

Part two storey new build Children's Centre at The Willows, Hilda May Avenue, Swanley – SE/08/1602

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 22 January 2008.

Application by Kent County Council Children, Families and Education for the construction of a part two storey modular building on existing school playground for use as a Children's Centre, including canopied entrance with buggy storage, weldmesh fencing and tarmac play area, plus marking out of existing parking bays for use by the centre at The Willows, Hilda May Avenue, Swanley (SE/08/1602).

Recommendation: Planning permission be granted, subject to conditions.

Local Member(s): Mr. M. Fittock

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

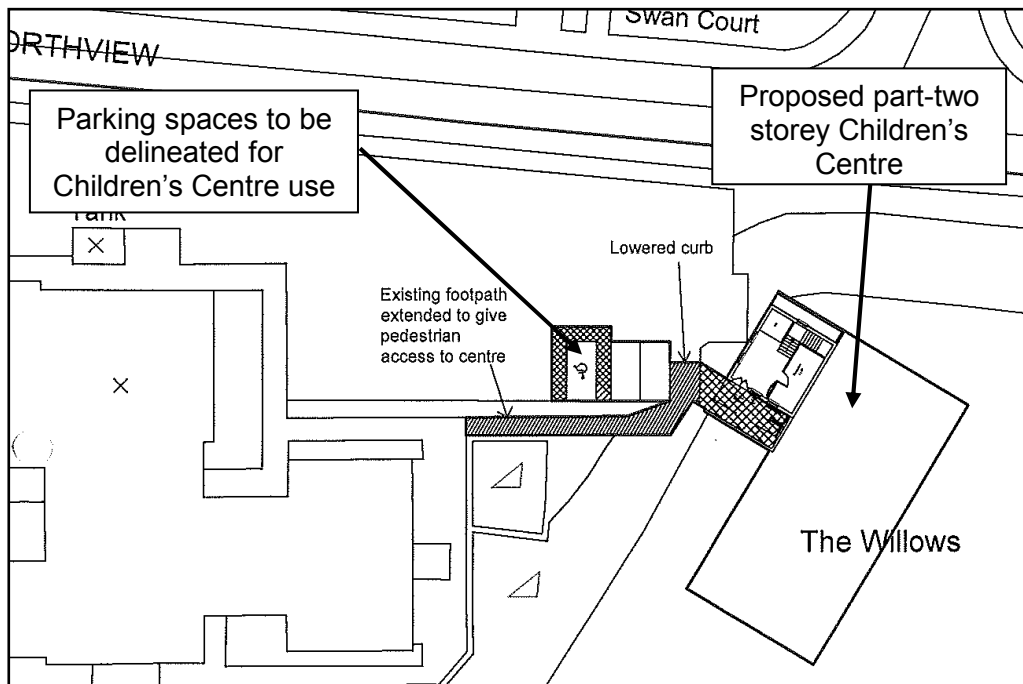
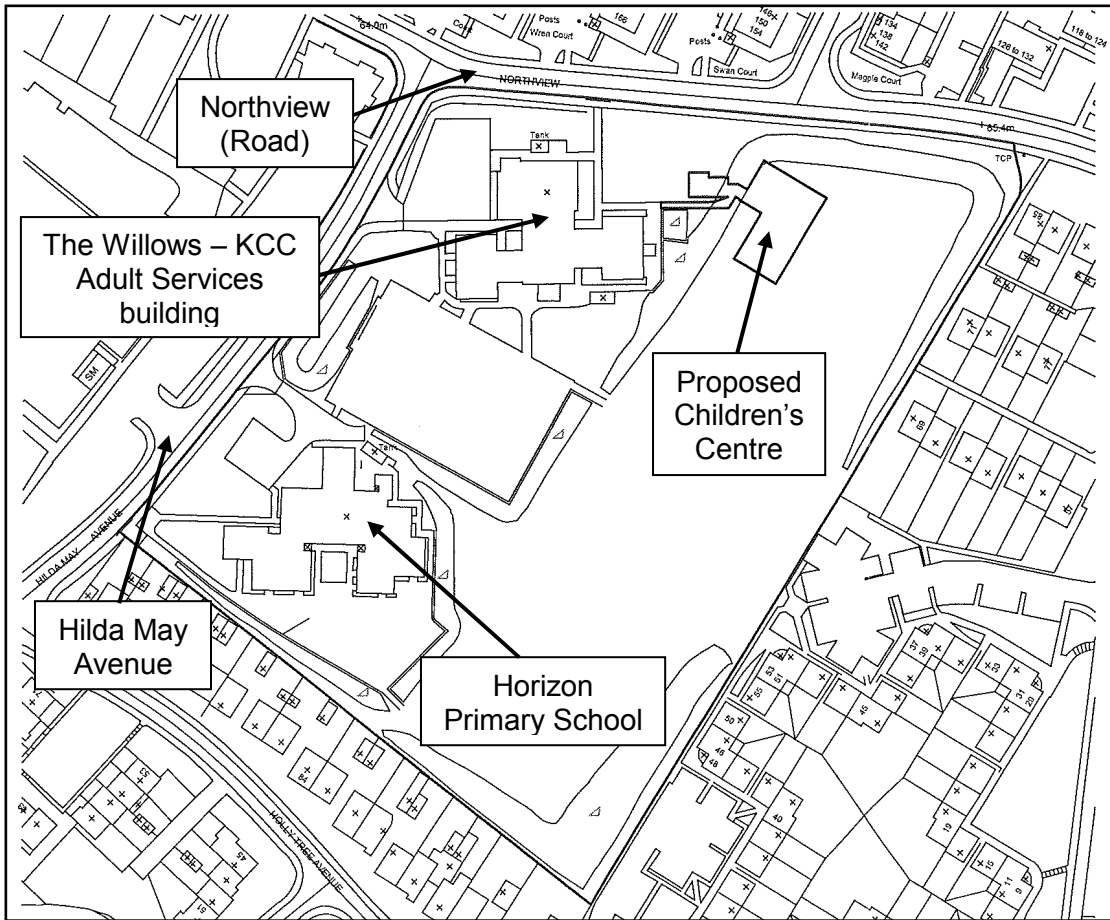
1. The Willows is located to the north-west of the main town of Swanley, on Hilda May Avenue. The site is primarily occupied by Kent Adult Social Services as an office base, with a smaller proportion of the main building being used by The Willows Pre-School Nursery. Prior to 2001, the Willows site was 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 (Road) 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 on page D1.2.*
2. The application site for the proposed Children's Centre is located to the east of the main Willows office buildings, on the edge of the north-west corner of former school playing fields.

