

LEE VALLEY REGIONAL PARK AUTHORITY

**REGENERATION AND PLANNING
COMMITTEE**

22 MAY 2025 AT 11:30

Agenda Item No:

5

Report No:

RP/93/25

PLANNING CONSULTATION BY EPPING FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

PLANNING APPLICATION FOR DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS AND STRUCTURES, AND REDEVELOPMENT OF SITE FOR STORAGE OR DISTRIBUTION (USE CLASS B8) PURPOSES, WITH ASSOCIATED PARKING, SERVICING, ACCESS ARRANGEMENTS, LANDSCAPING AND OTHER ASSOCIATED WORKS. AT NORTHFIELDS NURSERY, SEWARDSTONE ROAD, WALTHAM ABBEY, E4 7RG

Presented by Head of Planning

SUMMARY

This application proposes the redevelopment of Northfields Nursery for storage or distribution purposes (Use Class B8), together with associated parking, servicing, access and landscaping. The site which is currently in use as a garden centre is located on the eastern edge of the Regional Park adjacent to Sewardstone Road and to the south of Gunpowder Park.

As previously developed land, the proposal for a change of use to storage and distribution (B8 use class) is considered acceptable in principle. Potential impacts on the visual amenity and landscape character of the Park are considered to be minimised by the layout and design of the development together with the landscape proposals which seek to enhance the existing boundary vegetation including new tree hedge and mixed native shrub planting. The ecological assessment of the site has not raised any major issues and biodiversity net gain can be achieved on site within the reconfigured layout as part of the landscape proposals. Conditions are therefore sought to secure a detailed landscape scheme, a sensitive lighting plan and biodiversity enhancements.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Members Approve:

- (1) that Epping Forest District Council be informed that the Authority has no objection to the application for the redevelopment of Northfields Nursery for storage or distribution purposes (Use Class B8) with associated parking, servicing,

access arrangements, and landscaping **provided that** the following conditions are attached to any grant of consent to secure:

- (a) the submission of a detailed landscape and planting scheme together with a Landscape Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) so that responsibilities for the management and maintenance of the landscape and new habitats are clearly defined and over the long term;
 - (b) the provision and implementation of a lighting plan to be designed in accordance with the 'Institute of Lighting Professionals (2023) Bats and Artificial Lighting at Night Guidance Note 08/23' to ensure light does not spill into the dark corridor at the rear or western edge of the site or into the Park area beyond which is a Local Wildlife Site;
 - (c) the provision of a Construction Ecological Management Plan to protect the boundary vegetation, trees, hedges and associated habitats during construction and to ensure the removal of suitable habitats is undertaken outside the bird breeding season;
 - (d) the provision of Bat/bird boxes to be installed on the retained trees. This should include the provision of a Barn Owl box located on the edge of the application site facing out onto Patty Pool Mead;
 - (e) the submission of a Biodiversity Gain Plan and Habitat Management and Monitoring Plan to demonstrate the biodiversity net gain can be achieved on site and retained over the required 30 year period; and
- (2) that Epping Forest District Council be informed that the Authority would wish to be consulted on the above matters in due course.

BACKGROUND AND SITE CONTEXT

1 Location and Context

The application site extends to an area of 5.5 hectares and is located to the west of Sewardstone Road (A112) on the eastern edge of the Regional Park just south of Gunpowder Park. The site comprises an existing garden centre known as Northfields Nursery and Garden Centre (Use Class E). Buildings on site include the garden centre building (with main customer entrance, checkout, toilets, etc.) and a series of aluminium glasshouses and steel framed structures

displaying plants, seeds, compost, hard landscaping materials, tools, pots and other associated items for sale to the public. The area surrounding the buildings provides additional outdoor sales area. In the northwest, part of the site is used as a yard area for deliveries and external storage associated with the garden centre. In front of this is a grassed area used for overspill customer parking during busy periods.

