Wednesday 14 October 2026

Angela Rayner, Secretary of State, freezes the Christ's College library permission

Six days after Cambridge councillors voted the identical scheme through, the Secretary of State has stopped the permission being issued.

Dear friend,

The Christ's College library permission is frozen.

Last Wednesday Cambridge City Council approved, again, a scheme the Council and the College have already agreed was unlawfully permitted. The High Court rules on it next Tuesday. Six days before that hearing, the Secretary of State has stepped in.

It took eleven hours and fifteen minutes. Here is how Tuesday went.

What just happened

Tuesday, 9.22 am	We write to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government asking for a holding direction: an order stopping the Council from issuing permission for a scheme identical to the one before the High Court, six days before the Court hears it.
Tuesday, 1.00 pm	Daniel Zeichner, Member of Parliament for Cambridge, writes to the Secretary of State forwarding our submission, so that residents' concerns "may be brought to the attention of the MHCLG Planning Casework Unit" and are "noted and considered alongside the formal Article 31 submission".
Tuesday, 8.37 pm	Her Planning Casework Unit replies. A holding direction under Article 31 of the planning rules has been issued that day. It "prevents the Council from granting planning permission without special authorisation".

What it means

The permission councillors approved last Wednesday, for the identical scheme already before the High Court, is frozen. Officers cannot sign it. The Committee cannot sign it. Nobody at the Guildhall can, unless she says so.

Last Wednesday, the Chair of the Committee, Cllr Katie Porrer, warned members three times that if they waited for the High Court they would "lose the right to determine" the application. On that basis they did not wait. Six days later, the Secretary of State has taken the pen out of the Council's hand.

The Council cannot issue the permission on 16 October, or on any other day, without her authorisation. Members were told they could not wait a week for the Court. The Secretary of State has made them wait. When it takes the Secretary of State to hold a city council to the simple course of waiting for the Court, something is amiss in Cambridge.

Holding directions are rare. They are reserved for cases the Secretary of State wants to look at herself before a council is allowed to act. Our own interval is a matter of record: request 9.22 am, direction issued the same day, reply 8.37 pm. Eleven hours and fifteen minutes from a residents' email to a Secretary of State's direction. Whitehall moves like this only when it means to. When it called in the Beehive Centre in February 2025, its letter reached the Guildhall twenty minutes before the Committee began. This time the letter came before the Council could sign. Christ's College's scheme in the heart of heritage Cambridge now sits on the Secretary of State's desk.

What happens next

Tuesday 20 October: the High Court hears our case on the first permission for the identical scheme, as planned. Now with no second permission in the way.

And let nobody mistake this

We do not oppose a new library. We never have. We oppose a building, identical to the one before the Court, that Historic England called "too big for its location", set hard against Grade I courts, and waved through on a report

that itself found it in conflict with the Local Plan. Christ's needs a new library. It does not need this one.

One week ago

Think back a week. Papers landing on the morning of the meeting. Members given ten minutes by the Chair to read a case, about the identical scheme, that has been before the High Court for most of a year. Our emails to councillors captured and forwarded on; "Were those emails read?" and no answer from the Council. The ward councillor, Cllr Hugh Clough, and his copy of our letter that "did not reach my inbox". Our speaker given three minutes against a juggernaut that had been rolling since July. Members told three times that waiting for the Court would mean losing the right to decide. The vote taken.

A neighbourhood was told, in effect, that its voice did not count.

Six days later the Secretary of State has said otherwise. Our submission is on her desk. Our Member of Parliament, who by long standing practice takes no side on planning applications, wrote to us on Tuesday that he recognises "the strength of feeling that exists among local residents regarding the proposed development and the planning process", and sent our submission on to the Secretary of State to be "noted and considered". The permission is frozen. The Court sits on Tuesday.

So, this week, no ask. No letters to write, no forms to fill. Tell your neighbours. Raise a glass. You did this: more than 150 letters and documents on the Council's register, a full public gallery on 7 October, and a High Court claim brought by residents without a solicitor.

> *After last week's committee the Master issued a caution to "watch this space." This week the Secretary of State and the rest of Whitehall are watching too.*

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