

**WELWYN HATFIELD DISTRICT**

**PROPOSED NEW TWO-STOREY TEACHING BLOCK  
MONKS WALK SCHOOL, KNIGHTSFIELD, WELWYN GARDEN CITY**

*Report of the Director of Environment*

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**1. Purpose of Report**

To consider a planning application for a new two-storey teaching block at Monks Walk School, Knightsfield, Welwyn Garden City (reference 6/1526-01).

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 Monks Walk School, together with the more recently built Knightsfield School, occupies a Green Belt site immediately adjoining the northwestern edge of Welwyn Garden City. Following the reorganisation of secondary school provision in the town, student numbers at the school have been formally increased and additional accommodation is needed.
- 2.2 The application, submitted at the end of November, proposes a new two-storey technology and art block on the northern edge of the existing building complex. It would have traditional brick walls but a standing seam metal roof. No additional parking is proposed and the application is accompanied by limited landscaping proposals.
- 2.3 No objections have been received from any of the consultees, but Welwyn Hatfield District Council has referred to the harmful effect of the proposed development on the Green Belt and the need for it to be fully justified. The Highway Authority has no objection subject to certain conditions, including an approved school transport plan to be in place before the proposed development is occupied. A statutory undertaker has identified the need for a drainage condition. No representations have been received from members of the public.
- 2.3 The main issues raised by the application and considered in the report are Green Belt, design of the building, adequacy of the landscaping provisions, visual impact, highway implications and car and cycle parking provision. As the application proposes major

development within the Green Belt, it would need to be referred to the Secretary of State in accordance with departure procedures before it could be finally determined.

### **3. Conclusions**

- 3.1 The report finds that the education need for the development outweighs the harm which would be caused to the Green Belt. The design of the new block is satisfactory, but its landscaping needs to be more substantial. There should be no adverse impact on the public highway subject to certain safeguards. No other issues have been raised which cannot be dealt with by condition.
- 3.2 The report, therefore, concludes that the Director of the Environment should be authorised to grant planning permission, provided both that the Secretary of State does not wish to intervene and that an adequately detailed and enhanced landscaping scheme has been submitted. The permission should be subject to conditions including landscaping (implementation of an amended scheme for phase one and prior approval of a detailed scheme for phase two), maintenance of parents access into the site at either end of the school day, the provision of fourteen additional cycle parking spaces, contractors working arrangements, approval of a school transport plan prior to occupation of the new block and surface water drainage not to be discharged to soakaways. Advice should also be appended setting out further details about the contents of the school transport plan, the possible need for other drainage consent and the need for prior applicant contact with Transco.

## 1. **Description of the site and proposed development**

- 1.1 Background - Monks Walk School was formed from the amalgamation of two formerly separate schools on the same site and within the last few years a new special school for hearing impaired pupils, Knightsfield School, was also built on the site. The formal admission number for Monks Walk School was 200 pupils a year, but as part of the reorganisation of secondary school provision in Welwyn Garden City, the Local Education Authority decided that this should be increased to 210 pupils a year, albeit appeals have meant that the school has been admitting more than its admission number for a number of years. Its current roll is almost 1,260 pupils and this could rise to a maximum of 1,300. The school at present has 68 full-time and 72 part-time staff (a “full-time equivalent” of 107), but there are normally no more than 120 staff on the site at any one time. Knightsfield School has up to 52 pupils and a full-time staff of 24.
- 1.2 The application site lies within the Green Belt on land immediately adjoining the northwestern edge of Welwyn Garden City on relatively high land overlooking the Mimram valley, with housing on its southern and eastern boundaries. All the buildings are concentrated on the eastern side of the site with the playing fields to the west and north. The two schools, Monks Walk and Knightsfield, have between them 125 marked out parking spaces and there are casual opportunities around the site for a further 29 cars to be parked. There is a partial one-way system for vehicles through the site, with an entrance off Knightsfield and exit on to Digswell Park Road. As with most schools in the County, there is some congestion outside the site at the beginning and end of the school day. Monks Walk School has a locked cycle store which is stated to be “little-used” at present.
- 1.3 The planning application was received at the end of November. It proposes a new 1,450 square metre, two-storey technology and art block to be built on the northern edge of the existing building complex. The walls would have yellow stock brickwork cladding, with lengths of curtain window walling with white aluminium panels up to sill height. It would have a curved grey standing seam metal roof. On the ground floor would be a textiles studio, two food technology rooms, two art studios and related facilities, whilst the first floor would accommodate four science laboratories (including one small one for Knightsfield School), two more art studios and related facilities. The block would be developed in two phases, phase one being the technology block and phase two the art facilities to follow at a later stage when the funding is available.
- 1.4 The application includes a landscaping drawing which indicates some tree planting on the embankment to the north of the proposed new block and includes shrub planting beds related to phase one of the development only. No change is proposed to the existing parking or cycle storage provision. The supporting statement refers to Monks Walk School now forming a group to prepare a school travel plan. There would be five more members of staff.

