

Planning Committee

Thursday, 04 March 2021

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| Attendees: | Councillor Lyn Barton, Councillor Helen Chuah, Councillor Pauline Hazell, Councillor Brian Jarvis, Councillor Cyril Liddy, Councillor Derek Loveland, Councillor Jackie Maclean, Councillor Martyn Warnes |
| Apologies: | Councillor Philip Oxford |
| Substitutes: | Councillor Gerard Oxford (for Councillor Philip Oxford) |

826 Minutes of the Previous Meeting

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 4 February 2021 be confirmed as a correct record.

827 201048 Mersea Caravan Centre, Waldegraves Holiday Park, West Mersea

The Committee considered an application for the use of the site for the stationing of 57 static caravans in lieu of 117 caravan pitches and associated landscaping and access works.

The Committee had before it a report in which information about the application was set out.

The Committee members had been provided with video and photographs of the site taken by the Planning Officer to assist in their assessment of the impact and suitability of the proposals.

Mr David Cooper addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Planning Committee Procedure Rule 8 in opposition to the application.

Mr Cooper stated that approval of the proposal for the replacement of touring vans with 57 large static mobile homes would bring the total number of static vans to approximately 1962 units on Mersea Island.

The removal of 117 touring caravan /camper van units with this planning application on this site would create a loss of nearly 23% of the total number of 513 touring van sites on the Island leaving only 396 genuine touring pitches available.

There was a national requirement for more touring sites to cater for the increase in touring vans being sold and the Covid 19 effect of more UK based holidays. Official

places to stay when touring in areas such as Mersea Island would be under extreme pressure.

The knock-on effect of removing genuine touring van pitches would be more illegally overnight parked vans in car parks and the streets around West Mersea and Mersea Island. The Island was Colchester's much promoted tourist attraction but this consent would appear to go against the tourism policy by reducing the number of touring pitches available.

The dismissal of the principles laid out in the West Mersea Neighbourhood Plan document draft was difficult to justify as this plan recommended that the number of static vans should remain about the same, but encouraged touring vans rather than static holiday homes. The Neighbourhood Plan had been consulted upon with people of West Mersea and was sponsored by West Mersea Town Council and supported by East Mersea Parish Council.

On environmental terms was it right to cover over some 25%, nearly 0.6 of a hectare, of the site with concrete or paved area instead of grass field? This whole area was a grass site at present being totally unused from 1st December to 1st March.

Replacing 117 touring pitches with 57 static mobile homes made little sense in that it promoted the loss of 60 van sites for tourism. Also this was contrary to Colchester Borough Council's policy DM5 in the Emerging Local Plan and the Development Policies Adopted October 2010 Policy DP10 and explanation in paragraphs 4.28 and 4.29 which encouraged new and extended holiday touring vans: not a reduction, as the recommendation proposed.

Mr Cooper urged the Committee to reject this application and support the local community in its wishes to retain touring pitches rather than more static mobile homes which would result in a reduction in genuine visitors with their own touring units.

Fiona Bradley, Atwells, addressed the Committee pursuant to the provisions of Planning Committee Procedure Rule 8 in support of the application, explaining that she acted on behalf of the applicant, Waldegraves Holiday Park.

The site had been used as a holiday park by the current owner, Mr Lord, and his family since 1948. The Holiday Park, as a whole, had capacity for approximately 300 pitches for touring caravans. Permission was being sought to use one of the touring fields, which has 117 pitches, for the stationing of 57 static caravans. Approximately 180 touring pitches would be retained on the adjacent Touring Field whilst other fields on the site provide additional pitches for camping and as an overspill area for tourers.

There had been no objections from any of the statutory consultees. In addition, the Council's Landscape Advisor, Aboricultural Officer and Environmental Protection team had raised no objections to the application. Crucially, the consultees had advised that the existing infrastructure was adequate to meet the needs of the proposed development. In many cases, consultees had requested conditions be attached to any

permission to ensure impacts generated by the proposal are mitigated.

The existing site was already a developed piece of land and not an open green field. In accordance with the lawful use it could be used for 11 months of the year with touring caravans, motorhomes, tents, cars and associated paraphernalia occupying the site. The exception was this past year where lockdowns had seen the Holiday Park closed for months at a time.

In response to the concerns of the Parish Council and to other representations, Ms Bradley clarified that the proposed static caravans would not be used as permanent residential homes. The caravans would be occupied in accordance with the existing planning conditions and proposed condition 13 (which allows for occupation for 11 months of the year), and also in compliance with the Caravan Site Licence.

The Holiday Park would continue to be a popular destination for holiday makers and support tourism and other local ventures.

Members were urged to take the points made into consideration and support the Officer's recommendation and grant permission.

Councillor Jowers attended and with the consent of the Chair addressed the Committee speaking on behalf of the residents.

Councillor Jowers reminded the Committee of the number of visitors Mersea Island had attracted since the 1960s. Touring caravans would only visit for a week at a time on average and the touring site was not used January to March. Should the use be for static units that were often residential, then the site would only be unoccupied for one month. The impact of year round occupation on the local community would give rise to major problems such as use of doctors' and dental surgeries. He pointed out that static caravan owners did not pay Council Tax but were charged National Non-Domestic Rates. The emerging Neighbourhood Plan had not been taken into consideration.

