

EAST HERTFORDSHIRE DISTRICT

**PROPOSED RETENTION OF A DOUBLE MOBILE CLASSROOM UNIT,
CONSTRUCTION OF A NEW TARMAC PLAY AREA AND REALIGNMENT OF A
TARMAC PATH, AT THUNDRIDGE C OF E PRIMARY SCHOOL, ERMINE
STREET, THUNDRIDGE.**

Report of the Director of Environment.

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Local Member:- D Beatty.

1. Purpose of Report

To consider a partially retrospective planning application ref. 3/0040-04 for the proposed retention of a double mobile classroom unit, construction of a new tarmac play area and realignment of a tarmac path at Thundridge C of E Primary School, Ermine Street, Thundridge.

2. Summary

- 2.1 Planning permission was granted in September 2003 for the demolition of a single mobile and erection of a double mobile classroom unit at Thundridge School for a five-year period. The mobile is required as the total existing capacity of the school's permanent accommodation in accordance with DfES classroom standards is limited to 63. The school currently has 74 pupils, and this number is gradually set to rise and is expected to peak at 96 pupils (nursery and reception classes, and years 1-6) in 2006.
- 2.2 As a result of the tendering and manufacturing process, the appearance of the building subsequently erected differs from the approved details, set out in the previous planning application (ref. 3/1260-03).
- 2.3 This application therefore seeks retrospective permission for the erected mobile building, a small additional hard play area to the south of the building, and a new, short length of pathway along the southern boundary of the site to be re-routed. This would enable a hedge to be planted to screen the building from the neighbouring residential properties. There is no intention to increase the school's current admission limit of 12 per year.
- 2.4 The proposed development is required for a period of five years. Work will be undertaken during the period of the proposed temporary permission to ensure that longer-term permanent provision is identified if additional capacity

continues to be required. The school site is situated within the Green Belt and a Conservation Area.

- 2.5 Three letters of objection have been received raising concern regarding development within the Green Belt, effect on the Conservation Area, loss of green space, the potential length of time the structure may remain after five years, the colour of the mobile, the need for the development and suitability of the proposed landscaping scheme.

3. Conclusion

- 3.1 Whilst the mobile classroom represents inappropriate development in the Green Belt in principle, it is considered that very special circumstances exist to justify this development. It is considered that the double mobile classroom and landscaping would have a limited additional visual impact on the character and appearance of the Conservation Area compared to the original unit. The proposed landscaping scheme, together with a five-year maintenance programme, would provide adequate screening to near-by residential properties. Concerns have also been raised with regards to the increase in pupil numbers and the highway implications of traffic at the start and end of the school day. This can be mitigated through the requirement to produce a School Travel Plan.
- 3.2 The report therefore concludes that the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant a temporary retrospective planning permission for the proposed development for five years. This should be subject to conditions including a five year landscaping maintenance plan including the final height of the hedge, final colours of the mobile's roof fascia, doors and roof covering to be approved, the requirement to submit a programme for the implementation of a School Travel Plan within three months of planning permission being granted and the Travel Plan being submitted and implemented within twelve months thereafter, and a restriction on the hours of working required to complete the new hard play area and landscape works.
- 3.3 It is considered that given the existing capacity issues at the school, the length of time that the original single mobile classroom has been on site and its location in the Conservation Area, the Director of Children, Schools and Families should be advised that any further extension of time for mobile accommodation is unlikely to be considered favourably. The Director of Children, Schools and Families should also consider the longer term accommodation needs of the school, which are in keeping with its setting.