## 2. **Consultations and publicity**

- 2.1 Consultations have been initiated with Welwyn Hatfield District Council, the Highway Authority and statutory undertakers. Publicity was by means of notices in the local press and on site, and neighbour notification letters were sent to those living at eighteen addresses around the site.

- 2.2 Welwyn Hatfield District Council, whilst not specifically objecting, has made comments relating to the site's location within the Green Belt and the size of the building which represents inappropriate development within the Green Belt and would have a harmful effect on its openness. The District Council expects the County Council to have investigated whether sufficient very special circumstances exist to overcome the strong presumption against inappropriate development before determining the application.
- 2.3 The County Council as Highway Authority does not wish to restrict the grant of permission subject to any permission including conditions that parents should continue to be allowed to drive through the site using its one-way system to drop off and pick up students at either end of the school day; approval prior to the development being started of details for the provision of an additional fourteen safe and secure parking spaces which should be made before the development is occupied; and the development not to be occupied until a school transport plan has been submitted and approved by the planning authority in consultation with the highway authority. Details are given of what the transport plan should cover, including consideration of any possible off-site measures which might be needed.
- 2.4 A covering memorandum refers to the potential highway safety problems which there would be if parents were to be excluded from the school site. The level of parking provision is below current maximum standards and is acceptable provided that there is a policy to discourage sixth form parking within the school transport plan. The application is not specific about the amount of cycle parking facilities on the site but the provision is likely to be below current standards and so, as an interim measure until the school transport plan has investigated the situation, additional provision related only to the increase in pupil numbers is required at this stage. The condition requiring the school transport plan picks up on the commitment to the preparation of such a plan in the supporting statement and is important, as it relates to various issues raised in the consideration of the application.
- 2.5 The statutory undertakers - Two responses have been received. Neither has any objection, although the Environment Agency requests two conditions: one that there shall be no surface water drainage to soakaways and the other requiring approval of the storage details for oils, fuels or chemicals, together with an informative about other possible consent required. Transco has stated that, if planning permission is granted, the applicant would need to provide the company with further details under other legislation before starting work.
- 2.6 Public representations - none has been received.

### 3. **Planning considerations**

- 3.1 The application site lies within the Green Belt and a landscape development area as defined on the proposals map of the adopted District Local Plan.
- 3.2 The relevant policies of the Development Plan are:
- County Structure Plan - policies 1 (sustainable development), 5 (Green Belt), 13 (education and training), 22 (reduction of travel need & car usage), 23 (networks & facilities for non-motorised transport & buses) and 25 (car parking);

- Welwyn Hatfield District Local Plan (adopted version) - GB3 (development in the Metropolitan Green Belt), CR2 (landscape development areas), T3 (pedestrian facilities), T5 (cycle routes and facilities), T13 (traffic generated by major developments) and T15 (standards for new development);
- Welwyn Hatfield District Local Plan (emerging) - SD1 (sustainable development), R15 (biodiversity and development), M1 (integrating transport and land use), M2 (access for all), M6 (pedestrian facilities), M7 (cycle routes and facilities), M19 (parking standards for new development), CLT8 (new and extended education facilities) and RA1 (development in the Green Belt).

3.3 At this stage (i.e. before consultation responses are complete and the period for the receipt of public representations has ended) the main issues which are raised by the proposed development are:

- Green Belt policy;
- design of the building;
- adequacy of the landscaping provisions;
- visual impact on the landscape;
- highway implications;
- parking provision;
- cycle storage provision.

3.4 Green Belt - School buildings, even on an existing site, are not included within the categories of development regarded as appropriate within the Green Belt. Such buildings, therefore, are not acceptable unless any harm to the Green Belt is outweighed by other considerations.

3.5 The new two-storey block would extend the built up part of the site, and the ground it would occupy lies above the level of the recently built Knightsfield School, which in any case is only single storey on its northern side. Thus the new block would inevitably be more visually intrusive than that building or the two adjoining single storey blocks of Monks Walk School. Eventually the tree planting proposed as part of the landscaping scheme (see below) would help to soften the block's visual impact, but it would be some years before it became effective.

