

ST ALBANS DISTRICT

**PROPOSED NEW TWO-STOREY CLASSROOM AND SIXTH FORM BLOCK
ROUNDWOOD PARK SCHOOL, ROUNDWOOD PARK, HARPENDEN**

Report of the Director of Environment

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Local Member : Bernard Lloyd

1. Purpose of Report

To consider a planning application for a new two-storey classroom and sixth form block at Roundwood Park School, Roundwood Park, Harpenden (reference 5/2291-01).

2. Summary

- 2.1 Roundwood Park School, which is located within the Green Belt on the western edge of Harpenden, occupies a shared site with Roundwood JMI School. The demand for secondary school places in Harpenden has been increasing and it has been decided that Roundwood Park School should increase from a 5.5 form of entry (FE) school to a 6FE school. Consequently additional accommodation is needed.
- 2.2 The application, submitted in December, proposes a new two-storey V-shaped teaching block to the west of the existing building complex accommodating eight classrooms, an IT room, a sixth form common room and replacement changing facilities. It would have off-white self-coloured acrylic render walls, a light tan plinth and a slate-grey concrete tiled roof. A landscaping scheme comprising three replacement trees was received just as this report was being finalised.
- 2.3 St Albans District Council is not due to consider the application until 11 February. No consultation response has been received from Harpenden Town Council. The Highway Authority has no objection subject to certain conditions including an approved school transport plan to be in place before the proposed development is occupied. There are no objections from those statutory undertakers from whom responses have so far been received. At the time of finalising this report six letters of objection have been received from members of the public, the grounds including Green Belt, environmental concerns and traffic issues as well as more general concerns about the continuing expansion of the school and the speed with which these proposals are being pursued.

- 2.4 The main issues raised by the application and considered in the report are Green Belt, design of the building, visual impact, landscaping and highway implications, and car and cycle parking provision. As the application involves major development within the Green Belt, it would need to be referred to the Secretary of State in accordance with departure procedures before it could be finally determined.

3. **Conclusions**

- 3.1 The report finds that the harm caused to the Green Belt is limited and is outweighed by the education need for the development. However, it recommends further discussion on the external materials and the submission of a full landscaping scheme before the application is determined. There are two houses which would have an angled view of the new block but their residential amenity is not considered to be significantly affected. Congestion outside the site has been eased by coaches no longer having to wait outside on the public highway and the conditions recommended by the Highway Authority should ensure that the situation does not deteriorate as a result of any rising numbers at the school. No other issues have been raised which cannot be dealt with by condition. Any late consultation responses or public representations will be reported orally to the Committee.
- 3.2 The report, therefore, concludes that the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant planning permission, provided that the Secretary of State does not wish to intervene, that the materials details have been resolved, that an adequately detailed and improved landscaping scheme has been submitted and that no new issues are raised by St Albans District Council and any other late consultees. The permission should be subject to conditions including implementation of the landscaping scheme, the provision of twenty-two additional cycle parking spaces, car parking provision including the marking out of all spaces, contractors working arrangements (protection of public highway and delivery times), no parents to enter the site and no car parking within the coach parking area at either end of the school day, and the approval of a school transport plan. Advice should also be appended setting out further details about the contents of the school transport plan and the need for prior applicant contact with Transco.