- 2 A substantial tree and scrub buffer exists along the western boundary of the site which continues along part of the southern boundary. A row of trees and other groupings of trees and hedges also form part of the site. The western portion of the site is located within flood zone 2 with the remainder in flood zone 1.
- 3 To the north, east and south the site is enclosed by existing built form, comprising a collection of commercial/ industrial buildings to the north (on the site of a former horticultural nursery), a car dealership to the south, and residential properties to the east, fronting Sewardstone Road. Access into the site for both vehicles and pedestrians is provided from Sewardstone Road; there are three access points although it is understood the main access is from the north, with the middle access closed and the southern access generally only used to provide an exit route for customers after the garden centre has closed.
- 4 To the west of the application sites lie the open spaces of the Regional Park, including the adjacent Patty Pool Mead, designated as a Local Wildlife Site and further to the north Sewardstone Marsh and Gunpowder Park. Please refer to the Plan at Appendix A to this report. The King George's V Reservoir and Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and River Lee or Lea Diversion sit further to the west.
- 5 The application site is located within the Green Belt and has operated as a garden centre for a number of years. Retrospective planning permission was granted on appeal for the garden centre use (Class E retail) in 2024. The Planning Statement submitted as part of the application lists a number of constraints associated with the costs of operating and investing in the garden centre business which have contributed to the applicant considering an alternative use for the site.

DESCRIPTION OF THE APPLICATION PROPOSALS

6 **Layout, Design and Materials**

The applicant is proposing the demolition of existing buildings and structures and the redevelopment of the site to provide five buildings which can be flexibly sub-divided to accommodate up to 9 individual units for B8 purposes. A total of 2,228 sqm (GIA) employment floorspace will be created by the proposals accommodated within the 5 buildings, with unit sizes ranging from 220 sqm to 468 sqm. The design is considered to be suitable for small local businesses and start-ups and the flexible design allows for the units to be combined, providing scalability for businesses as they expand. The units will extend to a maximum height of 7.3m which has been set to follow the height of the existing structures on site. The layout of the units makes use of the topography of the site which slopes downwards towards the west so that each of the units will be visually hidden behind the first, please refer to the images at Appendix B to this report for the site layout.

- 7 The new buildings are located within the centre of the site, aligned in an east-west direction. The applicant is seeking to consolidate the built form and reduce

the visual impact of the site compared to the existing buildings and structures, as well as reducing the overall visual impact for adjacent residents. The application states that the proposals will result in a reduction in floorspace from 8,292 sqm to 2,228 sqm (GIA), and footprint from 8,484 sqm to 2,157 sqm giving a 73% reduction in floorspace, and 75% reduction in footprint. Some of the existing area currently occupied by buildings will be replaced with hardstanding to accommodate the yard, although the existing extent of hardstanding is to be pulled back from the western, southern and eastern boundaries.

- 8 The applicant is proposing a combination of light and dark green cladding for the units to blend the structures into the landscape, but the images shown are illustrative; it is stated in the Design & Access Statement (DAS) that the details and specifications are to be confirmed with the client prior to construction.
- 9 **Access and Parking**
Each unit will be served by an individual, secure yard with sufficient space for goods vehicles to manoeuvre, load and unload, as required for a storage and distribution use. Staff parking is to be provided at the end of each yard in order to achieve separation between goods vehicles and pedestrians. Vehicular access is to be provided via the existing northern most access onto Sewardstone Road. It is noted that the middle access is currently closed to vehicles and will remain closed as part of the current proposals. The southern access onto Sewardstone Road, will be closed to vehicular traffic, and provide an additional pedestrian and cycle access to the site.
- 10 72 car parking spaces are proposed, (there are 45 spaces currently onsite) with 16% of these being disabled spaces. 42% of the total car parking provision is to be provided with EV charging. Secure cycle parking is proposed via designated secured cycle spaces across the site, totalling 14 spaces. 19 spaces are to be provided for HGV parking.
- 11 **Landscaping and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)**
A landscape masterplan accompanies the application, and this has been informed by an Arboricultural Impact Assessment. The layout of the new buildings and hardstanding enables the retention of all boundary trees, a line of early mature limes and the area of amenity woodland on the western boundary. The proposals indicate the provision of 100 new trees (although the Planning Statement references 55) as well as new native hedgerow and shrub mix. The landscaping takes account of the trees that will need to be removed (49 in total) as per the Arboricultural Impact Assessment report; these are all internal to the site and categorised as trees of low quality or unsuitable for retention. Other features of the landscape include wildlife friendly planting around the parking areas, an attenuation basin in the southwestern corner of the site with wildflower and native shrubs and an area of naturalistic open space which wraps around the site through which a path is to be created for staff to use.
- 12 The enhanced landscaping will generate significant improvements to on-site biodiversity, with a net gain of 23.95% in habitat units and 30.54% in hedgerow units as detailed in the accompanying BNG assessment.
- 13 The Preliminary Ecology Assessment accompanying the application considers the habitats found on site to be common and widespread throughout the UK and therefore of limited ecological value. The development proposed is also not considered likely to impact protected and Priority species & habitats.

