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PLANNING AND HERITAGE STATEMENT TO SUPPORT AN APPLICATION FOR THE ERECTION OF A CLASSROOM BUILDING WITHIN THE GROUNDS OF CRANSLEY SCHOOL, BELMONT HALL, BELMONT LANE, NORTHWICH, CW9 6HN

PREPARED BY: ABL Planning & Development

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REV: FINAL

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- i. This Statement has been made to support a live application for the erection of a classroom building and creation of a car parking area. This is at Cransley School, Belmont Hall, Belmont Lane, Northwich, CW9 6HN. This application is submitted by Kel Palmer Plans.
- ii. The purpose of this Statement is to clarify and expand upon the above description of development and to consider the degree to which the proposals accord with national and local planning policies. The statement also reflects upon the degree to which the proposal can be described as *sustainable* development.
- iii. In essence, the proposal would provide an additional 5 classrooms, representing the partial redevelopment of previously developed land that would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development. Accordingly, it is not inappropriate development within the Green Belt with regard to the exception at paragraph 149 (g) of the Framework.
- iv. That said, even if the Council were to find that this scheme would be inappropriate development within the Green Belt, the proposal would allow for the continued provision of small, nurturing, classes to maintain a high standard of education at the Junior School. In accordance with national policy, this matter alone must be afforded great weight. Moreover, it would allow the business to continue to adapt to poor economic conditions and maintain and enhance its current level of economic contribution to the local area. Furthermore, a condition could be imposed requiring the complete removal of the building and associated infrastructure following the submission of a plan for a more permanent solution. All harm to the Green Belt would therefore be short term only and land would be kept permanently open. Consequently, even in this hypothetical scenario, the other considerations put forward would clearly outweigh the substantial weight given to the harm to the Green Belt. The very special circumstances necessary to justify the development would exist.
- v. Additionally, the proposal would not cause any harm to the setting of the Grade I listed Belmont Hall. There would be no harm to the historic environment, nor would there be any other technical planning harms with regards to the other material considerations assessed.
- vi. Overall, the proposal should be approved without delay as it is in accordance with the development plan as a whole and there are no other considerations which outweigh this finding. It would represent sustainable development for which the Framework advocates a presumption in favour.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 This planning statement has been prepared by ABL Planning & Development to support a planning application for:

***“The erection of a single storey classroom building within the grounds of Cransley School”***

- 1.2 To support the application, this statement has been sectioned into 7 parts:

1. Introduction
2. Site description
3. Planning history
4. Relevant planning policy
5. Proposal
6. Assessment
7. Conclusion

- 1.3 This statement is to be read in conjunction with drawings and reports submitted as part of this planning application.

- 1.4 Paragraph 38 of the National Planning Policy Framework (henceforth referred to as ‘the Framework’) states that LPAs should approach decisions on proposed development in a positive and creative way and continues by stating that decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.

- 1.5 Furthermore, Article 35 of the Development Management Procedure Order (2015) (DMPO) requires decision notices to include a statement explaining whether, and if so how, the LPA has worked with the applicant in a positive and proactive manner based on seeking solutions to problems arising in relation to dealing with a planning application.

- 1.6 The applicant therefore looks forward to working with the LPA within the spirit and encouragement required by the Framework and the DMPO.

- 1.7 Lastly, the development was not screened for EIA purposes as its nature and scale clearly does not meet the applicable thresholds and criteria for such development as set out in Schedules 1 and 2 to The Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017.

## **2. SITE DESCRIPTION**

- 2.1 The application site is positioned to the north of Warrington Road (A559) and is approximately 0.8ha in size. It comprises land associated with the Senior and Junior Schools at ‘Cransley School’, located to the north of a collection of buildings associated with the Junior School. The site accommodates a relatively small Tech building, together with vacant hardstanding used for staff and visitor parking. An established tree belt separates it from the Senior School, which includes part of

the Grade I listed Belmont Hall. Access to this part of Cransley School is taken from Belmont Road to the east.

2.2 Although the school is within the countryside, the site, as well as the nearby listed building, is experienced within a developed setting. The verdant character of the school site does, however, soften the presence of built form and provides screening from views from further afield. While there are residential buildings and camping facilities close to the school site, the wider area is characterised by large, open, field systems. Indeed, the site falls within the Liverpool, Manchester and West Yorkshire Green Belt.

2.3 Furthermore, to the east is Belmont moated site and fish-pond (a scheduled monument) and the Council's interactive policy maps associated with the adopted Development Plan identify that the site is located within a restoration area. The Environment Agency 'Flood Map for Planning' identifies the site as being within Flood Zone 1; the lowest risk of flooding.

