

Part I
Item No:

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL
PLANNING CONTROL COMMITTEE –9 JUNE 2005
REPORT OF THE CHIEF PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER

APPLICATION NO: S6/2004/1882/FP

ERECTION OF A NEW INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY (ICT)
BUILDING AT CHANCELLOR'S SCHOOL, PINE GROVE, BROOKMANS PARK

APPLICANT: THE BOARD OF GOVERNORS, CHANCELLOR'S SCHOOL

(Brookmans Park & Little Heath)

1 Site Description

- 1.1 The 6.9ha application site comprises the Chancellor's School buildings and grounds. Chancellor's School is a co-educational secondary school, located to the west of Pine Grove. The school buildings, which comprise a mix of three, two and single storey structures, are situated in the north eastern corner of the site, while the remainder of the land comprises school playing fields and open land.
- 1.2 The School is located to the west of residential properties fronting Pine Grove, served by an access which runs between No.s 61 and 63. The northern boundary of the site is delineated by The Drive, an unmetalled track, and further to the north lies Home Farm and Ash Close, a cul-de-sac of six detached dwellings. The western boundary is delineated by Golf Club Road, which intersects with the junction between Georges Wood Road and Brookmans Avenue to the south of the school site. The northern and western boundaries of the school are delineated by hedges. To the west of the School is Brookmans Park Golf Club and to the south east is Georges Wood, which is a County Wildlife site.
- 1.3 The School site is located within the Green Belt, outside the boundaries of the specified settlement of Brookmans Park that is excluded from the Green Belt.

2 The Proposal

- 2.1 Permission is sought for the erection of a new building, to be used as an Information and Communications Technology (ICT) block, situated at the western end of the collection of school buildings, south of The Drive. The new building would provide two ICT classrooms, accommodating up to 30 students each; a smaller tutorial room, resource area, network and server rooms.
- 2.2 The building would be irregularly shaped, measuring up to 17.05m wide and up to 17.5m deep. Part of the building is to be flat roofed having a height of 3.7m with the remainder having a mono pitched roof to a maximum height of 5.3m. The overall floorspace of the building is approximately 250 square metres. It is proposed to

construct the building with buff facing brickwork to match the existing buildings at the site. The roof would be of a standing seam or flat profile metal in grey or silver.

- 2.3 The application also proposes a profile metal roofed canopy between the new building and the existing computer block, providing a covered way, enclosing an area of approximately 70 square metres.
- 2.4 The agents for the development have provided supporting information with the application, which states, in summary:
 1. The extension is intended to upgrade and improve the existing facilities, not to increase the current school population. It is part of the School's development plans following the achievement of Specialist Status for Mathematics and Computing.
 2. The site, even though it is in the Green Belt, is adjacent to an existing built-up residential area.
 3. The size of the proposed new building is relatively small and is unlikely to have a detrimental effect on the character of the landscape.
 4. The proposal will not impact on the school playing fields. No trees will be affected.
 5. The property immediately adjacent to the new ICT block is a golf club. There are few residential buildings in close proximity to the block, so it should not have any detrimental impacts upon residential amenity.
- 2.5 The School has also submitted a letter, which specifically refers to the way in which the new ICT block would relate to pupil and staff numbers, confirming that there will be no increase in pupil or staff numbers and provides information on other activities, which take place at the school both within and outside the school day. A copy of the letter is attached at Appendix A.

3 Planning History

- 3.1 Permission granted under ref S6/0786/1994/FP on 15 December 1994 for the erection of single storey building to provide 4 new classrooms.
- 3.2 Permission granted under ref S6/0205/1995/FP on 11 May 1995 for the erection of single storey building to provide 4 new classrooms (revision of S6/1994/0786/FP)
- 3.3 Permission granted under ref S6/0652/1997/FP on 10 November 1997 extensions to provide new gymnasium, music/drama classrooms and associated storage and circulation space.
- 3.4 Permission granted under ref S6/0981/2001/FP on 19 July 2001 for erection of new main entrance and reception area to existing school.
- 3.5 Permission granted under ref S6/1570/2002/FP on 13 January 2003 for installation of fire escape to block E.

