

SECTION D  
DEVELOPMENT TO BE CARRIED OUT BY THE COUNTY COUNCIL

Background Documents: the deposited documents; views and representations received as referred to in the reports and included in the development proposals dossier for each case; and other documents as might be additionally indicated.

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**Item D1**

**Six bay modular building at Weald Community Primary School, Long Barn Road, Sevenoaks - SE/11/824**

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A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 14 June 2011

Application by Kent County Council, Children Families and Education for the placement of one, six bay modular building at Weald Community Primary School, Long Barn Road, Sevenoaks, TN14 6PY- SE/11/824

Recommendation: Permission be granted subject to conditions

**Local Member:** Mr. Nick Chard

**Classification:** Unrestricted

**Site**

1. Weald Community Primary School is situated within a residential development in a rural village, approximately three miles south of Sevenoaks town centre. The land surrounding the village on all sides is designated as being within both the Metropolitan Green Belt and the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), although the built confines of the village itself, including the school buildings and associated hard-standing falls outside of these designations. The school is located in the centre of the village on Long Barn Road, one of the main routes through the village, bordered to the east and west by residential properties, by the village green to the south and playing fields to the north. The school site is split in two by Wickhurst Road which wraps around the rear of the playground, with tennis courts and marked sports pitches on land immediately to the north. It is important to note that that part of the school site is included in the Green Belt and AONB designations. A site plan is attached.

