



Surrey's "suffer the little children..." tested

Plans to turn a family house into a home for vulnerable children on a Surrey street have been given the green light despite strong opposition from its future neighbours.

A five-bed detached home on Crosby Hill Drive in Camberley will be transformed into a children's home for up to three kids aged 10-17. Staff would live in with them around the clock, with no changes made to the building itself.

Council officers state the home is sorely needed, with rising demand for secure, regulated accommodation for children in care.

But of 28 locals who wrote in about the scheme, 27 objected. Concerns ranged from traffic and road safety to fears the change could alter the "character" of the street. But councillors said many of the concerns were based on myths and misunderstandings about children's homes.

Members of a Surrey County Council planning committee approved the scheme at a meeting on September 24.

One resident, however, wrote in support, arguing the location is exactly the kind of quiet and supportive environment vulnerable children should be given: "Everyone deserves a safe place to live," they said.

Despite traffic concerns, highway officers said there will not be a material change in the use of the road or car parking spaces down the street.

Rebecca Hanifan, responsible for looking after children's homes within Surrey, told the committee: "Children's homes are heavily regulated. The children who live in them are risk assessed and those with higher needs are placed in secure settings, not in the community.

"These are children who can live in a family setting- they go to school, they sleep well at night, and do normal activities over the weekend. Our homes blend into communities, property values do not drop and our children are well-behaved."

Cllr Ernest Mallett MBE dismissed the claims the children's home would damage the character of Crosby Hill Drive. He said: "How is that any different to children living in other houses? This is a perfectly viable use for the property. It won't be any trouble to anyone and won't be any different to any other house on the street.

"We are a first-class western society and we take care of people."

Others noted practical issues- like the lack of a bus shelter nearby and concerns about parking during staff changeovers - but backed the need for more children's homes, given the national shortage of foster carers.

The thorny issue of restrictive covenants on the property was raised by Nigel James, speaking on behalf of one of the neighbours, who said the council risked "wasting tax payers' money" if due diligence was not done. But officers and councillors stressed covenants were not a planning matter for the committee, and Cllr Mallett said they were "virtually unenforceable".

Cllr Jeremy Webster expressed unease about "parachuting" a children's home into a quiet residential area and cited apparent estate agent warnings of a 10 per cent dip in house values. Meanwhile, Cllr Trefor Hogg said he sympathised with residents' concerns but stressed: "We need both foster homes and children's homes in Surrey."

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View outside 18 Crosby Hill Drive, in Camberley. (Credit: Surrey County Council documents)