

Extension to and refurbishment of existing school buildings (for the relocation of Rowhill School) at the Woodview Campus, Longfield – DA/08/228

A report by Head of Planning Applications Group to Planning Applications Committee on 24 June 2008.

Application submitted by Kent County Council Children, Families, Health and Education for the proposed extension to and refurbishment of existing school buildings, erection of a new minibus garage and boundary fencing and alterations to existing car park area (for the relocation of Rowhill School, Wilmington) at the Woodview Campus, Main Road, Longfield - DA/08/228.

Recommendation: that the application be referred to the First Secretary of State as a departure from the Development Plan, and that subject to her decision, and subject to the undertaking and submission of a written agreement to ensure that the planning permission at Rowhill School, Wilmington, is not implemented, that planning permission be granted subject to conditions.

Local Members: Mr B. Bassam

Classification: Unrestricted

Site

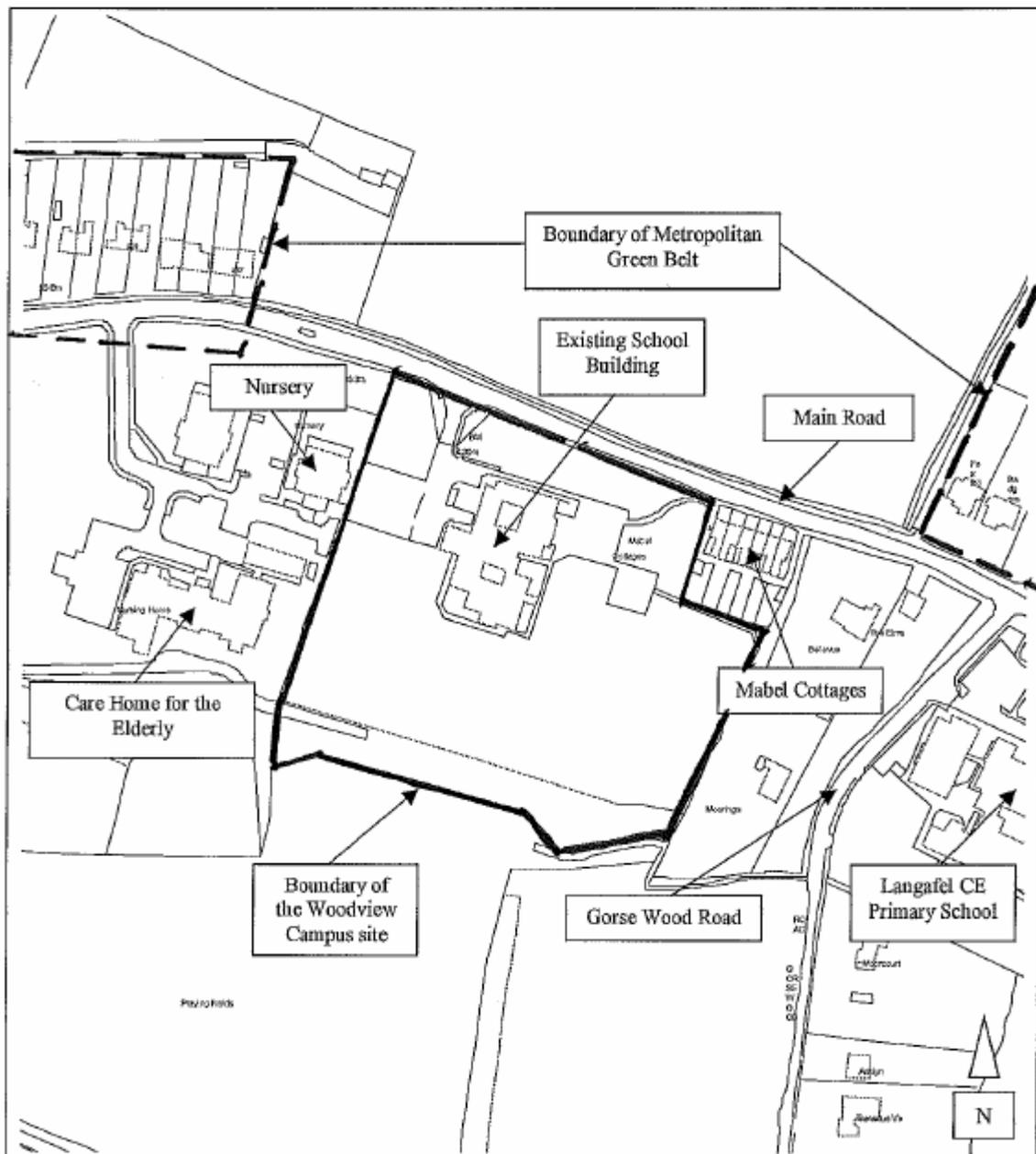
- 1 The Woodview Campus is located on the eastern edge of Longfield, accessed via the B260 (Main Road) which is located to the north of the site. The Woodview Campus occupies an area of 1.92 hectares, and is currently occupied by a small special needs nursery school and, temporarily, by the Phoenix Centre which is also a special needs unit. The premises were most recently used by the West Kent Hospital Schools Service but the Service has now permanently vacated the site following fire damage and rebuilding over the last 2 years. When the school originally opened on the site it had a capacity for 220 students of primary age, whereas approximately only 35 children and students now use the site, meaning that the school is currently operating well below capacity.
2. The application site comprises access and car parking to the north west, the main school buildings to the centre of the northern half of the site and playing fields extending to the east. Open grassland and tree planting extends to the south and west of the school buildings. The site is bound by the B260 to the north, beyond which extends gently sloping arable farmland, the playing fields of Axton Chase School, beyond which lies a railway line, to the south, and community facilities including a care home for the elderly and a nursery to the west. To the north east of the site, fronting the Main Road, are six terraced houses known as Mabel Cottages, and a further two detached residential properties are located to the east of the site boundary, beyond which lies Gorse Wood Road and Langafel CE Primary School. The adopted Dartford Borough Local Plan and the Dartford Borough Local Plan Review show the site to be within the Metropolitan Green Belt. *A site location plan is attached.*

Background

3. This application has been prepared with the objective of seeking planning consent for the relocation of Rowhill SEN School, currently based in Wilmington, Dartford. Although planning permission has been granted for a major extension to Rowhill School, which is also within the Metropolitan Green Belt, the applicant advises that this is not financially viable and has been abandoned. However, the existing accommodation at Rowhill School does not include adequate specialist teaching

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SITE LOCATION PLAN



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Woodview Campus
Main Road
Longfield
Kent
DA3 7PW

