Don't Move Saddleworth School

OMBC: ABOVE THE LAW & IRRESPONSIBLE

Despite a Judicial Review legal ruling to consider Uppermill, Oldham Council continue to bully through the planning application for the same flawed and unsustainable scheme at Diggle!

Residents & parents have been hugely misled by Oldham Council & the ESFA (formerly the EFA)

The recent Judicial Review was the only opportunity that Saddleworth residents had to properly challenge the extremely shaky foundations on which the school site selection decision was made in 2015 – the decision to choose the Diggle site didn’t go to planning committee but was voted through at a Council meeting – denying residents the right to properly object to the material foundations of that decision i.e. to challenge whether or not the planning issues had been properly taken into account, when comparing school sites.

Shaky foundations

The shaky foundations of that decision have crumbled before the Council’s & ESFA’s eyes, before a High Court judge, yet they are still holding onto the original ‘story’ & ‘messages’ constructed by their PR departments that this is the right decision – even though all the evidence now shows that it was not the right decision to make in 2015 and is still not the right decision now.

The 2015 Education Funding Agency Feasibility Study site selection exercise was heavily criticised in the High Court as being arbitrary, flawed and unfair. The site comparison exercise was merely ‘window dressing’ to make Diggle look like the best site:

- Firstly, It avoided including issues that would have resulted in a ‘worse’ score for Diggle & a ‘better’ score for Uppermill e.g. highways, light pollution, noise, heritage, landscape.
- Secondly, the way they ranked the 4 site ‘options’ that they were comparing was statistically flawed at a very primitive level. They got the maths wrong!

Don’t let OMBC & the ESFA make a mockery of democracy: make them re-visit the flawed site selection process.

The school site selection study has been exposed as flawed by the Judicial Review: OMBC & the ESFA no longer have any rational basis to justify the decision to move the school to Diggle.

The ESFA & Oldham Council should now re-visit the flawed site selection exercise.

Instead they have chosen to continue with the Diggle planning application & prioritise a land-swap deal with a local developer above all else:

- Disregarding their obligations under planning policy & environmental law.
- Showing utter contempt for principles of democracy & justice.
- Showing utter contempt for the genuine concerns of those opposing the move to Diggle.

TAKE ACTION

OBJECT TO THE ‘REFRESHED’ planning application for the Diggle site option + make them revisit the site selection process

SEE BACK PAGE FOR HOW

IN THIS ISSUE - Diggle v Uppermill

- The Diggle Site will result in: the MOST traffic, transport & safety issues; the MOST environmental harm and require the MOST public funds
- 18 good reasons to OBJECT to the ‘refreshed’ Diggle planning application
1. Poor access to a small village, traffic queues & congestion: Diggle is a virtual cul-de-sac, the entrance and exit from which – at the south end of Huddersfield Road – will be controlled by new traffic lights. Parents and residents will face long delays entering and leaving the village; traffic queues will extend beyond the junction of Huddersfield Road. Oldham Council have acknowledged this.

2. Safety issues: Should the junction priority at the Huddersfield/Standedge road junction be changed to accommodate the above queues at peak times – it will not solve traffic flow issues, nor the increased risk of traffic accidents/collisions on the A670.

OMBC and others have suggested two unrealistic, unsustainable & enormously expensive solutions to solve this issue & to solve the safety risk it poses:

- a) Moving back a retaining wall at the Diggle junction.
- b) building another road through the valley (across the floodplain) across adjacent farmland AND there are even reports that OMBC have tried to buy land from this farm & have suggested that compulsory purchase may be necessary in the future BUT they will defer thinking about this until ‘after the school is built’!

Q: Why were these extraordinary measures & costs not considered when comparing Uppermill with Diggle? Q: Why go to such great lengths to solve a problem that does not need to exist? Such costs & measures would be completely unnecessary if the school were to remain in Uppermill!

7. Safety issues associated with encouraging increased use of the northern access route

The blind turn off the A670 off moorland down to Diggle is a traffic hazard (especially in winter & foggy conditions): It has even been suggested that pupils from the West Yorkshire village of Marsden could travel to Diggle (since the school will be moved to the edge of the current school catchment area). Not a good idea – also because they would have to pass the already congested road past Diggle Primary School.

9. Failure to consider wider impacts on the surrounding transport network

Dobcross Village ‘rat-run’

The road network surrounding Diggle cannot support the traffic volumes & flows associated with this development. With traffic congestion inevitably increasing on the Huddersfield Road route out of Diggle, the neighbouring village of Dobcross (an historical Conservation Area) is certain to become an alternative route to & from Diggle, avoiding the congested main road.

The implications of the move to Diggle for Dobcross village were not considered as part of the site-selection study (not even considered within the Transport Assessment as part of the Diggle site planning application).

10. £200,000 per annum extra expenditure to bus children in from surrounding areas + un-necessary duplication of infrastructure e.g. bus turning circle. Such expenses & measures would not be needed if the school was to remain in Uppermill.

