

STEVENAGE BOROUGH

**PROPOSED SEVEN - CLASSROOM MODULAR BUILDING AND RELATED
DEVELOPMENT
THE LEYS JMI SCHOOL, RIPON ROAD, STEVENAGE**

Report of the Director of Environment

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Local Member: Reginald Smith

1. Purpose of Report

To consider a planning application for a new modular block containing up to seven classrooms, a separate nursery building and two new hard play areas at the Leys JMI School, Ripon Road, Stevenage (reference 2/526-01).

2. Summary

- 2.1 The Leys JMI School is a two-form entry primary school in north Stevenage. As a result of new housing development at Great Ashby, an overall shortage of primary school places is forecast for the area. In April 2000 it was announced that, as part of the package of measures for dealing with that situation, the Leys JMI School was to be temporarily expanded by one form of entry from 2000/1 or when necessary. In preparation for this expansion an application was made in May 2001 and planning permission subsequently granted for improvements to the site access arrangements so as to provide a one-way system for vehicles through the site, with an extended lay-by for parents to drop off and pick up children and fourteen additional parking spaces for staff. The permission has now been implemented.
- 2.2 In September 2001 an application was received for a modular building containing up to seven classrooms, a separate nursery classroom and associated hard play areas. The supporting statement explained that the development was related to the Great Ashby housing development and that it was needed "to cope with the expected temporary increase in demand for school places in the area". Consultations and publicity were carried out on that basis. A traffic assessment report was received after Christmas 2001.
- 2.3 Stevenage Borough has no objection, nor have any of the statutory undertakers. The Highway Authority has no objection subject to certain conditions, including both an approved school transport plan, implementation of approved access and internal parking arrangements, and a school safety zone to be in place before the proposed development is first occupied. None of the statutory undertakers consulted has raised anything which cannot be dealt with by condition. There has been only one representation from a

member of the public, who has raised a number of concerns about possible environmental and ecological effects, and he may be addressing the Committee about these.

- 2.4 More recently at least two issues have arisen which change the situation. Firstly the proposed buildings, being brick-clad, would in effect be permanent with a fifty to sixty year life. This means that it would be unreasonable to treat them as temporary and only to grant a limited five year permission, as is usual for temporary accommodation. Secondly the school has closed its newly constructed exit and wishes to continue operating with a single point of access/egress for vehicles. In addition the application has been amended, such that the elevation details of the classroom block have changed, the separate nursery classroom building is no longer included and one of the hard play areas is omitted. Although some planting proposals have now been submitted, they relate only to the central block of three classrooms. This is because the remaining budgetary provision for the whole project is now only sufficient for that initial three-classroom phase of the development, and it would be some time, if ever, before the other four classrooms and possibly the hard play areas could be built.
- 2.5 It is, therefore, considered that, although originally uncontentious, the application as it is now constituted should not be determined under officer delegated powers but should be reported to this Committee. It should also be treated as an application for permanent planning permission and in particular account taken of the vehicular access/egress system as it is now operated. This is the main issue now raised by the application, but the report also considers other issues including the design and appearance of the building, the highway implications of the proposed development and the arrangements for pedestrians and vehicles within the site.

3. **Conclusions**

- 3.1 The report concludes that the Director of the Environment should be authorised to grant permanent planning permission for the central block of three classrooms, subject to conditions relating to surface water control measures, the prior approval of details of the covered link, contractors' working arrangements including hours of working, implementation of the landscaping scheme, a school transport plan to be in place before the new development is first occupied (i.e. to have been submitted and approved by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Highway Authority before then), maintenance of pedestrian access into the site from the east at the beginning, middle and end of the school day, implementation of a school safety zone and any associated alterations to access and internal parking layout in accordance with a previously approved scheme before the development is first occupied. Advice would also need to be appended about prior applicant contact with Transco and explaining why planning permission has been granted but is only for three classrooms.