### **3. PLANNING HISTORY**

3.1 The relevant planning history as available on the Council's website is as follows:

- 15/04122/FUL - Demolition of classroom, nursery and boy's centre, 2 new classroom blocks, pavilion and relocated parking facilities – approved 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015.
- 15/04123/LBC -Demolition of classroom, nursery and boy's centre, 2 new classroom blocks, pavilion and relocated parking facilities – approved 8<sup>th</sup> December 2015.
- 10/01668/DIS – Discharge of condition 3 on planning permission 10/00177/FUL and 10/00107/LBC – construction of new modern pre-fabricated units (demolition of existing) – approved 9<sup>th</sup> August 2010.
- 10/00107/LBC – Construction of new modern pre-fabricated units (demolition of existing) approved 20th April 2010.
- APP/2003/0258 – Single storey classroom (renewal APP/2001/0325) – status unknown (13<sup>th</sup> September 2020).
- 4/APP/2002/1548/CCC – Renovation and refurbishment of Grade I listed building, new school building to replace temporary accommodation and, 13 two storey dwellings – Withdrawn 11<sup>th</sup> October 2002.

### **4. RELEVANT PLANNING POLICIES**

4.1 In accordance with the provisions of Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, this application should be considered against the provisions of the adopted development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

- 4.2 At the time of writing, the adopted Development Plan for Cheshire West and Chester Council comprises:
- Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part One) Strategic Policies – January 2015; and
  - Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part Two) Land Allocations and Detailed Policies – July 2019.
- 4.3 Other material planning policy considerations include the Framework and Planning Practice Guidance.
- 4.4 While the adopted Development Plan is to be read as a whole, the most relevant development plan policies are outlined below.

#### **CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER LOCAL PLAN (PART ONE)**

- 4.5 **Policy STRAT1: Sustainable Development** - The Local Plan seeks to enable development that improves and meets the economic, social and environmental objectives of the borough in line with the presumption in favour of sustainable development. Proposals that are in accordance with relevant policies in the Plan and support the following sustainable development principles will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 4.6 **Policy STRAT9: Green Belt and Countryside** - The intrinsic character and beauty of the Cheshire countryside will be protected by restricting development to that which requires a countryside location and cannot be accommodated within identified settlements. In line with national planning policy, inappropriate development is by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be allowed except in very special circumstances. The construction of new buildings within the Green Belt is considered inappropriate, however exceptions to this are identified in the National Planning Policy Framework.
- 4.7 **Policy ENV1: Flood Risk and Water Management** - The Local Plan will seek to reduce flood risk, promote water efficiency measures, and protect and enhance water quality.
- 4.8 **Policy ENV2: Landscape** – Amongst other things, development should take full account of the characteristics of the development site, its relationship with its surroundings and where appropriate views into, over and out of the site.
- 4.9 **Policy ENV3: Green Infrastructure** - The Local Plan will support the creation, enhancement, protection and management of a network of high quality multi-functional Green Infrastructure. This will be achieved by development incorporating new and/or enhanced Green Infrastructure of an appropriate type, standard and size or contributing to alternative provision elsewhere as well as increased planting and woodland.
- 4.10 **Policy ENV4: Biodiversity and Geodiversity** - The Local Plan will safeguard and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity through the identification and protection of sites and/or features of international, national and local importance.

- 4.11 **Policy ENV5: Historic Environment** - The Local Plan will protect the borough's unique and significant heritage assets through the protection and identification of designated and non-designated heritage assets and their settings. Development should safeguard or enhance both designated and non-designated heritage assets and the character and setting of areas of acknowledged significance. The degree of protection afforded to a heritage asset will reflect its position within the hierarchy of designations.
- 4.12 **Policy ENV6: High Quality Design and Sustainable Construction** – Amongst other things, development should, where appropriate; respect local character and achieve a sense of place through appropriate layout and design and be sympathetic to heritage, environmental and landscape assets.
- 4.13 **Policy ENV9: Minerals Supply Safeguarding** - Cheshire West and Chester will make provision for the adequate, steady and sustainable supply of sand, gravel, salt and brine, contributing to the sub-national guidelines for aggregate land-won sand and gravel, whilst ensuring the prudent use of our important natural finite resources.

#### **CHESHIRE WEST AND CHESTER LOCAL PLAN (PART TWO)**

- 4.14 **Policy GBC2: Protection of Landscape** - The borough's countryside will be protected. Where development requires a countryside location, it must protect and, wherever possible, enhance landscape character and distinctiveness, integrate into the landscape character of the area and be designed to take account of guidance in the Landscape Strategy.
- 4.15 **Policy T5: Parking and Access** – Proposals will be supported where safe access to and from the site is provided, there would be unacceptable impacts on amenity or highway safety and there would be sufficient parking facilities to serve the needs of the development.
- 4.16 **Policy DM2: Impact on Residential Amenity** - All proposals for new development will be expected to safeguard the quality of life for residents within the development and those living nearby. Development will only be supported where it does not result in a significant adverse impact upon the residential amenity of the occupiers of existing properties or future occupiers of the proposed development.
- 4.17 **Policy DM3: Design, Character and Visual Amenity** – Amongst other things, development will be expected to achieve a high standard of design that respects the character and protects the visual amenity of the local area.
- 4.18 **Policy DM4: Sustainable Construction** – Development proposals will be expected to achieve the highest levels of energy and water efficiency that is practical and viable, and to maximise opportunities to incorporate sustainable design features where feasible.
- 4.19 **Policy DM39: Culture and Community Facilities** – Proposals for new or improved community facilities and local services within urban areas, key service centres and local service centres will be