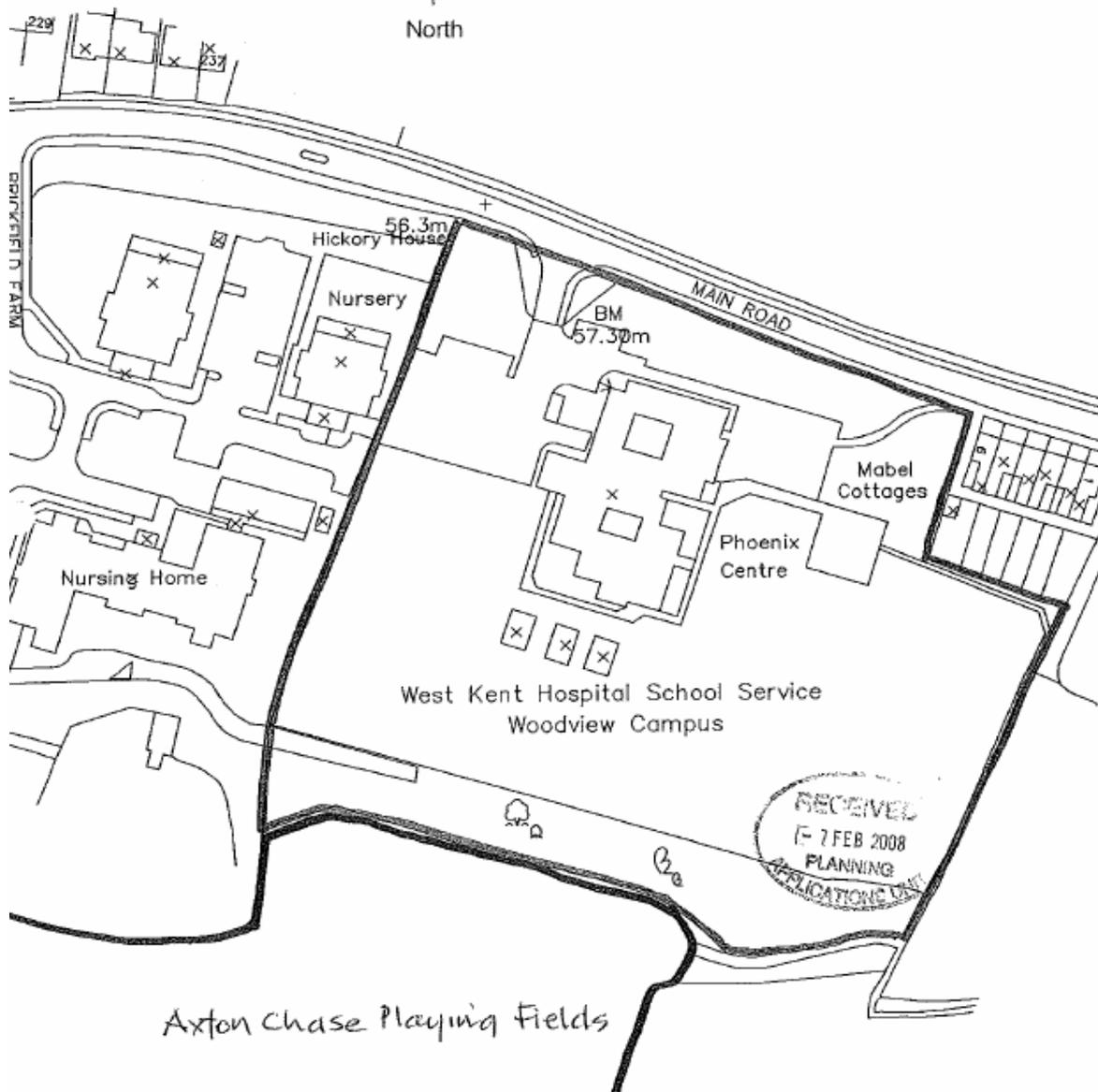
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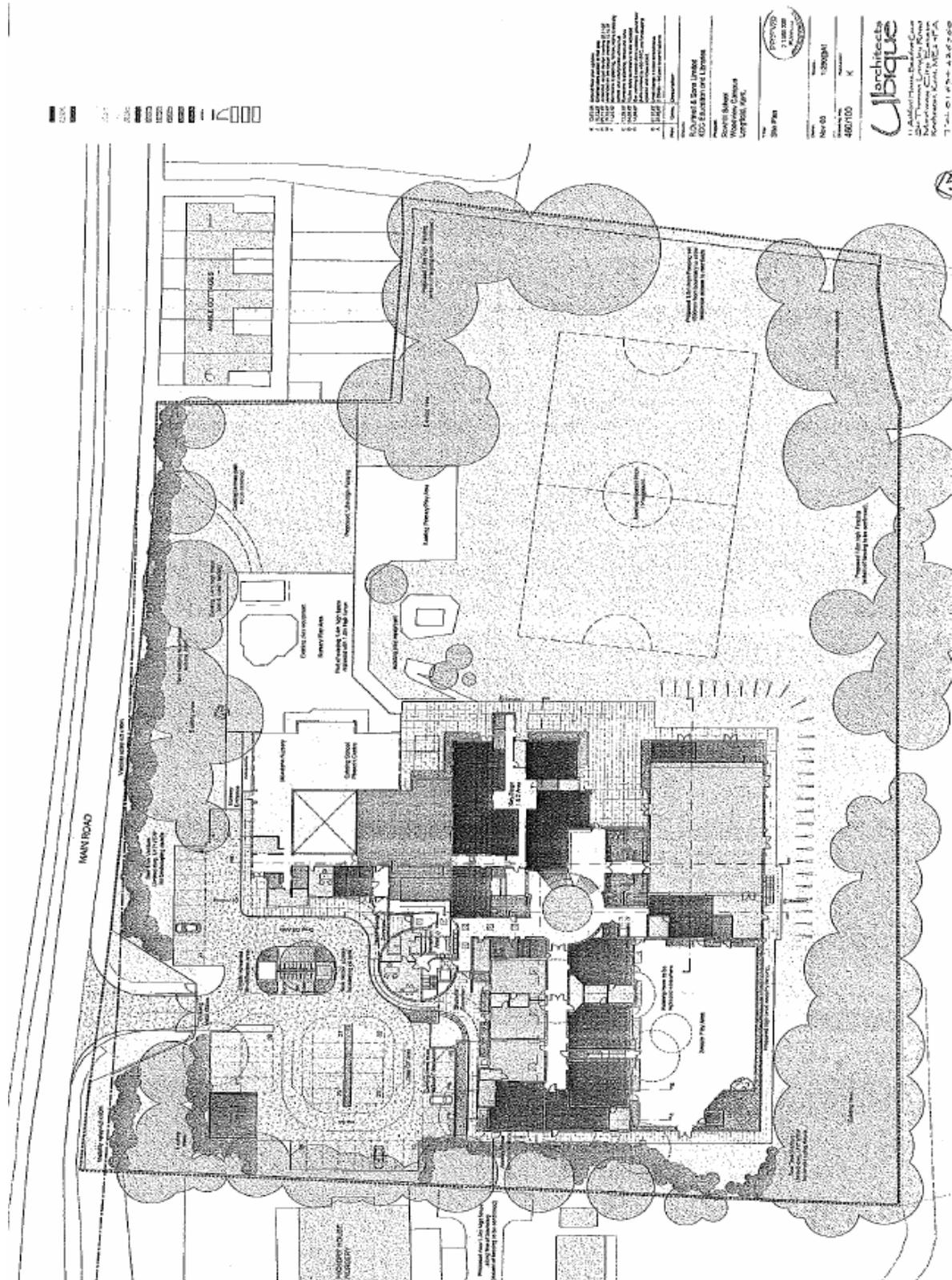
(Proposed Relocation Of Rowhill School)

