

PROPOSAL MA/10/1209 – CHILDREN’S CENTRE AT MARDEN PRIMARY SCHOOL, GOUDHURST ROAD, MARDEN

NOTES of a Planning Applications Committee site meeting at Marden Primary School on Wednesday, 29 September 2010.

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr J F London (Vice-Chairman in the Chair), Mr R E Brookbank, Mr C Hibberd, Mr R J Lees, Mr R F Manning, Mr A R Pascoe, Mr M B Robertson and Mr A T Willicombe. Mrs P A V Stockell was present as the Local Member.

OFFICERS: Mrs S Thompson and Mr J Crossley (Planning); and Mr A Tait (Legal and Democratic Services).

MAIDSTONE BC: Mr R Nelson-Gracie

MARDEN PC: Cllrs L Mannington and I Newton

THE APPLICANTS: Mrs V Savage (KCC CFE Project Manager) and Mrs F Miller (KCC CFE Locality Co-ordinator), Mr P Shallcross (KCC KASS Preventative Services), and Mr S Flook (AECOM).

ALSO PRESENT were Mrs R Linn (Head Teacher – Marden Primary School) and 4 members of the public.

(1) The Chairman opened the meeting by explaining that its purpose was to enable Members of the Planning Applications Committee to gather the views of interested parties and to familiarise themselves with the site.

(2) Mr Crossley introduced the application which was for a Children’s Centre. This was part of a project to provide a hundred such centres across the County of Kent on or close to school sites.

(3) In a number of instances, applications for Children’s Centres had faced planning difficulties due to the need to provide new buildings, often to a modest standard of design.

(4) Mr Crossley went on to say that in this particular case, there already was an existing building. It was a former Caretaker’s House on the Marden Primary School site. The intention was refurbish it to make it suitable for Children’s Centre use. This would require significant internal alterations including installing a lift, moving a staircase and widening the door to enable DDA access, and re-arranging the windows and doors at the back.

(5) Mr Crossley identified the two main aspects of concern. Both of these related to the external appearance. The first concern was over the proposed fire escape (required by both Building and Fire Regulations). The second was that it was intended to remove the brick walls and railings in order to provide two parking spaces in the front garden.

(6) Mr Crossley explained that the Planners had considered that the provision of parking in the front garden was unacceptable, particularly in the light of comments made by the Divisional Transport Manager stressing that cars would have to either reverse in or out and that neither of these options was acceptable on health and safety grounds. They had therefore recommended to the Committee that permission should be granted subject to an amended plan showing suitable car parking provision.

(7) The Planning Applications Committee had also discussed the proposed design of the fire escape and had decided to hold a visit before reaching a decision.

(8) Mr Flook (AECOM) said that he was happy that Mr Crossley had accurately described the application.

(9) Mrs Stockell (Local Member) said that she had no objection in principle to the proposal. The issues that needed to be addressed were the proposed removal of the front wall and railings; the fire escape and the parking issue. Local residents were already faced with people parking outside their front driveways. She asked if there was any additional land within the school grounds that could be used for this purpose.

(10) Mr Nelson-Gracie (Maidstone BC) said he had the same concerns as Mrs Stockell, particularly over the fire escape.

(11) Mr Newton (Marden PC) said that the Parish Council's objections had been effectively covered by the discussions up to this point.

(12) Mrs Miller and Mrs Savage (KCC CFE) said that the proposed Children's Centre was a part of Phase 3 of the national programme of delivering Sure Start Children's Centres. Their purpose was to act as a signposting centre for Health, Jobcentre Plus and activities for parents, carers, children and families. They were designed to provide a lot of outreach work for local families. One aspect of their health-related work was to encourage people to walk to the Centre. If successful, this would mitigate any parking impacts on local residents.

(13) Mrs Linn (Head Teacher, Marden Primary School) said that she very much hoped that approval would be granted. There were a number of vulnerable families in Marden, including children who would receive the necessary pre-school support that they were not currently getting.

(14) Mr Jarrett, a local resident said that he lived opposite the proposed development. He said that he worked from home and that he already had difficulties with parents parking outside his drive when children came and went to school. He was very concerned that these problems would grow due to the "dropping in" nature of the proposed development. He asked the Committee members to consider that it was very stressful to have to argue with parents who didn't want to move on so that he could drive in and out of

his property. He also pointed out (at a later stage of the visit) that vehicles were parking outside his driveway even as the site visit was taking place.

(15) In response to Mr Jarrett, Mrs Savage said that it might be possible to arrange for the Centre to operate outside the times when children were dropped off or picked up from the school.

(16) Mrs Pavey, a local resident said that she had no objection to the Children's Centre itself. Her objection was about the proposed fire escape which would overhang her neighbouring property. She asked whether it was really necessary to have a fire escape of that size in that location and whether it would be possible to overcome the need for it by installing sprinklers.

(17) Mr Flook (AECOM) said that careful note had been taken of all the grounds for objection and that discussions had taken place with the School. He then said that a fire escape was needed because the Regulations covered both Fire Prevention and Evacuation. The fire exit could not exceed 18 metres to get safely away from a fire. Avoiding the need for a fire escape would involve two internal staircases. The applicants had therefore looked at the possible provision of a Safe Route. Unfortunately, the cost would outstrip the budget for the Children's Centre.

(18) Mr Flook went on to say that the possibility of an alternative structure for the fire escape had been considered. He then produced alternative drawings (*which had not been shared with the Planners up to this point*). This would involve an exit point on the North side. It would need to remain above head height in order to avoid impinging on the School's open play and activity space. It would then turn the corner along the house rear before coming down to ground level in the garden. It would be built with materials in keeping with the building.

(19) Mr Flook then said that the applicants had held discussions with the School on overcoming the problem of parking provision. As a result, the School had been able to offer one disabled parking space within its car park. This would meet every requirement except the one that specified that it had to be no more than 45 metres from the building. An application would therefore have to be made for an exemption.

(20) Members then moved into the garden at the rear of the house. Mr Crossley pointed out the proposed new positioning of the door and windows as well as the fire escape. He said that the point where it reached the ground would be roughly in line with the next door conservatory. He said that if the fire escape layout were to be simply reversed, its underside would be by the door. The risk would be that people would hurt their heads as they exited beneath it.

(21) Mr Flook replied to a question from Mrs Stockell by saying that the legal requirements were very stringent, making it impossible to simply re-design the fire escape so that it became the mirror image of that currently

proposed. He then demonstrated to Members the point at which the fire Escape would touch the ground (some 3 metres from the wall of the building).

(22) Mrs Stockell asked whether the applicants had considered completely re-configuring the design of the building itself to mitigate the visual impact of the fire escape on the neighbouring property. Mr Flook replied that the design had to match the brief from the clients.

(23) Mr Robertson asked whether the applicants would consider providing dog bone markings (white marking placed on the public highway outside an entrance to off-street premises or a private drive) for the neighbouring premises. He then asked for an indication of the alternative materials the applicants proposed to use for the fire escape.

(24) Mr Flook replied to Mr Robertson's second question by saying that he anticipated that they would consist of steel painted black so that the colour scheme was in keeping with the outside railings.

(25) Members then inspected the house from the northern side, noting the alternative egress point for the fire escape as well as the distance it would need to be from the wall and the height it would need to be in order to keep the play/activity area safe for children's use.

(26) Members also viewed the neighbouring property from the first floor window (the egress point for the proposed fire escape).

(27) The Chairman thanked everyone for attending. The notes of the visit would be made available at the determining meeting of the Planning Applications Committee.