

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 7 September 2010.

Application by Kent County Council for the refurbishment of the existing school house located within the boundary of Marden Primary School, and conversion into a self-contained children's centre, with parking to the front and steel fire escape to the rear, Marden Primary School, Goudhurst Road, Marden, Near Tonbridge (Ref: MA/10/1209)

Recommendation: Permission be granted subject to conditions.

Local Member(s): Mrs. P Stockell

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

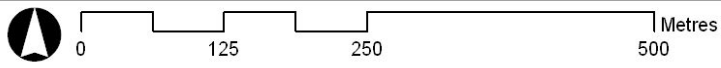
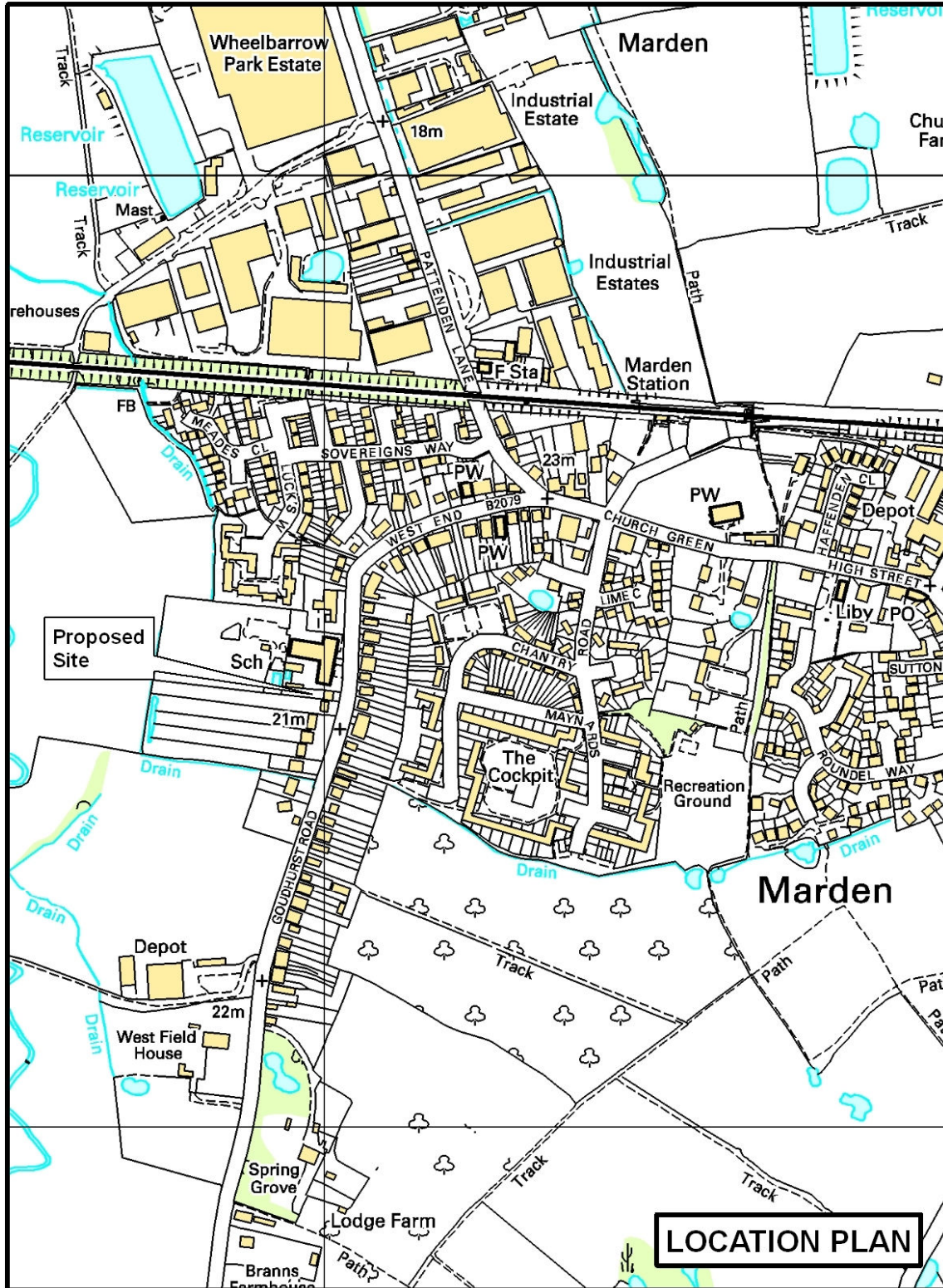
1. The application site forms part of an existing village primary school, and comprises the former school house on the school's road frontage. The property is a detached house and its last stated use is residential, albeit in County Council rather than private ownership.
2. The school site as a whole is included within the built confines of Marden village, fronting the B2079 Goudhurst Road, which is the main road through the village but which increasingly becomes residential away from the village centre. The site is therefore bordered by residential properties, apart from the school itself on the north side (see Site Location Plan). There are no specific Development Plan notations relating to this part of the settlement.