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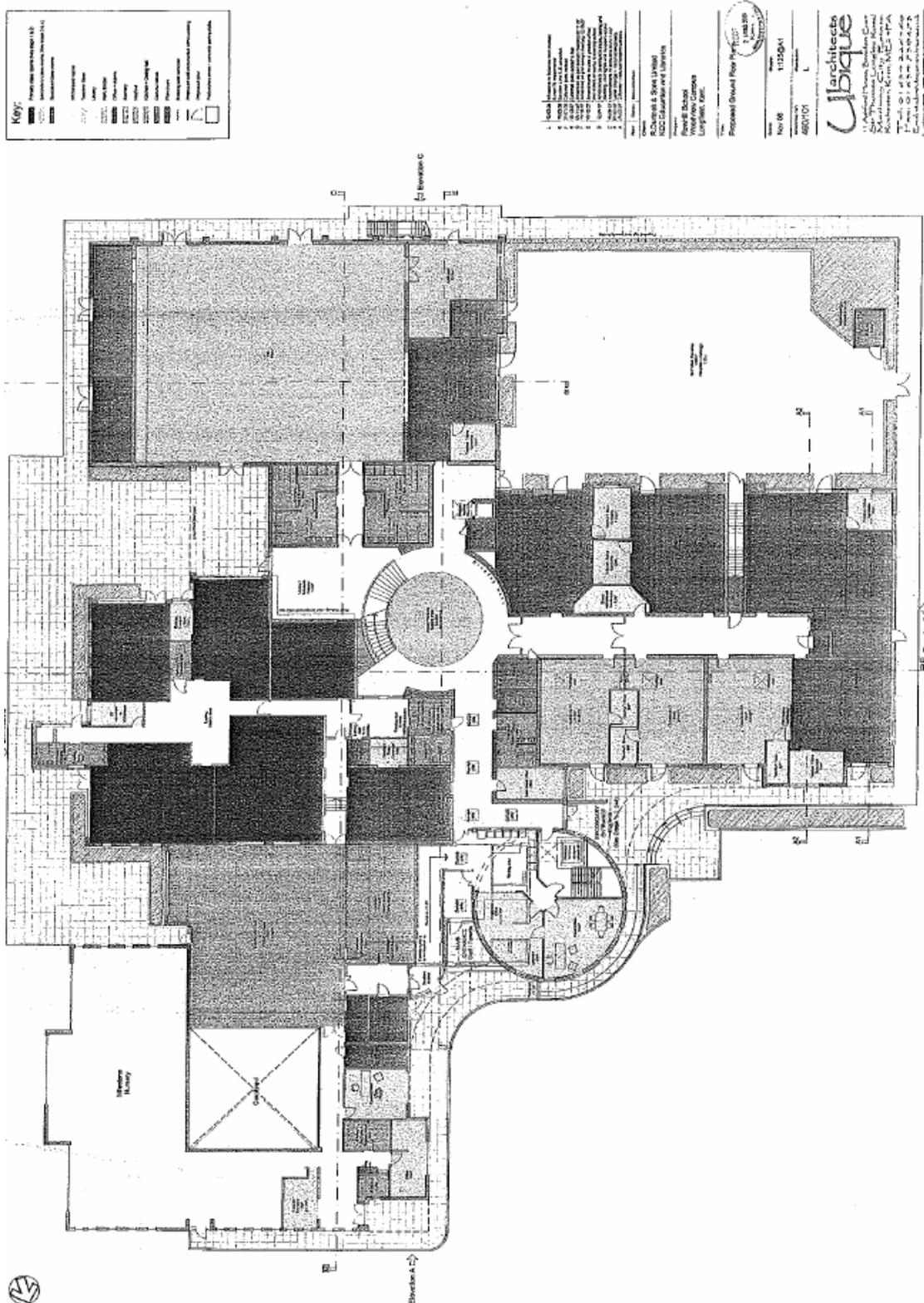
Location Plan
Scale 1:1250



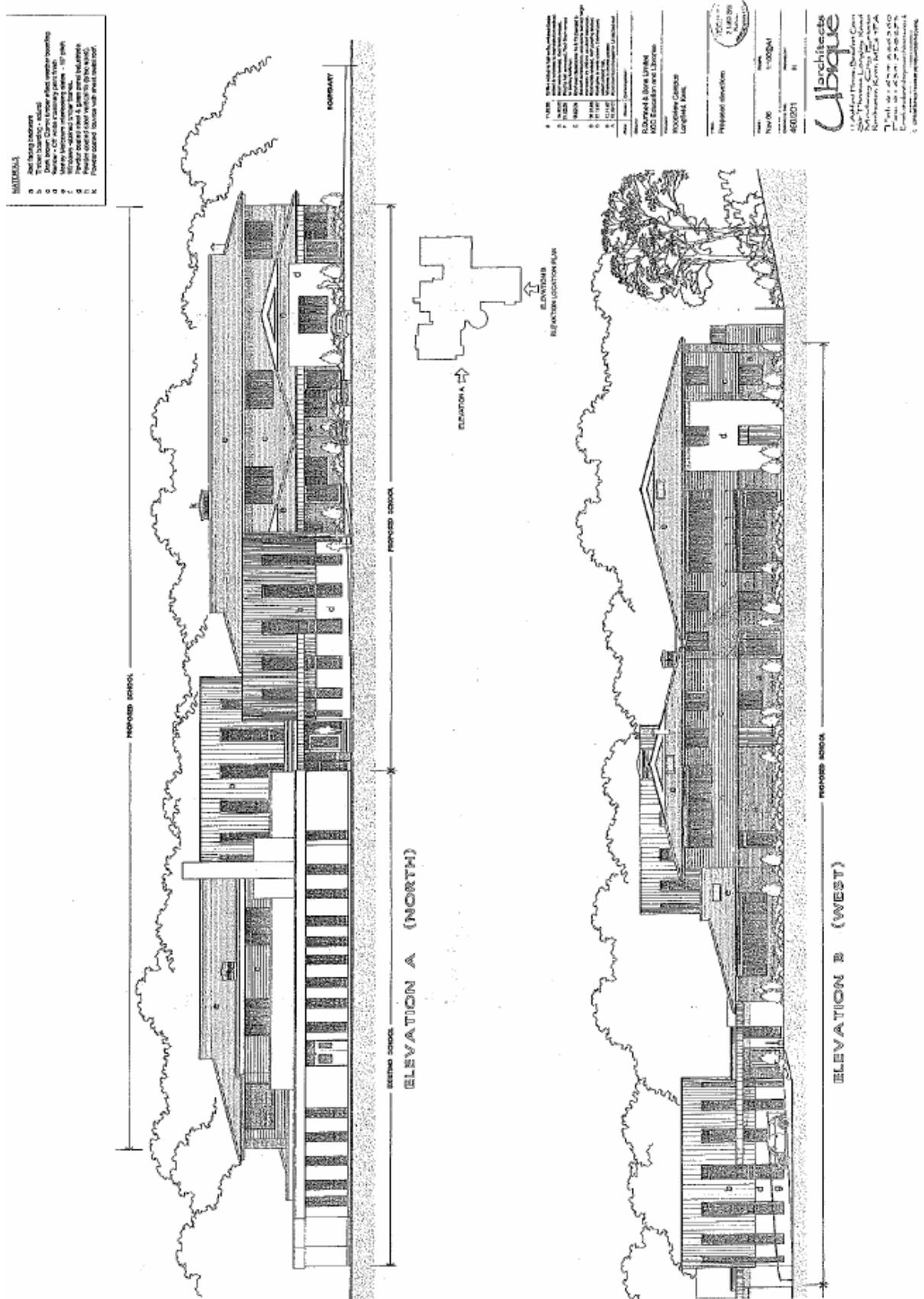
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rooms, and classrooms are generally under size for the number and nature of pupils at the school. It also lacks an indoor PE area, has insufficient class bases and areas for office and preparation functions.

