# Modular building for use as a Children's Centre. East Stour Primary School, Willesborough, Ashford - AS/07/1395

A report by Head of Planning Applications Unit to Planning Applications Committee on 6 November 2007.

AS/07/1395— Application by Kent County Council Children, Families and Education Directorate for the construction of a single storey modular building for use as a Children's Centre, car parking to existing school to be designated to Children's Centre and spaces lost by development to be re-provided on school hard play, hard play to be re-provided on soft landscaping. East Stour Primary School, Earlsworth Road, Willesborough, Ashford.

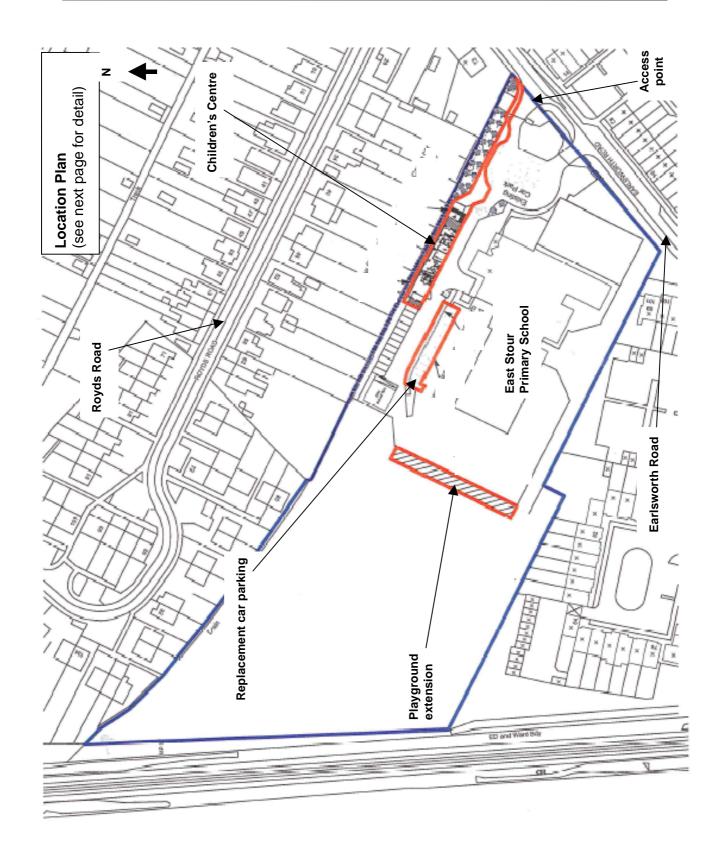
Recommendation: Permission be granted.

