

ITEM NO:	<u>Location:</u>	Kingshott School, Stevenage Road, Hitchin, SG4 7JX
	<u>Applicant:</u>	Kingshott School
	<u>Proposal:</u>	Change of Use of agricultural land to additional soft play areas for school use (Class D1 Use).
	<u>Ref. No:</u>	17/01998/ 1
	<u>Officer:</u>	Joanne Cousins

Date of expiry of statutory period: 28 September 2017

Reason for Delay

Committee cycle - extension of time agreed.

Reason for Referral to Committee

As the site area is over 1.0ha this application needs to be determined by the Planning Control Committee under the Council's scheme of delegation.

1.0 Relevant History

- 1.1 Extensive history relating to various applications for the expansion of the education facilities at the school. The first building to be used as a school on this site was Oakfield House, a country house built in 1859 which is still in use today. Later, the stables were converted into the Dining Room, Library and Art Room. Over the years various classroom blocks have been added and a theatre/gym was constructed and later extended. A covered swimming pool was also added. In September 2004 a new pre-prep building was opened, which is positioned in front of the original building as approached from the A602. This is known as the Rowan Building. In September 2008 a new two storey Middle School building was opened and this sits in a detached location to the east of the original building. This is known as the Ashbrook Building. A new standalone nursery which was completed in October 2010 and is known as Nutkins Nursery. New classrooms, dining hall, kitchen, gymnasium and reception, including demolition of existing structures was Permitted in December 2012- Only the classrooms element of this permission was implemented, which comprises a two storey block of contemporary design and materials to the rear of the site.
- 1.2 With regard to outdoor facilities the School has benefited from various planning permissions, including permission to change the use of agricultural land to playing fields in 2002, construction of all weather sports pitches with associated flood lighting in April 2017 and a Sports Hall building granted in May 2017.
- 1.3 In April 2017 permission was also granted for a new internal road system, provision of additional parking spaces and a new school access road with associated landscaping.

2.0 Policies

- 2.1 **North Hertfordshire District Local Plan No.2 with Alterations**
Policy 2 - Green Belt
Policy 39 - Leisure Uses

2.2 **National Planning Policy Framework NPPF**

- 8. Promoting healthy communities
- 9. Protecting Green Belt Land

2.3 **North Hertfordshire District Local Plan 2011-2031 Proposed Submission**

Policy SP5 - Countryside and Green Belt

3.0 Representations

3.1 **St Ippolyts Parish Council** - no comments received.

3.2 **Site Publicity** - no comments received

4.0 Planning Considerations

4.1 **Site & Surroundings**

4.1.1 Kingshott School is located off the A602 Stevenage Road to the south east of the town centre of Hitchin and is located in the green belt. The school site comprises the buildings with playing fields to the north. The surroundings thereafter is agricultural land. Directly adjacent to part of the northern boundary of the site is Oakfield Farm, within which there are two residential properties with the closest being Oakhurst. Hard standing on the school site includes driveways, three car parks, playgrounds and all weather sports pitches. In terms of access, there are currently two vehicular accesses to the school site from the main carriageway of the A602 Stevenage Road. The original access is the western entrance and exit which is designated for staff, visitors and right of way for Oakfield Farm.

4.1.2 The location plan attached to this report shows the field in question adjoining the established eastern boundary of the school, beyond the existing sports pitches. The boundary with the school is formed of a strong, well-established tree belt and the north boundary by a tall field hedge. As seen from Ashbrook, the field rises in level towards the eastern school boundary with the highest point being approximately half way along this boundary. From this point the field falls away down to Stevenage Road by some 2m and by a similar height down towards the north boundary. This results in the area of the application site being well obscured from Stevenage Road and to a lesser degree as viewed from Ashbrook.

4.2.3 Within the school boundary the area between the general complex of school buildings and the boundary contains a fenced all-weather pitch, a cricket green and an area used for different sporting purposes during the year. To the north of the school and extending to the north of the current application site, land is leased to provide playing fields.

4.2 **Proposal**

4.2.1 The application seeks permission for the change of use of 2.98 hectares of agricultural land for additional soft play areas/outdoor recreation for School use. This would involve the ploughing and sowing of new grass on the land which would then remain open with no courts or formal markings and the boundaries to remain as existing.

4.2.2 The application is accompanied by a brief Design and Access Statement confirming that the land has not been farmed for many years and will form additional play space whilst providing habitat spaces within the existing hedgerows.

4.3 Key Issues

4.3.1 The site is within a rural part of District covered by the Green Belt. The key issue in the determination of this application is to judge whether it proposes an appropriate form of development in Green Belt terms and, if so, whether the particular use would keep the land open in character. In addition the impact of the development on any nearby residents is a material consideration.

