

MC/18/1328

Date Received: 3 May 2018

Location: Land At Ranscombe Farm Sundridge Hill Cuxton Rochester

Proposal: Works to improve visitor and working facilities at Ranscombe Farm Reserve including: part change of use of agricultural land for provision of ancillary visitor car parking and facilities; formation of new surfaced paths and new cycleway; provision of 9 prefabricated buildings with a total floorspace of 126 square metres for visitor use and for storage of tools and materials used for site management; and provision of new composting toilet facilities

Applicant Mr Richard Moyse

Ward: Cuxton And Halling Ward

Case Officer: Majid Harouni

Contact Number: 01634 331700

Recommendation of Officers to the Planning Committee, to be considered and determined by the Planning Committee at a meeting to be held on 24th October 2018.

Recommendation - Approval with Conditions

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

Reason: To comply with Section 91 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).

- 2 The development hereby permitted shall be carried out in accordance with the following approved plans:

Drawing numbers; FAC01, FAC02 FAC03 Rev B, FAC04, FAC05, TRK01TRK02, TRK03, TRK04a, TRK04b, LND01, FEN06a, FEN06b, FEN06c, BDG01, BDG02, BDG03, BDG04, BDG05a, BDG05b, BDG05c, BDG05d received 04/09/18

Reason: For the avoidance of doubt and in the interests of proper planning.

- 3 No external lighting shall be installed on site until details of such lighting has been submitted to, and approved in writing by, the Local Planning Authority. The approved lighting scheme shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details and maintained as such thereafter.

Reason: In the interest of protection of wildlife environment and in compliance with Policy BNE5 of the local plan

- 4 Before development hereby approved commences, detailed proposals for the planting of trees, hedges and/or shrubs for screening the visitors hub and car parking areas shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority, and such trees or shrubs as approved shall comprise primarily native species. All planting comprised in the approved details of landscaping shall be carried out in the first planting seasons following the occupation of the visitor hub buildings and the use of the car parking areas or the completion of the development, whichever is the sooner, and any trees, shrubs, hedges or plants which within a period of five years from the completion of development die, are removed or become seriously damaged or diseased shall be replaced in the next planting season with others of similar size and species, unless the Local Planning Authority gives written consent to any variation.

Reason: To protect visual amenity and the character of the area and to ensure a satisfactory environment having regard to Policies BNE1, BNE2, BNE6 of the Local Plan

- 5 No container shall be placed on site until details and samples of all timber cladding and finish colour of the cladding materials to be used externally have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The development shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details.

Reason: To ensure that the appearance of the development is satisfactory and without prejudice to conditions of visual amenity in the locality, in accordance with Policy BNE1 of the Medway Local Plan 2003.

For the reasons for this recommendation for approval please see Planning Appraisal Section and Conclusions at the end of this report.

Proposal:

1. A visitor hub comprising the following:
 - One shipping container to be converted for used as an education centre/classroom. The building will measure 9.1m long x 2.6m wide and be 2.45m height and will have 6no solar panels on the roof adding further

60cm to the overall height of the building. There will be a ramp to the front door and the structure will have an external timber clad finish.