Recommendations include the need to ensure works are undertaken outside the bird breeding season and that any lighting should minimise spill onto the surrounding landscape to reduce potential adverse lighting-related effects upon species.

- 14 A Sustainable Drainage System (SUDs) strategy has been developed and incorporated as part of the proposals.
This includes measures such as the attenuation basin on site in the southwestern corner, vegetated roadside swales and permeable paving within the car parking areas.
- 15 **Transport and Trip Generation**
The Transport Statement submitted with the application considers the traffic generation, distribution and impact associated with the proposals. The existing northern access point at Sewardstone road is considered sufficient to accommodate larger vehicles as is the internal layout. The southern access will provide pedestrian and cycle access.
- 16 In terms of trip generation and total vehicle movements there is predicted to be a small increase of approximately 3 two-way vehicle movements over the course of a day. Overall the change in the number of vehicles trips across the day and within the peak hours compared to the existing garden centre use has been found to be negligible. Changes in traffic flows are predicted to be well within a 10% daily fluctuation level that occurs on the local highway network. The predicted peak hour HGV movements are expected to be 3 to 4 two-way movements (around 1 HGV every 15 to 20 minutes on average). Daily flows are predicted to be around 3 HGVs an hour over an average 12-hour period. The assessment notes that there is an element of HGV movements associated with the garden centre on a daily basis, noting that these have not been taken into account with the above analysis. It concludes that the analysis indicates that the proposed HGV levels are of a small order.

POLICY CONTEXT

- 17 **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) December 2024**
The revised NPPF para 154g states that the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed land in the Green Belt is not considered inappropriate where it would not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt. Paragraph 155 also states that commercial or other development in the Green Belt would not be considered inappropriate provided it would utilise grey belt land and would not fundamentally undermine the purposes (taken together) of the remaining Green Belt across the area of the plan, there is a demonstrable unmet need for the type of development proposed, and the development would be in a sustainable location.
- 18 The Glossary in the NPPF provides a definition of 'grey belt' which in summary is defined as land in the Green Belt comprising previously developed land and/or any other land that, in either case, does not strongly contribute to any of purposes (a), (b), or (d) in paragraph 143. For information the 5 purposes of the Green Belt as set out at Paragraph 143 of the NPPF are as follows:
 - a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
 - b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
 - c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and

- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

19 Local Plan

Local Plan Policy DM4 (Green Belt) restricts development in the Green Belt other than for specified purposes. The Policy states that "within the Green Belt planning permission will not be granted for inappropriate development, except in very special circumstances, in accordance with national policy." Policy E1 Employment Sites, refers to existing employment sites, both designated and undesignated and states, (under Part A) that the Council will seek to retain and enhance existing employment sites and premises for their existing authorised uses within Use Class B2, B8 or E, or Sui generis uses of an employment character. Proposals for the redevelopment, or intensification, of existing employment sites for employment uses or Sui generis uses of an employment character will be encouraged, (Part B).

- 20 Epping Forest District Council recognise that the Local Plan will be an important document in terms of the protection, enhancement, development and management of the Lee Valley Regional Park (LVRP) and the public enjoyment of its leisure, ecological, heritage, and sporting resources. The Local Plan 2023 recognises and supports the Regional Park, its vision and remit, as a key asset for the District, and component of the region's green and blue infrastructure (para 2.23). It also recognises the Park Development Framework (PDF).

- 21 Policy DM1 'Habitat Protection and Improving Biodiversity' states under bullet A that *"All development should seek to deliver net biodiversity gain in addition to protecting existing habitats and species. Development proposals should seek to integrate biodiversity through their design and layout, including, where appropriate, through the provision of connections between physical and functional networks."* The first part of Policy DM2 'Epping Forest Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the Lee Valley Special Protection Area (SPA)' sets out the Council's position that all relevant development proposals should assist in the conservation and enhancement of the biodiversity, character, appearance and landscape setting of Epping Forest and the Lee Valley.