1. Description of the site and proposed development

- 1.1 Roundwood Park School is one of three secondary schools serving Harpenden and the surrounding rural area. The demand for places is growing and there is currently insufficient capacity available in the town to meet it. The Local Education Authority is, therefore, proposing to increase the size of Roundwood Park School from 5.5 forms of entry (FE) to 6FE i.e. from 165 to 180 pupils a year, albeit because of appeals the school is already admitting more children than that number. The current school roll is just over 1,080 and it is suggested that it could eventually grow to about 1,100. The school at present has 60 full-time staff and 64 part-time staff (a “full-time equivalent” of 63.5), but it is understood that normally no more than 102 staff are present on the site at any one time.
- 1.2 The application site lies within the Green Belt immediately adjoining the western edge of Harpenden. The buildings are all modern with flat roofs, but have been developed over a number of years and so include both system-built and more recent light-coloured brick-clad buildings. There are also four double mobile classroom units on the site, the most recent of which was granted planning permission in the middle of last year. Roundwood Park School shares a site with Roundwood JMI School, with a single common access off Roundwood Park. There are currently six coaches transporting students to and from the secondary school, and the access was improved recently with provision made for coaches to park and turn round within the site. As a result there has been considerable reduction in the congestion which previously existed outside the site. There is scope for parking some 89 cars on the secondary school part of the site, but not all of these are necessarily marked out on the ground. The school also has bays for the storage of 69 cycles. Pedestrian access is also gained via a footpath between numbers 19 and 19a Roundwood Park.
- 1.3 The planning application - was received at the end of the first week in December 2001. It proposes a new two-storey V-shaped teaching block to be built at the back (western side) of the site. The building, which would stand on a small embankment approximately 1.4 metres high, would have walls of off-white self-coloured acrylic render, a light tan plinth and a slate-grey concrete tiled roof. It would provide eight more classrooms, an IT room, a sixth form common room and replacement changing facilities. An additional nine car parking spaces would be provided on the site of one of the mobiles. The other three such units would remain, although planning permission for them all will have expired by the end of July 2002 and application for their retention will need to have been submitted before their expiry date if these permissions are not to have lapsed.
- 1.4 The application is accompanied by a traffic report on conditions at both this and the other secondary school to be expanded in the town. The development would involve the removal of three existing trees and proposals for three new trees have been submitted. The supporting statement refers to the school now forming a working party to produce a school travel plan.

2. Consultations and publicity

- 2.1 Consultations have been initiated with St Albans District Council, Harpenden Town Council, the Highway Authority, statutory undertakers and BEAMS (Built Environment Advisory Management Service). Publicity was by means of notices in the local press and on site, and neighbour notification letters were sent to those living at eight addresses around the site.
- 2.2 St Albans District Council is not due to consider the application until a meeting on 11 February 2002. No response has been received from Harpenden Town Council or from BEAMS.
- 2.3 The County Council as Highway Authority does not wish to restrict the grant of permission subject to any permission including conditions that parents should not be allowed to drive into the site at either end of the school day, approval prior to the development being started of details for the provision of an additional 22 safe and secure cycle parking spaces which should be made before the development is occupied, the provision of a maximum of nine additional parking spaces and the development not to be occupied until a school transport plan has been submitted and approved by the planning authority in consultation with the highway authority.
- 2.4 A covering memorandum states that earlier problems associated with school buses parking outside the site in Rounded Park have been resolved with the provision of the on-site parking and turning facility, but that that facility should not be used by parents. The proposed car parking provision is consistent with the maximum standard set out in the County Council's supplementary planning guidance on the subject. However, the site's cycle parking provision is way below the standard set there and so, as an interim measure until the school transport plan has investigated the situation, additional provision related only to the increase in pupil numbers should be provided at this stage. The school transport plan condition picks up on the commitment to the preparation of such a plan in the supporting statement, as it is important and relates to various issues raised in the consideration of the application. The various points to be considered in the preparation of the plan and the policies and measures on- and off-site which may be necessary are also detailed in the response.
- 2.5 The statutory undertakers - Two consultation responses have been received. Neither has any objection, although the Environment Agency requests that drainage advice be appended to any planning permission granted and Transco states that the applicant would need to provide the company with further details under other legislation before starting work.
- 2.6 Public representations - Six letters of objection have been received. The objectors raise Green Belt, environmental and traffic issues, and concern is expressed about the continuing expansion of the school. Specific points include the following:
- concern about the speed which the application has been submitted and processed, with no prior local consultation or environmental appraisal - the County Council is intent on "steam rolling" it through;
 - the continuing incremental growth of the school, contrary to previous assurances given by the County Council that numbers at the school would not exceed 1,000;
 - further encroachment into and impact on the Green Belt;

- location of the building - shadow cast and visual impact from Medlows;
- impact on ancient oak trees;
- increased noise and pollution, especially diesel fumes from coaches;
- effect on quality of life and loss of privacy, especially from use of double decker buses as well as coaches;
- traffic impact particularly in Roundwood Park area, but also extending as far as the town centre and northwards towards Luton - dangerous and chaotic conditions outside site, need for traffic calming measures, increasing number of coaches (now up to nine) and difficulty they have in turning into school drive, need to take account of JMI School and nursery traffic, concern about safety of both primary and secondary school children, effect of reduction in interval between primary and secondary school finishing times by the latter recently having been brought forward by five minutes, difficulties of access for emergency vehicles at either end of the school day;
- increased litter around school entrance and on nearby pathways and gardens;
- increased water-logging of neighbouring gardens due to increased hard surfacing;
- light pollution - lights left on for long periods and badly directed.

