

NORTH HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT

**PROPOSED SINGLE STOREY CLASSROOM BLOCK, ENCLOSURE OF
CANOPY, ADDITIONAL HARDPLAY AND CAR PARKING AT
FEARNHILL SCHOOL, ICKNIELD WAY, LETCHWORTH**

Report of the Director of Environment

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1. Purpose of Report

To consider planning application ref. 1/1445-02 for a single storey classroom block, enclosure of canopy, additional hardplay and car parking at Fearnhill School, Icknield Way, Letchworth.

2. Summary

- 2.1 Fearnhill School is located within the Green Belt on the western edge of Letchworth. The school is located to the north of the site with playing fields to the south.
- 2.2 On 22nd April 2002, the County Council authorised the publication of a statutory notice concerning the closure of Norton School from 31st August 2002 and the expansion of Fearnhill, The Highfield and Knights Templar Schools.
- 2.3 Hertfordshire School Organisation Committee approved the closure of Norton School on 11 June 2002, and it was agreed that the three remaining schools in that area would be expanded by one additional form of entry from September 2003. Pupils starting their secondary school careers and those commencing GCSE studies from September 2002 have already been located at one of the three remaining schools in order to minimise disruption to their education. Temporary mobile classrooms were located at Fearnhill School in the summer of 2002 to provide accommodation for these additional pupils until such a time as permanent accommodation can be provided.
- 2.4 In September 2002 a planning application was submitted for development at Fearnhill School proposing a single storey classroom block providing eight classrooms, two IT rooms, offices, stores and classrooms. The application also proposes a new hard play area, 25 additional car parking spaces, landscaping works and the enclosure of a canopy overlooking the fields at the rear of the

school. The provision of a new classroom block would allow the removal of the recently introduced mobile classrooms.

- 2.5 North Hertfordshire District Council supports this application for permanent classroom accommodation at Fearnhill School. The Highways Authority does not wish to restrict the grant of planning permission. There have been no objections from the statutory undertakers whose responses have been received so far. No letters have been received from members of the public.
- 2.6 As this application involves major development within the Green Belt, if members are minded to grant planning permission, the application will need to be referred to the Secretary of State in accordance with departure procedures before it can be formally determined.
- 2.7 The main issues raised by this application and considered within the report are Green Belt policy, location and design of the building, traffic and highway implications, car parking provision, visual impact and landscape proposals.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 The report finds that the harm caused to the Green Belt is outweighed by the educational need for the development so exception to Green Belt policy is justified. Nevertheless the application should be referred to the Secretary of State in accordance with departure procedures.
- 3.2 Although the facing material of the new classroom block differs from that of adjacent existing elevations, the design is considered acceptable. The level of car parking proposed is 105 spaces which, although below the County Council's car parking standards, is considered acceptable in this instance. The provision of the landscaping scheme is acceptable subject to certain modifications.
- 3.3 The report concludes that, subject to the Secretary of State not wishing to intervene, the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant planning permission for the proposed development, subject to suitable conditions to include provision of car parking spaces, contractors working arrangements, implementation of landscaping scheme, and the preparation and implementation of a School Travel Plan that is acceptable to the Highways Authority.

1. Background Information

- 1.1 On 22 April 2002, the County Council authorised the publication of a statutory notice concerning the closure of Norton School from 31 August 2002 and the expansion of Fearnhill, The Highfield and Knights Templar Schools. It also resolved to use the capital receipts from the sale of the Norton School site to fund replacement accommodation at the three secondary schools.
- 1.2 Norton School had experienced difficulties over the last few years, and had been identified by Ofsted as requiring special measures. Due to a high turnover of staff, the school was unable to improve its performance. Alternative options to open a new school on the existing site, or for the Church of England to open a school there were considered, but rejected as they would be unable to deliver the educational improvements required within an appropriate timescale.
- 1.3 The Hertfordshire School Organisation Committee approved the closure of Norton School on 11 June 2002. The Committee also agreed that the three remaining schools in the area – Fearnhill, The Highfield and Knights Templar each be expanded by one additional form of entry from September 2003. This planning application relates to development necessary to implement that decision.
- 1.4 In order to minimise the disruption to those children starting their secondary school careers and those commencing GCSE studies, prospective and former Norton School Pupils who are currently in year 7 and year 10 have been relocated to the other three schools as from September 2002. These pupils are currently accommodated in temporary mobile classrooms until such a time as they can be accommodated within permanent extensions. The Norton School will continue to be used during the academic year 2002/3 for other school years.
- 1.5 Two double mobile classroom units were located at Fearnhill School during the summer of 2002, one at the rear of the school building complex and the other adjacent to the north-western boundary of the site. These were constructed to provide temporary accommodation for the additional 88 pupils that joined the school roll from September 2002.

