

Creation of a 2FE Primary School, Land at Thistle Hill,
Minster on Sea, Isle of Sheppey
14/500221/COUNTY (KCC/SW/0143/2014)

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 2 October 2014.

Application by Kent County Council Property and Infrastructure Support for the creation of a two form entry (2FE) primary school, including erection of a two storey school building, provision of hard and soft playing pitches, vehicular access way and on site drop off area, provision of car parking and cycle parking spaces, together with hard and soft landscaping on Land at Thistle Hill, Minster on Sea, Isle of Sheppey, Kent – 14/500221/COUNTY (KCC/SW/0143/2014)

Recommendation: Permission be granted subject to conditions.

Local Members: Mr Crowther

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

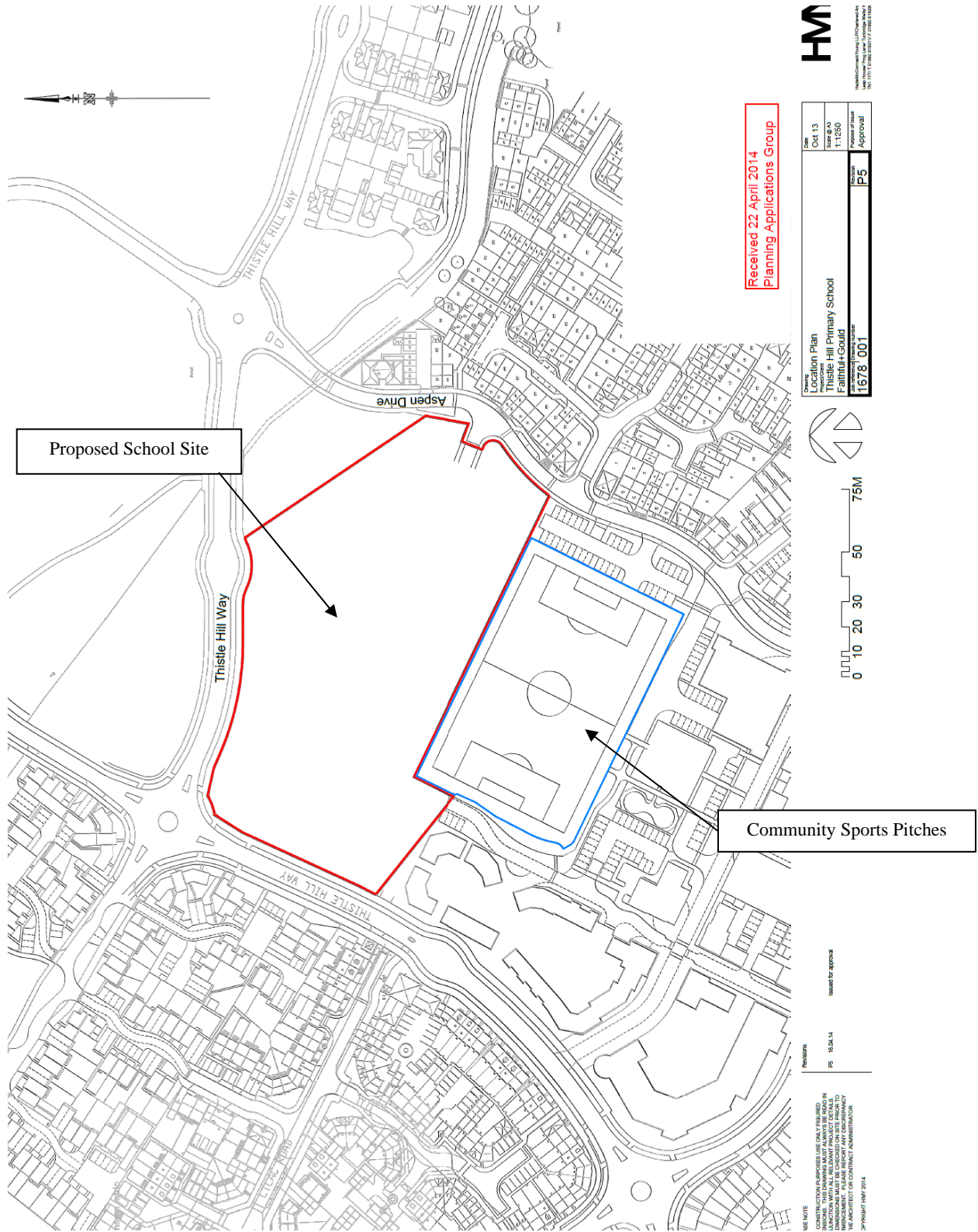
1. The proposed school site is an area of undeveloped land which lies in the middle of a new housing development in Minster, Sheppey. The areas to the east and west of the site have already been built out, with further work ongoing to the north. The nearby housing is predominantly 2 storey in height, but with some 3 storey blocks as well. The site is currently enclosed by wire mesh fencing, and the site generally slopes down from south-west to north-east with a fall of approximately 3m.
2. To the south of the site is a community centre (part single storey and part two storey in height) and between this and the school site is playing field land, enclosed by green wire mesh fencing.
3. Thistle Hill Way runs round the edge of the site to the west and north, with Aspen Drive running down the eastern boundary (the playing fields lie to the south). There are footpaths surrounding the site, along these residential roads, and the roads include traffic calming measures.

