

Public Meeting on Highgate School Development Plans

8 June 2023

Chair: Catherine West MP

Highgate Society: William Britain, Chair; Francis Wilkinson, Secretary

Highgate School: Adam Pettitt, Head; John Pheasant, Bursar; Barry Carter, Estates Manager, Gwyn Jones, Stephen Freeth, Simon Martini, Daniel O'Connell of the School's Capital Projects team; and architects Ed Toovey, Andy Barnett and Mike Burnell.

Attendance estimated at up to 250 including those online.

Introduction

Catherine West introduced the meeting, as well as introducing those on the platform mentioning the attendance of four people with previous roles as elected representatives: Bob Hall, Liz Morris, Nicky Gavron and Lord Rodgers. Also introduced was John McRory, a LB Haringey Planning officer.

Background

William Britain summarised the recent history of the School's planning applications and the fact that only now that the detailed applications had been lodged was it possible to see as a whole the impact and extent of the proposals. They had given rise to local concern so that this meeting was necessary to air views and ensure the School was aware of them. He welcomed the involvement of the School in the meeting and their recognition of the importance of the meeting as evidenced by the numbers brought to the meeting by the School.

Highgate School

Adam Pettitt said that the School was intent on listening to the community and for that purpose had attended today with its architects and in-house capital projects managers. He wished the School to give feedback through the Highgate Society and for that purpose said he hoped that a series of workshops facilitated by the Society would resolve at least half the concerns and hopefully more than that.

He said that there was a need to improve the School's facilities and to future-proof it, reducing the current disadvantages of children moving between sites, providing access for children and others with physical disabilities, and providing adequate accommodation for drama, sport and music, which was not currently adequately housed.

He emphasised that this was not about pupil numbers increasing in the life of the current SPD or after the life of that SPD.

Questions and Views

(The following questions and views were from those attending in person)

Liz Morris opposed any increase in pupil numbers, saying that an expression of an intention not to increase is not a commitment and a new Head or a new Chair of Governors might have a different view. She asked

Will the School commit, as part of the planning process, to there being no increase in pupil numbers during the life of the new buildings?

Liz Morris felt that the increases in space suggest an over-provision for the current numbers with consequent undue damage to the conservation area in which the School sits. She asked the School to consider whether the extent of disruption which would be caused to the environment and to the local community by these extensive works can be justified by the School's needs.

Later she asked how the School could justify saying that the rear extension proposed for Dyne House is 'domestic in scale' when it is so big. She said that there had been a lack of consideration of how the views of residents towards the Highgate Bowl would be affected by the development.

John Pearce, representing households in Broadlands Road, commented on what he considered to be the excessive scale of the developments together with the extent of the noise and disruption to be caused during the building period. He was concerned that a hydrologist, Nick Haycock, an expert on local hydrology who had looked at the plans and had estimated that 3 million litres of water would need to be re-routed, was shocked that there were no hydrological calculations included in the planning applications, and he considered the rainfall estimates made in the plans too low, and was concerned how the water would spill out in overflows. He said that report would be submitted next week and a response from the School and from Haringey planners on this subject would be sought.

Ceridwen Roberts asked how all the upheaval involved in the developments fits in to the School's sustainability programme and its objective to be a 'net zero' organisation. In particular how is the extensive astroturfing consistent with sustainability bearing in mind that the health and other environmental risks are such that California has now banned it?

Secondly she asked the question: What does the School do for Highgate? Local residents will be substantially inconvenienced by the developments. While the School is known for the good things it does in Tottenham and elsewhere not much is being done for Highgate.

Thirdly she said that children are not sufficiently encouraged to use their legs. Large children who are quite capable of getting themselves to school on foot or by bicycle were seen being dropped off by car. More should be done to encourage healthy travel which would cause less local congestion.

