

Installation of 3 mobile classrooms at The Westlands School, Westlands Avenue, Sittingbourne - SW/10/333

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 11 May 2010

Application by Kent County Council, Children Families and Education for the installation of 3 mobile classrooms at The Westlands School, Westlands Avenue, Sittingbourne, Kent, ME10 1PF- SW/10/333

Recommendation: Subject to the views of Swale Borough Council permission be granted subject to conditions, including the mobile classroom being removed from the site within 5 years of the date of the permission.

Local Member: Mr. Keith Ferrin

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

1. The Westlands School is situated within a residential development south of the A2 London Road on the edge of Sittingbourne. The Local Plan shows it as being outside of the built-up area boundary and within the countryside gap to the south. The school is enclosed by residential properties on three sides; to the north by London Road and Westlands Avenue, to the east by Somerset Close and to the west by Maylam Gardens. Open fields abut the southern boundary. The school occupies a relatively large site; totalling 10.95 hectares. The school consists of a number of permanent and temporary structures and has been subject to a significant level of development over the past 5 years. A site location map is attached.

Background and Proposal

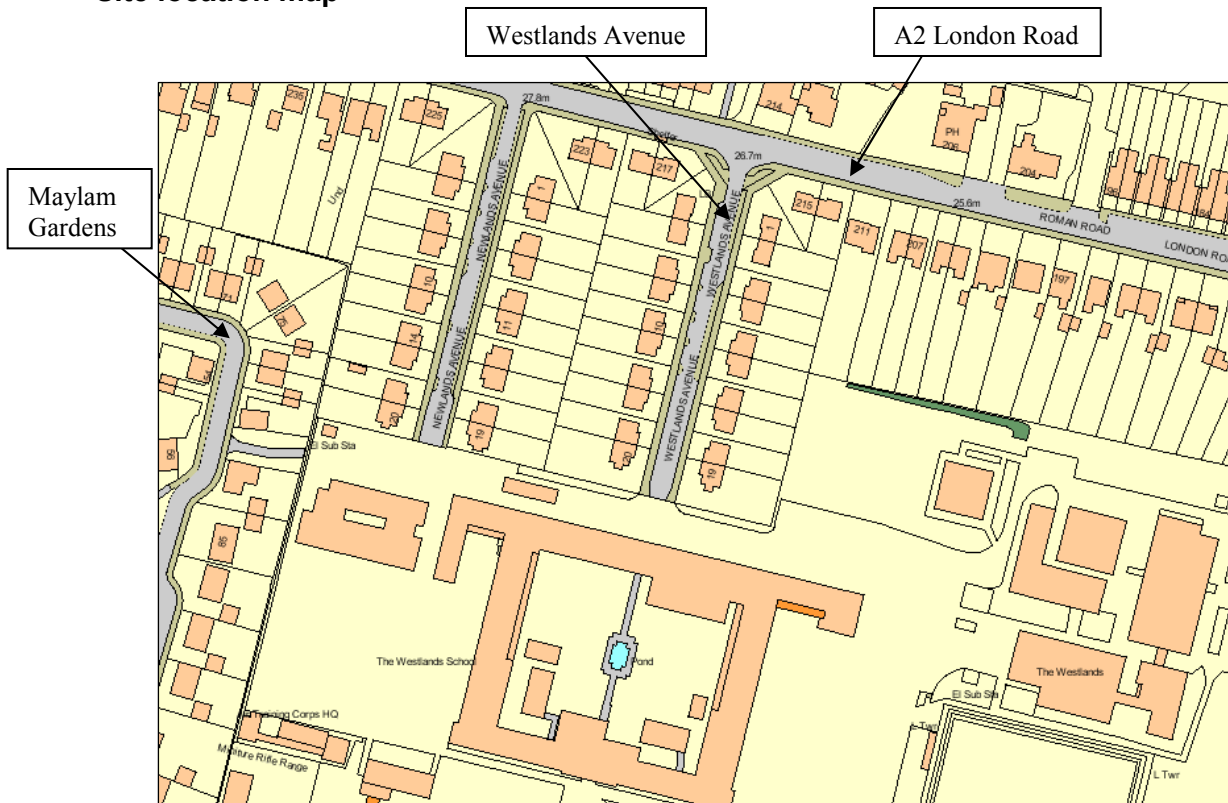
2. The proposal is to install three mobile classroom units on a piece of grassland in the north-west corner of the site. It arises from the School's need for additional teaching space as a consequence of an increasing roll. The School has stated that the classrooms would not be allocated to specific subjects, rather providing flexible teaching accommodation to deliver the curriculum. Each mobile classroom unit would measure 8.6 metres in length, 5.5 metres in width, and 3.2 metres in height. The application documents specify that the mobiles classrooms would have a dark green textured finish, PVC double glazed windows and a high performance grey/green felt roofing system to match the existing mobiles on site.
3. The school site and the general location of the proposed mobile classrooms has seen extensive development over recent years, with both permanent and temporary structures. In 2005, permission was granted for the erection of the Pyramid Centre to house the school's Physically Disabled Unit. Three years later permission was granted for two 2-bay mobile classrooms to be situated adjacent to the Pyramid Centre and in 2009, two additional 2-bay mobiles were granted permission. The result of these three developments is shown on the site plan on page D6.3.