Background

4. This proposed primary school would be constructed on a site that has been safeguarded as part of the Thistle Hill 70 hectare (173 ac) new neighbourhood development site, to the south of Minster. An outline planning permission, Master Plan and Development Brief were approved in 1997, and as part of that consent 1.6 hectares (4 ac) was set aside for the construction of a primary school. The 1997 Development Brief indicated that there would be in the region of 1000 houses, together with a village centre, incorporating shopping facilities, a Primary School, a community hospital, a community woodland and public open space. The 1997 Brief was subsequently replaced with a July 2009 version.

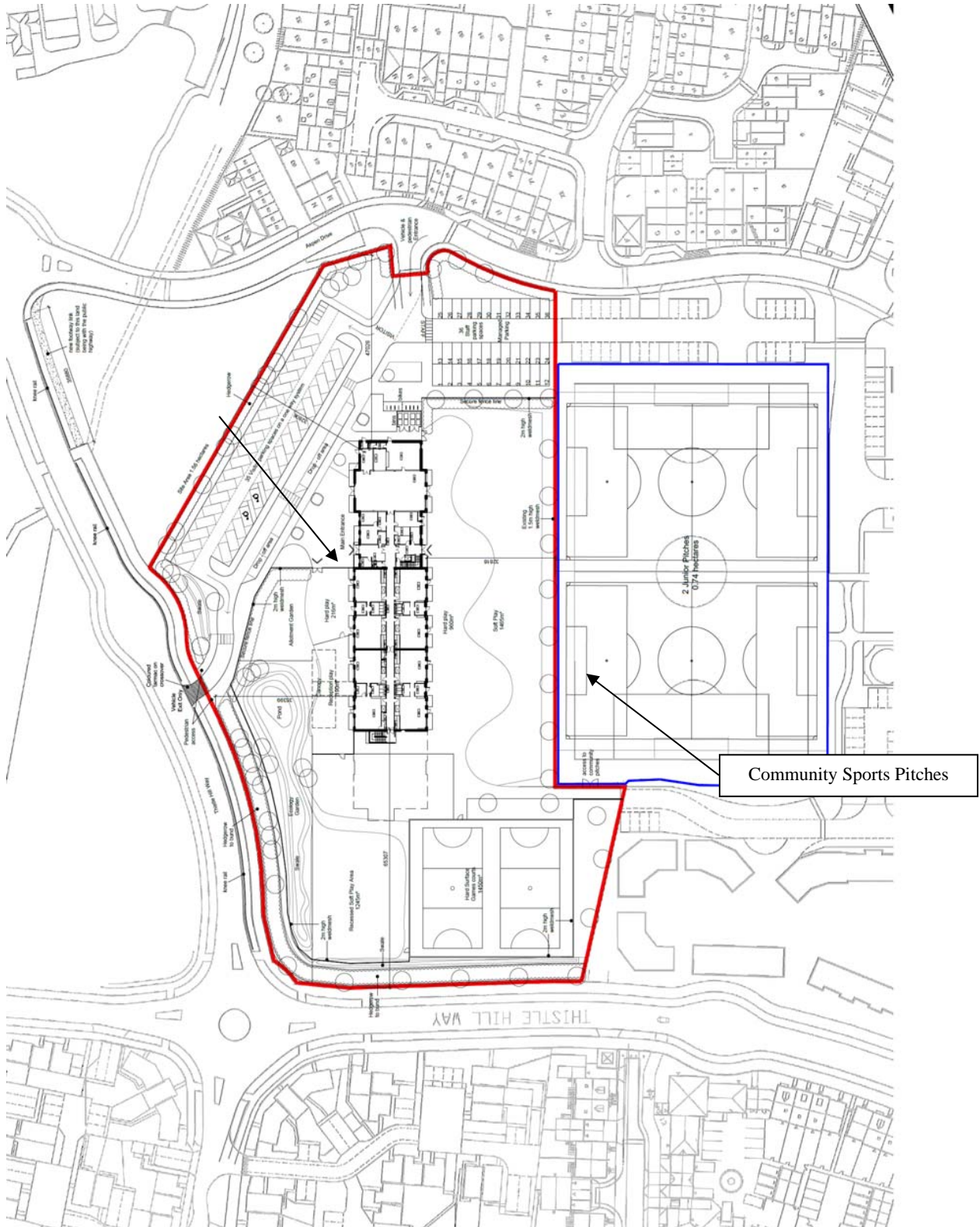
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General Location Plan



