PLANNING, DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT

PROPOSED EXTENSION OF THE PERMITTED USE OF THE EXISTING BUILDING AS AN OFFICE/EDUCATION CENTRE TO INCLUDE BUSINESS CONFERENCING AND SOCIAL FUNCTIONS AT OAK TREE FARM, TICKHILL LANE, DILHORNE ST10 2PL



1. Introduction

1.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement supports an application to extend the use of the existing office/education facility at Oak Tree Farm to include business conferencing and social functions.

1.2 The content of this Statement is commensurate to the complexity of the development proposed.

2. The Application Site and its Surroundings

2.1 The application relates to a former agricultural building which has been refurbished and converted to provide an office and education facility.

2.2 The site lies within the existing complex at Oak Tree Farm and is set a significant distance from the highway, within a wooded setting.

2.3 The site is located beyond any recognised settlement boundary and within the open countryside and Green Belt as defined by the adopted Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy.

3. Planning History

3.1 Planning permission was granted for the change of use of an agricultural building to an office/education facility on 7 September 2017 (Ref. SMD/2017/0352).

3.2 Condition Number 3 of this planning permission states:

"*The building to which this permission (sic) shall be used solely as a classroom, office and ancillary facilities in connection with the use of the site as an education centre providing education and vocational experiences to primary school children teaching them about environmental issues and ecology using the existing livestock and for no other purpose, including any purpose falling within Classes D2 and B1 of the Town and Country Planning Use Classes Order 1987 (as amended) unless a further planning permission has first been granted on application to the local planning authority*."

4. Planning Policy

National Planning Policy

4.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) provides guidance for development proposals within the Green Belt.

4.2 Paragraph 146 of the NPPF states:

> *Certain other forms of development are also not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided they preserve its openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it. These are:*
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> *a) mineral extraction;*
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> *b) engineering operations;*
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> *c) local transport infrastructure which can demonstrate a requirement for a Green Belt location;*
>
> ***d) the re-use of buildings provided that the buildings are of permanent and substantial construction;***
>
> ***e) material changes in the use of land*** *(such as changes of use for outdoor sport or recreation, or for cemeteries and burial grounds); and*
>
> *f) development brought forward under a Community Right to Build Order or Neighbourhood Development Order.*

4.3 This guidance clearly explains that changes of use or part changes of use of land or buildings are not inappropriate in the Green Belt provided the openness of the Green Belt is preserved and the purposes of including land within it are not conflicted.

The adopted Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy

4.4 The adopted Staffordshire Moorlands Core Strategy (CS) identifies the fostering of business growth and economic sustainability as one of the District's key challenges. It recognises that the service sector is seen as the main driver for economic growth; with an opportunity to capitalise on the growth of the 'experience economy'.

4.5 The CS also identifies tackling social exclusion and economic decline in the rural areas as another key challenge. It acknowledges that economic development needs to recognise the contribution which the rural areas can make to the District's economy with a major role for tourism in terms of providing opportunities for jobs, attracting investment and bringing in wealth.

4.6 The 'Vision' of the CS aspires to have sustainable and balanced urban and rural communities which have an excellent quality of life with access to appropriate, affordable and desirable housing, suitable local jobs, a range of recreational, cultural and leisure opportunities and high quality public services and facilities. It goes onto explain that the economy of the Moorlands will undergo a significant change with more diversified and higher quality

employment provision better meeting the skills and needs of its local workforce and more opportunities for business start ups across the whole of the District. It suggests that there will be a more flexible and proactive approach to employment development, raising the District's economic fortunes by exploiting its assets, raising local skill levels and opportunities and addressing deficiencies and disadvantages. It identifies tourism as a key element in the diversification of the District's economy, which will also contribute significantly to raising the environmental quality and the regeneration of the District.

4.7 Specifically, the Vision goes on to suggest that there will be a more vibrant and diverse rural economy which will provide a range of local job opportunities and support a thriving agricultural sector, whilst well managed, sustainable tourism will be a major driver in regenerating the rural areas and enhancing their character and quality.

