



This was no way to provide a new school for the Howard of Effingham

7th April 2026

After a 12-year planning saga, the scheme for Berkeley Homes to deliver a new building for the Howard of Effingham School, to be built on green belt and paid for by the profit from building 405 'enabling' homes, collapsed on 27th March when Berkeley Homes pulled the plug on the project and decided instead to pursue residential development without a new school.

So what went wrong? Effingham Parish Council (EPC) and Effingham Residents Association (EFFRA) believe this sad story demonstrates that private sector developers should not be permitted to deliver public sector infrastructure in exchange for inappropriate development that would not otherwise have been allowed, particularly on valuable green belt land. This was not the way to provide new buildings for our well-regarded secondary school.

In November 2014, a joint planning application was submitted by Berkeley Homes and The Howard Partnership Trust (THPT), the multi-academy trust that manages the Howard of Effingham School. The planning application claimed that 'Very Special Circumstances' could be used to allow 295 homes to be built in Effingham's green belt in return for constructing a new expanded school for 2000 pupils. Following very detailed and thorough consideration of this complicated application by Guildford Borough Council (GBC) planning officers, GBC refused the application in March 2016, citing reasons for refusal including:

- Inappropriate development in the Green Belt, with an insufficient case for very special circumstances, and effectively merging Effingham with Little Bookham.
- Damage to the rural character of Effingham village, to the Conservation Area and to the setting of Listed buildings.
- Possibility of a severe impact on local highways.

Both EPC and EFFRA had objected to the application, expressing the views of residents. In an early survey carried out by EFFRA in July 2014 on the principle of the scheme, 93% of the 350 residents who responded were against it. This was confirmed by the 542 local residents who submitted formal objections to GBC. Residents value the Green Belt and were concerned about both the impact of extra traffic on the narrow lanes through Effingham's historic village centre, as well as the planned new school to be built on top of a wild life corridor designated in Effingham's emerging Neighbourhood Plan. Effingham strongly supports the Howard School but our village community should not have to pay the price of a new building through loss of countryside and increased danger on our rural roads. We argued that the new school was essential public educational infrastructure which should be paid for by the state and not be dependent on Berkeley Homes making a profit from building on-green belt land. We also were concerned that 295 homes was unlikely to be the final number of required houses.

Berkeley Homes assured GBC the scheme was financially viable in their Financial Viability Appraisal (which was not made public) even though it required its normal high profit margin on the development. GBC's expert expressed concerns about the accuracy of the Appraisal with the

Planning Officer saying: “the quantum of development to support the new school has not been demonstrated”. Financial viability would become a recurring theme.

Berkeley Homes took this to appeal and sadly, the Inspector felt that this scheme was a good model for providing a new school building at no cost to the state, and allowed the appeal. That decision was subsequently upheld by the Secretary of State, and planning permission was given in March 2018.

The silver lining for Effingham from this decision was the potential for a new school to replace the current building as well as a Cullum Centre for children with special needs. We also welcomed the requirement that 20% of the new homes should be ‘affordable’, provided by housing associations, which is much needed in this green belt village. A contribution to help rebuild the old KGV hall and sports changing rooms was also welcome.

In August 2019 the Chairman of the Berkeley Group told EPC and EFFRA that the construction cost of the new school was more than expected and tried to persuade us to support an application for 55 more homes on the site at Effingham Lodge Farm.

The next major planning application was submitted in 2021. Having purchased the rest of the land on North Lodge Farm, Berkeley Homes applied to be allowed to build another 110 homes on that further stretch of green belt, claiming the scheme already approved was no longer financially viable even though public figures showed that the increase in house prices should have more than offset the increased construction costs for the school. GBC’s planning committee refused this application in March 2022.

There was another public Inquiry where the accuracy of the financial viability appraisal submitted by Berkeley Homes was challenged as they showed conflicting different costings of the school, together with some serious double counting of costs. The specification of the new school was also well above the benchmark for similar sized state schools. Berkeley Homes assured the Inspector if the appeal was allowed the scheme would be financially viable. The appeal was allowed in November 2022.

EPC were advised by a barrister against going to judicial review, but were told *‘On the facts of this planning appeal, a different Inspector may well have taken a diametrically opposed decision. Indeed, in my view the Inspector reached a decision that many other Inspectors may not have reached.’*

EPC and EFFRA accepted that planning permission had now been given for 405 new homes, a 40% increase in the number of households in Effingham. Our task now was to try to make sure that the final designs of school and housing, and the highways works on village roads, were the best that could be achieved for the Effingham community.

In July 2024 THPT wrote to parents of children at the Howard School to say that they were in discussion with Berkeley Homes about revising the plans for the new-build school. The letter explained that revised plans were necessary due to changes in economic circumstances, in particular inflation of building costs and a reduced rise in house prices. In addition, it seems that Surrey County Council now accepted that the predicted future demand for school places in the area has decreased, and THPT had decided the Howard of Effingham School should remain at its current size rather than expanding to 2000 pupils in accordance with the planning permissions given at appeal.

