

## PLANNING APPLICATION PL/26/0138 – FORMER HEMDEAN HOUSE SCHOOL SITE

CADRA supports the principle of sensitive redevelopment, but has significant concerns regarding heritage preservation, biodiversity, lack of exploration of its continued educational use and affordable housing provision.

### 1. Heritage Preservation

We have taken professional advice on the heritage, landscaping and biodiversity aspects of the proposals and our comments are based on that advice. We have included photos to illustrate just some of what we seek to preserve, and we are grateful to our advisor for supplying them.

#### 1.1 Hemdean House

Hemdean House and its Lodge have been identified as a Non-Designated Heritage Asset (NDHA) and granted Local Listing by Reading Borough Council. The site is a rare example of a mid-Victorian institutional building that retains a high degree of architectural "intactness".

- **Internal Fabric Protection:** We request a planning condition to preserve original internal features, including window shutters, period fireplaces, decorative plaster mouldings, and the original tiled flooring in the entrance hall. See photos at the end.
- **Design Quality of New Residential Block:** The proposed new residential block is disappointingly nondescript and fails to reflect the "special character" of the site. We suggest incorporating specific motifs from the original building, such as the horizontal light-coloured banding above the windows, to provide visual continuity.
- **Massing and Setting:** To protect the setting of the primary heritage asset, we advocate a reduction in the massing of the new block, specifically removing units from the end nearest the main house.
- **Heritage Interpretation:** Given the site's 165-year history in girls' education and its significance to the Caversham community, the developer should provide high-quality Heritage Interpretation Panels at the site entrance and near the main House.

#### 1.2 Music Practice Rooms and Conservatory

We strongly object to the demolition of the Music Practice Rooms (see old photo) behind the Home Economics block. These are rare surviving structures of significant local interest and should be repurposed (e.g., as a residents' garden pavilion). Furthermore, we suggest the reconstruction of the original conservatory on the south side of Hemdean House to serve as a high-quality communal amenity.

### 2. Biodiversity

The site's wooded character and Victorian garden context are central to its significance. Having taken advice from GLOBE, these are CADRA's concerns.

#### 2.1 Landscaping

We consider the current landscaping proposals generic and insufficiently rooted in the historic setting. A Heritage Landscaping Strategy should be required, drawing on specialist input (e.g. Berkshire Gardens Trust) to ensure that specimen trees and planting reflect the period character of a mid-Victorian residence.

#### 2.2 Trees

We have specific concerns regarding the accuracy of the submitted tree information and the level of protection afforded to the Hemdean Road frontage trees.

**Frontage Tree Removal** - The proposals will result in the loss of two prominent lime trees on Hemdean Road, not one as implied by the plans. This includes TPO T3, removed to create a new vehicle entrance, and a smaller lime tree at the northern end which is not shown on any submitted plan. This smaller tree is a replacement for a

previously removed TPO pine and must be retained. A minor adjustment to the pedestrian path would allow its protection.

**Root Protection Area (RPA) Conflicts** - Parking bays R7–R16 fall within the RPAs of the retained frontage trees. British Standard guidance (RPA radius = 12 × stem diameter) makes it clear that RPAs extend well beyond the canopy line, and that no hard surfacing or ground level changes should occur within them. These bays must therefore be removed and replaced with soft landscaping, which would also widen the planted strip between the building and the highway.

**Felled TPO Sycamore and Other Losses** - A large TPO sycamore recently felled along the southern boundary (near 16 Hemdean Rise) is still shown as present on the site plan. This tree, and other previously removed TPO trees within the grounds, must be accounted for and replaced through new planting.

#### **Impact on Residential Amenity:**

The combined effect of tree loss, RPA encroachment, and the height and proximity of the proposed building will result in an over-dominant frontage and unacceptable harm to neighbouring residential amenity along Hemdean Road.

### **2.3 Habitat Protection**

Beyond individual trees, the wooded areas form an important ecological resource. Without a strengthened landscape and tree protection strategy, the cumulative urbanisation of the site risks degrading the wider habitat network. A more comprehensive landscape strategy is required to safeguard the site's broader ecological value.

