



SHIPLAKE COLLEGE HENLEY-ON-THAMES

From the Chairman of Governors
Rt. Hon. Tim Eggar

3 August 2017

Dear Shiplake Community Action Group

Thank you for your letter of 27 June and our apologies for not responding sooner; a combination of a busy end of term, the Headmaster being away and the need to give your comprehensive list of questions the appropriate attention they deserve.

We are glad that you appreciated us holding the public meeting in the Memorial Hall, which we saw as an important consultation event. It was a really useful exercise for us as we spoke with our neighbours and others in the village about their thoughts on the proposal.

We have spent much time considering the comments received on the evening, and feedback sent since. We have been taking stock of the situation and have held off submitting a pre-application due to the concerns raised. Whilst there has been some vocal support of the proposal, we recognise the opposition from many nearby residents and others in the vicinity.

We appreciate your comments about the College's role within the community and its links to the primary school, which we also value highly, as well as the acknowledgement of how important sport is to us. We are the biggest employer in the local community, and one of the largest in the area. Over 30 members of our staff are also parishioners, with a large number of Shiplake residents also sending their children to the College. 60% of our current pupils are local day pupils.

We must stress our need to move away from the Riverside pitches. We first started looking for additional playing fields over 50 years ago! This has led us to what we felt was the only option available to us. We recognise that the proposed site is not ideal, hence the consultation evening. Due to lack of alternative options we have no choice but to pursue the only potential option.

We are happy to provide answers to your questions below:

1) The other alternatives (and reasons why not viable)

The College only owns the field in front of the Pavilion. The College first started looking for alternatives/speaking to neighbouring landowners to extend the fields available to us in the '60s and we have been in discussions on and off since that time. In the late '60s we agreed the lease of 'New Field', to the left of the College. The terms of the agreement restrict usage of the field to the College only, unless agreed by the lessors. Use of the Riverside pitches started in the mid-90s. These are only just suitable for rugby due to the agricultural silage grass, but also unsuitable due to regular waterlogging and/or flooding. The fields return to agricultural use after the September-December lease.

All feasible alternatives within walking distance of the school had been explored. These were either not practical for grounds preparation and maintenance reasons or the landowners were not prepared to make them available to us.

INCLUSIVE • INDIVIDUAL • INSPIRATIONAL

2) Suggestion to speak to St Mary's School regarding transporting students by minibus to 'offsite' location

We have not contacted St Mary's School in Henley as yet because we are looking to transport much higher numbers of senior school pupils. In any case, we do not have enough minibuses to do this, even if they weren't already designated for other College uses during games afternoons, which they often are.

3) Consider transporting students by minibus to another site...

Quite apart from this being environmentally unfriendly, this is simply not practical. As a last resort there is an option of using minibuses to ferry pupils back and forth to the proposed site due to its proximity to the College; this would not be possible if the site was further afield. Children's health is undeniably improved by regularly playing sport. It is not practical to compromise our timetable or reduce the number of games sessions our pupils have.

History

4) How many current riverside pitches are there?

There are five pitches.

5) How many pitches in total and what they are used for?

In addition to the five Riverside pitches for rugby, there are two on 'New Field', making a total of seven rugby pitches. There are two football pitches on 'Front Field', which is also a cricket square and therefore it is not possible to play rugby on these pitches as well.

6) Where is football currently played?

Football is currently played on the New Field, which has two pitches and additional space for training for up to two other teams. There are also two pitches on 'Front Field'. These are much smaller than we'd like, to help protect the cricket square, so only really suitable for Years 7 and 8, but we have to use them for Years 9 to 11. We also use the pitch at Memorial Hall for training and fixtures, making a total of five pitches available for football.

7) Please quantify amount of times unplayable as a percentage per season for each of the last 3 years

The pitches have been unplayable for approximately 25% of each rugby season because they have been waterlogged. The majority of flooding takes place in January to March (estimated at 40% of the time), which would make extending the current lease to include the football season worthless – even if they playing surface could be improved – which is cannot be.

A flood risk assessment report from an independent survey conducted as part of a separate planning application for a new boathouse by the river shows that the Riverside pitches lie in an area where the Annual Exceedance Probability (the probability of a flood event occurring in any year) is at 20% (ie 1 in 5 year).

8) You have stated 'there is limited space for training sessions' do training sessions have to take place on fixture pitches or could they take place in another area of the college grounds?

We use all the available space on New Field and Front Field for training (and don't just use the pitches) and there is no other space on the College grounds available. The Astro and Tennis courts are used for other sports (eg hockey, netball).

9) Could the sports pitch timetable be reconsidered i.e. Cricket on the riverside pitches and rugby at the front of the building?

There are no circumstances under which this would be possible. The Riverside pitches are agricultural silage grass – their condition, and the fact that the fields are used as farmland for 9 months of the year, means that it would be impractical for both parties.

10) By having more pitches this would alleviate pressure on ground maintenance this would clearly be a cost saving which could help with a drainage solution.