# Local Members: Mr G. Koowaree

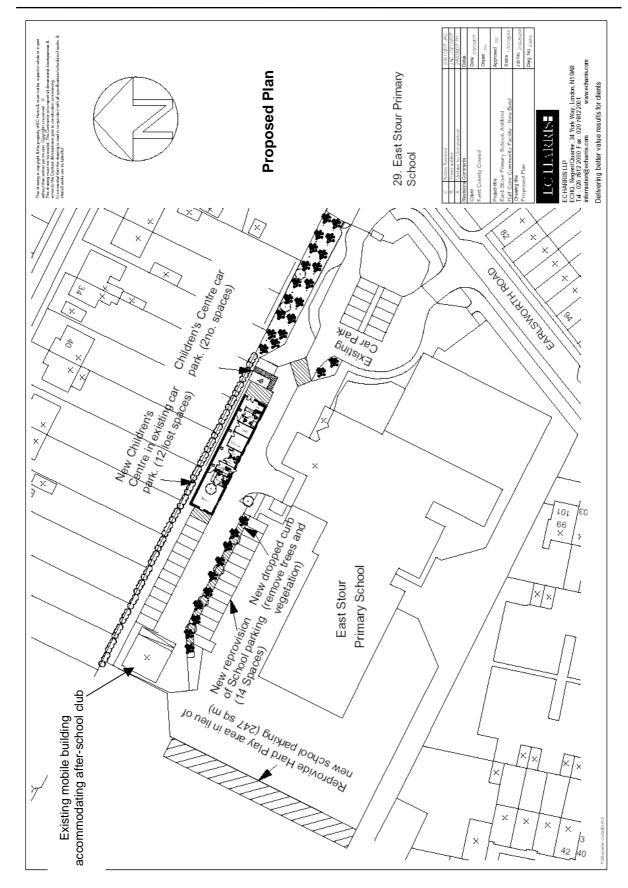
Classification: Unrestricted

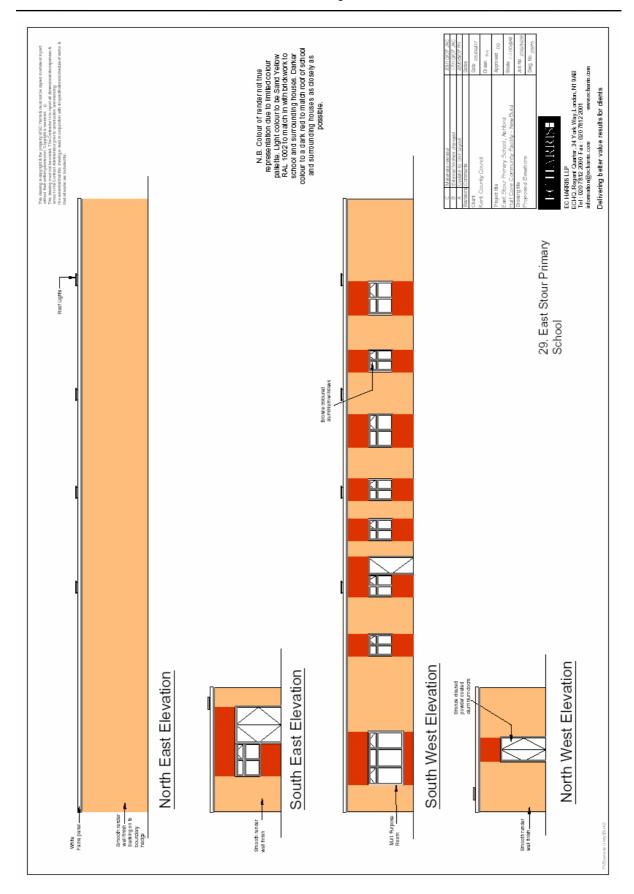
### Site

- 1. East Stour Primary School is located at the southern end of Earlsworth Road, South Willesborough, approximately 2 km to the south-east of Ashford town centre. The Primary School is 2 Form-Entry plus nursery and currently employs 55 members of staff on a full and part time basis. Access to the school is obtained through dedicated vehicle entry and exit points west off Earlsworth Road. The School has formal car parking spaces for 36 vehicles to the front and side of the school building. The original building was constructed in 1978, with an 8-classroom extension permitted in 1994. The school buildings are single storey, finished in yellow stock brickwork with wood panelling, and red tiled pitched roofs. A mobile building is located on site adjacent to the northern boundary, providing accommodation for an after school club. The school site is laid out on a roughly east-west axis, with the main entrance and buildings positioned to the east side of the site adjacent to Earlsworth Road, with playground space and playing field stretching out to the west. Residential property surrounds the school to the north, south and east, with a railway line to the west see attached location plans.
- 2. The application site consists of an area north of the school buildings on part of the existing school car park, which is located directly adjacent to the northern boundary of the school grounds. The application also shows development of replacement car parking on part of the existing hard playground space closer to the school buildings, and an extension to the playground directly adjacent to the hard play space to the west of the school, on the fringe of the playing field.
- 3. The nearest residential property to the application site are the rear gardens of houses on Royds Road, located north of the school grounds on the other side of an existing boundary hedgerow. The drawings show the distance between the proposed development and the boundary with residential property to be less than 2 metres. The closest façade to façade distance between the proposed development and the nearest houses on Royds Road would measure approximately 35 metres.
- 4. The Ashford Borough Local Plan (2000) Proposals Map does not identify any site-specific Development Plan Policies in connection with the application site.