4. Following the failure of proposals to redevelop the Rowhill School site, a 2-3 year search has been undertaken to find an alternative site for the school. Woodview Campus was considered as an existing vacant educational establishment with potential expansion capability, which would allow Rowhill School to completely relocate to better premises and remain on one site. Other suitable sites had been sought through the County Council, but I am advised that nothing could be found within the School's catchment area. In addition, the existing Woodview Campus includes a nursery set up to deal with children of pre-school age and with special needs. By relocating Rowhill School to the Campus both establishments would be able to share expertise and provide a continuum of educational provision. In addition, the establishment of a school at this location would provide the opportunity for joint ventures with adjacent schools, especially as both schools have autism units with established connections to Rowhill School. The Woodview Campus is also more centrally located for the area that Rowhill School serves, reducing travel distances and times. For the reasons outlined above, the decision was made to apply for planning permission to extend and refurbish the Woodview Campus in order that Rowhill School could be relocated to this site. The proposal is outlined below.

Proposal

5. This application proposes an extension to, and refurbishment of, the existing school buildings, the erection of a new minibus garage and boundary fencing, and alterations to the existing car parking area. The original single storey school buildings are typical of system built school buildings in Kent during the 1960's and 70's. The school has recently been partially rebuilt and refurbished following fire damage to the classrooms at the rear of the site. The applicant advises that the overriding objective in developing the design proposal was to fulfil the educational requirements of Rowhill School whilst respecting and protecting the openness of, and mitigating any encroachment into, the Green Belt. The development would provide accommodation for children aged 5-16 years of age with behavioural and learning difficulties.
6. As previously outlined, there is already a school on the site, with an existing building footprint coverage of 1544m². The Woodview Campus occupies an area of 1.68 hectares, meaning that the amount of building coverage relative to the site area is just over 9% as existing. It should be noted that the figure includes approximately 187m² of temporary portakabin accommodation at the rear of the site. The application proposals would result in a total of 2589m² of new floor area created, 1743m² of which would be at ground floor level. The applicant advises that the amount of building coverage as proposed relative to the site area would increase to 19.5%, leaving over 80% of the site open, with all of the existing playing fields, playgrounds and peripheral landscaped areas retained.
7. The extension to the existing school is the main part of this proposal. It is proposed to extend the school building to the south and west, incorporating the footprint of the existing temporary buildings. The applicant advises that the siting of the proposed extension has been chosen to be as close to the existing buildings as possible, whilst being in the least visible part of the site in an effort to maintain the open character of the site when viewed from the major vantage points. Locating the extension in the

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southwest corner would take advantage of the screening provided by the existing wooded hillside to the south, the established boundary hedge to the west and the existing school building itself to the north.

8. In order to minimise the footprint encroachment into the open space, the extension would be partly arranged over 2 floors, with a single storey element to the north, towards the site frontage, increasing to 2 storey to the rear of the site. An activity hall is also proposed, which would be of an equivalent height to the 2 storey teaching block, and is proposed to the south of the existing school buildings, adjacent to the playing fields. In addition, a focal entrance to the school was required, and a 2 storey rotunda was conceived to provide a strong and obvious focus for visitors, staff and students, whilst enabling it to be distinct from the other school accommodation around it.
9. The arrangement of the new extension allows the existing building to remain largely unaltered except for a number of minor openings to allow access between the old and new parts. The extension comprises of 15 classrooms, a library/resource room, and associated administration space, withdrawal rooms, toilets and changing facilities. The entrance rotunda would link the existing building with the new extension, and incorporates a dedicated pupil entrance, as well as access for staff and visitors. The administration area, headteacher's room and staff room are all located within the entrance rotunda as this would be the pivot point for access throughout the school. Once inside the school the main corridor leads to the main central circulation hub, from which point the pupils can be grouped and directed to the appropriate classrooms at the start of each day.
10. From the central hub, Key Stage I and II students would be directed towards their classrooms on the ground floor, whilst Key Stage III and IV students would be directed to their classroom, predominately located on the first floor. Within each identified Key Stage area at both levels there would be withdrawal rooms. On the ground floor, a number of specialist teaching areas, e.g. science, music and ICT, are proposed, which would be available to all pupils. The main activity hall is located to the rear of the building, and would incorporate a multi gym side room. From the hall, pupils would have direct access to the playing fields, and the proposed 'courtyard', a 600m² enclosed play area located in the south west corner of the site to the rear of the extension. The existing school hall would be retained and would function as the dining area, and the existing kitchen area would be reconstructed and refitted to serve the extended new school.
11. The applicant advises that the scale and massing of the proposed extension has been carefully developed to ensure the most compact and sympathetic building for the situation. The teaching accommodation at the northern side of the extension, facing the car park and main entrance has been kept to a single storey format, with a shallow pitched slated roof. The eaves of these classrooms are at 2.85m above ground level, lower than the eaves of the existing flat roofed school, which then follows a low pitch back to a ridge height of approximately 6m above ground level. The applicant considers that this helps to maintain an appropriate scale for the school, and assists in masking the scale of the larger 2 storey wing behind.
12. The 2 storey element of the extension contains most of the new teaching accommodation, and has been proposed at 2 storeys in order to minimise the footprint of the building. The overall height of the 2 storey wing is comparable to the adjacent nursing home. The rearmost part of the new extension would contain the activity hall, changing rooms, music room and storage and, therefore, needs to be higher in order to

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be fit for purpose. However, despite the inherent height required for the activity hall, its ridge height is at a similar level to the height of the main teaching block.

13. The whole building would be distinguished by 2 rotunda structures, one of which defines the central circulation hub and stairs, and the other being the main entrance to the school. A mixture of external cladding materials have been proposed for the development, the choice of which was influenced by the vernacular rural building materials prevalent in north west Kent. A mixture of brickwork, black weatherboarding, timber cladding, render panels and 'slate' appearance roofing are proposed.
14. At the scheme layout stage, consideration was taken to ensure a satisfactory relationship with neighbouring residential properties and their amenity areas. The main neighbouring issues relate to the proximity of the adjacent nursing home. The proposed layout of the development positions the teaching block element of the proposed extension 9 metres from the boundary of the site at the closest point, 17 metres from the flank wall of the single storey extension to the front of the nursing home, and 25 metres from the two storey main block of the nursing home. The applicant advises that the boundary is heavily populated with established trees and shrubs which provides effective screening.
15. The applicant advises that the proposed location of the new building would only necessitate the removal of a handful of 'low category' trees to the west of the existing building. All boundary planting would be retained. An Arboricultural Report was submitted in support of this application, which also outlines a proposed scheme of landscaping and tree planting, which would concentrate on the western boundary, improving screening with neighbouring community facilities.
16. As part of the proposals, a garage is required for the 2 minibuses owned by the School. The proposed garage is a low lying single storey structure, in a timber boarded rural design, located to the north west of the site, to the west of the site entrance. The applicant advises that the garage would be set amongst appropriate new landscaping, and would be sited upon an area of existing hard standing. The application site has 37 existing car parking spaces, and it is proposed to increase this to 42. In addition, the rearrangement of vehicle circulation includes drop-off areas and a one-way system around the car park. The drop-off areas would allow minibuses, taxis and cars to drop off pupils immediately adjacent to the main entrance, contributing to both vehicle and pedestrian safety. A Travel Plan was submitted in support of this application, which concludes that currently children are brought to school by 8 taxis, 7 minibuses and 1 coach, and this is likely to remain the same should the school be relocated. In addition, the School's management do not anticipate any difficulties in developing a car parking strategy that encourages staff to car share, use public transport or travel by foot or bicycle. A cycle storage area for 16 cycles would be provided as part of the development.
17. The proposals include for new secure perimeter fencing to the whole school site to achieve the required level of security against unauthorised intruders, and to ensure the safety of pupils during school hours. The fencing would be 1.8m in height, colour coated steel mesh system that would be most appropriate for the site's Green Belt setting. The fencing is intended to be erected on the main south, east and west boundary lines in substitution for the existing fencing. The fencing would also be erected through the site, parallel with Main Road but along the edge of the playing field, separating the school's playing field from the Nursery school playground along the Main Road frontage. The new fencing to the east side of the site would be offset from the boundary at the rear of

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Mabel Cottages and along the eastern boundary to maintain a reasonable footpath access width from the rear of the cottages to the fields to the south of the site. That is an access that the occupants of Mabel Cottages have enjoyed (unofficially) for some years, and the proposed development seeks to retain this. In addition, the front boundary to Main Road is currently defined by chestnut paling fence. The intention is to plant new native hedging along this line to create a more appropriate rural boundary feature.

