

**Children's Centre at The Willows, Hilda May Avenue,
Swanley – SE/07/2744**

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 11 December 2007.

Application by Kent County Council Children, Families and Education for the refurbishment and extension of existing nursery and office space to create a Children's Centre, including the erection of a canopy, buggy and toy store, and creation of an external impact absorbent play area at The Willows, Hilda May Avenue, Swanley (SE/07/2744).

Recommendation: Planning permission be granted, subject to conditions.

Local Member(s): Mr. M. Fittock

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

1. The Willows is located to the north-west of the main town of Swanley, on Hilda May Avenue. The site is primarily occupied by Kent County Council Adult Services as an office base, with a smaller proportion of the building being used by The Willows Pre-School Nursery. Prior to 2001, the Willows site was occupied by White Oak Junior School, with Horizon School (formerly White Oak Infants School) lying directly southwards from the application site. The application site is bordered by school playing fields to the east, residential properties along Northview to the North and White Oak Leisure Centre to the West. The school playing fields are designated as important areas of green space in the Sevenoaks Local Plan. *A location plan is attached.*
2. The application site is located within, and adjacent to, the south-west corner of the main Office building, and adjacent to and within the existing White Oak Pre-School Nursery building.

Background

3. The County Planning Authority granted planning permission in 2001 for a change of use of the site from the former White Oak Junior School to Adult Services offices and a pre-school unit, with associated additional parking, under reference SE/01/1453.

Proposal

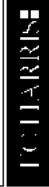
4. This application proposes the creation of a community Children's Centre through the adaptation, refurbishment and extension of part of the existing office accommodation currently occupied by both KCC Adult Services and the Willows Pre-School Nursery. In addition to changes to the internal layout, the proposed external alterations to the building would include three small-scale extensions, to create an additional floorspace of approximately 120 square metres and replacement uPVC windows and aluminium doors to match existing fenestration. External works proposed also include the provision of a buggy store, and a steel framed canopy above a new impact absorbent play area. The canopy is proposed to provide a covered play space to be used as part of the Children's Centre.
5. The application has been made on behalf of the County Council's Children, Families and Education Directorate. The scheme is one of a number of similar applications being proposed across the County as part of Central Government's National Sure Start

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Existing / Proposed Elevations

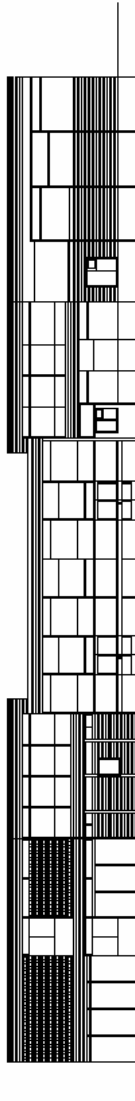
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Revision	1	EC Harris and North Architects added	15/02/2007
Comments			Date
Client	Kent County Council		
Drawn	J.C.		
Approved	J.C.		
Scale	1:200 (A3)		
Job No	07/02/07		
Dwg. No.	07/02/07		



EC HARRIS LTD
 ECHO, Reach Quarter, 34 York Way, London N1 0AB
 Tel: 020 7812 2000 Fax: 020 7812 2001
 information@ec Harris.com www.ec Harris.com

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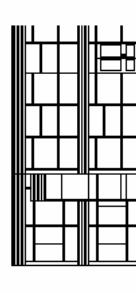
Existing South Elevation



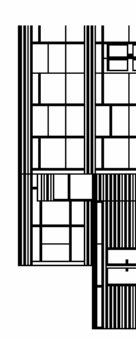
Proposed South Elevation

Dimension and level
 as shown

Dimension and level
 as shown

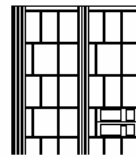


Existing East Elevation

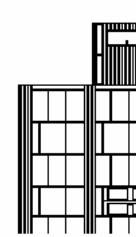


Proposed East Elevation

Dimension and level
 as shown

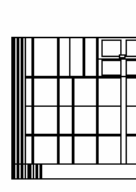


Existing West Elevation

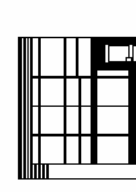


Proposed West Elevation

Dimension and level
 as shown



Existing North Elevation to new office



Proposed North Elevation to new Office

Dimension and level
 as shown

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Programme, funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES). The main aim of the Sure Start Programme is to increase the availability of childcare for all children, improve health and emotional development for young children and support parents in their aspirations towards employment. The aim of the Children's Centre is to offer a range of health, adult education and family support services for the local community.