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# **Background**

- 5. The recent planning history for the school site includes an application in 2003 for minor external changes to the existing buildings to enable the formation of a nursery at the school (ref. AS/03/1611), and an application made to Ashford Borough Council for a mobile building for use as an after school club in 2004 (ref. AS/04/1926). The Borough Council granted temporary approval for a mobile building at the school until 2010.
- 6. The County Planning Authority is currently considering a second application at East Stour Primary School for an extension to the reception and entrance arrangements to the main school building.

# **Proposal**

- 7. The application proposes the creation of a community Children's Centre within the grounds of East Stour Primary School. The Children's Centre would be housed in a new purpose-built single storey modular building that would be constructed off-site and brought to site in sections to be fixed to pre-constructed foundations. The development would create approximately 177 m² of floorspace for use as part of the proposed function. The building would be finished with a smooth render, in predominantly a sand yellow colour to match the brick work of the main school building. The windows are shown as powder coated aluminium units finished in bronze, with the roof finished in profiled insulated steel roof decking. The building would be designed and warranted for a period of at least a 25-years to meet the applicant's requirements. The supporting information received with the application confirms that the building would be designed to achieve a minimum BREEAM rating of GOOD, with a desired target of VERY GOOD.
- 8. 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 Programme. 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 toward employment.
- 9. The aim of the proposed Children's Centre is to offer a range of health, adult education and family support services to the local community. The building proposed would contain a multi-purpose meeting room for use by parents using the Centre as an informal meeting room through to formal seminar style learning. The application also includes a second smaller interview/ treatment room, staff room, reception/ office area, kitchen and associated toilet and cloakroom facilities.
- 10. The Children's Centre would operate as a separate community facility independent from the school. 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 3 members of staff on a full time basis with numbers rising for special events. The application sets out that the Centre is expected to generate up to 30 visitors across a typical day. The Centre would also provide a potential venue for educational events in association with the service, like seminar style training. The application advises that it is unlikely that these events would coincide with the peak movements at the start and end of the school day. An existing pedestrian gate and footpath along the northern boundary of the site would provide access to the Centre. The provision of the final section of the footway would require a small section of an existing landscaped area to be replaced with hard standing.

- 11. The proposed building would be positioned on part of the existing school car park and a built out landscaped area that divides the existing parking bays. This landscaped area contains a number of shrubs and one small tree that would be removed as a result of the development. The building would be adjacent to a 2m high boundary hedgerow which would be retained as part of the scheme. The development of the building on the car park would involve the loss of 12 spaces. In mitigation the application proposes to replace these spaces with 14 new spaces on part of the school's hard play space. Increasing the existing car parking provision on site from 36 to 38 spaces. The Children's Centre would be designated 1 space and 1 disabled parking bay directly adjacent to the entrance of the proposed building. The provision of the 14 new car parking spaces would involve the removal of internal fencing, low level shrubs, and 4 small trees.
- 12. To compensate for the school's hard play space that would be taken as a result of the new car parking arrangements proposed, a 247 m<sup>2</sup> playground extension is being applied for to the west of the existing hard play.

## **Development Plan Policies**

- 13. The Development Plan Policies summarised below are relevant to consideration of the application.
  - (i) The adopted **Kent and Medway Structure Plan 2006**:
    - Policy SP1 Seeks to protect and enhance the environment and achieve a sustainable pattern and form of development.
    - Policy SS6 Seeks to improve the built and natural environment, functioning and appearance of the suburbs of the major urban areas, including the provision of services and facilities that serve local needs.
    - Policy QL1 Seeks all development be well designed and of high quality that respond positively to the local character. Development, which would be detrimental to the built environment, amenity, function and character of settlements or the countryside, will not be permitted. Seeks development to consider the needs of the community, provide safe environment, protect residential amenity, and adopt sustainable construction techniques.
    - 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.
    - Policy TP3 Local Planning Authorities should ensure that development sites are well served by public transport, walking and cycling.
    - Policy TP19 Seeks development proposals to comply with the respective vehicle parking policies and maximum standards adopted by Kent County Council and Medway Council.
    - Policy NR1 Seeks development to incorporate sustainable construction techniques and prudent use of natural resources.

(ii) The adopted Ashford Borough Local Plan (2000) Saved Policies

Policy GP2 Seeks to protect and improve the setting and character of the Borough's urban environment.

