

COTHAM SCHOOL REDEVELOPMENT Application 08/03457

Review by RCAS Planning Group of planning and consultation process.

16th June 09

Background

RCAS had responded to a number of planning applications from 1999. By 2004 we and the Planning Officer had become concerned at the piecemeal approach and pressed for the preparation of a Development Plan. This was produced and put before the North Area Planning Committee in 2005. This included the replacement of the Craft, Design & Technology (CDT) building and a new building facing Cotham Road.

Community consultation prior to application

Despite longstanding involvement with the school's building plans we had not been made aware that wide ranging development options were being considered, nor that the Development Plan had been superseded. We discovered this when we were invited to attend a meeting for parents and neighbours on March 17th 08. Local Councillors and planning officers had not been invited to this meeting, nor had they seen the scheme that was presented. (The Planning Department do not appear to have seen the plans until the 21st July meeting – the planning application was made on 8th August.)

We discovered that various options had been explored by the project team and one selected and developed in some detail. The aim of the meeting was to explain and gain support for this scheme. Apart from introduction by Malcolm Willis the whole presentation was by the Skanska team, and it was clear that the school has been completely reliant on the design and building expertise of the LEP appointed team.

The new system for Pre Application Community Involvement to generate Statements of Community Involvement (SCI) was in place for Major Projects. Planning (Bryan Cadman) confirmed to us that Education were aware of the protocol and that it applied to this project, with RCAS as the nominated community group.

An important aim of Pre App CI was to allow discussion of development options at an early stage. In this case there was no contact till after all major design decisions had been made.

It was clear that the Project Team regarded the March 17th meeting, and a subsequent similar one on 8th July as providing the Pre App Consultation with the community that they were required to carry out. We regarded it as too late and inadequate.

See **Appendix A. RCAS Pre App Report No 1**, sent to school (Mike Wride) and Planning (Bryan Cadman).

Despite reminders we received no reply, so there was no meeting between RCAS as the nominated community group and the design team. Therefore no informed discussion at the critical and creative pre application stage. There is no evidence that any changes were made following our comments.

With regard to trees, RCAS Pre App Report recorded our understanding that no significant trees would be felled .(See para. on 'Landscaping'.) This understanding was never corrected by Skanska or the school.

Also, RCAS had twice been shown round the site including the area of the CDT building by Mike Wride. The importance of retaining existing trees, and particularly the established tree belt to Cotham Road was emphasised. RCAS were impressed that no significant existing trees were affected.

This understanding was confirmed by reading the Planning Application 'Design and Access Statement'.

Extracts from 'Consultations', para 4.3. -

- Removal of existing trees on the site is to be avoided as these are of great benefit to the area.

*The new building and MUGA*s are carefully sited to avoid the removal of any significant trees.*

- The need for the new scheme to minimise the loss of green space.

A new MUGA is proposed on an existing green area in the north east corner of the site where the cricket nets were traditionally located. The ball fencing and surface treatment will be carefully designed to ensure that the open green character of the green playing fields are retained and that views across the site from Cotham Lawn Road are not compromised. A secondary MUGA[§] on the east boundary will be screened by existing trees. A large student hard play area will be opened up to the west of the site, which will be landscaped to ensure improved views onto the site from the west. The new building is positioned not to encroach on green spaces but takes up the footprint of the existing CDT block.*

[§] This is the Tennis court/MUGA* (actually south boundary) where trees have been felled,

The planning application

We pursued our pre application points, and raised others, when the application was submitted. This was difficult as important drawings and information had not been submitted and requests via Development Control went unanswered.

Inadequate and misleading information must also have prevented proper appraisal by officers. This led to uncertainty of outcome in many critical areas which were left as Reserved Matters. This has proved crucial in respect of trees.

Trees.

We have reviewed the information included in the application and submit that it was inadequate and misleading in these respects.

* MUGA = Multi-Use Games Area

a. Landscape master plan.

This was the only drawing showing tree proposals. It was to a scale and drawn in a style where individual trees, particularly those in groups, could not be identified. The different densities of colour used to distinguish existing and new trees is far too slight to register, and is misleading in the context of Planning application statements of 'no felling.'

The need to remove 2 small and unimportant trees (Crab apple and plum) directly in front of the CDT building was apparent. No other tree removal was apparent.

b. Arboricultural Survey and Report.

This professional report covered all existing trees and recorded size, condition, classification, and Root Protection Areas, all in accordance with BS, together with recommendations of tree work required.

One dead tree needed removal, with surgery to a few others, including Holm Oak, Tree No. 3584. No other felling was indicated, which tied up with the assurances in Design and Access Statement. (See above)

This was the report of the Arboriculture Officer on the application.

"The tree report submitted is not sufficient. Essentially I need an arboricultural implications assessment and tree protection plan that details necessary tree protection for both the demolition phase of the works and the construction phase. Furthermore, in this report any tree removals need to be clearly stated along with any tree planting to compensate for the loss of trees."