We have explored exhaustively putting in drainage on the Riverside pitches and the advice is quite clear that whilst it may marginally help initially, the first flood will undo any short term benefit.

11) The communications state that river bursts its banks every 4-5 years. Since the bad flood 3 years ago and the number of new flood defences, is this still a realistic figure?

The pitches are on a floodplain and it only requires the water table to rise slightly for the pitches to become waterlogged. The very purpose of a floodplain is to act as a flood defence in itself, although naturally we cannot comment on whether we will see flooding to the extent as we have in the past (but see above for flood risk assessment).

12) Have all options of drainage and raising the pitch level been considered?

Yes. As above, the costs are significant and the work would be undone quickly.

13) Can you revisit timetabling so that the younger school have sports earlier in the afternoon and older children at 3.30pm thus maximising the use of existing pitches.

We have previously looked at this with regards to the overall shape of the weekly timetable for our pupils. We have not been able to identify a way to combine maximising academic learning and sport by changing the timetable.

14) For larger tournaments would you be using porta-loos as it is unrealistic to believe that young boys, playing sport and keeping rehydrated over a period of time will not need to use the facilities. Please can you confirm your plans.

We use the 'New Field' pitches for any tournaments that we currently run and have no intention to hold them at the proposed site. In addition, there are no toilet facilities at the current Riverside pitches, which are about the same distance from the main school as the new proposed site.

15) Sporting events at schools we have visited, especially at weekends, have brought in refreshments/coffee vans and we would like confirmation that this is not the plan.

We have no plans to do this. For confirmation, there would be fixtures on a maximum of 20 Saturdays in the year (approximately 10 during each of the Autumn and Spring terms). Any refreshments will be provided at the main school, as they are now. During the summer the fields will be just grass and we would allow this to grow if desired by the local residents.

Community and Rural Considerations

16) In whose opinion does the proposed pitches sit comfortably in the surrounding area?

The current design includes environmentally friendly hedgerows to complement the landscape already present, which would also hide a stock fence included to delineate the grass playing fields. They would also help shield the rugby/football posts, which would be up for two terms (approximately just 20 weeks of the year). There would be no buildings at the site. We would be happy, however, to respond to requests to not include the hedgerow if this was preferred.

17) From verbal comments about the pitches not be used frequently, from the communications it looks as though the pitches will be in use 5 out of 7 days sometimes with 150 students and associated staff, and verbally this was increased to 300 students. This is a huge amount of pedestrian traffic. Please clarify

The present estimate would be about 150 students for the Autumn Term for rugby and fewer than this in the Spring Term when football is played. This equates to the pupils in

Years 9 to 11 as the senior pupils would remain playing on 'New Field'. There are approximately 70 pupils in each of these three year groups but not all play rugby. Fewer pupils opt for football as, in addition to 'minor activities', there is also hockey and rowing.

18) From the communication it would appear the pitches will potentially be used for the entire school year. Is this true?

No. The current requirements are for rugby and football in the first two terms only. It would be beneficial to have the option to use during the summer term but there is currently no 'need'.

19) New location is preferable to the college logistically and financially however the logistics of movement in the village with additional cars parked up Memorial Avenue is potentially compromised, and whilst a financial gain to the college, a detriment to house prices in the area with such a change to the village "look and feel"

The location is not preferable financially (as there is a cost of capital and rental, which is more than the Riverside pitches). As the majority of use during the week would be for training not fixtures, there should be no risk of any additional cars. The only issue that might arise would be on a Saturday morning, with visiting teams and parents wishing to support their children. We would inform everyone that parking is only available at the College, although we recognise this wouldn't be 100% enforceable; we would allocate a staff member to monitor parking and we could also try and rent spaces from Memorial Halls.

20) Have you considered the change and potential decline to wildlife as the open wide expanse of field becomes closed off with hedging and stock fencing.

With the additional hedgerow, we felt that this would actually provide additional area where wildlife could thrive and improve the ecology, although as mentioned we would consider not including this in an application if preferred. There would be farmland left either side the proposed location and from April to late August the playing fields could be left to have a meadow effect.

21) There is an ongoing issue of litter on the Memorial field which is managed by a team of volunteers and local people caring for the countryside but there will be potentially more litter in the pitches with used sports drinks, or are you proposing a bin and how would this be emptied?

We share your concern with the problem of litter in the village and our pupils regularly help by doing group litter-picks. We have no bins at the Riverside pitches and litter is not a problem. For this reason, we have no plans to provide a bin at the proposed site but if we are wrong we would look at having one and we would empty it regularly as part of the ongoing maintenance we do at Memorial Field.

22) There was verbal talk about a hedge only but the communications state a hedge and stock fencing. Please confirm what you are proposing.

It is proposed that the boundary would be fenced with a post and wire field stock fence 1.2m high. This would be planted with an indigenous mix of deciduous species and then maintained as a field hedgerow as 3m high. In time this would conceal the fence and partly conceal the goal posts from afar. The fencing also serves to delineate the site and to keep dogs out of the playing field. There is no 'need' for hedgerows but we thought it would be environmentally beneficial.