1. Description of the site and proposed development

- 1.1 The village of Thundridge lies to the north of Ware and is situated in the Green Belt. Most of the village is situated in the Thundridge Conservation Area. The school site lies on the western edge of the village adjacent to and east of the A10. A number of residential properties adjoin the school site on its southern boundary, which slopes upwards away from the school.
- 1.2 The total capacity of the school's permanent accommodation in accordance with DfES classroom standards is 63 pupils. The school currently has 74 pupils, which is gradually set to rise, and is expected to peak at 96 pupils (nursery and reception classes, and years 1-6) in 2006.
- 1.3 The school previously had a single mobile classroom, which needed to be removed due to its poor state of repair. Planning permission was granted for the demolition of a single mobile and erection of a double mobile classroom unit for a five-year period, in September 2003. As a result of the tendering and manufacturing process, the appearance of the building subsequently erected differs from the approved details, set out in the previous planning application (ref. 3/1260-03).
- 1.4 This application therefore seeks retrospective permission for the erected mobile building, a small additional hard play area to the south of the building, and a new, short length of pathway along the southern boundary of the site to be re-routed. This will enable a hedge to be planted to screen the building from the neighbouring residential properties. There is no intention to increase the school's current admission limit of 12 per year. The proposed development is required for a period of five years.
- 1.5 This planning application contains three elements. It seeks retrospective permission for the erected double mobile classroom unit. It also seeks permission for a small additional hard play area to the south of the mobile building, and a short length of pathway along the southern boundary of the site to be re-routed. A 2.5m high beech hedge is proposed as part of a landscaping scheme to screen the building from the neighbouring residential properties.
- 1.6 The school currently has 8.6 full time equivalent staff, including 4.3 teachers, with the maximum number of staff on site at any one time being 14. The school has 11 marked out parking bays, however, given that 4 members of staff walk to school, parking can be considered adequate. Most children in the village who attend the school walk to school, although some children from outlying areas are brought by car.
- 1.7 The decision by the Director of Children, Schools and Families (CSF) to apply for planning permission for a temporary building reflects the uncertainty that currently exists about the overall long-term provision in the educational planning area that includes Thundridge School. This is linked to the creation of the new bypass and demographic changes. Work will be undertaken during the period of the proposed temporary permission to ensure that longer-term permanent provision is identified, if required. The County Council (as

education authority) expects that a permanent solution to resolve the provision of suitable accommodation for the school will be identified within the proposed five-year life of the mobile accommodation.

2. Consultations

- 2.1 Consultations were carried out with East Hertfordshire District Council, Thundridge Parish Council, Hertfordshire County Council as Highway Authority and The Built Environment Advisory and Management Service (BEAMS).
- 2.2 East Hertfordshire District Council does not object to the proposed development.
- 2.3 Thundridge Parish Council: note that the building is not appropriate for a Conservation Area but do not object to its retention for 5 years subject to a condition requiring a masking hedge of a fast growing species to screen the classroom from the houses in Ermine Street.
- 2.4 BEAMS: no response has been received at the time of writing this report.
- 2.5 The County Council as Highway Authority: has no objection subject to the imposition of conditions relating to the implementation of a School Travel Plan.
- 2.6 A total of 21 properties were consulted on the application and three letters were received objecting to the application. The main issues of concern can be summarised as:
 - traffic generation and parking problems;
 - development in the Green Belt;
 - impact on the Conservation Area;
 - the colour of the mobile;
 - the quality of the building;
 - loss of green space;
 - the potential amount of time the structure may remain after five years;
 - the need for the development;
 - size and species of hedge;
 - the position of the tarmac play area;
 - a maintenance scheme for any landscaping proposals;
 - positioning of realigned pathway.

3. Planning Considerations

- 3.1 The principal issues to be taken into account in determining this application are:-


- the need for the development;
- development in the Green Belt;
- the Conservation Area;
- traffic generation and parking problems;
- loss of green space;
- the proposed landscaping scheme;
- time-scale of development.

Most of these matters were considered when the previous application was evaluated. For ease of reference, they are repeated in this report and updated where appropriate, given the partially retrospective nature of this application.

Need

- 3.2 Thundridge School has an annual admission limit of 12, which has been the same for many years. The school has not and does not propose to increase its admission capacity, however younger year groups are larger and will work through the school, with projections indicating that the school will be at capacity in 2006/7 with 96 pupils (including the nursery). The current classroom for the older children is already undersized and this situation will be exacerbated during the 2003/4 school year. DfES Design Bulletin 82 states that classrooms should have 2m² per pupil. If the school did not provide alternative accommodation for its older pupils, they would have only 1.6m² per pupil. Were the top years of the school to be full (i.e. 12 pupils per year), there would only be 1.33m² per pupil.
- 3.3 The school is becoming more popular and current space is now seriously deficient for the pupil numbers now at the school as of September 2003 without the additional capacity from the mobile unit. Concerns have been raised that pupils attending the school come from outside the village. Admission rules allow parents to send their children to the school of their choice as long as places are available. Criteria, such as geographical proximity, do not come into play until there are more applicants than places. The Local Education Authority (LEA) cannot direct children to an under-subscribed school unless places are unavailable at the parents' preferred school. Therefore the mobile is required in order that the County Council can fulfil its obligations to parents wishing to send their children to the school and sustain a village facility.
- 3.4 Concerns have also been raised regarding the length of time the mobile will be needed for and how long it will remain in use. The applicant has stated that the reason applying for a five year planning permission for the classroom reflects the uncertainty that currently exists about longer-term school provision in the educational planning area that includes Thundridge School. Demographic changes and the effect of the new A10 bypass, require more detailed consideration of the future educational provision in the area. The applicant has stated over the duration of the proposed five-year temporary permission it expects to identify permanent provision for overall pupil numbers in the area.

