

WATFORD BOROUGH

**APPLICATION FOR CLASSROOM BLOCK AND CAR PARK TO CREATE
NEW PRIMARY SCHOOL ON SITE OF LEA FARM JUNIOR SCHOOL AND
GARSTON INFANTS SCHOOL, FOURTH AVENUE, WATFORD.**

Report of the Director of Environment

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1. Purpose of Report

To consider planning application ref. 9/0668-04 (CC0121) for a classroom block and car park to enable the creation of a new primary school on site of Lea Farm Junior and Garston Infants Schools, Fourth Avenue, Garston, Watford.

2. Summary

- 2.1 The application relates to proposals for the creation of a new primary school on the site of the existing Lea Farm Junior and Garston Infants Schools. This development is linked with the closure of Meriden School, Watford.
- 2.2 The application proposes the construction of a classroom block to accommodate eight classrooms, a nursery and ancillary accommodation as well as a car park to create parking for 96 cars on site plus a drop off point and five designated disabled parking spaces.
- 2.3 There is an established need for a 2.5 form of entry in the area. However, the proposed new school would accommodate 3 forms of entry, allowing some flexibility should any new families move into the area.
- 2.4 The new classroom block would be of single storey in height and constructed of buff coloured facing bricks with red infill panels below windows and standing seam roofing incorporating glazed ridgelights and roof lights. The proposals include a link corridor to the main school building.
- 2.5 The car park would be based on a gyratory type system and incorporate a central roundabout that provides a turning circle for coaches and allows easy in/out access for all vehicles.

- 2.6 It has been established that additional improvements would be required within the surrounding area. The proposal incorporates the upgrading of lighting and the drainage system at the Cow Lane/York Way underpass to the south of the site and construction of a speed table to create a safer pedestrian crossing in Fourth Avenue immediately outside of the school access.

3. Conclusion

The report concludes that, subject to no new issues being raised by statutory consultees the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant planning permission subject to:

- i) conditions to include submission of materials prior to development, hours of construction, contractor's access and arrangements on site, landscaping (including protection and retention of the oak tree), school travel plan, no use of the building until completion of the car park, indication of construction completion date;
- ii) Grampian style conditions relating to the speed table and the subway improvements, replacement playing pitch provision or community use agreement(s), timescale for making playing pitches available for community use

In addition, the Director of Environment should write to Watford Borough Council suggesting that a Tree Preservation Order be considered for the oak tree identified for preservation by the Landscape Officer.

1. Description of the site and proposed development

- 1.1 The application relates to proposals for the creation of a new primary school on the site of the existing Lea Farm Junior and Garston Infants Schools, Fourth Avenue, Garston, Watford. In order to achieve this, the application proposes the construction of a classroom block and car park.
- 1.2 The new primary school results from the County Council's proposals to amalgamate the three schools of Lea Farm Junior, Garston Infants and Meriden Primary Schools. This would result in the closure of these three schools and the creation of a new primary school. The target date for the opening of the new primary school is 1 September 2005.
- 1.3 This proposal is the second phase of a two-phase reorganisation of schools in the area. The re-organisation is necessary due to a growth in the number of surplus school places in the north east part of Watford. The County Council as Education Authority considers that the current 21% empty places over all schools in north east Watford and forecast of 28% in six years time cannot be sustained in terms of economic and educational viability of the schools.
- 1.4 There is an identified need for a 2.5 forms of entry (525 pupils) primary school in the north east Watford area; however, the new primary school would accommodate 3 forms of entry (630 pupils) to allow for some flexibility should any more families move into the area.
- 1.5 The new primary school would be formed from the construction of a new single storey classroom block with internal alterations to the existing school buildings. The 1120sqm classroom block would provide eight new classrooms, a 40-place nursery unit plus ancillary accommodation. Materials would include buff facing bricks with red facing bricks below windows and coloured rendered panels with a low pitched (10 degrees) standing seam roof incorporating glazed ridge-lights and rooflights.
- 1.6 The new classroom block would be located on playing field to the south of the existing school buildings on site. The link corridor would directly connect the new classroom block to the existing Lea Farm Junior School. A new paved area with a series of raised beds is proposed either side of the link corridor between the main school buildings and the proposed new classroom block.
- 1.7 Also proposed are two enclosed hard play areas surrounded by timber fencing and shrubbery to the south of the proposed new classroom block.