11. Huddersfield Narrow Canal:

It will be used by children as a route to school, presenting a hazard – especially when frozen in winter!

The ESFA & Oldham Council must now repeat the site-comparison exercise on the grounds that the selection process that resulted in the Diggle site being chosen should be considered to be seriously flawed.

Road traffic management & associated safety should have been one of the prime criteria included in the site selection exercise – but was entirely excluded!
Diggle site option: the option causing the MOST environmental harm & with the MOST long-term, permanent risks & hazards

3. Pedestrian hazards: If the planned scheme goes ahead at Diggle, children walking to school from the southern end of the village (i.e. from all other parts of Saddleworth) will have to share a congested roadway with cars & buses; they will have to cross the entrance to a drop-off that also operates as a turn-around & car park. This is a clear pedestrian hazard.

4. The drop-off and collection area allows for only 22 cars at one time: This will be inadequate for drop-off and wholly so for collection when – in effect – all parents seeking to collect pupils will be present at the same time, with space for just 22 to park.

5. Against principles of sustainable development: Pedestrian safety issues ensure that there will be no incentive for sustainable forms of transport e.g. cycling, walking. Traffic plans are unworkable, inappropriate and unsustainable because the rural and upland location of Diggle is unsuitable for a development generating such a large increase in traffic volume.

6. Diggle Primary School at the other end of the village: Current issues with parking & congestion will be exacerbated.

12. Site access: hazard to pupils and staff

The entrance to the school itself would be via a single-track access road over a bridge with very narrow pavements.

All pupils will enter the site using this route; all buses and vehicles will enter and exit using the same narrow route.

TFGM (Transport for Greater Manchester) have expressed concerns about the ‘suitability of access’ to the proposed site commenting that:

“The geometry of the left turn around the clock tower also creates an additional conflict, which may require this manoeuvre to be permanently signalled or for the school to…. manage all vehicular movements around this corner at arrival and departure times”

[TFGM consultation response—01.09.2015]

Realistically – even if traffic movements are managed & signalled – how long before an accident happens? How long before damage is done to the clock tower – damage that may well result in the building being demolished due to ‘health & safety’ issues?

These issues would place pupils at the proposed site at far greater risk than those children currently face in Uppermill.

13. Flood risk downstream + environmental damage

In the last issue of this newsletter we reported on the fact that the Environment Agency & Sport England had been misled concerning flood risk as a result of the huge ground engineering project to create sport pitches in a floodplain.

As a result of the challenges SdAG put forward at the Judicial Review the updated Flood Risk Assessment (FRA) report has now had to admit that the ground engineering will compromise the floodplain and increase flood risk downstream, towards Uppermill (previously they’d tried to say that ‘no development was taking place’). However, the FRA still downplays impacts, omits crucial information, fails to quantify the impacts and tries to defer the ‘solutions’ for loss of floodplain until after they’ve got planning permission (note: solutions may not be possible)!

The issue of fluvial (river) flood risk does not occur at Uppermill. Issues to do with loss of floodplain were not considered when comparing sites. This demands an urgent review of site options & serious consideration of the alternative site at Uppermill.

14. Sport pitch & recreational hazards

15. Sport Facilities are the wrong size for the age group

In the last newsletter we reported on the fact that Sport England had been misled regarding flooding, but that they still objected to the development describing the plans as "a missed opportunity for the school and community" that would “not be fit for purpose”; stating that the all-weather pitch design & size is inadequate for secondary school sport. E-mail correspondence (obtained by FOI) shows that the Head of Youth & Leisure at OMBC badgered SE into dropping their objection in the days leading up to the Feb 2016 planning committee meeting - even telling them they had ‘no reason to object’. SE wanted to see a “revised plan showing the AGP that accords with the FA guidance along with the grass pitch meeting U16 provision” They only agreed to withdraw their objection because they were promised that a ‘condition’ would be attached to any planning consent saying that the artificial pitch would be designed ‘in accordance with current Sport England / FA Guidelines’ i.e. to be a suitable for the age group. Yet, after 18 months - during which time the design could have been reviewed - nothing has changed!

The plans submitted with the current planning application, show that the sports pitch design remains inadequate for the age group: Sport England’s concerns have not been addressed. As Sport England point out – it would be a complete waste of resources to build a facility that was ‘not-fit-for-purpose’.

These facts demand a review of site options & alternative sites
**16. Demise of Diggle’s landmark clock tower**

Moving the school to Diggle will result in ‘substantial harm’ to the setting & significance of the listed building. A Judicial Review legal ruling has determined that it was UNLAWFUL for the Council not to consider a way of avoiding this harm i.e. through proper consideration of the alternative site at Uppermill.

The fact is that, if the school was to move to Diggle, the day to day operation of a school would put the listed building at increased risk of being demolished due to the access and traffic issues outlined in the box 12 on the previous page + due to ongoing maintenance & cost of maintenance issues:

“...we consider that it [the listed building] would potentially be a ‘magnet’ to students for other than educational purposes, with future management issues for the school”.