4 Planning Policy

- 4.1 Hertfordshire Structure Plan Review 1991 – 2011

Policy 5 – Green Belt

Policy 13 – Education and Training

4.2 Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005

D1 – Quality of Design

D2 – Character and Context

Policy RA1 – Development in the Green Belt

Policy CLT8 - New and Extended Educational Facilities.

Policy CLT7 – Community Use of Education Facilities

Supplementary Design Guidance, February 2005.

Supplementary Planning Guidance – Car Parking Standards.

5 **Representations Received**

5.1 The application has been publicised by the direct notification of neighbouring properties, site notice and press notice as a departure from the development plan. In response, letters have been received from 15 residents of Pine Grove and The Drive objecting to the proposal for the following reasons:

1. The application forms have not been completed correctly and the information on them regarding pupil intake, staff numbers and expansion of activity outside the normal school day contradicts information on the school's website about development plans following the School achieving the status as a Specialist College in Mathematics and Computing in 2003.

2. The application forms state that the school has 60 parking spaces on site, but also says that there are 95 staff in total during the course of the school day. It does not state whether these are full or part-time and how many will be on site at any one time. There is a shortfall of 35 parking spaces in that statement. These cars are being parked in Pine Grove and at the approach to the school. Sixth form students, who are able to drive, also park either on site or in Pine Grove. This application will exacerbate an already congested situation and the School is reluctant to properly address the concerns of nearby residents.

3. Worsening of highway safety and traffic problems. Pine Grove was originally a quiet residential road and at peak times is now carrying high volumes of both private and commercial traffic. At times the traffic is at a standstill, which must have implications for emergency vehicles.

4. Residents often have to wait 10 – 15 minutes to either access or exit their own properties due to the traffic congestion.

5. Parking problems exist in and around the school and congestion is not confined to just dropping off and collection times of the school day. Increased use of staff and pupil vehicles at the school has meant that there is insufficient parking within the school grounds resulting in vehicles associated with the school being parked in Pine Grove. There has been a general increase in traffic both in and out of traditional school hours, including weekends on occasion.

6. Site lies within the Green Belt.

7. The application particulars state that the new ICT block is to simply upgrade existing facilities and to meet the School's current shortfall in accommodation and as a result it is not expected to result in additional pupil intake. However, the School's website states that evening classes in IT skills will be offered to the wider community which will create a need for car parking and encourage vehicular activity outside the school day. There is also reference to setting up clinics and a drop-in facility for parents and pupils and continuing work with a family of schools, including four primaries and one secondary which could also generate additional activity and vehicle movements.

8. Need for the new ICT block questioned. The school received permission to build a drama and music block and additional gym facility in 1997 in order to become a centre of excellence for sport and drama, now it is for mathematics and computing.

5.2 Hertfordshire County Council – Highways – comment as follows: 'Chancellor's School has adequately addressed all Hertfordshire Highways concerns with regards to the above application (in the letter attached as Appendix A). Hertfordshire Highways concludes that the new ICT building would not generate any additional traffic or pupils, as it is simply an attempt to make up for a severe shortfall in accommodation for the school. Furthermore, as the proposed building would not generate more pupils, the existing parking arrangement for both students and staff members are considered acceptable. The extent to which the school makes its facilities available to other schools and the community would also remain as is. Therefore, as a result of the above, Hertfordshire Highways would not want to restrict the grant of permission'.

5.3 Welwyn Hatfield Access Group– comments that the scheme should comply with adopted plan standards and criteria, Building Regulations Part M and other British Standards relating to the design of buildings and the needs of people with disabilities and emergency egress.

5.4 North Mymms Parish Council make the following comment: "Whilst we do not object to this application, we wish to draw attention to the fact that the continuing development of the school is creating parking problems in the evening as well as school run times".