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 KCC Adult Services offices and a pre-school unit, with associated additional parking, under reference SE/01/1453. At the Planning Applications Committee on 11 December 2007, Members resolved to grant planning permission for the creation of a community Children's Centre through the adaptation, refurbishment and extension of part of the existing office accommodation currently occupied by Kent Adult Social Services and the Willows Pre-School Nursery, under reference SE/07/2744.
4. The development approved under reference SE/07/2744 has not been realised due to the internal space that would have been required within the existing office building not becoming available from Kent Adult Social Services. As such, the applicant has re-considered the nature of their proposal, and chosen a part two storey modular building on land to the east of the main office buildings for the proposed Children's Centre.

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Site Location Plan



Site Location Plans
The Willows Children's Centre, Hilda May Avenue, Swanley

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Proposed Children's Centre Elevations

The image displays five architectural elevations of a proposed children's centre. The elevations are arranged in two rows. The top row shows a side elevation on the left and a front elevation on the right. The bottom row shows a front elevation on the left, a side elevation in the middle, and a rear elevation on the right. The building is a two-story structure with a yellow facade on the ground floor and a green facade on the upper floor. The elevations include window placements, door locations, and landscaping elements like trees and a fence. Each elevation has a north arrow and a scale bar.

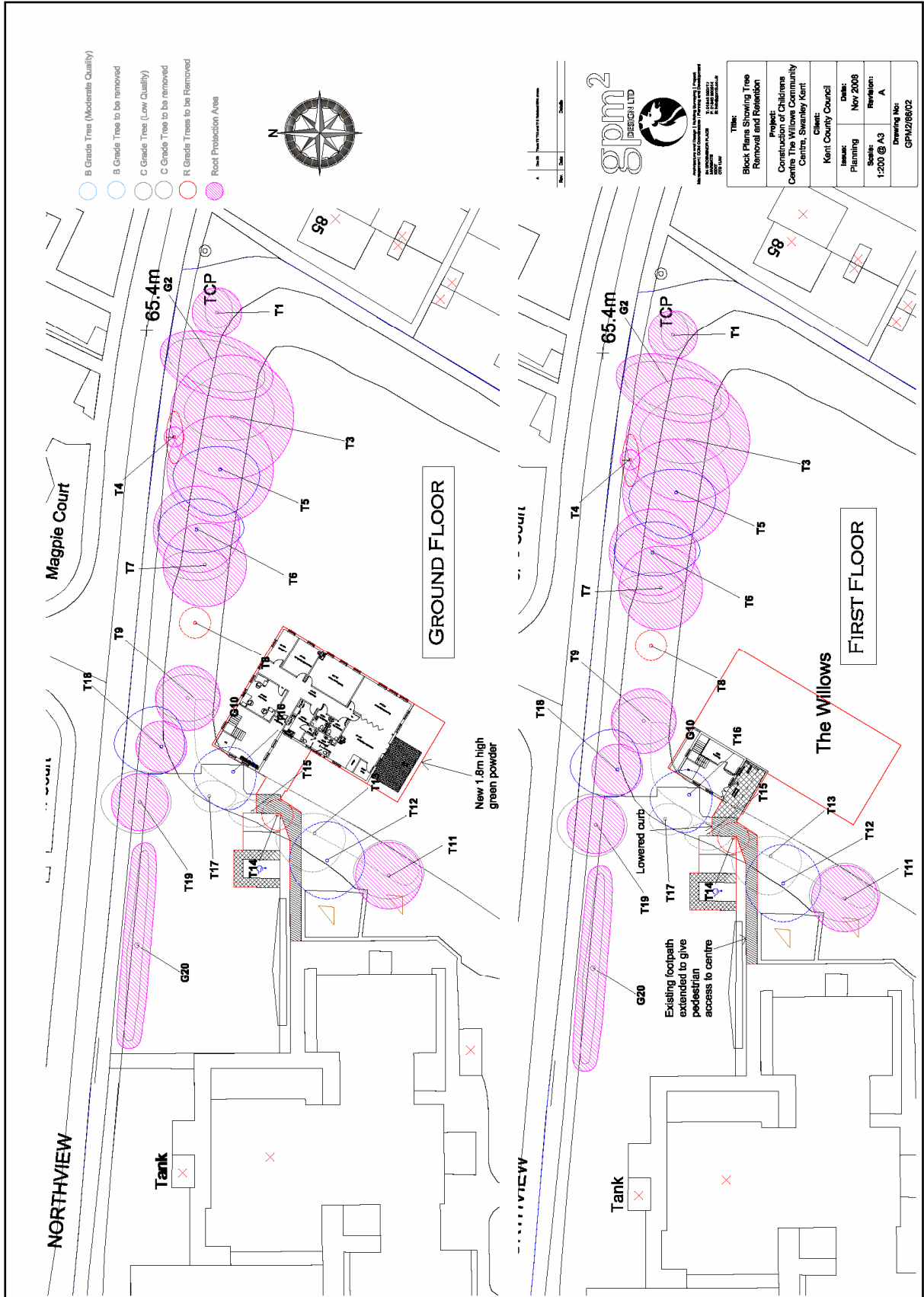
gpm² DESIGN LTD

Architectural Practice Limited, 100, The Willows, Hilda May Avenue, Swanely, Kent, SE26 6JG. Tel: 01893 860000. Email: info@gpm2design.co.uk

Title:	Proposed Elevations
Project:	Construction of Children's Centre, The Willows, Community Centre, Swanley Kent
Client:	Kent County Council
Phase:	Final
Project No:	1200 @ AS
Revision:	A
Drawing No.:	05-140/0001