This shows that the officer most concerned with this aspect did not know that 4 large trees of BS Category B2 were to be felled.

In the absence of information about tree removal it cannot have been possible to judge whether the application could comply with policy Planning Policy NE3.

c. Design process

The overall site layout and building design/footprint, together with landscape master plan had been produced and agreed with the School by March. Although basic tree location information was on the existing Topographical Survey all the critical building design work had therefore been completed before the Arbor report was carried out 30th June/ 4th July.

This appears to be mismanagement of the design process which has led to building plans being approved that could not be built without completely unexpected and in our view unacceptable loss and damage to trees.

The Arboricultural Report makes it clear that only the first stage had been commissioned, and that good practice required a second stage covering work to trees and Tree Protection Plan. It is hard to understand why the consultant was not asked to carry out this work at the same time, bearing that landscape and building plans were about to be submitted for planning approval.

Despite the lack of Arboricultural Report it must have been absolutely obvious to the design team that in respect of Cotham Road frontage their plans could not be implemented without felling or at least seriously threatening several major existing trees.

This was not apparent on the submitted floor plans of the building, as these did not show existing nearby trees, let alone that some of these were to be removed. Even the detailed plan of the Cotham Road entrance ML 0420, added to the application on October 24th, (2 weeks before Committee) shows trees without indicating whether these are existing or proposed.

No attempt seems to have been made to avoid the felling by adjustment to layout. This suggests that it was assumed that existing trees would be felled if they were in the way. We do not know if the school were aware that major trees would be felled. They were certainly aware of the value attached to the school's trees by RCAS/community, which had been repeated by *Sustainable Redland* and other groups supporting trees at the July public meeting.

RCAS has since investigated the layout and suggests that at least two of the felled trees could have been preserved, via an alternative ramp layout and slight adjustment of tennis court. **See Appendix B. Tree preserving alternative plan.**

Post felling - the mitigation works

We had concluded that it was impossible to design any tree planting scheme to compensate adequately for the loss of trees, as would be required under Planning Policy NE3, but every effort should be made to mitigate loss of amenity as much as possible.

We had become aware in mid May that Skanska's planting scheme submitted in December was likely to be approved and obtained details from Planning (Ben Rose). We thought them inadequate and on 26 May sent alternative suggestions to Planning, and to objectors known to us. This included one involving a change of ramp layout that would allow space for more generous compensatory tree planting.

One of our suggestions was adopted by Skanska and on May 29 we received their new drawing. We advised Planning (Ben Rose) that we would share this with other objectors, but asked about detailed tree works and tree planting proposals for the rest of the site because –

'We now consider it important that the community knows what is proposed for ALL the site, partly because of what has happened but more importantly because the community will want to see every opportunity used to plant new trees on the site.'

We now understand that despite this request, and previous correspondence with Peter Westbury these plans have now been approved. The opportunity to rebuild relations with local and other objectors appears to have been lost.

Issues for Development Control practice.

We now have a situation where Planning Consent was granted for buildings in a landscape setting that had not been designed or approved, and where the overall quality of the total development might be compromised by its impact on the landscape of the Conservation Area.

The Reserving of landscape and tree planting to Condition does not recognise the need for full integration of building and landscape.

It also removes the right of the public to be consulted on a subject that is of great importance to them. This is a concern with all Reserved matters, which could be mitigated by inviting comment on the details when later submitted – but only from those who had asked for this at Application stage.

It is also unacceptable for those who have commented on planning applications not to be informed when new or additional information (drawings) are submitted, as demonstrated in this case.

In this case almost half the drawings and documents that form the application were registered on 30/31st October. Some were revisions but many were new information including some relating to questions raised by RCAS. Even if we had known that they had been submitted it would have been impossible to study and comment before the Committee Hearing on 5th November.

APPENDICES

A. RCAS Pre App 1 Sent to School 04 /04 08 and Bryan Cadman 28th April.

Pre - Application consideration by RCAS PLANNING GROUP

Project : Cotham School redevelopment
Stage : First RCAS comments 4th April 2008

Background

The Society was not aware of plans for development prior to receiving an invitation to attend a presentation for parents and 'local residents' on March 17th. We understand now that this was the launch of consultation leading up to a Statement of Community Involvement which will accompany a planning application. The community has therefore not had the opportunity to comment on other possible solutions that is part of the SCI protocol.

RCAS has regularly commented at planning application stage during the last 20 years. This has been a period of temporary building solutions, replacement of facilities and significant expansion arising from LEA policy decisions.

The inadequate size of the school site has increasingly caused problems for the school, and for the local community. The sheer amount of building required has now resulted in significant loss of green space, damaging to the school, local residents and the Conservation Area. It is this over-development of the site that has caused RCAS most concern.

This has been compounded by some poor site planning and building design, creating an incoherent environment which adversely affects the area. Recent work, particularly the landscaping, tree planting and fencing to the site perimeter have begun to address the impact of the school on the surrounding area.