3. **Planning considerations**

- 3.1 The application site lies with the Green Belt as defined on the proposals map of the adopted District Local Plan.
- 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 & car usage), 23 (networks & facilities for non-motorised transport & buses) and 25 (car parking);
 - St Albans District Local Plan (adopted version) - policies 1 (Metropolitan Green Belt), 9 (non residential uses within residential areas), 34 (highway considerations in development control), 39 (parking standards), 65 (education facilities), 69 (general design and layout) and 74 (landscaping and tree preservation). There is no emerging District Plan Review.
- 3.3 At this stage the main issues which are raised by the proposed development are:
- Green Belt policy;
 - design of the building;
 - visual impact and landscaping;
 - highway implications;
 - parking provision;
 - provision for cyclists.
- 3.4 Green Belt - School buildings, even on an existing site, are not included within the categories of development regarded as appropriate within the Green Belt. Such buildings, therefore, are not acceptable unless any harm to the Green Belt is outweighed by other considerations.
- 3.5 There is currently a changing room block occupying part of the area where the new block is proposed, but the latter would be a considerably larger building and would

extend the built up part of the site further into the Green Belt than it is at present. However, the land to the rear of the existing school buildings is relatively enclosed. Therefore, although the ground falls away slightly to the west requiring the land first to be levelled and the building to appear as if built on a small terrace, the visual impact of the two-storey building on the Green Belt would be limited and it would not be widely seen.

- 3.6 The demand for secondary school places in Harpenden is increasing. Of the three secondary schools serving the town and surrounding villages, only Roundwood Park School is on the edge of the town within the Green Belt. Admission limits within Harpenden need to be increased by 1FE overall. Of the other two schools, Sir John Lawes School occupies a restricted site and the Local Education Authority considers that it should not be expanded by more than 0.5FE, whilst the other one, St George's School, is a foundation school and also on a restricted site surrounded by other development. It is, therefore, necessary for the other 0.5FE to be accommodated at Roundwood Park School, with inevitably any additional accommodation having to be built on Green Belt land. The front part of the site, where the Green Belt boundary forms something of a re-entrant into the urban area, is already intensively developed and so any further building now has to go at the back of the site beyond the existing built up area.
- 3.7 In these circumstances it is concluded that the limited harm which the development would cause to the Green Belt is outweighed by the school's and the LEA's need for the additional accommodation.
- 3.8 Design - Although an interesting shape and not the standard rectangular classroom block, the materials for the external surfaces are rather bland and colourless i.e. off-white acrylic render walls and grey concrete roof tiling. The application form refers to a plinth of light tan colour, but the elevations drawing does not appear to show this. There is already a variety of different style buildings on the site. The original school buildings, for instance, have black infill panels. The two most recently constructed blocks have buff brick walls, whilst the adjacent building to the proposed new block is system-built with dark red infill panels.
- 3.9 It is, therefore, recommended that there be further discussions on the appropriate external materials and their colour for the proposed new block before the application is determined.
- 3.10 Visual impact - The visual impact of the proposed new building on the Green Belt has already been considered. Whilst the building might be visible from the two nearest houses in the corner of Medlows, neither of them directly overlook this part of the site, the new building would be further away than the other two-storey block (at least 35 metres from the corner boundary of the site according to the site location plan) and, despite the trees to be removed, there would still remain a number of other sizeable trees nearer the site boundary to screen views of the new development from these houses. It is, therefore, not considered that the building would have a significant adverse impact on the residential amenity of any of the nearby houses.
- 3.11 However, the outline landscaping proposals submitted just prior to completion of this report are totally inadequate for the scale of building development involved. The

scheme only provides for three new trees and contains no other planting proposals. The development itself involves the loss of three sizeable existing trees from this area of the site. Not only should there be adequate compensation for this loss, but more consideration needs to be given to providing a proper landscape setting for the new block. In particular there would appear to be scope for substantial planting along the embankment on which the block would stand, with other possible opportunities on the open ground to the south so as also to provide some screening for the additional parking area. There is no indication of any tree planting to the north of the proposed block, as is indicated on the proposed site layout and one of the floor plan drawings. The submission also lacks the necessary specification and other details which should form part of any landscaping scheme.

