

Full Council

Title:	Southern Road Recreation Ground (P23/S0644/FUL)
Date:	4 April 2023
Contact Officer:	Graeme Markland, Neighbourhood Plan Continuity Officer

Background

1. The application site boundary covers the whole Southern Road Recreation Ground (SRRG) area which consists of one senior and two junior football playing pitches, a play / leisure area that has equipment suitable for toddlers through to teenagers, and some outside gym equipment. Community facilities on the site include the Guide and Scout buildings and the changing rooms. Their associated parking areas serve all three pitches and the Cuttle Brook Local Nature Reserve (CBLNR). The site has a long history of community use as a recreation ground and the former site of the Thame Agricultural Showground. The three buildings on site are traditionally constructed from brick and tile covering pitched roofs. All three were built in the late 1980s / early 1990s with the changing room and Guide hut replacing earlier buildings adjacent to Spring Path.
2. The Thame Neighbourhood Plan (TNP) declared a need for a larger community facility to seat around 200 people. The Plan identified the northern area of the SRRG as a suitable site for such a facility. Since the Plan was adopted, research undertaken on behalf of the Town Council has demonstrated a wider need for a range of sizes of meeting and function rooms to help meet the growing needs of local residents and organisations.
3. Growing pupil numbers across Thame have helped emphasise the need for a facility for young people to meet, socialise and acquire skills. Thame Youth Group has found itself competing against other community groups for venues but young people, especially those from the surrounding villages are among the least able to be flexible in the times they can meet.
4. The playing pitches are a great asset for Thame but cannot currently be rented for use for football at any level of the grass root game. The changing room water and space heating gas boilers were zoned to allow for two boilers to each serve a pair of changing rooms. A fifth is required to provide warmth for the building. All have exceeded their design life and can no longer be certificated as safe for use. To move away from gas boilers which are both expensive to maintain and use would require a major overhaul of the building's plumbing and heating system, and potentially significant changes to its insulation and means of ventilation.
5. The changing rooms also no longer meet the standards of sports bodies. The Football Association and other sporting organisations are looking to increase participation in sport and their adopted requirements now require that privacy can be given to individual players to take account of gender or cultural sensitivities. There is also a requirement to ensure that injured players or those with ambulant disabilities will not struggle to access a toilet or shower.

6. It is also very likely that any new community space provided at SRRG would be used for exercise classes or a base for outside activities and the availability of modern, accessible changing rooms would increase their appeal for hirers.
7. There have been several rounds of consultation held to guide the design and function of the proposed building. The first was open to Lord Williams's School (LWS) students and Thame residents. Some 1,050 responses were received which helped set the scope for the project. The second involved the testing of an initial design with young people from the Youth Café, the Air and Army Cadets, LWS, the 3 primary schools in Thame, the Scouts, Park Life and Youth Zone. Sport England, Thames Valley Police and SODC were also involved.
8. A third consultation involved a staffed public exhibition held in November 2022 at the Guide Hut with the design boards being then displayed online and at the Town Hall for over a month. Some 54 responses were received at this final stage.

Proposed Development

9. It is proposed that the existing changing rooms would be demolished, and new ones provided within a community facility built over the car park currently south of the Scout Hall, and the changing room site. The facility would be targeted towards meeting the needs of the children and young people of Thame and the surrounding villages but would also be available for general hire. Aside from a large hall and a series of common rooms and spaces, provision would be made for a games / music room, a kitchen, a function room, quiet meeting space and an office for support staff. The building's main rooms would be designed with movable partitions to provide one linked space. By combining the main common room and hall, a practicable space capable of holding at least 200 people, seated, would also be provided. The main community space would be two-story in height with a mezzanine floor providing a modest meeting / storage space and a large plant room.
10. The building would be accessed from a landscaped courtyard, with an entrance corridor linking the changing rooms and the building's main hall and spaces. Security doors would be able to close off the changing rooms from the rest of the building with access to them made via a separate entrance off the courtyard.
11. The main building and its entrance would be visible from Southern Road and play areas. An extension to the Scout Hall has been proposed on its north-west corner to close a similar space formed by the later addition of the Scout garage and goal store. This would provide a new entrance lobby, modern accessible toilets and a storage room.
12. Both the new changing rooms and the Scout Hall extension would be formed with pitched-rooves and be single-storey in height.
13. A small servery with a hatch opening onto the courtyard would allow for refreshments to be provided to those visiting the playing fields, play space and CBNR. Public toilets, one of which would be designed for disabled users, would also be accessible from the courtyard.
14. It is also proposed that all the play area and equipment, bar the basketball court, be moved south of the current access road in front of the new courtyard and community buildings. Most of the play equipment would be reused within this new area and placed alongside a new "natural" play area. The play areas, buildings and extensions would be surrounded by new landscaping, tree, flower and shrub planting and rain gardens, all informed by species native to the CBNR.
15. The old play area would be repurposed as a new car park that integrates with that serving the Guide Hall. It is proposed that this area, and all the hard surfaces on site will either be permeable

