

Application for new hostel block, dining block and glazed links at The Swattenden Centre, Cranbrook

A report by Head of Planning Applications Unit to Planning Applications Committee on 11 February 2003.

Application by Kent County Council (Social Services) for new accommodation for the Appledore Project, comprising a new hostel block, new dining facilities and new glazed corridors to link the proposed accommodation with an existing hostel at The Swattenden Centre, Cranbrook (TW/02/2569).

Recommendation: Permission be granted subject to conditions.

Local Member: Mr R.S. Manning

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

1. The Swattenden Centre is set within large grounds situated on the south side of Swattenden Lane about 1.6 kilometres (1 mile) south of the centre of Cranbrook. It is a rural area with scattered farms and dwellings, and is within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Landscape Area. A site location plan is attached.

Background and Proposal

2. It is proposed to demolish two existing buildings and to construct a new hostel block and dining block on their footprint. A glazed corridor would link the new blocks and a separate glazed corridor on the other side of the hostel block would provide a link with an existing hostel block which is to be refurbished. Reduced copies of the site layout and elevation drawings are attached. The applicant has provided the following information in support of the application:

“Reason for Development

The current physical facilities at the Appledore Project for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, located at the Swattenden Centre, are inadequate and do not meet the new National Care Standards for childrens' homes.

Over the past three years, the rise in the number of persons claiming asylum in the United Kingdom has had an impact on many parts of the country, including Kent, which has no recent history of settling immigrants. The arrival of people from different countries has required additional resources to meet the challenge of providing services to asylum seekers.

Kent County Council, Social Services Directorate, in co-operation with other local authority departments, has statutory responsibilities to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. Part of the Social Services Directorate's statutory responsibility includes accommodation of children under the Children Act 1989. These children are subject to the looked after children policy agreed by Kent County Council Social Services Committee on 5 October 1995.

Following a decision by Members (Children's Services Board in November 1999) unaccompanied minors aged 13-15 are placed at the Appledore Project Reception

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Centre, located within the confines of the Swattenden Centre. Some minors move on to live with host families. Unaccompanied minors aged 16 and above normally move to semi-independent living, which can be in or out of Kent.

The Appledore Project at the Swattenden Centre was established in October of 1999 during an unexpected influx of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The project is managed by the KCC Social Services Directorate's County Asylum and Refugee Services Unit (CA&RSU). The Education and Libraries Directorate provides the site, cleaning services, food services and pre-education assessment services. The project provides reception and accommodation for a maximum of 27 male unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors between the ages of 13-15. As a reception centre, the main purpose of the Appledore Project is to accommodate and assess new arrivals and to make plans for their future care. The project aims to help minors move on to host or foster homes or semi-independence after an initial assessment period.

The staff at the Appledore Project provide round-the-clock supervision in the most homelike atmosphere possible. The staff are supplemented by the Duty and Assessment social work team, the Looked After Children social work team, the Family Finding Team and contracted interpreters.

On 1 April 2002 new national care standards for children's homes came into effect. The standards are enforced by regular inspections by the National Care Standards Commission. The current physical facilities of the Appledore project do not meet the new care standards in multiple ways. An inspection of the Appledore Project in September of 2002 confirmed that the Appledore Project must significantly upgrade its facilities to meet the new standards.

The current physical facilities do not provide adequate sleeping quarters, adequate living quarters or adequate sanitary and bathing facilities. The difficult conditions create stress for children and staff.

A renovation of one of the current Appledore blocks and a total rebuild of two others are proposed to bring the facility up to the current National Care Standards.

The County Council's major objective is to continue to provide statutory services and accommodation to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children while also meeting the requirements of the National Care Standards Commission. The Commission has approved the design of the rebuild and renovation plans. The Commission has also requested that it be consulted on the management of the care of the residents while the rebuild and renovation is underway.