Background

3. This proposal is part of Phase 3 of the national programme of delivering Sure Start Children's Centres, of which 102 are planned to be provided across Kent. These centres aim to provide a range of parent and child services in a more integrated and accessible way than otherwise available. The services include:
 - outreach services for isolated parents/carers and children at risk of social exclusion;
 - information and advice to parents/carers on a range of subjects;
 - support to child minders via a quality assured, coordinated network;
 - activities for children and parents/carers at the Centre;
 - links with Jobcentre Plus; and
 - access to community health services.

The applicants advise that in the main, the Centres build on existing private, voluntary or independent or statutory services for children and families, such as schools, health centres, nurseries and family centres.

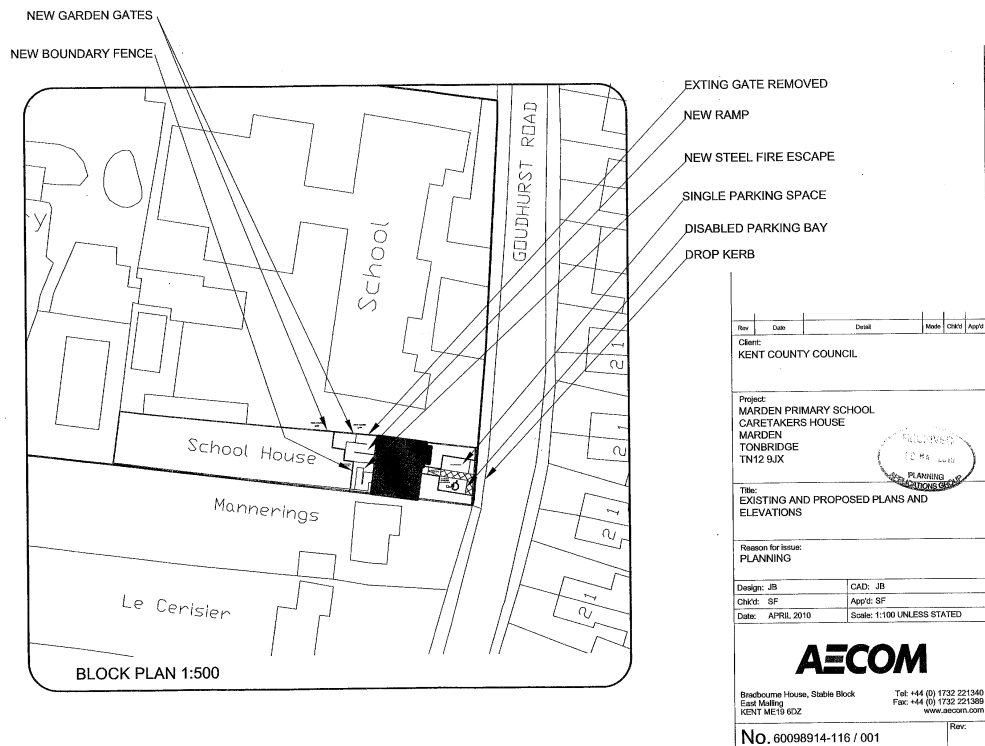
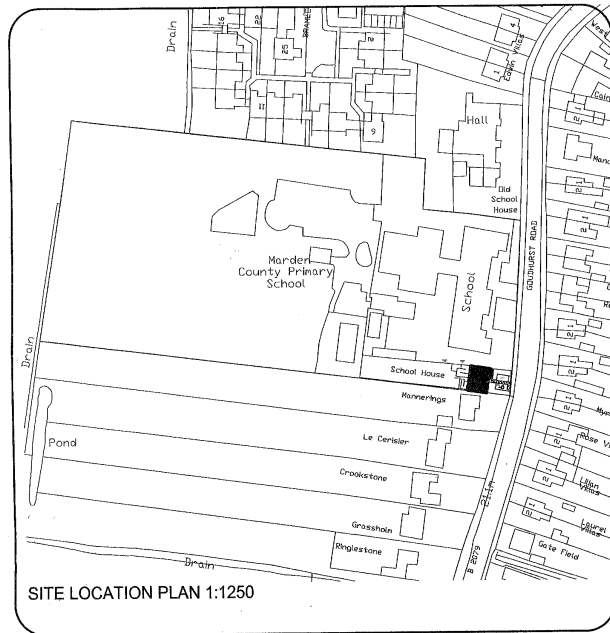
Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209