to rain waters or, like the rooves, collect and direct rainfall to rain gardens, and then on-site attenuation tanks that will store and slowly release waters into the ground in a controlled manner.

Transport

16. The site is deemed suitable to host a large community facility within the “made” TNP and has a long history of serving community uses and being considered for others. It is clear the site is a suitable and sustainable location for community uses.
17. It is proposed that the two access points off Southern Road will be joined through the formation of a single car park, with the entrance to the site being made via the road that serves the Scout Hall and changing rooms and the exit from that serving the Guide Hall.
18. The applicant’s Transport Statement declares there are 39 existing car parking spaces, only 1 of which is designed to disability standards, and 14 existing bicycle spaces. The report notes the proximity to the High Street with the nearest bus stop on the High Street being some 300 metres away.
19. The Transport Statement, and most of the proposal, has been produced in accordance with the Building Research Establishment’s Environmental Assessment Method (BREEAM) which looks at the projected travel means of occupants and visitors and how the development would provide access for a range and degree of disabilities.
20. The assumption has been made that the maximum capacity of the building would be around 200 people and the day-to-day modelling has taken account of the multiple users the car parks currently serve. It is judged that around 120 vehicles would visit the site on a typical day, with 7 arriving and less than 7 departing in peak hours. The author of the report states there are no specific accident issues to address on the surrounding highway network and does not believe the development would have a significant impact on the surrounding road network.
21. To test the existing provision, a parking survey was carried out on a weekday (Thursday) afternoon that was designed to coincide with the end of day rush at St. Joseph’s Primary School. The peak time was noted as being 7pm, but there were still 18 vacancies on site. Safe, local on-street parking opportunities increased towards the evening, compared to daytime hours.
22. A second survey using the same methodology on a Saturday noted the peak time was 2 pm, with 24 vacancies on the site. There were slightly fewer on-street vacancies in the evening compared to the afternoon.
23. Oxfordshire County Council’s (OCC’s) recently adopted car parking standard would suggest that 1 car parking space would need to be provided per 30 sq.m. of building floorspace. The calculation should include both the new *public* floorspace to be provided, and that already existing within the Scout and Guide halls. Applying the test stringently, what would be considered public could exclude the plant room, office, servery, and storage areas which means only 168.7 sq.m. of the proposed 1,404 sq.m. of floorspace would be inaccessible or unusable to the public. For simplicity, this report has assumed that all areas of the Scout and Guide huts are or would be publicly accessible. This would give the area of public floorspace to be served by the car parking as approximately 1,474 sq.m., which OCC standards suggest would require just over 49 spaces to be provided. Removing the newly proposed toilet facilities from the community and Scout Hall buildings would bring that down to 47.
24. The provision of 53 parking spaces (including 3 designed to disability standard) and 28 bicycle spaces may, therefore, be considered acceptable as even at peak occupation it would provide

for some spaces to serve those visiting the CBLNR. Four of the car parking spaces will have Electric Vehicle charging points provided.

