



Hasmonean School planning application - 16/6662/FUL

Mill Hill Neighbourhood Forum's (MHNF) response to the planning application submitted by Hasmonean School is set out below.

The planning application has a large number of documents associated with it. In the time available for review we have focused on the Planning Statement, the community use statement and the review of alternative sites. We think these give a reasonable summary of the main issues that need review and consideration. We trust that the Council will consider all the documents and proposals and identify many other issues that will need review as well.

In summary we **object** to the planning application because:

1. We do not think the "very special circumstances" case has been met to build a new school and associated parking, playgrounds, etc. on Green Belt.
2. The planning application proposes to use land that the Council agreed only 3 months ago at the September meeting of the Policy and Resources Committee should be reserved for natural habitat as part of a wider strategy for the Cophall estate.
3. The impact of a large new school, with 1400 pupils and over 200 teachers and support staff, on a local road infrastructure will lead to a material increase in traffic and congestion in an already heavily congested area.
4. We do not believe that the search for alternative sites has been fully explored. In particular the potential for using the two Jehovah's Witnesses sites in Mill Hill should be further reviewed.

Taking each of these points in turn:

Use of Green Belt

The application proposed that about 3.8 hectares (9 acres) of Green Belt should be given over to the school to build new buildings and facilities. The buildings will be about 250% larger than the current school buildings on the existing site off Page Street.

Green Belt policy, as it has been developed over the last 60 years is one of the most cherished of all public policies by the UK population. It has stopped the spread of urban sprawl and provided millions of people with much needed green space helping both the physical and emotional well being of so many people for several generations.

We understand the demand for additional places at the school and the need to update buildings and facilities. They are typical of the general pressure and demand on many schools in the Barnet area and across London and the UK. Schools are having to take innovative approaches to dealing with new demands and in that sense Hasmonean is no different from other schools.



But a balance has to be taken between the demands for schooling and the demands of the general population for a clean environment and places to enjoy walking and recreation. Both general planning policy and the specific policy on the Green Belt recognise that.

The new school buildings do not conform with the guidelines on building in the Green Belt as summarised in paragraphs 89 to 91 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Consequently building on Green Belt is only allowed in “very special circumstances” and, despite the lengthy arguments put forward by the School, we do not believe that those circumstances have been met.

Increased traffic and strain on the road infrastructure

The area around the proposed enlarged school already suffers from considerable traffic congestion as is shown by many of the public comments made so far on the planning application.

The roads in the area typically have traffic jams for several hours in the day, problems which extend over a wide area towards Mill Broadway, Holders Hill Circus and 5 Ways Corner. The traffic congestion has been getting worse over many years and with no significant investment in public transport, especially light railway services and trams, likely for many years, the problems will continue to grow.

We note that, due to the current levels of congestion, there are proposals to change the current junction between Page Street, Bunns Lane and Pursley Road. These proposals have been under scrutiny for some time and have yet to be agreed, a testament to the difficulties of improving current traffic flow. A much enlarged school on this site therefore will only serve to both bring forward and increase these problems with the resultant serious negative impact on the local residents and current road users alike. We would contend that, put simply, the roads can't take any more, something that the planning application seems to ignore.

The aspirations for pupils to walk and cycle to school, to use the available public transport and the school's objective to implement and manage a travel plan are all laudable, but they fail to recognise the stark realities of the current traffic problems and the fact there is no set of general or specific remedies that will alleviate them.

Proposals are contrary to the Council's recently agreed Copthall Planning Brief

The Council conducted an extensive analysis over the last 18 months into the future of the Copthall estate. This included how the estate can be improved to provide a better range of higher quality sporting and recreational activities for the whole community.

This planning brief was clear in concluding the uniqueness of the Copthall estate within London in its size and breadth of sporting and recreational activities that can be developed for the whole community.

The planning brief was agreed by the Policy and Resources Committee just three months ago in September. Specifically it said that the south-western corner of the estate, the land that the school



propose to appropriate and to build on, should be reserved as a natural habitat available for residents to roam over and explore and an area where wildlife, plants and fauna would have the chance to thrive. In that sense it is both sad and somewhat ironic that, just three months after this philosophy for the area has been agreed, a proposal should be made to build on the very same site.

Therefore we see no rationale for changing the conclusion of the Copthall Planning Brief that the land should be developed as a natural habitat to be enjoyed by people for generations to come. To do otherwise would suggest the “left hand of the Council” does not know what the “right hand of the Council” is doing.

