

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.

Item D1

Extension to car park provision, Lullingstone Country Park, Eynsford – SE/08/1896

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 4 November 2008.

Application by Kent County Council Environment & Regeneration Directorate for the extension of the existing hard paved car park with alteration to the line of the existing western boundary fence and widening of the entrance drive at Lullingstone Country Park, Kingfisher Bridge, Castle Road, Eynsford, Dartford (SE/08/1896)

Recommendation: Subject to any further views received by the Committee Meeting, the application be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government and subject to her decision, planning permission be granted subject to conditions.

Local Member(s): Mr. R. Gough

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

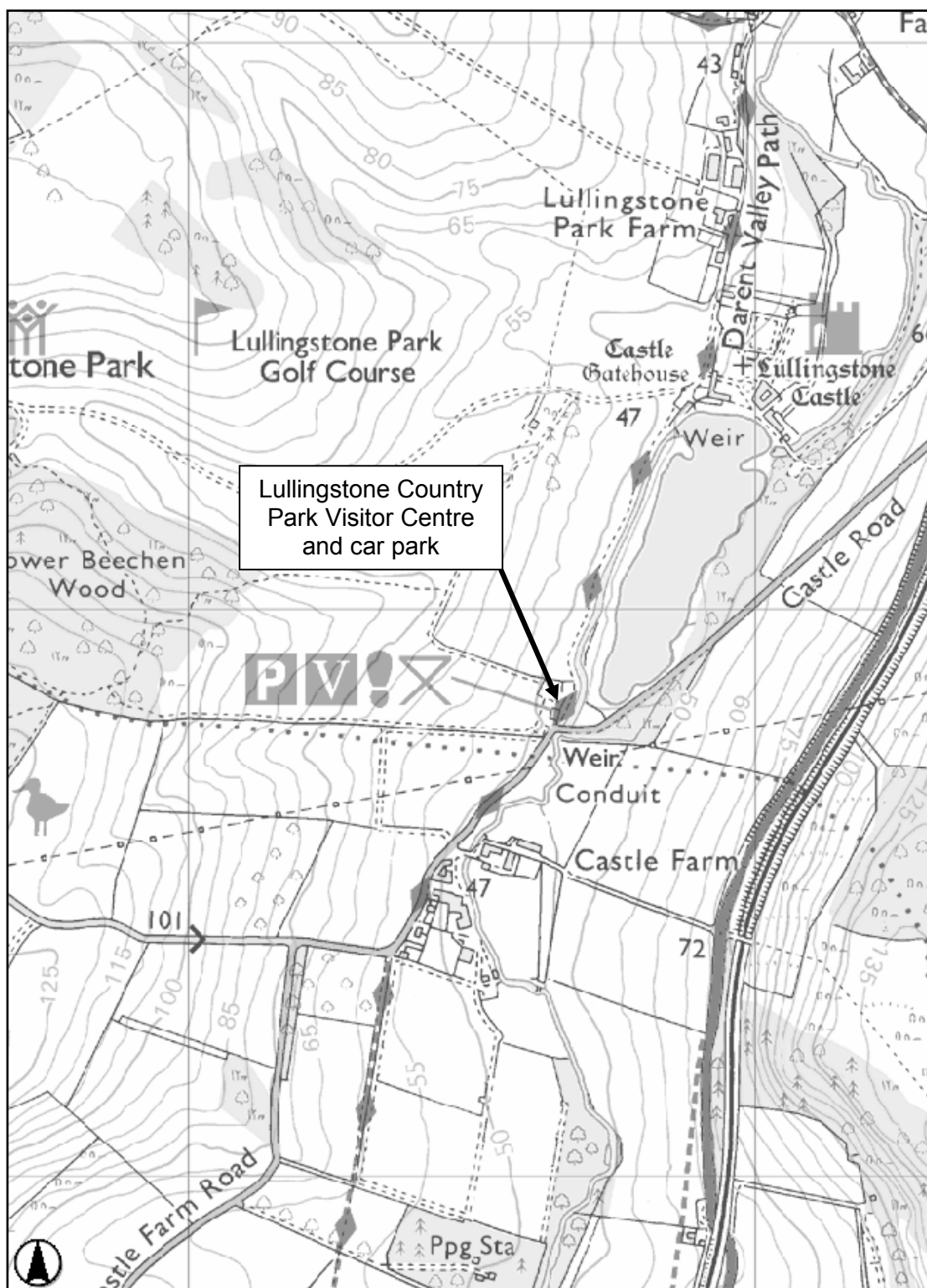
1. Lullingstone Country Park is a 460 acre site, located approximately 2.5km south of Eynsford Village off the A225 Eynsford to Otford Road. Once a Medieval deer park of the estate of Lullingstone Castle, it is now a site used for public recreation as one of Kent County Council's Country Parks. The site is located within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, within the Metropolitan Green Belt and in the North Downs Special Landscape Area. The park consists of un-enclosed wood land pastures with scattered ancient oak trees, broad-leaved woodland, and a thick belt of trees along the River Darent (located to the east of the Country Park site).
2. Visitors come to the park and Visitor Centre for informal recreation as well as a range of organised activities. The Visitor Centre offers a classroom / conference room which is advertised by KCC for education and business use. Courses are run within the Visitor Centre for all age groups from primary to adult to learn about all aspects of the countryside. These courses are an important and well used resource, and during the year 2007/08 adult education courses attracted 780 students over 45 visits and 1730 primary school children over 59 visits. In addition, a further 750 pupils also visited the site as part of other school visits. A general trend across the Kent Country Parks has been one of increasing visitor numbers. *A site location plan is attached on page D1.2*

Background

3. The site is now owned and managed by Kent County Council, and this ownership was transferred from Sevenoaks District Council in 2005. An Alcohol Licence has recently granted by Sevenoaks District Council for the selling of alcoholic drinks within the Visitor Centre in association with the hire of the venue's facilities.