The current Appledore Project has established extensive community relationships at the current site. This includes relationships with physicians, schools, leisure centres, youth groups and the local constabulary. An extensive search for alternative facilities within Kent that would meet the standards has been made. No alternatives have been found.

The Site

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The site is in the grounds of the Swattenden Centre. That is an activity and training facility primarily for school and youth organisations, based in a rural location approximately two miles from Cranbrook, Kent

The site of the proposed new hostel and dining area is currently occupied by two existing buildings, a barn and a store/gymnasium. Those existing buildings are immediately adjacent to the existing hostel used by asylum seekers.

The proposal is to demolish both the barn and store/gymnasium and locate the new hostel block and dining area on the 'footprints' of the demolished buildings. By replacing the old buildings with new in the same location, the existing adjacent playing fields, trees, pond and other existing buildings will not be disturbed.

The existing barn is a brick and slate building in a dilapidated condition and is currently only used for storage of groundman's vehicles and equipment. The store/gymnasium is a pre-fabricated concrete hut with an asbestos cement roof. The functions of both these existing buildings can be comfortably accommodated elsewhere within the Swattenden Centre grounds. Neither the barn nor the store/gymnasium contain any architectural features worth retaining, and neither building would be suitable for conversion to the functions needed by the proposed accommodation.

The existing vehicular access and car park to the south of the proposed buildings would be resurfaced as part of this development, but not expanded or amended.

Proposed Accommodation

The proposed accommodation comprises:

- a) A new hostel block containing nine double bedrooms with associated sanitary facilities, recreation room, study rooms, plant room, wardens office and warden's bedroom with en-suite.
- b) A new dining area including kitchen, laundry, residents' kitchen and wc.

Both the new blocks and the existing hostel (to be refurbished) will be linked by glazed corridors to allow all three buildings to function collectively.

Form of Construction and Materials

The proposal is to use forms and materials on the new buildings that complement the existing adjacent hostel.

It is proposed the new buildings would have white painted brick walls with rendered features around the windows and doors. The new buildings would have slated and hipped roofs at the same pitch as the existing hostel. Both the new buildings are single storey.

The plan of the new hostel block has bedrooms on the north side, facing the playing fields and away from the road, to create a quiet sleeping area. On the south side of the building are offices, day rooms and entrance doors, with the south elevation containing gable features to articulate the doors and day room window. The new dining block is designed in elevation to complement the hostel block, and is complete with an external eating area.

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The glazed links have been designed to unite all three buildings, while retaining the appearance of three separate buildings, as existing.

External works

The intention is to provide minimum new external works, these being the hard standing patio to the dining block and new pathways to the new hostel and dining blocks.

No other external works are required for the proposed accommodation.

All spoil from the development will be disposed at an approved landfill site.

No security lighting is anticipated. No external fencing is proposed.

Staffing and resident numbers

The proposed staffing is basically the same as the current staffing

No significant increase of staff is predicted. Extra residential social work staff are sometimes used on school holidays. KCC management staff make regular visits, as do volunteers.

Two teams of social workers and their support staff (totalling 20 persons) were previously working from the site. These two teams are no longer based at Swattenden, resulting in a reduction in use of the facility, roads and parking.

Current maximum number of residents	Proposed maximum number of residents
27	27

Highways Matters

There are no proposed changes to the current highways arrangements both to and on the site. As there would be no increase in staff numbers, no increase in parking facilities are required. The proposed residents would not be car owners or users, and therefore would also not increase the current car parking arrangements on site.

Contractors Access

The contractor's access would be from the existing entrance to the Swattenden Centre. The construction contract period for the development is expected to be in the region of ten months."

Development Plan

3. Kent Structure Plan 1996

- S2 The quality of Kent's environment will be conserved and enhanced and measures taken to minimise any adverse impacts arising from development.

