

# Ex-minister joins fight to stop sale of playing fields

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Evening Standard 27.06.08

A former Government minister today threatened to take a London council to court over its decision to sell school playing fields to property developers.

Sir Tim Sainsbury, a member of the supermarket dynasty, and his wife Susan are planning to launch the legal action after Chelsea and Kensington Council agreed to sell the land belonging to one of London's top schools.

The couple have a house close to Holland Park School's playing fields in Kensington, which are to be sold to developers to raise money for a massive £72.6 million redevelopment project.

The application was passed by councillors during a heated meeting filled with campaigners, teachers and the school's head, Colin Hall.

It will now pass to the town hall's cabinet, the Mayor and the Government Office for London for their approval, before it goes ahead.

But Sir Tim, a former Conservative trade and industry minister, wants the decision reversed and campaigners are vowing to fight on. He said: "Before our homes were built only two houses were accessed from Campden Hill, which is a cul-de-sac with no turning circle or reversing space. Since 2007 there are 80.

"We have been trying to get the council to carry out a traffic study. We now find that the council is relying on a study from 2005 or earlier, which is seriously outdated. It was quite improper to consider this planning application before a fresh transport study had been completed and was available for consideration. This alone would be grounds for a legal challenge."

The school was opened in 1958 and is known as "the Eton of comprehensives". Its famous alumni include film director John Huston and newspaper columnist Polly Toynbee. Tony Benn, the Labour veteran and former Cabinet minister, recently backed the campaign to save the school buildings and playing fields.

His children, including Government minister Hilary Benn, went to Holland Park and he has lived in Kensington for more than 60 years.

Sir John Baker, chairman of governors at the school, said the buildings were no longer fit for purpose.

He said: "The proposal is vital for the future of Holland Park School as London's first comprehensive school, and key to the continuing success of the school - already the eighth most improved school in the country over the last three years."

David White, chairman of the residents' association, said: "We are not surprised. We have to look at our options. We still think they are making a very big mistake."

Options include pressuring the Government Office for London to conduct an inquiry and asking Sport England, a body which must be consulted when school playing fields are sold, to intervene. The application includes new sports and swimming facilities, 72 new flats, 83 social housing and "key worker" flats and a children's centre.

After the application was passed Councillor James Husband, the council's cabinet member for education, said: "Our ambition is to build a fantastic new school with the type of facilities that will set the standard for education for the next 50 years."