

Hitchin Girls' School - Planning Application Submission.

A statement on behalf of the Trustees of Hitchin Girls' School to support the Planning Application for Change of Use of an existing School cottage (Use Class C3) to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) teaching and support facilities (Use Class F1).



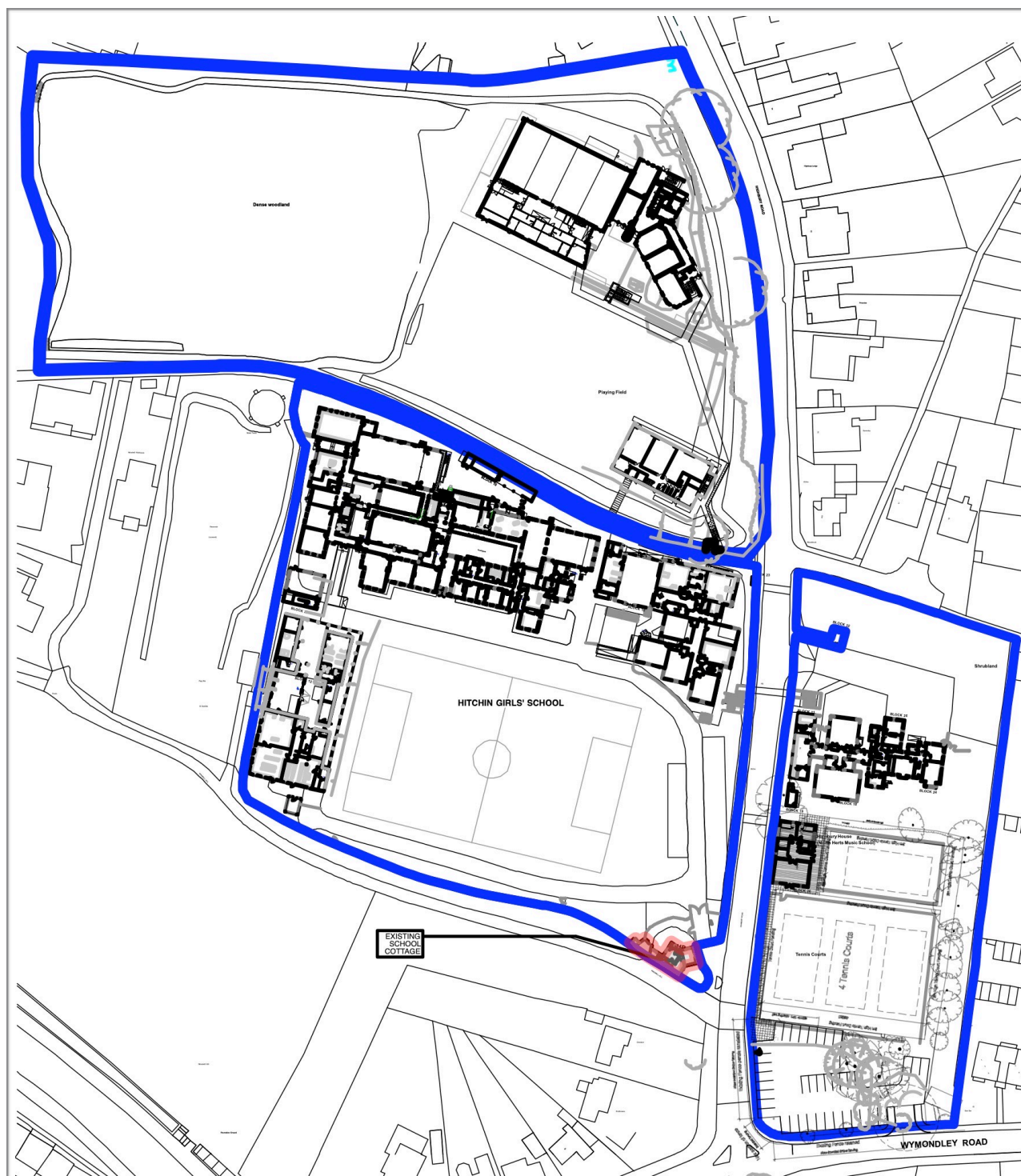
Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	<u>p3</u>
<u>Background</u>	<u>p4</u>
<u>Current Need</u>	<u>p5</u>
<u>Siting of the existing cottage</u>	<u>p5</u>
<u>Proposal</u>	<u>p6</u>
<u>Impact on surrounding area</u>	<u>p7</u>
<u>Compliance with local planning policies</u>	<u>p7</u>
<u>Conclusion</u>	<u>p8</u>

Introduction

This statement is submitted in support of a planning application for the Change of Use of the Caretaker's Cottage, located within the grounds of Hitchin Girls' School, from residential use (Use Class C3) to educational use (Use Class F1).

The proposed change will provide valuable space to meet the developing educational needs of the Academy, whilst maintaining the character and integrity of the site.



Background

Hitchin Girls' School (HGS) is a high achieving single sex, all-ability secondary school serving the local community with 1355 11-19 year olds on roll including 307 in the Sixth Form. The existing main school building was originally designed as a Grammar School for 500 pupils. It was converted to Academy status in August 2011.