1. Description of the site and proposed development

- 1.1 Background - The Leys JMI is a two-form (2FE) primary school (i.e. 420 pupils) with a separate nursery in north Stevenage.
- 1.2 In 1999-2000 the Local Education Authority (LEA) undertook a review of the provision of primary school places in Stevenage and concluded, in relation to north Stevenage, that there would be a shortfall in the number of places available. This was related to the development of some 2,500 dwellings at Great Ashby in northeast Stevenage (a proposal of the 1986 County Structure Plan) where there was a site reserved for a new primary school. In informal discussions between the LEA and the County Planning Authority on the overall situation, the latter had made it clear that proposals to expand any existing school by 1FE using only the traditional mobile classroom accommodation would be unlikely to be acceptable.
- 1.3 The LEA then took the decision to build a new 2FE primary school on the reserve site at Great Ashby, but at the same time to close another school (the 1.5FE Round Diamond JMI in Mildmay Road, north Stevenage) on its existing site and to relocate it to the new site at Great Ashby. Planning permission for the new 2FE school was granted in November 2001 and has yet to be implemented.
- 1.4 In addition the LEA decided that the Leys JMI, the nearest existing school to Great Ashby, should be expanded temporarily from 2FE to 3FE from 2000/1 or when necessary. Leys JMI considered that this expansion was only acceptable if it was not achieved by means of mobile accommodation. In preparation for the proposed temporary expansion and in advance of any details of the additional classroom and other accommodation required, it was then insisted that proposals for alterations to the school's vehicular access arrangements and parking provision (see paragraph 1.7 below) should be allowed to proceed.
- 1.5 The application site - The Leys JMI School occupies a site of some 2.6 hectares fronting Ripon Road in north Stevenage. It is bounded on three sides by housing development, with the open area of St Nicholas Park to the north. There are pedestrian paths to the houses either side to the east and west, with the path on the eastern side also leading to an underpass beneath Ripon Road and linking to St Nicholas Park. There is no footway outside the site on the north side of Ripon Road other than for a short distance at its western end to just beyond the site entrance.
- 1.6 The school has separate junior and infants buildings; both linked to a two-classroom block built in 1999 to replace an earlier mobile on the site. The original school buildings are of typical 1960s system construction with flat roofs, but the more recent block has brick facing walls and a pitched roof. There is a good boundary hedge around the whole site, as well as some mature trees and the remains of other hedgerows within it. The main site entrance is from Ripon Road, with additional pedestrian access points either side, although for security reasons they are either kept permanently locked or only opened at either end of the school day.
- 1.7 In July 2001 planning permission was granted for changes to the access and parking arrangements to provide an extended lay-by within the site for parents to drop off and pick up children. The number of parking spaces was increased from twenty-three to thirty-seven. Although the permission in terms of construction works has now been

implemented, the site is not operating as intended in that the new vehicular exit point is not in use but is kept locked. This is because of its proximity to the school's relocated crossing patrol (which has subsequently been moved to the west of the school access) and safety concerns about pedestrians trying to walk through the vehicular exit rather than using safe pedestrian routes into the school site.

- 1.8 The planning application - Although first submitted in mid July 2001, the application was not finalised until early September 2001, with a traffic assessment report received after Christmas 2001 and landscaping proposals relating to part of the proposed development in mid February 2002. The application as submitted in September 2001 was for a modular building containing up to seven classrooms, consisting of an initial phase of three central classrooms, followed, if necessary, by one or two subsequent phases of two or four additional classrooms both set forward slightly compared with the centre block. The blocks would have red facing brick walls with hipped red tile roofs to match the adjacent recently built block. The western extension would cut across an existing hedge. The application also included a separate nursery building and three additional hard play areas.
- 1.9 The application did not specify for how long the accommodation might be required, but the supporting statement (and previous discussions with the applicant) made it clear that it was for a temporary expansion of the school related to an expected bulge in numbers during the early years of the Great Ashby development. Access and parking were shown as that resulting from the planning permission granted in July and at that time under construction. Consultations and publicity for the application (see section 2 below) were on that basis.
- 1.10 In February 2002 it became clear that the type of building being proposed had a fifty to sixty year life, and so it became inappropriate to consider any planning permission granted could be for a limited five year period and the building required to be removed in due course. It also emerged that the school had not opened its new vehicular egress due to safety concerns and would prefer to see only one point of access/egress provided to the staff car parking and parents' drop off areas. In addition the application was formally amended to exclude the proposed nursery block and the elevations of the seven classroom block were changed in relation to the fenestration and roofing details. Velux-type windows in the roof rather than ground floor windows have been introduced into the southern elevations and, instead of the separate hipped roofs for each phase of the development, there would be a continuous long pitch for the entire length of the seven classrooms. At the same time it also seems that, much of the designated budget having been used on the access and parking work, there is now insufficient money available for other than the central three classrooms. The position over the additional hard play areas is unclear.

2. **Consultations and publicity**

- 2.1 Consultations were undertaken in September 2001 with Stevenage Borough Council, the Highway Authority and statutory undertakers. Publicity was by means of notices on site and neighbour notification letters sent to those living at twenty-nine addresses around the site.