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Tree Retention / Removal Plan



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Proposal

5. This application proposes the creation of a half core Children's Centre on a section of sloping grassland adjacent to the eastern corner of the main Kent Adult Social Services office buildings at the site. The half core Children's Centre is proposed to provide a community facility with a crèche, meeting and staff accommodation, together with external works including the provision of a buggy store, a new steel and polycarbonate-clad canopy and an external impact absorbent play area surrounded by 1.8m high green weldmesh fencing. As the building is proposed on a sloping site with a change in level of just over 2 metres, the building proposes an entrance at ground level with the main Children's Centre function rooms at first floor level. The proposal includes a lift to enable disabled access to the upper floor where the main centre uses would occur.
6. 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 which have been proposed across the County as part of Central Government's National Sure Start 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.
7. The application proposes that the Centre would be open from 08:00 to 18:00 hours, Monday to Friday, 48 weeks of the year. The Centre would employ 3 members of staff on a regular basis with the number rising for special events. The application states that the Centre is expected to generate up to 30 visitors in a normal day, spread out over the 10 hours of operation. It has been stated that only when a particular event, such as a seminar is being provided, would there be a number of people arriving at any one time.
8. The proposed Children's Centre is of a modular building type and would be constructed in major sections off-site and shipped to site and fixed on pre-constructed foundations. The building would be partially 'cut-in' to the existing sloping site, to allow the main building to sit above a lower ground floor entrance. The proposed building has been amended by the applicants to benefit from an 'enhanced' design which proposes vertical cedar cladding wrapped around the part two storey element of the building with a smooth green metal panelling to the rest of the building. The roof is proposed to be a metal flat deck. A plan showing the proposed 'enhanced' elevations of the modular Children's Centre can be found on page D1.3.
9. The application sets out that staff employed at the Centre would be employed within the surrounding area and would be encouraged to walk to/from work. In addition the application states that where staff would be expected to drive, they would be offered a parking space within the existing parking provision of the site which is proposed to be delineated specifically for Children's Centre use. The pedestrian access to the Children's Centre would be obtained from the existing gates in Hilda May Avenue and the existing footpath would be extended to offer a route from the entrance gate to the centre's entrance. It is noted that the application states that the Centre has been located to minimise travel distances by being located closely within the community it is intended to serve, and visitors therefore would be encouraged to walk.
10. The application proposes that the multi-purpose play area associated with the centre would be surrounded in green powder coated 1.8m high weld mesh fencing. In addition,

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it should be noted that as part of the proposals, the application involves the removal of 7 trees within, or in close proximity to the development footprint. An area of scrub planting within the development footprint would also be lost as part of the proposals. A tree survey has been submitted with this application, identifying that out of the 7 trees proposed for removal, 2 trees are considered to be 'B' grade (moderate quality and value) grade arboricultural classification, whilst 3 are 'C' grade (low quality and value) and the remaining 2 are considered to be 'R' grade (should be removed for reasons of sound arboricultural management). A plan showing the proposed tree removal and retention, as part of this proposal, can be identified on page D1.4.

Planning Policy

11. 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 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 EN9 – Tree cover and the hedgerow network should be maintained and enhanced where this would improve the landscape and/or biodiversity

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

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

Consultations

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

Swanley Town Council: was notified of the application on the 11 June 2008 and have expressed no comments to date. Any views received prior to the Committee Meeting will be reported verbally.

Divisional Transportation Manager: was notified of the application on the 11 June 2008 and have expressed no comments to date. Any views received prior to the Committee Meeting will be reported verbally.

Environment Agency: has raised no objection to the application.

Sport England: has raised no objection to the application.

KCC Landscape Advisor (Jacobs): makes the following comments, as set out below:

- Notes that the use of vertical timber cladding should help the proposed building sit more comfortably within the overall landscape;
- Notes that the tree retention plan shows that the retained trees should not be unduly affected by the construction of the proposed new Children's Centre, but reiterate the need to follow British Standard 5837:2005 – Trees in Relation to Construction guidance to protect these species from damage by materials and construction traffic;
- Emphasis the visual impact of removing trees T8, T9, T16, T17, T18 & T19 would cause the proposed building to become fully open to views from residential properties along Northview (Road) and The Spinney. Therefore, recommend that further information regarding replacement planting scheme be provided for review.

