



PRESS RELEASE

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PROPOSED 4TH SECONDARY SCHOOL FOR HARPENDEN AREA – WHAT NEXT?



Thursday 2nd August saw the Hand Down officially summarising the recent Judicial Review (JR) application ruling. This JR followed a recent grant of planning permission by Herts County Council (HCC) for the proposed 4th Harpenden area secondary school. Since Hand Down, the full ruling has been made available through standard court database and document systems with significant work gone into reading and analysing the content. Previous Press Release 180808 refers.

Anyone with any experience of reading, digesting and preparing reports of any nature, and in particular the nuances of court rulings will appreciate the time needed to evaluate and formulate a response. In this case, the expected 21 days Appeal timeframe was shortened to an extremely tight 7 days, following a request by one of the other parties.

Subsequently, Appeal papers were lodged with the courts on 9th August 2018. As required, these were electronically communicated to all parties towards the end of the day. An apparent good-practice recommendation is for no public communication until physical paper delivery - the day after electronic communications, or Friday 10th August.

So what will happen in 2019? The School's developers originally put forward a hopelessly over-ambitious build plan to support their planning application. Originally saying they could build and open the permanent Sports Hall as temporary classrooms in a mere five months, they then

abandoned this unlikely plan within a week of the Planning Decision and deferred opening to September 2019. Following the application for Judicial Review they asked the Court to expedite the JR to enable development, declaring that they actually needed 13 months to deliver the same facility, with the potential for occupancy deferred to January 2020.

In parallel, the same contractor (Kier) commenced work in April 2018 on the sister project - a Croxley Green secondary school on arguably an easier development site. Also targeted for September 2019 opening, Keir have already indicated a likely slip to October. Considerable doubt must therefore exist about whether the same development partners can deliver another complete new school in a much shorter time frame, on a site which still has very many conditions to discharge before development can commence. It's a high risk strategy from a team that has already demonstrated a willingness to sign up to effectively undeliverable commitments.

The time is now right to put arrangements in place that really can be guaranteed for pupils seeking places in 2019. In 2006, HCC's own Scrutiny Committee made recommendations for how HCC could and should significantly improve their school place forecasting and delivery. Harpenden, and the lack of granularity, were key mentions at that time. With no apparent evidence that those recommendations were acted on, HCC has, over many years been pursuing what looks to be a single-minded route to secondary school place provision on an unsuitable site. Despite frequent calls for HCC to work on flexible provision options and alternatives, they seem set to continue with no Plan B.

Steps within any Appeal are defined by the courts. Whatever the legal process duration and outcomes they are unlikely to influence the ability to physically build from scratch on such a tricky site in time to address the shortfall that the Council is predicting for 2019.

In order to mitigate build timescale uncertainty, as demonstrated both by the Croxley Green parallel and the recent delayed Katherine Warrington opening targets, parents can only hope (and should perhaps be directly asking) that ESFA, Herts County Council and the Trusts have contingency options. Those options should guarantee places to educate all in the area using resources that are available now and can quickly be made fit for purpose.

At least two of those possibilities use existing buildings and facilities. Primary school admissions are down and the government's school census shows that the Harpenden Academy is below half its published capacity of seven years at two forms of entry. This means it has potential to accommodate up to 6 forms of entry for a single year of pupils on an interim basis. Under the control of a related school trust it has a long history as an education facility over the many years and offers a central easy-access location. Alternatively, the same Harpenden Academy occupied spare space at St Luke's in Redbourn while waiting for conversion works to be completed at the former Library site and that same space option could be used to meet forecast 2019 secondary pupil shortfalls. By acting now, and putting in place relatively minor fit-out changes, there could be certainty of secondary school place supply to cover 2019/20.

The alternative leads perhaps inevitably to a repeat of the September 2018 entry fiasco. Here, pupils applied to a school before it had even applied for planning permission, only to be followed by an extremely uncertain Allocation day. On that day parents were expected to make choices at a time when HCC were not in a position to publish a Planning Decision, let alone physically deliver a school in an over-ambitious short timescale.

A number of our politicians seem able to move in a matter of hours in order to cast blame on others for situations the Council has single-handedly brought about over more than a decade. At the same time, for months they seem unable to talk to and listen to the people they were elected to represent. Arguably it is time to stop wrongly blaming others for HCCs own failure to suggest or deliver alternatives. Instead, perhaps it is time to do something that actually benefits their community, to provide flexible solutions that will be available when needed, solutions that can provide certainty to those being asked to choose their 2019 secondary options by the end of October.

Many people are still wondering just why Herts County Council seems so focussed both on this unsuitable site alone, a rigid attempt to build a school on a dangerously overcrowded road that is arguably about as far from actual need as it is possible to get in the planning area.

Ends