The next speaker said he was opposed to the plans to 'cram children into a ghetto of classrooms' in temporary buildings during the development. He referred to the 'chaos' in Bishopswood Road when the Junior School was rebuilt and the children decanted similarly: there was noise, dust, interference with ordinary life with the work and noise being continuous between 8am and 6pm making working from home difficult. He mentioned a 105Db generator which was removed on request, but which was only there for cleaning vehicles and he felt should have been removed or prevented by the School. He considered that the decanting had adverse effects on the children's learning, and that this would last for years.

Nicky Gavron said she lived on the south side of Broadlands Road. She said that all the School's fields were Metropolitan Open Land. Close to her there were great crested newts, bats, beetles and hedgehogs, all of which were protected species, and all adjacent to the school playing fields. So she was very surprised to read in the School's report that there aren't any protected species in the development areas. She asked:

Will the School give an assurance that it will review this aspect of their report to consider all the relevant protected species?

She noted that the doubling in size of the Richards Music Centre, the astroturf round the container classrooms for 10 years, the felling of many trees and the effect on drainage of the proposals for the amphitheatre would all have adverse effects on biodiversity and should all be considered in that light. She had asked the London Wildlife Trust to do a survey and asked:

Will the School permit the London Wildlife Trust to do a survey of the wildlife in the School's grounds?

Later she criticised the lack of vision particularly in relation to the consideration of climate change and referred to the emerging Haringey Plan which would require such considerations to be included in planning applications, while saying that officers in Haringey were currently working from an extremely out of date Haringey Plan. She was struck by the fact that the School does not appear to have a forward-looking policy in relation to biodiversity, has not considered re-purposing of buildings rather than rebuilding, and agreed that there is a lack of information in the documents submitted by the School in relation to the hydrology effects of the Mallinson development.

Alicia Pivaro, Chair of Highgate Neighbourhood Forum, said that she had heard nothing new this evening and hoped the School would look back at the records of earlier consultations and would now respond. Later she said that the Haringey planners should just say 'No', and referred to the success of local groups in opposing the planned development at Murphy's Yard in Camden.

Elsbeth Clements, a member of the Highgate Society's Planning Committee, former Chair of that Committee and the immediate past Chair of the Society, said that she had been involved in the previous consultation about these and other developments including the Junior School and Charter Building when a reasonable response had been received from the School. However the process since then had become bureaucratic and there had developed something of a breakdown in relationships with the community. She was very pleased that now Adam Pettitt was saying he wanted to make progress with the current plans through workshops and had said he thought 50% of the issues might be resolved that way, and she hoped that through that process it might be possible to resolve 100% of the planning issues. She also asked that the School provide an overall strategy document.

Nicola Caisley of Southwood Lawn Road reported that a basement expert had said that the construction period for Dyne House will need to be considerably longer than 36 months because of the constricted access to the site and the fact that 10,000m² of soil will have to be removed from the restricted site.

Jeff Salmon of Pond Square expressed strong views. He claimed that the School had done absolutely nothing to reduce the amount of traffic caused by parents picking up children, that less than 5% of the teachers and the pupils live in Highgate Village, and that he couldn't believe the scale of disruption which would be caused by these developments would be allowed anywhere else. He suggested that the School could get what it wanted by moving 10-15 miles away - 'not that I want to see that'.

Later he said 'The one thing that Highgate School does have on its side is Haringey Council'. His implication was that Haringey tends to allow developments.

Next a lady who introduced herself as an educationalist said that the temporary classrooms provided an environment which would undermine the delivery of effective education; that the pollution, noise and dust from the building work would damage the children as well as the community, and that the effect of all these developments would be to cause more disruption than people now expect.

The following lady spoke briefly to say that the plans don't enhance conservation.

Anthony Furlong, a resident of Broadlands Road for 40 years and now Chair of the Highpoint residents' association emphasised that the School should not be pushed out of Highgate, as the alternative would be much worse – instead of negotiating with the School negotiations would be with a number of private developers who would be harder to deal with. He supported the proposal for individual workshops about the separate plans and wanted to see a future of Highgate residents and the School together.