22 Park Development Framework

PDF Area Proposals 5.A.3 'Gunpowder Park & Sewardstone' under Visitors identify the importance of working with stakeholders to deliver a shared pedestrian and cycle route through the various open spaces east of the King George V Reservoir as a continuation of the Lee Valley Pathway, the National Cycle Network Route 1 which passes through Gunpowder Park. Proposals for Biodiversity state that Sewardstone Marsh and Patty Pool Mead should be managed and enhanced as a key access to nature site with habitat improvements to be undertaken throughout. Visitor access is to be enhanced by extending boardwalks and improving interpretation. Floodplain grassland and fen habitat to be enhanced on Sewardstone Marsh and the wet grassland habitat of Patty Pool Mead to be improved to provide nesting opportunities for breeding waders.

- 23 The Area proposals for Environment refer to sites in horticultural and agricultural use that lie between the reservoirs and Sewardstone Road. These are to be enhanced with careful screening of the potentially negative impacts of buildings and other features.

- 24 In the Lee Valley Regional Park Landscape Strategy the western part of the

application site lies within both the character area of LCA B1 (King George's and William Girling Reservoirs) and LCA H1 (Gunpowder Park), where the landscape resource is important in terms of its nature conservation value and opportunities it provides for informal recreation. The semi natural areas on the valley floor offer opportunities for enhancement to improve their quality as informal open space and access points into the Park. The focus should be on conserving and enhancing these valued qualities in the long term and ensuring it continues to support a diverse range of flora and fauna as well as opportunities for people to enjoy the valley landscape.

- 25 Development Framework Strategic Policies 2019 include policies to 'Conserve and enhance the Park's landscape character, key views and openness.' Those of most relevance are as follows:

L1: Require all development proposals to demonstrate how their location, scale, design and materials respect and respond to the character, sensitivities and qualities of the relevant landscape character areas, as detailed in the Landscape Character Assessment (LCA).

L2: Secure designs of new buildings and other structures which are appropriate to their landscape context as identified in the Landscape Character Assessment.

L4: Protect views that promote a sense of orientation and/or an appreciation of the natural and physical environment of the Lee Valley.'

PLANNING APPRAISAL OF PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

26 Principle of Development

The application site comprises previously developed land within the Green Belt currently in use as a garden centre. The redevelopment of such land is considered acceptable in Green Belt terms provided it would not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt (NPPF para 154 g)). The application proposes a significant reduction in the amount of built footprint locating the buildings in the centre of the site with the extent of the hardstanding pulled back from the edges of the site providing more space for landscaping. This helps to reduce the spatial and visual impact on the openness of the site compared to the current layout of the garden centre buildings.

The site is also likely to be considered 'grey belt' as defined in the revised NPPF Dec 2024 (please refer to paragraph 18). The principle of redeveloping the site for storage or distribution uses would therefore be acceptable in principle.

- 27 In assessing the effect of the proposals on the Regional Park and visitor enjoyment consideration needs to be given to visual, landscape and ecological impacts. With regard to visual impacts the conclusions reached above in terms of the Green Belt also apply in relation to the Park. The reduction in built footprint and consolidation of the built form as a terrace of units in the middle of the application site will reduce the amount of physical form potentially visible from the Park areas adjacent to the site, (albeit that some of the buildings are replaced by areas of hardstanding) and provides the additional space for the proposed tree and shrub planting. This will maintain and enhance the existing landscape buffer between the Park and the site. The height of the proposed units has been set to 7.3m to match the height of the existing development on site and the proposed green cladding chosen for the units will assist the proposals to blend in with the landscape. It is unlikely therefore that the proposed development will have a substantial adverse impact upon the visual amenity of visitors to the Park.

