

ASHMOUNT SCHOOL, HORNSEY LANE – The Highgate Society supports local residents' campaign to prevent it being demolished for housing

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On June 12, 2012 Islington Council Executive adopted the Council's Planning Brief for the Ashmount School Site on Hornsey Lane. The Planning Brief proposes high density housing to be built on the site of the school. Ashmount School is a locally listed building within the Whitehall Park Conservation Area, and is a significant architectural work by the late Architect Cadbury-Brown. It is a building that undoubtedly is worthy of conservation, but it is presently in a poor state of repair. The buildings were laid out on site in a way that made best use of the topography and retained all the existing mature trees.

Public consultation has now officially ended and the Council will now petition the Secretary of State to approve the change from educational to residential use as well as the disposal of the school playing fields. The adoption of the Planning Brief took place despite the strong objections of the Highgate Society. The Ashmount Site Action Group presented Islington Council Leader Catherine West with a petition of 1,148 signatories demonstrating the overwhelming local opposition to the Council's proposals. The Council Executive, assembling under the term 'Democracy in Islington,' have ignored the fact that of 142 consultation responses, only 5 (equating to 3.5%) support the development objectives of the planning brief.

Despite the Council going through the motions of a consultation, no material amendments or concessions have been made to a deeply flawed planning brief. The Council's undertaking to market the site to developers, before the change of use or the disposal of the site and playing fields has been approved by the Secretary of State, betrays a complete disregard for resident's views and normal consultation procedure. At the very least it would be reasonable to expect that the change of use from educational to housing would be approved before the preparation of a planning brief. The Council's obligation to consider best value has been ignored in the sense of community, employment and educational value as opposed to monetary value. In fact, the site has already been 'soft marketed' to registered providers of housing, and it is completely disingenuous for the Council to be consulting on the disposal of a public educational asset while at the same time negotiating with potential purchasers to maximise financial gain from the site.

The overwhelming response that the site remains in educational use is summarily dismissed. Islington's figures show that the need in the borough (after the relocation of the Ashmount School to new premises on Crouch Hill) will require, as early as 2016, additional spaces to meet demand. The plan for this is 'to extend the most popular schools.' Surely the Council should consider retaining existing schools as opposed to extending already oversubscribed (and overcrowded) schools as a more cost-effective and sustainable option. The Haringey response to the consultation clearly states: 'Through the use of actual and projected birth rates and school rolls, we are also aware that we are likely to require additional provision in the N8 area around Crouch End in the future.' Haringey Council also notes that both Haringey and Islington are members of the North London Strategic Alliance which is seeking facilities to meet post-16 provision as a result of raising the participation age or for vocational training. ASAG is aware of several educational entities who are interested in the site, and the Council has a duty to consider using an educational site for educational purposes before selling it to a developer for housing.

With regard to transport and parking, the planning brief again has serious flaws. The London Plan does not allow, or even open the possibility for, a car-free development on sites with a PTAL of 2 (or even with a PTAL of 3). This possibility is reserved for sites with a PTAL of 5 or higher. The policy not to have on-site parking makes no sense other than from a perspective of maximising revenue from the sale of the site, by exempting developers from providing on-site parking.

Finally there are a number of striking omissions in the draft planning brief:

- . There is no definition of the minimum size of 'publicly accessible open space' that is to be provided as a local amenity under the proposals. The brief only states vaguely that 'the provision of new public spaces should be explored'

- . No maximum storey height of any buildings is given.

- . No indication of future housing mix, tenure mix, or housing densities are given in the planning brief, either as habitable rooms per hectare or dwellings per hectare. This essentially gives any developer carte blanche. It is highly unusual that the planning brief should omit such crucial information.

- . The trees in the interior of the site, although covered by TPO's are 'likely to be removed due to health and safety concerns' (!). It is interesting to note that all trees on the interior of the site which would conceivably stand in the way of high density development are 'lower quality trees'. There is no arboricultural report in support of this conclusion. The brief seems to allow the wholesale removal of mature trees on the site as long as 'replacement trees are planted'.

- . The brief states that the existing school buildings 'do not form part of the cohesive character of the Conservation Area, which is predominantly Edwardian in character' is completely false in architectural and historical terms. The Whitehall Park Conservation Area description actually states that Whitehall Park 'includes a variety of properties with differing architectural qualities and styles.'

- . The opportunity to 'create a small public open space on the site as part of a new pedestrian route' is a euphemism for double-stacking future housing on the site to increase density.

- . The planning brief fails to mention that paragraph 72 of the NPPF states: 'The Government attaches great importance to ensuring that a sufficient choice of school places is available to meet the needs of existing and new communities. Local planning authorities should take a proactive, positive and collaborative approach to meeting this requirement, and to development that will widen choice in education. They should: 1) give great weight to the need to create, expand or alter schools; and 2) work with schools promoters to identify and resolve key planning issues before applications are submitted.'

- . The Section of the planning brief devoted to Conservation, seems primarily concerned with providing a rationale for removing the existing buildings which are locally listed.