EPC and EFFRA met with Berkeley Homes representatives and THPT in late January 2025 to discuss the new proposals. We were shown plans of the new design, and raised concerns about the sufficiency of school places, given the number of local residential developments which had planning permission, and about the safety of the proposed car park and drop-off arrangements.

Although we were told at the meeting that a new application was imminent, it wasn't until September 2025 that Berkeley Homes submitted the 'reserved matters' planning application to GBC. This proposed to reduce the capacity of the new-build school to the current level of 1600 pupils and simplify the design, including the deletion of the specialist Cullum Centre. EPC and EFFRA responded to the application expressing serious concerns about various aspects of this and EFFRA formally objected.

This 'reserved matters' application for the smaller school had not been determined by GBC when, in February 2026, Berkeley Homes submitted two more planning applications seeking to delete the affordable housing provision on the two Lodge Farm sites claiming yet again that the scheme was not financially viable.

Berkeley Homes wrote to EPC on 5 February 2026 describing the reasons for the new applications and stating their commitment to the project in glowing terms, saying:

Berkeley Homes is committed to the delivery of the new school and new homes in Effingham, despite challenging market conditions. The requested changes to the existing planning permissions will mean we can continue working closely with our community partners to achieve a positive outcome. A fit-for-purpose new school, to replace the outdated buildings, is long overdue and will offer a future-proofed, flexible community asset that will bring huge benefit to local families.

THPT wrote an optimistic letter to parents about the applications for revised plans the following day, saying:

Following one final stage of approval, we expect to be able to confirm that the new school buildings will open no later than September 2030. ...If this further permission is granted, we are excited about the opportunities that the new facilities will bring. Like many schools across the country, an upgrade to our facilities will enhance our ability to deliver life-changing education.

Parish councillors and EFFRA representatives met with Berkeley Homes and a THPT representative in late February 2026 to discuss the new applications. Not only did they want delete the affordable homes, they also wanted to increase the number of enabling homes that could be built and sold before they completed the new-build school to 258. Moreover, the Financial Viability Report predicted that it would be over five years before these 258 homes were completed and sold. If the new school was not completed until those new homes were occupied, its opening date would be pushed out to 2032/33, not 2030 as THPT hoped.

On 9 March, EPC and EFFRA sent a joint letter to Berkeley Homes seeking an explanation, pointing out that this created suspicion in the Effingham community that Berkeley Homes might build up to 258 homes and then not deliver the new school. We asked what legally enforceable assurances could Berkeley Homes offer that the new school will be delivered in a timely fashion. We received no answer to these questions.

On 16 March, EFFRA submitted strong objections to the new applications, citing in particular the risk that the school might not be built.

EPC made the formal decision to object to both applications at its meeting on 24 March, citing similar concerns and pointing out that approving these would mean that the resultant scheme would no longer be consistent with the planning permissions given at appeal in 2018 and 2022.

On 26 March, Berkeley Homes wrote to EPC and EFFRA not only withdrawing the planning applications and abandoning the whole project to deliver a new build school, but also saying it would pursue a new development on the land they own at Lodge Farm. The letter said:

It is with great regret that we have withdrawn our current planning applications in relation to new homes in Effingham, including the plans for the new Howard of Effingham School.... We are committed to bringing forward a viable scheme for our own site in Effingham, and we will continue to explore how development can still support positive outcomes for the community.

THPT and the Howard of Effingham School wrote to parents on the same day expressing their shock at the Berkeley Homes' sudden decision:

This week, Berkeley Homes has confirmed that they no longer intend to invest in a new school and are pursuing a residential-only scheme. We believe this is so that they can take advantage of a change in planning law. We are shocked and disappointed by this decision.

We may never know why Berkeley Homes abandoned the new school project so suddenly after 12 long years, but this was no way for a major housing developer to treat a school and a community.

The financial and emotional cost to the community of the 12 years has been high. The applications, variations, and appeals have caused huge expenditure by the borough and parish councils defending the residents of Effingham. Residents, councillors and school officials have wasted their time and energy. Many of our children have unnecessarily spent their school years in deteriorating school buildings with little maintenance due to an ambitious scheme. Some of them now have children in the school system who are likely to be applying for the school in due course. Will they see an end to this saga?

Where do we go from here? First, EFFRA will support the school in its decision to refurbish and upgrade the school's buildings. Second, we will continue to seek to protect the special characteristics of our village and to resist developments that do not respect its rural and historic character, its Conservation Area, its green belt land and ancient woodland.

Vivien White

*Chairman
Effingham Residents Association*