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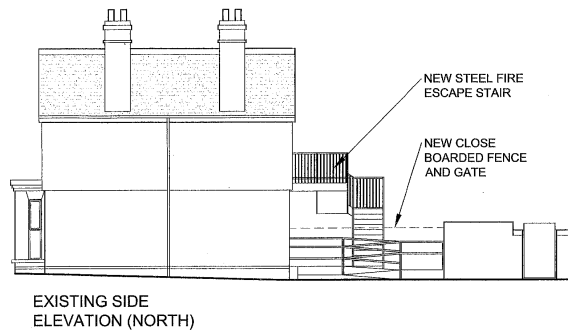
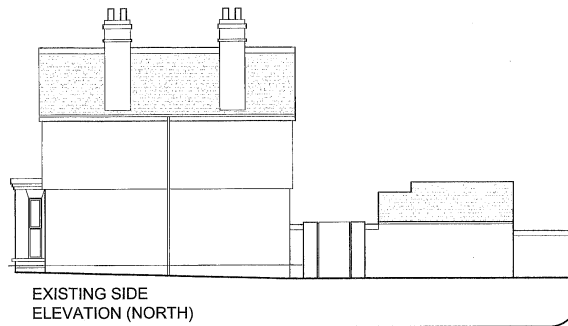
Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

SITE PLAN AND PROPOSED SITE LAYOUT PLANS (Do not scale)



Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

PROPOSED ELEVATIONAL CHANGES



Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

Proposal

4. The application seeks full planning consent for the refurbishment of the existing school house to provide a self-contained children's centre, with parking to the front, a fire escape to the rear and the erection of 1.8 metre high close boarded timber fencing to the garden area. The ground and first floors would be remodeled, involving the removal of some internal walls and repositioning of the internal staircase with a new platform lift. New internal walls would be adequately insulated to provide both thermal and sound insulation. Although not directly applicable, the design ethics would aim to correspond with the BREEAM 'Very Good' rating.
5. Externally, the front garden wall and railings would be removed with a hardstanding created to provide off-street parking for staff and a disabled parking space. Since an external play area is not required for this Children's Centre, the existing rear garden area would be retained for use by the School, with a close boarded fence erected along the full width of the property to provide a rear courtyard for the Centre, for fire escape, bin store and a ramped rear access into the school grounds. A new galvanised steel fire escape staircase is proposed to the rear of the property, to meet current Fire Safety Regulations, with some external emergency lighting.
6. The external alterations to the school house would include the widening of the front and rear doorways to provide the required 1 metre wide accesses for wheelchair users, whilst retaining the existing lintel detailing, the bricking up of two rear windows to allow the internal lift to be provided, and one rear window to be converted into a replacement rear doorway and vice versa. The intentions are to use matching brickwork and to retain existing features as far as practicable, including restoring and replacing where necessary the cast iron rainwater goods
7. The proposed Children's Centre would be required to be open 2 hours per day, on five days per week, with the flexibility to open outside these hours to meet local demand and needs. The opening hours are designed to prevent any disruption or increase in visitors to the site during peak school drop-off and pick-up times, given that some of likely extra needs could be provided from other venues in the Centre's catchment area, albeit under the Centre's overall management.
8. The Children's Centre would employ a Centre Manager, a Community Involvement Worker and an Administrator/Receptionist, together with a cleaner/caretaker. These posts are not necessarily full-time or indeed dedicated to this one Centre, with the core staff expected to be working within other venues within the catchment area as well. Staff employed within the surrounding area would be expected to walk and any required to drive would use the space provided at the Centre. The proposed car parking includes one staff parking space and one disabled parking space.
9. Visitors to the Centre are expected to drop in when necessary on an individual basis, but in the event of a pre-arranged activity there could be no more than 8-10 parents at the centre at any one time. Since the parents and children that would attend such activities would only be those from the local community, it is fully expected that they would walk to the Centre. Parents from the wider catchment would be expected to use the other venues in the catchment area, including medical surgeries, village halls, etc. Only when occasional events such as a seminar are being provided would there be several people arriving at the same time, but close coordination with the School would ensure that such events do not coincide with any school activities or drop-off/pick-up times.