2. Description of site and proposed development

- 2.1 Fearnhill School is situated within the Green Belt on the western edge of Letchworth. The school is located at the northern end of the site with playing fields to the south. Residential properties are located on the north-eastern boundary and a railway line runs along the southern boundary of the site. There are five mobile classroom units on site, two of which were granted permission for this year. Access to the school is from Icknield Way, which lies to the north of the school site. There are currently 80 car parking spaces

available on site. A circulatory access system that separates cars from the bus dropping off points is in place at the school frontage.

- 2.2 The planning application proposes a single storey classroom block of 763m² to be located immediately to the south of the school buildings overlooking the playing field. The accommodation would provide eight classrooms, two IT rooms, offices, stores and toilets. The building would be of a flat roof construction and would be faced with red multi-brickwork and would have olive/grey infill panels and olive window frames. The red multi-brickwork proposed does not match that of the existing adjacent elevations, although recently built elevations to the north of the school site have been constructed of red multi-brickwork. The proposed building would be constructed using a similar grid pattern to that of the existing building.
- 2.3 A new 375m² hard play area is proposed immediately to the west of the proposed extension. The canopy outside the technology area overlooking the playing fields would be enclosed by removing and reusing the existing walling panel.
- 2.4 An additional 25 car parking spaces would be provided, raising the onsite provision from 80 to 105. The additional car parking spaces would be located at the front of the site on areas that are currently grassed, adjacent to the existing car park.
- 2.5 Should planning permission be granted for the development, the two recently introduced mobile classrooms would be removed. The future of the three remaining mobiles will be reviewed before the planning permission for their retention expires in September 2004.
- 2.6 The application includes proposals to landscape the embankment running up from the playing field to the new extension. The area between the existing building and the proposed building would also be landscaped.
- 2.7 The application is accompanied by a report on travel assessment investigations, carried out by Wormald Burrows Partnership, to advise on the potential impact in travel terms of the closure of Norton School. The findings are reported later in the report under 'planning considerations'.

3. Consultations

- 3.1 North Hertfordshire District Council support the application for permanent classroom accommodation at Fearnhill School and hopes that the new development will be completed within the timescale anticipated in the supporting statement submitted with the application, leading to the eventual removal of all mobile classroom units from the site.
- 3.2 Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation have no objection to the proposal but wish to note that as the classroom is in a prominent location on

the top of a hill the opportunity should be taken to increase the amount of tree planting along the west side of the existing building.

- 3.3 The County Council Highways Authority does not wish to restrict the grant of permission.
- 3.4 Landscape consider the development is acceptable on landscape grounds on condition that some additional tree planting is undertaken for the purposes of visual amenity and to ensure minimum impact from the development on the Green Belt. Concern is raised about the appropriateness of the landscape treatment.
- 3.5 Sport England has no objection to the proposal.
- 3.6 Transco confirm that the company has plant in the vicinity, which may be affected by the proposal.
- 3.7 A total of 48 properties were consulted on the application. No letters objecting or supporting the application have been received.

4. Planning Considerations

- 4.1 The application site lies within the Green Belt as defined on the proposal map of the adopted district plan. The relevant development plan policies are:
 - County Structure Plan – policies 1 (Sustainable Development), 5 (Green Belt), 13 (Education & Training), 22 (Reduction of travel need & car usage), 23 (Networks and facilities for non-motorised transport & buses) and 25 (car parking).
 - North Hertfordshire District Local Plan – policies 2 (Green Belt), 16 (Areas of Archaeological Significance and other Archaeological Areas), 21 (Landscape and Open Space Patterns in Towns).
- 4.2 The principal issues to be taken into account in determining this application are:-
 - development within the Green Belt, including the educational need to accommodate additional pupils from the closure of Norton School;
 - impact of additional traffic movements on the highway network, together with car and cycle parking provision;
 - location and visual impact of the building;
 - design;
 - landscaping.

