

DOWNTON PARISH COUNCIL - NEWSLETTER - JUNE 2015

Downton Primary School's Planning Application – The FACTS

In its recent newsletter, Downton Primary School makes statements concerning its planning application and the position of the Parish Council. Downton Parish Council has produced its own newsletter to clearly state its position and so that residents may determine for themselves the merits of the planning application submitted by the school.

Downton Parish Council strongly supports the expansion of Downton Primary School. However, the Primary School's current planning application differs significantly from the proposals which were supported by the community at the public consultation in July 2013 as follows:

- The **one-storey**, two classroom extension has become a **two-storey**, two classroom extension, the height of which extends above the height of the roofline of the existing school buildings and that of the adjacent historic buildings in this part of the Downton Conservation Area;
- Additional land in the Memorial Gardens would have to be given up for a swale to hold the capacity of the water previously held by the existing Bunny river channel;
- The playground extension is to be made available for public use outside of school hours throughout the year thereby creating additional noise pollution and disturbance for neighbouring properties.

In the light of these material changes and impacts, the Parish Council has acted pro-actively and responsibly by responding to the very reasonable concerns of numerous residents from across the village and by bringing its position into line with the mandate which had emerged from the public consultation.

It is the position of the Parish Council that the way forward for this planning application is in the hands of the Primary School and Wiltshire Council's Education Department and has been so for several months. They need to bring their plans much more into line with the July 2013 proposals by:

- Reducing the height of the classroom block (in line with the existing roofline);
- Removing the swale (by widening the ditch upstream of the Memorial Gardens), and
- Removing the requirement for public access to the extended playground.

The Parish Council has been given no compelling educational, technical or legal reasons for why these changes cannot be made and so cannot see any reason why, by making these changes, the school should not be able to continue to deliver an outstanding education for the children of the parish. The Parish Council looks to Downton Primary School to address the reasonable concerns that have been raised. **Community cohesion across the parish is dependent on the school and Wiltshire Council being willing to compromise.**

If you would like to know more then please read on ...

Downton Parish Council strongly supports the expansion of Downton Primary School

and was the instigator of the discussions with the school, and then Wiltshire Council, in 2012. One of the Parish Council's key priorities, which it set in 2013, is 'To work in partnership with the Headteacher and Governors of Downton Primary School to ensure that all children of primary school age living in Downton parish are given a right of entry to Downton Primary School'.

Consequently, the Parish Council, Downton Primary School, Wiltshire Council and Charles Church jointly developed outline proposals for expanding the existing school. These were based on leasing approximately 12 percent of the Memorial Gardens to the school in exchange for an extension to the Memorial Hall, funded by Charles Church, which would provide accommodation for an expanded community pre-school and additional community meeting space (the extension is subject to a separate planning application).

The Parish Council very much recognises the importance of the Memorial Gardens and its heritage and these concerns were an important driver for presenting the joint proposals at a community consultation held at the Memorial Hall in July 2013. Its primary purpose was to obtain the views of the residents on whether the right balance had been struck between the needs of the Primary School and those of the wider community of Downton parish.

The proposals presented were as follows:

- A **single** storey two classroom extension;
- An extended playground formed by sectioning-off an adjacent strip of the Memorial Gardens and by building across the Bunny river channel;
- Removal of the trees on the current boundary between the Memorial Gardens and the Primary School and replacing with trees along the new boundary;

- An extension to the Memorial Hall to accommodate an expanded Downton Community Pre-School and additional community meeting space.

The outcome of the July 2013 consultation showed that:

- 90% of respondents thought it was very important for all Downton Parish children of primary school age to be able to attend the village primary school;
- 89% of respondents agreed or mostly agreed with the proposals as an acceptable approach for both the school and the community as a whole.

However, **Downton Primary School's planning application in December 2014 differed from the proposals which had been supported by the community.**

They contained:

- A **two-storey**, two classroom extension, the height of which extended above the height of the roofline of the existing buildings;
- A playground which extended significantly further into the Memorial Gardens;
- A playground to be laid out as a multi-use games area ('MUGA') which was to be available for public use outside of school hours throughout the year.

A by-product of the Parish Council's request to ensure the MUGA did not extend further into the Memorial Gardens, was for a swale to be constructed in the north east corner of the Memorial Gardens, to hold the capacity of the water previously held by The Bunny river channel. The Parish Council recognised that this was not an ideal solution but its alternative proposal of widening the ditch in the field upstream of the Memorial Gardens was rejected by Wiltshire Council for reasons of there being no time, in their opinion, to make arrangements with another landowner.