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Site Location Plan



Proposed Elevations

01 Proposed Elevations / Overview

Thistle Hill Primary School



South Elevation



North Elevation



West Elevation

Not to Scale

HMM|C
3 Tangam Lane, Palace Street, Canterbury, Kent CT1 1ED. T: 01227 454481 F: 01227 451372



East Elevation



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Proposal

5. When the reserved matters application was submitted and approved in 2007 it was not known whether the primary school would be provided, as the future plans of the Education Authority for the Isle of Sheppey were uncertain at that time. No detailed design for the school was included in that application, nor any specific conditions attached relating to the primary school site. The original planning permission has now expired therefore a new application for the detailed design of the school has been made.
6. Current education data shows that on the Isle of Sheppey school rolls are forecast to increase over the next three years across the Island. It is therefore planned to expand primary school capacity in Sheppey in response to rising birth rates, internal migration and the housing development surrounding the site at Thistle Hill, hence the requirement for this school.
7. The application seeks approval for a 2 Form Entry primary school. The school would sit almost centrally within the site and have an east-west orientation, with the front entrance facing to the north.
8. The building would be two storey in height and be of a flat roof design, following the guidance given in the Education Funding Agency Priority School Building Programme design brief. The building would have three elements to it – the two storey classroom section, a double height hall, and a single storey element housing the main kitchen and stores at one end of the building. At the other end there would be an external escape staircase which would be wrapped with an aluminium louvered screen. The three main building elements would be clad in slightly different materials and colours to distinguish them from each other, but with a continuous brick plinth to tie everything together. The windows would be recessed slightly to provide definition and shading, and their spacing would provide a rhythm to the facades.
9. Vehicular access into the site would be solely from Aspen Drive, at the point of the existing road spur, with access to a staff only car park on the immediate left (36 spaces, 24 of which would be tandem parked, therefore needing to be managed by the school). Visitor and parent parking would be provided to the north of the site which would include 35 visitor spaces on a one way system, plus a separate drop off only area with parking for 7 cars. All vehicles would exit onto Thistle Hill Way. There would be pedestrian access on both sides of the vehicle entrance and exit points, providing ease of access to the school building for pedestrians from all directions. There would also be a designated area for cycle parking adjacent to the staff car park and close to the school building.
10. The development would also include the completion of the footpaths that surrounds the site in a small section near the roundabout with Thistle Hill Way and Aspen Drive.
11. The external areas for the school would include hard and soft play areas to the south of the building, backing onto the community sports pitches. Outdoor play and teaching areas would be provided to the north of the building, along with a pond and ecology garden forming part of the Swale. A MUGA with 2 courts would be provided on the western boundary, enclosed by 2m high fencing. The site itself would be bordered by hedgerows along the road frontages, with a fence inside of this enclosing the schools external play spaces and along the southern boundary with the community sports pitches.

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12. The School would use these community pitches for their playing field provision (2 junior size pitches) as the development site area is not large enough to provide any pitches specific to the school.

