

Opponents hit out as row over new school site grows

‘Council’s claims are misleading’

CAMPAIGNERS have blasted Oldham Council’s decision to buy land in Diggle to build Saddleworth School on — and accused the council of being misleading.

The Chronicle revealed on Friday that the council is in final negotiations to acquire 13.28 acres of land at the former WH Shaw Pallet Works, off Huddersfield Road, to relocate the school.

Councillor Amanda Chadderton, Cabinet member for education, employment and skills, insisted the decision is unanimously backed by the Education Funding Agency (EFA) and Saddleworth

by **KEN BENNETT**

School Technical Group.

She said campaign group Save Diggle Action Group (SDAG) proposals to rebuild the school on its existing site were incorrectly costed and created safety issues and a lack of car parking during construction.

But SDAG spokesman Councillor Mike Buckley called it misleading and said a two-storey sports hall, playing fields and fences will be on green belt on the Diggle site, which will change its planning status to development.

He says the technical group has no qualifications, is self-elected, not representative of the com-

munity and its decision was not unanimous.

He added: “This is nothing but pure propaganda in favour of relocating the school to Diggle. Like previous statements by the council, it is short on fact but high on rhetoric.

“The rejection of recent proposals to build the school in Uppermill was made in the absence of any rigorous assessment. No one, including the technical group, had seen the results of the evaluation of the scheme that took place. The claims about inaccurate costings cannot be substantiated without the evidence on which these statements were made.

“The health and safety issues are clearly a red herring. These concerns can-



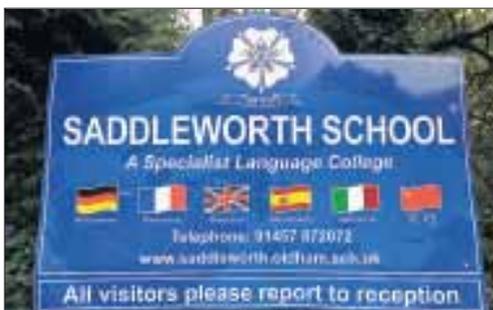
COUNCILLOR Mike Buckley



COUNCILLOR Amanda Chadderton



STUART Coleman . . . Diggle Community Association chairman



SADDLEWORTH School . . . controversy as council moves to buy land in Diggle

clearly be successfully managed. Is staff car parking during the construction period really a reason not to build in Uppermill?

“The lack of technical and financial information on both proposals brings into question the rigour and objectivity with which the decision to move to Diggle has been made. The council seem to be under the impression people do not need this information and will instead blindly trust the council to make the right decision.

“Uppermost in the council’s decision is undoubtedly the land swap deal, exchanging the existing Uppermill site for the green fields of Diggle. The Uppermill site is prime development land that would fetch a high price.

“The Diggle site is 75 per cent green belt, land that

could not be used for housing or industry and would command a much lower premium. How much are the council making out of the deal? They have refused to give any indication of the numbers involved.

“I am amazed the council are close to signing a deal. Surely they should first wait for planning permission to build on the Diggle site — by no means a certainty in view of the number of national and local planning policies with which the proposals will conflict.

Wrong

Councillor Graham Sheldon, chairman of Saddleworth Parish Council, said he is concerned with a range of issues including the loss of open space and the need for children to be bussed to the

new school.

He added: “The decision to use the Diggle site in my opinion is the wrong move. The existing site has been overlooked and has been proved to be more than adequate.”

Stuart Coleman, chair of Diggle Community Association and a new member of the school’s technical group, said: “I’m surprised to discover that there is, in Oldham Council’s opinion, unity among ward and parish councillors, Saddleworth School Technical Group and members of the local community.

“As far as I am aware several members of the technical group are against building in Diggle as are the majority of parish councillors.

“As the DCA’s chair, I meet members of the community on a regular basis and I have not, as yet, met anyone in favour of the school being built in Diggle.

“I find it disturbing, on one hand, Oldham Council say they will not build on Green Belt and then go on to say, ‘Green belt land would only be used in this scheme for sports facilities and ancillary buildings.’

“One of the ancillary buildings is, I believe, a sports hall. Also, they are proposing to install an all weather pitch. I don’t understand how this is not building on green belt.”



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