6. The application proposes a Children's Centre, which would contain a crèche / meeting room for use by parents who are using the Centre, as well as a second smaller multi-use room. Both rooms would provide flexible space for informal meetings through to formal seminar style learning. The arrangements also include an interview / medical room, an office area, staff room, kitchen and toilets.
7. The Children's Centre would operate as a separate community facility independent from the adjacent remaining office accommodation. The application proposes that the Centre would be open from 0800 to 1800 hours, Monday to Friday, 48 weeks of the year. The Centre would employ new 5 members of staff on a full time basis with the number rising for special events. The application states that the Centre is expected to generate up to 30 visitors across a normal day. The application sets out that the proposed nursery (which is currently on site and would be refurbishment by the current proposals) would have a roll of 52, with 26 pupils attending in the morning and 26 in the afternoon.
8. The application proposes that three parking spaces would be provided within the existing office car park for use by Centre staff. The Willows currently has a staff car park comprising of 42 car-parking spaces in total. The application states that the Centre has been located to minimise travel distances by being located within the community it is intended to serve, and visitors therefore would be encouraged to walk.
9. In addition, the application proposes a new section of 1.8m high green fencing to surround the external impact absorbent play area and proposed canopy structure.

Planning Policy

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

- (i) The adopted 2006 **Kent & Medway Structure Plan**:

Policy SP1 – The primary purpose of Kent's development and environmental strategy will be to protect and enhance the environment and achieve a sustainable pattern and form of development. This will be done principally by, amongst other matters:

- protecting the Kent countryside and its wildlife for future generations;
- protecting and enhancing features of importance in the natural and built environment;
- encouraging high quality development and innovative design that reflects Kent's identity and local distinctiveness and promoting healthy, safe and secure living and working environments;

Policy QL1 – All development should be well designed and be of high quality. Developments, individually or taken together, should respond positively to the scale, layout, pattern and character of their local surroundings. Development which would be detrimental to the built

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environment, amenity, functioning and character of settlements or the countryside will not be permitted.

Policy QL11 – Provision will be made for the development and improvement of local services in existing residential areas and in town and district centres, particularly where services are deficient. Flexibility in the use of buildings for mixed community uses, and the concentration of sports facilities at schools, will be encouraged.

Policy QL12 – Provision will be made to accommodate additional requirements for local community services in response to growth in demand from the community as a whole. The services will be located where they are accessible by walking, cycling and by public transport

Policy TP3 – Local Planning Authorities should ensure that development sites are well served by public transport, walking and cycling

Policy TP19 – Seeks development proposals comply with the respective vehicle parking policies and maximum standards adopted by Kent County Council and Medway Council.

(ii) The adopted 2000 **Sevenoaks District Council Local Plan**

Policy EN1 – Proposals for all forms of development and land use must comply with the policies set out in the Plan, unless there are overriding material considerations. The following criteria will be applied, amongst other matters, in the consideration of planning applications:

- the form of the development should be compatible in terms of scale, height and use of appropriate materials;
- the proposed development does not have an adverse impact on the amenities of a locality by reason of form, scale and height;
- the design of new development incorporates measures to deter crime;

Policy EN9 – The Local Planning Authority will safeguard important areas of green space within built confines.

Consultations

11. **Sevenoaks District Council:** has raised no objection to the application.

Swanley Town Council: was notified of the application on the 7 September 2007 and have expressed no comments to date.

Divisional Transportation Manager: has commented as follows:

“It would appear that the proposals enhance existing nursery facilities and provide additional community rooms by displacing some office floor space with some extension. I note that the project is aimed at a very local catchment area – with buggy pushing distance principles – and as such I would not seek to raise an objection”.

Environment Agency: has raised no objection to the proposal but offers the applicants advice on several issues, namely groundwater protection, foul drainage and the storage of fuel, oil and chemicals on the site. The site lies within a Source Protection Zone of a

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public water abstraction and care should be taken in the design of soakaways proposed for the site.

Local Member

12. The local County Member, Mr. M. Fittock, was notified of the application on the 7 September 2007. Mr Fittock commented as follows:

“Whilst I welcome the much needed Children’s Centre on the White Oak Ward, my first preference would be to make proper use of the redundant school site at Birchwood. If KCC Children, Families and Education will not consider any alternative site then I would reluctantly agree to this proposal, though would wish to go on record that my objections be noted as these Centres should not be placed in Social Services provision as they are intended to be servicing the whole community and not associated with Social Services provision.

The plans do not address the issue of drainage, as there are problems with water run off from the site, hence the willow trees. There have been reports of flooding in the past particularly when the gullies on the school site are not maintained.