- 2.2 Stevenage Borough Council has no objection, subject to the development being started within five years.
- 2.3 The County Council as Highway Authority, as it had already made clear in relation to the earlier application for changes to the site access and additional parking, was unable to comment on the current application without a traffic assessment report giving further details of the overall transport situation, both current and future, at the school. The necessary report was submitted in February this year. Having considered it, the Highway Authority recommends that any planning permission should be subject to conditions requiring both a school transport plan to be in place and a school safety zone outside the site to be constructed before the proposed development is first occupied with a further condition requiring pedestrian access into the site from the east to be available at the start, lunch-time period and finish of the school day.
- 2.4 The Highway Authority explains that it is satisfied with the level of staff parking provision, but that the school transport plan is needed because of the distance of parts of the Great Ashby development from the school and the likelihood of parents wanting to drive their children to and from the school. The side pedestrian access is needed by pupils walking across St Nicholas Park from Great Ashby who would otherwise have to make a significant detour via the underpass in order to reach the entrance in Ripon Road. There are speeding and consequent safety problems in Ripon Road outside the school which will need to be addressed through the implementation of a school safety zone. The Highway Authority shares the concerns expressed by the school about the schematic school safety zone proposals included with the applications, but is satisfied that a satisfactory scheme can be developed and that this can be secured through the imposition of a planning condition. The Highway Authority is also satisfied that a satisfactory scheme can be developed to address concerns about possible pedestrian use of the existing vehicular exit and this scheme can also be secured as a planning condition. A simple solution to this concern could involve the installation of a pedestrian guard rail in the verge opposite the exit to direct pedestrians towards the crossing patrol or the existing subway under Ripon Road. At the time of writing this report the school is understood to be considering proposals for closing the vehicle exit and altering internal vehicular access, but this design has not been formally submitted as part of the application.
- 2.5 The statutory undertakers - Two responses have been received and neither has any objection. The Environment Agency asks for surface water control measures to be carried out in accordance with details to be approved. Transco states that, if planning permission is granted, the applicant would need to provide the company with further details under other legislation before starting work as it has plant in the vicinity.
- 2.6 Public representations - One person has made a number of representations about the development and may be addressing the Committee about his concerns. These relate mainly to environmental and ecological effects of the development, including noise and traffic, to the possible loss of trees and wildlife, as well as vandalism, crime and litter. He is also concerned about the visual impact/appearance of the main classroom block, whether it would be of British manufacture, any possible weekend use and how long it might be there.

3. **Planning considerations**

- 3.1 The application site lies within the urban area of Stevenage and is subject to no specific policy or proposals according to 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), 13 (education and training), 22 (reduction of travel need & car usage), 23 (networks & facilities for non-motorised transport & buses) and 25 (car parking);
 - Stevenage District Local Plan (adopted version) - TW1 (sites without notation), TW7 (environmental safeguards), T6 (car parking requirements);
 - Stevenage District Local Plan (emerging) - TW9 (environmental safeguards), TW10 (quality in design), T16 (car parking provision).
- 3.3 The following are identified as the main issues raised by the current application:
- design/appearance of the building;
 - highway implications;
 - on-site arrangements for pedestrians and vehicles;
 - whether any planning permission granted should be permanent or only for a limited period.
- 3.4 Design/appearance of the building - Insofar as the colour of the brick facing walls and roof tiles for the new classroom block would match the recently constructed block nearby rather than the original school buildings, this is acceptable. In the application as now amended, the roofing and fenestration details for the central three classrooms by themselves are also acceptable, but if continued in the same line for two more classrooms either side, this would make for a very uninteresting building with something of the appearance of a long low shed (the original proposals were far more pleasing). Details of the covered link to the existing building are not available and would need to be covered by condition. The landscaping proposals (i.e. narrow beds along the south side of the centre of the block and three trees) are acceptable in principle, but relate only to the central three classrooms and are inadequate in scale for a major development of seven classrooms.
- 3.5 Highway implications - The application, if implemented in its entirety, would enable a fifty per cent increase in the size of the school. Action has already been taken, by the provision of a drop off/pick up facility for parents within the site, to reduce the number of parents' cars stopping on the public highway outside the site. However, this is only part of the answer. As well as a school transport plan with the objective of reducing the overall number of car journeys, a school safety zone is also needed to address the problems which still exist for vehicles and pedestrians in Ripon Road outside the site. A planning condition can be used to secure the provision of a school safety zone agreed by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Highway Authority.
- 3.6 On-site arrangements for pedestrians and vehicles – the Highway Authority is satisfied that a workable solution can be developed to offset concerns relating to pedestrian use of the existing vehicle exit. A simple solution to this concern could involve the installation of a pedestrian guard rail in the verge opposite the exit as part of the school safety zone scheme. The school is being consulted on designs involving the possible