4.8 The CS identifies a range of Spatial Aims. These include encouraging a strong, prosperous and diverse economy, to maintain and promote sustainable regenerated rural areas and to support and enhance the tourism, cultural, recreation and leisure opportunities for the District's residents and visitors.

4.9 The Strategy for the Rural Area is based on ensuring that villages continue to be vibrant and sustainable communities, providing opportunities for people of all ages. It explains that rural areas will maintain an important role within the District in terms of providing homes and jobs to meet local needs with better links with services and facilities in the larger villages and towns in order to address the decline in the rural economy and tackle social exclusion. It explains that in the smaller villages there will be limited development only, principally for local housing needs and rural diversification, whilst the countryside areas outside market towns and villages, including hamlets and other small settlements, will be subject to strict control over development with an emphasis on meeting essential rural needs, promoting environmental enhancement including landscape and biodiversity, and on encouraging appropriate economic diversification and tourism.

4.10 Paragraph 7.43 of the CS explains that in the Rural Areas, economic activities and uses complementary to the countryside will continue to be allowed in a carefully controlled manner. It advises that new employment development should be of a small scale and related to the larger settlements, where possible expanding existing employment areas. It goes on to say that there are also a number of well established employment areas in the open countryside which will be supported, where they are sustainable, to enable them to continue to provide opportunities for existing and new businesses.

4.11 Paragraph 7.44 explains that the Strategy places a strong emphasis on sustainable tourism, as a key driver for diversifying the local economy and strengthening the District's role in the sub-region. It adds that the District already has a significant number of tourism assets and given its strategic location near to major centres of population and adjoining the Peak District, it is well placed to play a major role in the North Staffordshire sub-region as a centre for rural tourism.

4.12 Policy SS1 of the CS relates to Development Principles. It states that the Council will expect the development and use of land to contribute positively to the social, economic and environmental improvement of the Staffordshire Moorlands in terms of delivering, amongst other things, quality local services such as provision for education, healthcare, leisure, community, cultural and tourist facilities.

4.13 Policy SS1a of the CS directs a presumption in favour of sustainable development. It explains that when considering development proposals, the Council will take a positive approach that reflects the presumption in favour of sustainable development contained in the National Planning Policy Framework.

4.14 Policy SS6C relates to the 'Other Rural Areas Strategy'. It explains that the other rural areas comprise the countryside and the green belt outside of the development and infill boundaries of the towns and villages, as defined in the Site Allocations DPD. It advises that these areas will provide only for development which meets an essential local need, supports the rural diversification and sustainability of the rural areas, promotes sustainable tourism or enhances the countryside. This policy indicates that in such locations, this will be achieved by, amongst other things, enabling the limited expansion or redevelopment of an existing authorised business for employment uses and supporting the diversification of existing farm enterprises (in accordance with policy R1).

4.15 Policy DC1 relates to design considerations. This policy directs that all development should be well designed and reinforce local distinctiveness. It advises that development should, amongst other considerations, be of a high quality and add value to the local area, be designed to respect the site and its surroundings, protect the amenity of the area, including residential amenity and provide for safe and satisfactory access and make a contribution to meeting the parking requirement arising from necessary car use.

4.16 Policy R1 of the CS explains that all development in the rural areas outside the development boundaries of the towns and villages will be assessed according to the extent to which it enhances the character, appearance and biodiversity of the

countryside, promotes the sustainable diversification of the rural economy, facilitates economic activity, meets a rural community need and sustains the historic environment. It goes on to explain that appropriate development should not harm the rural character and environmental quality of the area or any sites designated for their nature conservation, or historical interest by virtue of the scale, nature and level of activity involved and the type and amount of traffic generated or by other effects such as noise and pollution. It adds that priority will be given to the re-use of rural buildings for commercial enterprise, including tourism uses, where the location is sustainable and the proposed use does not harm the building's character and/or the character of its surroundings.