“Budget estimates prepared indicate that the cost to bring the Listed Building back to ‘habitable’ condition would be in the region of £750K - £800K”

[Letter from Project Director at the EFA to the Director of Development and Infrastructure at OMBC 29th August 2013]

The current school buildings at Uppermill have been allowed to fall into a state of disrepair (the Council, Governors and School Head have failed in their duty to maintain the present buildings). What are the chances that the council will commit to the maintenance & preservation of this listed building? There has been a suggestion that they may attempt to ‘gift’ the building to the community as a way of avoiding the financial responsibility and their legal obligation to look after it!

**17. The advantages of keeping the school in Uppermill; the hub of cultural, social & sports activity**

The current school site is located at the centre of Saddleworth’s transport hub and within walking distance of an existing bus turn-around facility. Six bus-routes currently serve the school in Uppermill bringing pupils from all parts of the school’s catchment area. Diggle has only one dedicated bus service.

The current school site is located within safe walking distance of: the only swimming pool in Saddleworth; a leisure centre incorporating all-weather sports pitches; two major gyms; a library; Saddleworth’s museum; the Civic centre (used for concerts and performances and for clubs and leisure activities) and the Satellite Youth Centre – a main hub of youth activity for all of Saddleworth (with dedicated outside sports facilities & a purpose-built indoor youth facility).

To take the school and its 1500 pupils further away from such a hub of social, cultural and sports activity goes against the grain of the government’s local and national campaign to promote the health and well-being of young people.

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**18. OMBC & ESFA: failure to apply basic maths!**

In 2015, the Education Funding Agency completed a ‘Feasibility Study’ where they compared 4 different site options (two at Diggle & two at Uppermill). To do this they looked at eight different ‘criteria’ and ranked the sites for each criteria:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Site A</th>
<th>Site B</th>
<th>Site C</th>
<th>Site D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Estimated cost</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buildability/construction</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL (SUM OF RANKS)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This system can easily be exposed as flawed for several reasons:

1. **None of the ‘criteria’ described in this leaflet were included in the above table** i.e. roads, health & safety, flooding, heritage…… i.e. all the criteria (important planning issues) for which Uppermill would have ranked ‘best’; so it was skewed towards making Uppermill look worse than Diggle!

2. **Having a rank system equal to the number of sites being compared (4 in this case) is statistically flawed because**

   (a) With only 4 ranks a tiny difference between Site A & Site B (e.g. a small difference in cost) is given the same weight as a large difference (e.g. if a listed building is damaged at site A but not at site B).

   (b) The scoring system for each criteria should (always) be completely independent of the number of sites; **because if you change the number of sites being compared you change the totals** (the sum of ranks)!

To illustrate (b): At the Judicial Review hearing Oldham Council tried to say they could add-in the ‘heritage’ criteria (that they previously omitted from the site-comparison table) & that “Diggle would still score one less than Uppermill”!

However, if you add in heritage as they suggest & compare three sites instead of four (Diggle pallet works & the two Uppermill options) Diggle ends up scoring the SAME as one of the Uppermill options – they both score 17 (see SDAG website for details). This proves that the system is deeply, flawed. It’s a basic error of maths.

Thus, on these grounds alone the selection process that resulted in the Diggle site being chosen should be considered to be seriously flawed. OMBC & THE ESFA MUST NOW RE-VISIT THE SITE-SELECTION EXERCISE USING A VALID & ROBUST SCORING SYSTEM TO COMPARE SITES.

**TAKE ACTION: OBJECT to the ‘refreshed’ Diggle planning application**

To help you, SDAG have prepared a template letter with 40 reasons to object AGAIN, in light of the Judicial Review UNLAWFUL verdict & in light of the continued unresolved & unsolvable issues at Diggle. We must press Oldham Council & the ESFA to re-visit the flawed site selection exercise: the Council & ESFA have no facts or evidence to support their assertion that Diggle still represents the ‘best site’: SDAG are confident that if all planning considerations are taken into account and sites compared with a robust & weighted scoring system, Uppermill would emerge as the best site for the school by far.

You can either address, sign & return letters to local post offices or send directly to the Council by letter or e-mail:

**Write to:** OMBC Planning Team, Civic Centre, PO Box 30, West Street, Oldham, OL1 1UQ

**E-mail:** planning@oldham.gov.uk

**Log objections online:** http://planningpa.oldham.gov.uk

*Remember to include your name & address + include the following planning reference numbers to ensure your objection is taken into account: [PA/337301/15, (school construction) PA/337931/15 & LB/337929/15 (demolition & listed building consent) PA/337930/15 (car park & highways works)] Remember: each person in your household can send a separate letter of objection; every signature counts.

For further help CONTACT SDAG at: savedigglegactionroup@gmail.com or savedigglenewsletter@gmail.com (for e-copies of our template letter).

For regular updates see: www.savediggle.org.uk

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Printed by StressFreePrint, Unit 3 Lodge Bank, Crown Lane, Bolton BL6 5HY and promoted by SDAG, 20 Huddersfield Road, Diggle, OL3 5NT