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Site Location Plan



Site Location Plan – Lullingstone Country Park, Eynsford
Scale 1:10000

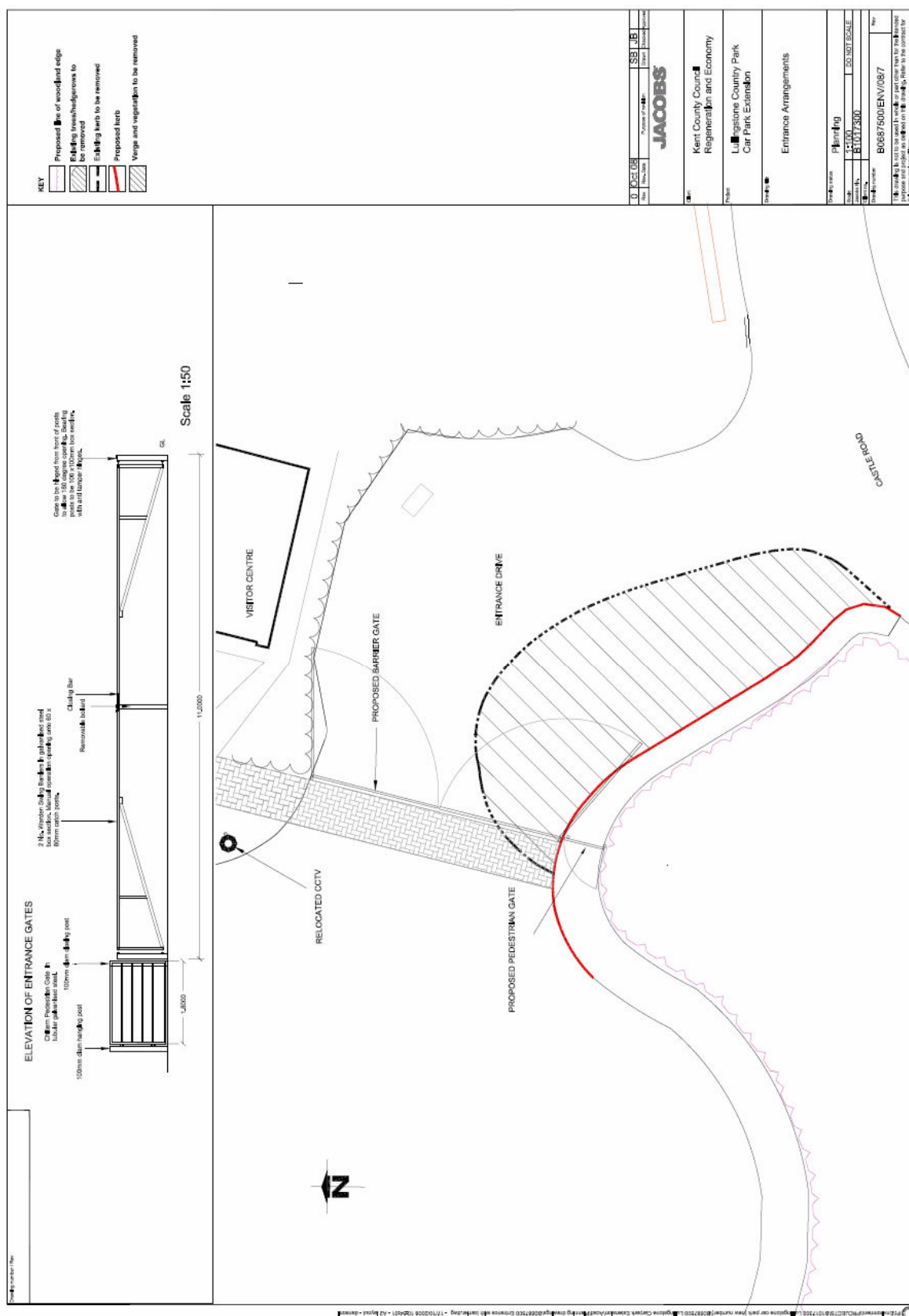
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Proposed Master Plan