Alternative sites have not been fully explored

Chapter 5 of the Environment Statement submitted as part of the planning application by the school summarises the efforts made to find an alternative site for the school.

The list provided is very long. However but we feel this is a triumph of “form over content” in that the vast majority of reviewed sites (small local parks or business estates) are clearly not remotely suitable by virtue of their size or current use. Therefore one wonders why they were included at all in the analysis.

Conversely the search summary provides little that can regarded as objective and in-depth analysis of the sites that might be suitable. In particular the two Jehovah’s Witness sites in Mill Hill are of the right size for the school and are available.

Whilst the current climate means that all such sites are considered for the residential build potential clearly building flats alone without essential supporting infrastructure, of which schools are close to the top of the list, is counterproductive to the local community in both the short term and long term.

We note also that the proposed new Saracens High School, which with 1300 pupils is of comparable size with the forecast size of Hasmaneian School at 1400 pupils, will be built on two separate sites in Grahame Park and will occupy in total just 3.16 hectares of land.

In view of the proposed separation of girls and boys in the Hasmaneian application we conclude that co-locating them is not vital. Consequently we also think the potential to rebuild both schools on their current sites has been dismissed too easily. Many schools have to bus pupils to sports facilities and clearly the boy’s school has done this for many years. No case has been made for this to change, especially when that would utilise valuable green belt space at public expense.

We also note that the catchment area for pupils is very wide offering greater scope for finding suitable sites anywhere across said catchment area. So we conclude that the search for other sites has not appropriately focused and consequently has not been fully completed. We think the school should review these opportunities again with the help of Barnet Council, the GLA, Hertfordshire County Council and central government to ensure that appropriate sites are fully researched and, if found suitable, are reserved for educational use and are not allowed to be simply built on by the housing developers.



As well as these main issues there are a number of other points we would make.

Demand for school places

We note that the planning application states that the existing school has 1090 places whilst the submission proposes a school with 1400 places, the additional 310 places to cope with forecast increase in demand. However we are aware that two new Jewish free schools are already being proposed in the area and that, in response to this, the Chief Rabbi said, just three months ago,

“A site of suitable size and location, along with the hard work and the problems that an **oversupply** of places would cause, would be both irresponsible and impracticable to try to open more than one new school.”

Given these concerns about oversupply of school places we would recommend the Council review the assumptions underpinning the forecasts included in the application.

Community use

The summary draft contract between the Council and the School, outlined in chapter 18 of the Environment Statement for the use of proposed new school playing facilities by the community, is unclear in several respects.

Firstly it does not define what is meant by “community” and it does not define what area the “community” would cover. Both points need clarity.

Secondly the contract terminates after ten years or by the decision of the school governing body. Any agreement to use school facilities between the Council and the school governing body, be it the current facilities or any proposed new facilities, should cover a time period consistent with any lease agreed by the same parties.

We have experience of promises made at the planning stage for community use not materialising in reality because of the restriction placed on usage and the costs to include security and the lack of available catering facilities usable by the general public.

Responsibilities for land proposed to be appropriated

It is not clear exactly how much land the school think should be appropriated to them in order to build the proposed new facilities. Paragraph 5.11 the Planning Statement says

” The application site area comprises 8.67 hectares providing for a new combined school of 6.19 Ha, of which 2.39 hectares is the existing Girls school, thus expansion of only 3.8 Ha. with retained open space, footpaths and woodland around the site.”



However paragraph 5.6 it says

“The final new fenced school site will thus be 6.19 ha within a landscaped setting.”

We could not find any clear statement as to who would be responsible and pay for the management of the residual 2.48 hectares (8.67ha less 6.19ha) although the planning statement talks about the landscaping and provision of paths for this area.

Covenants

We also understand that there are covenants which were placed on the land when it was sold for public use many years ago. We further understand that these covenants restrict the use of the land to sporting and recreational activities. Consequently any other type of development on the land would break the restrictions agreed in these original covenants.

Summary

In summary, whilst there are many other points that could be made, both about the technical consistency with planning policy and the broader issues of the impact of the local area, we believe the proposal is best viewed against a small number of material facts.

We do not think that the “very exceptional circumstances” case has been met for appropriating and building on Green Belt, the proposal is contradictory to the recently agreed Planning Brief for Copthall Estate, the search for alternative sites has not been exhausted and the effect on traffic of the proposed new school would be materially damaging to an already heavily congested area.

Our conclusion is therefore clear that the planning application should be **refused** and the Council should help the school consider alternatives which will both support the school’s ambitions and minimise the impact on the residents, community and environment of the Mill Hill area.