Policy GP5 Seeks to ensure the provision of community facilities and infrastructure.

Policy GP6 Seeks to encourage high design quality in new development.

Policy DP1 Planning permission will not be granted for development proposals which are poorly designed in terms of scale, density, height, layout, massing, landscape, access or detailing.

Policy DP2 Seeks development that respects the character and appearance of the surrounding area, and the ability of neighbours to enjoy reasonable levels of privacy, natural light, peace and quiet, and that is properly served by local transport system.

Policy DP4 Seeks development proposals to minimise the fear and risk of crime.

Policy TP1 Seeks proposals to take account of the need to minimise the need to travel, and the importance of providing access to a choice of transport modes. Including public transport, cycling and walking.

Policy TP11 Seeks development to provide for vehicle parking, in accordance with Kent Vehicle Parking Standards.

#### Consultations

14. **Ashford Borough Council** raises no objection, subject to Kent Highway Services raising no objection to the application, and the imposition of conditions covering the standard time limit for commencing the development, the submission of details of external materials and a landscape scheme, and the premises not to be used for any purpose other than that applied for.

**Divisional Transportation Manager** raises no objections to the proposal in respect of highway matters. Commenting as follows, 'The Children's Centre will have a total of 3 staff, and 1 parking space + a designated disabled bay has been allocated. Within Kent Vehicle Parking Standards the maximum parking standard for employees for this use class is 1 space per 2 staff. There will be sufficient spaces within the site to accommodate the 3 staff for the Children's Centre.'

Kent Police Architectural Liaison Officer has made the following suggestions:

'School flat roofs are frequently targeted for out of hours horseplay by young people, who seek to climb on the roofs. Consideration should be given to either replacing the flat roof or preventing access to it. If the modular construction makes replacement impossible then anti climb barriers should be placed along all the potential access points (e.g. near drain pipes, hand rails etc.) along with the necessary signage.'

#### **Local Member**

15. The Local County Member for Ashford East, Mr. G. Koowaree, was notified of the application on 25 July 2007.

# **Publicity**

16. The application was publicised by the posting of one site notice and the notification of 37 neighbouring properties.

## Representations

- 17. 5 letters of representation have been received on behalf of 7 neighbouring properties concerning the proposed development. The main observations and objections raised to the proposal can be summarised as follows:
  - Objects to the potential increase in noise and disruption from the site, given the proposed hours of use proposed for the Children's Centre - 0800 to 1800 hours, 5 days a week 48 weeks of the year. This would be beyond the normal school hours.
  - Raises concern that the proposed development would generate significant noise which would impact on residential amenity, and that conversely the Centre would suffer noise from residents working in their gardens and workshops located adjacent to the boundary.
  - Concern about the proximity of the development to residential property.
  - Questions why the building has to be directly adjacent to the boundary with property in Royds Road given the size of the school grounds?
  - Asks why the Centre cannot be built where the replacement car parking is proposed?
     Suggests that it would be a waste of money to move the car parking when the proposed Centre could be located on the hard play area in lieu of the new car parking area proposed.
  - Questions whether the hedgerow and landscaping along the boundary would be retained?
  - Asks why no improvements to the existing landscaping has been proposed to reduce the impact of the proposed building?
  - Objects to the development on highway grounds.
  - Considers that the existing car parking arrangements are already inadequate. With large numbers of vehicles causing congestion on the surrounding roads at peak times, creating potential dangerous situations for other road users and pedestrians.
  - Points out that the existing use of the site causes traffic problems during peak times, with parents parking in residential parking bays. Advises that any lose of parking spaces would be unacceptable as it would exacerbate existing problems. Requests that alternate parking be made available before the Children Centre is built. Raises no objection to the construction of the Centre itself.
  - Concern that the loss of car parking near the main gate would result in an increase in on street parking in surrounding roads.
  - Concern that the use of existing playground for car parking would erode the amount of open play space available to the School.
  - Advises that the construction of the School, playground and car park potentially caused drainage problems for properties in Royds Road.
  - Raises concern about the potential noise generated during construction of the proposed building.

### **Discussion**

18. In considering this proposal regard must be had to the Development Plan Policies outlined in paragraph (13) 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, this 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.