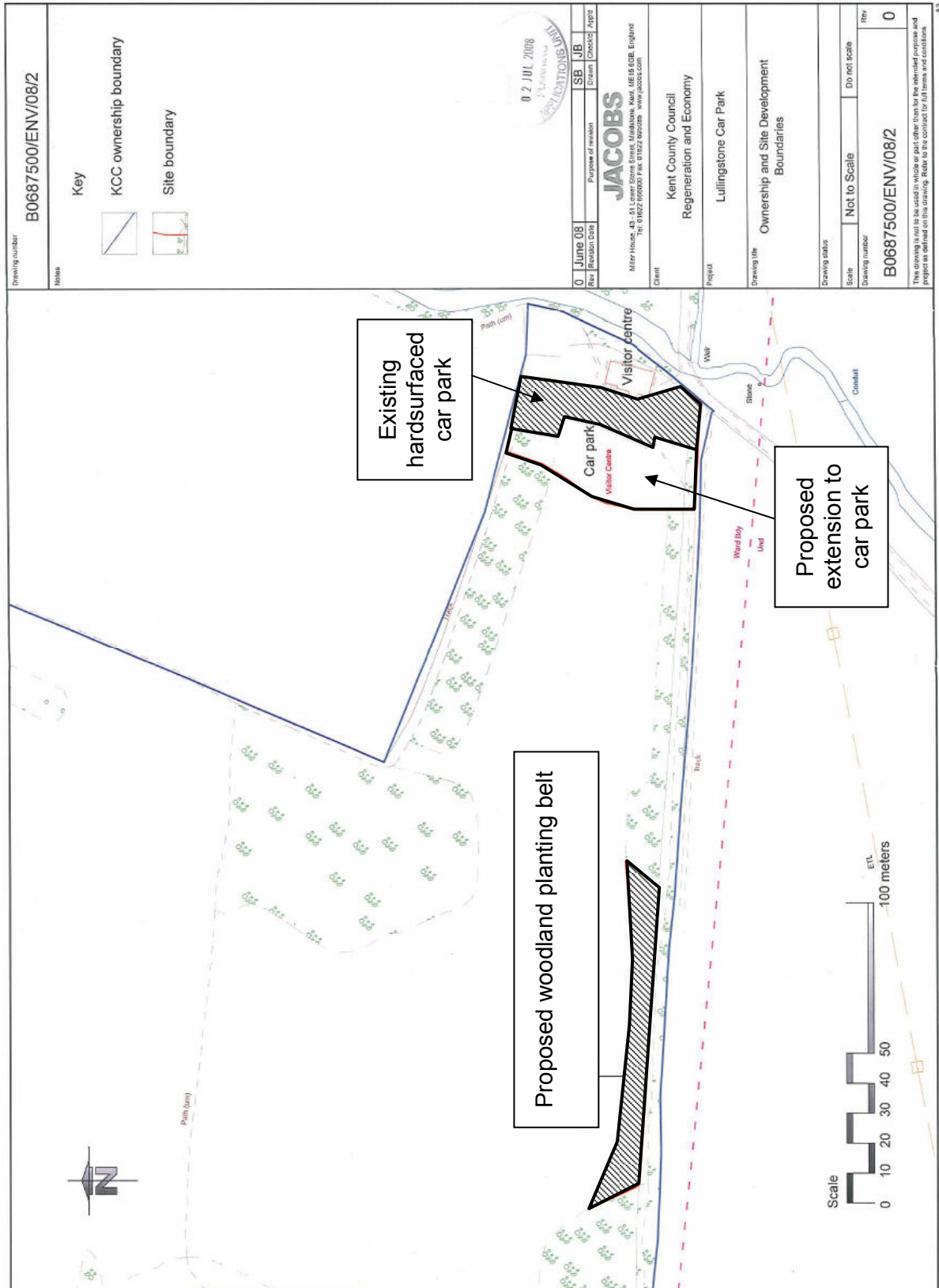
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Proposed Entrance Widening Details



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Proposed Woodland Planting & Outline of Increased Car Park Area



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Proposal

4. The proposal involves an increase in the number of vehicle parking spaces within the Visitor Centre car park to meet a higher demand on existing car parking provision, arising from an increase in visitor numbers being experienced at the site. In addition, the proposal involves the widening of the existing vehicle entrance from Castle Road in an attempt to reduce the current conflict that exists between cars, coaches and pedestrians due to poor visibility offered by the current narrow entrance.
5. The extension to the car park consists of an increase in hardstanding of approximately 3,600 sq. metres (0.336 ha), of which an area of 1813 sq. metres is already used as overflow car parking during summertime periods. This area consists of a grasscrete surface which provides users of the Country Park additional space to park at times of high demand. The remaining 1546 sq. metres of land to be hard surfaced is proposed to be taken from the grass bank adjacent to the overflow car park area. *The proposed land-take for the additional car parking can be seen on Page D1.5.*
6. Table 1 below summarises the existing number, proposed number and total number of vehicle parking spaces as a result of this application:

Type of parking space	Existing number of vehicle parking spaces	Proposed additional vehicle parking spaces	Total number of car parking spaces (as a result of application)
Car (on hardstanding)	40	77	117 <i>Note that the application proposes to provide the current number of overflow parking and an additional 37 spaces in new car park layout</i>
Car (overflow provision on grasscrete)	40	0	0 <i>Note that there would be no overflow car parking provision as part of proposal</i>
Coach	3	0	3
Disabled	2	4	6
Total	85	81	126

Table 1 - Existing and proposed vehicle parking provision

7. The car park surface proposed would consist of a tar spray and grit surface to match that of the existing car park. Car parking bays are proposed to be denoted by granite setts, and half round logs are proposed to mark new planting bays that have been designed to break up any formal arrangement of parking spaces.
8. As a result of the increase in car parking provision and widening of the existing entrance to the Country Park, the application involves the removal of 89 trees and 5 hedge areas that are immediately within the development footprint. The trees identified for removal are of varying quality according to professional arboricultural classification; however some are classified as having a significant aesthetic value, and as such make an important contribution to the landscape of the site.

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9. The application proposes a 52 metre belt of woodland planting along the western boundary of the Park (see *Proposed Woodland Planting Details, page D1.5*) comprising of a mix of 1,000 native tree species and 300 native shrub species. A native planting mix has been chosen taking into account ecological issues relating to the site, in particular the presence of dormice within the Park. It is therefore proposed that the woodland planting mix would provide additional compensatory habitat areas.

Amended Proposal

10. The application has been amended to take into account views received during the consultation and notification process, and technical issues which have arisen such as land drainage and highway matters relating to the widening of the vehicle entrance. A summary of the amendments to the proposal is given below:
- Amendments to the proposed vehicular entrance from Castle Road, to include the alteration of the kerb line and details of proposed new vehicle barrier and pedestrian gates;
 - Revised layout of the proposed vehicle parking and turning facilities;
 - Proposed drainage scheme; and
 - Amended location of proposed CCTV equipment.
11. Members will note that all other elements of the proposal (as discussed in paragraphs 4 – 9 above) remain in effect, and as such the Discussion contained within this report focuses on the current proposal, including those elements listed above.