- 3.12 It is recommended that the application should not be determined until a more adequate landscaping scheme including a sufficiently detailed planting and maintenance specification has been submitted. It is also considered that the cypress tree by the adjacent tennis courts and close to one corner of the proposed building should be suitably protected from accidental damage during the construction phase of the development.
- 3.13 Highway implications - A number of concerns have been raised by local residents about the highway situation outside the site and about safety issues arising from the congestion which exists there at either end of the school day. The Highway Authority has no objection in principle to the application and is satisfied that, whatever the existing situation, it would not be affected to any significant degree by the development proposed, although there are a number of issues related to this which need to be addressed through a school transport plan. The application has been submitted on the basis that it relates to a LEA decision to increase the official pupil intake at the school by fifteen pupils a year and that in practice that figure is already being exceeded. Any increase in traffic, therefore, would be minimal.
- 3.14 However, what cannot be guaranteed is that the new official figure will not itself be regularly exceeded, as has happened in the past, with the associated increase in traffic at the school. That it is why it is important that the highest priority is given to the preparation of a school transport plan which, having investigated and analysed the situation in sufficient depth, then includes appropriate policies and other measures in order to encourage a change in people's travel habits and to alleviate the problems identified. The supporting statement refers to a working party to be formed to produce a travel plan and an expectation that the "policies will be in place by September 2002". On that basis, a condition requiring a plan to be submitted and approved by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Highway Authority before the proposed new block is first occupied should not present any undue problems for the applicant.
- 3.15 Meanwhile for the construction phase it would be appropriate for there to be a condition protecting the public highway from obstruction by contractors activities and limiting the times of deliveries to the building site. Nor should any such use be made of the school's coach parking and turning area. The usual limits set for delivery times are between 8am and 6pm on Mondays to Fridays and between 9am and 1pm on Saturdays, with none permitted on Sundays and bank holidays and, during term time, no such vehicles to enter or leave a site within the period half an hour either side of the start and

finish of the school day. Such a condition would also help to protect the residential amenity of those living close to the school entrance roadway.

- 3.16 Parking provision - Existing parking on the site is quite congested. There are 54 spaces marked out and opportunities for perhaps 35 other spaces in various locations around the secondary school part site. With so many “spaces” not marked out, the actual pattern of parking around the site is not as indicated on the drawing submitted with the application. During the day visitors to either the secondary school or the primary school often have to park around the coach turning area.
- 3.17 The County Council’s current car parking standards require a maximum provision of 110 spaces for Roundwood School. This comprises provision for staff (one for each full-time equivalent member), visitors (1 space per 100 students) and sixth formers (1 space per 8 students over 17 years of age). Whilst this latter element might appear to be encouraging sixth formers to drive to school contrary to current sustainable transport policies, its inclusion in the calculation is considered important. This is because this notional provision could be used to offset any actual shortfall in the staff parking provision, given that the overlap of working hours between part-time staff at the school mean that there could on occasions be up to twenty-six more staff present on the site than the full-time equivalent figure would suggest. The additional provision should help to ensure that no-one has to park outside the site causing road safety concerns on the public highway.
- 3.18 It is not known how many additional staff there might be once the proposed new accommodation with its eight new classrooms becomes available, but the application suggests that student numbers might only increase by 20. The application proposes the provision of another 9 spaces, bringing the school’s total to around 98 spaces. On the basis that the new standards are maxima, then the overall provision is considered satisfactory, although it also requires the provision to be properly managed. It is suggested that all the parking spaces should be clearly marked out to ensure most efficient use of the ground available.
- 3.19 Provision for cyclists - The supporting statement refers to the school having storage for 69 cycles in 9 bays. Although centrally located within the site and therefore secure, they are open stands and not covered. To be consistent with current standards this provision should be significantly increased, and indeed encouraging more students to cycle (or walk) to school rather than travel by car is key to easing the existing congestion outside the site about which the local people are so concerned. The recommendation of the Highway Authority is that storage facilities for an additional 22 cycles should be provided before the proposed new building is first occupied, leaving any further provision to follow on from the assessment work undertaken as part of the school transport plan. This is considered a reasonable approach, provided that there is a commitment to the provision of such additional facilities beyond that as may then be deemed to be necessary.
- 3.20 Other points raised in representations received (i) *drainage* - as regards any potential exacerbation of existing problems in nearby gardens, consultations have been carried out with both the Environment Agency and Thames Water Utilities, but neither has raised any objection, The slope of the ground is such that any increased run-off is likely to be towards the school’s playing fields rather than the nearby houses;

(ii) *air pollution*, especially diesel fumes from coaches - the development will not itself result in any increase in the existing number of coaches entering and leaving the site, and only nine additional parking spaces are proposed within the site, so there should be virtually no change over the existing situation;