[Please note that following discussions with the applicants concerning the removal of trees T18, T19 & T9 adjacent to Northview (Road), the applicant has confirmed that these trees are now proposed to be retained as they do not fall under the

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development footprint. This has resulted in the existing landscape screening along Northview being retained as part of the current proposal].

Local Member

13. The local County Member, Mr. M. Fittock, was notified of the original application on the 11 June 2008. He was notified of the amended ['enhanced design'] proposal on the 22 September 2008. His comments relating to the original proposal, together with his further comments on the 'enhanced design' proposal can be found in Appendix 1.

Publicity

14. The application was publicised by the posting of two site notices at the main entrance of the site with Hilda May Avenue, and the boundary of the site with Northview. In addition, 16 neighbouring residential properties were individually notified of the application.

Representations

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

Discussion

Introduction

16. The application proposes to seek planning permission for a new build modular part two-storey community Children's Centre on the land to the rear of The Willows. The application is being reported to the Planning Applications Committee as a result of the objections received from the local County Member, as outlined in Appendix 1. In considering this proposal regard must be had to the Development Plan Policies outlined in paragraph (11) 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. I consider that the key considerations in this particular case relate to the design of the proposed building; the location of the building, particularly with regard to its visual impact and the impact on existing trees; together with the need for the centre within the local community to provide a range of health, adult education and family support services.
17. The proposed Centre is one of 52 similar facilities which have been applied for, and are in the process of being constructed across the County by KCC's Children, Families and Education Directorate. A number of similar style modular building Children's Centres have been approved by the County Planning Authority and have been constructed at various sites, amongst others including Wincheap Primary School (Canterbury), Knockhall Primary School (Dartford) and Longmead Primary School (Tonbridge).

Location

18. The application site is located on sloping ground to the north-western corner of the former White Oak Junior School playing fields. The playing field is no longer used for any specific purpose as it sits within the curtilage of the site currently occupied by Kent

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Adult Social Services as an office base. The playing field is physically detached from that of the adjacent Horizon School by a metal palisade fence. It is worth noting that both this former playing field site, together with the current playing fields of Horizon School are designated as Important Areas of Green Space, under Policy EN9 of the Sevenoaks Local Plan. However, given that the proposed location of the Children's Centre would be located to the corner of the land covered by this landscape designation, it is considered that any potential impact on Policy EN9 would be, in relative terms, marginal. It is further noted that Sevenoaks District Council has raised no objection to the proposal, having considered the application against their own development plan document. Accordingly, I would not seek to raise an objection to this proposal on the basis of Policy EN9 of the Sevenoaks Local Plan.

19. Members will note that the siting of the proposed Children's Centre in this particular location would require the removal of 7 existing trees and low level scrub. However, having considered alternative locations within the current Willows site, it is considered that the land is largely taken up by existing 'built development', and as such there does not appear to be any alternative location better suited for the installation of a modular building. As proposed, the location of the Children's Centre would use a currently under-used area of sloping ground within the site, by cutting into the existing bank and creating a part two-storey building.
20. As identified in paragraph (10) above, the trees which would be required to be removed from the site are classified, in arboricultural terms, as a mix of moderate to low quality and value. Therefore, I consider that the loss of such species would not be to the detriment of the wider landscape, and can therefore be justified in this particular case. Members will also note that the trees located directly adjacent to Northview (Road) [Trees T19, T18 & T9 as shown on page D1.4] are proposed to be retained and protected, in accordance with the relevant British Standard, during construction. In my opinion, I consider that the retention of these 3 trees, which were previously shown to be removed, would ensure that the proposed modular building would not be highly visible from residential properties fronting Northview (Road). As such, I consider that the visual impact of the proposed unit from outside of the site would be relatively negligible and would therefore not seek to raise an objection to its siting or the removal of up to 7 trees within the proposed development footprint.

