



SDNPA report PC24/10

8th November 2010

EAST HAMPSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Application No: 39366/017

**Gospel Hall and associated access, parking and landscaping
Bohunt Manor, Portsmouth Road, Liphook GU30 7LD**

Report by: Interim Head of Planning

Purpose of the report – This report relates to an application for the erection of a Gospel Hall with parking, landscaping and access on the edge of Liphook. The purpose of this report is to gain members' agreement to comments to be submitted to East Hampshire District Council on the application.

Resource implications - There may be implications for staff resources should the application go to appeal.

1. Recommendation

That East Hampshire District Council be advised that:

1. The National Park Authority accepts the need for this community to meet and interact as part of their faith and recognises the deficiencies of the existing hall in Fernhurst. The Authority also acknowledges that the Fernhurst Assembly has been seeking an alternative site for a number of years without success for a variety of reasons.
2. The Authority also accepts that, in policy terms, Policy HC3 of the East Hampshire District Local Plan Second Review allows for new community facilities, such as that proposed, in the countryside. However, permission will only be granted if the criteria set out in the policy are satisfied. The Authority notes that the site search does not appear to be up-to-date, and it cannot therefore be confident that it demonstrates the lack of alternative sites that would satisfy the second criterion or at least be more appropriate for the National Park, such as a site outside the Park.
3. In addition, in order to satisfy Policies GS1 and GS3 of the Local Plan, the proposed development should conserve and enhance the landscape and setting of Liphook.

The National Park Authority considers that the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment submitted with the application underplays the impact of the proposed development, particularly on landscape character, and that the proposed development, with a large utilitarian building and urban car park, lighting and fencing would significantly detract from that character and the contribution of the site and the area of land to the north to the setting of Liphook, and represent an extension of the urban area into the countryside.

4. The National Park Authority has a duty to foster the social and economic well being of communities within the Park, which could include a community of faith. However, the Authority notes that the majority of the members of the Fernhurst Assembly live outside the Park. Accordingly, it is not considered that the Authority's duty lends any significant support to the application, nor the fact that the existing Meeting Hall is within the National Park. The Authority does not consider, either, that a potential improvement in biodiversity from the proposed landscaping outweighs the likely harm to landscape character.
5. The National Park Authority therefore objects to this application, and suggests that the identification of a suitable site be pursued through the LDF process.

2. The Site

- 2.1 The site is on land forming part of the former Bohunt Manor Estate (the Manor is now used a separate office building) to the south-west of Liphook and just within the National Park. The site is diamond-shaped, slopes gently from north to south and extends to 1.1ha. It is currently unused arable land, forming the southern corner of a field alongside Portsmouth Road (the B2070).
- 2.2 The site is bounded by a mature tree belt to the south-east boundary along Portsmouth Road. To the south-west boundary is some vegetation, beyond which are Links Cottages, Links Hotel, a golf course and the site of permitted allotments. The north-western and north-eastern boundaries are currently open.
- 2.3 Permission has been granted for a new doctors' surgery and medical centre on land forming the north-east corner of the field, together with a new roundabout on Portsmouth Road at the junction with Station Road to the east and a new access into the field to the west. The new access would serve the surgery/medical centre and also both proposed sports pitches and allotments which have also been permitted, the pitches a way to the north-west of the proposed Gospel Hall site and the allotments a way to the south-west.
- 2.4 A copy of the context plan is attached to this report and will be displayed at the Committee meeting.

3. The proposals

- 3.1 The application is for the erection of a single-storey Gospel Hall (use class D1), with associated access, parking and landscaping works. The proposed Gospel Hall would measure a maximum of 27.3m in width and 45.2m in depth and would have a gross footprint of 1,150 sq.m. It would have an eaves height of between (approximately) 2.7m and 4m, and a ridge height of approximately 7.5m. The roof would be constructed of red/brown tile profiled steel sheeting with horizontal timber boarding stained dark brown with a red brick plinth proposed for the walls.
- 3.2 A car park with 84 spaces is proposed adjacent to the Gospel Hall on its north-west side. The car park would be lit by 12 lights mounted on 4m high columns. Access to the car park would be via an upgraded section of the permitted access track to the proposed allotments. The existing trees along the south-east and south-west site boundaries would be retained, with new tree planting proposed along the north-east and north-west site boundaries and landscaping for the car park. The site would be enclosed by a 2m high green metal mesh fencing set back on all four boundaries, with 2m high metal gates.
- 3.3 The proposed development would leave an open area of the field between the access road off the permitted roundabout and the Gospel Hall to the north and south respectively, with the Portsmouth Road to the east and the proposed upgraded access road to the Gospel Hall to the west. This open site is not owned by the applicants and no proposals for this area of land form part of this current application.
- 3.4 It is proposed that the Gospel Hall would be used generally on no more than four days a week, although use on a Wednesday and Thursday would alternate from week to week. The busiest day would be a Sunday with two services operating at different times of the day. For these occasions, the expected congregation would be between 40 – 120 for the local Brethren and up to 300 for a joint event with a neighbouring assembly. However, the Hall would also be used once a year for a “Fellowship Meeting”, normally over a weekend, when it could be filled to its capacity of 650 people.