- 1.8 A nature conservation area is proposed on the south-eastern boundary of the school site. A 3m wide sloping margin/mound at the boundary is to be constructed to create wild meadow grass/flowers.
- 1.9 The proposal for a new enlarged car park on site includes the provision of a central roundabout, to allow for the turning of coaches and is based on a gyratory type system to enable easy in/out access. The car park would be lit by means of URBIS ZX1 (Access Way), ZX2 (Roundabout) ZX3 (Car Park) Sealsafe Lanterns. 13 lighting columns are proposed along the length of the car park and access route within the school site. The lighting has been designed to minimise any light spillage beyond the car park and its related areas. Technical specifications have been supplied as part of the application.
- 1.10 There are currently 25 car parking spaces on the school site. The proposal would increase the number of available car parking spaces to 96 and include a drop off point for disabled users, coaches and deliveries. Based on calculations it is suggested that 79 parking spaces would be sufficient for the new school, however the applicant has proposed a larger car park than minimum requirements set by Hertfordshire County Council standards.
- 1.11 A covered cycle rack for 48 cycles is proposed for the new school, to be located alongside the existing junior school assembly hall near the drop off point and access to hard play overspill from the proposed roundabout.
- 1.12 A pedestrian barrier with pass-through gates is proposed along the entire length of the car park.
- 1.13 The proposal would involve the felling of 6 trees on the school site. A landscaping proposal forms part of the planning application, providing details of replacement and additional planting on site.
- 1.14 Contractor's access onto the site would be via the main entrance point at the front of the school with regard to the construction of the car park and via the rear of the site from Cow Lane for construction of the classroom block. This would entail the removal of the existing bollards at the end of Cow Lane and their replacement with a set of low level gates which will be operated by the contractor as and when necessary. Heras fencing will separate the site compound from the working area.
- 1.15 Also proposed as part of this application is the construction of a pedestrian crossing speed table to be located 18.5m outside of the main school access on Fourth Avenue. This would provide a safer crossing for pedestrians immediately outside of the school grounds.
- 1.16 The applicant has identified that there is a need to upgrade the existing underpass at Cow Lane/York Pass in order for it to be in suitable condition to be used by parents and children to reach the new school.

It is therefore proposed that Hertfordshire Highways would upgrade the lighting on the York side of the underpass. However, they are currently in the process of reviewing the lighting along the whole length of the footpath. The drainage system in the underpass would also be improved given that it has been identified that there is frequent flooding during heavy rainfall.

2. Consultations

- 2.1 Watford Borough Council – will consider the application at the Planning (Development Control) Committee on 7 September 2004. The Council's resolution will be reported orally.
- 2.2 Environment Agency – information is provided in relation to the control of surface water run-off. The sustainable drainage methods (SUDS) are detailed. It is stated that where it is intended that disposal be made to public sewer, the Water Company or its agents should confirm that there is adequate spare capacity in the existing system and that they would be willing to accept any increases to flows.
- 2.3 Transco – confirms that the company has plant in the vicinity, which may be affected by this proposal.
- 2.4 Veolia Water – the scientific and technical consultants to Three Valleys Water detail that the site is located within the groundwater protection zone of Wall Hall pumping station. This is a public water supply comprising a number of chalk boreholes operated by Three Valleys Water.
- 2.5 Sport England – initially objected to the proposal on the grounds that the proposal will result in the permanent loss of approximately 5,000m² of the school playing field, without satisfying exception E3 set out in both Sport England's policy 'A Sporting Future for the Playing Fields of England' (1997) which relates to land that is incapable of forming, or forming part of, a playing pitch, or which would result in the reduction in the size of the playing area of any pitch, and government guidance in paragraph 15 of PPG17. However the objection was withdrawn when two solutions were discussed with Sport England and agreed with the applicant. The preferred option is for the applicant to secure use of the Lea Farm recreation area which abuts the school site, from Watford Borough Council to provide satisfactory replacement playing pitches, or another suitable site (not currently used as playing fields and preferably close to the school). The alternative in the event that this preferred option is not achievable would be for the applicant to sign up to a community use agreement to formalise the community use of three existing school playing field sites in north east Watford.
- 2.6 Sport England suggest two conditions be applied to any decision notice, firstly to require details of replacement playing pitch provision to be submitted and approved in writing by 31 January 2005 or a

community use agreement(s) setting out terms for use by the community of playing pitches on the application site, Meriden Primary School site and Alban Wood Primary School site by 31 January 2005. The second condition relates to the playing pitches, the subject of the first condition to be available for community use by 1 January 2006 unless otherwise agreed in writing by the County Planning Authority and Sport England.

