

GRANGE FARM, SOUTH OCKENDON, ESSEX

APPLICATION FOR PLANNING PERMISSION BY AZHAR ACADEMY

PLANNING STATEMENT

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Azhar Academy is a charitable organisation concerned with the promotion of Islamic education for young people in parts of the London area where such facilities are lacking. It was established in 1996 at its original south London base and its principal activity is the setting up of Madrasahs (Islamic educational establishments) where none currently exist.
- 1.2 To date, Madrasahs have been established in Epsom, Purley and Norbury / Streatham Vale. Development offices have been opened in east and west London to facilitate expansion into those areas.
- 1.3 The Academy recognises the important place of sport and recreation in a fully rounded educational experience. Consequently, it has been seeking to introduce such activities into the syllabus it is able to offer.
- 1.4 The desirability of making provision for a number of different sports at a single location dictates a requirement for an extensive area, to accommodate pitches and changing facilities.
- 1.5 In view of the difficulty of locating such an area within the urban fabric it has been necessary for the Academy to look beyond. In October 2002 the opportunity arose to purchase the Grange Farm site and this was duly secured by the Trustees. The objectives of the Academy are set out in the Grange Farm Mission Statement which is attached as Appendix 1.

2 THE PROJECT

- 2.1 In order to realise its vision the Academy is seeking to provide a range of primarily outdoor sports facilities at the Grange Farm site. These will comprise:

- Two full-size football pitches (sub-divisible to provide for five-a-side also)
- Eight lane 400 metre running track
- Indoor sports hall
- Changing rooms with ancillary catering facilities and caretaker/groundsman's accommodation
- Retention of existing stable block, possibly to provide changing facilities

2.2 In addition to the above, it will be necessary to provide coach and car parking facilities together with a new means of vehicular access to the site.

2.3 It is understood that consideration will need to be given to incorporation of pedestrian routes, suitable boundary treatment and planting. It is anticipated that these matters will be discussed with the appropriate officers of the Council as the application progresses and further details will be provided accordingly.

3 WHY GRANGE FARM?

3.1 The Academy has sought to identify a suitable location for the facilities in accordance with a "sequential" approach commencing with locations within the urban area, then on the urban fringe and finally and finally close to, but separate from, the built-up area. Through this exercise it has not been possible to identify any land which is sufficiently extensive, suitable for the purpose and available for purchase.

3.2 When the opportunity arose to secure the Grange Farm site, the Academy was conscious of the close proximity of the existing Grangewaters Outdoor Education Centre and aware of the potential synergy between that facility and its own objectives for Grange Farm. It was considered unlikely that such a coincidence of opportunity was unlikely to arise elsewhere.

3.3 Grangewaters is a local authority activity centre managed on behalf of the Council. It provides for both water based and non-water based activities and offers a variety of courses and programmes for schools, voluntary organisations and other groups.

3.4 The Academy took the view that if it did not secure the land at Grange Farm whilst it was available the opportunity would be lost for the foreseeable future.

3.5 Whilst recognising that the site is outside the built-up area it is nevertheless only some 1.3 kilometres from the urban area of South Ockendon.

4 PLANNING GUIDANCE AND POLICY

National Planning Guidance

- 4.1 Of particular relevance to the Academy's proposals for Grange Farm are Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts and Planning Policy Guidance 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation.

Planning Policy Guidance 2: Green Belts

- 4.2 PPG2 sets out the Government's objectives concerning the inclusion of land within the Green Belt and gives guidance on the approach to development proposals within it.

- 4.3 It is noted at paragraph 3.1 that there is "a general presumption against inappropriate development within them".

- 4.4 Paragraph 3.4 advises that the construction of new buildings inside a Green Belt is inappropriate unless it is for purposes including:

"essential facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation, for cemeteries, and for other uses of land which preserve the openness of the Green Belt and which do not conflict with the purposes of including land in it"

- 4.5 Paragraph 3.5 goes on to explain what is meant by essential facilities, stating that they should be:

"genuinely required for uses of land which preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land in it. Possible examples of such facilities include small changing rooms or unobtrusive spectator accommodation for outdoor sport, or small stables for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation."

- 4.6 At paragraph 3.15 it is noted that:

"the visual amenities of the Green Belt should not be injured by proposals for development within or conspicuous from the Green Belt".

- 4.7 Further guidance is provided at paragraph 3.16 in respect of development within Community Forests as follows:

“Any development proposals within Community Forests in the Green Belt should be subject to the normal policies controlling development in Green Belts, and should respect the woodland setting.”

Planning Policy Guidance 17: Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation

4.8 The Guidance sets out the Government’s policies in this area, which may also be material to decisions on individual planning applications.

4.9 The Guidance includes the following at paragraph 25 in respect of development for sport and recreation in urban fringe areas:

“The countryside around towns provides a valuable resource for the provision of sport and recreation, particularly in situations where there is an absence of land in urban areas to meet provision. Subject to (paragraphs 27-30) local authorities should encourage the creation of sports and recreational facilities in such areas and the development of areas of managed countryside, such as country parks, community forests, and agricultural showgrounds. Where planning permission is to be granted for such land uses, local planning authorities should ensure that facilities are accessible by walking, cycling and public transport as alternatives to the use of the car.”

4.10 Paragraph 30 goes on to advise in respect of Green Belts that:

“Planning permission should be granted in Green Belts for proposals to establish or to modernise essential facilities for outdoor sport and recreation where the openness of the Green Belt is maintained. Development should be the minimum necessary and non-essential facilities (eg additional function rooms or indoor leisure) should be treated as inappropriate development. Very special circumstances which outweigh the harm to the Green Belt will need to be demonstrated if such inappropriate development is to be permitted.