4. Background

- 4.1 The applicants are The Gospel Hall Trust, acting on behalf of the Brethren, ‘a gospel-based church open to all members of the public to attend meetings’. *‘It operates as a Christian Community where fellowship and integration are vital components so that the social fabric of society and families can be supported and nurtured. They rely on daily assembling to support their prime objectives of Christian worship, faith, fellowship, teaching and social values’.*

- 4.2 The Planning Supporting Statement submitted with the application explains that such objectives require a suitable place of assembly. *'Typically, but not necessarily, an Assembly consists of Brethren living in a town and nearby villages and settlements all within easy reach of each other. Within this area there will be a number of smaller meeting halls used twice a week and one larger or main hall where the whole place will gather for the other services throughout the week. One or two of these services will include a combined service with the Brethren from a neighbouring Assembly'*.
- 4.3 In this instance, the "Fernhurst" Local Assembly, established originally in the early 1900's, comprises people living in Fernhurst, Liphook, Camelsdale, Haslemere, Hindhead and Grayshott. Neighbouring services are held with the Brethren from the Bognor area or, on occasions, those from Portsmouth, Farnham and Guildford.
- 4.4 The main hall for the Brethren in this area is at Fernhurst. The Planning Statement explains that this hall is too small to properly accommodate the numbers now attending the services held there, and there is no space for expansion. The Statement continues *'The replacement of the current hall at Fernhurst is not a viable option for the applicants due to the size of the site, the significant planning constraints imposed by the site's location within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty'*. Car parking is a problem when meetings are being held.
- 4.5 The Fernhurst Assembly has therefore been looking for a new site on which to build a larger hall for approximately eight years. The criteria for the site included a minimum size of approximately 1 ha and a location somewhere near the intersection of Hampshire, West Sussex and Surrey where the majority of the congregation reside. The application is accompanied by an Alternative Site Search Report that explains a total of 33 sites have been seriously considered during that time (26 of which are outside the National Park). The Report highlights the tight planning and environmental constraints in the search area.
- 4.6 Liphook has been a favoured potential location as the applicants consider it to be less constrained (relatively); has a range of services but currently no meeting hall to meet the needs of the Brethren Community living there; it is within easy reach of all the Brethren in this area as it is accessible by train - the station is a short walk from the proposed Hall. The Alternative Site Report notes that when the application for the medical centre was submitted, six alternative sites had been considered and discounted around Liphook. These sites were reconsidered for the proposed Gospel Hall, but discounted for the same reasons. The Study therefore states *'Clearly, it has been accepted that there are no alternative preferable sites for the medical centre within or close to Liphook and this thus similarly applies to the Trust and the site required is also larger than the medical centre'*.
- 4.7 The intention is that this new hall would be the main hall facility, with the existing Fernhurst meeting hall reverting to a small local facility.

5. Assessment

National Park Purposes

5.1 The site is within the South Downs National Park. National Parks have two statutory purposes which must be taken into account when considering planning proposals that could have an impact upon the National Park:

1. *'To conserve and enhance their natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage'*.
2. *'To promote opportunities for the public understanding and enjoyment of these special qualities.'*

If there is a conflict between these two policies, then the first must take precedence. National Park Authorities also have a duty in pursuing those purposes:

'To seek to foster the economic and social well being of local communities within the National Park'.

5.2 This duty makes specific reference to communities within the Park. Whilst this is normally taken to refer to communities in settlements, there is no reason why it should not also apply to communities with shared interests. In this instance, the community could be considered to be the Fernhurst Assembly of the Brethren. However, even if that is accepted, it is clear that the Assembly covers a much wider area than the National Park – as explained above, the Assembly includes members from Fernhurst, Liphook, Camelsdale, Haslemere, Hindhead and Grayshott – and it would therefore appear that the majority of the Assembly live outside the Park.

5.3 A large part of the Site Search area is within the National Park, but this appears to be because it is skewed by the inclusion of Fernhurst. The map showing the search area indicates that of 129 members of the Assembly, only 29 are in Fernhurst, with the majority in Hindhead (41), Haslemere (35) and Liphook (24). Although the current meeting hall at Fernhurst is within the National Park, this is an accident of history, and there is no clear link between the Fernhurst Assembly and the National Park. It is significant that 26 of the potential sites considered were outside what was to become the National Park.