25. Thame Valley Police's Crime Prevention Design Advisor Liaison Officer has asked for the cycle store to be either made fully secure or be moved to where it can be overlooked from the main building.
26. The applicant has submitted vehicle tracking diagrams that demonstrate that a car, a refuse vehicle and a fire engine could each enter the site, service the building and depart the site in forward gear. It has been noted, however, that these diagrams show entry and exit from what is indicated as an entrance. The applicant may need to show as a minimum that the car and refuse vehicles can enter and exit the site using the designated entrance and exit.
27. The proposal provides sufficient car parking on site for occupants and visitors. The development may not, however, satisfy provision of secure cycle parking in line with the latest SODC (which refer to OCC) standards and would not, therefore, be in conformity with TNP Policy GA6. It is believed that this would be relatively easy to remedy.

Flood Risk

28. The site is considered as being at the lowest risk of surface water flooding. It has been proposed that all surface water, including roof run-off will be able to be lost to infiltration within the site itself. Surface water from the roadway serving the site, and the rooves of the Scout Hall and community building would be drained either into attenuation tanks or first into rain gardens within the car park and play / courtyard areas and then into attenuation tanks. The tanks would slowly release water into the ground around the site. It is claimed the scheme has been designed to cope with 1-in-100-year storm events, and has built-in a 40% buffer to account for climate change. It is not clear if a small buffer has been provided to allow for some degradation over time of the permeable surfaces.
29. The car park bays and play areas would have permeable surfaces to allow for natural drainage and be surrounded by rain gardens to capture any overspill, above or below ground. This is likely to be an appropriate solution for this site as the existing changing rooms, Scout and Guide Halls all utilise soakaways for rain and surface water. The proposal is considered to be in conformity with TNP Policy ESDQ11, in incorporating Sustainable Urban Drainage into new development and ESDQ12, in providing a Drainage Strategy.

Ecology/biodiversity

1. The applicant has submitted both Tree and Ecological Impact Assessments. A tree survey in April 2022 established the type and health of the trees within the application site. The ecological assessment involved a second visit with thorough ground and canopy-level surveys of each tree undertaken to fully understand the condition of each and check if they had / have potential to provide a habitat for birds or bats.
2. Three trees would need removing to accommodate the proposal and these are identified on the submitted Tree Removal Plan. One, the northern-most lime tree in the avenue of 14 planted south of the car park, is of the highest quality and value and, if undisturbed, would provide a contribution to the amenity and biodiversity of the area for some decades to come. The second and third are immediately west of the Scout Hall's garage. The closest to the garage is a whitebeam of lower quality and value and with a limited lifespan. The next is an ash of moderate – high value with an expected lifespan of 20 years or more.

3. Of the three, the whitebeam is considered to have insufficient value to consider as a constraint to development. The ash was felt to offer a constraint but, due to the benefits of the scheme proposed, its loss was considered acceptable.
4. The mature lime tree was recognised as being worthy of retention, if possible, by both the Arboriculturists and the District's Tree Officer. During the design process several options were looked at to ensure its retention, but each resulted in schemes with severe drawbacks such as failing to design out hidden pockets of space. It was concluded that the tree, even if damage to its root system could be avoided, would in time require extensive pruning in order to prevent harm to the building. The District Tree Officer has, therefore, agreed to the removal of all three trees, noting the submitted plan for their replacement.
5. The Ecological Impact Assessment (EclA) notes the site shares a boundary with the CBLNR to the west. Of value on the application site are the trees, which provide flight lines and foraging corridors for birds and bats. Other potential habitats, such as the single-species and ornamental hedgerows on the north of the site and adjacent to the changing rooms offer little value other than offering potential nesting sites for birds. As part of the work, the EclA undertook DNA sampling of the local pond to the west for Great Crested Newts (the results were negative) and surveyed the whole site. It was noted that the western edge of the site, where the Cuttle Brook woodland starts, had the most potential to host reptiles, amphibians and mammals.
6. A bat survey recorded bats of 5 different species using the site. No bats were found within either the changing room building nor the three trees that have been identified for felling. Without features that could support bat roosting, no further surveys for bats have been recommended.
7. Several means of enhancing biodiversity on site were listed within the study and all have been planned for within the scheme:
 - A mix of 6 native and 4 non-native trees with high biodiversity value will provide features and habitats on corners of the development and within the play areas.
 - Use demolition rubble / log and brush piles to provide habitats on the western woodland edge.
 - Maintain dark corridors for bats and ensure any new roosting features added are not washed by light. All lights are to be warm in colour and avoid light spillage with security lights set with very short timers.
 - Light sensing, automatic blinds are proposed for the building's southern windows to prevent light spillage across SRRG. No windows face towards the Cuttle Brook.
 - The trees on the eastern boundary will be underplanted with shade-tolerant plants and flowers, adjacent to the play areas and tall grasses and herbaceous perennials will border the play areas.
 - The parking areas will be edged and divided with plants, flowers and shrubs of types to help integrate the area to the edge of the CBLNR. Rain gardens within the parking area and adjacent to the play / courtyard edges will be planted with grasses, perennials and wetland flora to help attenuate the run-off. It is intended to reuse the boulders that line the current edge road within the rain gardens as features.
 - Plants to be used will include a mix of native day and night-flowering, scented flowers and shrubs.
 - The building will host bird, bee and bat boxes integrated into the walls with further bat, bird and insect boxes placed on trees within and around the site (see Hard Landscape Plan TC190.02.HL).
8. Together with the above, it is claimed that the woodland edge planting between the entrance to the CBLNR and the Scout Hall, the introduction of new wildflower meadows and the reduced mowing in some areas the aim of the landscaping scheme would help join the Scout Hall and