Green Belt.

- 3.5 The village of Thundridge lies to the north of Ware and is situated in the Metropolitan Green Belt. Buildings even of a temporary nature on existing school sites are not identified within the categories of development regarded as appropriate within the Green Belt (Policies RA2 of the Adopted East Herts Local Plan and GBC2 and 3 of the Deposit Draft District Local Plan, Second Review).
- 3.6 The proposed new double mobile unit replaced a single one in the same location. It was stated in the first application for the double mobile (ref. 3/1260-03) that it would be 30cm lower than the then original single mobile. Whilst the overall bulk of the double unit would be greater than the original unit, the reduced height meant that, overall, it was considered to have minimal impact on the Green Belt setting. The original mobile was removed prior to being able to establish its original height, but it now appears that that the replacement mobile may be slightly higher. This is in part due to the mobile having a pitched roof () as opposed to the mono-pitch originally intended. However it is not possible to accurately confirm any difference in height compared to the original unit.
- 3.7 The sloping nature of the school site and adjoining land means that the mobile is located on ground below the height of land to the south and west of the school site. Vegetation surrounding the site adjacent to the A10 and to the south provides partial screening, which would be supplemented by areas of 2.5m high beech hedging as part of the submitted landscaping scheme. There is increased bulk of development in terms of the northern and southern elevations of the mobile. Despite the increase in bulk compared to the previous single mobile, it is considered that the siting of the mobile classroom within the school site is such that the additional visual impact on the Green Belt setting is minimal.
- 3.8 In these circumstances it is concluded that given the limited impact that the proposed development including the landscaping scheme, would cause to the Green Belt, it is outweighed by the special circumstances justified by educational need, particularly given the temporary and replacement nature of the proposal.

Conservation Area.

- 3.9 This application proposes development within a Conservation Area (Adopted District Plan Policy 18 and Deposit Draft Policy BH4). The original mobile classroom was old and falling into disrepair and made no material contribution to the Conservation Area (Adopted District Plan Policy 18 and Deposit Draft Policy BH6). Being a new mobile classroom unit, the visual appearance is improved and would be softened by the proposed beech hedging. It has also been agreed to plant non-invasive bamboo on the neighbours' side of the boundary if required. The nearest neighbours have been consulted on the colour for the mobile classroom and two of the three have confirmed that the present colour of the mobile is acceptable, although they would wish to see the roof fascia and doors to the rear elevation painted a similar colour and the roof covering in green felt. On this basis it is considered that the mobile would have no additional detrimental impact on the appearance and character of the

Conservation Area. East Herts District Council have raised no objection to the proposal.

Highway Considerations.

- 3.10 Two objections have been received with regard to the current traffic and parking situation and the increase in pupil numbers that could be catered for at the school. Paragraph 3.3 addresses the question of school admissions. Whilst it is acknowledged that some of the additional children will come from outside the village it is not considered that this will have a significant impact. The Highway Authority have raised no objection in principle to the proposal, subject to the imposition of conditions relating to a School Travel Plan.
- 3.11 The School Travel Plan would help to reduce congestion in the long term. This helps to meet the aims of the County Council's sustainable transport policies and policies TR3 and TR4 of the District Local Plan Review, Deposit Draft. The A10 currently provides a deterrent to children walking from the west of the trunk road. Once the new by-pass is completed it is expected that more children from this part of the village will walk to school.

Loss of Green Space.

- 3.12 Concerns have been raised about the loss of green space on the school site. The double mobile footprint covers the footprint of the single mobile classroom together with an area formerly used for play apparatus, which had a wood, chip base and retaining wall. A replacement hard play area is proposed to the south of the mobile classroom. The school uses a playing field on the opposite side of the A10 accessed through a tunnel going underneath the road. Given the footprint of the new mobile in relation to previous structures and use of another school field for recreational activities, the loss of green space on the school site is considered minimal.