Simon Blendis, a resident of Southwood Lane and a parent of a child at the School said that he agreed with the School that some of the buildings do need updating, but believes the School sees the need for an upgrade as an excuse to expand rather than to meet the present needs of the pupils. The building work will tend to harm the school environment for present pupils. He said that the original 2015 plans were even bigger and described the current plans as 'a grandiose, legacy project'.

He said that he had consulted an expert on basements (Alan Baxter) who expected that there would be a lot of vibration and so much noise that he would not be able to work from home for 3 years. He said that the plans do not seem to be proportionate to the School's needs. He asked:

Will Haringey Council appoint someone to validate the needs, as opposed to the wishes, of the School?

He added that the removal of 10,000 cubic metres of soil would require 4,000 lorries equivalent to six per hour for the relevant period.

Amy Brown of Southwood Lane said she was concerned about the potential disruption and that she felt the School, rather than enhancing the community of which it is part, appears to be strangling it by these plans.

Gail Waldman representing Highgate Conservation Area Advisory Committee (CAAC) said she had looked at the objections online yesterday and found that the main concerns are:

- Disruption through developers' vehicles, and

- The School would be too big.

From the point of view of the CAAC the School buildings would be too big in comparison to the scale and proportions of the surrounding buildings. She said there are 28 listed buildings in a short length of Southwood Lane.

She said that Highgate's identity is as a former 'mediaeval hilltop village' and it is that identity which residents value. The applications would cause irretrievable harm to the village. She said it is London policy that Schools need to show a local need for any plans for expansion, and that has not been done. She said that the ecology reports submitted were all based on out-of-date parameters. She had two questions:

Will John McRory (LB Haringey Planning) identify which organisation should undertake an Environmental Impact Assessment of the developments?

Will the School reply to the 20 questions which the CAAC has submitted some time ago but to which no answers have been received.

Later she added that while there was work being done to the science block there was no retrofitting being done and that retrofitting to meet climate change objectives could be expected to take at least another 5 years.

The next speaker, a resident of Southwood Road expressed concern that the heavy vehicles that would be using that road would further damage the infrastructure since there was a cracked sewer in the road.

Delva Patman, Chair of the Southwood Lane Residents' Association, said there was a formal objection from the Association on Haringey's planning portal. She asked that the Haringey planners ensure that all the technical information submitted is properly considered by external specialist organisations with the relevant expertise. She said that these applications were of an importance which meant it was not up to the planners to decide them but up to the School and the Councillors. She said that it seemed that not all the information submitted by the School had been put on the website, in particular the report on daylight and shadowing which has not been provided and has not been uploaded. She asked:

Can Haringey check and ensure that all submitted information from the School and from objectors is uploaded and available on the portal?

Chris Underhill introduced himself as the longest established estate agent in Highgate whose offices were directly opposite Townsend Yard which has been the access route for two big developments, which are active at the moment. He said that those developments had caused enormous disruption including damage to cars and buildings and structural damage to adjacent buildings which are the subject of claims.

He said that he had been asked to arrange condition inspections of properties adjacent to the School's proposed developments. In the light of those inspections he said he trusted that Highgate School has good insurance to cover the claims that he thought would result.

He also asked that the School provide parking somewhere on its land for those who lose parking spaces because of the developments. He suggested the provision of electric shuttle buses to bring pupils from locations outside Highgate.

Jill Kerslake of North Road said that she had experienced directly the ‘chaos, noise, dust and traffic’ of the School’s last rebuild. She said she was horrified by the plans and hoped that the workshops would provide a genuine opportunity to challenge the plans and to change minds.