2.7 The Herts and Middlesex Bat Group – state that records show that bats have been recorded at Lea Farm Junior School on a number of occasions and recommend a professional bat survey be carried out.

2.8 Head of Landscape – is not of the view that any of the trees to be felled would prove a reason for refusal. Concern is raised regarding the contractors access route in that there is insufficient space to create the access without damage to trees. It is considered that the threat to the oaks warrants consideration for Tree Preservation Orders. Impacts on landscape character of the area are considered to be nominal, although could be further reduced by the use of reinforced grass for the parking areas. It is suggested that the visual impact on Cow lane path can be minimised if the vegetation on this boundary is protected from any damage during the works using protective fencing on both sides.

2.10 Hertfordshire County Council as Highways Authority – consider that conditions would be necessary:

- Before work on the classroom block commences on site details of lighting and drainage improvements to the pedestrian subway are to be submitted for approval in writing by the Planning Authority.
- Within six months of the granting of permission for the classroom block building, a School Travel Plan shall have been submitted and approved in writing by the Planning Authority.

Reasons for the above conditions are to ensure that the lighting and drainage proposals are designed and constructed in accordance with the Highway Authority's current specification and to assist in the promotion of sustainable transport policies of the County Structure Plan and in accordance with PPG.

2.11 A total of 37 properties were consulted on the application, with 0 letters objecting to the application and 0 letters of support being received during the consultation period.

3. Planning Considerations

3.1 The relevant policies of the adopted Development Plan are:

- County Structure Plan - policy 13 (education and training) and 47 (sporting, recreation and other leisure uses);

- Watford Borough Council Local Plan 1993, adopted June 1996 – policies L2 (open space retention), L6 (sports/recreation provision), SE9 (tress, woodland and hedgerows), SE10 (tress and hedgerow protection), SE11 (landscaping), SE16 (standard of design), T3 (transport and new development), T9 (car parking) & CS1 (accessibility).
- Watford District Plan 2000, Draft for Deposit May 2000 – policies SE1 (sustainable development), SE26 (wildlife corridor), SE29 (replacement trees), SE30 (protection of trees, woodlands and hedgerows), SE32 (tree and hedgerow provision in new development), T4 (transport and new development), T5 (new development and green travel plan), T6 (pedestrian facilities), T7 (pedestrian facilities in developments), T18 (car parking standards), T19 (non-residential development), T22 (car park location and design), L4 (open space protection), L5 (playing fields), L9 (children’s playspace), CS6 (new facilities), U1 (standard of design), U2 (landscape design), U3 (integration of character).

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

- appropriateness of increase in car parking provision on site;
- the potential for any further impact of noise and disturbance on the neighbourhood above and beyond the existing situation on site;
- the reduction of school playing field as a result of this development;
- appropriateness of building design.

Appropriateness of increase in car parking provision on site.

3.3 There are currently 25 car parking spaces available to visitors and staff on the site. However, the applicant has identified a need for up to 79 parking spaces to accommodate the increase in staff and visitor spaces and in addition provide 5 disabled parking spaces and a drop off point alongside the main school entrance. The applicant has addressed the issue of parking by providing an increase of parking spaces within the school grounds and a roundabout to enable the circulation of traffic based on a gyratory type system.

3.4 The applicant wishes to provide an additional 18 parking spaces above that calculated from Hertfordshire County Council parking standards for schools based on a new school of 525 pupils. This should allow for some flexibility should there be an increase in families moving into the area, as is the case for creating a 3 forms of entry school. This number is considered sufficient to accommodate the amalgamation proposed without significantly worsening parking conditions in and around First and Forth Avenues. In providing a new school, it is considered important to reduce parking outside of the school site and therefore the need arises for additional parking provision within the school grounds.