Planning History

11. Sevenoaks District Council granted planning permission for the construction of the Visitor Centre in 1989, when the facility was managed by the District Council. Since then the County Council has taken over the management of the Visitor Centre.

Planning Policy

12. In ODPM Circular (11/2005), the Government's commitment to the principles of the Green Belt and to maintaining tight planning controls over development on Green Belt land has been reaffirmed. It is expected that all planning applications for development in the Green Belt be subject to the most rigorous scrutiny, having regard to the fundamental aim of Green Belt policy as set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 2 [PPG2], that is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. The openness of Green Belts is considered to be their most important attribute and therefore there is a general presumption against inappropriate development, which is by definition harmful and should not be permitted, unless it can be justified by very special circumstances.
13. The Government's Planning Policy Statement 7 [PPS7]: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas sets out the policies applicable to rural areas. These include the need for strict control over development in the open countryside with the overall aim of protecting the countryside for its intrinsic character and beauty, the diversity of its landscapes, heritage and wildlife and the wealth of its natural resources, so it may be enjoyed by all. All development in the open countryside should be well designed and inclusive, in keeping and scale with its location, and sensitive to the character of the countryside and local distinctiveness. Nationally designated areas that include Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are confirmed as having the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty.

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

Policy QL7 – Important archaeological sites, together with their settings will be protected and where possible enhanced. Where important or potentially important archaeological remains may exist, developers will be required to arrange for archaeological assessment and/or field evaluation to be carried out.

Policy QL11 – Existing community services and recreation facilities will be protected as long as there is a demonstrable need for them.

Policy SS2 – Within the Metropolitan Green Belt there is a general presumption against inappropriate development.

Policy EN1 – Kent's countryside will be protected, conserved and enhanced for its own sake and development in the countryside should seek to maintain or enhance it.

Policy EN4 – Protection will be given to the nationally important landscapes of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The primary objective in these areas will be to protect, conserve and enhance landscape character and natural beauty.

Policy EN5 – Special Landscape Areas will be protected, conserved and enhanced, whilst having regard to the need to facilitate the social and economic well-being of the communities situated within them.

Policy EN8 – Wildlife habitats and species will be protected, conserved and enhanced, especially through long term management and habitat creation schemes.

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Policy EN9 – Provision should be made for the creation of new woodland, especially indigenous broad-leaved species. Tree cover and the hedgerow network should be maintained.

Policy EN12 – The environment within river corridors and river catchments, including the landscape, water environment and wildlife habitats, will be conserved and enhanced

Policy TP3 – Local planning authorities should ensure that development sites are well served by public transport, walking and cycling, or will be made to do so as a result of the development. Travel Plans should be encouraged for larger developments that generate significant demand for travel, to promote the use of these means of transport.

Policy TP11 – Facilities for pedestrians and cyclists will be provided and their use promoted.

Policy TP19 – Development proposals should comply with the respective vehicle parking policies.

Policy NR5 – The quality of Kent's environment will be conserved and enhanced. Development should be planned and designed to avoid, or adequately mitigate, pollution impacts, including noise and levels of light intrusion.

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

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 EN6 – Development that would harm or detract from the landscape character of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty will not be permitted.

Policy EN7 – Development within the North Downs Special Landscape Area will be permitted only where it would cause no significant harm to the landscape character of the area

Policy EN25A & B – The Local Planning Authority will preserve and protect the sites and, where appropriate, the settings of all archaeological sites. The Local Planning Authority will require, where appropriate the developer to provide information in the form of an assessment of the archaeological importance of the site in question and the likely impact of the development.

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Policy GB2 – Within the Green Belt there is a general presumption against inappropriate development. Development is inappropriate unless it is for the following purposes:

- essential facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation which preserve the openness of the Green Belt and which does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it.

Policy VP1 – Vehicle parking provision will be made in accordance with adopted vehicle parking standards.

Consultations

15. **Sevenoaks District Council:** has raised no objection in principle to the development. However, it is suggested that an amended scheme of informal landscaping within the vicinity of the Visitors Centre, and an adequate surface water drainage scheme be provided by condition. The Council suggests that existing CCTV pole and ancillary equipment/cabling will need to be protected during construction. It should be noted that the Darent Valley Sewer passes under the car park, therefore caution should be taken during construction and the relevant Authority should be consulted.

Eynsford Parish Council: Councillors object as they believe this is inappropriate development in a Green Belt area which would destroy an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

Shoreham Parish Council (adjacent Parish Council): “Object to the proposal in its present form as it is intrusive development in the Green Belt. KCC has a duty to preserve and enhance the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and this scheme, with a sea of tarmac, detracts from the visual amenities of the area. However, if tarmac is not used but other materials such as grasscrete or a form of geotextile support, then the Council would view the proposal more favourably. In addition, the Council objects to the proposed planting on the southern boundary as it is considered unnecessary. Further, the planting will obscure walkers and give rise to concern for their personal safety. The Council requests that a condition be imposed preventing the installation of further external lighting”.

Divisional Transportation Manager: has raised no objection to the car park or improvements to the access in principle. However, has requested that technical details relating to the works proposed to the highway be submitted for later consideration as the subject of a planning condition.

Environment Agency: has no objection to the principle of the application but makes comments relating to flooding, surface water drainage, and surface treatment materials of the proposed hardstanding.

KCC Landscape Advisor (Jacobs): Note that the location of the Country Park is within the sensitive landscape of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The extended car park would provide an enlargement to the Visitor Centre complex and would be slightly more formalised in comparison to the existing situation in terms of parking layout. As part of the localised setting of the visitor centre, and the reasonably restricted visibility of the site from the wider landscape, the landscape impacts are only likely to be slight. The layout and materials proposed are generally considered suitable. The planting proposals are also acceptable in terms of the extent of the proposed planting, species, sizes and densities.