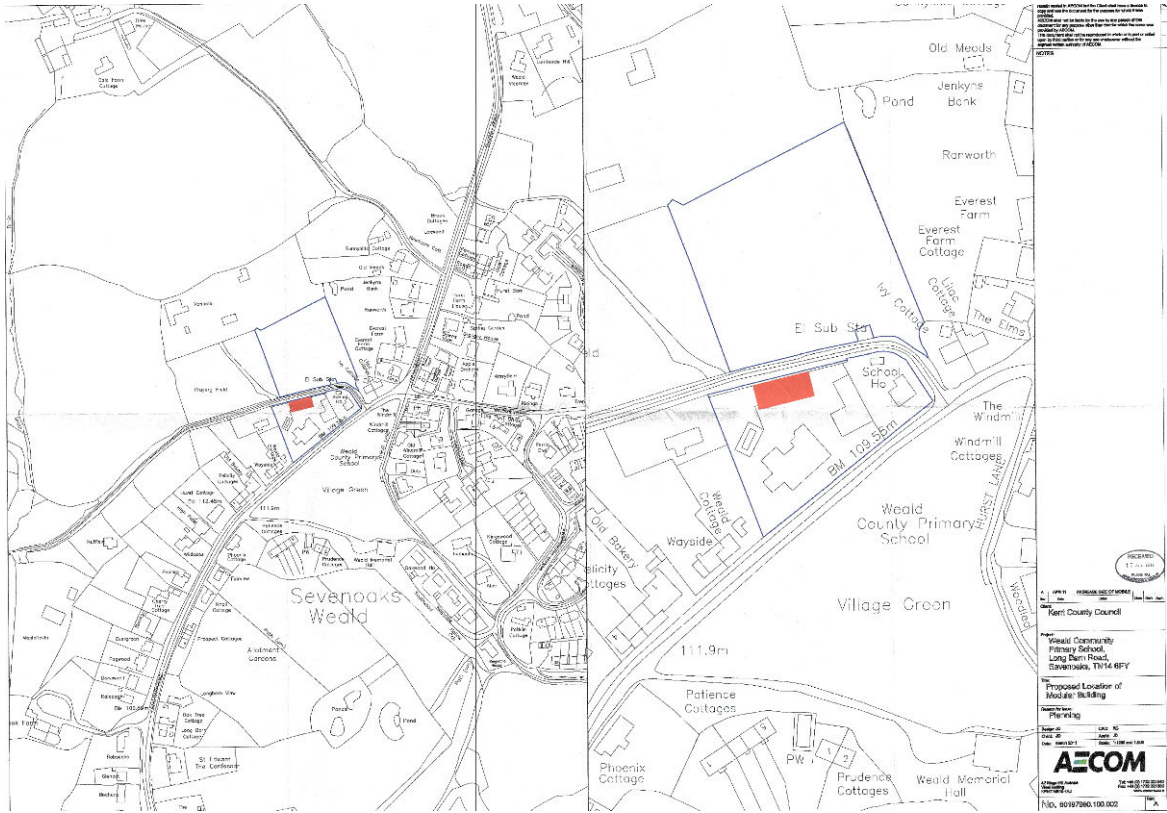
**Background and proposal**

2. The proposal is for the placement of one, six bay modular building on the northern boundary of the school playground. There is currently a smaller mobile classroom and some play equipment situated in the same area which will be removed to allow the proposed structure to be accommodated. The mobile classroom unit would measure 19.65 metres in length, 8.5 metres in width, and 3.2 metres in height and provide two classrooms, two store rooms, two toilets and one accessible toilet. The application documents specify that the mobile classroom would have a dark green textured finish, aluminium double glazed windows and a black shallow felt pitched roof. The School have stated that the larger building is required to provide additional teaching space for the next academic year when the school roll will increase by 5 pupils. Although the rise in pupils is only slight, the increase will necessitate a sixth class to prevent large class sizes and hence the need for an additional classroom.

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Site Plan



Ariel photograph



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#### Elevations



3. The current mobile unit has been on site for over 25 years and was renewed most recently in 2008 on a temporary planning permission which is due to expire in 2012. Other recent planning applications at the school have included permission to erect a pergola to form an external teaching area under reference SE/03/1840, the construction of a single-storey extension to the rear of an existing classroom under reference SE/05/1674 and the replacement of UPVC windows under reference SE/08/1216.

#### Planning Policy

4. The development plan policies summarised below are relevant to consideration of the application:

(i) **Planning Policy Guidance 2 – Green Belt**

There is a general presumption against inappropriate development within the Green Belt, which is by definition harmful and should not be permitted unless it can be justified by very special circumstances. The construction of new buildings within the Green Belt is inappropriate unless it is for the following purposes:

- agriculture or forestry
- essential facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreations, for cemeteries, and for other uses of land which preserve the openness of the Green Belt and which do not conflict with the purpose of including land in it
- limited extension, alteration or replacement of existing dwellings.

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- limited infilling in existing villages and limited affordable housing for community needs
- limited infilling or redevelopment of major existing developed sites identified in adopted local plans.

(ii) The adopted (2009) **South East Plan**

*Regional policy is contained within the South East Plan 2009. Members will already be aware of the relevant South East Plan policy considerations in relation to the proposed development, in that The Plan was revoked and later reinstated pending the enactment of the Localism Bill. Members will also be aware that they have to have regard to the policies in the SEP and the Government's intention to abolish the Regional Spatial Strategies (RSS) as material considerations. However the weight to be accorded is a matter for the decision makers. The relevant policies to this application are:*

**Policy SP5:** Any strategy aiming to focus new development into sub-regions and existing settlements needs to be reinforced by a strong policy to maintain separation of settlements.

**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 C3:** High priority will be given to conservation and enhancement of natural beauty in the region's Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and planning decisions should have regard to their setting. Proposals for development should be considered in that context.

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

(iii) The adopted (2000) **Sevenoaks Local District Plan**

**Policy EN1:** General Principles of development; all forms of development must comply with development plan policies, unless there are overriding material considerations. Development should: be compatible to the site in design, scale and density; respect the topography and retain important features; not affect the amenities of the locality; and provide appropriate facilities for those with disabilities.

**Policy GB1:** Extent of land included within the Green Belt. The permanence of the land within the Green Belt must be maintained. The extent of the Green Belt must only be altered in exceptional circumstances.

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(iv) The adopted (2011) **Sevenoaks Core Strategy**

**Policy SP1:** All new development should be designed to a high quality and should respond to the distinctive local character of the area in which it is situated. The District's heritage assets and their settings, including landscapes and outstanding views will be protected and enhanced.

#### **Consultations**

5. **Sevenoaks District Council** raises an objection to the application, stating that the proposed mobile classroom has a detrimental impact upon the setting of the school and village green, and therefore does not comply with the provisions of the Policy EN1 of the Sevenoaks District Plan and SP1 of the Core Strategy.

**The Divisional Transport Manager** raises no objection to the proposal, but recommends that a travel plan be prepared if the School do not already have one.

**Weald Parish Council** initially raised objection on the grounds of:

- appearance of the mobile classroom not being in keeping with the Village Design Statement
- the building is too large for the site and will result in a loss of outdoor playing area
- the building would spoil the outlook from the AONB
- the increase in traffic and parking problems associated with the rise in pupil numbers
- if permission is granted for the proposed mobile classroom the Parish would expect the hedge on Wickhurst Road to be protected to provide screening.