The car parking allocation is also cause for concern. The assumption that users will not arrive in cars is totally wrong as anyone who visits the area when the school turns out will clearly see. The situation has been made worse this term with the closure of Birchwood School and all the parents from the West of the estate now using the Horizon School. The office space on the plans would indicate a higher use of professionals using the parking area. Two places are inadequate. You might be able to negotiate overflow usage in the White Oak Leisure Centre though they have often complained to the School about users’ unauthorised use. Parking in the street is limited because of the width of the estate roads. Maybe Swanley Town Council could be approached for overflow parking places in the nearby Woodlands complex?

There is an issue on the existing building about energy conservation. The old school was not double-glazed and the walls do not have insulation. If a refurbishment is going ahead then this needs to be brought up to standard.”

Publicity

13. The application was publicised by posting a site notice at the main entrance of the site with Hilda May Avenue, and the individual notification of 6 neighbouring residential properties.

Representations

14. I have received no letters of representation to date in connection to this application.

DiscussionIntroduction

15. The application proposes to seek planning permission for a community Children’s Centre, comprising both internal remodelling works and several small-scale extensions. The application is being reported to the Planning Applications Committee as a result of

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an objection received from the local County Member. In considering this proposal regard must be had to the Development Plan Policies outlined in paragraph (10) above. Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 states that applications must be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Therefore the proposal needs to be considered in the context of the Development Plan Policies, Government Guidance and other material planning considerations arising from consultation and publicity.

16. The proposed Centre is one of 52 similar facilities being applied for by KCC's Children, Families and Education Directorate across the County. The aim of the Children's Centre is to offer a range of health, adult education and family support services to provide for the needs of that particular local community.
17. The application proposes the adaptation, refurbishment and extension of part of the existing Willows Centre. In addition, the application proposes some further minor alterations to the exterior of the building, including replacement uPVC windows and aluminium doors, all of which would be covered by Permitted Development Rights. The application also includes the provision of an external buggy store, a toy store, and new steel framed canopy above a new area of impact absorbent play surface.

Location

18. The application site falls within most of existing built development, with only three small-scale extensions proposed for the north and south sides of The Willows building. It is worth noting that the school playing fields of the adjacent Horizon School (formerly White Oak Infants School) are designated as Important Areas of Green Space, under Policy EN9 of the Sevenoaks Local Plan. However, given that this proposal would not affect any of this area designated under Policy EN9, I cannot see a conflict with the development plan policy and would not raise an objection on these grounds.
19. Members will be aware of the views expressed by the local County Member, under paragraph (12), relating to an alternative site for this proposal at the former Birchwood School. Having investigated this suggestion further, the applicants have concluded that the Birchwood site has already been allocated within KCC as a potential capital receipt, and as such the site is to be sold for future redevelopment. Therefore, on the basis of these findings, I conclude that that site is no longer available for use as a Children's Centre.
20. In addition, it is also worth noting that the proposed development would involve the internal remodelling of the Willows Pre-School nursery, and the proposed Children's Centre would, if granted permission, work in connection with this existing function along with other nurseries within the surrounding area.
21. The proposal would not move the built development within the site towards residential properties, nor towards designated green space. Accordingly, I consider that the minor external changes and small-scale extensions would not be inappropriate in the context of Development Plan Policies or the local environment.

Traffic and Access

22. Another element of the application that requires consideration is the potential for the proposed use to generate additional traffic activity, including movements to and from the site, and whether any change in the use would result in an unacceptable impact on the surrounding area. The Children's Centre proposed would operate 'drop-in' style facilities

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to support young families in the immediate local community, provide a venue for occasional training events in support of this service, and provide a day nursery for 0-5 year olds.