- One shipping container to be converted for used as a visitor welcome room. The building will measure 6.1m long x3m wide and be 2.45m in height and will have 6no solar panels on the roof adding further 60cm to the overall height of the building. There will be a ramp to the front door and the structure will have an external timber clad finish.
 - One shipping container building measuring 3mx3m and 2.45 in height for storage use.
 - Two shipping containers for storage use. These buildings will measure 6.1m long x2.6m wide and 2.45m height.
 - 2 composting toilets measuring 2.5 by 2m and 2.45m height.
 - Provision for 40 car parking spaces including 3 blue badge spaces. The parking is split into 30 general parking spaces including 3 disabled spaces and 10 over flow spaces on grass-reinforcement mesh for use during the occasional events.
 - The centre compound to be enclosed by 1.35m high post and rail fencing with backed stock netting and associated access gates.
 - With the exception of the visitor base building all the above buildings are to be mounted on corner pads.
 - The visitor centre compound would be about 2200m² of which about 700m² (the over flow car parking and the events areas) would be retained as grassed surface areas and the remaining areas would be hard surfaced with type 1 rolled stone. The over flow parking area would be grass on reinforcement mesh.
 - A fenced off area next to the education building measuring (35mx20m) 700m² will be for use as outdoor events activities.
2. Use of an existing 40m by 15m hard standing area along the northeast corner of the park for stationing 3 no shipping containers for storage use purposes in association with the day to day management and maintenance of the park, its woodland area and foot paths and cycle path areas. These containers would also be clad in timber in order to blend with the character of surrounding countryside. These containers measure 6.1m long by 2.45m wide and 2.45m high. Two of the containers would be kept side by side and located on the northern part of the hard standing area and the third container about 20m further to the south.
 3. Widening of the existing entrance access road to the park to allow two-way traffic. This will involve works to the steep embankment on the northern side of

the road for a distance of approximately 110m. This road would be tarmacked similar to the existing road surface.

4. Construction of a new stone-surfaced entrance footpath to run parallel and on the east side of the entrance road. This footpath will be 1.4m – 2.0m wide and set back 2m from the road in order to provide safe access for pedestrians separate to the road. The path will continue up through the existing woodland and cross the entrance road just beyond the proposed Visitor Hub/compound.
5. Creation of new cycle and footpath together with surfacing of existing footpaths and tracks totalling 3615m in length. This would also comprise:-
 - 645m of surfaced forestry track, on the line of existing unsurfaced tracks, part of which would be shared with visitors on existing public paths.
 - 1555m of additional new surfacing to provide a shared-use path for walkers and cyclists.
 - A new cycling route, linking the A228 Sundridge Hill to the existing shared use route on the Town Road, and connecting to the Darnley Trail cycle route. The surfacing will be to a 3m width to match the existing surfaced sections and to permit shared use with site management vehicles. Up to 875m of the proposed path lies within Cobham Woods SSSI.
 - 1415m of additional new surfacing on footpaths, to improve accessibility, particularly for people with limited mobility.
 - Construction of a new 150m long 3 m wide drivable track in the southeast corner of the park west of the main access road to facilitate better access for management of the park.
6. Provision of 10 additional visitors' car parking spaces along the North West corner of the park, close to the southern edge of Cobham wood to facilitate better access to the western part of the park for visitors and staff.

Relevant Planning History

MC/03/1263	Land at Ranscombe Farm Sundridge Hill Installation of a 26.05 metres high lattice mast together with 2 cabinets & ancillary equipment with compound of about 9m x 14m Decision Date: 4 August 2003 Decision: Refused
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MC/03/0992

Land at Ranscombe Farm Sundridge Hill

Installation of a 20 metre high telecommunications monopole to support 3 antennae and associated ground based equipment for use by the emergency services

Decision Date: 9 June 2003

Decision: Withdrawn

Representations

The application has been advertised on site and in the press and by individual neighbour notification to the owners and occupiers of the properties within the park.

Eight letters of representations have been received expressing concern about the following points.

