

SECTION 7 - CONSULTATION

(a) History of the Consultation Process

(b) Developer's Responses

CONSULTATION

The importance of consultation has also been recently elevated with the Coalition Government's localism agenda. The Localism Bill, which was revealed on 13 December 2010, set out how the Government intends to devolve decision-making down to a neighbourhood / local authority level and empower communities. Therefore, consultation and engagement with the public and local stakeholders has become even more relevant to the planning and development sector.

Local Dialogue Statement of Consultation p.7

History of the Consultation Process

The first that residents of the St. Michael's Road Area Residents Association knew of this proposed development was when the University advertised in the local press in November 2010 and distributed glossy leaflets. The leaflets advertised two public consultations in December; one to be held on campus and intended mainly for University staff, the second at St. Mary Bredin Church Hall (South Canterbury) for the local community. In these leaflets the University declared an intention to proceed to a planning application in February. It is questionable whether the University allowed enough time for residents to consider the scale and scope of the development and to engage in meaningful dialogue concerning residents' reasonable concerns.

In the event, both consultations had to be postponed because of bad weather, and were re-scheduled to mid-January; the off-campus one was re-located to St. Stephen's Community Centre.

Neither of the consultations included scale models to communicate effectively the fact that this development has a footprint twice the size of the Cathedral and proposes to locate four- and five-storey buildings in close proximity to a residential area of two-storey homes.

The second public consultation in January was well attended by the local community who expressed severe reservations about the choice of site both orally and in writing. In response to the strength of feeling among members of the St. Michael's Road Area Residents Association the committee sent a letter by e-mail (23.01.11) detailing residents' concerns to the Chancellor Sir Robert Worcester, the Vice-Chancellor Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow, and Professor Keith Mander, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor leading the development proposals. These letters were copied to Professor David Nightingale (Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Denise Everitt (Deputy Vice-Chancellor), Professor John Baldock (Pro-Vice-Chancellor), and Professor Alex Hughes (Pro-Vice-Chancellor).

One reply was received. This was from Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow (28.01.11) in which she stated:

I have passed your letter on to Local Dialogue who are handling the public consultation on behalf of the University. I expect they will be in touch with you very shortly.

No reply was received from Local Dialogue. SMRARA was therefore surprised to see in the EIA Consultation Appendix by Local Dialogue that

Over 130 emails, letters and phone calls from the public were received, all of which received a response. (EIA Consultation Appendix pp.1-2, para 2.7)

Following a subsequent e-mail to Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow (06.04.11), Local Dialogue eventually responded (11.04.11):

Firstly please accept my apologies for not replying to your letter sooner. Let me assure you a copy was forwarded to the development team for consideration and has been included in the Statement of Consultation that formed part of our planning application.....

Other members of the community have reported similar unsatisfactory experiences with Local Dialogue, ranging from no response to inadequate response to queries. One resident who wrote a letter to Local Dialogue was disappointed to see that her contribution was omitted from the consultation entirely. On contacting Local Dialogue to complain she was told '...that my letter had not been forwarded to Local Dialogue from the Freepost depot and Local Dialogue had never seen it.'

Members of the community were also concerned that Local Dialogue is not a local company and clearly had no knowledge of the particular sensitivities about the choice of the Chaucer Fields site. Observations were made that Local Dialogue appeared to be responding as from a script. Comparisons were made to Local Dialogue's previous work for the Bunhill development in London which appears to provide a template for the consultation exercise which they were engaged in holding for this very different proposed development. (See <http://bunhillcourt.com/pages/team.html>)

Developer's Responses

Local Dialogue acknowledged in the Statement of Consultation that submissions were clear about community objections to the choice of site.

