

School unveils outline Plans – Comments invited

July 2017

Introduction

After a long wait, the potential secondary school proposer HSET (the Trust) has started to reveal plans for a potential Batford Farm development. In practice HSET is one of the school promotion group. Other members are ESFA (Education & Skills Funding Agency, successor to EFA) and Hertfordshire County Council (HCC). HCC's role seems to have progressively changed from no involvement, to land provider, to (now) full development partner.

With limited notice, leaflets advertising exhibitions began to be delivered in late June. Exhibitions began on Monday 10th July with more scheduled for Thursday 13th (Batford Memorial Hall), Wednesday 19th (Wheathampstead Memorial Hall) and Thursday 20th (Redbourn Village Hall). Each event runs from 3.00pm to 8.30pm. Exhibition material was initially to be made available on the Trust's website for one week after the final exhibition. This now appears to be extended to 2 weeks (to 3rd August).

If you attend – and we encourage you to do so – you will receive a questionnaire that, like the website, advises you that you are part of a consultation.

So what is being asked? Two formal consultations are due under the Academies Act and Planning Regulations. ***This exercise is neither of these.*** When questioned, the Trust stated is seeking views which will be used as part of a Statement of Community Involvement to accompany a formal Planning Application. This Planning Application is expected to be lodged in September this year with Hertfordshire County Council (who has just openly declared their direct interest above) as Planning Authority.

Exhibitions

The Exhibition subject is the emerging school (now called the Katherine Warrington School) plans. It is meant to summarise work done so far and outline remaining work ahead of a Planning Application. Clearly a lot of effort has gone into what the school should contain for education purposes and you can live with a bit of PR gloss on the history. However, from the third (of 9) exhibition boards you find that much of the work is, at best, formative.

Board 3 identifies Kier Construction as the lead contractor, responsible for staging the exhibitions. From Board 3, the displays cover every aspect of how the potential development will affect the local and wider community. The areas with limited or no information include Green Belt impact; heritage impact, flood and surface water impact, landscape impact, visual impact and perhaps most critically traffic and transport impact.

On traffic and transport, a later display board says a TA (transport assessment) will take place, with scope agreed with Hertfordshire County Council (again) and a School Travel Plan will be submitted with the final application. Meanwhile, without any indication of where pupils will come from (see RSRP's recent article for indications of this) there are only site plans to indicate the thought process so far. Those plans show separate entrance/exit, both

directly from the Lower Luton Road (on the slope east of the Common Lane roundabout). A 79-space car park is expected to provide all parking including drop off.

Alignment of Lower Luton Road at the Common Lane junction appears to have changed, removing the roundabout. The road line appears to be moved towards the Farm fields to allow a footpath/cycle path to be established on the south side. There is a new pedestrian crossing part way up the hill. No information is available about any other changes in the surrounding area e.g. other Lower Luton Road pinch points, improved pathways from Wheathampstead, Station Road bridge, etc.

Analysis

RSRP's initial view is that seeking views and public opinion at this stage is premature. Work undertaken so far is insufficient for local residents to draw conclusions. It is pointless when no tangible proposals are on the table. The same applies to landscape where visitors are left to discover that large sections of the fields would be dug out and transported to make highly visible plateaus for sports pitches. These plateaus are so much higher than the base level that they require winding hillside paths to reach them. There are no visualisations of the transformed landscape that could help residents assess the impact on their perspective of the area. *If you want to express any concerns, you should visit the exhibitions.*

The questionnaire: When you visit you will be given a questionnaire which has three main sections for written comments. Q1 starts with "if you support ... what do you like about the emerging plans", Q2 "if you have any concerns or do not support..." while Q3 asks for any ideas to improve. None of these addresses the lack of work undertaken in key areas affecting residents.

Your answer on any aspect you think is good may lead to your opinion being counted as supporting the school at HCC's choice of site. You may wish to qualify your answer (by clearly stating that aspects you like do not mean you support every aspect or the site choice). You can put more comments in the 'Any other comments' box on the back of the questionnaire. If you do not consider sufficient work has been done on any aspect of the exhibited work please make this point and state that you consider this exercise cannot be taken as a consultation as it does not contain sufficient information to consult on.

You may also care to ask about or comment on the lack of consultation on the site choice/location and how it serves the communities in the area.

Moving Forward

RSRP will analyse material that is put into the public domain and continue to provide relevant evidence-based work for residents to consider. Our latest analysis of school place demand (now based on over a decade of data) is available both on our web site and Facebook, along with our latest newsletter. For those who have noticed activity in the fields this week we understand this is a blanket archaeological assessment being undertaken as part of site analysis (again not available for the exhibitions). We are not aware if it will include any focus on previously identified areas of potential archaeological interest.