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Location map



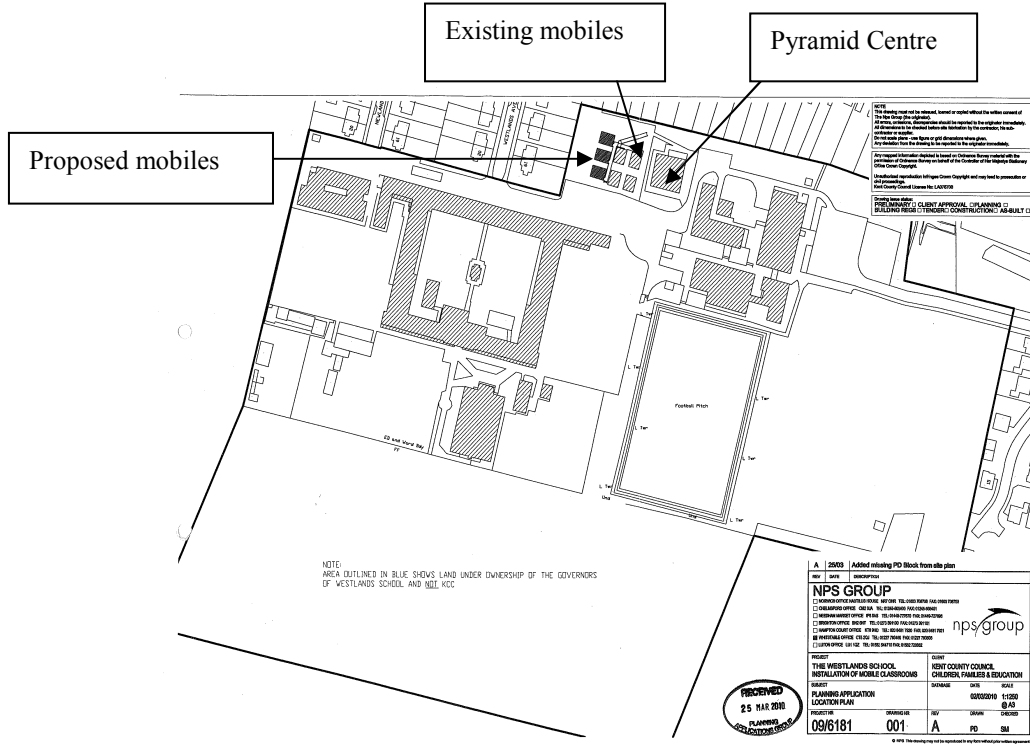
Site location map



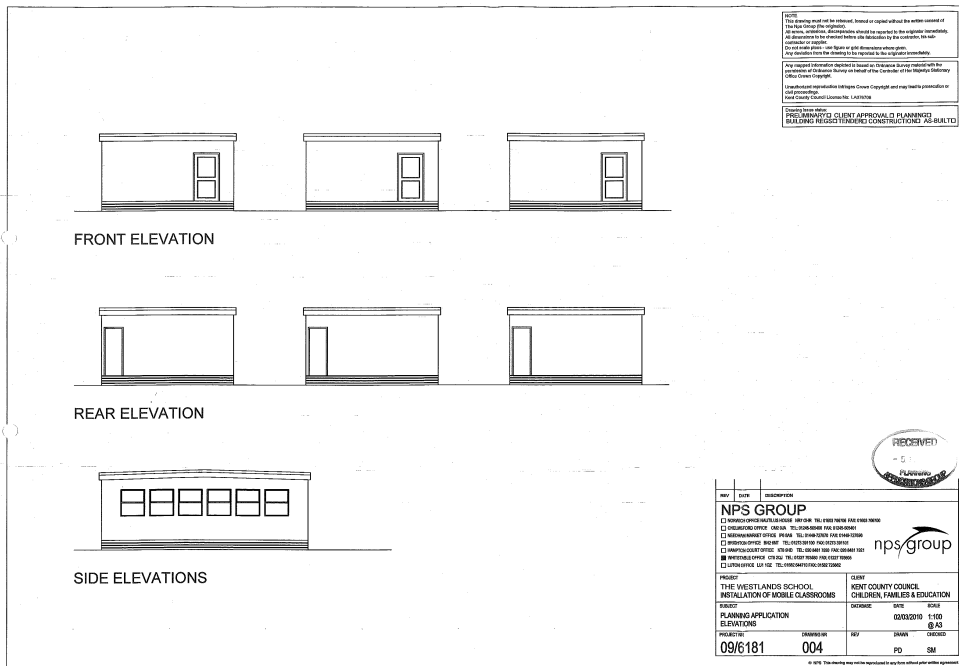
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Site plan



Elevations



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4. The applicant states that there are limited locations available to the School for the installation of new mobile classroom units without encroaching onto sports pitches. Further, the School explains that numerous enabling works were carried out during the installation of the existing mobiles on the adjoining land ensuring the area is fully accessible and suitable for school use. The existing access ramp would be extended to allow access to the proposed mobiles. Therefore the applicant deems this location to be the most appropriate.

Planning Policy

5. (i) **The South East Plan:**

Policy CC1: Seeks to achieve and maintain sustainable development in the region.

Policy CC4: Expects that all new development will adopt and incorporate sustainable construction standards and techniques.

Policy CC6: Seeks sustainable and distinctive communities that respect the character of settlements and landscapes, and achieve a high quality built environment.

Policy S3: States that Local Planning Authorities should work to ensure adequate provision of school facilities

Policy BE1: Seeks to promote and support design solution opportunities with new development that are relevant to context, local character and distinctiveness

- (ii) **The adopted 2008 Swale Borough Local Plan:**

Policy E1: Expects all development proposals to respond positively by reflecting the positive characteristics and features of the site and locality; protect and enhance the natural and built environments; be both well sited and of a scale, design and appearance, that is appropriate to the location.

Policy E6: Seeks to protect and where possible enhance the quality, character and amenity value of the countryside, proposals permitted include necessary community infrastructure.

Policy E7: The Borough will only permit development that falls within a designated countryside gap if it does not result in the merging of settlements

Policy E19: Development proposals should seek to achieve high quality design and distinctiveness by, among others, providing a development that is appropriate to its context in respect of scale, height and massing and makes best use of texture, colour, pattern and durability of materials.

Policy C1: Seeks to enhance existing community services and facilities, especially where proposals would meet an identified local need in an accessible location.

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Consultations

6. **Swale Borough Council** views are awaited and will be reported verbally at the committee meeting.

The Divisional Transportation Manager raises no objections to the proposal.