4.3.2 Green Belt Impact

With regard to the impact upon the openness of the green belt, the National Planning Policy Framework (referred to further as the Framework), is a key consideration when assessing this issue. Paragraph 80 of the Framework states:

"Green Belt serves five purposes:

- to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;***
- to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;***
- to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;***
- to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and***
- to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land".***

4.3.3 The NPPF also states at para 81 that ***Once Green Belts have been defined, local planning authorities should plan positively to enhance the beneficial use of the Green Belt, such as looking for opportunities to provide access; to provide opportunities for outdoor sport and recreation; to retain and enhance landscapes, visual amenity and biodiversity; or to improve damaged and derelict land.*** In my opinion the application satisfactorily meets these requirements being for outdoor informal sport and recreation and as such is, in my view, a straightforward proposal for consideration and determination by the planning authority. Clearly the use of the existing field in the manner described (see para 4.2.1) would preserve the openness of the area. I would therefore regard the proposal as an appropriate form of development in the Green Belt which preserves the openness of the Green Belt. This also reflects the provisions of Green Belt policy within the District Local Plan and emerging plan.

4.3.4 The application is for the change of use only and does not include any means of fencing, merely stating that existing boundaries would be maintained. If fencing were required this would in any event constitute permitted development and I do not believe that the openness of the Green Belt would be prejudiced by say post and rail fencing around the boundary or by any enhanced boundary landscaping as the applicants may chose to carry out.

4.3.5 Furthermore, Insofar as the "essential" nature of the additional soft play areas are concerned, the desire of the school to continue to provide outdoor facilities for pupils would accord with Paragraph 72 of the Framework which states the following in support of school facility expansion and alteration:

"The Government attaches great importance to ensuring that a sufficient choice of school places is available to meet the needs of existing and new communities. Local planning authorities should take a proactive, positive and collaborative approach to meeting this requirement, and to development that will widen choice in education. They should:

- give great weight to the need to create, expand or alter schools***
- work with schools promoters to identify and resolve key planning issues before applications are submitted".***

This central government intention for schools is to be able to improve their facilities is considered to add further weight to the case for allowing the proposed development. In my view the application presents no harm to the openness of the Green Belt. However if very limited harm were to be incurred to the openness of

the green belt this would in my view be greatly outweighed by the benefits of the development in my view in providing access to outdoor recreation and leisure and is therefore considered acceptable development in this green belt location.

4.3.6 Finally the current local plan Policy 36 states:

For leisure uses, the Council will normally permit development proposals which are acceptable in land use and environmental terms, and according to the following criteria:

(iii) low intensity leisure development will normally be permitted between towns where it would improve the rural environment or it would prevent coalescence between towns.

I am satisfied that the proposed change of use would be compliant with this policy.

4.3.7 Impact upon neighbouring properties

For the impact on neighbouring properties, there are no properties immediately adjacent to the land which abuts the existing school and agricultural land. The nearest dwellings are those on Stevenage Road, adjacent the site called 1-3 Ashbrook Cottages. Given the nature of the proposal and the distance from these properties I do not consider that there would be any material impact upon the amenities that these properties currently enjoy.

4.4 **Conclusion**

4.4.1 The application represents, in my opinion, an appropriate form of development in this Green Belt location and one that would satisfactorily maintain the general open character of the area. It would be for appropriate outdoor recreation activities and would have no adverse impact upon any nearby residential amenity. As a consequence I have no adverse comments to make and recommend that permission should be granted.

5.0 Legal Implications

5.1 In making decisions on applications submitted under the Town and Country Planning legislation, the Council is required to have regard to the provisions of the development plan and to any other material considerations. The decision must be in accordance with the plan unless the material considerations indicate otherwise. Where the decision is to refuse or restrictive conditions are attached, the applicant has a right of appeal against the decision.

6.0 Recommendation

6.1 That planning permission be **GRANTED** subject to the following conditions:

1. The development hereby permitted shall be begun before the expiration of 3 years from the date of this permission.

Reason: To comply with the provisions of Section 91 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as amended by Section 51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004.

2. The development hereby permitted shall be carried out wholly in accordance with the details specified in the application and supporting approved documents and plans listed above.

Reason: To ensure the development is carried out in accordance with details which form the basis of this grant of permission.

Proactive Statement

Planning permission has been granted for this proposal. Discussion with the applicant to seek an acceptable solution was not necessary in this instance. The Council has therefore acted proactively in line with the requirements of the Framework (paragraphs 186 and 187) and in accordance with the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015.