

SPEECH TO COUNCIL – LEEDS GIRLS' HIGH ACTION GROUP

Lord Mayor, Councillors, I am grateful for the opportunity to speak to you today about the proposals for the development of the Leeds Girls' High School site in Headingley. My name is Martin Staniforth and I speak on behalf of the Leeds Girls' High Action Group, which brings together residents and community associations in the Hyde Park and Headingley area. My colleagues are Annie Faulder, Rachel Harkess, Richard Hughes and Isobel Sidebottom.

Lord Mayor, the High School site is the jewel in the crown of our area, a site which, if developed sensitively, has the potential to transform the area for local people now and in the future. At a public meeting in the spring over 100 local residents were clear about what they wanted to see there. They wanted low-density family housing. They wanted to keep the green spaces and trees and to preserve the heritage buildings and boundary walls. They wanted an eco-friendly development with minimal impact on traffic congestion. And they wanted the existing swimming pool and sports hall off Chestnut Avenue to become a community facility.

These views reflected three main concerns. First is the need to rebalance the local population. Headingley and Hyde Park have become a mecca for students, and their sheer concentration has brought problems of refuse, noise and crime. High quality, mixed, family housing on the High School site would help to improve matters by attracting long-term residents into the area and encouraging a wider range of local shops and amenities.

Second is the need to retain and increase green space. The playing fields and open spaces on the school site offer a rare opportunity to do this in an area where more green space is a priority, and to improve the health of the local population, and particularly local children, through increased exercise.

Third is concern about traffic congestion on the A660 which has worsened markedly in recent years. The move of the school, which will reduce traffic at peak times, could help to tackle this problem through a development which would make maximum use of public transport links to the City centre rather than encouraging car use.

Sadly the draft planning and development brief for the site rides roughshod over the community's wishes. The plans, which have been described as "a developer's charter", propose building on much of the current green space including protected playing pitches. They propose 4-6 storey apartment blocks on the Victoria Road side of the site. They show no commitment to adequate provision of affordable housing. They make no mention of the need to comply with Council policy to restrict developments for student housing in the area. And they make no real assessment of the impact of the development on local traffic.

The plans as they stand will do nothing to improve conditions for residents and reverse the decline in their quality of life. They will not attract significant numbers of families into the area, which is what the local community badly needs. They will reduce, rather than increase, the amount of green space. They will impair the visual attraction of the site. And if, as we fear, the proposed apartment blocks become student accommodation, they will worsen not improve the population mix in the area.

A well-attended public meeting held last month unanimously rejected the current proposals. As well as objecting to the plans, residents were particularly unhappy that they came with the Council's logo on them, implying that the Council endorsed what was being proposed, and with the unseemly haste with which they were being rushed through. They were also concerned that there was no attempt to look at the cumulative impact of individual planning proposals on the community – to look at the bigger picture. They expect Councillors to stand up on behalf of the local community and to ensure that any development on this site is sensitive to the needs of local people and is fully considered and scrutinised.

To sum up, we fundamentally object to what is currently proposed for the site which would be detrimental to the local community. We believe there is a once in a lifetime opportunity to create an exemplary sustainable development on the site and we would be willing to work in partnership with the Council and the School to achieve this. But this can only happen if the Executive Board rejects the current plans when it considers them next month.

Thank you.