Jacobs Noise raises no objection to the proposal subject to the classrooms not being used for teaching activities which would feature amplified music.

Local Member

7. The local County Member, Mr K. Ferrin, was notified of the application on the 25 March 2010.

Publicity

8. The application was publicised by the posting of a site notice and the individual notification of 42 nearby residential properties.

Representations

9. Representations to the application have been received from 9 nearby properties. The concerns and objections raised to the proposal can be summarised as:
- There is already a building and 4 mobiles units on the site, adding more would make the land look cluttered and create an eyesore
 - The proposed site for the mobiles is incredibly close to the gardens and they would overlook gardens on Westlands Avenue and London Road.
 - There are potential sites for mobile units elsewhere on the school grounds.
 - Noise would be increased from the installation of the mobiles in the proposed position.
 - Residents would not be able to relax in their gardens.
 - There would be increased traffic and congestion on Westlands Avenue.
 - There would be light disturbance.

Discussion

Introduction

10. This proposal has arisen out of the School's need to provide additional teaching accommodation to cope with an anticipated increase in the school roll. The school roll is currently 1673 and this is expected to increase to 1838 in September 2010 principally due to a greater take up of sixth form places and a larger intake of year 7 pupils. The school has considered other localities within the site for the three mobiles, but have concluded that the proposed siting is the most suitable and convenient location. As summarised in paragraph 9 above, representations received in respect of this application have identified issues relating to the location of the mobiles, and the associated concerns of noise and light disturbance for neighbouring residential properties, the over-development of land in the immediate vicinity and the potential for

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increased volumes of traffic on surrounding roads. These issues need to be considered in the context of the relevant development plan policies outlined in paragraph 5 above.

Planning history

11. As briefly summarised in paragraph 3, The Westlands School has seen a significant level of development over the past decade including the location of four mobiles on land immediately adjoining the proposed mobile classrooms and the erection of the Pyramid Centre. Other notable developments within the school grounds have included the construction of an Educational Vocational Centre in the north of the site and the erection of a four court sports hall with associated changing facilities, and a subsequent first floor extension to provide a viewing gallery, in the south of the site. Representations make reference to the 'cluttered' appearance of the land. The north-western corner of the site, where the mobile classrooms are proposed to be sited, occupies an area of approximately 2400 square metres and of this, approximately 1350 square metres has already been developed. If the three mobile classrooms were to be granted planning permission, the developed area would increase to about 1590 square metres.

Siting and design

12. The representations object to the location of the mobile classrooms, due to the close proximity of neighbouring properties and the effect on residential amenity. As illustrated in the site plan on page 2, the location proposed for the mobile classrooms is in the north-west corner of the site, and is bordered by residential properties to the north in London Road and to the west in Westlands Avenue. The distance between the proposed mobile classrooms and the boundary of the nearest garden on Westlands Avenue is approximately 12 metres and the distance to the façade is 30 metres. The distance between the mobile classrooms and the nearest garden boundary on London Road is approximately 10 metres. The boundary in this section of the school grounds is demarcated by a 2 metre high beech hedge. At 3.2 metres in height, the mobile classrooms would therefore be visible from the properties on both Westlands Avenue and London Road. However, taking into account the separation from the boundary and the presence of the boundary hedge I do not consider there would be a significant visual impact, given that main school buildings occupy this wider part of the school site.
13. Mindful of the adjoining residential properties, the applicant has oriented the mobile classrooms to the proposed position in an attempt to minimise any potential for gardens to be overlooked. Windows would be installed in the side elevations of the structures, resulting in only the most northern of the three mobile classrooms having a view of the school boundary adjoining London Road. However bearing in mind the distance of 10 metres from the boundary and 45 metres from the facades of the nearest houses, and the 2 metre height of boundary hedge, I do not consider that an objection on grounds of loss of privacy from overlooking would be warranted.