Subsequently the Parish Council reviewed their comments after discussions with representatives from the School and now supports the application, subject to conditions covering a 5 year temporary time period for the classroom and assurances that the hedge along Wickhurst Road is protected.

#### **Local Member(s)**

6. The local County Member, Mr Nick Chard was notified of the application on the 31 March 2011.

#### **Publicity**

7. The application was publicised by the posting of a site notice and the individual notification of 6 nearby residential properties. The application documents were also made available for public viewing on Kent County Council's website.

#### **Representations**

8. Representations have been received from 11 parents of children at the school. Subsequently, 8 objections were withdrawn after the School agreed to relocate the play equipment that it being removed (details of which have not been submitted as part of this application). The concerns and objections raised to the proposal can be summarised as:

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- health and safety issues arising from reduced playground space, coupled with an increase in pupil numbers
- suggestion that a 2-storey building would be a better solution to the problem
- increase in traffic and parking pressures as a result of a wider catchment area
- suggestion to expand the school on the land across Wickhurst Road
- lack of pavements outside the school create a safety hazard for pupils and other pedestrians, an increase in pupils will exacerbate the problem.

### **Discussion**

#### Introduction

9. This proposal has arisen out of the School's need to provide additional teaching accommodation for an additional class. The school roll is currently 147 and this is due to increase to 152 in September 2011, and forecasts predict further rises in the coming years. The applicant explains that the rise in pupils has come from increased local pressures on primary school places and consequently the Local Education Authority has increased the admission numbers for the next academic year. As already stated, there is a mobile classroom unit in the same area as that proposed, which is of a smaller footprint, measuring 7.7 metres (width) by 9 metres (length), giving a floor space of 69.3 square metres. As well as being too small for the additional class, the applicant advises that due to the condition of the existing mobile classroom, it is proving uneconomical to maintain and without a replacement the delivery of the national curriculum would be seriously compromised. They also advise that a permanent building would be the preferred solution for the School but this is not feasible within the current capital spending programme.
10. As summarised in paragraphs 5 and 8 above, representations received in respect of this application have identified issues relating to the health and safety implications of the proposal and traffic and parking problems associated with children coming to the school from outside the village. Alternative options for the provision of additional teaching accommodation have also been suggested by concerned parents. Impacts of the mobile classroom on the setting of the school, village green and AONB have been identified by the District and Parish Councils. These issues need to be considered in the context of the relevant development plan policies outlined in paragraph 4 above.

#### Siting and design

11. Both the Parish Council and District Council have objected to this application on the grounds of siting and design and have particular concerns over the impact of the mobile classroom on the setting of the school, village green and AONB. As illustrated on the site plan on page 2, the location of the proposed mobile classroom is in the north of the school grounds, and is bordered by Wickhurst Road, with the school playing fields and tennis courts beyond to the north, residential properties to the east and west and the village green to the south. The school's southern boundary is demarcated by low-level palisade fencing and an un-obscured vantage point of the school can be gained from the village green. Intermittent planting partially screens the site and the existing mobile classroom from the northern boundary.

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12. Mindful of the sensitive location of the school site, the applicant has proposed measures to mitigate the appearance of the building. The submitted Design and Access Statement states that the mobile classroom would be dark green and finished in a low maintenance plastisol-coated galvanised steel cladding. It is envisaged that the colour of the proposed mobile classroom would complement the existing surroundings, and the foliage on Wickhurst Road would go some way to mitigate the visual impacts of the building when viewed from the AONB. The applicant has also agreed to continue the planting along the Wickhurst Road boundary to provide full screening of the mobile.
13. The existing mobile classroom is now in poor condition and painted a pale green which tends to draw undue attention to it. Although a larger unit, arguably the overall appearance of the replacement building, providing that it is painted in a dark green, would be an improvement. It is also worth noting that a large proportion of the mobile classroom would not be visible from the village green because it would be obscured by the main school building which is at the front of the school site. Taking into account the Wickhurst Road boundary treatment and the presence of the existing mobile classroom, I do not consider that there would be a significant visual impact from either the village green to the south or the land designated as being within the AONB to the north or the visual amenities of the Green Belt land also to the north. The design of the mobile classroom would generally be considered contradictory to certain Local Plan policies, arguably not responding to the distinctive local character of the area, as referred to in Policy SP1 of the Sevenoaks Core Strategy. However, it is important to acknowledge the temporary nature of the mobile classroom, with a view for the School to review the situation in the future and therefore less emphasis can be placed on the design of the building in this instance.