### **Traffic and Access**

- 19. A number of the representations received from nearby residents raise concern over the existing traffic issues in association with the school site. The letters identify problems with vehicles parking on surrounding roads at peak times resulting in situations that are inconvenient and potentially dangerous for other road users. In turn, concern is raised that the proposed Children's Centre would generate an increase in movements to and from the site, over stretching the existing car parking arrangements, and resulting in an increase in problems on the public highway.
- 20. East Stour School is a 2 Form-Entry Primary School and Nursery that has a school roll of 334 children, employing 55 members of staff on a full and part time basis. The School has dedicated entry and exit points on to Earlsworth Road with car-parking facilities for 36 vehicles, including a pupil drop-off area for cars not otherwise needing to park and wait.
- 21. The Children's Centre proposed would operate a drop in style facilities to support of the Government's Sure Start Programme for young families in the local community. The Centre would offer a range of health, adult education and family support services. The application sets out that the Centre would employ 3 members of staff on permanent basis, with an estimated 30 visitors to the Centre across a normal day. The application sets out that the use of the Centre would normally be spread across a 10-hour day, and only when an event, like a seminar, is being held would there be several people arriving at one time. The applicant advises that the Centre has been purposefully located within walking distance of the community it would serve, with visitors encouraged to do so.
- 22. Kent and Medway Structure Plan Policy TP3 and Ashford Borough Local Plan Policy TP1 require that any new development be well located to minimise the need to travel, and ensure access to move sustainable means of travel, like public transport, walking and cycling.
- 23. The proposed Children's Centre has been located to serve the needs of the local community, proposed alongside an existing community service where there is likely to be crossover in terms of the people using the school and nursery with those that would use the proposed Centre. The access and traffic problems surrounding the school are mainly centred on the peak movement times at the start and end of the school day. The facility proposed would not be directly linked to the existing school operating hours with movements spread more evenly across the day, rather than centred on regular peak times. East Stour School is well located in relation to the surrounding community with access to public transport and the public footpath network.
- 24. The proposed building would be positioned on part of the existing school car park resulting in the loss of 12 spaces. However, in mitigation for this loss the application proposes the replacement of 14 spaces elsewhere on site. The Centre itself would

benefit from 2 additional spaces increasing the overall number of parking spaces available at the site.

25. I note the concerns raised by local residents over the existing traffic problems experienced in association with the school. However, the Centre has been specifically proposed in a location that is easily accessible to the community it would serve. Given the size of the building proposed and the numbers of visitors expected to use the facility, I am not of the opinion that the Centre would result in an unacceptable increase in movements to this site. The existing car parking arrangements are appropriate given the number of staff employed at the school. The Divisional Transportation Manager has advised that the proposed car parking arrangements would be in accordance with the Kent Vehicle Parking Standards for the proposed land use. He comments that the existing and proposed car parking arrangements would be sufficient to accommodate the 3 members of staff that would be employed at the Centre. The proposals would also allow for parking facilities for disabled visitors. All other visitors to the Centre would be encouraged to walk. This could be monitored and facilitated through the development of a Travel Plan for the Centre and the provision of cycle parking facilities. Whilst, it is inevitable some visitors would choose to drive, taking account of the Divisional Transportation Manager's views, I do not consider that the level of movements that are likely to be generated would warrant an objection to the application on highway grounds.