18. This application was accompanied by a Transport Assessment, Travel Plan, Archaeological Report, Ecological Report, Flood Risk Assessment, Arboricultural Survey and DDA report.

Reduced copies of drawings showing the existing and proposed site layout are attached together with floor plans and elevations/site sections.

Planning Policy

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

The Kent & Medway Structure Plan 2006:

Policy SP1	Seeks to conserve and enhance Kent's environment and to ensure a sustainable pattern of development.
Policy SS2	Within the Green Belt there is a general presumption against inappropriate development.
Policy SS6	Seeks to improve the built and natural environment, the functioning and appearance of the suburbs, including the provision of services and facilities that serve local needs.
Policy EN8	Wildlife habitats and species will be protected, conserved and enhanced. Development likely to have an adverse effect, directly, indirectly or cumulatively, on important habitats or species, will not be permitted unless the adverse impact on an important nature conservation resource can be adequately mitigated and/or compensated.
Policy EN9	Tree cover and the hedgerow network should be maintained. Additionally, they should be enhanced where this would improve the landscape, biodiversity, or link existing woodland habitats.
Policy QL1	Seeks to ensure that all development is well designed and of a high quality that responds positively to the local character. Development, which would be detrimental to the built environment, amenity, function or character of the area, will not be permitted.
Policy QL12	Provision will be made to accommodate additional requirements for local community services in response to

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growth in demand from the community as a whole. The services will be located where they are accessible by walking, cycling and by public transport.

Policy TP3 States that the local planning authority should ensure that development sites are well served by public transport, walking and cycling.

Policy TP19 States that development proposals should comply with vehicle parking policies and maximum standards adopted by the County Council.

Policy NE5 Development should not result in an unacceptable level of pollution i.e. noise levels.

Policy NR10 Development will be designed to avoid the risk of flooding. Where development is necessary in area at risk of flooding it should be designed and controlled to mitigate the impact of flood risk.

(i) The adopted (1995) **Borough of Dartford Local Plan:**

Policy S2 Encouragement will be given to the provision of community facilities.

Policy S4 There is a presumption against development in the Metropolitan Green Belt, as defined in the Local Plan; continued protection will be given to the Countryside and its amenity value and recreation potential will be enhanced.

Policy S6 Encourages conservation and improvement of the existing built environment and the achievement of a high quality and standard of design in new development.

Policy GB2 Within the Green Belt there will be a strong presumption against permitting development other than which accords with Planning Policy Guidance Note 2 or Structure Plan Policy MGB2.

Policy T19 Proposals for development will not normally be permitted where they are not appropriately related to the highway network and generate volumes of traffic in excess of the capacity of the highway network.

Policy B1 The following factors will be taken into account in considering development proposals:

- a) Proposed Use, which should be appropriate for its location and should not have a detrimental effect on the local area through visual impact, traffic generation, noise or other factors.
- b) Design, which should be of a high standard and respect and integrate with the surroundings. Particular attention

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should be paid to the mass, form and scale of the proposed development and its impact on the environment and neighbouring uses.

- c) Materials, which should be of good quality, pleasing in appearance and durable.
- d) Amenity of adjoining properties, particularly in the case of residential properties, should not be materially detracted from by development proposals. This includes the loss of daylight or sunlight, and overlooking from habitable rooms.
- e/f) Access and parking.
[.....]

Policy CF3 The Council will encourage and support the provision of social, community, educational and cultural facilities and infrastructure to meet the current and future needs of the Borough.

(ii) Second Deposit Draft (2002) **Dartford Borough Local Plan Review:**

Policy DD11 A high standard of design will be sought in all proposals. Planning Permission will be granted if the proposed development :

- 1) Is compatible with neighbouring buildings and spaces or improves their surroundings in terms of scale, height, massing, materials and site coverage.
- 2) Incorporates a layout that respects the original topography of the site and retains trees, hedgerows and shrubs which are important landscape features.
- 3) Retains or enhances the privacy and amenity of the local area by reason of form, scale, height, outlook, noise and light intrusion or activity levels including vehicular or pedestrian movements.
- 4) Retains important buildings.
[.....]
- 9) Incorporates appropriate provision for the role of the car.
[.....]

Policy GB2 The openness of the Green Belt defined in the proposals map will be preserved. Within the Green Belt inappropriate development, as defined, will not be permitted. In addition, planning permission will only be granted where it is demonstrated that the use is viable and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future.

Policy CF2 New, additional, or replacement utilities infrastructure shall be sited and designed so as not to harm the environment or appearance of existing developed areas, new developments, the Green Belt and other open land.

Consultations

20. **Dartford Borough Council** raises objection to the proposal for the following reasons:

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“1) The proposed development, by virtue of its overall size and, in the opinion of the Borough Council, in the absence of any ‘Very Special Circumstances’, would constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt, and is contrary to Policy GB2 of the adopted Dartford Borough Local Plan 1995, Policy GB4 of the Dartford Borough Local Plan Review Second Deposit Draft, Policy SS2 of the Adopted Kent and Medway Structure Plan 2006, and the guidance given in PPG2 (Green Belts)

2) Should the County Council be minded to approve the application the Borough Council would request that the following be taken into consideration:

- i) The extant planning permission at Rowhill School is revoked without compensation;
- ii) Measures are put in place to ensure the protection of the trees to be retained at the site during construction in accordance with BS 5837:2005 Trees in Relation to Construction;
- iii) The scale of the rear block is looked at as it appears to dominate the site forming a strong backdrop against the tree belt to the south of the site;”

Following the submission of additional information from the applicant, Dartford Borough Council comment as follows:

“The development proposed is a substantial increase on the existing built footprint and in the opinion of the Borough Council is not an infill extension. The proposal is significantly higher and covers a greater footprint than the existing buildings on site, and it is considered that this has an unacceptable detrimental visual impact on the area and the Green Belt setting. It is for the County Council to determine whether the proposal is acceptable and the justification amounts to ‘very special circumstances’ which outweighs the potential harm to the Green Belt.”

Longfield and New Barn Parish Council objects to the plans as seen. The Parish Council consider that there is no site plan to indicate the security measures for the school. In addition, the Parish Council state that the pavement adjacent to Main Road appears to be inadequate and unsafe for families walking from New Barn to Longfield. The Council hoped that a countryside path would be included, linking with the Axton Chase site.

Divisional Transportation Manager raises no objection to the proposal subject to conditions requiring a review of the Travel Plan at 3 year periods, and a limit on the number of students to allow the traffic impact to be assessed should pupil numbers rise.

Environment Agency raises no objection to the proposal subject to a number of conditions covering matters such as drainage, flood damage prevention measures and land contamination.