Landscaping Scheme.

- 3.13 Representations received have also commented about the proposed landscaping scheme as part of this application. The landscaping scheme proposes the realignment of the existing tarmac path and the planting of three separate areas of 2.5m high beech hedging along parts of the site's southern boundary. This will provide some screening for residential properties adjoining the southern boundary of the site. The final height of the hedge to be maintained will be required by condition. Some local residents have stated a preference for bamboo hedging, a desire for the new hedging to be continuous along the southern site boundary and for the hedging to be taller in height.
- 3.14 It is considered that beech represents an appropriate species for the site. Bamboo on its own was considered not naturally native to the locality, however, the Director of CSF is prepared to provide a non-invasive species for two adjoining properties. The purpose of the proposed hedging is to break up the bulk mass, and soften any visual impact of the mobile, and not necessarily to entirely screen the proposal. The beech hedging is expected to grow at approximately 0.3m per year once established. A maintenance scheme should maintain the height of the hedge, which will provide adequate

screening from the proposed development, and will be required by the attachment of a condition to any planning permission granted.

- 3.15 It is not considered appropriate to create a continuous new hedge along the southern boundary as there is existing established vegetation. All vegetation (existing and new) along the southern boundary would be subject to a five year maintenance scheme to ensure maintenance during the length of the permission.

Tarmac Play Area.

- 3.16 Concerns have been raised that the tarmac play area made impede a fire exit. This is a consideration in the management and operational use of the site.

Time-scale of Development.

- 3.17 Concerns have been raised that the mobile classroom may be in place for a longer period than the five year temporary period requested by this planning application, especially given the length of time that the previous mobile classroom was in-situ. This new mobile classroom would only have planning permission for a five-year period, which can be limited by planning condition. If the school wishes to retain the mobile classroom beyond five years it will need to apply for planning permission to do this and any such planning application would be considered on its merits taking into account all material considerations at the time of determination. However, an informative could be attached to any planning permission (as with the previous application) to encourage a reviewing of the longer term needs of the school, together with the reasoning for a five year limitation.

Financial Considerations.

- 3.18 Concerns have been raised over the cost of the temporary building. This does not form a material consideration in the determination of this application.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 Whilst the school lies in a small village and a restricted site area, the current admission numbers and legislative requirements mean that there is an essential need for this additional teaching space. It is considered that the limited additional impact that the proposed development would cause to the Green Belt and the Conservation Area as compared to the original mobile classroom is outweighed by the very special circumstances justified by educational need and the temporary nature of the proposals and that .
- 4.2 It is acknowledged that a limited number of adjoining properties would have an increased view of the mobile classroom compared to the original unit. However, this could be ameliorated by additional planting, which would help to provide additional screening.
- 4.3 The increase in numbers of cars caused by this proposal would be limited, and therefore the Highway Authority considers that any detrimental impact can be off set by the implementation of a School Travel Plan.

- 4.4 It is therefore concluded that the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant a temporary planning permission for the proposed development for five years subject to conditions including a five year landscaping maintenance plan including the final height of the hedge, colours of the mobile's roof fascia, doors and roof covering to be approved, the requirement to submit a programme for the implementation of a School Travel Plan within three months of planning permission being granted and the Travel Plan being submitted and implemented within twelve months thereafter, and restricting the hours of working required to complete the new hard play area and landscape works.
- 4.5 However, given the existing capacity issues at the school, the length of time that the original single mobile classroom has been on site and its location in the Conservation Area, should planning permission be granted, the Director of Children, Schools and Families should be advised that any further extension of time for mobile accommodation is unlikely to be considered favourably and that he should consider the longer term accommodation needs of the school which are in keeping with its setting.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 There are none for this committee to consider.

Background information used by the author in compiling this report

Planning application reference 3/0040-04 (and accompanying statements and plans)

Consultation responses and representations received in response to planning application ref 3/0040-04.

Hertfordshire Structure Plan Review 1991-2011, adopted April 1998;

The East Hertfordshire Local Plan 1986-2001 (with Alterations) adopted December 1999;

The East Herts Local Plan Second Review (Deposit Version - December 2000).

