

**Full Council**

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<b>Date:</b>	<b>26 February 2019</b>
<b>Title:</b>	<b>Lord Williams's Lower School Design Brief</b>
<b>Contact Officer:</b>	<b>Graeme Markland, Neighbourhood Plan Continuity Officer</b>

**Background**

1. Members will be aware that Lord Williams's Lower School, and its playing fields on the north side of Towersey Road, are allocated within the Thame Neighbourhood Plan (TNP) for housing development, community facilities, and the delivery of public open space. The school hosts around 1,000 pupils in academic years 7 – 9. The Lower School, together with the Upper School on Oxford Road represents a single entity managed and operated by the Thame Partnership Academy Trust. With both staff and facilities shared between them, there has been a long-term realisation that reduced costs and greater efficiencies would be made by moving the Lower School to the Upper School site in Oxford Road.
2. In order to help finance the move, the site was promoted for development as part of the Thame Neighbourhood Plan. Given its location within Thame the site was deemed most suitable for housing and was therefore allocated for 135 dwellings, in line with complimentary neighbourhood plan policy on housing density. In making the allocation it was recognised that certain risks are associated with the single-site project. These included wide-ranging matters such as the ability to plan and finance the necessary, complimentary development at the Upper School site and a lack of any consistency in national education policy and financing. Policy H2 of the TNP provided certainty for the delivery of the housing identified for Thame by giving a hard target by which planning permission for the site had to be granted, 1 April 2021. Failure to achieve this target will result in the activation of reserve housing sites in land off Oxford Road and Wenman Road and the automatic removal of the allocation at the Lower School site.
3. Specific matters for consideration to be taken into account when designing a housing scheme at Lord Williams's Lower School are given in TNP Policy HA5. Some matters are absolute, such as the delivery of 1.9 hectares of public open space on the playing fields north of Towersey Road, having green space within the main development, and a limit in building height to 2 storeys. There are, however, certain flexibilities:
  - The placement of development land north of Towersey Road can be either at the eastern, or western end;
  - Existing buildings, the sports hall and Phoenix Centre, can be retained for community use as part of the scheme, or replaced. The "large community use" seen as necessary within the TNP is identified and discussed within TNP Policy CLW1. Three sites are identified as having potential for what is seen to be best delivered as a single facility, the Lower School site being one of them. The Policy does not preclude other sites from coming forward but does note that sites within or next to the Town Centre will be preferred.
4. The on-site sports hall has four courts. The District Council's Draft Sports Facilities, Local Leisure Facilities and Playing Pitch Studies December 2018 explains this will still be required over the next plan period and notes the need to replace this facility elsewhere, should the facility be lost as a result of development. Also discussed within this document is the recognition that the loss of any playing field would need to be mitigated against.

5. As with all of the TNP allocations a design brief has to be produced and agreed by the Town Council prior to any planning application being made. The Thame Partnership Academy Trust have hired local architects PCMS Design and planning / urban design consultancy Lanpro to produce the design brief. There have been several contact meetings with officers of the Town Council to report progress and in October 2018, a presentation of a draft brief with Members and officers.
6. A public exhibition was held on 15 November 2018 to present a draft scheme, influenced by Thame Town Council's commentary. Leaflets outlining the project and inviting local residents to attend the exhibition were distributed over an area agreed beforehand with the Town Council. How Lanpro had reflected the views of members of the public in producing their second draft design was the main topic of a second meeting with Members and officers held in December, 2018.

## Discussion

7. The design brief before the Council today is to be compared with the requirements of TNP Policy HA5, and its supporting text. Members must consider if it meets the requirements.
8. There have been many changes made to the scheme as originally proposed, and following the public exhibition in November 2018. Lanpro are to be praised for their willingness to listen to the concerns of both Members and local residents, and make changes. This may in part be a result of the Thame Partnership Academy Trust's wish to see the site developed in proper partnership with local residents, and to leave as "good neighbours".
9. Members may wish to consider the following options when making a recommendation:
  - a) The design brief is approved, with or without suggested amendments;
  - b) As discussed in Lanpro's letter that accompanied the design brief document, to allow consideration for the potential number of dwellings on site to be raised, above 135;
  - c) To reject the design brief, in not conforming to TNP Policy HA5.
10. The proposed design brief, as shown in Figure 19 of the design brief document, is judged to meet all of the criteria laid down in TNP Policy HA5 and it is advised that option c) would not be an appropriate choice.
11. Since work on the project began to gain momentum, the Trust, PCMS Design and latterly Lanpro, have all expressed concern over the viability of the site with regards to the financial contribution it can provide towards replacement facilities on the Upper School site. The site, like any other, must also pay for planning obligations including affordable housing and, ironically, education. In spite of the fact that the Town Council have assumed this will be a not-for-profit scheme, viability concerns remain. The County Council has provided funds for a viability study for the scheme, but in order to fully identify any gaps in finances it has become essential that a design brief, signed off by the Town Council, can be provided.
12. Lanpro have suggested that flexibility is permitted to allow for higher housing numbers on site, as outlined in option b). This would permit the design brief to enter a cycle of being changed, tested against both the requirements of Policy HA5 and viability concerns, and changed again until a suitable design is found. With the benefit of an "open book" viability assessment being available to the Town Council, Members may wish to decide if this proposal is acceptable.

13. The difficulty in selecting option b) is that it would be contrary to TNP Policies H1 and H2, and HA5 in giving rise to housing density above 25 dwellings per hectare (net). Any subsequent design brief could, therefore, not be judged successfully against Policy HA5.
14. In deciding which option, or alternative to choose, the Council should consider the following:
- The design brief does not have to be viable in order to be compatible with Policy HA5. Passing the design brief as it is would permit the gap in viability to be established;
  - Any subsequent planning application would, however, be subject to a viability assessment. As with any other scheme, the first planning obligation to be eroded would be the provision of affordable housing;
  - Any under provision of affordable housing would not only be contrary to TNP Policy H8, but could lead to arguments for alternative provision, elsewhere, which would involve other market housing to make that scheme viable;
  - That the availability of one of the reserve housing sites is uncertain, due to concerns around archaeological remains.

**Recommendation:**

15. Given the incompatibility with core TNP policies, it is recommended that Thame Town Council, follows option a) and considers approving the design brief as illustrated in the accompanying document.