supported where they are of an appropriate scale to serve the local community. Schools (and other community facilities) should, where appropriate, secure pay and play community access for sport and recreation through a community use agreement.

- 4.20 **Policy DM44: Protecting and Enhancing the Natural Environment** – Amongst other things, development will be supported where there is no net loss of natural assets and, wherever possible, it delivers net gains within the borough. Development likely to have an impact on protected sites (statutory and non-statutory), protected/priority species, priority habitats or geological sites must be accompanied by an Ecological Assessment.
- 4.21 **Policy DM45: Trees, woodland and hedgerows** - Development will be supported where it conserves, manages and, wherever possible, enhances existing trees, woodlands, traditional orchards, and hedgerows. All significant healthy trees, woodlands, traditional orchards, and hedgerows should be integrated into the development scheme. Should the above assets be lost, appropriate mitigation will be sought either through on or off site contributions.
- 4.22 **Policy DM47: Listed Buildings** - Development proposals or works, including alterations, extensions and changes of use shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.
- 4.23 **Policy DM50: Archaeology** – The policy sets out that development proposals will need to take into account the significance of the heritage asset and their setting, and the scale of any loss or harm. Development proposals affecting archaeological heritage assets which meet the requirements of the Local Plan (Part One) policy will be supported.

#### **NATIONAL PLANNING POLICY FRAMEWORK**

- 4.24 The Framework sets out the Government’s planning policies for England and how these should be applied. the following advice is relevant:

##### *Approach to Sustainable Development*

- 4.25 **Paragraph 7** of the Framework states that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.
- 4.26 **Paragraph 8** states that achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives, which are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways (so that opportunities can be taken to secure net gains across each of the different objectives):

*a) an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right types is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure;*

*b) a social objective – to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be provided to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by fostering well-designed, beautiful and safe places, with accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities’ health, social and cultural well-being; and*

*c) an environmental objective – to protect and enhance our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, improving biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.*

4.27 **Paragraph 9** states that planning decisions should play an active role in guiding development towards sustainable solutions, but in doing so should take local circumstances into account, to reflect the character, needs and opportunities of each area.

4.28 **Paragraph 10** states that, so that sustainable development is pursued in a positive way, at the heart of the Framework is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. This is then detailed at **Paragraph 11**.

4.29 **Paragraph 38** makes it clear that decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.

#### *Design*

4.30 **Paragraph 130** seeks to ensure that developments optimise the potential of sites and function well.

#### *Biodiversity*

4.31 **Paragraph 180** seeks, amongst other things, to improve biodiversity in and around developments and secure measurable net gains for biodiversity.

#### *Highway Safety*

4.32 **Paragraph 110** seeks to ensure that safe and suitable access to the site can be achieved for all users.

4.33 **Paragraph 111** states that development should only be prevented or refused on highways grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network would be severe.

#### *Green Belt*

4.34 **Paragraph 137** states that the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence.

- 4.35 **Paragraph 138** outlines the five purposes of the Green Belt. This includes checking the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas and assisting in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment.
- 4.36 **Paragraph 147** states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances.
- 4.37 **Paragraph 149** of the Framework states that a local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt unless one of a number of exceptions apply. One such exception is at 149 (g) which states:

*“g) limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed land, whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), which would:*

*– not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development; or...”*

#### *Historic Environment*

- 4.38 **Paragraph 194** of the Framework requires an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting. The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets’ importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance.
- 4.39 **Paragraph 199** of the Framework states that, when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be).

#### *Education*

- 4.40 **Paragraph 95** of the Framework states that it is important that a sufficient choice of school places is available to meet the needs of existing and new communities. Local planning authorities should take a proactive, positive and collaborative approach to meeting this requirement, and to development that will widen choice in education. They should:

a) give great weight to the need to create, expand or alter schools through the preparation of plans and decisions on applications; and

b) work with school promoters, delivery partners and statutory bodies to identify and resolve key planning issues before applications are submitted.

