



EFFINGHAM PARISH COUNCIL PRESS RELEASE

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Immediate Release

## **Defending Effingham's Neighbourhood Plan - Berkeley Homes / Howard of Effingham Planning Inquiry**

The Public Inquiry into the appeal against refusal of planning permission to rebuild and enlarge the Howard of Effingham School on Green Belt land, funded by building 295 new houses in the village, ended on Friday 2 June. Planning Inspector David Morgan listened to the closing speeches from the barristers representing Guildford Borough Council and Effingham Parish Council (both seeking dismissal of the appeal) and Berkeley Homes / The Howard Partnership Trust (the appellants). To gain planning permission, the appellants needed to show there were very special circumstances which would outweigh the harm to the Green Belt and to the historic village of Effingham. The final decision rests in the hands of the Secretary of State. Effingham's Neighbourhood Plan, which is set to go to Examination in June, will carry weight in that planning decision.

In closing for Effingham Parish Council, counsel Scott Stemp said that any benefits of the proposal were clearly outweighed by the harm they would cause, and the appeal proposals would 'drive a wrecking ball' through the Neighbourhood Plan. He told the Inquiry:

*"The appeal proposals directly conflict with, and attempt to ride roughshod over, many policies in the Submission Effingham Neighbourhood Plan, from severing the wildlife corridor to fundamentally ignoring the spatial strategy and housing allocations. The reality is that the Howard of Effingham expect the Neighbourhood Plan to conform to the Trust and the school's ideas for the future and development of Effingham.....It would be nothing short of astonishing for a community which has so positively embraced the ethos and practice of localism to then be ignored – and worse, directly contradicted and overridden, by one appeal scheme which will, at a stroke, render pointless so much of a submitted Neighbourhood Plan."*

Parish councillor Paula Moss, Chairman of the Effingham Neighbourhood Plan Advisory Group, said:

*"This proposal would have a devastating effect on the Effingham community and on our Neighbourhood Plan, destroying years of hard work by local residents to set out our vision for the future of our village, including 52 smaller new homes to meet local need, whilst protecting our environment and countryside. I see no need for any expansion of the school as the Howard of Effingham has always been able to meet the needs of the community and this is expected to continue into the foreseeable future."*

Parish councillor Liz Hogger, who is also Borough Councillor for Effingham, said:

*"The appeal proposal would result in urban sprawl overwhelming the historic village and Conservation Area. The proposed site for the huge new school building, on the eastern part of Effingham Lodge Farm, would destroy the clear green gap between Effingham and Little Bookham, and block the wildlife corridor through to the ancient woodland of Thornet Wood. To allow this appeal and force complete revision of Effingham's own Neighbourhood Plan would contradict the whole spirit of localism, allowing the tail to wag the dog."*

Six witnesses for Effingham Parish Council presented their case for dismissal of the appeal during the three-week Inquiry:

- Cllr Cliff Hackett described the dangers and difficulties already faced by pedestrians and drivers resulting from current traffic levels on the narrow roads through Effingham's Conservation Area. He challenged the appellants' predicted traffic increases from the proposals, saying they would increase the risk of accidents, especially for young children walking to the primary school at the mini-roundabout junction in the heart of the village.
- Cllr Paula Moss presented a detailed rebuttal of the appellants' claim that there was a need to expand the Howard of Effingham School to 2000 pupils, providing evidence that increasing the size of the school was not supported by Surrey County Council's plans for this part of Surrey. Rather than extending educational choice for children in Effingham and the surrounding area, expansion here was likely to result in a reduction in choice to attend other nearby schools, hence, actually reducing choice in the wider area.
- Cllr Keith Cornwell, a former governor at the Howard School, strongly denied that there was an urgent need to rebuild the school, pointing to a government-commissioned 'Property Data Survey' which showed that most of the school buildings were in good condition, though there was a need for better maintenance. In his view, there was plenty of scope for improvements and replacement buildings on the existing school site, and this approach is supported in the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Cllr Liz Hogger gave evidence on the planning policy objections to the proposals. She pointed out that Effingham Lodge Farm was classified as 'high sensitivity' Green Belt, which is protected from development in the Borough's draft Local Plan going to consultation this month. The appeal proposals contravene Neighbourhood Plan policies, including the Local Green Space at Browns Field, the wildlife corridor across Effingham Lodge Farm, and the allocation of four housing sites in the village for smaller homes for young families and older people wishing to down-size.
- Heritage expert Peter Bell, of Asset Heritage Consulting, described Effingham Conservation Area, which includes the historic village centred around the Anglo Saxon parish church and a small number of medieval farmhouses, and contains many Grade II Listed and locally listed buildings. The addition of another 295 dwellings (37 within the conservation area and 258 alongside it), an increase of 83%, will irreversibly change the way in which the historic village of Effingham is perceived. Perception will no longer be of an evolved medieval village in rural surroundings but of a much larger modern suburb with a historic core.
- Ecology expert Paul Whitby, of The Ecology Co-op, provided evidence about the impact of the proposals on the wildlife corridor and the Site of Nature Conservation Importance at Thornet Wood, including concerns about the likely presence of protected species of bat, and evidence about the 'marshy grassland' habitat on Effingham Lodge Farm. Mr. Whitby observed a representative of Berkeley Homes walking across the marshy grassland on the morning of the Inspector's site visit, clapping his hands to the distress of a nesting pair of lapwings, birds on the Red list of Conservation Concern. The Parish Council brought this matter to the attention of the Inspector.

Speaking at the end of the Inquiry, Councillor Arnold Pindar, Chairman of Effingham Parish Council, said

*"Whatever the outcome of this planning appeal, residents of Effingham can be sure that our Council witnesses provided well researched, detailed evidence, to support the strongly held views of the vast majority of our residents."*

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