The County Council’s Landscape Advisor has commented as follows:

“Whilst we approve of the design and materials of the proposed extension and refurbishment, we query the close proximity to the adjacent Hazelwood Nursing Home and the subsequent imposing effect. We support the landscape proposals in terms of location and amounts of planting, although we would like to see the native hedgerow extended along the boundary fence. We also query the choice of some shrub species in terms of health and safety for children. We suggest that the applicant submits detailed landscape proposals, although this could be submitted as a condition to planning permission. The proposed 1.8m high security fence would cause a slight adverse visual impact from properties to the east. There would not be a significant impact on trees

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because of the extent of trees within the site boundary which would be retained, the limited arboricultural value of the trees to be removed and the extent of proposed mitigation planting.”

Following the submission of additional information from the applicant, The County Councils Landscape Advisor comments as follows:

“We have no comments to make regarding the applicant’s minor amendments to the proposals in terms of roof design and other changes. As suggested by the applicant, we would be satisfied for the detailed landscape proposals to be submitted under a planning condition, should consent be granted, and are pleased that our suggestions would be incorporated. As explained by the applicant we understand and accept the need for the 1.8m high security fence, but again stress the importance of providing a native hedgerow along the fence line to soften the visual impact.

We appreciate the justifications provided for the location of the proposed extension and the resulting proximity to the adjacent Hazelwood Nursing Home, but we consider that the benefit of a reduced encroachment on the Nursing Home outweighs the slight encroachment on the playing field. In addition we do not consider that there would be any significant adverse impact on the Green Belt setting or the access and car parking, should the extension be moved away from the Nursing Home. Therefore we suggest that the applicant considers a slight revision to the location of the extension in order to reduce the anticipated visual impact on the Nursing Home to slight adverse. “

The County Archaeologist has not commented to date.

Local Members

21. The local County Member, Mr B. Bassam, was notified of the application on the 18 February 2008 and raises no objection to the proposal.

Publicity

22. The application was publicised by an advertisement in a local newspaper, the posting of 2 site notices and the individual notification of 10 neighbouring properties, including the adjacent nursing home and nursery. As the site is within the Metropolitan Green Belt the advertisement and site notice indicate that the proposed development does not accord with the provisions of the development plan in force in the area in which the land to which the application relates is situated.

Representations

23. I have not received any letters of representation from local residents.

Discussion

24. In considering this proposal regard must be had to the Development Plan Policies outlined in paragraph (19) 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, this proposal needs to be considered in the context of the Development Plan Policies,

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Government Guidance and other material planning considerations arising from consultation and publicity. Issues of particular relevance include site selection, impact upon the Metropolitan Green Belt and wider landscape, highway implications and access, landscaping and local amenity.

25. Policies SP1 and QL1 of the Kent and Medway Structure Plan, Policy B1 of the adopted Dartford Borough Local Plan and Policy DD11 of the Dartford Borough Local Plan Review, seek to conserve and enhance the environment and require development to be well designed and respect its setting. This is particularly relevant to this site which is identified within the Dartford Borough Local Plan as being within the Metropolitan Green Belt. Any development within the Metropolitan Green Belt could affect the openness of it and would be contrary to planning policies, which presume against inappropriate development in the Green Belt. On this basis the development proposed must be considered as a departure from the Development Plan. Therefore, if Members were minded to grant planning permission, the application would need to be referred to the First Secretary of State for her consideration. In assessing the proposal, the Green Belt issues need to be considered more closely to establish whether or not there are very special circumstances that would warrant setting aside the general presumption against inappropriate development.

Green Belt

26. By virtue of the criteria in PPG2, the development is inappropriate in Green Belt terms. Inappropriate development is, by definition, harmful to the Green Belt and it is for the applicant to demonstrate why permission should be granted. Such development should not be approved, except in very special circumstances.
27. The applicants have stressed that of the utmost importance is the need to find replacement accommodation for Rowhill School. It should be noted that the existing Rowhill School site is also within the Metropolitan Green Belt and, therefore, is subject to the same policy designations as the proposed Woodview Campus site. The applicant has submitted a thorough report in support of this application which details the need for the development, and justifies the size, scale, siting and massing of the proposed extension to the Woodview Campus. Dartford Borough Council has raised objection to this application on the grounds that 'the proposed development, by virtue of its overall size, and the opinion of the Borough Council, in the absence of any 'very special circumstances' would constitute inappropriate development in the Green Belt'. The Borough Council consider that the proposed development is contrary to Development Plan Policies which seek to preserve the openness of the Greenbelt.
28. In light of this, this report will first consider the 'very special circumstances' that need to be provided to justify and support development within the Greenbelt. Should valid and appropriate 'very special circumstances' be accepted, I will then consider the impact of the proposed development on the openness of the Green Belt, assessing the siting, scale and massing of the extension.
29. As detailed within the opening section of this report, this application has been submitted with the objective of seeking planning permission for the relocation of Rowhill SEN School, currently located in Wilmington. The existing Rowhill School site covers an area of 1.42hectares, and is sited within the Metropolitan Green Belt. As outlined within paragraphs 3 & 4 of this report, planning permission to extend Rowhill School on the existing site was granted in December 2005 (due to expire in December 2008). However, that is now considered not to be financially viable and has, therefore, been abandoned

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by the applicant. In addition, the existing site is subject to severe space restriction due to the compact nature of the site, which is on the boundary of an urban area and within the Green Belt. It should be noted that a case of need was provided in association with the 2005 application to extend the existing school, and as planning permission was granted, it was considered that this case of need formed the basis of 'very special circumstances' to warrant development within the Green Belt. This case of need has not changed and, if anything, is more robust in light of ever changing regulations and guidance with regards to delivering the Curriculum.

30. Therefore, the need for extended or replacement accommodation is still paramount, and the applicant advises that the existing accommodation does not include specialist teaching rooms, and classrooms are generally under size for the number and nature of pupils at the school. It also lacks an indoor PE area, has insufficient class bases and areas for office and preparation functions. The applicant has successfully demonstrated a case of need for new/extended accommodation to house Rowhill School. Failed attempts to provide additional accommodation on the existing site have resulted in the applicant undertaking an extensive search to find an alternative site for the school. The only suitable site identified within the School's catchment area was the Woodview Campus in Longfield. Paragraph 4 of this report details the reasons for the selection of this site, all of which I consider to be acceptable in principle. The existing Woodview Campus includes a nursery set up to deal with children of pre-school age and with special needs. By relocating Rowhill School to the Campus both establishments would be able to share expertise and provide a continuum of educational provision. In addition, the establishment of a school at this location would provide the opportunity for joint ventures with adjacent schools, especially as both schools have autism units with established connections to Rowhill School. The Woodview Campus is also more centrally located for the area that Rowhill School serves, reducing travel distances and times.
31. The applicant has outlined what they consider to be 'very special circumstances' to justify development within the Green Belt, whether that be on the existing or proposed site. However, in light of failed attempts to extend the existing accommodation, the applicant has demonstrated a case of need for the relocation of Rowhill School. I consider that the applicant has made all reasonable and practicable attempts to extend the existing accommodation, and with the failure of these attempts, the only viable solution is to relocate the school to an alternative site.
32. However, it is a concern that should planning permission be granted for this proposal, the net loss of Green Belt would be greater than that included within this proposal as the planning permission at the existing Rowhill School site could still be implemented. Dartford Borough Council also raises this concern. The applicant has confirmed that should planning permission be granted, they would be willing to enter into an undertaking to revoke the extant consent to alter and extend the existing Rowhill School. However, the County Planning Authority cannot require the County Council to enter into a legal agreement with itself. Therefore, I consider it appropriate to require, as a pre-condition, written confirmation from the Head of Kent County Council Property Group and the Head of Kent County Council's Education Department that the development at Rowhill School would not be implemented. Should Members be minded to permit this proposal, planning permission would not be granted until the County Planning Authority received this written confirmation. In addition, it should be noted that planning permission for the development at the existing Rowhill School site was granted under Regulation 3. Therefore, only the County Planning Authority could benefit from the permission, and in addition, the

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permission would expire in December 2008. I therefore conclude that this provides the necessary confirmation that development within the Green Belt would be minimised.

