

## **Ashdown House Planning Application (the “Application”)**

### **Comment**

The Council has carefully reviewed the revised Application and recognizes that some changes have been made seeking to address concerns expressed by many parties. However, we consider these changes to be very limited in extent and fall far short of addressing our concerns and those of our parishioners.

As previously stated, we will welcome a development proposal for this site, so long as it:

- Protects the integrity of the historically important building at its centre
- Has a realistic Transport Study
- Has appropriate traffic management on the long drive, which doubles as a bridleway extensively used by horses, pedestrians and cyclists, as well as those other homes and businesses who share it
- Has a safe junction with Hartfield Road
- Makes use of existing assets, rather than demolishing them
- Protects important trees
- Provides a level of affordable housing and/or a S106 agreement that will be applied to benefit this Parish

Unfortunately, we feel that as currently resubmitted the Application still falls far short on these, and therefore we object.

We comment further on some of these issues below.

#### **The building and development**

We understand that a view may be taken that, in the absence of anyone wishing to purchase the House as a single dwelling or hotel (as approved for Homestall Manor, a closed listed ex-boarding school in this Parish), the division of the House into flats is the only solution. However, in our view, this will result in significant damage, particularly due to the unsympathetic nature of the proposal. Pressure should be put on the developers for a better solution, as Wealden Planning did with Homestall, that protects the external and internal features of this internationally important Grade II\* building.

Many of the 90+ comments on this application have commented on this aspect in detail, so we will not repeat them here.

The nature of the surrounding development is totally out of character for a very rural setting and will strongly detract from the main building.

#### **The Transport Study**

Again a significant cause of concern of our Parishioners.

Previously, we strongly questioned the statement that this development will not result in any intensification of traffic, based as it is on deeply flawed assumptions regarding the number of day pupils at the school. For almost all its existence the school only accepted boarders but in the last few years, when pupil numbers had fallen by over 30% from the height, it sought to attract some day pupils, but with limited success. The developers have responded to East Sussex Highways with a further report that seeks to justify their previous assumptions and in doing so have chosen to select the most advantageous year for this (although note in the year in question the school itself advertised that boarders represented two thirds of the pupils, not the 50% claimed). Further the acceptance that some day pupils may be transported by minibuses, with the assumption of one 8-seater bus, ignores the fact that the School owned three larger minibuses. Further the report ignores that some day pupils will come from the

same family and some from teachers living in the family houses on site (reduced fees a key incentive used to attract teachers to prep schools)

We still do not accept any suggestion that the school could possibly reopen as a day school, resulting in even more traffic. Ashdown House closed partly because it was unable to attract sufficient day pupils, no doubt due to the strong competition from the successful day/boarding schools very close by (Michael Hall, Brambletye and Cumnor House). The impact of VAT on school will now represent a further strong deterrent

### **The drive**

The drive is a long, single-track lane with raised grass verges on either side and only two passing points. The verges are approximately a metre each, with either hedges or mostly lower arable fields (which form part of the Medway flood plain) beyond. We understand that the verges are not included in the right of way.

Given the above, the likely level of traffic will require either a reduction in the size of the development or measures to ameliorate the severe impact on existing users, including both homes and businesses, and the bridleway. This Application should be declined unless the developer can reach an agreement with, and pay for, further passing places for the long term. More immediately, it is a struggle to imagine how destruction/construction traffic can be managed. The developer states that contractors will be made aware of the constraints, but there is no possible holding place for vehicles at the Hartfield Road end of the drive, other than on that Road, which would be extremely dangerous. Indeed, we believe they would have no automatic right to introduce traffic management measures on a bridleway owned by another party.

Additionally, the current informal connexion from the drive onto the Forest Way should be adopted by East Sussex Pathways, who may require a financial contribution, to avoid the added danger of horses and people on the old, narrow railway bridge over the Forest Way.

### **The junction**

Many comments from our Parishioners have expressed their concern about how the Transport Study has assessed, the impact on the junction of the drive with Hartfield Road. We support these comments and wish to add our further observations. It is not obvious from maps or photographs, but the junction from the drive is steep, very narrow down to and beyond the old railway bridge (and no passing points nearby). Most traffic will, from the development, be turning right towards a traffic calming point; those going to the development will come from that point and be unable to turn off the road onto the drive, causing a major pinch point. We note that a proposal to slightly adjust the junction, but this will provide limited benefit. We also question the right of the developer to make such changes to the landowner's road.

### **Existing assets**

We are disappointed that the developers have not made any effort to consider the use some existing assets to make their development part of the Village/Parish. Some attempt at this would, in our view, have eased this Application in making it part of the Village, rather than effectively a remote gated community on an island on the flood plain. The swimming pool used to be available to Forest Row Primary School; the theatre would be an asset to a Village that is highly artistic; and abandoning cricket/rugby/football fields to untended landscaping are all things that could embrace any development with its community.

Retention of such assets could also provide a source of income to ensure that the Grade II\* building is well maintained in the future.

### **Community engagement**

Developing on our concerns above, we are disturbed at the total lack of community engagement after the Application was first submitted.

The Council was approached for a meeting prior to the first Application, which we accepted so long as we could see some specific proposals beforehand. Since when there has been no communication from the developers or their agent. Not even responses to our invitations to attend our public meetings to discuss the Applications.

Given the number of submitted concerns from adjoining neighbours and the Council, we would have expected a responsible developer to engage with, rather ignore, the community.

### **Trees**

We require TPOs on a number of trees. We understand that there is no current intention to remove these but wish to have this formalised.

### **Affordable housing**

We understand that any developer seeks to avoid any obligation to provide affordable housing by entering an S106 agreement, which this developer does blatantly. This Parish is in dire need of affordable housing. If Wealden is willing to accept such an agreement, which would be disappointing, the District should be prepared to use the proceeds for this purpose.

### **In Conclusion**

We would need to see very significant changes before supporting such an application. As it stands, this proposal makes no contribution to the strategic objectives of the Parish. The development is far from the Centre of the Village, assets that could be used for the benefit of the Parish are to be demolished and the design of the development is inappropriate for the location.