RCAS is therefore pleased to see a scheme that is intended to remedy many past mistakes and has the potential to create an environment that benefits education and is worthy of the Conservation Area. The restricted size of the site still poses many problems and we consider that special efforts will be needed to mitigate this problem.

Preliminary comments based on Drawings as presented March 17th, and site visit with Mike Wride on 3rd April 08

General. We were aware from the 2005 Draft Development Plan that replacement of CDT and art, and the addition of Humanities building were needed. We note that a more extensive scheme is now proposed that requires more demolition of facilities built in the last 20 years. (A poor reflection on past decision making!)

We understand the logic of the present proposal and see that this will considerably improve circulation within the site. Accommodating all space needs in a single building should make the best use of the site and improve quality of outside areas.

In principle, it should have less impact on the area than previous proposals, which included a 3 storey building on Cotham Road.

Other comments and suggestions

Pedestrian access and noise. The new segregated approach for students will move the main source of noise right next door to a private house, and also impact on Springfield House. Very thorough attention, probably involving high boundary wall to deflect sound plus landscaping will be needed to reduce loss of amenity.

Boundaries with residents.

Springfield House and 5/7 Cotham Rd - We assume that the boundary treatment adjacent to will be negotiated directly.

Cotham Park houses and 27 Cotham Lawn Rd - Sports netting or similar will be provided to protect the gardens from balls from the new hard courts. We ask that the hours of use of these is restricted to prevent undue nuisance.

Parking. We ask that every effort is made to ensure that at least the present number of parking spaces are retained. The proposed RPZ (if implemented) is primarily intended for residents, and granting of permits to schools cannot be assumed, and may be resisted by residents.

We suggest that the new parking to Cotham Lawn Rd is broken up by tree planting – not copper beeches but smaller species, with clear stems. This treatment could allow the whole frontage to be used for parking?

Cotham Rd access. We ask that the existing stone boundary wall is breached as little as possible to maintain the continuity of this street feature. We presume that landscaping on this boundary will conceal the (higher level) parking. The number of parking spaces could be increased here?

Wooded area. A very important asset to Cotham Road and Hartfield Avenue and the area. Its large trees and lower level shrubs, many evergreen, create a substantial landscape feature, in scale with the large villas that predominate in this road. It also screens and partly conceals the large recent school buildings. We accept the need for proper management and planned maintenance but this should include new reinforcing planting.

Landscaping and tree planting. We are pleased to note that except for one heavily pollarded tree no felling is involved. This development provides the opportunity to improve the external environment for the school and for the area. We urge that as much green space – grass, planting and trees - is retained or created as possible. The shade provided by trees will be increasingly valuable - for example to the south west facing paved recreation area?

Building Design. We feel that the basic form of the new building is appropriate and will relate well to the main public view, Cotham Road. With regard to 'style' we feel a simple well detailed modern approach, as suggested by the present information and the architects other work seen on website, would be the best approach. The choice of materials and colours etc will be very important. We would welcome more information, including views from ground level, and site sections and elevations, and indication of material options. .

Climate change aspects. The Society is now very concerned to see all possible measures taken to minimise carbon footprint, improve the urban micro climate and 'future proof' new developments. We hope the City Council will make Cotham School an exemplar of the best practice.

We presume that sustainable materials will be preferred and on going energy needs minimised by the design of structure and services. We welcome the intention to use bio mass fuel and urge consideration of renewable energy, such as solar thermal panels for hot water. The long un-shadowed flat roofs would accommodate a line of PV panels.

Green roofs. We welcomed the sedum roof provided at Charnwood and urge that a similar treatment is applied here, where large flat roofs are available to both main block and DT. This opportunity should be taken to partially compensate for the loss of absorbent surfaces on the site and reduce the run off of rainwater to sewers.

The additional benefits for school and local community would include

- extra insulation and thermal mass reduces energy requirement
- reduction of local summer temperatures by transpiration
- improved air quality, (oxygen production, carbon dioxide absorption, trapping of airborne particulates, etc)
- enhanced bio-diversity via new habitat for native bird and insect populations.

All new hard surfaces should be permeable to avoid increased load on sewers.

Temporary buildings. We understand that these will be located on the grass area near to existing buildings.

Appendix B. (Revised 28th June)

Tree preserving alternative plan. (RCAS Planning Group) See *graphic below.*

Based on Skanska drawing ML 0206 –PO2 Softworks. This sketch suggests that a different ramp layout plus possibly the moving of the Tennis court / MUGA back slightly would have made it possible to save all or some of the 4 trees felled.

The trees are all on ground raised some 2m. above street level and the root structure of the front two will have been constrained by retaining walls. Investigation would have been required to establish root structure but the layout shown would have provided a good chance of saving the at least some of the 4 trees.

It would also have provided a more substantial area for planting new trees should any existing have to be removed.

Because RCAS had no idea that these trees were to be felled there was no opportunity to consider the issue, raise objections and/or make constructive suggestions about alternatives.