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

Planning Policy

10. The Development Plan Policies summarised below are relevant to the consideration of the application:

The adopted **Maidstone Borough-Wide Local Plan (2000)**:

Policy ENV2 Requires all proposals for new developments in village settlements to relate sympathetically to the context of their setting and adjoining buildings, with regard to scale, height, proportion, detailing and materials, building frontages, highways and car parking, etc. with due regard given to the reasonable enjoyment of their properties by neighbouring occupiers.

Policy CF2 In considering the change of use of existing redundant community facilities, the Borough Council will need to be satisfied that an identified need for community facilities, that could be met on the site, does not exist.

Policy T13 All proposed development should comply with the adopted parking standards

Consultations

11. The following views have been received from consultees:

Maidstone Malling Borough Council: raises no objections to the proposal.

Marden Parish Council: had raised the following queries in response to this application:

- could the fire escape be moved to the opposite side of the building to reduce the adverse impact on the neighbouring property to the south, and could it be conditioned for emergency use only?

- could the southern boundary fence be raised to 1.8 metres, should the garden area be a separate application for change of use, and why is it all included in the application site boundary?

- part of the street scene would be lost if the existing wall and railings were removed for parking, and the parking is not considered adequate for what is proposed, with some parents still driving to the Centre. Alternative on-site parking should be explored.

In response to further information on these aspects, the Parish Council has not objected in principle, but has asked for the following to be considered:

- the need for the fire escape is understood, but they wish to see it moved to the opposite side of the building;

- the use of the garden area by the School as a nature area and outdoor classroom is noted; and

- they feel strongly that the parking arrangement could lead to additional traffic congestion and the street scene would be altered if the wrought iron railings were removed (which have been identified in The Marden Society's *Register of Historic Street Furniture*).

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

The Divisional Transportation Manager: has commented as follows:

"Whilst I have objections to the current proposals in respect of highway matters it may be possible to overcome these objections if amendments were made.

Kent Highway Services has concerns regarding accessibility to the site and the location is deemed unsafe to consistently reverse in and out of the site. Given the size and dimensions of vehicles carrying disabled personnel, it is deemed unsafe for drivers to reverse out of the site, given the following concerns from my observations:-

- Zebra Crossing guard railing would cause hindrance for visibility when reversing*
- Foliage from neighbouring properties would also cause a lack of visibility when reversing out of the site*
- Safety is the key issue, therefore vehicles must enter and leave the site in a forwards facing gear.*

For the application to proceed, Kent Highway Services would like to see a turning area fronting the 'Old School House' allowing a vehicle to enter and leave the site in a forward facing gear to maximise highway safety. Alternatively, the applicant could seek permission from the School regarding vehicular parking."

The Environment Agency: has no comments to make on the application.

Local Member

12. The local Member, Mrs. P Stockell, has been notified of the application and at the time of writing has submitted no written views on the application.

Publicity

13. The application was publicised by the posting of a site notice and the individual notification of 19 nearby residential properties.