23) Although not discussed at the meeting there is a fear that these proposed pitches would be used in the summer holidays as your existing pitches are used by your summer schools. Please could you confirm your plans.

There are no plans for such usage. Any summer schools would use our main fields as they currently do.

24) If the site is developed then what criteria will you have put in to ensure the development will not open the "floodgates" for lighting, clubhouse, overflow parking, toilets etc.

Any further development would contravene the lease with the Phillimore Estate and therefore there are absolutely no plans for any lighting, buildings or WC facilities.

Links with the Community

25) Misleading communications regarding use by the primary school

The new pitches would be made available to the primary school and they could benefit from them; it would be up to the primary school how much they would wish to use them.

26) What local community groups would use the proposed space, when there is still availability at the memorial field.

Over the years the school has had many request to use our playing fields but we have not been able to assist due to the terms of the New Field lease and the restricted Front Field capacity. No specific community groups have stated they would use them but we would like to be able to make them available. We are committed to try to respond to local residents' views. If feel on this are strong we could drop our desire to make the fields available for the community groups.

27) How local is local communities? Would Henley clubs be offered the use and therefore where would they be told to park?

As above, they would not be made available if there was strong opposition. We would continue to make our Front Field available for use to the greater local area.

28) Wording in the communications is ambiguous in many areas especially relating to the primary school as above but do Shiplake College "NEED" an additional pitch as suggested or "THEY WOULD LIKE" an additional pitch for future growth"

The College needs to move away from using the Riverside pitches. They are not fit for purpose in that the type of grass is unsuitable for ball sports and are prone to water-logging. An additional pitch is needed to accommodate the training and fixture schedule for rugby and football.

29) The proposal of a change in location of the bus stop to outside the Church Hall does not consider the effect on public transport users from Memorial Avenue and Orchard Close of whom it would be a longer journey and if the residents use Orchard Close this once again increases the pedestrian footfall through this quiet cul-de-sac making it somewhat of a thoroughfare.

We understand that the X80 bus route is in addition to the Arriva 800 and thus there would be a choice for Shiplake Cross residents. The additional location of the bus stop is not our proposal. However, we met with the bus company and the local Oxfordshire District Councillor to consider this additional stop. In doing this we hoped that we would be helping to add to the local services.

30) "The school currently use the college fields from time to time" We understand it is once a year for an annual sports day. Please advise when else the primary school are using the field.

Shiplake Primary uses the New Field for their annual sports day, by permission of the lessors. In addition, as part of our outreach programme, other primary schools use our Front Field pitches.

31) We feel the parking at college is hugely unrealistic and ambitious. How is this going to be policed on tournaments days and when the sessions coincide with the end of the school day? Parking on Memorial Avenue will be a huge issue to safety of all passing traffic, so not only affecting residents but all local traffic.

As previously answered, the majority of fixtures would take place on a Saturday and so not coincide with the end of the primary school day.

32) The proposal is on agricultural land, surely with the insecurity of Brexit, we should be preserving and utilising our resources.

By ending the lease with the Riverside pitches we would be freeing these up for agricultural use all year round – this space is actually larger than the proposed site for six pitches, but due to the boggy condition of the pitches only fits five pitches.

33) The Phillimore's have always been custodians of our community and we are concerned if this has been offered, what will be proffered next?

It is not for us to comment on the Phillimore's estate but will reiterate that there will be strict terms on the lease, which will define the terms in which the land can be used by the school.

Safety

34) The village would welcome an improved crossing point however this has not yet occurred despite the village and Shiplake College parents of the primary children requesting this. There is no guarantee this would happen and therefore there is still a considerable risk to pedestrians crossing a fast and busy road. Do you have assurances this crossing could happen?

We have no guarantee that the crossing would happen but clearly there is a discussion to be had and we are grateful for your support on this.

35) The communications suggest parking would be kept to a minimum however Memorial Avenue is a minor road and already busy with residents, traffic from surrounding villages and visitors to the Memorial hall. It is also an unofficial cut through when diversions on the A4155 are in place.

As mentioned, there would be no need for any pupils or staff to drive to the site during the week, with the majority of fixtures taking place on Saturday mornings. We would put in every possible measure to prevent parents of the College or opposition schools from parking at the site.

36) Memorial Avenue is also used by the primary school children to do cycle proficiency, an increase in traffic could result in an accident.

The use of the site during the week would be from about 3.15pm, which is when the primary school finishes (and pupils would be walking to the site not driving). Unless the cycle proficiency course is an after school club or on Saturday mornings, this shouldn't be affected.

We hope that these answers are helpful. Since the consultation evening we have gone back to landowners of other possible sites and had confirmation that these are not currently available to us, although we continue to seek out possible alternative locations.

We are currently considering our next steps. This may include making a pre-application for planning, which would seek to accommodate local residents' concerns. Such a pre-application would only serve to establish whether there was a reasonable chance of getting permission granted and would not be a declaration that formal planning application would be submitted.

Yours sincerely

Tim Eggar
Chairman of Governors