The plans received a mixed response. The significant number of those consulted had reservations about the proposals. Although many agreed with the need for more on-campus student accommodation, concerns were raised about the site selection, particularly in regard to its proximity to a residential area and the loss of grassland. (Statement of Consultation p.5)

Meeting with Residents of Harkness Drive 09.12.10

Site selection – Chaucer Fields is not their desired site location and they asked if Park Wood, the Innovation Park site or areas to the north of the campus, including sports fields, would not be better. They objected to the

principle of development of the site. There is also the belief that there was a covenant on the site that would prevent development. (Statement of Consultation p.11)

CPRE 19.01.11

Site selection – they were concerned that this is not the best site on campus for accommodation.

(Statement of Consultation p.13)

Canterbury Conservation Advisory Committee 03.02.11

They were generally supportive of further student accommodation on campus but it must be in the correct location. (Statement of Consultation p.13)

...the majority of respondents thought the site location was inappropriate.

(Statement of Consultation p.23)

A significant number of respondents (19) thought the location of student accommodation could lead to an increase in noise and / or other anti-social behaviour by students (especially late at night). Here, several people expressed concern about the amount of noise already experienced in streets near campus and thought that this would get worse with the new development. (Statement of Consultation p.23)

On the whole, respondents appreciated the need for further student accommodation on campus. However, significant concerns were raised on the proposed location. In general, attendees thought that a more suitable site could be found further away from residential properties. (Statement of Consultation p.24)

Six respondents supported the proposals as presented with 99 objecting or expressing concern about certain aspects. Furthermore, 20 respondents said they recognised the need for expanding student accommodation on campus. This suggests that many people are not anti-development per se. (Statement of Consultation p.26)

Nonetheless, the majority of people expressed concern about the site selection and impact on surrounding residential accommodation from the proximity of students passing or living nearby. (Statement of Consultation p.29)

Despite this, the University appears to have made no serious attempt to identify alternative sites for the elements of this proposed development. Their insistence on a single development of almost 800 student rooms combined with the proposed hotel and conference centre pre-judged the consideration of other sites which score as highly as Chaucer Fields on the published criteria. Their response to the consultation exercise was to modify minor elements of the scheme and to offer 'consideration' of various strategies to address anti-social behaviour and disturbance, as follows:

Following the extensive consultation with local residents and stakeholders detailed above several changes have been made to the scheme.

- The accommodation blocks nearest homes will be three rather than four storeys
- The accommodation blocks will be positioned so no direct window overlooking and orientated east–west rather than north–south to maximise natural daylight
- The distances between the accommodation blocks and the nearest local residences has been increased from 60m to 69m for Durnford Close and from 82m to 90m for Harkness Drive
- There will be extensive landscaping to create a buffer between student accommodation and residential properties
- Development of a Landscape Management Plan and enhancement of wider meadow area and replacement of lost habitat with supplementary planting
- Discussions are ongoing with Canterbury City Council on restricted parking options
- Discussions with Stagecoach on night bus provision
- General vehicular access restricted to the top end of the site with only emergency vehicles allowed at lower levels
- Consideration of CCTV cameras to improve security and visibility at southern end of development close to public footpaths
- Inclusion of a base for Campus Watch Security, located in the Hub building to aid student supervision and management
- Hours of operation of Hub to take into consideration local residents
- Lighting proposals will be sympathetically designed to minimise light pollution
- Proposed materials selected to mirror the Kent vernacular
- Solar panels to be specified as low reflectance
- Consideration of restrictive car ownership clauses within the proposed student lease agreements for Chaucer Fields

(Statement of Consultation p.33)

These ‘considerations’ commit the University to no action and it is unlikely in the current financial climate that further funding will be found to address the existing problems in the neighbouring residential area, let alone an extension of these problems over a wider area.

Conclusion

While it is clear that many respondents appreciated the need for more student accommodation and would like to see it located on the Canterbury campus, the majority of those consulted had concerns about the proposed siting of the scheme. In general, respondents thought the development would be better sited elsewhere on campus. (Statement of Consultation p.34)

Despite this unequivocal conclusion by the consultation company (Local Dialogue) employed by the University, the University has chosen to ignore the concerns of the community it was intended to be consulting. The plans remain substantively unaltered and on a site which is widely regarded as unsuitable.