#### **LEGAL CONTEXT – HERITAGE**

- 4.41 Established caselaw<sup>1</sup> contains important findings which have direct implications for developments concerning designated heritage assets. The Court emphasised the need for decision makers to apply

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<sup>1</sup> Barnwell Manor Wind Energy Ltd v East Northants DC, English Heritage, National Trust and SSCLG (2014) EWCA Civ 137.

the intended protection for heritage assets as specified under s66(1) of the relevant 1990 Act and the parallel duty under s72(1) of that Act. These are as follows:

*“Section 66(1) – “In considering whether to grant planning permission [or permission in principle] for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority or, as the case may be, the Secretary of State shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.”*

4.42 In essence, the decision maker has a statutory duty to give ‘considerable importance and weight’ to the desirability of preserving the setting of listed buildings when carrying out a ‘balancing exercise’ in planning decisions.

## **5. PROPOSAL**

5.1 This application seeks permission for the erection of a single storey building which would create an additional 5 classrooms. This would allow Cransley School to meet the increasing growing demand for Junior School places. The building would be a single storey, flat roof, modular structure, akin to a mobile classroom. Access to the classrooms would be via a small number of steps. The facades of the building would be timber clad and would match the existing Junior School buildings which are located to the south of the site. The drainage for the building would be located under the ‘skirt’. The building would be located on existing hardstanding. No alterations are proposed to the site access and no alterations are proposed to the surfacing material of the existing car park. The building would be located within an existing area used for the car parking of school minibuses and staff parking. However, sufficient vehicular parking would be retained within the site.

## **6. ASSESSMENT**

6.1 It is considered that the main issues with the proposed development are:

- Whether the proposal would be acceptable with particular regard to local and national policy concerning the Green Belt; and
- The effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area, including the setting of the Grade I listed Belmont Hall.

### **1) Green Belt**

#### ***Legal and Policy Context***

6.2 Policy STRAT9 of the Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part One) (LPP1) states that, in areas of the countryside with the Green Belt, additional restrictions will apply to development in line with the Framework. The Framework states that the construction of new buildings in the Green Belt should be regarded as inappropriate, unless for one of a limited number of specified exceptions. One such exception is at paragraph 149 (g) which is for limited infilling or the partial redevelopment of previously developed land (PDL), whether redundant or in continuing use. This is subject to

development meeting one of two criteria, one of which is that the proposal would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development.

- 6.3 In relation to this exception, in *Samuel Smith Old Brewery (Tadcaster) & Oxton Farm v North Yorkshire CC & Darrington Quarries Ltd [2018] EWCA Civ 489* it was acknowledged that some forms of development, including mineral extraction, may in principle be appropriate, and compatible with the concept of openness. Similarly in *Euro Garages Ltd v SSCLG & Anor [2018] EWHC 1753 (Admin)* the judge indicated that rather than treating any change as having a greater impact on openness of the Green Belt, the correct approach is to consider the impact or harm, if any, wrought by the change. Whether or not any change will have an adverse impact, and so cause harm to openness, might depend on factors such as the scale of the development, **its locational context**, and its spatial and/or visual implications. As well as setting out the correct method for assessment under paragraph 149 (g) of the Framework, this particular judgment shows that the term ‘existing development’ includes that which is beyond the site’s boundaries in the immediate area, not just that at the site itself.

#### ***Previously Developed Land***

- 6.4 The site is clearly developed and accommodates buildings and an area of hardstanding. It therefore represents previously developed land (PDL) in line with the definition provided at Annex 2 to the Framework. In reaching this finding, one should be mindful of the Court’s finding in *R (Lee Valley Regional Park Authority) v Broxbourne BC [2015] EWHC 185 (Admin)* which highlight that “...the flexibility in the NPPF for previously developed land may not require every part of the application site to have been previously developed land...”.
- 6.5 Unrelated to the Green Belt, it should also be noted that paragraph 85 of the Framework states that the use of PDL should be encouraged where suitable opportunities exist. The Framework also places considerable emphasis on making efficient use of land. The proposal would therefore comply with the identified objectives of the Framework. This carries significant weight in favour of this scheme in general.

#### ***Openness***

- 6.6 Having found that the site represents PDL, it is now necessary to consider whether or not the development would have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development in this area.
- 6.7 Openness has both visual and spatial dimensions. Cransley School is a sizeable educational complex accommodating both Junior and Senior Schools. These comprise a number of existing buildings, including the three storey Senior School at Belmont Hall and its associated large gymnasium, a collection of buildings (Tech, Science, Pavilion etc.) associated with the Junior School and large staff and visitor parking areas. The comings and goings of parents, students and staff, together with the physical presence of buildings, parked cars and school buses, have a marked effect upon the openness of this part of the Green Belt. This is reinforced by the presence of nearby camping facilities and residential properties.