3.6 Against these considerations has to be set the school's need for additional accommodation because of the increased pupil numbers it is admitting following the closure of one of the town's other schools as part of the reorganisation of secondary education in the area. On this edge of Welwyn Garden City the Green Belt boundary in the adopted District Local Plan is generally defined as running along the rear boundaries of the housing development, with even the built up part of the immediately adjoining school site thereby falling within the Green Belt. Inevitably, therefore, any new facilities which the school needs cannot be located other than in the Green Belt, there not being any opportunity for them to be provided elsewhere.

3.7 The new block is required to provide additional and enhanced science and technology facilities for the school. The block's location within the site relates to the disposition of existing facilities and organisation of the school. The school's main science and technology accommodation is already concentrated at the northern end of the developed part of the site. For the new block to be located adjacent to these existing facilities would be the most efficient in operational terms for the school. It would consolidate the

provision in this part of the site and enable some existing laboratories elsewhere on the site to be converted to other uses.

- 3.8 In these circumstances, therefore, it is considered that the school's location immediately adjacent to the urban edge of Welwyn Garden City, the school's need for the accommodation and the factors affecting its particular location within the site, are sufficient to justify the proposed development and that these factors outweigh the harm which the development would do to the Green Belt.
- 3.9 Design - The new block would have its own distinctive appearance, different from most of the existing buildings of Monks Walk School, which are generally typical 1960s system-built with flat roofs. However, the yellow stock brick cladding on its walls would pick up on the colour of the brickwork on the adjacent science block as well as that of the newer and more traditionally styled Knightsfield School. The curved standing seam grey metal roof is not found elsewhere on the site, but they have been used on similar buildings on other school sites and have not looked out of place. The overall design is considered to be acceptable.
- 3.10 Landscaping - The proposals indicated are acceptable as far as they go, but are somewhat disappointing in relation to the scale of the development involved. The drawing shows three (recently increased to four) quite small shrub beds on the school side of phase one of the development and indicates provision for twenty 'feathered trees and large bushes' along the embankment sloping down to the northeast of the block. The proposed tree planting would supplement the existing young trees already planted there as part of the scheme to provide a landscape setting for Knightsfield School.
- 3.11 It is considered that there are other opportunities for more imaginative tree and shrub planting around the new building in the spaces between it and the existing blocks. This is an exposed site in the Green Belt rather than an enclosed urban site, and more could be done to help 'set' the building in the landscape and at the same time to improve the school environment itself. Full details of the tree planting are not included on the submitted drawing, and there is as yet no full written specification for the planting and maintenance works. It is recommended, therefore, that an amended scheme, together with the missing details should be required before the application is determined in order for the County Planning Authority to be assured as to their adequacy and to be confident that the landscaping scheme would be successful.
- 3.12 There were originally no landscaping proposals at all for phase two of the development, mainly, it was understood, due to uncertainty over its timing. However, an amended drawing has just been received with a note referring to an additional ten trees as an extension of the phase one tree bank to be provided on completion of the phase two development. Otherwise it is stated on behalf of the applicant that it is not felt appropriate in this case to provide small scale planting against the building on its north and west elevations.
- 3.13 The same issues arise of providing an appropriate landscape setting for this phase of the development as do for phase one. At one time consideration was given to excluding phase two of the development altogether from any permission which might be granted, on the grounds of the submission being incomplete. However, on balance it is concluded that on this occasion it would not be appropriate but that there should be a

separate condition requiring the prior approval of a full landscaping scheme for that phase and indicating what the scheme would be expected to include.