6 Discussion

6.1 The determining issues in this case relate to whether the proposed building is acceptable, having regard to Green Belt policy and, if not, whether there are any very special circumstances that justify an exception to Green Belt policy; whether the development can be accommodated on the site without harming the character and appearance of the Green Belt or locality generally; whether it would harm the amenity of the occupiers of neighbouring properties and whether it would be acceptable in terms of highway safety and car parking.

Green Belt and Very Special Circumstances

6.2 The application site lies within the Green Belt wherein National, Structure and Local Plan policies seek to resist development other than that required for agriculture, forestry or mineral extraction or essential small scale facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation, or uses which preserve the openness of the Green Belt. The new build ICT block is not required in connection with any of the limited exceptions to the presumption against development in the Green Belt and it therefore, constitutes inappropriate development and is thereby contrary to PPG2: 'Green Belts' and the relevant Structure Plan and District Plan policies. It is therefore, necessary to

consider whether there are any very special circumstances of sufficient weight to overcome the presumption against inappropriate development in the Green Belt.

- 6.3 The applicants' agent has put forward a case for very special circumstances based upon the need for the extension to enhance and upgrade existing school facilities as part of achieving and maintaining the award of specialist status for mathematics and computing, the relatively minor nature of the development as part of the overall amount of built form on the site, the small scale single storey nature of the building and its location with the existing buildings on the site and overall limited visual impact on the openness of the Green Belt and general character of the locality. I concur with this argument and accept that this does constitute very special circumstances to justify a departure from the development plan.

Impact upon the character and appearance of the locality

- 6.4 The new ICT building and canopy link to an existing computer building are single storey with a maximum height of 5.3m, located against a backdrop of existing buildings in the northern part of the site, adjacent to The Drive. The design and external appearance of the building is in keeping with the other school buildings on the site. No existing landscape features or school playing field space would be lost as a result of the proposals. There are limited views of this part of the site from Golf Club Road and The Drive. The visual impact of the new works on the character and appearance of the locality is not significant and the design and external appearance of the building and canopy are considered to be acceptable. I am satisfied that there would be no adverse impact upon the character of the Green Belt or locality generally as a result of the proposals.

Impact upon the residential amenity of adjoining occupiers

- 6.5 There would be no adverse effect on the amenity of residential occupiers in terms of loss of privacy, sunlight and daylight or overbearing effect as the nearest residential properties are in Ash Close and Home Farm and these are situated at least 70 metres from the nearest point of the new building. Residents of properties on Pine Grove and The Drive would not have a view of the new building due to the intervening presence of the existing buildings.

Impact upon highway safety and car parking

- 6.6 It is noted that the main concerns from the majority of neighbouring residents who objected to the proposals relate to traffic generation, highway safety and car parking considerations. Policy CLT8 of the District Plan sets out the criteria against which new and extended education facilities will be assessed. Some of those criteria relate specifically to car parking provision; travel patterns including shared journeys and cycling and impact on highway safety.
- 6.7 The comments of Hertfordshire Highways confirm that they have no objections to the scheme based upon the information supplied by both the School and their agents. I consider that, given the position of Hertfordshire Highways and as the proposals are intended to upgrade existing facilities and not to provide capacity for additional pupils and staff, it will be difficult to substantiate a reason for refusal of planning permission based upon this proposal giving rise to additional traffic generation and car parking requirements, leading to conditions prejudicial to the free and safe flow of traffic on the local highway.
- 6.8 I understand the concerns of local residents that, as the school has evolved over time and patterns of behaviour regarding the journey to school have changed resulting in

more pupils and staff travelling by private car, the problems of vehicle movements and traffic generation at either end of the school day have worsened. This is exacerbated by the narrow approach to the main entrance of Chancellor's School. However, this can only be a material consideration for planning applications where the development is likely to generate additional traffic generation in its own right. This is not the case with the current proposal, based upon the information supplied with the application.