- The need for parking facilities for a total of fifty- two cars is unnecessary, the infrastructure into the reserve is wholly inadequate, the narrow single track with blind bends is not suitable for the amount of traffic that is currently using it let alone a further fifty- two vehicles.
- It is dangerous to drivers, pedestrians and animals, there have been many precarious experiences and fortunately, to-date, and no-one has been hurt.
- As residents who share the road with Plantlife and tenant farmers, we do not wish to contribute towards the wear and tear and damage that a further fifty- two vehicles will cause.
- At present there is low impact from crime on the reserve, due mainly to the vigilance of the residents. However, with greater numbers privy to the fact there are buildings on the reserve containing tools, equipment etc., theft and vandalism will be greater enhanced - a sad inditement of our times, but a fact of life. Post and wire fencing will not deter anyone intent on committing crime.
- Currently the occupiers of eight residential dwellings at Ranscombe Farm Reserve are able to ensure that our privacy is protected. With the increased numbers of vehicles put forward in the proposals it is inevitable that we will have more vehicles and "sightseers" coming into our residential development. We do not want our privacy compromised.
- Since the number of visitors to the reserve has increased we have had a break-in resulting in a huge loss.
- Members of the public regularly walk our boundary and even across our land despite the 'no trespassing' signs! This is only caused by Plant Life promoting the Reserve.
- Increase in the number of visitors to the park will result in more traffic on the road leading to our homes; this may cause a fatal accident.

- The ecology survey was carried out during the winter months. This is an inappropriate time for assessment of the wildlife. Such a study should be carried out by a professional and independent organisation.

KCC Ecology advises that the proposed development has limited potential to result in ecological impacts subject to an appropriate condition regarding lighting and an informative encouraging provision of bat and bird boxes.

Development Plan

The Development Plan for the area comprises the Medway Local Plan 2003 (the Local Plan). The policies referred to within this document and used in the processing of this application have been assessed against the National Planning Policy Framework 2012 and are considered to conform.

Planning Appraisal

Background

Ranscombe Farm Reserve was acquired in 2005 and is managed as a nature reserve and informal country park. It is 252ha (560 acres) in size and lies on the western edge of the Medway Towns. Part of the site is included in the Cobham Woods Site of Special Scientific Interest and is within the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It is one of the most important sites in the UK for the conservation of threatened plant species.

The park consists of about 130ha of woodland, (the vast majority of which is ancient, semi-natural woodland, with some secondary woodland and around 6ha of recent planting); approximately 40ha of grassland, including some small areas of species-rich chalk grassland; about 80ha of arable farmland is managed under a Farm Business Tenancy and is subject to a Countryside Stewardship agreement.

The park provides 10 miles of paths – including Public Rights of Way and the North Downs Way National Trail.

The park is open to visitors, for free, every day of the year. The park has provision for up to 11 car parking spaces at its main entrance on Sundridge Hill. There are also a number of pedestrian access points from other adjoining roads such as Elgin Gardens, Whiteleaves Rise, Albatross Avenue, Poplicans Road and Bush Road. Cyclists can also access the park.

Due to the poor level of car parking provision for visitors, lack of storage facilities, and unmade path surface conditions, the park currently attracts very low level of visitors compared with other country parks in the borough. It is estimated that the number of visitors is about 20-40,000 persons per year.

The intention of the applicant is to improve this country park's facilities in order to make it more accessible to wider members of the community including disabled people, mums with prams, elderly people and to make the park attractive as a Nature study location for schools. Thus increasing visitor numbers to the park all year round.

There are also a small number of long established private residential dwellings/houses within the park who share the vehicular access to the park. The representations received and mentioned above are from the occupiers of these dwellings.

Principle

Medway Local Plan has identified Ranscombe Farm as part of a wider Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (Policy BNE32), North Downs Special Landscape Area (Policy BNE33) and Site of Nature Conservation Interest (Policy BNE36). These policies restrict development within the Kent Downs AONB and Special Landscape Areas to those which help to conserve the natural beauty, wildlife, cultural heritage and enhance the landscape of the area.

Ranscombe Farm is also within Green Belt area (Policy BNE30) where presumption is against inappropriate development. Development will not be permitted, unless the following objectives are fulfilled:

- Open character of the area is maintained.
- New buildings will only be permitted for the purposes of:
 - a- Agricultural and forestry or
 - b- Essential small scale facilities for outdoor sport or recreational

In addition Policy L9 of the local plan has identified Ranscombe Farm as a potential site for use as a Country Park. This is to offset the impact of channel tunnel rail link and M2 on the landscape and to offset the serious shortfall of open space in Strood area.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2018 in paragraph 172 seeks to protect the AONB areas and states that great weight should be given to conservation and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in...Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues.

