

Report to District Development Control Committee



**Epping Forest
District Council**

Report reference:

Date of meeting: 27 July 2005

Subject: St Johns School, Epping: Planning Application EPF/1400/04

Officer contact for further information: Barry Land

Committee Secretary: Simon Hill

Recommendations/Decisions Required:

Following responses from the applicants, to further consider the application for the erection of a new, 6 Form Entry, secondary school, residential development and open amenity space on the site of St Johns School, Epping

Report:

Background

1. This application was reported to the meeting of this committee last month when consideration was deferred so that officers could express the committee's concerns to the applicants and seek improvements to the traffic/highway related matters and a better package in relation to the use of Green Belt land and the affordable housing percentage.
2. The proposals at that time was for the erection of 4 hectares of housing, 1.44 hectares of which would have been on land designated as Green Belt. Residential development in the Green Belt is inappropriate and contrary to established policy. The affordable housing element being offered was 10% of the total number of dwellings, rather than the 30% required by the Council's adopted policy. The highway works proposed indicated a new school access in Bury Lane available for staff and contract buses but not for pupils on foot or being brought by car and the closing of Lower Bury Lane to through traffic.
3. The proposals are described in full and the issues fully explained in the attached copy of the original report (Appendix 1).
4. The committee expressed concern about the amount of Green Belt land being used for housing, the low percentage of affordable housing but also the consequences on the extent of housing in the Green Belt if affordable housing were to be increased, and certain traffic related matters that resulted in concerns about safety and inconvenience.

Revised Proposals

5. Officers have met with the applicants and certain revisions have been made to the scheme:

- (a) the extent of the housing has been reduced by 0.33 of a hectare to 3.67 hectares with a consequent increase in the area of public open space to be provided to 1.77 hectares;
- (b) the affordable housing has remained at 10% but the applicants have agreed to provide a sum of £100,000 to the District Council to be used for financing affordable housing provision elsewhere in the district; and
- (c) a revision to the traffic related elements by providing a drop-off point within the site as part of the overall access/car park management strategy.

Planning Issues

Green Belt

- 6. The reduction of the housing element to 3.67 hectares still results in housing extending just over 1 hectare beyond the Green Belt boundary. However, it is important to note how the figure of 3.67 hectare is derived. The Green Belt boundary was drawn tightly around the extent of the school buildings in the late 1980s. Today, there are other hardsurfaced areas - playgrounds and tennis courts – that extend beyond this tightly drawn Green Belt boundary. The extent of the currently developed school site is 3.67 hectares and the proposed housing area would be equivalent to that.
- 7. The applicant argues therefore that any encroachment beyond the Green Belt boundary is equivalent to the previously developed land at the site (commonly referred to as 'brownfield') and does not encroach into previously undeveloped Green Belt.
- 8. The committee may feel that this reduction, although relatively small in itself, is significant because of the extent of the currently developed site and is sufficient to ease their concern over encroaching into the Green Belt.
- 9. The area of public open space has, as a consequence, been increased to 1.77 hectares as further mitigation for developing beyond the designated Green Belt boundary.

Affordable Housing

- 10. The offer of a commuted sum for affordable housing is less desirable than achieving the affordable housing on site, particularly if the site and its surroundings are capable of supporting such housing, which is the case being on the edge of a town with all necessary services. Nevertheless, there is clearly concern that more affordable housing would have led to further encroachment into the Green Belt and that less affordable housing would not have met the Council's policy nor its aspirations in this regard.
- 11. The provision of 10% affordable housing is therefore the minimum that should be required and the commuted sum is of benefit to the provision of more elsewhere in the future. The views of the Head of Housing Services on this offer will be reported orally to the committee.

Traffic Related Matters

12. The applicants are aware that their policy of not encouraging parents to bring children to school by car was not regarded as realistic by the committee and have confirmed that a drop-off point will be provided within the site and submitted as a part of their overall access/car park management strategy. The purpose of this revision is to address safety fears, avoiding conflict between pedestrians and the unmanaged arrival and departure of parents' vehicles, particularly in Lower Bury Lane.
13. At the time of completing this report, details of the drop-off arrangements have yet to be submitted and will be reported orally at the meeting, together with comments on the revisions from the Highway Authority.
14. It is probably true to say however that these revisions, though addressing safety fears, do not change the overall pattern of vehicle movements which will still lead to more vehicles using the Bury Lane/High Road mini-roundabout, which in turn may result in increased delay and inconvenience at this junction during the morning peak hour.
15. However, it must also be emphasised that the new school will not increase traffic in the locality as a whole. There are no plans to increase pupil or staff numbers and the number of vehicles coming and going from the school is not likely to increase. Indeed, part of the purpose of this redevelopment is to build on the academic improvements already achieved so that the school becomes the first choice of more local families. The vast majority of pupils walk to school permeating through the adjacent residential areas and with less children being driven out of Epping to other schools and more walking to their new, local school, school trips in the locality as a whole could fall.

Conclusions

16. The revisions to the proposals are not large-scale in themselves. However, the applicants argue that they are significant, addressing the heart of the concerns previously raised and the committee may feel that they are sufficient to set aside their previous objections.
17. Should the committee be minded to grant permission, a list of conditions were appended to the previous report and terms of the necessary section 106 agreement were listed in paragraph 55 of that report, further supplemented by a commuted sum for affordable housing and any additional works required for the drop-off point. The committee are reminded however that any resolution to grant needs to be referred to GO-East for their consideration.