James Schlesinger of Southwood Lane said that he had information that the potential for ground movement had been severely understated, and that the rise in the surface water level as a result of the proposed developments, and of resulting leakage into neighbouring properties, had not been properly considered. He asked, perhaps rhetorically: *Are these not unacceptable risks due to gratuitous over-development?*

Richard Webber, a member of the Committee of the Highgate Neighbourhood Forum, said that he had recently been at a presentation at which a Haringey planner said that buildings should be re-purposed rather than rebuilt; that tear-down and reconstruction would not be permitted; and that this would be in Haringey’s new Local Plan. He asked:

Can Haringey tell us what their policy is on rebuilding versus re-purposing and related matters?

Tony Agathangelou said he had moved back to Highgate before Christmas, having lived in Brighton for the previous 6 years. He had noticed that the place is looking quite shabby. It now full of SUVs collecting children and the place is dirtier. He said that Highgate School was a place of ‘enormous privilege’, that it should be doing more to encourage diversity and he wished to sound ‘a note of ideological opposition’ to what was being done.

Adam Garfunkel, secretary of the Kingsley Place Residents’ Association said that for the past 8 years he and others had been saying that they were concerned about overlooking as a result of the development plans, particularly from roof terraces, and had been assured that the roof terraces were not for use by pupils. But now he was surprised to see that there would be roof terraces accessible to pupils and staff. He was accordingly sceptical as to whether the views of local residents would really be taken into account in the School’s planning.

A previously lodged question was then read by Catherine West. It expressed a concern that there had been planning permission granted to the School in 2013 in relation to buildings in Bishopswood Road. The questioner was concerned that this would cause even more disruption if it was to go ahead as well, and that Haringey could not assess the present applications without also considering the position on these applications. The questioner asked:

Does the School propose to pursue any of the developments in Bishopswood Road and Broadlands Road for which permission was given in 2013?

Paul Parsons of 21 Kingsley Place asked whether it would not be possible to refurbish the drama studio at the rear of Dyne House rather than pull it down and rebuild it.

Next a lady said that traffic round the Mallinson Centre ‘was already a nightmare’ and that the proposed developments, together with existing permission for the building of 13 flats in Denewood Road made her question whether anyone would be able to move in that area.

She also observed that there was an *‘inverse relationship between the size of a child and the size of the car’* which brought them to school.

Peter Walton introduced himself as a resident of Highgate in the same house for 79 years and said ‘I hope you will all join me on the barricades’.

Nadia [] introduced herself as an RIBA chartered architect living in East Finchley. She said she had looked at the drawings and while she recognised the nobility of wanting to expand a school she asked whether the plans meet current fire escape requirements. She challenged whether the architects have sat down and really considered carefully the specifics of each site. She also said that the children’s own views were important and should be heard.

Conclusions

Catharine West said that the event this evening would be written up, that the Local Authority would consider what it should do, that there should be consideration of what representation of children and young people there should be, and that in any event the workshops should not start until there was an Environmental Impact Assessment.

So, she concluded, there are big questions to be answered before this goes to a Planning Committee in Haringey, and we need to get a letter off to Haringey with all these questions.

William Britain said he had asked one online question and there would be others to which he would respond. He said he believed that the School is genuine in its expressed wish for further consultation, and that there needs to be a clearer framework for that consultation. He said a note of the meeting and its questions will be put on the Highgate Society website and sent to Catherine Williams, the LB Haringey Cabinet member for planning.

John McRory of LB Haringey said he was concerned that there may be information missing from the website and will take that up with the School and with the questioner who raised the issue. He was then asked

Is there capacity in the process to take on board major changes in the application?
(Elspeth Clements)

Which organisation will be reviewing the CAAC’s observations on heritage/conservation? (Gail Waldman)

He said that there is no date set for a Planning Committee to consider the applications, that the changes can be taken into account, that it is up to the planning authority to decide whether an Environmental Impact Assessment is required, and that they do have a consultee to whom they refer conservation and heritage matters.

Adam Pettitt said now was not the time for him to respond but the School would fully engage with the consultation process.