The objectives of the above mentioned proposals are to enhance the country park's facilities in order to make Ranscombe Farm more inviting and appealing to wider members of the public; attractive and user friendly so that more people are able to use and enjoy the open recreational opportunities that the park has to offer; and at the same time to ensure that there are adequate facilities on site to ensure that the park staff have the necessary material and equipment on site to manage and maintain Ranscombe Farm as a whole for the future generations in compliance with the above mentioned policies and paragraph 172 of the NPPF.

The proposals assist to promote the purposes of the country Park by providing facilities directly related to the conservation and enhancement of open recreational use and management of the Ranscombe Farm as a country park. As such it is considered that there is no in principle objection to the proposed development.

Design

The location of each element of the development proposed has been assessed in order to affirm that it is sustainable and to ensure that they would cause as little impact on the wildlife, wooded areas, landscape character and visual amenity of the park and residential amenities of the residents of the park as possible.

The location of the proposed visitor hub has been determined by the availability of the nearest cleared and flat area of land close to the main vehicular entrance access point and road to the park and maximise screening that the existing surrounding trees together with additional landscaping can provide. The identified land forms part of a large agricultural field currently being farmed/cultivated for agricultural use; where due to regular ploughing there is very little concern about impact on the local ecology and wild life.

The main body of the buildings proposed would be metal shipping containers of different sizes. Such structures would not normally be considered appropriate in terms of materials and design for use in country parks or AONB locations. They do however provide for secure storage and as the applicant intends to clad them with wood this will limit visual impact and will be in keeping with the rural character of the surrounding area.

The proposed surfacing materials for the permanent car parking areas within the compound and additional 10 parking spaces to the northwest corner of the park would be rolled stone and the surfacing of the over flow parking within the compound would be grass reinforcement mesh. These surfacing materials would not detract from the visual character of the park and are considered acceptable.

The proposed 3 no container units that will be located on the north east corner of the park will also be timber clad so that in design and visual terms they relate better with their surroundings. The identified location for these 3 containers is already hard surfaced. These buildings would be used for storage and staff facility purposes in association with forestry works and maintenance of the park.

The proposal therefore is considered acceptable in design terms and in compliance with Policy BNE1 of the local plan and paragraphs 91, 92, 96 and 172 of the NPPF.

Amenity

There are a small number of residential properties in a cluster inside the park. They are about 430m northwest of the proposed visitors hub and over 530m east of the proposed

10 car parking area to the northwest of the park. Having regard to the distance involved between these dwellings and the visitor hub or car parking area, it is considered that there would be no adverse impact upon the residential amenity of these properties.

The residential properties within the park share the vehicular access to the park. The proposal to attract more people to the park would add to the volume of traffic to the park. However, this would not be significant enough to cause detriment to the amenities of the occupiers of these dwellings.

In addition, enhancement and improvement of the footpath and cycle path facilities within the park would encourage residents of the nearby settlements to use the park.

With regard to burden cost associated with the maintenance of the access road, this is a matter for the management of the park and the owners of the dwellings in the park to resolve and is not a planning consideration.

The proposal therefore would accord with Policy BNE2 of the local plan.

Highways

The proposal would increase the number of car parking provision on site from 11 no to 78 spaces. This includes the proposed 10no over flow car parking spaces.

The applicant has stated that the car parking spaces within the visitor hub would only be accessible when the centre is open otherwise the hub's car parking spaces would be shut and not open to the general members of the public visiting the park. As a result, at such times, public will only have access to the 11 car parking spaces situated close to the access gates to the park along the Sundridge Hill road and 10 new car parking space proposed to the northwest corner of the park.