Representations

14. In response to neighbour notification, 3 letters of representation have been received, from adjacent addresses in Goudhurst Road. The key points of concerns and objections can be summarised as follows:
 - We have no problem in general with the proposed children's centre use, but are concerned over parking impacts, the proposed fire escape and the use of the rear garden.
 - The proposed parking to the front of the property would have no turning facility, meaning vehicles would either have to reverse in or reverse out onto a busy road on the apex of a bend, where commuters' cars are parked during the day and where school parents park at arrival and departure times. The proposed parking spaces and the on-street parking by visitors to the centre would greatly add to the current congestion.

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

- We strongly object to the positioning of the proposed fire escape, which seems particularly large and ugly, and would practically overhang our conservatory and be clearly visible to us and our neighbours. If it was moved to the other side of the rear elevation it would be a little less invasive.
- The proposed use of the rear garden area by the School could bring school noise considerably closer to our rear garden, separated by only a low brick wall. If the area became a play area, then balls and other objects might get thrown over damaging the flowers and shrub borders.
- Living opposite the site, we already have trouble with people parking across our driveway, so are concerned about the parking arrangements, the hours of use, numbers of adults and children attending and whether the house will look aesthetically in keeping.
- Given the daily congestion outside the School House with school parents and children waiting for the school gates to be opened, the parking at the School House would only exacerbate an already potentially dangerous situation on a narrow pavement with very limited space.
- Parking in the vicinity of the school is a nightmare at the beginning and end of the school day, with parents parking across residents' driveways creating considerable road safety hazards with their selfish parking. The application states that the Centre would be used by local residents able to walk to the facility, but the same could be said of the school which also serves local children and who do not walk. However, my biggest concern is where the additional Children's Centre traffic would park.
- A previous proposal to remove the front fence was refused because the property is on a blind bend in the road and would be an accident waiting to happen. The pelican crossing causes enough problems and the footway on the school side has already been widened, thereby narrowing the road and visibility when leaving driveways. If the development was to proceed all cars should back into their drives and no cars should be left on the road.
- The site would become an accident 'black spot' and where would the contractor's vehicles park? They should park in the school car park and not in front of our houses.
- The development would be a waste of money given the limited opening hours, and a site meeting would be a good idea for local residents to air their views.

Discussion

15. The application is required to be determined in accordance with the relevant Development Plan policies, unless other material considerations are of overriding importance. Therefore, the proposal needs to be considered in the context of the Approved Local Plan and other material considerations, including those arising from consultation and neighbour notification responses. In this particular case, the determining issues would therefore include relevant planning policies, parking, access and traffic aspects, external alterations and residential amenity aspects.

Policy Context

16. Current Development Plan policies do not generally presume against the proposed development, as long as it is compatible in design terms with its context and surroundings, accord with highway and parking requirements and has acceptable impacts on neighbouring properties. There is a Local Plan policy presumption against the loss of community facilities by changes of use, but in this particular case the

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

proposed change involves a change from one community use to another. Under the circumstances, I see no objection in principle from a planning policy viewpoint, but the detailed considerations below on design, parking and amenity will inform the consideration as to whether there is any substantive conflict with the Development Plan policies.

