Henley/Harpsden Neighbourhood Plan (NP)

Proposed housing development on Gillotts School playing field

Should we be building on school playing fields?

Are you interested?

Are you concerned?

Is there another way?

If so, please let me know by emailing trevor.howell@lineone.net, writing to me at 65 Blandy Road, Henley-on-Thames, RG9 1QB or calling me on 01491 578850. You also have the opportunity to express your views in both the Draft Neighbourhood Plan and Gillotts School consultations

I hope the following summaries will help:

1. Neighbourhood Plan
2. Compliance with District Council strategies and Government guidelines
3. Disposal of school playing fields
4. Alternative funding options
5. Gillotts School communication to parents on 1st May 2014

1. Neighbourhood Plan

- The Draft Neighbourhood Plan (DNP) for 400+ new homes has just been published and is now the subject of a 6-week consultation with the residents of Henley.

This is crunch point for the community

- One of the sites earmarked for homes is a section of Gillotts School playing field, the **greenfield** area behind Blandy Road and Makins Road. If developed it will be a cul-de-sac with access via Blandy Road.

- The school governors want 85 houses built on it to raise £10m for refurbishing the school buildings, claiming this is their only funding option. The school's own separate 6-week public consultation has started.

- In the first public consultation on the 'broad suitability' of sites, Gillotts attracted a **substantial majority against**, being the second least popular site for housing. Despite this, in a diluted form, it has found its way into the DNP, where 55 houses are proposed, possibly rising to 85.

- The emotional appeal of crumbling school buildings has ensured that the site's inclusion in the DNP has bypassed common sense as well as the NP criteria, which prioritise **brownfield over greenfield**.

Gillotts deserves better facilities, but not by selling its playing fields to fund them. There has to be a better way.

***Questions to ask**: Is £10m a realistic estimate for the refurbishment of Gillotts, if Townlands Hospital can be built from scratch for £9m? Are the consultants and developers acting in the best interests of the school and local community?*

2. Compliance with District Council strategies and Government guidelines

- NP legislation requires only "general conformity" with relevant Core Strategies and Local Plans. While SODC's Core Strategy (Dec 2012) states that the NP Site Allocations Plan must include proposals for supporting Gillotts' building needs, it does not say the NP should finance the school's entire capital programme.

- More tellingly, the strategy also refers to **a shortage in Henley of a multi-use games area, 10 junior/mini football pitches and 2 rugby pitches.**

- Government guidelines on the Protection of Open Spaces say that existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:

    - an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
    - the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
    - the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the needs for which clearly outweigh the loss.

***Question to ask:** Can the school prove that there will be no net loss of playing field capacity or sports facilities?*

3. Disposal of school playing fields

- The Secretary of State for Education currently has a "presumption against the sale of school land". School land cannot be sold without his consent. And gaining consent is not easy; applications are subjected to tough scrutiny. The school must consult with parents, governors and the community and the results, with evidence, must accompany their application. They must also show that they have exhausted all other funding options.

- Consent will only be given if the sports curriculum needs of the school **and nearby schools** can continue to be met. Proceeds must go to improving sports or educational facilities. **Sport has the first call**, and surplus playing fields **must be offered to schools that need them.**

***Question to ask**: Would St Mary's and Sacred Heart schools want access to Gillotts' playing field?*

4. Alternative funding options

- With the community's help, every effort should be made to find other funding sources to render a land sale unnecessary (not forgetting that Gillotts must show that all funding alternatives have been exhausted). This would be advisable anyway, as **consent cannot be taken for granted** and the decision, yes or no, will not come quickly. Fundraising should focus on both sports and non-sports facilities:

    - Apply to the Academies Capital Maintenance Fund (ACMF). The 2014/15 funding round offered up to two projects to a maximum of **£2m** each.
    - Negotiate a share of SODC's Community Infrastructure Levy (once it comes on stream)
    - Appoint a corporate fundraiser
    - Start a local fundraising programme; ask local media for help; approach the school's alumni
    - Negotiate public/private sports partnerships to attract inward investment
    - Apply to become a sports academy and seek sponsorship from major sports brands.
    - Approach Sport England and other sports bodies for grant funding

***Questions to ask:** Is the school open to this approach? Did they apply to the ACMF 2014/15 round? Will they apply in 2015/2016?*

5. Gillotts School communication to parents on 1st May 2014

- The attached document states that £600K was obtained from the Academies Capital Maintenance Fund. To say that it was "mostly to keep the school going" is misleading. The school already receives over £2m p.a. from central government for day-to-day educational operations.

- The £600K was in fact part **capital funding** for the refurbishment of the Gym and for replacing roofs, and part emergency funding for repairs to the underground heating system and drains. This demonstrates that **the school can bid successfully for capital funding**.

- The document also shows a running track and rugby pitch on the area sloping down towards Harpsden. This makes no sense, unless they intend to level it. If not, the paper plan is misleading to parents and the Secretary of State. The extent of the proposed disposal is therefore **nearer 50%** of the viable flat area.

***Questions to ask:** Is the rearrangement of facilities realistic? It looks very tight. Will the sloping area be levelled? Did the consultants who drew up the plan work from a paper plan only when allocating the facilities, or did they physically appraise the site?*