It is considered that the proposed additional car parking spaces would significantly improve the park's car parking provision and would not adversely impact on the free flow of traffic on the Sundridge Hill road access point or within the park's road networks. The proposal therefore would be in compliance with Policies T2 and T13 of the local plan.

Ecology Impact

As mentioned above the identified site for the visitor's hub forms part of the park's agricultural land and as such has little, if any ecological merit. Wooded areas surrounding the hub and the car parking area to the northwest of the park are unlikely to be affected by the proposals.

The proposal to create new footpaths and improve the existing ones, and the intensification of the use of these foot and cycle paths by an increase in the number of visitors, would cause very marginal impact on the wider ecology of the park provided

during the construction phase, works are carried out under supervision of a qualified Ecological Clerk and outside the bird nesting season (between March to September).

The applicant is not proposing any external lighting within the visitor hub or any other part of the proposed development therefore no light pollution would result from the proposal.

To enhance biodiversity and local ecology KCC has recommended an informative be added to any decision for erection of new birds and bats boxes within the development area and this is recommended.

It is considered that the recreational use, public health and educational benefits arising from the improvement of the park's facilities and greater number of visitors to the park would outweigh the marginal impact resulting from greater use of the park.

On balance therefore it is considered that the proposal would be acceptable and in compliance with Policies BNE35, BNE36 and BNE37 of the local plan and paragraphs 98 and 100 of the NPPF.

Landscape and Visual Impact

It is considered that given the type of buildings (metal containers) chosen for this development and the physical engineering works that are proposed for the ground preparation for base of containers, parking areas and surfacing materials identified for the footpaths and cycle paths, the impact on the landscape would be limited and reversible and as a result will cause very minor impact on the landscape character of the area.

With regard to the long distance visual impact, the proposed visitor hub, the location for the car parking spaces to the northwest corner of the park and the location of the 3no containers to the northeast part of the park, these are well screened by the existing wooded areas and as a result the proposed buildings and vehicle parking areas would be well shielded from views from the surrounding countryside. However, to reduce and soften the visual impact of the visitor hub and car parking area from within the country park some hedge and tree planting is shown in the submitted drawing ND01. However no details have been provided about the type and size of the species to be planted. To deal with this issue a landscaping condition is recommended.

Other Matters

Tranquillity and Night Skies

The park is close to channel tunnel rail link line and M2 Motorway, but is nevertheless within the countryside away from an urban area. No external lighting is proposed. The proposed solar panels are to generate electricity for use inside the buildings within the

visitor hub. However a condition is recommended that no external lighting shall be installed without prior approval of the LPA.

The proposal therefore would not detract from the current level of park's tranquillity and night skies.

Conclusions and Reasons for Approval

The proposal is relatively small in scale and would provide facilities required by the Ranscombe Farm Park staff and volunteers for the up keep, conservation and enhancement of the park and to enhance the park facilities in order to make it more attractive for the wider public to visit and enjoy the park facilities and services. The potential landscape and visual impacts would be mitigated for by existing screening, additional planting and by timber cladding of the proposed containers in an appropriate colour. Further landscaping and no external lighting could be ensured via conditions. It is therefore considered the development complies with the requirements of the paragraphs 91, 92, 96, 98, 100, 172 of the NPPF and Policies BNE1, BNE2, BNE BNE35, BNE36, BNE37, T2 and T13 of the Local Plan and is recommended for approval.

The application would normally be determined under delegated powers but is being referred for Committee determination due to the number of representations received expressing a view contrary to officer's recommendation.

Background Papers

The relevant background papers relating to the individual applications comprise: the applications and all supporting documentation submitted therewith; and items identified in any Relevant History and Representations section within the report.

Any information referred to is available for inspection in the Planning Offices of Medway Council at Gun Wharf, Dock Road, Chatham ME4 4TR and here <http://publicaccess1.medway.gov.uk/online-applications/>