- 6.8 The site itself comprises a building associated with the Junior School and staff and visitor parking areas. Its developed nature is readily apparent within the site. That said, the site is screened by established trees and there are only limited, restricted, long-distance views towards it from vantage points within the public domain. Overall, the area in which the site falls is significantly developed. It is characterised by built physical permanence associated with education. The site is not seen within the context of any open landscape from further afield. As such, the site and immediate area make no meaningful contribution to the openness of the Green Belt.
- 6.9 The proposal is for a single storey, modular, classroom building. This would be positioned on a section of the existing parking area to the north of the Junior School. The building would add additional physical permanence to the site. However, this would not be an excessive amount and a significant amount of open space would remain at the parking areas. Furthermore, it would have a narrow, linear, arrangement and low profile that would be comparable in scale to nearby buildings at the Junior School and would not be visually prominent at the site. Moreover, the site is well contained, and the new building would be heavily screened by existing vegetation.
- 6.10 Taking everything together, the immediate area is not 'open' and does not contribute in this regard in any meaningful way. Rather, it is significantly influenced by existing built form and other paraphernalia at Cransley School. The proposal would be well contained and screened. As such, and given its relatively limited size and scale, it would not be apparent within this pocket of development. When glimpsed from further afield, the building's form, scale and use would integrate successfully with the educational site. It would not stand out or draw the eye to its physical presence. For these reasons, although the proposal adds to the site in a modest spatial sense, it does not harmfully change the perception of the openness at this part of the Green Belt (which is already heavily eroded by existing development).
- 6.11 It follows that, when seen in its proper context, this development does not result in a greater impact on openness than the existing development in this particular area of the Green Belt. This assertion is further reinforced given that the Council could impose an appropriately worded condition requiring the building to be removed after a period of 10 years. At this point, a strategy for the provision of additional classrooms in a more permanent manner would have been advanced by the School. Consequently, there is an available mechanism that would allow for the complete removal of this building, wholly negating any effect on the openness of the Green Belt. This would also ensure that the proposal is fully in accordance with the fundamental purpose of Green Belt policy outlined at paragraph 137 of the Framework which is to keep land *permanently* open.

#### ***Overall Conclusion – Green Belt***

- 6.12 Drawing the threads of the above assessment together, the proposal represents the partial redevelopment of PDL that would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development. Accordingly, it is not inappropriate development within the Green Belt with regard to the exception at paragraph 149 (g) of the Framework. The scheme should also not be regarded as harmful to the purposes of including land within the Green Belt (with particular regard to *Lee Valley Regional Park Authority, R (on the application of) v Epping Forest District Council &*

*Anor (Rev 1) [2016] EWCA Civ 404*). There is no conflict with Policy STRAT9 of the LPP1 insofar as it requires that developments within the Green Belt are in line with the relevant restrictions of the Framework.

### **Hypothetical Inappropriate Development**

- 6.13 Notwithstanding the above, for completeness, the hypothetical scenario in which the development is considered to be inappropriate development in the Green Belt has been considered below.

#### ***Legal and Policy Context***

- 6.14 The Framework states that inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. It goes on to advise that substantial weight should be given to any harm to the Green Belt and that very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.
- 6.15 ‘Other considerations’ do not have to be rare or uncommon to be special (*Wychavon v SSCLG & Butler [2008]*). This is consistent with the comments in *Basildon v FSS & Temple [2004] EWHC 2759 (Admin)* and in *Basildon v SSETR & Ors [2000]*. The circumstances do not have to be unique, and the possibility that similar circumstance might arise elsewhere does not prevent a finding of very special circumstances in any particular case.

#### ***Very Special Circumstances***

##### ***Need and Social Benefits***

- 6.16 Cransley Senior and Junior Schools are well established educational facilities with considerable reputations for excellence. The School as a whole is characterised by an enhanced and varied curriculum, with small class sizes and a structured careers programme. It is also well known for creative learning, winning many national Independent Schools Association Awards for Drama and recently participating as a finalist in the ISA Awards for Excellence and Innovation in Performing Arts. The Junior School utilises the resources, facilities and expertise of the Senior School, providing small, nurturing, classes. Its reputation for excellence already results in a high demand for pupil places.
- 6.17 Given the economic climate (discussed later in this Statement), a number of independent schools in the area are closing (including Yorston Lodge in Knutsford). There is also relatively limited choice for private education in Northwich, with the nearest competing school being The Grange School (Junior and Senior Schools) at Hartford. Consequently, and given the excellent reputation of Cransley School, there is increasing pressure to accommodate for additional pupils at the site.
- 6.18 As such, the existing Junior School is seeking to expand its pupil intake. However, it does not have the existing facilities to accommodate for this and maintain its current academic practices (notably the smaller class sizes). The proposed building would provide a functional space for up to 5 new

classrooms. Not only would these spaces allow for an enhanced pupil yield, but they would also provide the opportunity for the School to continue with its ethos of affording small, nurturing, classes to maintain its high standard of education. This in turn would also allow Cransley School to continue to compete with other independent schools in the area that have similar educational aspirations. The proposal is the minimum size required to achieve this and is clearly of an appropriate scale to serve the local community (in line with this particular requirements of Policy DM39 of the LPP2).