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To further complement the broader landscape character, it is also suggested that one or two additional trees be incorporated within tree pits within the car parking. These would perhaps be most reflective of the surrounding landscape if they were located at random rather than in a regular pattern.

The proposed hedgerows would provide a thin buffer between the car park and the landscape to the west. Whilst this hedgerow would assist in filtering views, they would perhaps appear slightly evenly spaced and regular within a landscape which is generally less regimented. To provide more effective visual screening of the car park, and to more fully support the landscape character of the parkland to the west, a slightly thicker belt of native tree and shrub belts might have been considered as opposed to hedgerows.

In comparison to the existing car park, the proposed extension would clearly appear larger with more formal surfacing. From within the car park itself, the layout, surface materials and planting blocks would be visually suitable within the localised setting of the visitor centre. From higher ground to the west, the car park would be more noticeable than the existing arrangement. However, the change in level and planting along the western boundary would assist in screening some of the area. Other proposed 'off site' mitigation planting and the wider existing vegetated landscape setting would assist in minimising the visual impact caused by the proposed extension.

The proposals would involve a significant amount of existing vegetation removal, some of which (two Oak trees) are assessed as being of high quality value. It is considered that the vegetation loss would cause a localised impact within a broader landscape. The existing vegetation belt between the existing hard surfaced and grass car parking area currently assist in visually softening the car park and Visitor Centre. Its removal would result in the loss of an existing screening feature until new planting is well established.

KCC Biodiversity Officer: Notes the content of the ecological scoping report and states that a method statement must be provided by planning condition to detail the suggested mitigation measures for the translocation of any slow worms within the development site.

KCC Archaeology: Notes that the site lies within an area of high archaeological potential connected with a number of Roman and Iron Age settlements located nearby within the Country Park. The proposals, which include a planting regime and the levelling of the valley slope, has the potential to affect buried remains and therefore involve significant archaeological works to mitigate that impact. In view of the potential for archaeological remains to exist, suggest that the following condition be included on any grant of planning permission:

- No development shall take place until the applicant has secured the implementation of a programme or archaeological works

16. A number of consultees listed above (namely Sevenoaks District Council, Eynsford & Shoreham Parish Council, the Environment Agency and the Divisional Transportation Manager) were re-consulted on those amendments highlighted in paragraph (10) above. Any further views received will be reported verbally at the Committee meeting.

Local Member

17. The local County Member, Mr. R. Gough was notified of the original application on 15 July 2008, and notified of the amended proposal on 16 October 2008.

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Publicity

18. The application was publicised by the posting of a site notice on the main entrance of the Country Park and the advertisement of the application in a local newspaper. The site notice and advertisement indicate that the proposal does not accord with the provisions of the Development Plan in force, as it is located within the Metropolitan Green Belt.

Representations

19. I have received three letters of objection from local residents and two objections from local village interest groups (Eynsford Village Society & The Shoreham Society) to date in respect of this application. The main points of objection are summarised as follows:
- Environmental damage and loss of amenity grounds;
 - An expansion of the car park will encourage more visitors, travelling by car, with an associated increase in greenhouse gas emissions and pollution. If the wish is to increase visitor use, then better public transport links would be the best approach, otherwise I cannot see how this proposal fits with Kent's own Local Transport Plan;
 - Unless the approach roads are enlarged, there will be a marked increase in traffic congestion, together with increased danger to the many walkers who use the road down from the A225 to get to and from the Visitor Centre and Lullingstone Park itself. On highway grounds, Castle Road is not adequate for existing traffic to the Visitors Centre and any development that increases traffic should be avoided;
 - Extending the size of car park will reduce the available amount of land for visitors in which to sit, picnic, etc. and will have a significant adverse visual impact;
 - Completely inappropriate, particularly in what is an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty;
 - Note that existing hedgerows and trees are to be removed, which are currently extensively used for birds nesting, as well as providing mature screening. Proposals for further planting will not address short/medium term damage to the environment;
 - It is accepted that on occasion there is a problem of parking in the highway and nearby private land, however these problems also arise when the car park is not full, partly due to avoidance of car parking charges, and partly because of restricted opening times. No consideration has been given to the re-opening of the car park on Redmans Lane (which is sought by local residents).
 - Visitor numbers appear to be exaggerated, based on local knowledge of the site;
 - The visitor centre is meant to be used for educational purposes with ancillary catering. Notwithstanding the statements in respect to school visits and courses, the principle purpose is now catering and the proposals seem to be more directed to an expansion of that use and events;
 - Application is misleading, as it appears that the use of the grass overflow car parking is a permitted development, which is not the case;
 - The existing surfaced car park is within close proximity to the centre and is very well screened by mature vegetation, thus not significantly impacting on a sensitive and important landscape;
 - The proposal involves almost doubling the size of the current permitted car parking area. The proposal to extent further up the hill will have a significant visual impact, even after re-establishment of the planting;
 - Feel that the true reason for the proposal is to increase the commercial use of the Visitor Centre, contrary to the current planning use permitted. The intention is therefore to encourage more visitors, notwithstanding the detrimental impact to the adjacent communities;

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- Object to the design of the proposed extension – it introduces a large and unnecessary area of tarmac, and this is grossly contrary to Green Belt policies, particularly with regard to the openness of the Green Belt;
- If the application were to be accepted, the car park would be the largest in the parishes of Eynsford and Shoreham and not associated with any of the villages in those parishes.

