



Consultations Update – September 2017

STOP PRESS (27 September 2017):

As this article went for publication, notice of a Planning Application appeared on Herts County Council's website. It appeared late in the day (Tuesday 26 September).

As expected it confirms HCC is the Planning Authority that the Application has been made to. It also confirms suspicions that the applicant is also HCC. This is contrary to many other statements that the applicant would be the ESFA (Education Skills and Funding Agency - previously EFA) as advised by HCC when it published a suite of reports it had commissioned in 2015. It also declares that the Consultation started on 26 September. Perhaps most remarkably, it has a 'valid date' of 12th September and, to date, it is a Consultation with no supporting documents to review as none have been published on the HCC Planning Portal as of this morning (27 September). Similarly no notices have been placed on or around the site, nor have neighbours received formal communication relating to an Application (both requirements of such a process).

It is no surprise that HCC appear to be redefining new lows in how to disregard their residents. RSRP will continue to monitor, analyse and report on how to challenge a process that can only be described as wrong - in every aspect.

Consultations Update

Last week saw HSET stage a 'drop in' session as part of the Section 10 Consultation process required under the Academies Act to gain funding approval for the Katherine Warington School. Perhaps not surprising that following the fiasco with distribution of leaflets and letters, many of the visitors were less than impressed when they arrived, and, from reports received, learnt little from the event.

The Trust acknowledged difficulties with distribution and extended its deadline for responses to October 25th. However some immediate neighbours to the proposed school had not received any formal communication when the consultation evening was held and were only able to attend because RSRP and others had done the Trust's job and informed them. We understand that further leafleting has now taken place to those who have advised the Trust that they were omitted, but we are still receiving reports of failing to communicate.

For those who did attend the greatest frustration was a complete lack of further information on how the School would impact the community. One of the greatest concerns was transport for both potential distant pupils and for residents in the locality. At the previous event when the Trust and its partners (including HCC) tried to tell the community about the emerging plans, there was a big gap in the Transport work. The information boards said the work was still to be done. HCC went further, stating that the basis for that work – a Needs Assessment to be produced by HCC – did not exist and

that the previous one (issued alongside the Vincent & Gorbings reports in 2015) was now out of date. So, despite no idea of where children would come from for the school (and its sister schools in the Town)-the Trust clearly feels able to ask for public approval in any event. Questions to various people officiating on the night suggested that all pupils would be encouraged to walk or cycle to the school, some officials going as far as to suggest there would be no buses.

The reality of the situation was best summed up by a comment from one Trust member who stated that the Travel Plan will be submitted with the Planning Application and will, like the choice of site, be largely HCC's responsibility. That means that in this Section 10 consultation you are being asked to either ~~to~~ recommend approval or rejection of a funding agreement – without full knowledge of what is being asked for. Having seen the material presented at the consultation event RSRP is therefore formally asking the Trust for more information. We are asking about the content of the Trust's proposals, the impact on the Community, and how the Trust proposes to account for the gaps in the Consultation process. We are asking for specific information from the Trust via a short series of questions, requesting responses that we will publish to enable completion/submission of forms before the extended deadline. (Questions will be published on RSRP website shortly).

Perhaps the most alarming aspect of the Consultation evening was the number of questions that were referred to an imminent Planning Application. It is understood that despite having published no further information on the many issues raised in the July events, the school's promoters – ESFA (DfE), HCC and the Trust – are to make a Planning Application by the end of September. At time of writing (25 September), neither SADC nor HCC Planning Portals were showing any applications for the site, nor have any legally required notices been posted on the site. However, it is likely that these will appear shortly if there is to be any ~~sort of~~ chance of meeting the aspiration to have some pupils on site by September 2018. When an application is made it will, of course, have to go through the regulation processes of going out to consultation. For a development of this scale, this is expected to be significantly longer than the usual minimum 21 days given for public comments. The same guidelines will apply whether it is HCC who will hear what is, in effect, their own application or whether, like the majority of new build Academies, it is the District Council (in this instance St Albans) who hear the application. What is known is that HCC have placed a notice on the gate (warning not to trespass on the land) stating they now own the land. Enquiries (via public domain Freedom of Information Request) confirm that HCC purchased the land on 25 August 2017 – seemingly forgetting their pledges not to purchase without Planning Consent.

RSRP has a substantial portfolio of evidence to mount a robust challenge to any planning application for this site. Until an application is published, it is inappropriate to identify specific areas of challenge, as the content and supporting material for the application is unknown. RSRP regret that HCC have chosen to lock residents out and ignore their concerns, and that in doing so, HCC have repeatedly turned down opportunities to consider better solutions (to the problem of ensuring provision of school places where they are truly needed). What is apparent is that HCC are prepared to go to considerable length to push this matter, and that will oblige anyone with legitimate grounds to challenge to do so in a professional manner. There is, of course, a price tag for engaging professional advisors, therefore now is the time to help RSRP with funding to make sure that the best case is presented/the best solution emerges. RSRP website has details of how this can be done or contact any of our Committee members.

RSRP will continue to post material on this site and through its facebook pages to keep people informed on developments and how residents can challenge.

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