Photograph of existing mobile classroom from the village green looking north

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Photograph of existing mobile classroom from playing fields looking south

#### Health and safety issues

14. All of the representations received in respect of this application have identified what is perceived as a risk to health and safety through the placement of the proposed mobile classroom. The objectors state that outdoor space is limited with the current mobile classroom in situ, resulting in segregated break-times to avoid accidents, and the prospect of a larger mobile classroom would further reduce the outdoor space, leading to the potential for more accidents. I understand from officers of the Education Authority, that whilst there are statutory minimum requirements in place for soft team games areas (playing fields), there are no such requirements for hard play areas. The Department of Education (DfE)- Building Bulletin 99 'Briefing Framework for Primary Projects' has produced a formula for calculating suggested minimum hard play areas for primary pupils:

- Hard games court area =  $2\text{m}^2 \times \text{number of pupils plus } 600\text{m}^2$
- Hard informal and social area =  $1.5\text{m}^2 \times \text{number of pupils plus } 400\text{m}^2$

15. Using the DfE's formula, the current amount of hard informal and social area (playground) is 611.7m<sup>2</sup> and with the proposed mobile unit installed this figure would reduce to 513.975m<sup>2</sup>. This is below the suggested minimum of 628m<sup>2</sup> on the presumption that the school roll will be 152 in September 2011. However, it is important to remember that the figures offered by the DfE are only guidelines and there is no statutory minimum requirement. Whilst the safety of children is obviously a concern, this is not considered to be material to the determination of the planning application and is a matter for the School and the Education Authority to come to terms with and manage as appropriate. In particular, where a school has to operate within a limited site area, it is



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essentially a matter for the Education Authority as to how best to use the operational space that is available, eg. whether indoor teaching accommodation is more important than outdoor playspace.

#### Alternative solutions

16. Suggestions have been made that the mobile classroom could be located on the school site to the north of Wickhurst Road. As earlier stated the site is designated as Green Belt land and also forms part of the Kent Downs AONB where there would be a strong presumption against any development except in exceptional circumstances. Furthermore, it would compromise its current use by the School for recreation and sport, as well as being more visually intrusive in the wider landscape setting. The main school site is very much constrained by a lack of space, and I accept that the proposed area for the mobile classroom is the only viable option. A two storey option has also been suggested for the mobile classroom but in my view this would result in an unacceptable visual impact.

#### Traffic and parking

17. Increased vehicular traffic and parking pressures as a result of the extra pupils has been identified by objectors. The school is situated in the centre of the village, a few hundred metres from a crossroads. Parking within the school is limited, so parents dropping off and picking up students park outside the school on Long Barn Road and the surrounding streets, which are unrestricted. Whilst the majority of students live within walking distance of the school and are encouraged to walk to school, inevitably some parents choose to drive and thus there is a build-up of cars during peak times of the school day. The applicant has stated that the majority of the pupils joining the school in September are siblings of existing pupils and therefore additional vehicles movements should be kept to a minimum. Whilst there is the potential for a slight increase in traffic, the Divisional Transportation Manager has not raised a highway objection to the proposal but has requested that a School Travel Plan is submitted if planning consent is given, and is revised accordingly if pupil numbers continue to rise in subsequent years.

#### **Conclusion**

18. The applicant's reason for the installation of the mobile classroom will be noted. Whilst the proposal does not fully accord with Development Plan Policies relating to design, given the temporary nature of the building, 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 the surrounding Kent Downs AONB. 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. I therefore recommend that planning permission be granted for a temporary period of 5 years from the date of the permission and conditions relating to the colour of the mobile classroom and a planting scheme along the Wickhurst Road boundary.

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#### Recommendation

19. I RECOMMEND that PLANNING PERMISSION BE GRANTED SUBJECT to a condition requiring the mobile classroom to be removed from the site no later than 5 years from the date of this permission, conditions covering the painting of the mobile classroom in dark green, boundary planting and the submission of a school travel plan.
20. I FURTHER RECOMMEND that the applicant be advised by way of INFORMATIVE that the permission granted for the above mentioned mobile classroom is for a temporary period and that the applicant urgently seek to address the issue of finding a permanent solution.

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