Planning Policy

13. The most relevant Government Guidance and Development Plan Policies summarised below are pertinent to the consideration of this application:

- (i) **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** March 2012 and the **National Planning Policy Guidance** (March 2014), sets out the Government's planning policy guidance for England, at the heart of which is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. The guidance is a material consideration for the determination of planning applications but does not change the statutory status of the development plan which remains the starting point for decision making. However the weight given to development plan policies will depend on their consistency with the NPPF (the closer the policies in the development plan to the policies in the NPPF, the greater the weight that may be given).

In determining applications the NPPF states that local planning authorities should look for solutions rather than problems, and decision takers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.

In terms of delivering sustainable development in relation to this development proposal, the NPPF guidance and objectives covering the following matters are of particular relevance:

- Consideration of whether the opportunities for sustainable transport have been taken up and safe and suitable access to the site can be achieved for all people;
- Achieving the requirement for high quality design and a good standard of amenity for all existing and future occupants of land and buildings;
- The great importance that the Government attaches to ensuring that a sufficient choice of school places is available to meet the needs of existing and new communities, and that great weight should be given to the need to create, expand or alter schools.

- (ii) **Policy Statement – Planning for Schools Development** (15 August 2011) which sets out the Government's commitment to support the development of state-funded schools and their delivery through the planning system.

(iii) **Swale Borough Local Plan 2008:**

Policy SP1 Sustainable Development: Proposals should accord with principles of sustainable development that increase local self-sufficiency, satisfy human needs, and provide a robust, adaptable and enhanced environment.

Policy SP2 Environment: Development should avoid adverse environmental impact, and where development needs are greater, adverse impacts should be minimised and mitigated.

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- Policy C1 Existing and New Community Services and Facilities**
The Borough Council will grant planning permission for new or improved community services and facilities, and particularly those that include provision for wider public use.
- Policy E1 General Development Criteria:** Proposals should cause no demonstrable harm to residential amenity and other sensitive uses or areas; reflect positively characteristics and features of the site surroundings; and protect and enhance the natural and built environments.
- Policy E19 Achieving High Quality Design and Distinctiveness:** Development proposals should be of a high quality design and respond positively to design criteria.
- Policy E21 Sustainable Design and Build:** Proposals should incorporate sustainable design and build measures into the detailed design of new development in its use of siting, design, materials and landscaping.
- Policy T1 Providing Safe Access to New Development:** Proposals which cause unacceptable impacts of the capacity of the highway network or on highway safety will not be granted planning permission.
- Policy T3 Vehicle Parking for New Development:** Requires appropriate vehicle parking for new development in accordance with the adopted Kent County Council parking standards.
- Policy T4 Cyclists and pedestrians:** Requires cycle parking facilities for new development in accordance with the Kent County Council cycle parking standards.

(iv) The draft **Swale Borough Local Plan ('Bearing Fruits')** (August 2013) also contains broadly similar policies on transport, parking, design and general development criteria, but these policies currently carry very little weight, given their draft status.

Consultations

14. **Swale Borough Council** objects to the application as they consider the proposed design to be of poor quality, which fails to respond positively to the existing environment, reinforce local distinctiveness or strengthen the sense of place.

Minster on Sea Parish Council objects to the application as they consider the design to be soulless and uninspiring; that the visual impact of the proposal would be detrimental to the surrounding environment and would not complement the attractiveness of the surrounding dwellings; and they object to the public football pitch being appropriated within the school to the detriment of the local community. Upon re-consultation they also commented on the maintenance issues with flat roofs and suggest alternative designs of schools which they felt would be more appropriate.

A further letter has also been received stating that the Parish disagree that the design of

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the building cannot be altered, and in their view they believe that there is no requirement for a flat roof design. They are disappointed that their views are not being taken into account by KCC, especially as they represent the views of the local community.

Environment Agency raises no objection.

Sport England has no concerns with the planning application, but suggest that their guidance regarding MUGA design be taken into account during construction.

Biodiversity Officer is satisfied with the conclusions of the Ecological Survey submitted and requested details be submitted of the Swale and Ecology Garden as a condition.

Kent County Council's Highways and Transportation Officer has no objection to the proposals following receipt of amended plans, subject to various highway conditions.

School Travel Plan Officer raises no objection but recommends a School Travel Plan be registered with KCC within 6 months of occupation of the school, and thereafter maintained and reviewed.