(iii) *litter problems* - this is a matter for the school to discourage its students from leaving litter around, whether within the site or outside it; it is not a reason for refusing the current application;

(iv) *light pollution* - no details have been given of any lighting proposals around the building, and indeed anything below four metres in height would not require planning permission. Although a condition could be attached to any planning permission granted excluding the use of any external lighting outside certain hours, say after 11.30pm at night and before 7am in the mornings, this would not affect the school's existing lighting;

(v) *speed with which proposed development is being pursued* - whilst it is true that the applicant held some discussions with local residents prior to the submission of a previous application for building development on this site, there is no formal duty to do so. Consultations and publicity on the current application following its submission have been in accordance with statutory requirements and the County Council's own code of practice for publicity for planning applications. Should any late representations be received, then they will be reported orally to the Committee and, if the Committee is minded to authorise the granting of planning permission, will be copied to the Secretary of State with all the other representations received, as will be any late consultation responses.

4. **Financial implications**

There are none for this Committee

5. **Conclusions**

5.1 Roundwood Park School occupies a relatively secluded site on the edge of Harpenden. The entire site, not just the playing fields at the rear of the school buildings, is included within the Green Belt in the adopted District Local Plan. There is a shortage of secondary school places in Harpenden and the Local Education Authority has decided to meet it by expanding two of the three local schools. This in turn requires the provision of additional built accommodation for the schools involved. In the case of Roundwood Park School it cannot be provided other than within the Green Belt. However, any harm to the Green Belt caused by the proposed development is considered to be limited and outweighed by the education need for the additional accommodation.

5.2 There are reservations about the details of the external materials proposed for the new building and it is recommended that there be further discussion on this aspect before the application is determined. An appropriately detailed landscaping scheme, including tree protection measures, should also be provided before the application can be determined.

5.3 With the additional provision to be made, the amount of on-site car parking is considered to be adequate, although all the spaces need to be properly marked out. There may well be justification for increasing the cycle storage provision some way

beyond the twenty-two additional spaces recommended at this stage. The contractors working arrangements need to be managed so that they do not obstruct or otherwise adversely affect the public highway. At either end of the school day the coach parking area needs to be kept clear of parked cars and parents should not be entering the site at these times.

- 5.4 There is congestion outside the site at either end of the school day, but in the first instance at least the proposed development should not add significantly to this. The formal increase in student numbers at the school which has given rise to the application has in fact for the most part already occurred. Further increases beyond the current figure cannot be ruled out, but the key to easing the congestion problem outside the site lies in changing people's travel habits, not restricting student numbers. The School's commitment to the preparation of a school transport plan, preferably in association with Roundwood JMI School, is, therefore, crucial. It is essential that the necessary work has been done and that a plan, setting out appropriate measures and policies, has been submitted for approval and is in place before the new accommodation is first occupied.
- 5.5 No objections have been raised by any of the statutory undertakers from whom responses have been received, although two suggest that appropriate advice should be appended to any planning permission granted.
- 5.6 Once the materials details have been resolved and a satisfactory landscaping scheme submitted, then, provided that St Albans District Council does not raise any fresh issues in its consultation response, there is no reason why planning permission should not be granted. It would need to be subject to conditions including implementation of the landscaping scheme, provision of additional cycle storage, the provision and marking out of all car parking spaces, contractors working arrangements, protection of coach parking area/parents not to enter the sit at either end of the school day and approval of a school transport plan. Advice would also need to be attached covering the matters raised by the Environment Agency and Transco and setting out further details of what needs to be included in the school transport plan.
- 5.7 However, as the application involves significant development within the Green Belt which would be a departure from the Development Plan, the application would need to be referred to the Secretary of State in accordance with departure procedures before it could be finally determined.

Background material used by the author in compiling this report

Application documents i.e. application form, supporting statement, eight drawings numbered 167/RP/PR/201, 5625/T/01C-02, 5625/T/02C-02, 167/RP/PR/203/B, 167/RP/PR/206, 167/RP/PR/204/C, 167/RP/PR/205/D and 10599/L/901 and traffic report by Wormald Burrows Partnership dated August 2001;

Consultation responses received;

St Albans District Local Plan, adopted 1994;

Parking Provision at New Development : Supplementary Planning Guidance in relation to HCC Structure Plan policy 25, approved December 2000

Report to Environment Cases Sub Committee 15 April 1997 (item 4) on previous applications for new development on this site and retention of mobile accommodation.