33. Having considered the principle of relocating the School to the proposed site, the development now needs to be assessed against the principles of relevant Green Belt and Development Plan Policies. Development Plan Policy has a general presumption against inappropriate development within the Green Belt, and seeks to maintain the openness of the Green Belt. A fundamental aim of Green Belt Policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open. Inappropriate development should not be approved except in very special circumstances.
33. The applicants consider that the application site has the immediate benefit of being a large site, centrally located within the School's existing catchment area on land within the County Council's ownership. They also point out that the Woodview Campus falls within an area dominated by institutional uses in the Green Belt between Longfield and New Barn, which is surrounded by existing built development. That includes ribbon development to the north; Longfield Village settlement and institutional development to the west; railway line, edge of Hartley Village to the south and residential and institutional development to the east. These institutional uses include Longfield Integrated Care & Physiotherapy Centre; Hazelwood Nursing Home; Axton Chase; School; Hickory House Children's Day Nursery and Langafel C.E. Primary School.
34. This proposal would not be completely new development, but infill development as an extension to the existing school. However, the appropriateness of the proposed extension within the Green Belt needs to be given careful consideration. The applicant advises that when analysing the site and its setting, all of the features and characteristics of the existing site were considered, and it was obvious from that analysis that the area of the site in the south-west corner, to the rear of the existing building would be the most appropriate to locate the extension. Locating in this corner would take advantage of the existing screening provided by the wooded hillside to the south, the existing nursing home and boundary screening to the west, and the school building itself to the north. From the south, the topography and woodland hillside would completely screen the proposed extension and, therefore, the visual impact from the south would be negligible. However, the extension would be visible from the east, west and north. I do consider, however, that by positioning the building to the rear of the site, views of the development from the main road and other vantage points would not be prominent and the streetscape itself would not be significantly adversely affected.
35. The new building would be aligned with the neighbouring nursing home building, and would not extend built development further south into the Green Belt. The proposed extension would not extend further to the east than the existing school buildings and would not, therefore, encroach onto the playing fields or the open area of the school site, maintaining the openness of the eastern half of the site. In addition, the siting of the new extension and sports hall would, in part, be on an area of former development, in the form of the existing temporary modular buildings, which set a precedent for allowing development in this area of the school site, albeit temporary in nature.
36. I consider the proposed siting of the development to be acceptable. To locate development elsewhere within the school site would encroach onto playing fields, areas of hard play or car parking, and subsequently would extend built development into the open areas of the school site. This would have an adverse impact upon the openness of the Green Belt, and would be contrary to Development Plan Policies. The proposed site is well screened and, apart from housing 3 modular buildings, is an unused corner of the

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school site. Built development would be contained to the western end of the site, following a natural continuation of development with the adjacent nursing home and community buildings.

37. However, the County Council's Landscape Advisor considers that the applicant should consider a slight revision to the siting of the extension in order that the building be moved further away from the adjacent Nursing Home. The Landscape Advisor considers that a reduced encroachment on the nursing home outweighs the slight encroachment upon the playing field that would be necessary in order to move the building. However, this would involve further encroachment into the open element of the site, extending the building beyond the existing line of built development, which is not appropriate in my view given the site's Green Belt location. In addition, as outlined in paragraph 14 of this report, the applicant considered the relationship with neighbouring residential properties at the scheme layout stage. The distances between the proposed extension and the existing nursing home fall within those recommended within the Kent Design Guide, and the boundary here is heavily planted. In addition, the applicant advises that there would be classroom windows to the flank wall of the teaching block, but these would not give rise to overlooking issues due to the well screened boundary and distances between the buildings. Although moving the building further away from the boundary would be encouraged in some situations, on balance, in this instance I do not consider it appropriate given the resulting encroachment upon the playing field and further into the Green Belt. Therefore I consider the proposed siting to be acceptable. However, the scale, mass and design of the proposed building needs to be considered, bearing in mind the site's Green Belt location.
38. The footprint of the building was given careful consideration by the applicant, as this has implications for the massing and scale of proposed extension. The applicant states that:
- ‘much time and thought was given to the thorny issue of the bulk of the buildings generally and the 2 storey teaching block in particular. In order for the school to be a complete and viable entity a prescribed amount of floor space is required and the option is whether to accommodate this on a single level or on 2 levels. Due to the sensitive nature of the site and the special circumstances of the location, a decision was made to design part of the accommodation on 2 levels in order to minimise the footprint coverage on the site, and the consequent encroachment in the Green Belt.’
39. As a result of this consideration, the teaching block has been designed with a low, single storey elevation to the front, with a two storey element located behind this, creating a stepped increase in height. This aids in mitigating the impact of the two storey teaching block and the sports hall, although the increase in height over the existing buildings is substantial. The massing of the extension has been questioned by Dartford Borough Council, and it is requested that this be reduced. However, in order to reduce the mass of the building, whilst providing the amount of accommodation required by the School, the footprint of the building would have to increase. That would either extend the building closer to the boundary with the neighbouring nursing home, or further onto the open area of the site, which accommodates the school's playing fields. On balance, I do consider that the provision of a part two-storey extension is preferable to a larger footprint, which would encroach further into the Green Belt and open areas of the site. Although a precedent for two storey accommodation on the Woodview Campus has not been set, surrounding residential properties, community buildings and educational institutions, all of which are within the Green Belt, are 2 storey. Therefore, a 2 storey development on this

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site would not be out of character with the surrounding area, and could be considered to be acceptable.

40. The design of the building, and the materials proposed, aid in mitigating the mass of the proposed extension. The entrance rotunda provides a strong visual focus, and would link the old and new development on site. The rotunda, which would be finished in timber cladding, would provide a step between the height of the existing school and the proposed extension and sports hall, as well being an obvious entrance point to the building. The County Council's Landscape Advisor considers that the proposals would create an improvement in the overall coherency of the site, stating that 'one all encompassing building would be more visually appropriate than the current arrangement of temporary mobiles'. The Landscape Advisor also 'approves of the proposed materials and design of the school'. In terms of design and appearance, I consider that the proposed building is appropriate to the context of the site, and would complement the existing buildings on the site. The development has the potential to improve the appearance of the site as a whole and, therefore, subject to the imposition of a condition requiring details of all materials to be used externally to be submitted for approval, I do not consider that the design of the building would have a negative impact upon the locality.
41. The proposed extension is a large addition to the school buildings, increasing the floor space by 2589 square metres, 1743 metres of which would be at ground floor level, and this could be considered to be disproportionate. Although the siting, massing and scale of the development has been given much consideration by the applicant in terms of its Green Belt location, and this must be commended, I do not consider that this development can be described as 'limited extension' and, therefore, could be regarded as inappropriate development within the greenbelt. However, I also consider that there are very special circumstances which are collectively sufficient to outweigh the presumption against inappropriate development within the Green Belt. The applicant has successfully demonstrated a case of need for the development, and has taken all reasonable measures to mitigate the impact of the development, both through its initial design, and the introduction of planting and screening. Moreover, I do not consider that the development would have a significantly detrimental impact on the openness of the Green Belt and, therefore, should not be refused on Green Belt grounds.