National planning policy

5.4 Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 1 *Delivering Sustainable Development* promotes 'social cohesion and inclusion', and requires development plans to promote development that creates socially inclusive communities. PPS1 also requires planning policies to seek to protect and enhance the quality, character and amenity value of the countryside and urban areas as a whole, with a high level of protection given to the

most valued townscapes and landscapes. Those with national and international designations should receive the highest level of protection.

- 5.5 The PPS also explains that planning should seek to maintain and improve the local environment, with high quality design being the aim of all those involved in the development process, and a key objective being ensuring that developments respond to their local context and create or reinforce local distinctiveness. Good design should *'be integrated into the existing urban form and the natural and built environments'*.
- 5.6 National planning policy relating to the countryside is to be found principally in PPS7 *Sustainable Development in Rural Areas*. The objectives for rural areas include *'thriving, inclusive and sustainable rural communities'*, *'good quality, sustainable development that respects and, where possible, enhances local distinctiveness and the intrinsic qualities of the countryside'*, and *'continued protection of the open countryside for the benefit of all, with the highest level of protection for our most valued landscapes and environmental resources'*.
- 5.7 In paragraph 21 it states: *'Nationally designated areas comprising National Parks.....have been confirmed by the Government as having the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. The conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape and countryside should therefore be given great weight in planning policies and development control decisions in these areas'*.

Local planning policy

- 5.8 At the local level, Policy GS1 of the East Hampshire District Local Plan Second Review is a general policy relating to sustainable development. It allows development that would meet the social needs of the District, provided that it would respect the need to maintain and, where required, to preserve or enhance the natural or built environment. The policy sets out a number of considerations to be taken into account in determining planning applications, which include the overall appearance, intrinsic character and quality of the countryside and its landscape character areas and the distinctiveness, intrinsic character, setting and individual identity of settlements.
- 5.9 Policy GS3 is another generic policy, and relates to the protection of the countryside, which is to be protected for its intrinsic character and beauty. Development will not be granted for development within the countryside (the application site is outside, although adjacent to, the settlement policy boundary for Liphook) unless specified criteria are met. These include that the development is necessary for farming, forestry, countryside recreation, small-scale tourism or any other genuine and proven need for which a countryside location is essential.

5.10 Policy HC3 states that, in the countryside, the development of community facilities (which include meeting halls and churches) will only be permitted if it:

- i. the proposal meets an identified local need;*
- ii. there are no suitable sites available within a settlement policy boundary;*
- iii. the site is adjacent, or well-related to, the built-up area of the settlement;*
and
- iv. the traffic generated is of a type or amount appropriate to rural roads, particularly sunken lanes, and does not require improvements which would harm the character of rural roads in the area'.*

5.11 The applicants make the point that neither the Waverley Borough, East Hampshire District nor Chichester District Local Plans make any allocations for places of religious worship, and believe that, in order to justify the development in the countryside, the proposal needs to demonstrate compliance with the four criteria of Policy HC3.

5.12 The “need” for the proposed development as explained by the applicants is set out in section 4 of this report, as is the applicants’ search for a suitable site since 2002. The applicants consider that they have demonstrated a lack of suitable and affordable sites within any defined settlement policy areas. The site is close to the built-up area in that there is housing development on the other side of Portsmouth Road opposite the application site which lies within the settlement policy boundary.

5.13 As regards access and traffic, a new roundabout and access road have already been approved. A Transport Planning Statement submitted with the application concludes that the proposal will not result in a significant traffic impact during the normal peak hours because of the timing and nature of the proposed use. 56 two-way movements per day are projected, which can be accommodated on the B2070.

5.14 However, whilst it is acknowledged that the applicants have been looking for a suitable site for a number of years, and have assessed over 30 sites in that time, many of the sites were considered and rejected in 2003/2004. Although some of these sites have subsequently been redeveloped, there is a possibility that circumstances have changed and one or more of the remaining sites may now be available. There is no indication in the Alternative Site Search Report that previously-discounted sites have been reconsidered, or that the site search is otherwise up-to-date (other than that the last of the alternative sites considered was this year).

5.15 Although none of the existing local plans covering the site search area identify a site for this proposed development, it is considered that pursuing such an allocation through the LDF would be preferable to a speculative planning application. Of course, for the area of the Park, it will be the Authority that produces the LDF, and the needs of communities within the Park will clearly be a very important component of that policy framework.