# **Siting and Layout**

- 26. The application proposes the Children's Centre building on part of the school's car park, directly adjacent to an existing boundary hedgerow with property in Royds Road. Local residents have raised concern about the proximity of the proposed building to residential property, considering that the development as proposed would have the potential to impact on the amenities of adjoining gardens. A number of the letters received raised the question of whether other locations within the school site have been considered.
- 27. The building proposed would measure approximately 29 metres by 6 metres by 3.2 metres high, and, in my opinion, would be appropriate in height, scale and massing compared to the surrounding built environment. The location proposed is approximately 2 metres from the boundary line, and over 35 metres from the façade of the closest residential property. The layout of the building shows no windows to the elevation facing residential property. This approach coupled with the existing hedgerow on the boundary would serve to prevent any loss of privacy to adjoining properties from the development of the site. The existing hedgerow, which would be retained as part of the development, would virtually screen the proposed building from property in Royds Road during the summer months. However, the development would be more visible during the winter months when the leaves have dropped from the boundary landscaping.
- 28. The applicant has advised that the position proposed within the school grounds was selected based on the need to allow good public access whilst maintaining site security. The Centre would be independent from the School providing a facility to the wider community. The applicant confirms that the Centre would need to be easily accessed from the public highway to encourage use. The Centre would also need to be kept separate from the school, with a monitored access route, to prevent the security arrangements within the school grounds being compromised. In my opinion, considering the options available on site and the criteria set out above, the location proposed would appear to be the most appropriate given the layout of the school. The location would allow easy direct and level access to the highway via a footpath along the northern boundary, and positioned within the car park it would be kept separate from the school function allowing visitors to come and go without interfering with the existing function or site security.

29. Representations were received from local residents about the impact of the replacement car parking proposed on the open hard play space available to the school. I would advise that the extension of the playground to the west would compensate for any loss of hard play. In addition, the arrangements shown would not have a significant impact on the level of playing field provision or any marked sports pitches. I would therefore not wish to raise concern over this issue.

## Design

- 30. The application proposes the construction of a single storey building with a smooth rendered finish with aluminium windows and doors. The modular construction allows the building to be finished to a specific standard in a quality-controlled environment, ensuring that the specifications meet the applicant's requirements and that the construction period on site is kept to a minimum. The building would be designed to have a minimum useable life of at least 25 years, and would be warranted by the manufacturer for this period. The 25-year life-span is a requirement of the Department for Education and Skills which would provide funding for part of this project.
- 31. The applicant states that the building proposed has been specified to minimise the height, in order to limit the visual impact on the surrounding built environment, and to make the most of the boundary landscaping in screening and softening the proposal. In response to Officers' initial concerns over the design of the building, the applicant has enhanced the specifications of the external materials being proposed. The enhancements include a rendered finish and the use of aluminium windows as opposed to UPVC. The applicant advises that the building would benefit from a finished floor level at the height of the adjacent ground level. That would enable level inclusive access arrangements, reduce the overall height, and move the visual appearance away from traditional 'mobile buildings' by avoiding the need for skirts and void spaces under the building. The applicant states that the proposed development would achieve a minimum BREEAM rating of 'GOOD' with desired target of 'VERY GOOD'.
- 32. No objections have been received to the proposed design of the building from consultees. Kent and Medway Structure Plan Policy QL1 and Ashford Borough Local Plan Policies GP2 and GP6 seek development that is well designed of a high quality that respect the character of the surrounding built environment. The development proposed has been brought forward to meet an identified local need, the design of the development reflects the applicants requirements whilst drawing on the surrounding urban environment. The height of the building has been kept to a minimum taking account of the location proposed within the site. The position and orientation of the building, adjacent to the northern boundary, at right angles to Earlsworth Road, would benefit from the softening impact of existing landscaping and minimise the visual impact of the building on the street scene. The location proposed would enjoy the benefit of existing landscaping to the north and west around the boundary of the school site, and would be screened to the south by the existing school building. The external materials would draw on the existing colour palette of the school.
- 33. Whilst the building proposed has a basic visual appearance and Officers would have reservations over its use in a more prominent, or sensitive, location, I would consider that the proposed layout respects the character of the surrounding environment and would not be unacceptable in this particular case. The external materials proposed draw from the existing school buildings seeking to integrate the development on site. The use of a modular building allows a modern method of construction, encompassing off-site manufacturing. This technique helps to reduce waste during construction, as well as to cut the construction time and disruption on site. Therefore, subject to conditions

requiring the submission of external materials for prior approval, and that before development is commenced the applicant demonstrates that the development would achieve a sustainable and energy efficient building, I consider that the design aspect of the proposed development would accord with the appropriate Development Plan Policies, including Kent and Medway Structure Plan Policy QL1, and Ashford Borough Local Plan Policies GP2 and GP6.