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- S9 In considering development proposals local authorities will have regard to the need for community facilities and services.
- ENV3 Long-term protection for the designated Kent Downs and High Weald Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Priority will be given to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty, including landscape, wildlife and geological features, over other planning considerations.
- ENV4 Long term protection of Special Landscape Areas. Enhancement of the landscape will be given priority over other planning considerations, whilst having regard to the economic and social well-being of the area.
- RS1: All development permitted at villages and small rural towns and in the open countryside should be well designed; appropriate in location, scale, density and appearance to its surroundings; acceptable in highway and infrastructure terms; have particular regard to the Plan's environment policies; and preserve and, as far as possible, enhance the character, amenity and functioning of settlements and the countryside and in the Green Belt will be subject to Policy MGB3.

4. Tunbridge Wells Borough Local Plan - Adopted Plan (1996)

- ENI Requires all proposals for development to satisfy certain criteria, including: no unacceptable loss of/affect on amenity; respect for the context of the site; no loss of significant buildings, related spaces, trees, shrubs, hedges or other features important to the character of the area; no significant adverse impact on highways safety; services for foul and surface water sewerage and water supply have sufficient capacity/can be improved; no significant adverse effect on any features of nature conservation importance; and design, layout and landscaping take account of the security of people and property.
- EN23
1. Proposals for development within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Nature Beauty will only be permitted if they would conserve or enhance the natural beauty and special character of the landscape. Major developments will not be permitted except in cases where a proven national interest and lack of an alternative site can be shown;
 2. Proposals for development within the High Weald Special Landscape Area but outside the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty will only be permitted where they would cause no significant harm to the important landscape character of the area; and
 3. Where development is to be allowed in either the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or the High Weald Special Landscape Area, particular attention will be paid to the design, layout and landscaping in order to minimise impact on the natural beauty and landscape quality of the surrounding area.

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Consultations

5. **Tunbridge Wells Borough Council** raises no objection subject to conditions, including the standard time limit and the development to be carried out using the materials specified in the application.

Cranbrook Parish Council raises no objection in principle to the proposal subject to a condition being imposed that the facility would be for minors aged 13 – 15 as per the supporting statement.

They also queried the situation regarding the present permitted use of the site and whether this allowed use by Social Services.

The Area Transportation Manager raises no highway objection.

Local Member

6. The local County Member, Mr R. S. Manning was notified of the application on the 25 October 2002. No written comments have yet been received.

Publicity

7. The application was publicised by, the posting of a site notice, and the individual notification of 3 nearby residential properties.

Representations

8. I have received two letters of representation from the residents of Swattenden Oast objecting to the proposal, initially as follows:
 - Fear that the Appledore Project would bring further young asylum seekers and refugees or young students to the site so adjacent to their house and those of their neighbours.
 - During the time they have lived there have had a few problems the most serious being an attempted break in at night after refugees had been moved into the Swattenden Centre. As Cranbrook Police station is only open for 15 hours a week are concerned at further youngsters living opposite, as they are in a vulnerable position and the nearest Police station's for emergencies are at Maidstone and Ashford.
 - They are doubly concerned because there is a footpath through their garden which Swattenden residents use to go into Cranbrook and can see what they have got.
 - They are not kept informed about what is going on at the Centre. Camping takes place in the summer by students and whilst they do not object they have been disturbed when they decided to have a music festival.
 - Another cause for concern is the dangerous bends along Swattenden Lane and the absence of footways and lighting particularly with the speed of traffic and articulated lorries using it 24 hours a day 7 days a week going to Fridays and Oasters. Lorries

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pull into their drive when they cannot pass each other. The situation is very dangerous for pedestrians particularly after dark and to increase the numbers of residents at the Swattenden Centre is considered to be an unacceptable risk. It is fortunate that the only casualty to date has been a duck and her five ducklings mowed down by a lorry that could have so easily been a row of students.