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1. View of the north-west boundary adjoining Westlands Avenue



2. View of the existing four mobile classrooms sited adjacent to the proposed with Pyramid Centre in the background

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14. Arguably the design of the mobile classrooms could be considered contradictory to certain Local Plan policies. Mobile classroom units would generally not be described as reflecting positive characteristics, or enhancing the built environment, as noted in Swale Borough's Local Plan Policy E1. However, given the context of the site, the scheme does relate to the massing and scale referred to in Policy E19, by providing design continuity with existing temporary structures. Moreover, acknowledging the temporary nature of the mobile classroom units, less emphasis could be placed on the design in this instance with a view for the School to review the situation in the future. Furthermore, this particular school is one of those included in the next wave of Kent secondary schools to be redeveloped under the Building Schools for the Future programme, whereby there is likely to be substantial replacement of existing buildings and a notable opportunity to review the entire accommodation and layout on this site. Under the circumstances, the use of all proposed mobile classrooms on this site can be regarded as genuinely temporary pending the wider review of the whole site development. For these reasons I do not consider an objection on design grounds would be justified.
15. The issue of increased noise as a result of the siting of the mobile classrooms close to residential properties was identified by local residents. This included the potential for an increase in noise from pupil movements during lesson changeovers and noise coming from within the actual classrooms. A noise consultant was consulted on this application and raised no objection. They concluded that because the classrooms would be accessed from their eastern façade, facing away from residential properties, the noise generated from pupil movements around the buildings is unlikely to generate adverse noise impact on surrounding residential properties. With regard to noise generated from within the classrooms, our noise consultant asked for clarification that the classrooms would not be used to facilitate music, drama, dance or any other activity with amplified music. The School has now confirmed that the mobile classrooms would not be used for lessons which involve amplified music. I do not therefore consider there is any basis for a planning objection to on grounds of noise

Transport and access issues

16. The issue of increased traffic and congestion on surrounding residential streets has been raised by a number of residents. One letter of representation associated additional classrooms with more pupils and a higher volume of traffic on Westlands Avenue. Whilst there would be additional pupils and the potential for increased traffic, the Divisional Transportation Manager has not raised a highway objection to the proposal.

Character and appearance of the countryside

17. As noted in paragraph 1, The Westlands School is located outside of the Sittingbourne built-up area and is within the countryside gap where Policy E7 of the Swale Borough Local Plan in effect seeks to protect the open countryside and prevent settlements merging. I do not consider that this proposal would be contrary to this policy because of the context of the site. The application site is bordered by residential development to the north and west and a collection of school buildings, varying in size, to the south. The three mobile units in the north-west corner of the site would be a relatively small addition adjoining the existing developed part of the site and would not encroach in to the open part of the site to the south. Nor would it in my view compromise the openness of the surrounding land or contribute to the merging of settlements. Furthermore, the

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proposals would satisfy Local Plan Policy E6 by providing a much needed community facility within the countryside gap.

Conclusion

18. The applicant’s reason for the installation of three additional mobile classrooms will be noted. Whilst the proposal does not fully accord with Development Plan Policies relating to design, given the temporary nature of the buildings, and the context of the school site, I do not consider that the proposal would have a significant detrimental impact on the setting of the site or on residential amenity. I also consider that it is otherwise in accordance with the general aims and objectives of Development Plan Policies, which include general support for the provision of community facilities such as those for education purposes. Subject to the views of Swale Borough Council, I therefore recommend that planning permission be granted for a temporary period of 5 years from the date of the permission, and to conditions which restrict the teaching usage of the classrooms to subjects which do not involve amplified music.

Recommendation

- 19 SUBJECT to the views of Swale Borough Council, I RECOMMEND that PLANNING PERMISSION BE GRANTED SUBJECT to a condition requiring the mobile classrooms to be removed from the site no later than 5 years from the date of this permission, and to conditions which restrict the teaching usage of the mobile classrooms to subjects which do not involve amplified music, and that require the orientation of the buildings to accord with the plans submitted, with no rear windows facing the boundary on Westlands Avenue.

Case officer – Jo Ritter	01622 696100
Background documents - See section heading	