new buildings through a common theme to help integrate them with the woodland edge of the CBLNR. The proposal is, subject to confirmation by the District's Countryside Officer, considered likely to meet the requirement to provide a net gain in biodiversity in line with LP 2035 Policy ENV3.

9. LP 2035 Policy ENV2 will only permit development likely to cause direct or indirect harm to a Local Nature Reserve if the need for and benefits of the development outweigh the adverse effect on the protected site and if it can be proved that alternative sites are not available. The greatest risk likely to arise indirectly from noise and / or increased visitor activity. With no windows or openings directly facing the CBLNR, the harm from noise would be expected to be modest.
10. ENV2 requires evidence that the development could not reasonably be located on an alternative site that would result in less harm to biodiversity. One site, Lord Williams's Lower School is no longer available as an option and the second, the Cattle Market site would not bring any improvements to the sports facility and play areas. Policy ENV2 does allow for mitigation to provide for any adverse effects arising from the proposal, and these would be delivered through the identified biodiversity improvements. These improvements would imply a degree of conformity with LP Policy ENV5, which seeks the protection or enhancement of existing Green Infrastructure.

Energy Efficiency

11. For a non-domestic building South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) LP 2035 Policy DES10 requires a 13% reduction in carbon emissions compared to the 2021 Building Regulations. The applicant claims a 25% reduction will be possible through building the fabric to a higher standard than required and using Photo-Voltaic solar panels (PV panels) in combination with a ground source heat pump to provide water and space heating. While it does not guarantee it, the report suggests that over time the system would at least pay for itself within its design life but be likely to provide annual savings of up to a few thousand pounds over traditional heating methods.
12. Other technologies were investigated but ruled out on grounds of higher maintenance costs, air quality concerns and being inappropriate for the location. The proposed use and form of renewable and low-carbon energy is in line with both LP Policies DES9 and DES10.
13. The building's Building Management System (BMS) and Mechanical Ventilation Heat Recovery System will monitor each room for temperature, humidity and carbon dioxide levels to ensure comfort for occupants while maximising energy efficiency. The BMS will be able to adjust for when rooms will be occupied, provide cooling air during summer nights and compensate for changing weather ahead of it happening.
14. LP Policy DES7 requires that land and natural resources be used efficiently. Due to its location and the need for the services to be accessible to all members of the community the buildings are largely single storey. The use of a mezzanine floor for the sizeable plant room ensures that the land is being efficiently. The building's orientation and large windows means the south façade will be able to gather warmth during winter months and maximise opportunities for using natural light. The raingardens will act as stores, reducing the need for landscaping plants to be watered with mains water.