Local Member

15. The local County Member Mr Adrian Crowther was notified of the application on 16th May.

Publicity

16. The application was publicised by the posting of three site notices around the perimeter of the site, an advertisement in the local newspaper, and the individual notification of 41 residential properties.

Representations

17. In response to the publicity no letters of objection were been received from members of the public.

Discussion

18. In considering this proposal regard must be had to the Development Plan Policies outlined in paragraph 15 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.
19. This application is being reported to the Planning Applications Committee following the objections received from the District Authority and the Parish Council. In my view the main issues to consider are the design and layout of the school and the traffic and parking implications associated with the school use.

School Design and Layout

20. The proposed school building has been arranged in three elements as set out above, with a two-storey classroom element, a double height hall, and a single storey kitchen and store area. The building would have a flat roof and the three different elements would be clad in different materials to provide distinctive elements of the building. Large timber and aluminium windows would provide ventilation and daylight and would be spaced rhythmically along the length of the elevations to form an interesting and well-proportioned façade. The windows would be set back as far as possible in the openings to provide a depth to the elevation and a nominal amount of shading. In some cases the reveals of the windows would be of a vibrant colour to add contrast to the elevation.
21. The metal escape staircase located at the end of the classroom element would be enclosed with an aluminium louvered screen around it, and the same screening would be used to shield the plant material that would be required on the kitchen roof. A steel and timber framed canopy, with a polycarbonate sheet covering would be included over the main entrance to provide a focal point for the entrance to the school.
22. The design of the school had been discussed at a pre-application stage, and was further reviewed by the South East Regional Design Panel prior to submission of the planning application. Concern has been raised during the consultation process by the Parish and the Borough Council that the design is not appropriate and could be improved - in particular objection has been taken to the flat roof design. The wish for an alternative design based on previous schools built in the near locality has also been expressed, with the view that these were 'better' than that currently proposed. These other schools were built at a time when the funding for school construction was not as stringent as it is in the current financial climate, and they cannot be replicated now.
23. The design of this school was based on the very prescriptive template and guidelines provided by the Department for Education and the Education Funding Agency (EFA), which the scheme needs to follow to secure the necessary funding. The 'base line' design model for a 2 Form Entry Primary School basically limits proposals to a two storey, flat roof design, which allows the thermal properties of the concrete to be used to cool the building in the summer. Although a flat roof is not a mandatory requirement, the architects have advised as follows:

"The flat roof is a result of the requirement from Government to follow the EFA Baseline Design guidance in order to obtain the funding for this Basic Needs school. The environmental strategy outlined in this guidance requires the building to have thermal mass to help regulate the temperature and avoid the reliance on mechanical cooling. The best location for thermal mass is at the ceiling level which is achieved using concrete planks for the floors and roof. Concrete planks cannot be laid economically to any significant pitch, so the roof is flat [in appearance, but] a minimum 1:60 fall is created using tapered insulation to allow the roof to drain. The waterproof layer of the roof would be a robust 3 layer built-up bitumen system. Access for maintenance of the vent terminals and other pieces of plant would be via a roof access hatch; protection from falling would be achieved with a minimum 1100mm [c. 3 feet, 7 inches] high parapet".

Whilst a flat roof design does not meet everyone's idea of 'good design', in this case the school has been well thought out so that it operates soundly for its occupants (i.e. the teaching provision), the design was amended to take on board the positive comments of

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the South East Regional Design Panel, and it is considered it would be entirely in keeping with the surrounding area of new and modern housing development. It should be noted that the site does not lie in an area where there are heritage aspects to take into consideration or respect the setting of, such as Conservation Areas or proximity to Listed Buildings. The context here is a modern residential development, partly still under construction.

24. Notwithstanding the above, the agent has made some minor alterations to the scheme which includes increasing the height of the parapet on the hall element to further distinguish that element and provide interest to the roof heights across the building as a whole. Coloured banding has been introduced to the kitchen element along with contrasting coloured reveals to the hall elevations. I do consider that these alterations further improve the overall design and external appearance of the building.
25. In terms of the layout of the site, the school building would occupy the centre of the site, with the parking areas to the north and east of the school. The remainder of the site would have areas of soft play space and hard surface playgrounds, plus allotment gardens and the swale which would incorporate an ecology garden and pond – all of which would provide external teaching facilities for the school, whilst providing an interesting and 'green' appearance for the school grounds. A landscape condition has been proposed to ensure details of the landscape scheme can be approved and include areas of planting to soften the appearance of the parking areas.
26. In summary, and despite the objections received, I strongly consider that the design of the school is acceptable, fully in line with Government policy and would be in keeping with the surrounding modern residential development, in accordance with Policies E1 and E19 of the Swale Borough Local Plan.