6.9 Similarly with regard to parking provision, it is considered that as the extension is to improve existing facilities rather than to expand pupil numbers, it is not appropriate to apply the standards set out in the Council's supplementary parking guidelines. In any event these are calculated on the basis of pupil numbers, which are not altering, from the information I have been given, rather than in relation to the creation of additional floor space. It does appear from the application form that there may be an existing shortfall with 60 spaces being provided on site but 95 staff members at the school on a typical day. The Headteacher of the School confirms that he has put in place measures to provide the parking shortfall on other areas within the school grounds, outside the designated parking areas. In any event, if the new development does not generate a parking requirement of its own, it would not be appropriate to seek to use this as an opportunity to remedy an historic situation.

6.10 It is noted that details posted on the School's website do make reference to wider community use of the ICT facilities. It is a practice common to many schools and education establishments to allow dual use of education and sports facilities outside school hours and during the school holidays and is encouraged by Policy CLT7 of the District Plan provided any dual community or leisure activity is ancillary to the main use of the facility for education; does not interfere with the delivery of the education service and has no harmful impact upon the character of the surrounding area or amenities of nearby residential properties or other uses. In this case, such wider community use is intended to take place outside the normal school day or during the school holidays and would be unlikely to generate more traffic than could be accommodated within the School's existing parking facilities. In some cases the school offers its expertise to other schools in its family of schools by taking its specialist skills directly into these schools. The School have confirmed that two major events take place within the academic year (Open Evening in October and Exhibition Evening in July), which generate large amounts of traffic. However, on those two occasions the School alert local residents in advance and allow parking on the school field. These occasions are not specifically affected by the current proposal. Therefore, even where additional use of the ICT facility is intended, this will take place outside normal school hours and will be unlikely to give rise to a level of traffic generation and car parking requirements to justify a refusal of planning permission on this basis.

7 Conclusion

7.1 I have carefully considered the argument put forward by the applicant to justify the development proposed, which would normally be considered inappropriate in the Green Belt. I concur that the need for the extension to enhance and upgrade existing school facilities as part of achieving and maintaining the award of specialist status for mathematics and computing, the relatively minor nature of the development as part of the overall amount of built form on the site, the small scale single storey nature of the building and its location with the existing buildings on the site and overall limited visual impact on the openness of the Green Belt and general character of the locality constitutes very special circumstances which are sufficient to outweigh the limited harmful impact that an additional amount of new building would cause to the Green Belt. I am satisfied that the design and external appearance of the building and

canopy is in keeping with the locality, would not have an adverse impact on the character and appearance of the locality or amenity of neighbouring residents and would not give rise to an additional parking requirement or conditions prejudicial to highway safety.

- 7.2 The proposal thereby accords with Policies 5 and 13 of the Hertfordshire Structure Plan and Policies RA1, D1, D2, CLT7 and CLT8 of the District Plan; the Supplementary Design Guidance and the Supplementary Planning Guidance - Parking Standards.

8. Recommendation

- 8.1 I recommend that application S6/2004/1882/FP be granted subject to referral to the First Secretary of State as a departure from the Development Plan the following conditions:

1. SC01 – Time limit
2. SC19 – Materials
3. SC26 – Setting out
4. SC10 – Landscaping – tree protection after each ‘tree’ insert ‘and hedge’.

- 8.2 The reason for the grant of planning permission will be non-standard:

It is considered that the proposed development, by reason of the case made for the new building, constitutes very special circumstances, that justifies a departure to established Green Belt policy, does not have an unacceptably harmful visual impact on the character and appearance of the Green Belt, landscape, rural character of the area in which it is located or residential amenity as:

- the development proposed has a limited visual impact on the openness of the Green Belt, landscape and rural character of the site, is acceptable in terms of scale, form and design and is in keeping with the character and appearance of the locality and does not result in unacceptable overlooking or loss of privacy and does not have any unacceptably dominating impact with regard to neighbouring uses nor does it prejudice highway safety and parking at the site.

Chris Conway, Chief Planning and Environmental Health Officer

Date 25 May 2005