- 6.19 The proposal would therefore provide increased options for local communities in terms of high quality educational services. This is in line with paragraph 93 of the Framework which seeks to plan positively for the provision of local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments. Moreover, it is in accordance with paragraph 95 of the Framework insofar as it seeks to ensure that a sufficient choice of school places is available to meet the needs of existing and new communities. Indeed, paragraph 95 of the Framework specifically states that local planning authorities should take a proactive, positive and collaborative approach to meeting this requirement, and to development that will widen choice in education. Furthermore, **great weight** must be given to the need to expand and alter schools.
- 6.20 On this basis, the social benefits associated with the proposed expansion of Cransley School can be afforded nothing other than substantial weight.

#### *Economic Benefits*

- 6.21 The former coalition Government stated shortly after the Framework was launched that “*its number one priority is to get the economy moving again*” (Ministerial statement 6th Sept 2012). This strategic ambition remains the case once more than nine years later, in a post-EU Exit and COVID economic environment. As a barometer to the wider economic outlook, the Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, has recently announced at a Bank of England Monetary Policy Report Press Conference held on 4 August 2022, that GDP growth in the UK has slowed. Interest rates are approaching historic highs and it is entirely possible that the economy could soon enter a recession. Supporting the economy is therefore more important than ever.
- 6.22 This assertion is reinforced by the July 2020 White Paper, which states that “*Millions of jobs depend on the construction sector and in every economic recovery, it has played a crucial role.*”. In addition, the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors have recently highlighted that for every £1 spend on construction a further £2.84 is generated across the wider economy (Build Back Better May 2020, University of Birmingham Paper).
- 6.23 The economic benefits of development are also confirmed in the Framework as a key dimension to achieving sustainable development. Paragraph 81 states that discretion is taken away from the decision-maker in the weight that economic growth should be given and that this weight can be no less than significant:

*“Planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. **Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth***



*and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development.”*

- 6.24 Cransley School is a considerable local employer, providing a number of well-paid job opportunities. This in turn supports the economic viability of local communities. The proposal would therefore allow the business to continue to adapt to poor economic conditions, compete with other independent schools and maintain its current level of economic contribution to the local area. Furthermore, the proposal would provide a platform by which Cransley School can expand its current level of employment (by 2 FTE positions) and there would be additional employment associated with construction and installation.
- 6.25 Overall, it is likely that there will soon be a notable economic downturn. Local and national planning policies, together with Government aspirations, seek to create the conditions in which businesses can thrive, expand and adapt, particularly under uncertain economic conditions. In this light, the economic benefits associated with this proposal should be afforded substantial weight.

*Temporary Nature of Proposal*

- 6.26 As already discussed in this Statement, this proposal is akin to a temporary modular building. It would provide requisite educational space for a period of time during which the School would develop options for a more permanent solution. Consequently, all harm to the Green Belt would be for a short period only and would be reversible. This could be adequately managed through the imposition of an appropriately worded condition to ensure that, in the long-term, the land at the site remained permanently open. This factor again weighs heavily in favour of this scheme.

***Overall Conclusion – Hypothetical Very Special Circumstances***

- 6.27 Should the Council find that this development would be inappropriate within the Green Belt (which it is not), it would be harmful to the Green Belt and should not be approved except in very special circumstances. Very special circumstances will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.
- 6.28 The proposal would allow for the expansion and adaptation of an existing educational facility. It would provide a functional space for up to 5 new classrooms to allow for an enhanced pupil yield and the continued provision of small, nurturing, classes to maintain a high standard of education. This in turn would also allow Cransley School to continue to compete with other independent schools in the area that have similar educational aspirations. In accordance with national policy, this matter alone must be afforded great weight.
- 6.29 As illustrated, Cransley School is also a considerable local employer, providing a number of well-paid job opportunities. This in turn supports the economic viability of local communities. The proposal would therefore allow the business to continue to adapt to poor economic conditions and maintain and enhance its current level of economic contribution to the local area. Furthermore, a condition could be imposed requiring the complete removal of the building and associated infrastructure

following the submission of a plan for a more permanent solution. All harm to the Green Belt would therefore be short term only and land would be kept permanently open.

- 6.30 Taking these factors into account, even in this hypothetical scenario where the proposal was found to be inappropriate development within the Green Belt, the other considerations put forward would clearly outweigh the substantial weight given to the harm to the Green Belt. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development would exist.

## **2) Character and Appearance, Including the Setting of the Grade I listed Belmont Hall**

- 6.31 Belmont Hall to the west of the site is a Grade I listed building. The decision maker has a statutory duty to give 'considerable importance and weight' to the desirability of preserving the setting of this designated heritage asset. The Framework also advises that great weight must be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets.