Traffic and Parking

27. The proposed school would be located amongst an area of new housing development, and would provide a community facility to support the residents now living in this area. However, as with all new developments there is generally pressure for parking spaces and adequate provision needs to be made for school parking in order to ensure overspill parking doesn't create an amenity problem for the surrounding residents.
28. The application has been supported by the submission of a Transport Statement, and it is considered that the surrounding highway network would be suitable to cope with the traffic that is anticipated to be generated by the school use.
29. 35 visitor spaces are proposed for the school, along with an additional 7 spaces for drop off only, all on a one-way system entering from Aspen Drive and existing onto Thistle Hill Way. An additional 36 spaces are proposed solely for staff parking, 24 of which would be tandem spaces, therefore would need to be managed by the school. The Highways and Transportation Officer has considered the parking provision proposed and considers that the level is acceptable, exceeding numbers generally expected for a school of this size.
30. However, there was concern that on-street parking might still occur, particularly during the afternoon pick up period, and that Thistle Hill Way would experience the worst of this with cars parking on the grass verges, affecting the flow of traffic and creating

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maintenance problems. To resolve this concern, knee rails have been included along the length of Thistle Hill Way, either side of the exit, which would stop cars parking along this road verge and causing an amenity impact for neighbouring residents.

31. In addition the applicants have submitted a Memorandum of Understanding, in which they agree to pay the costs of introducing a Traffic Regulation Order should parking and waiting restrictions become necessary near the pedestrian access on Thistle Hill Way, once the school has opened.
32. The layout of the site would allow good linkages with the existing pedestrian and cycle routes in the vicinity. A small section of footpath to the north-east of the site is currently missing (close to the roundabout junction of Thistle Hill Way and Aspen Drive) and this is proposed to be completed as part of this planning application, thus improving the pedestrian links in the area.
33. Bike storage facilities are proposed close to the school which would encourage travel to school by alternative means to the car, and a condition is proposed for the need to submit a School Travel Plan to encourage sustainable transport methods.
34. It is therefore considered that the scheme would be acceptable in relation to both traffic generation and parking provision, and would accord with the provisions of Policies T1, T3 and T4 of the Swale Borough Local Plan.

Other Matters

Drainage

35. The site is located within Flood Zone 1 and, although the lowest risk category for flooding, the site area is more than 1 hectare in area, therefore the application has to be supported by the submission of a Flood Risk Assessment (FRA). This document has assessed the likely flood risk associated with the site and the details of the drainage strategy required (including Sustainable Drainage Systems SuDS), and the document has been assessed by the Environment Agency and Kent County Council's Flood Risk Project Officer.
36. The drainage strategy for the site includes measures such as permeable paving, swales and tree pits, and these measures will provide surface water conveyance and storage during storm events, as well as providing amenity and biodiversity benefits to the School and local community.
37. The FRA has demonstrated that the site can be developed safely without exposing the new development to an unacceptable degree of flood risk or increasing the flood risk to third parties. From this point of view, the scheme is considered to be acceptable and in accordance with the requirements of the NPPF.

Construction

38. Given that there are neighbouring residential properties, if planning permission is granted it is considered appropriate to impose a condition restricting hours of construction to protect residential amenity (Monday to Friday between 0800 and 1800; Saturday 0900 to 1300; and no operations on Sundays or public holidays).

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39. Should permission be granted a condition requiring the submission of a full Construction Management Strategy prior to commencement of development is considered appropriate. That should include details of how the site access would be managed, details of the methods and hours of working, location of site compounds and operative/visitor parking, details of site security and safety measures, lorry waiting and wheel washing facilities and details of any construction access.
40. In addition to the above, should permission be granted, a further condition to ensure that dust and mud are not deposited on the highway would also be considered appropriate, to minimise disruption to local residents.