The school was rated 'outstanding' in all areas in its most recent Ofsted inspection carried out in October 2024.

The school is located on top of Windmill Hill, off Highbury Road, to the east of Hitchin Town Centre, in Hertfordshire and is within a conservation area. Located on a split site, straddling Highbury Road, there is a pedestrian link bridge linking the two sites. The western half of the site comprises the majority of the school buildings and a grass sports pitch. There is an additional playing field to the north of the main school buildings on which is a sixth form centre and, on an area to the north of the playing field, is a more recent Sports Hall and Teaching Block. The eastern half of the site comprises of further school buildings, along with hard play and informal recreation areas. Mature trees surround and screen the northern and eastern sides of the school site.

The existing buildings are a mix of two and three storeys in height and vary in style from a traditional red brick, pitched roof, former grammar school building to more recent contemporary styled flat roofed developments such as the Sixth Form building.

In 2016 Hertfordshire County Council identified the need for additional permanent secondary school places in Hitchin from September 2018 in order to meet demand from the local area. The County Council has a statutory duty to ensure sufficient school places across its area and worked closely with the three secondary schools in Hitchin to understand future demand and explore possible options for meeting this. Expansion of Hitchin Girls' School was part of a town-wide strategy to ensure sufficient secondary places are available for Hitchin for the future. The Governing Body of Hitchin Girls' School consulted on the proposal to enlarge the school by 1.5 forms of entry from September 2018 and following this consultation the Governors agreed to proceed with the proposal. Capital funding for the expansion was agreed with the County Council.

Developments were undertaken to provide Hitchin Girls' School's with sufficient teaching space to accommodate the increased pupil intake. This was mainly provided by a new classroom block but was also supplemented by additional areas of new extensions to the existing main school building and science block to address existing deficiencies and those areas deemed in need of expansion to cope with the additional pupil numbers.

The existing school buildings are grouped and predominantly arranged around 2 sides of the main playing fields (in front of the original main school). This area of playing field is already below recommended area. More recent developments in the form of a new sports hall and teaching block have also been carried out on a tiered area of playground to the north of the school site effectively regenerating an otherwise under used area of the site.

Additionally a two storey science block (2 classrooms), a 43 space car park and new ramped student rear access was created. The last elements of these works were completed in 2021.

Current Need

The school wish to provide dedicated and enhanced facilities for their Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) department. At present these are disparate and are timetabled to suit use of otherwise heavily used spaces around the school. There is limited scope for alternative locations for SEND within the undersized school grounds and the original tightly configured site.

An existing caretaker's cottage, owned by the school, is located on the boundary immediately adjacent the main school entrance gates. The cottage was originally intended to house site staff but it has not been used for over a year now and is no longer required for this purpose.

By repurposing the cottage, the Academy will make efficient use of existing resources and infrastructure, whilst helping to reduce environmental impacts associated with new construction.

Siting of the Existing Cottage

The cottage (54 Highbury Road) is located on a corner plot created by the junction of Highbury Road and Windmill Hill. The cottage is a detached, and a more isolated building relative to the other houses in the neighbourhood. Windmill Hill Road separates the cottage from other residences along Highbury Road.

There is existing access to the cottage from both Highbury Road and from within the school grounds. The proposals set out in this application will not alter these existing access arrangements.

The building is effectively self contained and will work well for the intended purpose. The cottage layout lends itself to smaller and more focused teaching and support spaces which are readily available for 'one on one' teaching and small group learning and activities.

The proposed educational use will not result in significant changes to the existing site or its operations. It will compliment the existing facilities by providing additional space for the SEND department whilst repurposing an under-utilised building within the site.