- 3.5 The land proposed for parking use is currently a grassed area forming part of the playing field although not marked out as a playing pitch of any kind. The balance needs to be struck between the increase in parking requirements and the necessity for playing provision for the school curriculum and children's play time. Sport England have concluded that a net loss of playing field at the school site would result from this development and as such are not prepared to look favourably at this proposal without additional playing field space being sought to be used by the school. The applicant is currently pursuing suitable solutions as proposed by Sport England.
- 3.6 The car park would form an extension to that already on site. The gyratory system with a roundabout would enable cars to continue to enter the parking bays from one direction and exit via the other direction, thus allowing a continuous flow of traffic and alleviate any congestion. This would reflect the existing arrangements on site which would not therefore change, but simply be extended.
- 3.7 The issue to address is accommodating a safe area for children to be dropped off and picked up from school and reduce the amount of on street parking in surrounding roads to the school. Although it is accepted that sustainable means of transport is encouraged at all school sites, it is inevitable that staff, visitors, disabled persons and parents dropping off young children creates a need for parking spaces available within the school grounds.
- 3.8 There is an existing lockable gate at the front entrance to the school from Fourth Avenue. This is opened and closed when necessary and as such serves as a partial security measure at the school. There is a separate pedestrian footpath leading from the school entrance gate to the main school entrance and reception area. The proposed alterations regarding the car parking arrangements would enforce the segregation of vehicles and pedestrians by erecting a pedestrian barrier with pass-through gates. There would be a need for a new pathway surrounding the car park, including the diversion of the existing footpath leading through the school playing field to a rear pedestrian access to the school grounds from an adjoining public park and residential estate.
- 3.9 In order to encourage sustainable means of travel, the applicant should be required to produce a school travel plan which aims to reduce travel by private car and increase walking, cycling, car sharing and the use of public transport. This can be controlled by condition. It is unreasonable to insist on the submission of a school travel plan prior to the closure of the three schools of Lea Farm Junior, Garston Infants and Meriden Primary schools and the opening of the new primary school. The implementation of a school travel plan would be in line with sustainable policies and car parking policies in Watford District Local Plan and Draft for Deposit 2000.

The potential for any further impact of noise and disturbance on the neighbourhood, above and beyond the existing situation on site.

- 3.10 The surrounding area to the school site is predominately residential in nature. The area suffers from peaks in traffic flow associated with the school programme especially along Fourth Avenue and some congestion at the bell end of this road at the entrance gate to the school. It is thought that traffic causes the most noise and disturbance to nearby residents in the vicinity of the school grounds. This is also a reason for concern regarding any pollution issues.
- 3.11 The lighting of the car park would only be required to be used as and when necessary, primarily during winter months whilst the school is open on weekdays and whilst staff are leaving the premises following the closure of the school at the end of the school day. The lighting columns can be switched on and off whenever required. From the data submitted with the application, it is considered that there would be minimal spillage of light from the modern lighting columns to be used. The effect of the lighting on the nearby properties should be minimal given that there is considerable screening along the boundary of the school with the properties in First Avenue abutting the site.
- 3.12 The lighting would be directional and face away from any nearby properties. Three slightly different types of lighting columns are proposed on site. The access way is proposed to be lit by 4 single columns and one twin headed unit of 6m in height and with a 5° inclination. Average illuminance is 10.0 lux with a minimum of 5.0 lux. The roundabout is to be lit by 3 single headed units of 8m in height with a 5° inclination. Minimum illuminance is 1.0. lux. It is proposed that the car park be lit by 4 twin headed units of 10m in height and with a 5° inclination. Average illuminance is 15.0 lux with a minimum of 5.0 lux and overall uniformity of 20%. Based on the calculations supplied with the lighting design from the lighting company, adequate lighting would be achieved across the whole of the access and parking area with minimum illuminance at the front boundary of the school.
- 3.13 The school site currently occupies two schools, namely Lea Farm Junior School and Garston Infants School and as such the local area is accustomed to associated noise and disturbance related to this educational use of the land. It is anticipated that this situation would not be altered considerably, however there would potentially be more of an intense use on site. This is likely to result in additional cars in the vicinity of the school site and additional movements of children of a morning and afternoon. However, the additional parking provision on site would help to alleviate this extra influx of pupils and related car journeys. It is considered that First and Fourth Avenues can cope with the anticipated additional school traffic as a result of this proposal.