Design

21. Members will note the concerns raised by the KCC Local Member, as detailed in Appendix 1, in connection with the design of the proposed modular building. As a result of the objections received to the original design proposals, which consisted of a metal clad modular building, the applicants amended the design to benefit from an 'enhanced' external finish which includes the use of wrap-around vertical cedar cladding on the part two storey element of the building. By contrast, the rest of the building would be finished in a smooth green metal panelling which would require low maintenance after installation. It is noted that this specific 'enhanced' design approach has been adopted on a number of similar Centres across the County located in sensitive or prominent locations. In my opinion, I consider that the 'enhanced' design improves the external appearance of the proposed building.
22. Whilst it would undoubtedly be beneficial to encourage a design solution for the proposed Children's Centre which matches the existing style of the buildings on site and is of a permanent construction, as opposed to a modular type construction, this has not been possible with the current wave of Community Children's Centres. Budget constraints and the timescales for project delivery have set-out that modular style

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buildings need to be used for the units proposed. It should be noted that the large sums of money being provided for the Building Schools for the Future programme can in no way be used to fund new and separate projects such as the Children's Centres. In my opinion, I consider that the benefit brought about by the Centre in terms of the range of health, adult education and family support services that would be offered, together with the 'enhanced' design style of modular building, outweigh any potential significant design concerns in this particular case.

23. In addition to the proposed modular building, the application proposes the inclusion of an impact absorbent play surface, a polycarbonate canopy structure and the erection of 1.8m high green powder-coated weld-mesh fencing. In design terms, I would not raise objection to either of these external elements, but suggest that exact details of the canopy be secured by planning condition in this case.
24. It is my opinion that the proposed design of the centre in this particular location, whilst not an example of outstanding architectural design merit, is acceptable in planning terms and broadly meets the requirements of Policy QL1 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan. Accordingly, I would not seek to raise an objection to this proposal on design related matters.

Traffic and Access

25. Another element of the application that requires consideration is the potential for the proposed Children's Centre use to generate additional traffic activity, including movements to and from the site, and whether this would result in an unacceptable impact on the surrounding area. The Children's Centre proposed would operate 'drop-in' style facilities to support young families in the immediate local community, providing a community facility with crèche, meeting and staff accommodation.
26. 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 3 full-time members of staff employed at the proposed Centre, with the number rising for special events, the application sets out that staff would be employed from within a close proximity to the site.
27. 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 residents 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, 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.
28. I consider that should the proposal be approved, there is a potential risk that the congestion level might increase on some occasions, but it is unlikely that this would be on a regular basis, or to be sufficient enough to recommend refusal of the application on these grounds alone. 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. Accordingly, I would not seek to raise an objection to this proposal on highway matters.

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Hours of Use

29. 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 Kent Adult Social 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.

Drainage

30. 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. Bearing this issue in mind, I would seek to ensure that a foul and surface water drainage scheme be required by condition in the event that Members are minded to grant planning permission. Such scheme could then be fully considered at a later date by the County Planning Authority in consultation with the Environment Agency.
31. In addition, Members should note that the Environment Agency has raised no objection to the proposed development, as set out in paragraph (12) above. 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.

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 proposed part two-storey Community Children's Centre is in general conformity with the Development Plan. Whilst I note the views received from the local County Member, particularly in relation to design, I conclude that the benefits brought about by the inclusion of such facility within the local community, together with the 'enhanced' design approach offered up by the applicants, is sufficient to outweigh any potential concerns in this particular case. I therefore recommend that planning permission be granted as set out in paragraph (33) below.

Recommendation

33. I 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;
 - trees shown for retention be afforded protection during construction in accordance with the current British Standard.