View towards cottage and school from Windmill Hill/Highbury Rd junction



View towards cottage along Windmill Hill

Proposal

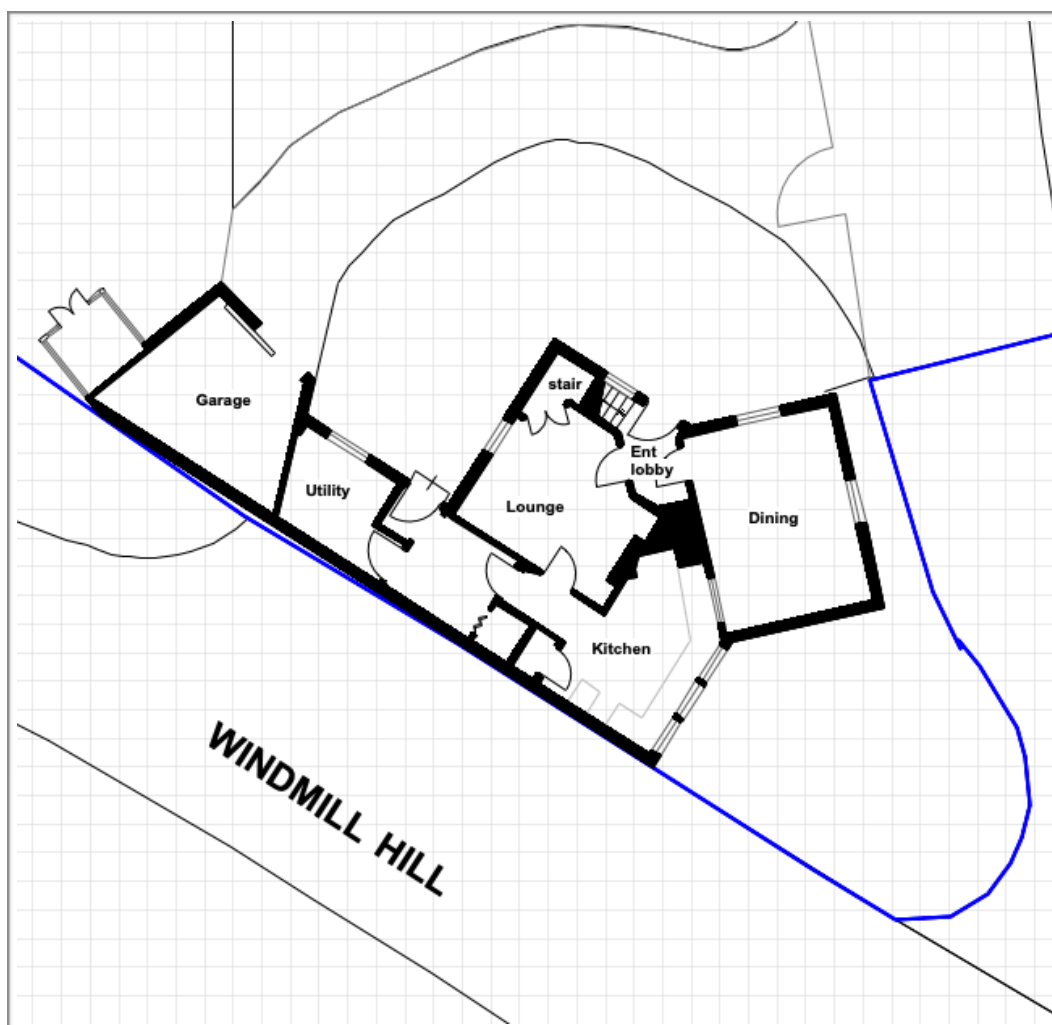
The application proposes a change of use for the caretaker's cottage from a residential dwelling to an educational facility. The change of use is being proposed to meet the Academy's existing and developing needs for SEND educational spaces.

The building is generally in a good state of repair although the interior will require refurbishing and decorating as it has not been in use for the last year. The internal layout may also be adapted to suit the new educational function, but these changes will be minimal and not impact on the existing elevations of the cottage.

No alterations are proposed to the external wall layout of the building, and the existing access arrangements will be retained.

Furthermore, the proposed use aligns with local planning policies that encourage the sustainable reuse of buildings and the improvement of educational facilities.

Accordingly the school, through submission of this application, are seeking planning consent for the change of use of the school cottage so that it can be used for SEND teaching and support purposes rather than for staff accommodation.



Impact on the Surrounding Area

The change of use will have minimal impact on the surrounding area. The building will remain within the Academy's boundaries and will not result in increased traffic or noise pollution. The number of students and staff using the new educational space will be in line with the Academy's overall capacity and will not significantly alter the dynamics of the site.

Additionally, the existing residential character of the cottage will be retained, and no external alterations will be made, ensuring that the building remains in keeping with the aesthetic of the Academy and its surrounding environment.



View towards Cottage from Windmill Hill



View towards Cottage from Highbury Road



View towards cottage from Highbury Road main gateway



View towards cottage and school from Highbury Road

Compliance with Local Planning Policies

The proposal is consistent with local planning policies, including those that support the development of educational facilities, the reuse of existing buildings, and the enhancement of sustainable educational infrastructure. It aligns with the local plan or policy which encourages the optimisation of underused buildings and the delivery of educational services that contribute to community well-being.

Conclusion

The proposed change of use of the caretaker's cottage to educational use is a sustainable, practical, and low-impact solution to the Academy's evolving needs. It will support the delivery of quality education while making efficient use of the existing buildings on-site. The nature of the school's SEND requirements will work well in a dedicated building with smaller, more intimate teaching spaces.

The proposal complies with local planning policies and will not cause any detrimental impacts to the surrounding area.

The proposals aim to make good use of existing, currently moth-balled accommodation which is no longer used for its original, intended purpose. The proposed usage will rejuvenate this otherwise derelict building. The re provision of this building creates a logical and economical solution in creating a focussed area for the SEND department.

With a local, and indeed a national, rise in the numbers of students with EHCPs (Educational Health Care Plans) and students requiring specialist support with their mental health and wellbeing it is essential that the school has the availability of suitable spaces to conduct this important and specialist provision.

The use of the cottage for educational purposes will contribute positively to the Academy's ongoing mission to provide high-quality education in a supportive and conducive environment at this high achieving school.