Design

15. The applicant has submitted a Design and Access Statement that explains the three main consultations held that have informed the requirements and design of the building. The Statement has also examined the site in order to establish the positives and negatives of the site to be supported and enhanced or addressed, if possible, through the proposal. As part of this process, it has examined the opportunities and constraints the site provides.
16. Positives include the good location, the beauty provided by the trees, the value of the nature reserve, green open space and play area. The Guide Hall, with its active frontage and large windows across the major facades is deemed a positive. Negatives include the poor design quality of the changing rooms, that it and the Scout Hall shield the parking areas necessitating high level floodlights, and that the access road divides the pitches and play area. The Scout Hall is notable for having largely inactive facades with windows concealed by security grills.
17. The layout of the proposal has been informed by the need to reduce the risk of anti-social behaviour on the site, bring the playing pitches and play area into proximity, and to provide seating, a courtyard and a building as hubs for meeting and activities. Options for a solution included looking to have a separate building to the changing room and building to the north of the Scout Hall, but each other design was considered to lead to a negative outcome in terms of visibility relating to crime prevention, daylight within the rooms, views to the CBLNR, and impact on higher quality trees (section 3.1, Design & Access Statement).
18. The design of the building is stated as having been informed by long barns present within and around Thame (the Tithe Barn is given as an example). There is no explanation of why other architectural designs were not considered. The site did, however, once accommodate a barn-like pavilion and such a form may be less likely to be considered as out of place against the backdrop of the CBLNR, with its past agricultural use and location within the setting of the Thame Conservation Area.
19. An asymmetric roof form has been chosen for the pitched roof of the main building. While a deviation from the traditional barn form, the design does allow for the overall roof height to be reduced and for PV panels to be positioned where they will be less visually intrusive. The roof form also provides a modern twist to the familiar. The rooves over the changing rooms are pitched, but by having two ridges the height and mass of the buildings are reduced, helping maximise views through to the woodland of the CBLNR.
20. It is stated that the materials proposed have again been inspired by local vernacular. The most obvious feature would be the raised-seam copper roof. While only present on a few buildings locally, its use would be appropriate as it will weather and in time blend against the backdrop of the CBLNR. It should also suffer less damage over time from ball strikes and wind damage, when compared to a traditional tile, slate or thatch roof. Copper is a material with a high level of embodied carbon, but that negative is offset against its expected lifespan and its inherent recyclability. The rooves of the changing room and Scout Hall extension are proposed to be a modern singly-ply membrane.
21. The rear of the proposed newbuild and extensions facing the Cuttle Brook would be made from painted blockwork, which should help reduce maintenance costs. The remaining walls are all identified as being covered with patterned brickwork to reference both the vernacular in Thame and the adjacent Scout Hall and garage. Due to the proposed timber-led construction method, the brickwork effect may be achieved through the use of thin, clay “slips” which significantly reduces the energy required to make them. Windows would have powder-coated metal frames for longevity with the benefit of being recyclable at the end of their life.
22. Some of the design has been informed through the pre-application and consultation process. There are no windows proposed, for example, on the western boundary with the CBLNR in order to prevent light spill into that sensitive environment. The proposed new entrance for the Scout

Hall has reduced glazing for similar reasons. It is claimed that all lighting will be low-level and angled to avoid spreading light upwards or into the CBLNR.

23. In demonstrating consideration of the site's context and the historic character of the area and how the proposal responds to the specific character of the site and its local surroundings, the proposal is considered to be in conformity with TNP Policies ESDQ15 and ESDQ16. In closing pockets of hidden space and in connecting the play areas with the pitches it is demonstrated how weaknesses of the site have been addressed, again in line with ESDQ16's requirements. Through referencing successful design elements common to Thame (such as the form, and patterned brickwork) and the positive active façades of the Guide Hall the proposal is in conformity with TNP Policy ESDQ17, in making a positive contribution towards the distinctive character of the Town as a whole.
24. The Design & Access Statements and drawings clearly detail the proposal and have allowed for it to be understood. The proposal is, therefore, in conformity with TNP Policy ESDQ19.
25. The orientation, layout and roof heights of the proposed buildings minimises the shielding effect of the development on the CBLNR. While some impact is unavoidable, the design is felt to comply with the requirement of TNP Policy ESDQ21 in maintaining, where possible, views across open spaces, which applies to development adjacent to the Cuttle Brook.
26. The design has had to join a development that aims to appear and be inviting to the relatively defensive structure of the Scout Hall. The use of common façade materials helps in this. The change in roof materials between the two-storey main building, the single-storey changing rooms and the Scout Hall and garage is deemed an appropriate strategy when responding to changes in form. This approach is in conformity with TNP Policy ESDQ26 which suggests a change in materials as a way to draw attention to, rather than conceal a change in form.
27. The drawings, including the elevations, shows almost all the detail required by TNP Policy ESDQ27, except for lighting. This is considered acceptable given that the lighting strategy will be required to satisfy the concerns of the District's Countryside Officer.