Case officer – Julian Moat	01622 696978
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Background documents - See section heading
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Appendix 1 – Local Member Comments

Comments based on original proposal:

Mr. J Moat
Planning Application Group
Invicta House
Maidstone
Kent
ME14 1XX

3 July 2008

Dear Mr. Moat

Application No SE/08/temp/0024
THE WILLOWS, HILDA MAY AVENUE, SWANLEY, KENT

I am replying to your letter of 11 June. In this letter you did not specifically invite me to make any comments on the planning application I would however ask you to bring the following concerns, in full, to all members of the KCC planning committee that will be considering this application in a date unspecified in your letter.

While fully supporting the of children's centers my enthusiasm for the concept should not run roughshod over the basic mores of planning consent. This flat tin roofed box shed has no place in any of the concepts of design as recommended by the KCC. I am totally opposed to the design and would strongly advise all members to vote against this application. Though not material to planning law members are aware that the Children's and Families Directorate of the KCC is about to embark on the biggest schools rebuild program in Europe. As such is very important that when considering planning issues that the very basic standards are achieved. Indeed it is KCC policy on building design that we should encourage good design.

If anyone can point out to me one element of good design in the proposals for this children's centre would they please let me know. These industrial box units are appropriate as temporary block offices on building sites but as a permanent structure plonked in the middle of a pleasant residential area they have no place whatsoever. The only one consideration has been taken into account and that is price. The boxes are to be attached to a well maintain 1960ies school building. There is no matching features that would normalise this extension with the existing building that one would expect from a usual planning application. Nor has there been any attempt to match the building with the surrounding flats and houses. Therefore the plan is detrimental to the street scene.

The design and access statement point 4 suggests that the design is constrained by the funding time scales and delivery of the KCC. This is difficult to understand, as members will remember I asked two questions a full council over two years ago trying to activate KCC to play its part in the introduction of children's centre. Design should in no way be compromised for haste even though the money for round two has been provided by central government and the place should have been constructed and running by April 2008. If the design is

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constrained by price then this should not be a planning consideration. If it is a bad plan then it should be rejected under existing planning guidance. Though it should not be material in planning law I again would remind members that a local school was closed on the understanding that the local community would benefit from a children's centre. While the school has been shut for over a year and the local community kept its part of the bargain in amalgamating two schools in double quick time there has been no movement from KCC on the sale of its valuable asset.

There are no additional parking places being provided. The car park is to have the existing bays relined. Parents will be in buggy distance of the centre. This is not acceptable as the numbers of professionals visiting the site will increase dramatically. This is the whole point in providing the building to bring together, health visitors, midwives, pediatricians, doctors, nurses, school professionals, Welfare offices young peoples mental health workers, playgroup leaders, police and anyone else involved in the complete range of children's services. They will not all be visiting the centre all the time but, if the centre is to meet its basic standards they will all be using the centre as a point of reference. As none of these live and work within buggy pushing distance of the centre then how are they supposed to get there. I visited the willows site yesterday and the car park was full. A young mum parked on the yellow line opposite to call in to see a worker. If the car park is full now where are all these additional professionals going to go? Not Making any additional parking spaces available is a nonsense and will make the site unworkable.

The flat roof of the building is reported to be made of metal deck. While very cheap, this can be an extremely noisy, during rain and not conducive to long term office use and not considered fit for purpose.

Bill Anderson is the much admired head of children's services and it would be wrong if his only legacy in Kent was to be "Anderson Shelters". I would therefore ask the planning committee to reject this application.

Yours sincerely

Mark Fittock
KCC Member for Swanley

Ref: Childrens Centres

Comments based on 'enhanced design' proposal:

Comments as follows:

- I regret the removal of 10 trees and would like to see them replaced else where on the site.

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- There is a need to consider protection for the remaining trees.
- Root projection extended into the road at Northview at G2. Is this acceptable long term?
- The removal of trees will further expose the very poor building design which is not in keeping with the street scene nor in keeping with KCC's own good design guidance.
- My other concerns previously expressed have not been addressed in these changes.
- The willow trees shown on the west of the site have exceptional root systems are planners aware of the problems with the drain on the adjoining school site at horizon school?
- I have received complaints about the lack of dropped curbs in Hilda May Avenue at the access to the site though I am yet to check this out.
- I will award a prize to anyone on the planning committee who can come up with a more badly designed building.

Mark Fittock