### ***The Significance of the Asset***

- 6.32 Although now partly a school, Belmont Hall was formerly a country house. It was designed by James Gibbs and dates from around 1755. As well as its historic evolution, the architectural composition of the building, together with interesting internal and external detailing, contributes considerably to its significance. Features include; stone-dressed Flemish bond brown brickwork, moulded stone corncicing with flat 3-bay pediment bearing Smith Barry's arms, decorative windows (including round two storey brick bay windows and large, 12-pane, sash windows), late Georgian balustrade to forecourt, with urns on piers and pair of panelled gateposts in each return, painted stone mantels with head of Bacchus, vines, grapes, fruit, nuts and foliage in shouldered architrave and carved mouldings to door-panels and architraves.

### ***The Setting of the Asset***

- 6.33 The asset is set back from Warrington Road and is accessed by long private roads from this carriageway and Belmont Road to the east. Its discreet positioning, together with the verdant setting, restrict views from the public domain from further afield. Public views are predominantly available from the adjacent campsite.
- 6.34 Consequently, the asset is only experienced within its immediate setting. To the rear of the building is the back lawn to the Senior School (a recreation area for students). Close to the western elevation is the large gymnasium. Beyond this is a camping facility and a residential unit. To the east of the asset is the Junior School, comprised of a complex of buildings, as well as staff and visitor parking areas. This part of Cransley School is somewhat divorced from the asset by an established tree belt. Although a section of the building is used as a landlord residence, it is therefore mainly experienced in a developed, predominantly educational, setting.

### ***The Effect of the Proposal on the Setting of the Listed Building***

- 6.35 The site mainly comprises a section of hardstanding used for the parking of vehicles associated with Cransley School. It is separated from the asset by an adjacent tree belt and does not appear discordant in the developed setting of the School. It therefore makes a neutral contribution to the asset's overall setting.
- 6.36 The proposal would be a linear, modular, building arranged on a broadly north/south axis. Its elevations would be clad in timber under a flat roof. The materials palette would match that used for the existing buildings at the Junior School to the south and would harmonise with this verdant setting. Furthermore, the building's appearance would be akin to a temporary classroom and is entirely typical of buildings found at educational facilities such as this. Accordingly, the proposal would not appear discordant at this location and would integrate successfully with the form and appearance of buildings to the south. Neither would it unduly urbanise this developed site. This assertion is reinforced given the proposal's discreet, well screened, location and modest scale which would not notably increase vehicular movements to and from the site.
- 6.37 In terms of scale, the proposal would be single storey only and would be commensurate with the height of nearby buildings. Taking this into account, together with the distance to the asset and the presence of screening vegetation, the proposal would not appear unduly prominent or oppressive. Neither would it inappropriately compete with Belmont Hall in terms of size or draw the eye away from it.
- 6.38 The proposal would not occupy an excessive amount of hardstanding and sufficient open space would be left around it. Accordingly, the building would not appear unduly cramped in relation to its size and would not harm the asset by virtue of an inappropriate increase in 'pressure' from the physical presence of development. Furthermore, the development would be confined to the existing, previously developed, School site. It would not encroach beyond site boundaries into open countryside. Taking this into account, and as any external lighting would be directional and managed by the School, there would be no harm to the character of the wider landscape setting (which is not itself an intrinsically dark landscape).

### **Overall Conclusion – Character and Appearance and Historic Environment**

- 6.39 Taking all of the above into account, the proposal's design would assimilate successfully into this developed educational setting. Its overall size would not result in an unduly prominent or bulky feature and would not compete with the historic asset for visual primacy. It would simply be read as another subordinate educational building at the School. Furthermore, the proposal would not encroach into open countryside and would have no material effect upon the wider landscape setting.
- 6.40 For these reasons, the proposal would not harm the character and appearance of the area and would preserve the setting of the Belmont Hall. It would therefore accord with Policies ENV2, ENV5 and ENV6 of the LPP1 and Policies GBC2, DM3, DM4, DM44, DM45 and DM47 of the Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part Two) (LPP2).

- 6.41 Should that Council conclude that there is harm to the setting of Belmont Hall, which there is not, then this can only be to a limited degree. It would be 'less than substantial' within the meaning of the Framework. In accordance with paragraph 202 of the Framework, such harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. In this instance, there are significant social and economic benefits. Amongst other things, these are as a result of enhanced employment at the site, together with the provision of a much needed educational facility which would allow the school to continue to provide excellent education and would ensure that sufficient choice of school places is available to meet the needs of existing and new communities. Accordingly, in this hypothetical scenario, the public benefits would outweigh the less than substantial harm to the setting of the asset. There would be a be clear and convincing justification for the identified harm and this should not be a barrier to permitting this scheme.