DiscussionIntroduction

20. The application seeks planning permission for an extension to the existing vehicle parking provision and the widening of the existing vehicle entrance to Lullingstone Country Park Visitor Centre car park. The application has arisen in an attempt to meet a higher demand on existing car parking provision, arising from an increase in visitor numbers being experienced at the site. It has also arisen in an attempt to address highway safety concerns relating to an existing narrow vehicular entrance into the County Park site. The proposal involves the increase in hardstanding of approximately 3,600 sq. metres in an area located within the Metropolitan Green Belt. Given the scale of the development, the proposal is considered as a departure from the Adopted Local Plan on the basis that the proposal does not accord with adopted Green Belt policies. The application site is also located within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the North Downs Special Landscape Area. The application is being reported for determination as a result of the objections received from two local Parish Councils, local residents, and two local residents action groups.
21. In considering this proposal, regard must be had to the Development Plan Policies outlined in paragraph (14) above. Section 38(6) of the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 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. Issues of particular relevance in this case include the visual impact of the proposed development, in particular in terms of the openness of the Metropolitan Green Belt; the impact on the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and surrounding Special Landscape Area; the removal of existing trees and hedgerows; the impact of an increased amount of vehicle parking at the site; and the design of the proposed car park and mitigating landscaping measures. The above issues should be balanced against the benefits of these improvements to the Visitor Centre facilities to the wider community in general, and in terms of improved highway safety.
22. In addition, Members should note that if they are minded to grant planning permission, the application would have to be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government for consideration on the basis that the application does not accord with the adopted policies contained within the Development Plan. This is required under the Town and Country (Green Belt) Direction 2005.

Metropolitan Green Belt issues

23. As previously discussed, Lullingstone Country Park is located within the Metropolitan Green Belt. Therefore in the context of the relevant National Planning Policy and Development Policies that apply, set out in paragraphs (12) – (14) above, consideration needs to be given to whether or not the proposal involves inappropriate development, and if so, whether there are 'very special circumstances' that would warrant setting aside the general presumption against the development. As previously noted, the

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fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land between urban areas permanently open, since the most important attribute of Green Belts is their openness.

24. The use of land within Green Belts, as set out in PPG2, states that land within these designations has a 'positive role to play in providing opportunities for access to the open countryside for the urban population' as well as 'providing opportunities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation near urban areas'. In addition, PPG2 describes that development within the Green Belt is inappropriate unless it is for, amongst other purposes, 'essential facilities for outdoor sport and outdoor recreation which preserve the openness of the Green Belt and which do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it'. The development of the car park as such would be considered to be inappropriate development within the Green Belt.
25. In considering the impact of the proposed development on the Metropolitan Green Belt, I consider that any impacts as a result of the proposal are likely to be marginal on the Green Belt's overall openness due to the development being essentially two-dimensional, and located within an area that is relatively well screened from wider views by existing well-established vegetation boundaries around the Country Park site. That said, whilst I acknowledge that the enlarged car park would be used by an increased amount of vehicles which would appear more prominent in the locality, these three-dimensional objects are not static features in terms of the overall landscape. In addition I note that the current overflow car parking area already provides an increased amount of visual intrusion above and beyond the formal laid out parking area. Whilst visual impact is not in itself a Green Belt consideration, I consider that the proposed development would only result in a marginal impact in terms of the visual amenity of the wider Green Belt on the basis of the substantial landscaping scheme proposed as part of this development. In particular, the addition of landscape planting measures would ensure that any short-term visual injury caused as a result of the proposed development to the landscape would be reasonably mitigated against over time as new landscape planting is established.
26. In this particular case, I consider that the applicant has provided a strong case of need for the expansion of visitor parking facilities (for both cars and coaches) in line with a general increasing trend of the numbers of visitors to Kent County Council's Country Parks, and more specifically the expansion in the numbers of visitors being received at the site. Whilst I note the concerns from the local community relating to the intensification of the use of the Country Park for purposes outside of its traditional 'Country Park' function, I consider this to be a function which is mirrored closely by other KCC Country Parks, such as Shorne Woods. It has become a trend that existing Country Park Visitor Centres have intensified their uses to cater for the likes of educational facilities such as school visits and adult education courses. I consider that any such intensification is ancillary to the purpose of the venue as a Country Park, and as previously discussed believe that the applicant has been able to demonstrate a clear need for the additional vehicle parking spaces proposed.
27. Members will note that the use of the site as a Country Park has long been established, and is in any case an 'appropriate use' within the Green Belt (as defined by PPG2). Whilst the development proposed in this particular case is, in itself considered to be 'inappropriate development' within the Metropolitan Green Belt, it is clearly necessary to serve the primary use of the Country Park which is an 'appropriate use' within the Green Belt (providing 'opportunities to the outdoor countryside for sport and recreation', as defined by PPG2).

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28. Taking account of the marginal impact on the openness of the Green Belt, the very clear need for additional parking and the ancillary nature of the development considerations in paragraphs (23) – (27) above, I consider that collectively these amount to a very special set of circumstances capable of outweighing the presumption against inappropriate development.