23. The application proposes no new additional car parking facilities at The Willows centre, but instead proposes the delineation of 3 parking spaces, including one disabled bay, from the existing provision of 42 parking spaces on The Willows site. Whilst it is noted that there would be 5 full-time members of staff employed at the proposed Centre, the application sets out that staff would be employed from within a close proximity to the site. In addition, the application states that the proposed Centre would be taking over a large area of existing office space within the building, reducing the number of existing staff using the existing Willows car park.
24. There is no additional visitor car parking proposed apart from one disabled parking bay. The applicant states that all the Centres in Kent have been strategically located to minimise travel distances for the majority of the community it is intended to serve. The Sure Start scheme puts a great deal of emphasis on “buggy pushing distance” with the users of the centre encouraged to walk. It is estimated that the Centre would have up to 30 visitors in a day, over and above the existing number of visitors using the existing pre-school Nursery which would be relocated within the proposed Centre. However, the applicant advises that these visitors would be spread out over the 10 hours of operation and visiting primarily via an appointment system, rather than all on site at any one time. Only when a particular event, such as a seminar, is being provided would there be a number of people arriving at one time, who ought to be able to use the existing operational parking on the rest of the site by arrangement, bearing in mind the reduction in staffing at The Willows centre. I consider that if the proposal is approved, there is a potential risk that the congestion level might increase on some occasions but it is unlikely for this to be on a regular basis or to be sufficient enough to recommend refusal of the application on these grounds. Moreover, the Divisional Transportation Manager is satisfied that the surrounding highways have the capacity to accommodate those movements.
25. From a policy point of view, it is considered that the proposal meets the requirements of Policies TP3 and QL12 which require that community facilities be grouped together to reduce the need for travel, be easily accessible by walking and public transport. In the opinion of the Divisional Transportation Manager, the proposed development complies with vehicle parking policies and maximum standards adopted by the County Council as stated in Structure Plan Policy TP19. Bearing in mind the views expressed by the Divisional Transportation Manager, in paragraph (11) above, and the fact that some of the existing office staff would be displaced by new Children's Centre staff, I would not seek to raise an objection on highway and parking grounds.

Hours of Use

26. The proposed hours of use of the Centre have been stated by the applicants as being between 0800 to 1800 hours, 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year. In reality, these hours of operation would not be dissimilar from the hours of operation of the adjacent Adult Services Offices, or those of the existing pre-school nursery. Accordingly, I would not seek to raise an objection to the hours of use proposed by this application.

Design

27. The external changes and extension to the existing building in the application are relatively minor in nature. The proposed extensions are single storey, flat roofed and

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clad with white uPVC cladding to match the existing Willows building. In my opinion, given that the main building is of a similar nature to the proposed extensions, I would not raise an objection on design grounds. In addition to the proposed extensions, the other main element of the proposal is the steel-framed polycarbonate canopy located to the southern side of the Willows building. Taking account of the location and design of the structure, subject to a condition requiring the submission of materials to be used in construction of the canopy, I would not raise objection to the design of the canopy or the other minor external changes proposed in the application.

Drainage

28. Members will note the concerns relating to drainage and potential surface water run off from the site during periods of intense rainfall, as raised by the local County Member in paragraph (12). Bearing this issue in mind, the applicants have agreed that as a result of the new buildings a larger soakaway would be built to deal with surface water run off. In any case, should Members resolve to permit this application, a condition could be placed on any decision requiring the prior submission of a surface water drainage scheme to be approved by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Environment Agency.
29. In addition, Members should note the advice given from the Environment Agency in relation to this application, as set out under paragraph (11) above. The Environment Agency states that *'the site lies within a Source Protection Zone III of a public water supply abstraction...[....]...and that care should be taken in the design of soakaways'*. Therefore, in my opinion I see no reason to raise an objection on these grounds, subject to an appropriate surface water drainage scheme being submitted to and approved by the County Planning Authority.

Energy Conservation

30. It should be noted that the local County Member raised concerns relating to energy conservation of the existing Willows building. As part of this proposal, the application includes the replacement of all existing windows and doors within the Children's Centre to modern, energy efficient uPVC and aluminium replacements. As part of Building Regulations Approval, which would be needed for the works proposed in this case, there are strict controls for modern buildings requiring energy efficient techniques to be used within construction. With regards to the remaining Adult Service offices at the Willows Centre, it is not possible to control this building given that it falls outside of the application site.
31. In my opinion, given that the proposals include the replacement of existing windows and doors, and that the refurbishment and extension works will be required to be constructed using modern energy efficient techniques, I see no reason to raise an objection on these grounds.

Conclusion

32. Having regard to the Development Plan Policies, in addition to the material considerations raised by the local County Member in this case, I consider that the refurbishment and extension of the Willows Centre for use as a Community Children's Centre is in general conformity with the Development Plan. Whilst I note the views received from the local County Member, relating to an alternative site, surface water drainage, car parking and energy efficiency, I conclude that the majority of these issues have been addressed within the application, and where this is not the case could be

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secured by condition, and therefore I recommend that planning permission should be granted as set out in paragraph (33) below.

Recommendation

33.1 RECOMMEND that PLANNING PERMISSION BE GRANTED, SUBJECT TO conditions, including conditions to cover the following aspects:

- the standard time limit;
- the development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details;
- surface water drainage scheme being submitted to and approved by the County Planning Authority prior to any development commencing on site;
- details of materials of the canopy being submitted to and approved by the County Planning Authority prior to any development commencing on site.

Case officer – Julian Moat	01622 696978
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Background documents - See section heading
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