

APPENDIX TO ITEM 3

Northbrook School – Drop-in and Local Meeting 5th June 2008

Prior to the local meeting a drop-in session was held from 6pm-7.15pm to give those interested an opportunity to view the plans and a model of the scheme and to ask any questions directly of the applicant team, their daylight consultant and planning officers.

Visitors to the drop-in session mainly had specific concerns relating to the impact of the works on their individual properties in addition to general points regarding the scale of the building and the impact on the surrounding area and streetscene and its character and appearance as well as parking implications and highway safety. Detailed points were raised regarding the Taunton Road, Hedgley Street and Wantage Road junction which some local people stated has a blind spot. There were concerns that the number of pupils and reduction in car parking could be a danger. There was also much discussion about the entrance to the site from Brightfield Road and access into Manor House Gardens and the use of the tennis courts. Residents were extremely concerned that the use of the tennis courts by the school would mean that they would not be available for public use and the gardens would be undermined as it had the potential to be heavily used by pupils from the school who would 'take over' the Gardens and in effect use it an extension to the school.

Attendees felt that the school was too big for the site and that this would overshadow surrounding houses as well as being a dominant and overbearing presence.

Residents who raised concerns regarding the entrance to the school via Brightfield Road were generally pleased that this element of the scheme had been revised so that the entrance would remain only for emergency use and minibus access. However, issues such as the behaviour of pupils, vandalism and rubbish were still concerns for the majority of attendees.

It was asked why the school could not stay at the Ennersdale site rather than move back to Taunton Road.

Following the drop-in session the local meeting commenced. It was chaired by Cllr Brian Robson.

Introduction from Cllr Robson was followed by a short speech from a school governor who set out the benefits of the school for the local community.

Following this Tim King, Development Control Manager provided clarification about planning issues and what could and could not be controlled through the planning process. Most notably the use of existing accesses from Brightfield Road and Manor House Gardens are not strictly planning related and instead are school management issues.

Residents were extremely concerned that these matters had been set apart from the planning application as they would impact on the surrounding area and their quality of life.

Lloyd Stratten from ACP architects presented the scheme. During and after the presentation a number of questions were asked and comments made, which are noted below.

There was disagreement amongst residents about the use of the access gate into Manor House Gardens from the playground of Northbrook School. The majority of residents stated that it had not been used since the upgrade of the Gardens.

It was clarified that the caretaker's house is within the Lee Manor Conservation Area Consent is therefore required for its removal.

The architect stated that there would be the facility to have functions in the school building on evenings and weekends.

Occupiers of the properties directly opposite the school on Taunton Road felt that the height of the building at 4 storeys coming forward of the established building line up to the back edge of pavement would be overbearing and also have implications on privacy due to the position of windows facing directly onto their houses.

The issue of flooding was raised and the need for a flood storage area. The architect explained that this was a requirement of the EA being that the school was in a flood plain. In addition to a flood storage area beneath the school building it was stated that there would be rain water harvesting and green roofs to improve water run-off from the site.

It was asked how mature new trees would be on the site. There were concerns that the trees could take many years to grow and benefit the scheme. It was explained that the trees would be semi-mature in order to allow them to establish themselves and survive relocation.

A matter raised throughout the meeting was the suitability of the site given its size for the school, particularly with an increased number of pupils. The vast majority of residents felt that the school needed a bigger site and should therefore not be re-provided on the Taunton Road site. Questions were asked about the site selection process and it was indicated that a Freedom of Information request would be made about this. It was explained that neither the architect nor planning officers were involved in this process and the education service would have to provide the details of this. It was also asked why pupil numbers have been increased.

The size of the school would result in reduced amenity space provision. The architect stated that the proposed scheme would provide 2.9m² of amenity space per child. Residents felt that this was inadequate and was a strong indication that the site was not large enough to provide the necessary learning environment.

The use of the Gardens during break times would mean that it could not be enjoyed at those times by the local community.

Residents felt that the scheme has ignored properties facing the site on the opposite side of Taunton Road instead focussing on the park and conservation area. The height up to the back edge of pavement and number of windows suggested that no thought had been given to this relationship.

The architect's photomontage visuals presented were felt to give unrealistic views from properties directly opposite and were misrepresentations. In reality residents considered that the building would be oppressive from these locations. The angles and positions, chosen by the architect, were felt to give the best possible views whilst ignoring less flattering views. The accuracy of the visuals was also questioned as one image showed the caretaker's house although it is proposed to demolish this. The architect stated that the views had been chosen because they enabled the whole site to be seen rather than deliberately showing the best angles.