Local Amenity

28. The site has an interesting planning history with proposals for housing, a police station and a secondary school having all been considered in the past. SRRG has, however, been seen as a focal point for the community through Thame Show and later, community events and recreation and leisure. If no development happens the site will continue to be used for these and for parking for major events such as the Fair and the Carnival. Through the proposed development the northern part of the site would no longer be able to be used for this purpose meaning occasional uses would have to move further south in the site, with access taken off Moreton Lane. This would, at least, remove such occasional nuisances from this end of Southern Road.
29. There would, however, be an increase in traffic and visitors into the site. The applicant claims that the principle of the development and its access has been considered reasonable by the Highways Authority, OCC. There may be a benefit in introducing the proposed one-way system with a separate entrance and exit as there is frequent queuing of vehicles at peak times, often caused by those waiting to access the Guide Hall from Southern Road.
30. The District's Environmental Protection Team have been consulted and will no doubt raise any concerns regarding nearby residential amenity. In moving the play area, one or two homes on the corner of Southern Road opposite the site's current access may experience reduced noise, while a small number of others, perhaps 2 or 3, may experience an increase. The area where the play area would move to is already commonly used, however, for casual play including ball

sports and many young people gather under the trees on the boundary and play music and chat. The noise from the play area is, therefore, unlikely to be significantly greater than that frequently caused in the same area. The proposed extra planting and trees within and around the play area may help provide a minor reduction in noise levels.

31. It is expected that lighting will either be resolved through the application, or through a planning condition. Due to the sensitivity of the site's location lighting would have to be directional and angled downwards. While it is proposed that the windows on the building's southern elevation are fitted with automatic blinds to prevent light spill over the playing field and trees, the eastern and courtyard windows are not. The nearest receptor to the courtyard window would be over 70 metres away, and around 65 metres from the eastern-most window. While these windows are unlikely to cause a nuisance the proposed planting regime would provide some, limited shielding.

Principle of Development

32. Playing fields are highly protected areas. The loss of playing pitches, or support areas including changing rooms would normally be refused under both national guidance and local policy. Sport England are a statutory consultee for all development affecting playing fields and their view carries significant material weight.
33. Sport England have already confirmed through consultation that they believe the proposal meets their exception policies, in not affecting the playing field (which will include play run-off areas and space for spectators) and in providing ancillary facilities that support the principal use of the site as a playing field. They have confirmed that the quantity and quality of the pitches would not be adversely affected.
34. Thame remains short of public open space across all categories. The proposal would result in a decrease in the amount of public open space available for casual play and leisure. The loss is limited to the development areas required to infill behind the Scout Hall and behind the Changing Rooms, and to the reprovided and new parking spaces. The need and benefits of the development need to be weighed against this loss.
35. The principle of using the northern end of SRRG is part of the vision of the TNP (paragraph 5.8) as it was identified as a potential site that could deliver a new community facility large enough to hold 200+ people. This does at first glance appear contrary to the principle to protect key open spaces in the Town as SRRG is listed as one (paragraph 5.10).
36. TNP Policy CLW1 and its related Objective does, however, state that a large community facility is a requirement and that developer contributions would be sought towards its funding and that SRRG is a suitable site. Paragraph 10.1 of SODC's Infrastructure Delivery Plan identifies that the extra population arising from the allocation from the 2012 Core Strategy of 775 homes would generate a need for 0.7 of a community hall. While this would be assumed to be a reasonably modest building the Local Plan 2035 has directed another 743 homes to Thame. Further need was established through the Town Council's partially published survey of facility needs, completed in late 2017, which showed that many local groups were struggling to find venues or wished for larger facilities to cope with increasing memberships.
37. The TNP recognised that the loss of open space at SRRG would require mitigation. Policy ESDQ7 requires any developer and the Town Council to consult with local people to agree improvements to the park and that the improvements are made alongside any development (the Policy erroneously assumes that a planning application would be required for such improvements, which is not necessarily the case).