The reduction of school playing field as a result of this development.

- 3.14 Approximately 5,000sqm of playing field would be permanently lost as a result of this development, approximately 2,500sqm on the land proposed as a classroom block and 2,500sqm on the land proposed to be used for the car park. Additional hard play area has been provided in place of some of the playing field to the south of the proposed new classroom block. 360sqm of the two enclosed play areas totalling 1170sqm would be specifically for nursery school children. There are two other hard play areas on site either side of the infants and the junior school buildings that would continue to be used.
- 3.15 The reduction in playing field on site would result in the need for marked playing pitch layouts to be reorganised. As such, it appears that it is not possible to accommodate the same number of playing pitches of the same size should the development be permitted. The applicant has confirmed that they will use their best endeavours to meet Sport England's preference that replacement playing fields are provided on the Lea Farm Recreation Ground which abuts the school site, or another suitable site. However, should the preferred option prove unsuccessful, the applicant has also confirmed that they would be willing to put in place community use agreements to make existing school playing fields available for community use at three playing field sites in north Watford, namely the Lea Farm/Garston School site, Meriden School and Alban Wood Primary School.
- 3.16 Development on playing field land is not considered the most appropriate use of the land for any expansion, especially when it would result in a permanent loss of playing field for the school. However, the applicant is confident that a sufficient amount of playing field will be available for the new school. Should this result in there being an area of additional playing space for the school to use as and when required, this would be the County Council's responsibility to maintain, as the Local Education Authority.
- 3.17 The closure of Meriden Primary School has resulted in there being a considerable number of children to accommodate in the area. The new development would maintain sufficient spaces in the locality to educate these children.
- 3.18 An extension on an existing school site means that the existing core facilities at the school can be utilised, including the canteen, school hall and toilet facilities. In this instance it has proved uneconomical to maintain the upkeep of Meriden Primary School with dwindling numbers of pupils to accommodate in the immediate area. Lea Farm Junior and Garston Infants School occupy a significant site and as such there is scope to incorporate an extension to the existing building.

Appropriateness of building design

- 3.19 The classroom block has been designed to complement the original school buildings on site. It is to be single storey in height and be accessible to all persons. The provision of disabled WCs has been included in the design.
- 3.20 Proposed materials would be sympathetic to the character of the surrounding area. Any visual impact of the building would be softened by the proposed landscaping which is comprehensive in terms of providing for replacement tree planting, hedges around the car park and fenced hard play area, trellis around bin store and extension of 'mound' as 'wildlife corridor'. The new classroom block would not be directly visible from any neighbouring properties given its proposed location at the rear of the existing school buildings on site.

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 The creation of a new school on the site of Lea Farm Junior and Garston Infants school is a consequence of the closure of Meriden School, Watford. There is sufficient space on the existing Lea Farm and Garston School site to accommodate this expansion of school buildings. However, it is acknowledged that there is an overall loss of net playing field at the site, something that is being addressed by the applicant. The proposals make more than sufficient provision for on site parking facilities and has addressed wider issues including the upgrading of the Cow Lane/York Way underpass. The proposal incorporates a significant amount of landscaping around the proposed development on site, which aids in the softening of the visual impact of the proposed building and car park construction.
- 4.2 The report concludes that, subject to no new issues being raised by statutory consultees, the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant planning permission subject to conditions to include submission of materials prior to development, hours of construction, contractor's access and arrangements on site, landscaping (including protection and retention of the Oak tree), school travel plan, no use of the building until completion of the car park, indication of construction completion date, Grampian style conditions relating to the speed table and the subway improvements, replacement playing pitch provision or community use agreement(s), timescale for making playing pitches available for community use and that the Director of Environment should write to Watford Borough Council suggesting that a Tree Preservation Order be considered for the Oak tree identified for preservation by the Landscape Officer.

5. Financial implications

- 5.1 There are none for this committee.

Background information used by the author in compiling this report

Planning application reference 9/0668-04;

Consultation responses received in response to planning application ref.
9/0668-04;

Hertfordshire County Structure Plan Review 1991-2011.

Watford Borough Council Local Plan 1993 adopted June 1996.

Watford District Plan 2000 Draft for Deposit May 2000.