocation and not within HCC ownership.
- 4.7 The first of these, land at Verulam Golf Club was found, on further detailed investigation, to present serious problems in terms of levels, underground services, a shared access with other users, the need for extensive tree felling and restrictive covenants. Even with extensive access improvements, visibility along London Road would fall short of accepted standards.
- 4.8 The site on part of the playing fields at Francis Bacon School presented far fewer physical difficulties. It is a level site, with direct access to a major distributor road, and excellent visibility in both directions along London Road.
- 4.9 Since the site lies just beyond the urban envelope of St Albans in the Metropolitan Green Belt, preliminary discussions were held with the Director of Environment to whom the planning application would be made. On the basis of the evidence presented, particularly the Fire and Rescue Services operational justification for this location, it was agreed that a defensible case for overcoming the fundamental planning objections could be made. Moreover, further work on the proposed access demonstrated that, with certain improvements, this was acceptable on highway grounds.
- 4.10 Discussions were then held with the Governors of Francis Bacon School including a detailed presentation of the proposals to a meeting of the Governing Body. A letter dated July 30<sup>th</sup>, 2001 was received from the schools consultants which stated:

“the Governing Body of Francis Bacon School confirmed that it is, in principle, prepared to agree to a sale, to Herts County Council, of a parcel of land fronting London Road and extending to 1.6 acres .....

- 4.11 Following this letter, negotiations on the value of the site to be acquired were initiated. Initially, the figure proposed by the schools consultants was significantly above the County Council’s opening offer and whilst the value sought by the school has recently been reduced, it remains twice that which the County Council’s advisers consider reasonable.
- 4.12 Since it is considered that this site represents an optimum relocation opportunity for the Fire and Rescue Service, that the Home Office continue to press for a solution to the fire cover shortcomings in south St Albans, and that a persuasive and defensible case will be presented to justify development in the Green Belt, it is considered essential that all necessary steps are taken to secure the acquisition of the site at a justifiable cost. Acquisition by agreement is still being pursued but, given that there remains a wide gap between the respective land valuations, it is recommended that the making and submission of a compulsory purchase order be authorised.

## **5. Planning Considerations**

- 5.1 It is accepted that a fire station would normally represent inappropriate development in the Green Belt and that very special circumstances are therefore needed to justify such a proposal.
- 5.2 However, in this case it is felt that the search area for the new location was properly and carefully identified on the evidence of real-time runs, and the sequential analysis of opportunities within this area revealed only two realistic locations. Further detailed investigation proved the unsuitability of the Golf Club site, whilst the Francis Bacon School site emerged as the optimum location in terms of accessibility, site conditions, size, and location away from residential properties. It has also been established that the reduction in the area of its playing fields will not compromise the school’s future growth potential.
- 5.3 The planning application would be submitted to the Director of Environment with whom encouraging pre-submission discussions have been held. It should, however, be noted that should Development Control Committee be minded to grant permission, the application has to be referred to the Secretary of State as a departure from the development plan.
- 5.4 In a recent appeal decision, the Secretary of State accepted that the statutory requirement to provide fire cover and the absence of suitable, available, non-Green Belt sites amounted to the type of very special circumstances envisaged in Green Belt policy and allowed the proposal. In so doing, be accepted that purchasing sites which could command residential values was not a realistic proposition.
- 5.5 The Corporate Director (People and Property) has authority to seek planning permission for schemes which are in accordance with general Council policies and where financial provision has been made. He is not, however, authorised to make

planning applications which would materially conflict with or prejudice the implementation of the Council's Structure Plan or which are clearly inconsistent with an identified policy in an adopted local plan which is up to date.

## **6.0 Financial Implications**

- 6.1 It is expected that the funding for the acquisition of the new fire station site and for the construction of the buildings will come from the anticipated capital receipt from the disposal of the former Ariston Works site on which it is currently located.
- 6.2 Beginning in the summer of last year, the County Council has presented proposals for the development of part of the Ariston Works site and, in February of this year, the Planning Committee of St Albans District Council agreed that a joint Planning Brief be prepared. This Brief would provide comprehensive planning guidance for the future development of the site.
- 6.3 Following a public consultation exercise last July on proposals to develop part of the site for housing and the provision of community facilities a revised Planning Brief was presented to the District Council's Cabinet on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2001. At this meeting, it was agreed that the joint Planning Brief be approved, subject to amendments.
- 6.4 This decision established the basis for estimating the capital receipt from the development of the site. Further assurance will now be sought through the submission of a planning application to the District Council based on the guidelines in the approved Planning Brief.