The visual and landscape impact

- 5.16 A Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) has been submitted with the application, which concludes that the site is only visible from short-range, close views and demonstrates that the proposed development would be generally discreet within the landscape as a result of the site's topography and characteristics and that of the surrounding area. The Planning Statement explains that the proposed building has been sited close to the established boundaries in order to reduce its visibility in views and its visual impact on the open qualities of the field and landscape to the west. It also explains that the proposed materials and soft landscaping would help assimilate the building into the landscape, and the retention of the existing roadside vegetation would restrict views of the building.
- 5.17 The LVIA concludes that it is considered that the additional impact of the new building will not be significant in the context of the mixed development locally, and that the '*proposed rationalisation of the building on the site*' and the introduction of new native tree, shrub, hedgerow and meadow planting will provide benefit to wildlife and visual amenity.
- 5.18 It is accepted that the main views of the proposed Gospel Hall would be from close-range views. However, the site and these views are within the Park, and are no less important for only being at close range. Your officers consider that the LVIA has underplayed the likely impact of the proposed development, particularly on landscape character.
- 5.19 The site is an area of unused arable land and is not particularly attractive in its current state. Nevertheless, its open, undeveloped nature relates to the wider countryside rather than the built-up area, presumably the reason for its inclusion within the National Park, and the site and land to the north contribute to the setting of Liphook. The proposed medical centre and new access road are, of course, already permitted and will intrude into this undeveloped land on the west side of Portsmouth Road within the Park, but the proposed Gospel Hall, with its large extent of physical development, unrelated physically or perceptually to the built-up area, would consolidate and extend this intrusion. The remaining open area between the medical centre and access road and the Hall would be too small and compromised to still provide an open character to the setting of the village. Undoubtedly there will be pressure to develop this area in the future.
- 5.20 The Hall itself is somewhat utilitarian in design and the proposed development also includes an 84-space block paved car park with 12 no. 4m high lighting columns, and a proposed 2m high green metal mesh fence. These are urban features that would be alien to the character and appearance of this area of countryside.

Biodiversity

5.21 A Phase 1 ecological survey of the site has shown that the site has low ecological value in its present state, with no protected species, although the report recommends that the boundary planting is retained to support any possible breeding birds or bat foraging usage, and the use of low-level lighting and shielding to avoid disturbance. The proposals reflect these recommendations. It is accepted that appropriate planting could increase biodiversity on the site.

6. Conclusion

6.1 The need for this community to meet and interact as part of their faith is accepted, as is the fact that the existing hall in Fernhurst is too small and has inadequate parking. It is also accepted that the Fernhurst Assembly has been seeking an alternative site for a number of years without success for a variety of reasons. Clearly the application site meets their aspirations and requirements.

6.2 In policy terms, it is accepted that Policy HC3 of the East Hampshire District Local Plan allows for new community facilities, such as that proposed, in the countryside, but only if the criteria set out in the policy are satisfied. The main issue is with the second criterion, which requires a demonstration that there are no sites available within a settlement policy boundary. The site search does not appear to be up-to-date, and your officers cannot therefore be confident that it demonstrates the lack of alternative sites that would satisfy this criterion or at least be more appropriate for the National Park.

6.3 Although, as this proposal is not considered to be “major development” in terms of PPS7 there is no specific policy imperative to demonstrate that no sites are available outside the National Park, given the requirement PPS7 that great weight be given to the conservation of the natural beauty of the landscape and countryside of National Parks, it is reasonable to expect that a site outside the Park should be preferred where possible.

6.4 In addition, in order to satisfy Policies GS1 and GS3 of the Local Plan, the proposed development should conserve and enhance the landscape and setting of Liphook. Your officers consider that the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment submitted with the application underplays the impact of the proposed development, particularly on landscape character, and that the proposed development, with a large utilitarian building and urban car park, lighting and fencing would significantly detract from that character and the contribution of the site and the area of land to the north to the setting of Liphook.

6.5 Although the National Park Authority has a duty to foster the social and economic well being of communities within the Park, and a “community” could refer to the Brethren, and some members of the Fernhurst Assembly live within the National Park, the majority of the members of the Assembly come from outside the Park. Accordingly, it is

not considered that the Authority's duty lends any significant support to the application, nor the fact that the existing Meeting Hall is within the National Park. A potential improvement in biodiversity from the proposed landscaping is not considered to outweigh the likely harm to landscape character.

6.6 The Committee is therefore recommended to object to this application, and to suggest that the identification of a suitable site be pursued through the LDF process.

7. Resource implications

7.1. There are potential implications for staff resources should the application go to appeal.

8. Risk management

8.1. The risks of costs being awarded against the National Park Authority at appeal are low, providing the National Park Authority does not act unreasonably. The recommendation that is presented the Committee is considered by your officers to be reasonable.

9. Human rights, equalities, health and safety

9.1. As the National Park Authority is not the determining authority there are no implications for the Authority arising out of the application.

10. Consultees (if applicable)

None

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Attachments: Location plan, site context plan, proposed elevation drawings.