- 3.14 Visual impact - This has largely been considered within the earlier paragraphs dealing with the Green Belt implications of the proposed development and landscaping. The proposed development would be prominent within the site, but there would be no other views of it from nearby outside the site. There are no residential properties directly overlooking this part of the site whose amenity would be affected. From further afield the development would be seen in more distant views of the site. Its full height could not be screened and it would be many years before the tree planting proposals became effective in the landscape. However, the impact is not considered to be such as to make the proposed development unacceptable provided that the planting provisions are improved.
- 3.15 Highway implications - The school is fortunate in having the benefit of an in and out system with a length of internal roadway where parents can stop to drop off and pick up students. There have been no objections from nearby residents to the proposed development. The Highway Authority is satisfied that the public highway would not be adversely affected provided that parents continue to be permitted to drive through the site and subject to a number of other issues being dealt with in the school transport plan, an approved version of which should be in place before the new development is first occupied. The supporting statement refers to the school forming a group to prepare a travel plan for these issues to be examined, so that, given a commitment to this work by the applicant, there should be no problem in meeting the terms of any such condition.
- 3.16 A condition is also required to ensure that during the construction phase of the development the contractors working arrangements do not cause any problems for the public highway and that delivery times are limited. The usual times for this are between 8am and 6pm on Mondays to Fridays and between 9am and 1pm on Saturdays, with none permitted on Sundays and bank holidays and, during term time, no such vehicles to enter or leave the site within the period half an hour either side of the start and finish of the school day. Such a restriction would also help to protect the residential amenity of those living adjacent to the school's access and egress points.
- 3.17 Parking provision - Current standards would require a maximum of around 170 parking spaces for the two schools on this site. This compares with the actual provision of 154 available spaces including those where cars are parked but which are not physically marked out on the ground. In practice the existing level of provision appears to be more than adequate for the needs of the site and there is no evidence of anyone, teachers, sixth formers or visitors to the site having to park on the public highway outside the site other than at the beginning and end of the school day.
- 3.18 Cycle parking provision at Monks Walk School, on the other hand, is way below what current standards would require for a school of this size. There is a small cycle storage facility on the site, but it is not well used nor is there much to encourage this at present. The recommendation of the Highway Authority is that storage facilities for an additional fourteen cycles should be provided as part of the current development before the new building is first occupied, with the school transport plan detailing how it is to be increased subsequently in accordance with current standards.

3.19 Other issues : drainage - One of the conditions requested by the Environment Agency requires the prior approval of the construction details for the storage of oils, fuels or chemicals. However, this information was passed to the applicant who has since confirmed that there are no proposals for the construction of any such facilities as part of this application.

#### 4. **Financial implications**

There are none for this Committee

#### 5. **Conclusions**

5.1 Monks Walk School occupies a prominent site on high ground adjoining an area of housing development on the edge of Welwyn Garden City. The entire site, the school buildings as well as the playing fields, are included within the Green Belt in the adopted District Local Plan. Students numbers at the school are increasing. The proposed development would extend the built up part of the site and, being higher than the adjacent buildings, it would be readily seen in distant views of the site. However, it is considered that this harm to the Green Belt is outweighed by the school's need for the accommodation and the impossibility of its being provided elsewhere.

5.2 The proposed block would provide a certain contrast to the other buildings on the site, but its design and appearance is considered satisfactory. However, the landscaping proposals are currently inadequate and an amended scheme is required; full details of the specification for the planting and maintenance are also still needed. A separate condition requiring prior approval of a detailed scheme involving both tree and shrub planting for phase two of the development is also needed.

5.3 No problems are anticipated for the public highway, but there would be potential congestion and safety problems if for some reason parents were ever to be prevented from using the school's one-way system for dropping off and picking up. Current parking standards are maxima, and the provision for the two schools on this site are below that standard but appear to be adequate. Sixth formers need to be discouraged from driving to the school and the cycle parking provision needs to be increased, initially by fourteen spaces. A school transport plan is needed to address these and other issues and should be in place before the proposed development is first occupied.

5.4 No issues have been raised by any of the statutory undertakers from whom responses have been received which cannot be dealt with by condition or advice.

5.5 Once an amended landscaping scheme has been agreed and the other necessary details submitted, there is no reason why planning permission should not be granted. It would need to be subject to conditions including landscaping (implementation and prior approval of a scheme for phase two), parents access to the site, provision of additional cycle storage, the contractors working arrangements, approval of a school transport plan and drainage (no soakaways). Advice would also need to be attached to any planning permission granted setting out further details about the contents of the school transport plan, the possible need for other drainage consent and about the need for prior applicant contact with Transco.

- 5.6 However, as the application involves significant development within the Green Belt which would be a departure from the Development Plan, the application would need to be referred to the Secretary of State in accordance with departure procedures before it could be finally determined.

*Background material used by the author in compiling this report*

Application documents i.e. application form, supporting statement and nine drawings numbered 454/A/500, 454/AL/010, 6048/T/01-01, 454/AL/011, 454/AL/101, 454/AL/102/A, 454/AL/103, 454/AL/104 and 454/AL/L/901;

Consultation responses received;

Welwyn Hatfield District Local Plan, adopted 1998;

Parking Provision at New Development : Supplementary Planning Guidance in relation to HCC Structure Plan policy 25, approved December 2000;

Report to the Environment Cases Sub-Committee 12 December 1995 (item 6) on two previous applications on the same site.