- State that Swattenden Lane is a “Green Belt” area where no development should take place and it is unacceptable that the Council should be considering further developments of their own. Comment that the council depot along the lane is a serious eyesore and the gritting lorries increase the danger to pedestrians.
 - It must be borne in mind that there are no services in the Lane. The overhead lines for electricity and telephone, are frequently knocked out by traffic and high winds. They are against any development that would increase traffic on an already over used lane and if the lane had to be dug up for more services this would exacerbate the problem and increase risk to residents.
9. Following clarification of the proposal they have written a further letter reiterating their objection. They comment that whilst it is a relief that the numbers will not increase it does not stop the fact that it is an inappropriate place for these youngsters to live in the first place as the road is far too dangerous. They further comment, “imagine you are a young foreigner in a strange country without your family and probably unable to speak English. You are left at a residence in the middle of nowhere and the route to the nearest town is via an unlit country lane with no pavement and frequented by articulated lorries. It is an accident waiting to happen. The chances are that these youngsters are not used to traffic and if they are it would be driven on the other side of the road.” They have discussed the proposals with their neighbours and they all feel that the Swattenden Centre is an inappropriate site for the young refugees.

Discussion

10. This proposal has arisen from the need to improve/replace the existing inadequate accommodation for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors, as set out in paragraph (2) above, and to ensure that it meets the current National Care Standards for childrens’ homes. It involves the construction of two new buildings and two glazed links that are the subject of this application and the refurbishment of an existing block.
11. The site is within the open countryside and part of the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Landscape Area where policies give priority to the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty, including the landscape, over other planning considerations. However Structure Plan Policy S9 has regard to the need for community facilities and services, and it should be borne in mind that the proposal relates to an existing facility, i.e. an established residential centre, rather than proposing an entirely new development and use in the open countryside. Furthermore the new blocks proposed would be located over the footprint of two existing buildings which would be demolished.
12. The new buildings would be visible from Swattenden Lane but would be set back within the grounds. These include mature trees against which the buildings are/would be seen, and which filter views from some directions. In terms of design and appearance, the new blocks reflect that of the block to be refurbished (see elevation drawing and also paragraph (2) above) and are similar in mass and profile to the existing buildings that would be demolished. As such I do not consider that the proposed buildings would cause significant harm to the important landscape character of the area, and given the

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poor quality of the existing buildings that would be replaced, it could be argued that the new buildings would provide some enhancement. However I consider that some additional tree planting would be beneficial in softening views of the buildings, where the views are more open. This could be conditioned.

13. The applicants have indicated that it is not proposed to increase the numbers of unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors cared for at the Centre and that no significant increase in staff is predicted. Also that the development would not result in any increase in vehicular traffic. There are, though, a number of highway/pedestrian safety issues raised by nearby local residents, which are set out in paragraphs (8) & (9) above. These would not in themselves be sufficient reasons to refuse the application bearing in mind it relates to an existing use of the site and not a new one or an intensification of the existing use. It will also be noted that the Area Transportation Manager has not raised a highway objection to the proposal. Some of the issues raised appear to my mind to relate, to some extent, to appropriate management and supervision. I have therefore copied the letters of representation to the applicants to draw attention to the concerns raised.
14. In respect of the Parish Council view that permission should be subject to a condition being imposed that the facility would be for minors aged 13 – 15 only as per the supporting statement, the applicants have confirmed that they would not object to this. In my view though it would be more appropriate for any condition to refer to minors related to the Appledore Project. To refer to a specific age range/group could be unduly restrictive by unnecessarily precluding, for example, 12 or 16 year olds, and therefore it would be unreasonable.

Conclusion

15. The landscape context of this site is recognised but given the need for the new accommodation, the existing use of the site and that the siting and details of the new buildings are considered to be acceptable, I would not raise a planning objection. I recommend accordingly.

Recommendation

16. I RECOMMEND that PERMISSION BE GRANTED SUBJECT TO conditions including conditions covering the standard time limit, the development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details, external materials and landscaping, and the use of the new buildings being restricted to use for unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors related to the Appledore Project.

Case officer - Paul Hopkins	01622 221051
Background documents - See section heading	