

THREE RIVERS DISTRICT

**PROPOSED CHANGE OF USE TO OFFICES
PARTS OF BLOCKS B AND C, LANGLEYBURY, HUNTON BRIDGE**

Report of the Director of Environment

Author: Brenda Strangleman (01992 556267)

Local Member : E Clarke

1. Purpose of Report

To consider a planning application (ref. 8/1169-01) to use as offices for the Children, Schools and Families Service of parts of blocks B and C, Langleybury, Hunton Bridge

2. Summary

- 2.1 The application site is located within the Green Belt. Langleybury School closed in 1996, but the site continued for two years after that as the Langleybury campus of Francis Combe School in Watford. Office use of part of block B began in 1997 and was gradually increased, so that by last year when the permissions were renewed until May 2003, there was some 690 square metres of floorspace involved.
- 2.2 The current application proposes to extend the office use by a further 760 square metres, comprising the remainder of block B and part of block C. Staff numbers would increase from an existing 88 to a maximum of 100. Planning permission is sought until May 2003.
- 2.3 Three Rivers District Council's formal response has not yet been received, but the Council is understood to have objected on Green Belt grounds and because the site would be better used as a school. Abbots Langley Parish Council objects because the site has become a place of work, making it difficult to return to school use if the need arose. The County Council as Highway Authority has no objection. No public representations have been received.
- 2.4 The report considers the two immediately relevant policy issues, Green Belt and highway implications, and finds that the proposed development is acceptable in these terms. However, there would be concerns on sustainability and green transport grounds about the potential for increasing office commitments there, because the site is isolated in the countryside, making it an inappropriate location other than in the short term for such development by the County Council.

3. **Conclusions**

The report concludes that the Director of the Environment should be authorised to grant planning permission for a limited period until May 2003 for use solely by Children, Schools and Families staff serving the South West Hertfordshire area. Advice could also be appended to any planning permission granted to the effect that the site is not considered an appropriate location for more intensive use as County Council offices nor more generally for such use in the longer term.

1. Description of the site and proposed development

- 1.1 The application site - The site as defined in the application comprises some 10.8 hectares of land. It includes Langleybury mansion, the complex of school buildings and the immediate grounds including playing fields. The mansion is a grade two star listed building, which has been converted into separate residential flats but is now empty. The school buildings are all post-war and a mix of single and two-storey development, amounting to over 6,000 square metres of floorspace. There are various hard surfaced areas around the buildings, which are available for parking. Immediately adjacent to the site are some farm buildings and the former stable block of the mansion, also converted into flats. Otherwise the site is surrounded by agricultural land.
- 1.2 A driveway some 120 metres long leads up to the mansion and school buildings from Langleybury Lane, which runs past the site. Langleybury Lane is an unclassified rural road, which also carries lorries to and from some nearby gravel workings; some improvements have been made recently to its alignment. The A41 road is just over 0.5 kilometres away, with the settlements of Hunton Bridge and Abbots Langley on its far side.
- 1.3 Background to the application - Langleybury School closed in 1996, but the site continued for two years after that as the Langleybury campus of Francis Combe School in north Watford. In 1997 and 1998 there were three applications for office use of different parts of block B (a two-storey classroom block), involving a total of some 690 square metres of floorspace by what were then education and social services staff serving the South West Hertfordshire area. In each case planning permission was granted on a temporary basis until May 2000, by which time it was understood that the County Council would have decided the future of the site. However, that did not happen and, although the Social Services permission was never implemented, a further application was submitted last year to continue the education office for a further three years to May 2003, and planning permission in these terms was granted. The future of the site is still unresolved.
- 1.4 In addition to the County Council's continuing use, from time to time there have been other occupants of other parts of the former school buildings. Although leased to them by the County Council as landowner, these outside occupiers have made their own applications for planning permission direct to Three Rivers District Council.
- 1.5 An application in 1999 to improve safety conditions at the site by widening the driveway, with provision for lighting and a footway as well as other related changes in the parking area by the mansion, was withdrawn. This was because of the difficulty in resolving the various issues related to the inappropriate nature of the development in a rural location and its potential impact on the setting of the listed mansion.
- 1.6 The planning application - The application was submitted in mid-August. It proposes office use of the remaining 180 square metres of block B and of a further 580 square metres within the single storey block C for occupation by Children, Schools and Families (CSF) staff. According to information submitted with the application, there are currently 88 CSF staff working within block B and, if planning permission for the additional floorspace were granted, the total number of staff working in the two blocks could increase to an overall total of 100. The disproportionate amount of floorspace involved for the relatively small increase in staff arises from the need to ease existing

overcrowding, accommodate employees with special needs and provide ancillary meeting and staff rooms. Planning permission until May 2003 is sought to coincide with the other existing consents at the site. No specific increase in parking provision is proposed, but the application indicates capacity for some 100 cars to be parked in various locations around the site.