There was concern over parking and that post COVID more tourists would be attracted to holiday in the UK and that touring vans would use car parks if there were not touring pitches available and there were more residential caravans. Visitors to the occupants of residential/static caravans would increase the volume of traffic and gridlock would be an issue.

The quality of tourism and number of visitors impacted residents. Mersea islanders felt overwhelmed. The proposed use would not be the best use for the island which was a small island dependant on fishing and farming businesses.

John Miles, Planning Officer, presented the report and assisted the Committee in its

deliberations.

The Planning Officer shared a presentation with members including plans, aerial views and photographs of the site with the inclusion of some taken pre COVID to illustrate occupancy.

He explained that access to the site was via Waldegraves Lane where it joins East Road and Chapmans Lane. There were some residential properties on the lane as well as a business park.

The site currently had 264 static units and 297 touring pitches, totalling to 560 caravans. The proposal would alter the numbers to 321 static units and 180 touring pitches, giving a total of 501 caravans.

Caravan sites do not have statutory parking requirements but it was proposed that each unit would have a parking space allocated and electric vehicle charging points would be agreed by condition. There were additional parking spaces on the wider site.

Essex Highways were satisfied with the proposal in regards to traffic.

There would be a hard and soft landscaping including a linear feature of trees. The application was accompanied by assessments:

The sustainable drainage systems assessment (SuDS) had been undertaken and details of the system would be outlined in a condition. Whilst the static caravans would be on a concrete base that would not be permeable, a porous car parking surface and porous paving would be used on the ancillary areas with hard and soft landscaping conditioned by the Council's Landscape Planning Officer.

The Ecology assessment recommended a contribution to the Essex Coast Recreational Disturbance Avoidance Mitigation Strategy (RAMS). Natural England had been consulted on wildlife habitats and were satisfied that there was no adverse ecological impact on the integrity of sites.

The Planning Officer clarified that whilst the site had a Lawful Development certificate it related to the situation in 2018 and a planning application was required for change of use.

There would be a requirement that the static caravans were not used for one month of the year. Occupation of the static caravans would be regulated under the site licence which requires record keeping and logs, and is reviewed. Enforcement action could be taken if there were breaches and planning officers worked closely with colleagues in Licensing and Enforcement. The proposed static holiday caravans provided fewer units of accommodation and would mean fewer holidaymakers.

The Planning Officer stressed that the site was established for visitor accommodation. This use was allocated in the Local Plan and supported in the emerging Local Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan does not carry as much weight as the Local Plan and the emerging Local Plan and must accord with the strategic priorities in the Local Plan. Simon Cairns, Development Manager further explained that if the draft West Mersea Neighbourhood Plan were in conflict with a strategy in the Local Plan then the Neighbourhood Plan would fail to be adopted.

The Committee raised the issues of on road parking. Touring caravans would have nowhere to park and this would have a harmful effect. However, in response it was also pointed out that touring caravans would probably call and reserve a pitch before travelling.

Other issues of concern were drainage and aesthetics, the known increased demand for touring pitches and that touring visitors should have choice. Concerns around wildlife, the environment and the well-being of residents were also highlighted, including the impact of static caravan dwellers on local infrastructure.

The issue of the cumulative effect of applications was raised and it was suggested that Mersea had reached capacity in terms of static caravans. The Committee were advised that their remit was to consider just the application before them on its merits, and the wider point raised around overall caravan numbers was a wider issue of policy to be determined through the Local Plan process. Cumulative issues would also have been taken into consideration under the Licence.

The Committee acknowledged that residents had concerns and looked at policies DM5, DP10 and SS12c to examine how these would apply to this application.

DM5 was generic, supporting visitor accommodation and caravan sites unless there was significant harm to the amenity of people living nearby. It was noted that the nearest property was some 200 yards away.

The impact on Doctors' surgeries was not a material planning consideration and whilst residents felt overwhelmed there was no data on the number of visitors using surgeries that supported this. Investigation of the effect on schools and medical practices had taken place in conjunction with the Local Plan and no substantive evidence had been provided.

The Planning Officer confirmed that DP10 showed general support for visitor accommodation in appropriate locations including static and touring caravans in caravan parks. It showed no specifics around just touring caravans. The emerging Local Plan was largely in line with DP10. SS12c in the Emerging Plan looked at Mersea and was supportive of development/changes of use including static caravans.

A motion to refuse the application on the grounds of the environmental impact on the life and well-being of residents and wildlife in Mersea, and to support West Mersea Town Council's draft Neighbourhood Plan was proposed and seconded, but on being put to the vote, was not carried
(4 voted FOR, 5 voted AGAINST)

A motion to approve the application subject to the conditions outlined in the report was then proposed.

RESOLVED (5 voted FOR, 4 voted AGAINST)

that the application be approved subject to subject to a proportionate financial contribution to the Essex Coast RAMS being secured, and the imposition of the conditions contained in the report.

828 Applications determined in accordance with Officer Scheme of Delegation

Simon Cairns, Development Manager reminded the Committee that an additional approval had been made and that details of this had been provided in the amendment sheet.

RESOLVED (UNANIMOUS) that the applications that had been determined under the revised scheme of delegation that were listed in the Appendix to the report and in the amendment sheet be noted.