

County Councillor calls for alternative School sites to be considered

Councillor Keith Taylor, Chairman of the Planning & Regulatory Committee at Surrey County Council and County Councillor for the Shere Division which includes West Clandon has renewed his call to GBC Planning Policy staff to continue to investigate other possible sites for this school noting that it is possible that some of the consultation responses suggest other sites. He confirms that the County Council will respond to any requests from GBC Planning Policy to consider alternative sites which are 'less problematical'. He adds, "At this stage, however, there is no certainty that such alternative sites will be found."

Councillor Taylor's intervention comes just ahead of a site meeting called by the Parish Council to be attended but representatives from the Surrey Education Authority, Surrey Highways and the Guildford Planning Department at which it was hoped to impress on them the unsuitability of the site for the development proposed.

It is clear from other correspondence seen by the Parish Council that no formal appraisal of the site or the impact locally has yet been undertaken and it is unlikely that anything meaningful will be completed let alone published before the site visit on 8th August or even before the close of the consultation on the Draft Plan

Councillor Taylor confirms that most of the objections raised by Clandon residents relate to transport issues. The main issues and an indication of the County's possible response are as follows:

Walking

Many residents accepted that some pupils might be able to walk to school and might even prefer to do so. However, they felt that the speed of the traffic along the A247 and the narrow pavements would make this dangerous.

Both national and County policy is to encourage pupils to walk to school whenever this is reasonable and safe. This is not only to reduce road traffic but also for health reasons (preventing obesity etc). For secondary schools, the national guidance is that it is reasonable to expect pupils to walk up to 3 miles. Indeed, pupils from low income families (free school meals etc) are only entitled to free transport if they live more than 3 miles away.

For a school at Cuckoo Farm, all children from West or East Clandon would be less than 3 miles away and the same would be true for most of Send and Ripley. For a 5 FE school, up to about 60% of the pupils could therefore be within the recommended walking distance.

There is a normal width pavement on one or other side of the A247 along the whole stretch from Clandon Crossroads to Burnt Common and there is an existing set of traffic lights opposite Meadowlands to allow pedestrians to cross safely. However, a new school would undoubtedly increase the pedestrian traffic through the village and it would therefore be appropriate to consider the possibilities of widening pavements and/or providing other safe crossing points.

However, for pupils coming from the villages to the South (e.g. Shere, Albury or Chilworth) the concerns expressed by residents are entirely justified. These villages are all more than 3

miles away and there is only a pavement for a short stretch of the A25 from Clandon Crossroads up to Newlands Corner.

Cycling

Many residents have commented that the narrow carriageway of the A247 and the speed of motor traffic would make it dangerous for either pupils or staff to cycle.

There is already significant cycle traffic along the A247 through West Clandon. However, much of this is during weekends, with cyclists going to or from the popular cycling areas in the Surrey Hills. There are certainly some “pinch points” along the A247 through West Clandon where two wide vehicles have difficulty passing each other. This obviously creates a more difficult and dangerous situation for cyclists. If a new school was built, consideration could be given to trying to provide more carriageway space for cyclists. However, I suspect that it would be difficult to do much about the pinch points. The residents are probably therefore right about it being difficult if not impossible to achieve a safe and convenient cycle route.

Buses

There is a bus service (the 463) through West Clandon and there is an existing bus stop very close to Cuckoo Farm. However, many residents have commented that the service is so infrequent (once every two hours) that it would be of little value to either pupils or staff.

Unfortunately, the 463 service is currently very little used and has to be heavily subsidised by the Council Taxpayer. On a positive note, the extra custom generated by a secondary school might help to secure the future of the 463 service and possibly even justify an increase in frequency. However, as long as the 463 service continues to run, it would probably be used by at least some staff and pupils, particularly from Woking or the more distant parts of Send and Ripley.

However, many of the villages to be served by the new school currently have “School Special” bus services, mostly running to George Abbot. Some of these would no longer be required because the new school would now be within walking distance. However, for others, the current School Special bus could simply be diverted from George Abbot to the new school.

The A247 would become very congested if all of these School Special buses had just to drop off or pick up at the current bus stop used by the 463. It would probably therefore be necessary to provide a bus drop off and pick up facility within the curtilage of the new school.

Trains

Many residents have commented that the proximity of Cuckoo Farm to the station would not be a benefit because hardly any children from the anticipated catchment area would travel by train. This is probably true, although most secondary schools do have at least some pupils who travel long distances e.g. where the parents have moved home fairly locally and the child does not wish to change school.

However, experience with many existing secondary schools suggests that parking by staff or visitors is almost as much of an issue as parents dropping off or picking up their children. For the residents of nearby residential roads, the drop off and pick up problem is at least limited to a short period at the beginning and end of the school day. However, if staff or visitors park in nearby residential roads, this takes up valuable parking space for the whole day. The proximity of the station could therefore be a very important benefit for staff and visitors wishing to get to school, without having to drive a car there and finding somewhere to park it.

Cars

Many residents have expressed congestion and safety concerns about parents trying to drop off or pick up their children on the A247, close to the hump back bridge.

The County criteria for selecting school sites give great weight to maximizing sustainable travel and thus minimizing the number of children being dropped off or picked up by car. Every school is also required to have a School Travel Plan and one of the main features of this is normally to do everything possible to encourage parents and children to switch from the car to more sustainable modes of travel. However, we must still realistically assume that a significant proportion of pupils will be dropped off and picked up by car.

Many schools are accessed off main roads and, in practice, drivers normally make use the nearest available side roads as informal drop off and pick up areas. For Cuckoo Farm, this means that most drivers would probably try to make use of Meadowlands. With proximity of the station, it should be possible to provide enough parking within the school curtilage to avoid staff or visitors trying to park in Meadowlands. However, the challenge would still be to prevent the situation for the residents of Meadowlands from becoming unacceptable at drop off and pick up time.

The most common solution to this is to identify local "Park and Stride" sites. West Clandon already has a good example of a "Park and Stride" site at the village Infant School. Under a longstanding but informal arrangement, parents are allowed to park within the grounds of Clandon Park for long enough to drop off and pick up their children.

However, the primary school in nearby Ripley has an arrangement under which parents are allowed to use the car park of the village hall to drop off and pick up their children. Given that the West Clandon village hall is so close to Cuckoo Farm, one obvious possibility to explore would be a similar arrangement there.

The Infant school in the nearby village of Chilworth has managed to negotiate an arrangement with the adjacent pub (the Percy Arms) under which parents use its car park as a drop off and pick up area. The Onslow Arms is adjacent to Cuckoo Farm and has a large car park. Again, therefore, an obvious possibility to explore would be a similar arrangement there.

The experience of many other secondary schools across the County suggests that a combination of a robust travel plan and this sort of creative thinking can be sufficient to prevent the situation becoming unacceptable for adjacent residential roads.