4.3 Green Belt

School buildings, even on an existing school site, are not included within the categories of development regarded as appropriate within the Green Belt. New buildings, therefore, are not acceptable unless any harm to the Green Belt is outweighed by other considerations.

4.4 The new one storey block would extend the built-up area of the site, although it would be lower than the existing two storey block located to its north-east. The proposed extension would be located on the edge of the playing field, on land which slopes downwards towards the main pitches area to the south of the school building. The sloping nature of the land makes it impractical for pitch sports and Sport England concur with this view.

4.5 The closure of Norton School, due to its consistent failure to meet Ofsted standards, results in the need to provide additional school places at Fearnhill School. The proposal has been made with the educational objective that all pupils within Letchworth have equal access to good quality education and the future success of the three remaining schools fundamentally depends on this factor.

4.6 To ensure that the three schools have equal status they must be of a similar size. The applicant has indicated that to expand two of the schools to 7 FE and to leave one at 5 FE would send the wrong signals to both parents and pupils and as such would not achieve the overall objective of good quality education throughout the town. The applicant considers that the perception would be that one school is more worthy than another due to higher levels of investment thereby attracting pupils with higher academic potential.

4.7 In these circumstances it is considered that the harm which the development would cause to the Green Belt is outweighed by the school and the LEA's need for the additional accommodation.

4.8 Highway Implications

At present the traffic management at Fearnhill School experiences very few problems. The school has a very effective circulatory access system that separates cars from the bus dropping off points, providing safe access for pupils into school. Children from the immediate area generally walk. However, those from further afield generally arrive by bus or car. Few pupils would appear to cycle to school, despite suitable cycle storage facilities within the site. The local network experiences heavy traffic, particularly along Icknield Way; however, the only significant congestion problems occur at the junction with Bridge Road and Cowslip Hill.

4.9 Following total reallocation, 160 pupils from Norton School will be travelling to Fearnhill. The study carried out by Wormald Burrows Partnership states that the number of pupils expected to walk or cycle amounts to 58, with 102 travelling by car or bus. This would result in an estimated 21 to 41 additional

cars arriving at Fearnhill School. With 160 pupils allocated to Fearnhill School the resulting staff increase will be in the region of 13.

- 4.10 The existing parking provision within the site is below the maximum permitted standards of approximately 160 and staff and visitor car parking facilities at the school are often over capacity, although generally sufficient to prevent overspill onto the local highway network. As staff commonly park on verges around the school, formalisation of parking areas will provide additional spaces to accommodate the increase. The consultant's report suggests that additional parking provided for staff and sixth formers would 'free up' the main car park for visitors and short term parking. 25 additional car parking spaces are included in the proposal which would raise the onsite provision from 80 to 105 and whilst this is below maximum permitted standards it is considered acceptable. The Supplementary Planning Guidance 'Car Parking Provision at New Development' states that maximum standards should be used as a starting point for progressive reductions in on-site provision.
- 4.11 The supporting statement refers to there being storage facilities for 105 cycles at present, 84 of which are under cover. There are currently more than 30 spaces freely available each day therefore there are no proposals to increase provision at this time. However, regular review of the School Travel Plan will identify and address any need for further provision in the future.
- 4.12 Pedestrian and cycle safety has recently been improved within the vicinity of the site by the implementation of a 'Safer Routes to School' scheme. This scheme has led to the installation of road markings, signage and pedestrian barriers at the school entrance to slow traffic and protect pedestrians. To encourage sustainable travel modes, the scheme has also led to the provision of bus shelters to encourage bus usage and better security for cycle storage areas.
- 4.13 The School is currently working on the preparation of a School Travel Plan, which should be completed by January 2003. The establishment of a formal School Travel Plan will allow regular monitoring to take place by means of regular travel questionnaires and surveys. Trends should therefore be picked up and potential problems identified. School Travel Plans will be required for all three schools which are subject to expansion, and they must interact with each other to achieve sustainability of Letchworth and Baldock Secondary Schools as a whole, although each school will need to set its own targets. The traffic consultant's report that was submitted with this application states that School Travel Plans should be strictly enforced and will need to be capable of capping any growth in car usage for the foreseeable future.
- 4.14 Should permission be granted, a condition should be imposed to ensure that the contractors working arrangements do not cause any problems for the public highway and that delivery times are limited during the construction phase of the development. The usual times for this 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 the site within the period half an hour either side of the start and finish of the school day. Such a restriction would also help to protect the residential amenity of those living adjacent to the school's access and egress points.