#### **OTHER MATERIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

##### ***Biodiversity***

- 6.42 The site is of limited ecological value. The proposal would not affect any protected species and no further ecological surveys are required. In addition, the proposal would not result in harm to any locally, nationally or internationally designated wildlife site. It would therefore cause no harm in terms of biodiversity, in line with the provisions of Policy ENV4 of the LPP1 which, amongst other things, seeks to protect the natural environment.
- 6.43 Indeed, it should also be noted that the proposal would result in biodiversity net gains through the introduction of both bat and bird boxes. Such improvements could be secured conditionally. This would be in line with the provisions of paragraph 180 of the Framework and weighs in favour of this scheme.

##### ***Living Conditions***

- 6.44 Given the distance between the site and nearby residential properties, the proposal would not prejudice living conditions in terms of outlook, access to daylight or privacy. Moreover, as the scheme would only result in a small increase in the number of vehicles moving to and from the site and students and staff circulating within it, there would be no harm to residents in terms of noise and disturbance. This is in accordance with Policy DM2 of the LPP2.

##### ***Flood Risk***

- 6.45 The proposal is within Flood Zone 1, indicating a low probability of flooding. Furthermore, there is no evidence of significant surface water collection at the site. Consequently, the proposal is not unduly susceptible to flood events and would not increase the likelihood of such events off-site. The scheme is therefore in accordance with Policy ENV1 of the LPP1 and Policy DM40 of the LPP2 insofar as they seek to manage flood risk.

### ***Highway Safety and Parking***

- 6.46 The proposal would be located on an area of hardstanding currently used for the parking of vehicles. However, sufficient parking spaces would remain for both the Junior and Senior Schools (2 spaces per classroom in accordance with the Council's Revised Parking Standards Supplementary Planning Document). These would be arranged in a useable formation. Consequently, sufficient staff and visitor parking spaces would be provided.
- 6.47 Turning to highway safety, the proposal is relatively limited in scale. There would be no material increase in the number of vehicular movements to and from the site via existing access points. These access points also have suitable visibility splays for the vehicle speeds on adjoining carriageways. As such, the existing access to the site would not be harmfully intensified and vehicular and pedestrian safety would not be prejudiced. The scheme is therefore in accordance with Policy STRAT10 of the LPP1.

## **7. CONCLUSION**

### ***Planning Balance***

- 7.1 The application site is located in the Green Belt. Development within the Green Belt should not be approved except in very special circumstances unless it meets one of the exception criteria. The proposal represents the partial redevelopment of PDL that would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development. Accordingly, it is not inappropriate development within the Green Belt with regard to the exception at paragraph 149 (g) of the Framework.
- 7.2 Even if the Council were to disagree, it must take into account other material considerations in considering whether very special circumstances exist. To this effect:
- The proposal would provide classroom spaces to allow for an enhanced pupil yield (as a result of the excellent reputation of the School, together with the closure of nearby independent schools). This would provide the opportunity for the School to continue its ethos of affording small, nurturing, classes to maintain its high standard of education. The proposal is the minimum size required to achieve this. Overall, the scheme would provide increased options for local communities in terms of high quality educational services, ensuring that a sufficient choice of school places is available to meet their needs, and great weight must be given to the School's aspirations to expand its facilities in line with national planning policy.
  - Cransley School is a considerable local employer, providing a number of well-paid job opportunities. This in turn supports the economic viability of local communities. The proposal would therefore allow the business to continue to adapt to poor economic conditions, compete with other independent schools and maintain its current level of economic contribution to the local area. Furthermore, the proposal would provide a platform by which Cransley School can expand its current level of employment (by 2 FTE

positions) and there would be additional employment associated with construction and installation.

- This proposal is akin to a temporary classroom building. It would provide requisite educational space for a period of time during which the School would develop options for a more permanent solution. Consequently, all harm to the Green Belt would be for a short period only and would be reversible. This could be adequately managed through the imposition of an appropriately worded condition to ensure that, in the long-term, the land at the site remained permanently open.

7.3 It follows that, even in this hypothetical scenario where the proposal was found to be inappropriate development within the Green Belt, the other considerations put forward would clearly outweigh the substantial weight given to the harm to the Green Belt. Consequently, the very special circumstances necessary to justify the development would exist.

7.4 In addition, the proposal would preserve the setting of the nearby Grade I listed Belmont Hall and would not harm the character and appearance of the wider landscape. Sufficient public benefits would exist in any event should the Council identify less than substantial harm to the historic environment (which is not the case). No other planning harms have been identified in this assessment.

7.5 Overall, the proposal should be approved without delay as it is in accordance with the development plan as a whole and there are no other considerations which outweigh this finding.

### ***Overall Conclusion***

7.6 It is concluded that the proposal would represent sustainable development for which the Framework advocates a presumption in favour. It is therefore respectfully requested that permission be granted.