By late January 2015 the Parish Council became aware that the school had not consulted with its neighbours prior to the submission of its planning application and pressed the school to do so right away. This resulted in the school submitting a position statement dated 16th February to Wiltshire Council and in which the Chair of Governors stated the following:

- *"... we are in favour of the classroom extension as shown, but if the height can be reduced without compromising safety, architectural quality, comfort and quality of use for the end user then **we would be minded to agree to it being lower.**"*
- *".... although there would be significant sporting benefits for pupils if the MUGA was created, and it seemed fair to allow the community some use of it because they would be 'losing' some playing field amenity as a result of its provision, **if the strip of playing field were simply to become an extended area of playground the school would be content** because the bigger objective of securing the expansion of the school would still be achieved."*

In mid-February 2015 following the submission of objections from across the parish, the Parish Council considered it appropriate to revisit its previous comments and update them in order to bring its position into line with the mandate which had emerged from the public consultation.

The Parish Council's objections were as follows:

- 1 The provision of public access to the MUGA, on the following grounds:
 - a. Its proximity to the neighbouring listed properties in the Downton Conservation Area and the impact on the quality of life of those residents in the neighbouring

properties in the evenings, weekends and during school holidays.

- b. The Primary School had confirmed that there is no resource at the school to manage the public access to the MUGA.
 - c. A MUGA in this location may jeopardise the Trafalgar School's current plans and ability to obtain funding for a much larger MUGA (size 100m x 63m) which would be well located away from housing, comply with the requirements of Sport England as well as have on site management, sufficient parking, floodlighting, and changing rooms available on site.
- 2 The height of the new classroom block on the grounds of its impact on the neighbouring properties and listed buildings and its view from The Borough which are within the Downton Conservation Area. The height of the roof contravenes Wiltshire Council's own Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan for Downton (2008) and government guidance which states that local authorities should "preserve and enhance conservation areas".

By April the Parish Council had become aware of more detailed drawings for the proposed swale that now showed a more intrusive use of the Memorial Gardens than had previously been presented. In response, the Parish Council contacted the owner of the field upstream of the Memorial Gardens and learnt that he would be willing to consider the option of expanding the capacity of the ditch in his field to retain the water otherwise held by the proposed swale. This proposal was put to Wiltshire Council's Education Department in early May but, as yet, the Parish Council has received no clear indications that this preferred option will be actively pursued.

To date no changes at all have been made to its planning application to reflect the school's position statement of 16th

February. The school continues to cite a Sport England requirement for public access to the MUGA as the reason for refusing to withdraw this aspect from its planning application. However, the proposed MUGA already fails to comply with other Sport England requirements:

- the MUGA is only 2 metres away from the nearest neighbouring property and so is considerably closer than the minimum distance of 12 metres, let alone the ideal of at least 30 metres, recommended by Sport England;
- the MUGA is smaller than Sport England's latest standards;
- Sport England has formally objected to the school's planning application.

The Parish Council has, by reference to existing Wiltshire Council policies and by example precedents of similar applications for MUGAs in other local authorities, provided sound arguments for why community access to the proposed MUGA is not justified. As such, the Parish Council has decided that any lease of the land to the school will be conditional upon it being limited to school use only from 8am to 6pm in term time only.

The Parish Council appreciates that developing a tight site is challenging but, like any planning applicant, the school must consider the likely impact of its expansion on its neighbours. It should not be able to develop in isolation and the community asked to approve whatever plans the school devises simply because 'this is a once in a generation opportunity'. **The neighbours have a legitimate right to make valid and reasonable objections.**

At its April meeting, the Parish Council received a petition signed by 110 residents who lived in

the immediate vicinity of the school calling on the Parish Council to maintain its objections. It also subsequently met with John Glen MP regarding its concerns and received his support for lobbying Wiltshire Education for a more compromising approach.

The Parish Council will continue to work in partnership with the Primary School to ensure that all children of primary school age living in Downton parish are given a right of entry to Downton Primary School. This will require the planning application to be amended to:

- Reduce the height of the classroom block (in line with the existing roofline);
- Remove the requirement for public access to the extended playground;
- Remove the swale (by widening the ditch upstream of the Memorial Gardens).

The Parish Council has been given no compelling educational, technical or legal reasons for why these changes cannot be made and so cannot see any reason why, by making these changes, the school should not be able to continue to deliver an outstanding education for the children of the parish.

A meeting is planned for 3rd July involving Wiltshire Council, Downton Parish Council and Downton Primary School at which it is hoped that a positive way forward can be achieved.

For more information and future updates please see the School Planning Application page on the Parish Council's website at www.downtonparishcouncil.gov.uk.

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