Visual impact on landscape designations

29. Members will note that site is located within both the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the North Downs Special Landscape Area, and consideration therefore needs to be given to the protection, and where possible, the enhancement of these designations. Policies EN1, EN4 and EN5 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan afford protection to Kent's countryside, AONB and Special Landscape Area respectively, whilst Policies EN6 and EN7 of the Sevenoaks Local Plan (Saved Policies) specifically afford protection to the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Landscape Area.
30. I note that the proposal involves the addition of approximately 3,600 sq. metres of hardstanding and the removal of 89 trees and 5 hedgerows which lie directly within the development footprint. Having visited the site and considered the visual impacts of the proposed development, in particular on existing landscape designations, I consider that relatively long distance views of both the Visitor Centre and its associated parking, are currently sheltered from view by existing mature vegetation surrounding the Country Park. However, as a result of this proposal a large amount of this planting would be removed, the car park extended, and new landscape planting areas created which would consist of native tree and shrub planting. Although new planting would be carried out using medium standard tree and shrub species, the planting would inevitably appear significantly less established than existing vegetation on site. Members will note that further discussions, specifically relating to landscaping, are highlighted below in paragraphs (33) – (36).
31. Whilst I recognise that the development would give rise to a localised detrimental impact in terms of visual amenity, I consider that when considering the wider surrounding landscape designations such as the AONB and SLA, these impacts would be minimal based on the site being relatively well screened through existing vegetation. I note that views of the enlarged car park from the higher ground to the west would be more noticeable than that of the existing parking arrangement, but consider that over time the mitigating landscaping measures proposed would establish to shelter views across the Visitor Centre and the enlarged car park.
32. On balance, I consider that the proposal would not significantly injure the visual amenities of either the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or the surrounding North Downs Special Landscape Area designations, for which Development Plan policy seeks to preserve. I believe that the proposed landscape planting scheme will act as a compensatory measure to ensure that no significant visual harm is caused as a result of this development. I therefore am of the opinion that this proposal is in broad accordance with Policies EN1, EN4 and EN5 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan and Policies EN1, EN6 and EN7 of the Sevenoaks District Council Local Plan (Saved Policies).

Landscaping

33. Members will note that the proposed extension of the hard-surfaced visitor centre car park and vehicle entrance widening result in a substantial amount of tree removal within the site. The trees to be removed are located in the north-west of the site, within the existing car parking arrangements, and along the existing western side of the current

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vehicular entrance off Castle Road. A tree survey undertaken by the applicants have indicated that over 78.5% of these trees are grade 'C' (low quality and value), 20.4% are grade 'B' (moderate quality and value) and 1.1% are grade 'A' (high quality and value) according to Arboricultural classification.

34. The proposal also involves the loss of 5 existing hedgerows within the site as a result of the extension and re-configuration of the vehicle parking provision. As a compensatory measure the applicant proposes a substantial planting scheme consisting of new planting beds, containing native tree and shrub species, to separating parking bays; native hedgerow planting along the western boundary of the extended car park; and the planting of a 52 metre belt of woodland planting along the western boundary of the Country Park site. I note that concern has been raised by the County Council's Landscape Specialist on whether additional trees can be incorporated at irregular intervals to further break up any potential formal planting arrangements. This matter is being investigated, but I note that the applicant is reluctant to plant many more additional trees within the scheme from a safety perspective as additional tree planting may result in more CCTV equipment being required, as trees would grow and block CCTV vision splays. I consider that this matter can be further addressed by planning condition, together with a landscape maintenance programme for a period of 5 years, should planning permission be granted.
35. Whilst I note that the landscaping measures proposed are relatively substantial in terms of within and surrounding the proposed car park, I acknowledge that such measures would take a relatively long period of time to establish and appear 'natural' in terms of those existing trees and shrubs within the Park. However, I consider the benefit of such compensatory landscape measures to be a material factor to the consideration of this scheme.
36. As previously noted, I consider the landscaping impacts of the development on the wider scale to be relatively minimal for those reasons indicated in paragraphs (33) – (35) above. I further consider that the proposal is in general conformity with Policies EN8 and EN9 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan, and accordingly recommend that subject to further consideration relating to additional tree planting and a programme of landscape maintenance, planning permission be granted subject to those conditions outlined in paragraph (51) below.

Design

37. I note that the design of the car park layout has been designed by the applicant to be informal whilst incorporating the essential facilities needed for the end user. I note that the design is inevitably a more formalised layout than that of the current parking situation on the basis that the entire area would be hardsurfaced and marked out by individual parking bays. This is opposed to existing areas such as the overflow parking area where bays are not currently denoted by any formal arrangements. In my opinion, I consider that from within the car park itself the layout, surface materials (subject to prior approval) and planting blocks would be visually suitable for this location. I note that the use of good quality materials such as granite setts and tree logs to denote parking bays and planting beds would help to improve the visual appearance of the proposed scheme.
38. In addition, I note that the design has been created to cater for the needs of disabled users, through the creation of an additional 4 parking bays, and the re-configuration of 3 coach parking bays. The proposal has also been designed to encourage sustainable forms of transport through the provision of cycle parking facilities, together with areas for motor cycle parking.

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39. The design approach consists of a series of parking aisles separated by planting beds, tree planting pits, and hedgerows. Through the middle of the car park a pedestrian walkway would be created linking the Visitor Centre to the Park beyond the extended car park. A pedestrian walkway would be denoted by a change in surface texture from a tar spray and gravel (of the main car park) to a brick paving walkway.
40. Members will note that the use of tarmac with a bonded gravel surface has been questioned by one of the local Parish Councils (as summarised in paragraph 15 above). The applicant has provided additional clarification for this choice of surface treatment on the basis the use of grasscrete would not be a practical solution in this location as it was considered that the grass beneath would never establish adequately due to the heavy use of the car park. It has also been stated by the applicant that the use of grasscrete would be better suited to overflow parking as opposed to the need to provide a permanent parking solution as is the case in this particular application. As I consider that the colour choice of the proposed bounded gravel surface is an important consideration in visual terms, I recommend that the details of this matter be reserved by condition for later consideration.
41. In terms of the design approach chosen by the applicant, I consider the overall scheme to be acceptable in terms of layout, choice of materials and proposed planting. On this basis, I would not seek to raise an objection on design grounds on this particular case.