#### Noise and Hours of Use

- 34. Objections have been received from nearby residents over the potential for the Centre as proposed to generate unacceptable levels of noise within adjoining residential gardens. In turn, a resident suggested that activities in these gardens, including the use of power tools within a workshop, would potentially impact in noise terms on the proposed Centre. Objections has also been raised to the extent of the hours of use proposed for the Centre 0800 to 1800 hours, 5 days a week, 48 weeks a year.
- 35. In reference to the concerns over the potential noise impact, I note the type of use proposed is unlikely to generate an unacceptable increase in the existing background noise levels already generated by the school during its day to day activities. I acknowledge that the hours of use proposed would extend the normal school hours and comment further on this point below. However, whilst the building would be sited on the boundary, the use proposed is not particularly intensive or likely to generate a continuous or high level of noise. Taking account of the length of the gardens and boundary treatment, I would not raise a planning objection to the development on noise grounds. I note the resident's comment about the proximity of his workshop to the proposed building, however, again I do not consider that the use of this facility is likely to have an unacceptable impact on the development proposed.
- 36. The hours of use proposed would not extend the existing hours of operation at the school site by a substantial amount. I note that the hours would extend the regular school hours until 1800 hours, however, there is already an existing after school club run in the mobile building positioned along the northern boundary from the application site. The hours of operation proposed are not extensive, and would mirror an extended school day. The proposed use of the site would be in harmony with Government initiatives for Extended Schools, making the best use of the facilities available for the benefit of the wider community. Given the size of the Centre and the numbers of potential visitors suggested in the application, in my opinion, the Centre would not cause an unacceptable impact to adjoining residential properties as a result of the hours set out above.

#### **Security**

37. The Police Architectural Liaison Officer has raised a suggestion about the security implications of providing a flat roof on the building proposed, and the need to prevent opportunities for young people who may access the school grounds after hours to climb on the structure. Whilst the applicant has advised they would be unable to achieve a pitched roof as part of this scheme, they have agreed to install anti climb measures to limit access to the roof as suggested by the Liaison Officer. Therefore, subject to a condition requiring that acceptable measures be put in place, I would not raise objection to the proposals on security grounds.

38. The application as proposed would result in the loss of 5 small trees and various low-level shrubs planted within the development site. The proposals would retain all other landscaping, including the hedgerow that continues along the northern boundary of the site. I note the observations made by a local resident about the need for further landscaping to soften the building as proposed. Whilst there would be limited space between the proposed development and the boundary of the site to achieve any substantial enhancements to the existing arrangements. Given the vegetation that would be lost as part of the proposals, I would consider that the provision of a landscaping scheme detailing appropriate replacement planting around the school grounds, where it can be accommodated, would be reasonable. Therefore, I would make any recommendation subject to the provision of an appropriate landscaping scheme.

## Conclusion

39. I consider that the design and layout of the development as proposed accords with the Development Plan, and that there are no material considerations that indicate I should recommend otherwise. The Divisional Transportation Manager has considered the highway implications of the development in the context of the existing school and is not raising an objection to the proposal. The proposed use would increase the number of visitors to the site, however, I consider that the type of use would distribute these movements across a normal day, and would not have a perceivable or unacceptable impact on the congestion experienced at peak travel times. I therefore consider that, subject to the imposition of appropriate conditions, the benefits associated with the provision of a community facility outweigh any detrimental impacts the proposals may have and that planning permission should be granted.

#### Recommendation

- 40. I RECOMMEND that PERMISSION BE GRANTED SUBJECT TO the imposition of conditions, including the following:
  - the standard time limit;
  - the development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details:
  - details of external materials to be submitted;
  - details of a scheme of landscaping to be submitted;
  - details of cycle parking;
  - details confirming that the development will achieve a sustainable and energy efficient building;
  - details of foul and surface water drainage;
  - replacement car parking to be provided prior commencement of use of the Centre,
  - details of anti-climb measures/ barriers to be submitted and installed on the building;
  - hours of use for the Children's Centre to be restricted to 0800 to 1800 Monday to Friday;
  - the use of the building to be restricted specifically to use as a Children's Centre only;
     and
  - submission, implementation and ongoing review of a Travel Plan for the Children's Centre.

Case officer – James Bickle 01622 221068

Background documents - See section heading