closure of the existing vehicular egress and vehicular routes within the school's parking and drop off areas, but this design has not been formally submitted in support of the current application. A planning condition can be used to ensure that any alterations to the school's access and parking arrangements are incorporated within the design of the required school safety zone scheme and agreed by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Highway Authority.

- 3.7 Temporary or permanent permission - The application, even in its amended form, is for the temporary development of up to seven classrooms. However, the type of building proposed has a fifty to sixty year life (and is similar to that proposed in another current application elsewhere in the County where a permanent permission is being sought). The County Planning Authority normally only grants temporary planning permission for a maximum period of five years, albeit application may subsequently be made and planning permission granted for the building to be retained for another five year period.
- 3.8 In the case of the application under consideration, although said to be required to enable a temporary expansion of the school related to a predicted bulge in the number of primary school age children coming from the Great Ashby development, it is not known for how long that requirement may last; it could be for considerably longer than any initial five year period for which planning permission might be granted. Given this situation, and also the practical improbability of the County Planning Authority ever requiring the removal of the proposed building before the end of its useful life, it is considered that it would be misleading and inappropriate for the Authority in this case to both consider the proposal within the context of a temporary period and grant a time limited permission.
- 3.9 Moreover, given the realities of the financial constraints on this development, the current uncertainty as to whether anything more than three classrooms will ever be needed, the concerns about the overall design in relation to a full seven classroom block and the minimal landscaping proposals which have been submitted, it is concluded that the most appropriate course of action would be to grant permanent planning permission for three classrooms only. This would mean that any proposals for future extensions to the block would then need to be brought forward in a subsequent application and all the issues properly considered at that stage.

4. **Financial implications**

There are none for this Committee

5. **Conclusions**

- 5.1 The additional accommodation is part of a package of proposals designed to ensure the availability of sufficient primary school places to meet the needs of north Stevenage including the Great Ashby development. There is considerable uncertainty surrounding how much accommodation is needed and for how long. The type of building proposed in this application has a fifty to sixty year life. In its amended form the design is acceptable for a three classroom block, but there are reservations about its being extended to seven classrooms. The immediate need and budget available is for just three classrooms.

- 5.2 Amendments have recently been made to access and parking arrangements at the site in preparation for the school's expansion, but are not fully operational. Measures to overcome concerns about pedestrians using the existing vehicular exit can be incorporated into the school safety zone which still has to be designed and which should be in place before the school is expanded. Particularly because of its relationship with the Great Ashby development, a school transport plan is needed to encourage the maximum number of pupil journeys by non-car modes and to avoid any increase in vehicular traffic along Ripon Road to and from the site.
- 5.3 It is, therefore, concluded that planning permission could be granted for a three classroom block as permanent development (i.e. no time limit), subject to conditions relating to surface water control measures, the prior approval of details of the covered link, contractors' working arrangements including hours of working, implementation of the landscaping scheme, a school transport plan to be in place before the new development is first occupied (i.e. to have been submitted and approved by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Highway Authority before then), maintenance of pedestrian access into the site from the east at the beginning, middle and end of the school day, implementation of a school safety zone and any associated alterations to access and internal parking layout in accordance with a previously approved scheme before the development is first occupied. Advice would also need to be appended about prior applicant contact with Transco and explaining why planning permission has been granted but is only for three classrooms.

Background material used by the author in compiling this report

Application documents i.e. application form dated 30 August 2001, supporting statement and the following six drawings numbered 495/A/001/A, 495/SP/05/C (superseding 495/SP/05), 495/A/200 (superseding 495/A/06), 495/A/201 (superseding 489/A/07), 495/L/901 and 495/A/09 (additional drawing) and undated traffic assessment report submitted December 2001; also withdrawn drawing number 495/A/08;

Consultation responses and public representations received;

Hertfordshire County Structure Plan Review 1991-2011, adopted April 1996;

Stevenage District Plan 1990 Review, adopted October 1994;

Stevenage District Plan Second Review 1991-2011, second deposit draft published May 2001.