### **3. Loss of Educational Asset and Policy OU1 Compliance**

We are very concerned about the total loss of the site's educational function without the developer first satisfying the rigorous requirements of Local Plan Policy OU1 and site allocation CA1h.

- **Failure of Marketing Evidence:** The applicant asserts there was "no interest" in educational use [PS 5.10]. We challenge the validity of this marketing. To be policy-compliant, the developer must provide an independent Marketing Report proving the site was offered at a realistic price for educational use, rather than a premium residential price tag which naturally excludes community providers.
- **Acute SEND Shortage:** There is a severe, documented shortage of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) places in Reading. While the applicant prioritises older persons' housing, a retirement home can be built on almost any residential site. Conversely, the "enclosed," tranquil, and wooded nature of Hemdean House is a rare resource specifically suited to the sensory and safety requirements of SEND pupils, and at the heart of the community.
- **Nursery School:** CADRA has been contacted by residents about the loss of all educational facilities, and we know that a petition has been raised to keep the PlayDay nursery school on the site open. There is clearly a need for some level of educational provided.
- **The Co-Location Solution:** We reject the developer's binary choice between total loss of education or total retirement use. A mixed-use co-location model, providing a specialist SEND unit within the historic House and allowing a reduced-scale residential block on the grounds is entirely feasible. Both demographics require a quiet, secure environment; a small SEND unit is far more compatible with retirement living than a standard large-scale primary school.
- **Affordable Housing Disparity:** The current proposal targets high-equity "downsizing", yet 71% of the identified need for specialist older persons' housing in Reading is for *affordable* tenures. By ignoring this, the developer is bypassing Policy H3 and failing to meet actual local need.

**Requirement:** The Council should pause this application until a formal SEND Feasibility Study is conducted. The site's value as a community and educational asset must, under Policy OU1, take precedence over its value as market-led housing land.

#### 4. Traffic, Congestion, and the Hemdean Road "Pinch Point"

While the Transport Statement claims a technical reduction in daily vehicle movements, a net saving of only 24 trips is statistically insignificant and fails to address the chronic, all-day congestion in Caversham.

- **Loss of Traffic Relief:** Currently, the school frontage is one of the few sections of this older part of Hemdean Road where cars park on only one side, allowing for two-way traffic flow. The introduction of a second site entrance and the intensification of residential use will inevitably lead to increased on-street parking demand and more frequent "turning movements." This will turn a functioning part of the road into another "pinch point," exacerbating existing gridlock.
- **Underestimated Impact:** The report replaces a predictable, short-duration "school peak" with constant, unpredictable vehicle movements throughout the day. Given the narrowness of Hemdean Road, this "trickle" effect will cause more frequent disruptions than the current school use.

#### Recommended Conditions to Mitigate Local Impact:

1. **"Permit-Free" Development:** Given the developer's claim that residents will have low car ownership, the development must be "Permit-Free." New residents should be legally barred from obtaining on-street parking permits to prevent overspill into the already congested Hemdean Road.
2. **Car Club Provision:** To support a low-car lifestyle, the developer should be required to fund a dedicated on-site Car Club vehicle for a minimum of 5 years.
3. **Redesign of Northern Access:** The proposed second entrance should be reviewed to ensure it does not compromise the current 'flow' of the road. This specific stretch of Hemdean Road is currently one of the few sections where parking is limited to one side, providing a vital passing point for two-way traffic. By placing a new entrance here, the developer will introduce turning manoeuvres and potentially new parking restrictions that will eliminate this 'relief valve,' turning a functioning part of the highway into another permanent 'pinch point' and safety hazard.
4. **Construction Traffic Management:** A strict Construction Traffic Management Plan (CTMP) must be a "pre-commencement" condition to ensure that heavy plant and delivery vehicles do not park on or block Hemdean Road during the build phase.

#### CONCLUSION

The current proposal requires significant refinement to ensure it does not cause "less than substantial harm" to the heritage significance of the site. CADRA believes the recommendations above would better balance the need for new housing with the preservation of Caversham's unique built and natural heritage. On this basis **CADRA objects to this application.**

#### PHOTOS

##### The Music Practice Rooms



## The Old Coservatory



## Fireplace



## Tiled Flooring



## Main Entrance



## Windows Frames