38. The development would provide changing rooms designed and built to modern accessibility standards and served by efficient low-carbon technology. This will increase the attractiveness of the playing pitches for senior and junior games. While the moving of the existing play area is not necessarily a benefit in itself, the addition of a new natural play area, with the potential for adding new play equipment is, as is the direct connection of the play area to the pitches and wider open space. New landscaping including the new trees, plants and raingardens, plus the new habitats that will be provided within also offer significant improvements to the existing.
39. Further opportunities for improvement away from the pitches would be possible in the north-western part of the site, behind the Guide Hall, and south towards the junior pitches. While the former currently provides for casual play adjacent to the formal play area and a connection to Spring Path, Brook Lane and the CBLNR it could be repurposed to provide a quiet space, improved for biodiversity interest, or a “bootcamp” space. This would not, however, necessarily require planning permission as the Town Council may be able to use its permitted development rights for such limited work.
40. It is considered that the principle of developing this area for a community venue is acceptable, that sufficient improvements have been proposed and the development is in conformity with TNP Policy CLW1 and ESDQ7. It is also considered in conformity with Local Plan Policy TH1 1. vii), Strategy for Thame, which expresses support for new or enhanced community facilities that meet a recognised need and LP 2035 Policy CF2, which directs community facilities and services to areas within settlements where they would meet a clearly identified local need and are accessible for all members of the community. The development would also meet LP 2035 Policy CF3 in providing new sport and recreation facilities within the settlement it will serve, in an area within reach of public transport, and co-located with other community uses.
41. The applicant has demonstrably undertaken considerable consultation with local residents and community groups, including schools and youth activity groups. While a separate Statement of Community Involvement has not been produced in line with TNP Policy CLW2, the consultations, and how they affected the proposal, has been referred to in detail within the accompanying Design & Access and Planning Statements. It is considered that the requirements of this policy have been met.

Summary

42. The proposal is seeking to deliver a much-needed community facility within a highly sensitive site that is within the setting of the Thame Conservation Area, adjacent to the CBLNR and within a recreation ground that has the considerable affection of residents and visitors.
43. The need for the development is inarguable. The test that should be applied to the proposal is, therefore, whether the development is in a suitable location, of sufficiently good design to sit within its environment, and whether the benefit of the development outweighs the loss of open space. The location has already been approved through the TNP, its Examination and Referendum; and again, through more recent consultation with residents and stakeholders.
44. While the existing changing room is of a utilitarian design and may not be missed, the Scout Hall remains a much used and fit for purpose facility, despite its enforced “hardening” in response to anti-social behaviour. The successful integration of the new building with the Hall was a key part of the brief. It is felt that the modest use of contrasting, patterned brickwork and the deliberately contrasting roof forms and materials help, rather than hinder this. The form and quality materials chosen for the new buildings will help advertise their function, provide longevity and, unlike the current changing rooms, deliver buildings that will be worthy of any major refurbishments required in the distant future.

45. It is the hard and soft landscaping that will, through the use of high-quality materials and the use of a detailed planting scheme, provide clear functions for all of the areas and work hard to integrate the existing with the new. The design is of a very high standard and has clearly evolved through the parallel and holistic design of the buildings and landscaping.
46. The loss of open space should be considered acceptable, as the design of the buildings, play areas, and landscaping is of a very high standard and the benefit of providing a much needed facility for the youth of Thame, that can also be used by the wider community, is clear.
47. While the development cannot yet be considered to be fully compliant with every policy (TNP GA6 is an example) it is believed only relatively minor amendments will be required to make the whole scheme acceptable.

Recommendation

48. For the reasons given above, it is recommended that Thame Town Council Supports this application.