The architect indicated that the Design Panel was supportive of the scheme and showed a slide with quotes from a series of Panel meetings. Local residents questioned the role of the Panel. The planning officer explained that their role is advisory only and while their comments indicated that they were supportive of the scheme, they are based only on the architectural quality of the building and not on the planning considerations, such as the impact on amenity of neighbouring occupiers.

Following the presentation, further comments were made by the audience.

Charles Batchelor, representative of the Lee Manor Society noted that much had been made of the impact of the school on the Gardens. This had resulted in the school being pushed forward onto the site boundaries giving it a dominating presence. The resultant overbearing building would damage the street and the conservation area. He was concerned about the use of render rather than London stock brick which is the predominant local material. The use of render would exaggerate the impact of the school. It was claimed that at a pre-application consultation event between the applicants and local residents, the applicants had indicated that the school size would not increase from that existing. If the development went ahead, it was felt that the school would not be a good neighbour.

The problems with the scheme are the height and ground space it would take which would alienate the local community. Parking is a major problem and the provision of only one space is ridiculous. The proposed building line and discharge of all pupils out onto Taunton Road at once would cause safety problems for pedestrians and the children themselves. The building would be imposing and there is a lack of recreation space.

The proposal is predicated on the use of recreation facilities in Manor House Gardens. As part of the Heritage Lottery Grant it was agreed that the integrity of the Gardens had to be restored and the school use controlled. Representatives from the education service should be present so that this issue can be discussed.

Residents want the school to succeed but this does not justify a scheme that would harm the local area.

Historically the access gate directly into Manor House Gardens from the school has not been used. No objection to the controlled use of the park by the school.

There has been a constant increase in numbers of pupils historically. What is the capacity of the existing canteen facilities to those proposed? Would children have to go out for lunch? The architect replied that the proposed canteen facilities were twice that of the existing school and that if needed all children could be fed on site.

The access gate into the Gardens was historically for emergency use only. The use of the courts by the school takes away the opportunity for others to use the facilities and the Gardens would suffer as a result. Even during PE, not all children are supervised if they are not participating which can result in behavioural problems.

Children need space to learn but the proposal would give a cramped environment. All play and recreation facilities should be provided on site.

One attendee stated that the school used the gate into the Gardens every day before the Heritage Lottery Funding. This was strongly disputed by some other residents.

Traffic impact at cross-roads. Would the school projecting further out than the current building obstruct views? Planning officers agreed that the safety issues and visibility lines that residents had mentioned would be raised with Highways officers so that they could provide further clarification.

Daylight impact on 48 Taunton Road. Would severely harm amenity. Officers confirmed that further daylight/sunlight analysis had been requested and was underway.

Concerns regarding the impact during construction.

Pupils using raised teaching decks/terraces would be noisy and cause issues with overlooking/privacy. The presentation focussed on what the school wanted rather than taking into account the local community.

What percentage of pupils live locally to make it a community school. The applicant team could not answer this question but stated that the figures are available.

Who could say that the number of pupils proposed was too many? The planning officer explained that this was linked to the size of the building. Guidelines set out how big classrooms etc had to be dependent on the number of pupils. Therefore the consideration of the development and size of the building was linked to how many pupils were proposed. The decision on numbers was taken by the education service based on local need. However this does not override considerations about the scale of the building to the

local area. Officers also have to consider the quality of the educational environment the building would provide.

The space outside the building on the Taunton Road pavement is not big enough to safely provide enough waiting area for pupils whilst allowing pedestrians to pass also.

Particular concerns were raised by the residents of 50 Taunton Road about the relationship of their property to the school once the caretaker's house was demolished. They would have no separation from the school and would be adjacent to terraces. Also enquired about the boundary treatment to them and the potential for landscaping along the boundary which had been removed since they had viewed initial pre-application plans. Even with the stepping down of the building, they would still be engulfed by a large development.

What would the screening be to the teaching deck/terrace? The architect stated it is proposed to be a 1.1m high fence/railing. Planning officers stated that this type of detail could and would be conditioned for approval should the scheme be approved.

Would the green area outside the Council blocks to the south-east corner of the Taunton Road/Wantage Road junction be removed? Planning officer explained that this area is not within the scheme boundary and did not form part of proposals.

Finally, the planning officer mentioned that the residents' views aired at the meeting, in addition to those received as part of the formal consultation exercise, would be noted and summarised in the Committee report. In addition to this all letters would be made available to Members. Details were given about the frequency of Committee meetings and the opportunity for a representative of the objectors to speak. Requests were made that more than one speaker be allowed to address the Planning Committee because of the different issues raised and the number of interested parties. The officer explained that this decision was for the chair of the meeting on the night but that a request could be made and it would be noted in the summary of the meeting and in the planning report. The lead-in times and notification of Planning Committee meetings were explained.