4.15 Location and Visual Impact

The proposed new single storey classroom block would be located immediately to the south of the existing school building on the edge of the school playing field which slopes from north to south. The sloping nature of the land where the building would be located makes it impractical for use as a sports pitch, therefore it is not considered that the development would have an adverse effect upon playing field provision within the school.

4.16 The building is located within a prominent location on the top of a hill and is visible, although from some distance, from properties located along the eastern boundary of the site. As the proposed building will be lower in height than the existing two storey classroom block it is not considered to have a significant adverse impact on the residential amenity of any nearby houses. Although the school boundary is well screened with trees, additional tree planting along the western boundary of the site would help mitigate any long distance visual intrusion from Stotfold Road and surrounding areas.

4.17 Design

The proposed classroom block would be a single storey flat roofed building constructed using red multi-brickwork, olive/grey infill panels and olive window frames. The adjacent classroom blocks are faced in white and incorporate olive infill panels and window frames. The new classroom block would be constructed using a 'grid pattern' to match the style found on the existing elevations. The proposed block would therefore provide a contrast to the existing elevations. It is considered that the red multi-brickwork would enhance the visual amenity of the site as the existing elevations are rather drab in appearance. The overall effect would be one of continuity between the new and the old, yet at the same time with a distinction towards the use of more modern materials. The red multi-brickwork would not be completely out of keeping with the school as recently constructed buildings towards the front of the school have been constructed using this facing brick, and it is therefore considered acceptable.

4.18 Landscape

As the proposed block would be located on a slope it is proposed to reinstate grass on the bank located to the south of the building and plant shrub beds around the base of the building. Shrub planting in this location, at the top of a well drained bank, may well fail due to dry conditions therefore the area should remain fully grassed or an irrigation system should be installed during the establishing period.

4.19 The area between the existing school building and the new classroom block would see the planting of shrub beds, seven trees and the provision of

hardwood benches and brick paved areas. Shrub planting in this area may well come under pressure from trampling therefore they should be protected with a fence. Landscape advice received suggests that shrub planting under the eaves on a north-facing wall is inadvisable, therefore it is recommended that a 600mm wide access strip should be provided in this position.

- 4.20 Additional tree planting is suggested along the western boundary of the site to mitigate against visual intrusion that may be had from long distance views of the site.
- 4.21 Overall the development is acceptable in landscape terms subject to additional tree planting being undertaken for the purposes of visual amenity and to ensure minimum impact from the development on the Green Belt.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 Fearnhill School is located on the western side of Letchworth and is situated within the Green Belt in the adopted District Local Plan. Following the closure of Norton School the Local Education Authority has decided to expand the three remaining schools in the area, Fearnhill being one. The proposed development would extend the built up part of the site. However, it is considered that this harm to the green belt is outweighed by the school's need for the accommodation. As such the special circumstances required to justify the setting aside of Green Belt policy has been shown to exist in this instance.
- 5.2 The external facing of the proposed new block would provide a certain contrast to the existing adjacent classroom blocks in that it would be faced with red multi-brickwork. Its design and appearance is considered acceptable in this instance as it is considered that the new block would enhance the appearance of the rear of the site, which is currently rather drab. The new facing would not be completely out of keeping as recently constructed buildings at the front of the school site have been constructed of red multi-brickwork.
- 5.3 An additional 25 car parking spaces are proposed in this application which would bring the on-site provision to 105, which although below the County Council's car parking standards, is considered acceptable in this instance. The landscape scheme is considered satisfactory subject to certain slight amendments.
- 5.4 The report concludes that planning permission should be granted. Permission would need to be subject to conditions including implementation of landscaping scheme, provision of car parking spaces, contractors working arrangements, and the preparation and implementation of a School Travel Plan that is acceptable to the Highways Authority.
- 5.5 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.

6. Financial implications

6.1 There are none for this committee.

Background information used by the author in compiling this report

Planning application reference 1/1445-02

Consultation responses and representations received in response to planning application ref. 1/1445-02

Hertfordshire County Structure Plan Review 1991-2011, adopted April 1998

North Hertfordshire Local Plan, adopted April 1996

Supplementary Planning Guidance: Parking Provision at New Development.