- 28 The illustrative Landscape Masterplan indicates that the proposed scheme will improve the landscape character of the site whilst retaining and enhancing a number of important features such as the amenity woodland on the western boundary of the site adjacent Paty Pool Mead, the line of early mature limes in the northern part of the site and boundary trees. These are important features in terms of the wider Regional Park landscape and in terms of the overall quality of the proposed development. The range of additional landscape and habitat typologies proposed, such as new tree and native hedge planting within and along the boundaries of the site, attenuation basin and swales with wildflower planting, permeable paving for car parking area and perimeter native shrubs would also make a positive contribution to the landscape character of the area and its biodiversity.
- 29 Given the importance of the site's existing landscape framework and its enhancement in terms of the landscape character and ecology of the wider Regional Park area, a detailed landscape scheme together with a management plan should be a condition to any approval. It is suggested this takes the form of a Landscape Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) so that responsibilities for the management and maintenance of the landscape and new habitats and open spaces are clearly defined and over the long term.
- 30 In relation to potential ecological impacts on the Regional Park, the Preliminary Ecological Assessment (PEA) has concluded that the proposed development is unlikely to impact protected and Priority species & habitats. This position has been endorsed by the Council's ecological advisors Essex County Council Place Services. A number of mitigation measures have been identified, and these should be secured by condition of any consent as follows:
- The need to minimise light spill onto the surrounding landscape – a lighting plan should be conditioned and produced in accordance with the 'Institute of Lighting Professionals (2023) Bats and Artificial Lighting at Night Guidance Note 08/23'. The lighting plan should ensure light does not spill into the dark corridor at the rear or western edge of the site or into the Park area beyond which is a Local Wildlife Site. This is important to protect nocturnal and crepuscular species and ensure these areas and the boundary habitats are kept dark during the hours of darkness.
 - Consideration regarding potential for bird nesting – a condition should be attached to any grant of consent to ensure the removal of suitable habitats is undertaken outside the bird breeding season. This could be covered via a Construction Ecological Management Plan which would also protect the boundary vegetation, existing habitats and trees during construction.

Bat /bird boxes should also be installed on the retained trees. Barn Owl have been recorded locally on Patty Pool Mead, and it would be appropriate to request that a Barn Owl box is located on the edge of the application site facing out onto Patty Pool Mead to provide additional habitat, supplementing that already provide by the Authority on adjacent sites.

- 31 A Biodiversity Gain Plan will be submitted in due course and prior to commencement if the application is approved and the Authority should be consulted on the details. Likewise, a Habitat Management Monitoring Plan

(HMMP) for the BNG should be secured for all significant on-site enhancements. The maintenance and monitoring outlined in the Plan will need to be secured via planning obligation for a period of up to 30 years.

32 Conclusion

As previously developed land, the proposal for a change of use to storage and distribution (B8 use class) is considered acceptable in principle. Any impacts on the visual amenity and landscape character of the Regional Park are minimised by the layout and design of the storage units and the landscape proposals which seek to retain and strengthen the existing boundary vegetation with new tree and hedge planting and mixed native shrub planting. Conditions should be sought to ensure a detailed landscape scheme is provided together with a Landscape Ecological Management Plan (LEMP) so that the site remains screened from the adjoining Park areas and provides additional habitat in accordance with the biodiversity enhancements proposed that also benefits the Park.

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

33 These are addressed in the body of the report.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

34 There are no financial implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.

LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

35 Planning applications referred to this Authority are submitted under the consultative arrangements of Section 14 (4-7) of the Lee Valley Regional Park Act 1966. The Act requires a local planning authority to consult with the Authority on any planning application for development, whether within the designated area of the Park or not, which might affect any part of the Park.

36 The Park Act enables the Authority to make representations to the local planning authority which they shall take into account when determining the planning application.

RISK MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

37 There are no risk management implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.

EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

38 There are no equality implications arising directly from the recommendations in this report.

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BACKGROUND REPORTS

Consultation by Epping Forest District Council

April 2025

APPENDICES ATTACHED

Appendix A	Plan of the application site
Appendix B	Proposed Site Layout

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
PEA	Preliminary Ecological Assessment
CEMP	Construction Environmental Management Plan
SSSI	Site of Special Scientific Interest
PDF	Park Development Framework
LVRP	Lee Valley Regional Park
DAS	Design & Access Statement
SUDs	Sustainable Drainage Systems
HMMP	Habitat Management Monitoring Plan
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
SPA	Special Protection Area



Commercial redevelopment at Northfields Nursery site

1:3,500 @ A4
23/04/2025

Produced by Corporate GIS (HH)

Application Site
Park Bound

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Appendix B Proposed Site Layout with landscaping



Proposed Elevations Extract from Design and Access Statement – dashed red line indicates existing mass on site