Parking, Access and Traffic Impacts

17. The parking provision for the proposed Children's Centre has provoked concerns over its adequacy, its suitability in road safety terms and its impact on the streetscape. Additionally the Centre itself is a concern to neighbouring residents in terms of potential traffic generation. The provision of parking space at the Children's Centres across the County is based on the operational parking needs, ie. the numbers of staff based at the Centre, on the understanding that some staff would be peripatetic and not there all the time the Centre is open, whilst others would live locally and be expected to walk to there. Visitors to the Centre would also be those living in close proximity, given that those from further afield would be expected to visit other satellite facilities closer to where they live. Under the circumstances, there is no need to provide more than the two spaces provided in the application and the Divisional Transportation Manager has accepted this level of provision as being appropriate.
18. The suitability of the proposed front parking area is however of concern, given the need for vehicles to either reverse off or onto the road, as well as the visual impact of the loss of the front boundary treatment. With regard to road safety aspects, the Divisional Transportation Manager is objecting to the proposal in its current form and has indicated that there either should be space for vehicles to turn around within the site, or else spaces should be made available elsewhere within the school site, as also suggested by the Parish Council. Since the front garden is of limited size (10 metres wide by 7-9 metres deep), I do not consider that there is sufficient space to include a turning area as well, unless only one space was provided. I also consider that it would be impracticable to improve the sightlines at the access point for emerging vehicles without impacting on the neighbouring property to the south, which is outside the control of the applicant. Notwithstanding the highway safety objections, there are also visual amenity concerns regarding the proposed frontage parking area.
19. In order to create the parking spaces to the front, it would be necessary to remove the whole of the existing dwarf walling and ornamental iron railings. I agree with consultees and objectors that the loss of the front walling and railings would be regrettable, because it is one of the few remaining frontages in Goudhurst Road with original railings that has not been removed/replaced to create off-road parking. Moreover the brick walling corresponds with the school house and is a characteristic feature of the remnant historic streetscape here, and continues along the entire frontage of the school site. Nevertheless, the school house is not Listed nor within the Conservation Area, and it is entirely possible that were the building sold as a private house then its new owners could readily replace the attractive garden, walling and railings and create a front parking area with very little intervention of planning control. Given that the removal of the front boundary would only provide space for two vehicles, and with no safe turning space, on balance I consider that the removal of the frontage walling should be resisted and that alternative arrangements should be agreed with the School. In particular, there is a recently extended car park within the school site which could be used by the Centre Manager by arrangement with the School, but Members should be aware that it might not be possible to provide the required disabled parking space within the expected 50 metres of the premises.

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209



20. The Parish Council and some neighbouring residents are also concerned about the wider traffic impacts of the Children's Centre, whilst not objecting to the principle of this particular use of the school house. As mentioned above, the use of the Centre is such that there would not be many visitors during its opening hours and only very rarely at any one time. In the main, visitors would attend pre-arranged appointments throughout the working day, and specifically to avoid the peak times for the delivery and collection of school pupils. The objections voiced tend to reflect an existing school traffic congestion issue, which the current application would scarcely contribute to, because of the Centre's more sporadic activity and the fact that its visitors would either be able to readily walk there or would already be visiting the school. The applicants have also advised me as follows in this regard:

"We do not envisage the proposed children's centre to increase the current congestion and volume of traffic. The provision of the Children's Centre aims to support families with children under 5 years in the local area and families living in Marden will be encouraged to walk to the new children's centre. Although, as with all round 3 centres, this children's centre has a large catchment area, the children and families that live outside of Marden are not expected to travel to the centre to access the services. In order to reach those families further a field, the Children's Centre team is currently delivering a range of outreach services in local venues such as village halls and community centres, this outreach service is part of the Children's Centre Core Offer and will continue once the Centre is built.

In order to further avoid any increase in traffic/disruption, Children's Centre services are planned and delivered at times after and before School drop offs and collections, eg morning groups usually run 9:30am - 11:30am and afternoon sessions run 12:30 - 2:30pm. Any groups that will be run in the new centre will be small. It is anticipated to

Proposed Children’s Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

only have groups of 6-10 children, with their carer, and any larger groups will be held in alternative venues such as village halls. Car parking is proposed as indicated on the submitted drawing and is for a member of staff and disabled bay only: No further cars are proposed to be parked on the front drive of the property.”

External Alterations and Residential Amenity Impacts

21. The proposed alterations to the school house to accommodate the Children’s Centre are largely internal and beyond the scope of planning control, but some of these have ramifications for the external appearance and arrangements. The proposed alteration to the front doorway to accommodate wheelchair users has the unfortunate effect of distorting the precise proportions of the door and window openings which are all of equally slenderness and correspond with the original house proportions. However, this is a minor and otherwise unavoidable adulteration to meet current equal access requirements, and the sort of alteration that could be introduced to any (unlisted) property without planning consent. Of more concern is the removal of the front wall and railings to accommodate the car parking area, as discussed above (*para. 19*).



