



# PRESS RELEASE

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HERTS COUNTY COUNCIL FAILS LOCAL RESIDENTS - AGAIN



Despite a history of numerous errors, omissions, inconsistencies and other problems inherent in both the proposal and project, as expected Herts County Council (HCC) approved their own planning application at a special Development Control Panel convened today, 19<sup>th</sup> February 2018. While a small group of residents may take a measure of relief from the meeting, many more across Hertfordshire are expressing disbelief and dismay. Recognised by HCC as a Green Belt development outside the local plan, the NPPF requires the decision to pass the application to be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, with the expectation of a call-in to ensure the completely independent review that this application so badly needs (and appears to have been missing so far).

Clearly expecting a large number of visitors, parts of County Hall were roped off. Despite the huge amount of local interest, the fact that it was the first working day after half term for the fifth date given for the meeting were perhaps reasons why there were relatively few visitors in the public area. Those visitors able to make the meeting were not allowed in the main entrance, but were ushered into the Council Chamber via the back door and warned not to make any distractions. With 6 hours allocated for the meeting agenda, the Chair opened by saying he hoped to deal with matter in 3 hours and succeeded as none of the key issues that that HCC continue to attempt to bury were really brought to the table with the Panel seemingly reluctant to challenge any aspect outside those the Officer introduced in his overview.

At an unheard-of 130 pages the enormous officers report included over 50 conditions, a vast number that serves to confirm not only the unsuitability of the site, but also the poor level of preparation, engagement and appropriate planning, something that at least 2 of HCCs own departments, St Albans and Wheathampstead criticised the applicants for. Bizarrely the officers identified that the car parking provision was likely to be at least 20 short of the requirement they would expect but the Panel failed to require the developer of the site to provide a more appropriate number. Large numbers of objections were minimised or marginalised, while scant benefits were not only given more space and time in the presentations, but were consistently presented in a manner that removed any veneer of balanced debate. Supporters including local councillors failed to provide accurate, objective, evidence-based information, apparently preferring to denigrate those who expressed concern and gloss over details that clearly showed no need for a school at this Batford location.

Particularly disappointing was the member for North East Harpenden, Cllr David Williams who spoke in support of the proposal. Now Leader of the Council and having chosen not to engage with, listen to or act in any way to support his constituents since his election, he also appeared to resort to personal comments aimed at individual residents in his constituency during his speech. At one point he claimed that 50% bus transport (by potential school pupils) demonstrated a sustainable travel solution. In fact, at some 20 busses/40 journeys out and return, morning and evening, it completely misses the point that a school in a more suitable area of need would take traffic off the roads and allow some 80% pupils to be in easy walking distance, significantly removing the need for busses altogether.

As it stands, because of distances involved, the vast majority of pupils are expected to need to travel by car/bus, with a significant proportion on the Lower Luton Road, known by Herts County Council to be over-capacity. Evidence from existing schools clearly demonstrates school-related traffic problems. A proposed 4-vehicle central queueing lane for vehicles entering the school from the Lower Luton Road was explained to be sufficient to reduce traffic impact. Those who know the road and regularly sit in very long rush-hour queues through Batford will quickly understand that is over-optimistic, as is under-provision of on-site parking as a method of deterring car travel. The traffic scenarios in themselves just serve to confirm that this location is about as far from an appropriate solution as anyone can imagine.

One minor concession appeared to have been made – although some council members still held the view that the Lower Luton Road was safe, a document handed out at the beginning of the meeting stated that bus travel would be increased for Wheathampstead children and that it would be funded by the ESFA – though the promise was for the first seven years only. Traffic discussion served to crystallise just one aspect of this inappropriate proposal. Despite stepping through some elements, sadly at times the supposedly-neutral Spatial Planning department seemed more like a cheerleader for the development.

Speaking for the proposal, local parents organisation Harpenden Parent Group not surprisingly failed to address material planning issues, question the many problems inherent in the plans put forward, or recognise the looming place surplus. In addition to also resorting to derogatory remarks about anyone who tested the suitability of the plans, they also implied they were party to information that might otherwise be regarded as confidential by Herts County Council, including school application figures that are believed not to have been finalised or publicly released yet. The head-elect similarly criticised those who had taken the time to analyse and understand the proposals in great detail. In extolling the virtues

of a school that has yet to be developed, supporters failed to demonstrate how a new school, modelled on the existing 3 schools would successfully serve those pupils who are currently less well served in the existing model, the perhaps less academic pupils who struggle today. It all demonstrated a lost opportunity for Harpenden that will continue to fail a certain percentage of our children.

Very early in this whole saga, HCC stated that the appropriate time for discussion of all matters would be at planning and they would not purchase the land until they had planning permission. Since the planning application was launched, however, HCC have continued to claim that it is now too late to test or debate their evidence base and decisions. Last week, HCC confirmed that at some unknown time they changed course on land ownership (apparently without notification or public scrutiny) to acquire the land before planning in order to engineer hearing their own planning application. That alone demonstrates a far from neutral approach, along with a complete lack of respect for the very people they are meant to serve. What are they thinking? The public are more than ever seeing this as a continuing trend.

We look forward to Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government exercising his right to call-in this application because this proposal requires the completely independent review that a call-in would provide. Combining HCC's resounding lack of engagement and understanding of just how unsuitable this site is with a not unexpected decision from the panel it is safe to say that opposition will continue and steps are in hand.

- Ends-

## **About**

**Right School Right Place** is a campaign group made up of over 2000 concerned residents and supporters in Batford, Harpenden and Wheathampstead and the wider school planning area who support the need for a new district school but believe that Hertfordshire County Council has proceeded with a rushed and undemocratic decision to develop a school site in Batford. This is despite clear evidence that this site is highly unsuited to this use, resulting in urban sprawl between Harpenden and Wheathampstead and irreparable harm to the Green Belt in this Landscape Conservation Area (33) (designated as conserve and improve by Herts County Council).

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