Highway Safety

42. I note that the widening of the existing vehicular entrance to the Country Park has arisen to address highway safety concerns of visitors using the facility. Members will note that the Divisional Transportation Manager, in paragraph (15) above, has raised no objection to the car park improvements or improvements to the access in principle. They have however, requested that further technical details relating to the entrance widening be submitted by planning condition for later consideration. I note that within the amendments made to the current scheme (as outlined in paragraph 10 above) these details have been provided by the applicant. I currently await the further views of the Divisional Transportation Manager on this matter, and will endeavour to report these views verbally at the Committee meeting.
43. Members will note that concern has been raised relating to improvements needed to Castle Road as a result of the intensification of the use of the Country Park; the parking of visitors cars outside of the site to avoid parking charges or outside of normal opening hours; and the possibility of re-opening Redmans Lane Car Park. In terms of the intensification of the use of the visitor centre, the application has been made to address the current demands for vehicle parking as opposed to any future expansion of the facilities available at the site. Under the circumstances, no improvements to the local highway network have been offered by the applicant, or have been requested by the Highway Authority. In terms of vehicle parking outside of the site this is a matter beyond the direct control of both the applicant and indeed this application. Should this aspect continue to be a problem the issue would need to be addressed to the Highway Authority for them to investigate what measures could reasonably be adopted to prevent unauthorised parking occurring. In relation to the re-opening of Redmans Lane Car Park this option has not been considered a viable option by the applicant for reasons that the car park is located off-site and would not be a practical solution to address the specific need addressed within the current planning application.
44. On the basis of no objection from the Divisional Transportation Manager in principle, I consider that a highway objection on either the design of the car park or the principle of

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the entrance widening cannot be sustained. Accordingly, I would not seek to raise an objection on highway safety matters in this particular case.

Ecology

45. I note that the KCC Biodiversity Officer has recommended, in paragraph (15) above, that a method statement be provided by planning condition to detail the suggested mitigation measures for the translocation of any slow worms within the development site. I concur with this view and recommend that such condition be placed on any future decision. I also note that this recommendation is consistent with Policy EN8 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan whereby wildlife habitats and species will be protected, conserved and enhanced through long-term management and habitat creation.

Archaeology

46. As noted in paragraph (15) above, the site lies within an area of high archaeological potential. It has therefore been recommended that should planning permission be granted a condition securing the implementation of a programme of archaeological evaluation and recording be attached to any decision. I concur with this view given the high archaeological potential of this site, and the nature of the groundworks proposed, and note that this view is consistent with both Policy QL7 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan and Policy EN25A & B of the Sevenoaks Local Plan.

External Lighting

47. External lighting of the car park is not proposed with this application. As this particular element has the potential to increase the amount of visual pollution from the site, I recommend that a condition be attached to any decision to ensure that no means of external floodlighting (to illuminate the car parking area) be installed at the site without the prior approval of the County Planning Authority.

Conclusion

48. This proposal seeks to provide enhanced facilities for an existing Country Park located within the Metropolitan Green Belt and within the sensitive areas of the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the North Downs Special Landscape Area. It is proposed that the improved facilities would be used by the wider community who benefit from the Country Park as an area for informal recreational, for which there is a general upwards trend on visitor numbers experienced across Kent County Council's Country Parks. The site is a long established recreational facility, but its sensitive countryside location means that the proposed development has raised some key Planning Policy issues particularly in respect of the developments impact on the openness of the Green Belt, and its impact on Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Landscape Area.
49. I consider that the applicant has been able to demonstrate a very clear need for additional parking at the site in line with an increased upwards trend in the numbers of visitors experienced. I also consider that the proposed extension to the car parking facilities and associated highway widening improvements are ancillary to the purpose of the Country Park in providing a facility for the wider community to gain access to the outdoor countryside for sport and recreation, which in terms of National Green Belt policy is considered to be an accepted appropriate use. I further consider that the development proposed would only lead to a marginal impact on the openness of the Green Belt, for those reasons previously discussed. Collectively, I consider that all of these factors amount to a very special set of circumstances capable of outweighing the presumption against inappropriate development.

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50. Similarly, I consider that the impact of the proposed development on both the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Landscape Area designations would be minimal in this particular case. In conclusion, I consider that the proposed landscape mitigation measures would substantially protect any detrimental harm caused by the proposal to the locality in terms of visual appearance. Furthermore, I am of the opinion that the proposed development would otherwise be in accordance with the general aims and objectives of the relevant Development Plan Policies. Subject to any further views received by the Committee Meeting, I recommend that the application be referred to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and that subject to her decision, planning permission be granted subject to the following conditions as set out in paragraph (51) below.

Recommendation

51. SUBJECT TO any further views received by the Committee Meeting, I RECOMMEND that the application BE REFERRED to the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, and SUBJECT TO her decision PLANNING PERMISSION BE GRANTED, SUBJECT TO conditions, including conditions to cover the following aspects:
- Standard time limit;
 - The development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details;
 - No development shall take place until the applicant has submitted further details of the proposed specification and colour treatment of the proposed car park surface treatment;
 - No external lighting be installed at the site;
 - Vehicle and pedestrian entrance gates be powder coated black;
 - No development shall take place until the applicant has submitted further details of proposed landscaping scheme and a programme of maintenance for a period of not less than 5 years;
 - Landscape planting shall be implemented within the first available planting season following the completion of the development hereby permitted;
 - All trees to be retained on site shall be afforded protection during construction operations in accordance with the current British Standard;
 - No development shall take place until the applicant has submitted a method statement for the translocation of slow worms within the site;
 - No development shall take place until the applicant has secured the implementation of a programme of archaeological works;
 - Adequate measures be taken to ensure that vehicles leaving the site engaged in the construction works do not deposit mud or debris on the public highway;

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