22. The proposed alterations to the rear door and windows of the school house are more extensive but not in themselves significant to the overall appearance of the rear of the building. Of more concern is the introduction of the steel fire escape staircase and the opening up of the rear garden area for more regular use by the School. The

Proposed Children's Centre, Marden Primary School – MA/10/1209

Parish Council and the neighbours are concerned about the visual intrusion and the potential for overlooking from the external staircase. The adjacent house extends further back than the school house, and has a blank side elevation at this point, but it has a glass conservatory extending into its rear garden area which potentially would be overlooked. Whilst the need for the staircase is also unfortunate for such a small building and operation, bearing in mind that for most of the time it will be less used/occupied than any of the neighbouring private houses, I would agree that it would have less impact on the neighbouring property if it could be sited further way to the north. However, the practicalities of achieving that are such that there is very little option beyond the currently proposed arrangement, and the applicants have advised me as follows:

“From a design perspective, by repositioning the staircase to the left it will create a clash with the position of the new stair stringer, therefore causing a height clearance issue to the ground floor exit door. The suggested reposition will also compromise the ramps for the DDA secondary means of escape to the rear of the property. The current design has had to reposition an entire door entrance on the ground floor so that anyone entering or exiting would not hit their head against the new fire escape, by switching it to the left we would face a similar issue and the internal layout could not accommodate a new door position. More importantly if positioned on the left instead of the right it would mean the fire escape would be right outside the children's toilet which is not acceptable.”

23. The fire escape egress has to be via the southernmost window opening of the first floor landing, because the other windows are to toilet areas and not communal space. Reversing the direction of the external staircase is also hampered by space restrictions, and would still mean the upper landing area is close to the neighbouring property. The applicant has offered to reduce the visual impact with some additional screening or planting, but that would need to be high to have any beneficial effect. Nevertheless, it needs to be borne in mind that the fire escape is intended for emergency use only, and hopefully would never need to be used, and if it was the users would be unlikely to be loitering to take in the view. Should planning consent be granted therefore, I would recommend that its use should be strictly confined by planning condition to emergency use only, and that the visual intrusion should be offset by the further conditional requirement for some additional screening as suggested by the applicants.
24. The rear garden would be subdivided under the proposals by new timber fencing to provide a separate service courtyard for the Centre with the larger part retained by the School as a nature garden and an occasional outdoor classroom space. Neighbouring residents are also concerned about potential noise nuisance, visual intrusion and litter arising from the proposed use of this area. Given that the use would be limited, and for most of the time not in any active use, and when used it would always be part of structured and supervised activity, I do not consider that the impacts on the neighbouring residents would be unduly detrimental. In particular, the proposed use of the school house garden area is unlikely to be any more intrusive than the use of any other (private) garden spaces that are adjacent to each other, and over which there is ordinarily very little planning control. In the event that planning consent is granted, a condition could also be imposed governing the use and activities relating to this part of the site, and it being managed in a sensitive and neighbourly manner by the School.

Conclusion

25. Whilst I see no objection to the *principle* of the proposed development, I consider that the proposed car parking arrangements need to be re-thought, together with some more neighbourly treatment of the proposed fire escape staircase. The latter is a matter that could be addressed by the imposition of a condition on any planning consent, but the car parking is a matter that needs to be addressed prior to issuing any planning consent, since that aspect alone might not be deliverable. On the assumption that these matters are capable of being satisfactorily addressed, I consider that the proposed development otherwise generally accords with the relevant Development Plan Policies, in terms of compatible building design aspects and impacts on neighbouring amenities. Whilst objections have also been raised to the impacts of the proposed development on road traffic conditions, I am of the view that the proposal would only marginally add to the existing vehicle movements and so that is not in itself a reason to withhold planning consent. Under the circumstances, I would advise that the proposed development does not significantly conflict with relevant Development Plan Policies and, subject to appropriate conditions to mitigate the areas of concern, I recommend that permission be granted.

Recommendation

26. SUBJECT TO the receipt of an amended plan showing an alternative provision of the proposed car parking spaces, I RECOMMEND that PERMISSION BE GRANTED, SUBJECT to conditions, including conditions covering:
- the standard 3 year time limit for implementation;
 - the specifications for external building materials to match the existing materials;
 - the use of the fire escape staircase being restricted to emergency use only;
 - the provision of additional screening between the proposed fire escape staircase and the adjacent residential property;
 - the use of the premises to be restricted to between 0800 and 1800 hours, Mondays to Fridays;
 - the use of the rear garden area by the school pupils to be restricted to supervised activities only; and
 - the use of the premises to be restricted solely to the uses applied for and development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details.

Case Officer – Jerry Crossley	01622 221052
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Background documents –See section heading