Highway and Access

42. The applicant is proposing to increase to number of car parking spaces on site from 37 to 42, and to rearrange the circulation within the car park to create a one way system and drop-off area. In addition, a garage would be provided to house the two minibuses owned by the School. The garage is proposed to be located to the north west of the site, to the west of the site entrance, and I consider this location to be logical in terms of its relationship to the car parking area, and acceptable in visual and landscape terms. The applicant is proposing that the garage be a single storey low lying structure, with a timber boarded rural design. Again, I consider this to be appropriate given the site location. However, further details of the external finishes would be required under planning condition, should permission be granted.
43. As outlined in paragraph 16 of this report, a Travel Plan was submitted in support of this application, as was a Transport Assessment. The Travel Plan concluded that currently children are brought to school by 8 taxis, 7 minibuses and 1 coach, and that this is likely to remain the same should the school be relocated. In addition, the School's management do not expect any difficulties in developing a car parking strategy that

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encourages staff to car share, use public transport or travel by foot or bicycle. A cycle storage area for 16 cycles would also be provided should permission be granted. The Divisional Transportation Manager raises no objection to the proposed development, subject to conditions, and is satisfied with the details included within the Travel Plan and the Transport Assessment.

44. However, the Divisional Transportation Manager requests that a condition of consent be a limit of the number of students attending the school, to allow the traffic impact to be accessed should pupils numbers rise. However, it is not within the remit of the Planning Authority to limit the number of pupils attending the school. Rather, this is a School management issue, and is ultimately constrained by the amount of accommodation available and DFES capacity stipulations. However, it is also requested that a condition of consent be a review of the Travel Plan at 3 year periods. By reviewing the Travel Plan every 3 years any change in the school roll would need to be addressed, and the implication of the change assessed and reviewed within the updated Travel Plan. Therefore, I consider that any increase in the school roll, and the highway implications of this, would be included within the School Travel Plan. A condition of consent would, therefore, be a review of the Travel Plan at 3-year periods.
45. Longfield and New Barn Parish Council has raised objection to the application as seen. One of the grounds of objection is that the Parish Council considers that the pavement adjacent to Main Road appears to be inadequate and unsafe for families walking from New Barn to Longfield. The Parish Council hoped that a countryside path would be included within the application, linking with the Axton Chase site. First, it should be noted that due to the nature of the pupils who would attend the Woodview Campus, arriving by foot is not a common occurrence, as supported by the data included within the Travel Plan. The pavement along Main Road is not part of the application site and is part of the public highway, the maintenance of which is the responsibility of Kent Highway Services. In addition, the applicant advises that there is already a footpath link from Gorse Wood Road leading to the playing fields of Axton Chase School, which is often used by the children and staff of Langafel Primary School when walking between their school and the playing fields, avoiding the need to walk along Main Road. I do not consider that the condition of the footpath, which is outside the boundary of the application site, is relevant to the determination of this application. In addition, the Divisional Transport Manager has not expressed any concern over access to the site.
46. In light of the above, I consider that the relocation of Rowhill School to the Woodview Campus would not have a detrimental impact upon the local highway network. The applicant is providing sufficient parking, and reorganising the access and parking area to create a one way system and drop off area which would improve the existing arrangement. Therefore, subject to the imposition of conditions requiring details of the external materials to the garage to be submitted, and a review of the Travel Plan at 3-year periods, I see no reason to refuse this application on the grounds of Highway implications, access or car parking.

Landscaping

47. The applicant advises that the proposed location of the new building would only necessitate the removal of a handful of 'low category' trees, located to the west of the existing building. All boundary planting would be retained, and an arboricultural report was submitted in support of this application. The County Council's Landscape Advisor is satisfied that detailed landscape proposals be submitted pursuant to condition and, therefore, should planning permission be granted, the submission of a detailed

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landscaping and planting scheme would be from a condition of consent. The Landscaping Advisor makes a number of suggestions to be included within the landscaping scheme, including the provision of a native hedgerow along the new fence line to soften its impact. The applicant has agreed to address all of the suggestions made, and the Landscape Advisor would be consulted on the detailed landscape and planting proposal when submitted. I consider this to be acceptable, and therefore, subject to the imposition of conditions, see no reason to refuse this application on landscape grounds.

Local Amenity

48. It should be noted that this application has not resulted in any representations from neighbouring residents, including the adjacent Nursing Home. The proximity of the proposed development to the Nursing Home was considered above, and deemed to be acceptable. I do not consider that the development would have an adverse impact upon the amenity of local residents due to the siting of the development, and the consideration the applicant gave to the closest residential properties when preparing the application for submission. In addition, details of any external lighting would be required to be submitted for approval under planning condition, and hours of construction would be limited to between the hours of 0800 and 1800 Monday to Fridays, and 0900 and 1300 on Saturdays, with no works on Sundays or Bank Holidays. Subject to the imposition of conditions, I am satisfied that this development would not have a significantly detrimental affect upon local residential amenity.

Security

49. As referred to in the Highway and Access section above, Longfield and New Barn Parish Council raises objection to this application. A ground of objection was that the Parish Council considers that there is no site plan to indicate the security measures for the school. The applicant has confirmed that the submitted plans do show the new perimeter fence, and that Section 10 of the submitted Planning, Design and Access Statement details the security measures proposed for the school, including a 1.8m high fencing system. In addition, securing the school on a daily basis, ensuring the safety of pupils and school property, is a School management issue. The security measures proposed within this application are acceptable for the needs of the School, and are appropriate for the site, bearing in mind its sensitive location.

Conclusion

50. This proposal has given rise to a variety of issues including the need for very special circumstances to justify inappropriate development in the Green Belt and the impact of the proposed development on the openness of the Green Belt. However, I consider that very special circumstances have been demonstrated in this particular case for overriding Green Belt policy constraints in terms of the education need for replacement and improved school accommodation, the lack of alternative sites and the limited visual impact on this part of the Green Belt. On balance, therefore, subject to the imposition of conditions, I am of the opinion that the proposed development would not give rise to any material harm and is otherwise in accordance with the general thrust of the relevant Development Plan Policies. Therefore, I recommend that the application be referred to the First Secretary of State as a departure from the Development Plan, and that subject to her decision, permission be granted subject to appropriate conditions

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Recommendation

51. I RECOMMEND that

- (1) the application BE REFERRED to the First Secretary of State as a departure from the Development Plan, and that subject to her decision, and subject to
 - (2) the undertaking and submission of a written agreement to ensure that the planning permission at Rowhill School, Wilmington, is not implemented,
- that PLANNING PERMISSION BE GRANTED SUBJECT TO conditions, including conditions covering:

- the standard time limit,
- the development to be carried out in accordance with the permitted details,
- external materials to be submitted, including those for the garage;
- details of external lighting,
- a scheme of landscaping and tree planting, its implementation and maintenance,
- the protection of all trees to be retained,
- protection of nesting birds,
- submission of a surface water drainage scheme,
- submission of a scheme detailing flood damage prevention methods,
- land contamination,
- provision and retention of car parking, cycle parking and turning area as indicated,
- implementation and ongoing review of a Travel Plan,
- hours of working during construction,

Case officer – Mary Green	01622 221066
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Background documents - See section heading