2. Consultations and publicity

- 2.1 Consultations were carried out with Three Rivers District Council, Abbots Langley Parish Council and the Highway Authority. Publicity was by means of notices on site and in the local press, and neighbour notification letters were sent to those living at thirteen addresses around the site.
- 2.2 Three Rivers District Council considered the application at a meeting on 11 October 2001. At the time of drafting this report the District Council's formal consultation response has not yet been received, but the Council is understood to have objected on Green Belt grounds and because it considers the site would be better used as a school, as well as making a number of other comments.
- 2.3 Abbots Langley Parish Council objects to the application on the grounds that "the area is now becoming a place of work and it will be difficult to return it to a school if the need arises".
- 2.4 The County Council as Highway Authority does not wish to restrict the grant of permission.
- 2.5 Public representations - no individual representations have been received.

3. Planning considerations

- 3.1 The main issues to be considered in the determination of the application are:
 - Green Belt policy
 - highway implications
 - sustainability.
- 3.2 The relevant policies of the development plan are:
 - County Structure Plan - policies 1 (sustainable development), 5 (Green Belt), 13 (education and training), 22 (reduction of travel need and car usage) and 25 (car parking);
 - Three Rivers Local Plan 1996-2001 - policies GB1 (Green Belt) and GB9 (re-use and conversion of buildings in the Green Belt).
- 3.3 Green Belt - The application site lies within the Green Belt and involves no physical development, only the bringing back into use of currently unused floorspace within an existing building complex. As such it will not affect the openness of the Green Belt. The only visual effect could be an increase in the number of cars parked around the site. However, from the information submitted with the application, a maximum increase of only twelve staff being anticipated. There is not, therefore, considered to be any Green Belt objection to the proposed development nor any adverse impact on the setting of the mansion as a listed building.

- 3.4 Highway implications - There are no objections from the Highway Authority. The additional traffic associated with the stated maximum increase of twelve staff would be minimal and well within the capacity of the highway outside the site. The parking provision should also be adequate, the applicant having indicated capacity for the same number of cars as people who would be working in blocks B and C. In this isolated location, very few people could be expected to walk there or come by public transport, but there should be at least an element of car sharing which would then leave some spaces available for visitor parking or for use by any other temporary occupants of other parts of the site.
- 3.5 Sustainability issues - The site is isolated in the countryside and not readily accessible other than by car. An office base at this location does not represent a sustainable form of development. Not only do most staff have to drive there from nearby urban areas where they live, but also most of the schools they serve and which the staff need to visit are also some distance away in the towns of South West Hertfordshire.
- 3.7 Whilst, therefore, Langleybury is not an appropriate location in the medium or longer terms for such office use by the County Council, it is not considered that these are grounds for resisting a short term and relatively small scale expansion of the temporary office use currently on the site. Even so, there could be concern if there were subsequently to be a build-up of staff such that the additional floorspace involved in the current application were to be occupied as intensively as is the existing floorspace. As it stands, the application suggests an improvement in existing working conditions overall and only a minimal increase in staff. Nevertheless, to ensure that the development does not lead to creeping commitments, with the accommodation available becoming a base for more general and wider office purposes as with previous applications on this site, any planning permission granted should be only for staff serving the South West Hertfordshire area.

4. Financial implications

There are none for this Committee

5. Conclusions

The development does not contravene Green Belt Policy and it would not have any adverse highway implications. However, Langleybury is not an appropriate location for County Council office use other than as a short-term expedient, bearing in mind its isolation and issues of sustainability and green transport policy. Nevertheless planning permission could be granted for office use of the additional floorspace proposed, provided it was for CSF staff serving the South West Hertfordshire area and for a limited period until May 2003.

Background material used by the author in compiling this report

Application documents i.e. application form dated 10 August 2001; supporting statement and two drawings numbered RC/LC/1 and RC/LC/2;
Consultation responses received;
Three Rivers District Local Plan 1996-2011, adopted July 2001;
Previous HCC applications 8/236-97, 8/114-98, 8/413-98, 8/1662-99 and 8/791-00.