Biodiversity

41. The application has been supported by the submission of an Ecological Appraisal, which has been considered by Kent County Council's Biodiversity Officer. Upon review of the information submitted it is considered that due to the habitat present on site there is a low potential for protected species to be impacted by the proposed development. Bats have been recorded in the area, however, and external lighting can be detrimental to roosting, foraging and commuting bats. An informative is proposed which gives the applicants details about the Bat Conservation Trusts lighting guidance to address this concern.
42. The proposed development would enhance biodiversity by incorporating hedgerows, a pond, an ecology garden, allotment garden and a Swale within the site. In order to ensure the ecology garden does not compromise the functionality of the swale, a condition requiring the submission of details of both is proposed.

Use of Community Sports Pitches

43. As outlined earlier the school site is not large enough for the required playing pitches to be provided on site. Therefore, the School is proposing to share the use of the community sports pitches which lie directly to the south of and adjoining the school site, further to an agreement set out between Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council. The Parish Council has raised objection to the School 'appropriating' these pitches to the detriment of the Community, however this arrangement was fully envisaged in the earlier Development Brief. Sport England has been consulted on the application and has raised no concerns regarding this shared use. Furthermore it is likely that the community use of the sports pitches would fall outside of school hours – being used more at evenings and weekends than throughout the school day. I therefore consider that this shared use would be entirely acceptable, in accordance with the agreement made between Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council, and not dissimilar from arrangements made for other shared facilities involving school development.

Conclusion

44. The application has been considered on its own merits and in the light of the NPPF, the Planning for Schools Development Policy Statement and the Development Plan, and comments received raising concerns about the scheme. I consider that the proposed new school at Thistle Hill would be acceptable from a design point of view, and would

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not harm the character of the new housing development within which it would be situated. Whilst I can understand there being disappointment that the new school would not be of a more adventurous design and appearance, all schools are now required to be more ergonomic and less extravagant in cost terms, and to ensure that that happens the current Government has imposed a mandatory template for school design which the applicants have no choice but to follow. The site would be easily accessible via a good highway network, and be provided with an above average level of on-site car parking to support the school. It is therefore considered that the development would accord with the principles of sustainable development as set out in the NPPF.

45. Therefore, subject to the imposition of conditions, I consider that the development would not give rise to any material harm, and is otherwise in accordance with the general aims and objectives of the relevant Development Plan Policies, the Planning Statement and the guidance contained in the NPPF, and that permission should therefore be granted.

Recommendation

46. I RECOMMEND that PERMISSION BE APPROVED, SUBJECT TO the imposition of conditions covering (amongst other matters) the following:

- the standard 5 year time limit;
- the development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details;
- the submission and approval of details of all construction materials to be used externally;
- the submission of a School Travel Plan within 6 months of occupation and its ongoing review;
- measures to be taken to prevent mud and debris being deposited on the public highway;
- hours of working during construction to be restricted to between the hours of 0800 and 1800 Monday to Friday and between the hours of 0900 and 1300 on Saturdays, with no operations on Sundays or Bank Holidays;
- the submission of a Construction Management Plan, providing details of access, parking and circulation within the site for contractors, site personnel and other operatives & management of the site access to avoid peak school times;
- the access being provided prior to occupation;
- the northwestern access onto Thistle Hill Way being an 'exit only' access with appropriate signage;
- the offsite highway works being carried out prior to occupation;
- the parking to be laid out as approved, prior to occupation, and thereafter maintained and used for no other purpose;
- the cycle parking to be provided prior to occupation, and thereafter permanently retained;
- the submission of a landscape scheme to be approved by the County Planning Authority;
- the replanting of any trees and shrubs that die within 5 years of planting
- the submission of details of the Swale and Ecology garden; and
- the submission of details, and written approval, of any external lighting.

I FURTHER RECOMMEND that the following INFORMATIVES be added:

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- the registering with Kent County Council of the School Travel Plan through the “Jambusters” website following the link <http://www.jambusterstpms.co.uk>;
- the adherence to the Bat Conservation Trust’s guidance in relation to external lighting;
- the design of the MUGA being in accordance with Sport England’s guidance;
- that foul drainage be discharged to the mains sewer; and
- that all necessary highway approvals and consents are obtained.

Case Officer: Helen Edwards

Tel. no: 03000 413366

Background Documents: see section heading