Essex and Southend-on-Sea Replacement Structure Plan

4.11 The Structure Plan was adopted in 2001 and will remain operative until adoption of the East of England Plan

4.12 The approach to development within the Green Belt is set out at Policy C2. Insofar as it concerns outdoor sport and recreation, this policy reflects the guidance of PPG2

with the exception that it introduces a proviso that essential facilities should be “small scale”.

- 4.13 Policy NR1 comprises a general requirement to protect, conserve and enhance the landscape.
- 4.14 Policy NR10 notes that the establishment of the Thames Chase Community Forest is supported for purposes including landscape improvement, outdoor recreation and nature conservation.
- 4.15 Policy LRT2 advises that, within Thames Chase, the provision of outdoor recreation facilities, landscape improvement and access by a choice of means of transport will be supported provided that these are consistent with Green Belt policy and other policies of the plan.

Thurrock Borough Local Plan

- 4.16 The Local Plan, which was adopted in September 1997, remains the operative document for development control purposes.
- 4.17 The Plan’s objectives include:
 - Objective 2: To keep the Green Belt open, and only allow building in the most exceptional circumstances
 - Objective 3: To improve access to and recreational opportunity in the countryside
- 4.18 Policy GB1 reflects the advice of PPG2 in setting out those forms of built development which may be acceptable in the Green Belt.
- 4.19 The Council’s approach in respect of leisure and recreation is described at paragraph 10.3.1 in the following terms:

“In order to achieve these objectives, the Council intends to:

- (a) identify land requirements to meet the leisure needs of Thurrock’s increased population over the Plan period for open space, built sports facilities and commercial entertainment facilities
- (b) seek to improve the footpath and bridleway network in order to facilitate access to the countryside, and
- (c) encourage the provision of formal outdoor recreational facilities in the countryside while safeguarding the environment.”

4.20 The Grange Farm site lies within a designated Landscape Improvement Area. The relevant policy, LN2, states that:

“In Landscape Improvement Areas, the Council will expect sympathetic landscaping schemes in association with new developments. The Council will also undertake environmental improvement schemes and encourage private owners to take up grants for environmental improvements available from public sources.”

4.21 The site is also located within Thames Chase (the East London Community Forest). Policy LN7 states that:

“Within Thames Chase the Council will expect development proposals to contribute positively towards the implementation of the objectives of the Community Forest project, relating particularly to habitat creation, environmental enhancement and, where appropriate, recreational use of the forest.”

Thames Chase

4.22 Thames Chase is one of twelve Community Forests in England. It is a partnership with a long term aim:

“To renew and regenerate the landscape at the edge of East London and South Essex by creating Thames Chase, the Community Forest: a varied wooded landscape for local people to influence, create, use, enjoy and cherish.”

4.23 The six key objectives are:

- Creating new woodlands
- Managing existing woodlands
- Creating and improving access
- Involving local people
- Conserving and enhancing the natural environment
- Working in partnership and attracting funding

4.24 Enhancing access within the Forest area is regarded as highly important and over 50 km of new paths have been created since 1990. It remains the intention to connect existing and new sites with “greenways”.

- 4.25 Environmental education also plays an important role within Thames Chase and is delivered at the Thames Chase Forest Centre and other sites within the Community Forest.

5 UTILISATION OF THE FACILITIES

- 5.1 It is the intention of the Academy to operate the facilities in a manner similar to the regime at Grangewaters. This will involve making them available in particular to schools and youth groups in areas where there is currently limited access to outdoor sport and recreation, in Essex and east London.
- 5.2 The facilities will offer a contrasting, yet complementary, focus to those at Grangewater to the potential benefit of both.
- 5.3 It is expected that use of the facilities will predominantly be by organised groups. For that reason travel to the site would be more likely to be by coach or bus than by private car. It is the intention of the Academy to encourage the use of such means of transport. Ockendon railway station, which is approximately 30 minutes from London Fenchurch Street, would provide a convenient means of access from central and east London.

[Ismail – is there anything further we can add concerning where those using the facilities are likely to come from?]

6 BENEFITS OF THE PROPOSALS

- 6.1 The proposals have the potential to offer significant benefit in both the educational / social and environmental senses, namely:
- Enabling young people currently not able to do so to gain access to high quality outdoor sport and recreational facilities
 - Contributing towards the objectives of Thames Chase by means of:
 - pedestrian links in accordance with the objectives of the Community Forest
 - appropriate planting schemes
 - Creating a synergy with the existing facilities at the neighbouring Grangewaters site

- Enhancing safety and security in the area through the presence on site of a caretaker / groundsman

7 COMPLIANCE WITH POLICY

7.1 In formulating its proposals for Grange Farm the Academy has had regard to the relevant strands of planning guidance and policy. In particular:

- The development primarily comprises outdoor sport and recreation facilities. The ancillary buildings, including the sports hall, are modest in scale and are important in order to optimise the use of the site and the benefits of the proposals. The sports hall, for example, will enable the use of the site when adverse weather conditions might preclude use of the outdoor facilities
- The proposals will provide sport and recreational facilities in an urban fringe area, with the potential for access by non-car modes of transport
- The proposals will help to meet the current and emerging need in Thurrock for sport and recreation facilities
- In terms of providing for enhanced pedestrian linkages, landscape improvements, educational opportunities and recreational facilities, the development will be supportive of the objectives of the Thames Chase Community Forest
- Details of the buildings proposed and of planting, boundary treatment and other works have yet to be prepared and will be the subject of discussion with officers of the Council and other responsible organisations. Through this process, the Academy will ensure that the proposals are sensitive to the landscape generally and Thames Chase in particular.