5. The Proposal

5.1 The proposal seeks to extend the use of the existing office/education facility in order to include business conferencing and social functions when not in use for the primary function.

5.2 The proposal is part of an ongoing diversification for Oak Tree Farm. A separate Business Plan supports the application and explains the rationale behind the proposal. In the interests of brevity, the full Business Case will not be repeated here, but it is summarised as follows:

- The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting enforced temporary closure of the existing Educational Centre has resulted in an essential need to explore new revenue streams to help cover fixed operating costs.
- Current Government guidelines and restrictions have resulted in projected 80% reduction in revenue from educational events in the next eighteen months as school leaders have already identified significant difficulties in resuming educational activities away from their own campuses.
- The ability to effectively diversify the current business in a timely way to bring new income streams will be essential in ensuring the long term delivery of support to primary schools, which is the primary aim of the core business. The existing Business Model has already created the opportunity to deliver free outdoor learning sessions to almost one thousand children.
- The objective is to diversify and expand the use the existing building in order to safeguard two jobs and provide the opportunity to create several part-time jobs, thereby boosting the local economy.
- The demand for good value, high quality rural wedding venues has always been strong within the District. There is potential for wedding guests to spend several days in the local area as part of the celebrations, boosting local tourism.
- The local area already has significant natural assets and major tourist attractions including Alton Towers Resort, Churnet Valley

and a wide selection of cultural destinations. The visitor economy is worth an estimated £1.6 billion to the Staffordshire economy. The proposal would complement these attractions and provide further opportunities to increase dwell time in the area.

- The Business Model includes a commitment to use local suppliers and produce. With consumer demand making a real move towards interest in local provenance, the use of local supply chains will not only contribute to the local economy but will also be a strong selling point when booking events. The area already has a well-established support network for companies that deliver events and the business would generate more demand for their services.
- Local public houses and restaurants would also see significant benefit from more guests coming into the area, as many of the high-quality establishments in the vicinity would be recommended as part of an enhanced local experience.

Design and Appearance

5.3 The proposal does not involve any physical alterations to the inside or outside of the building or its curtilage, other than any improved noise insulation measures as deemed necessary by the Acoustic Assessment.

Noise and Disturbance

5.4 It is anticipated that there would be a maximum of 15 social functions each year, starting at 12pm and finishing no later than 1am the following morning, although amplified music would cease at midnight. The frequency and operating hours of the function facility could be controlled by suitably worded planning conditions.

5.5 A detailed Acoustic Assessment supports the planning application, Again, in the interests of brevity, the full Report will not be repeated here, but its main findings are as follows:

- A detailed Baseline Noise Survey has been undertaken at a measurement location representative of the closest noise-sensitive receptors to the site. This Survey has established the prevailing local background noise levels at times when it is anticipated that the proposal has the greatest potential to give rise to an adverse impact.
- The Assessment identifies that low frequency noise levels are unlikely to exceed the limits set at the noise sensitive receptor locations given some basic improvements to the building structure; namely providing additional insulation to the roof skylight openings.
- The Assessment recommends further mitigation measures in the form a noise limiting device set across low frequency bands 40 Hz – 160 Hz as well as the overall broadband noise level and the production of a Noise Management Plan.

Traffic and Parking

5.6 The site offers ample parking spaces to accommodate the likely number of vehicles associated with any function. It is anticipated that many attendees would arrive my taxi or minibus.

5.7 The site is served by an existing access with adequate visibility. There is no history of any accidents within the last 5 years within the immediate vicinity where the access to the site has been cited as a contributing factor.

5.8 The existing planning permission for the office/education facility does not impose any restrictions on the number of children visiting or the number of vehicles that may access the site at any one time.

5.9 As a diversification scheme, the proposed business conferencing and social function facility would not operate at the same time as the Education Centre. Neither would generate a materially greater amount of vehicle movements or an intensification of the use of the existing point of access to the highway network. On this basis, it is considered that the proposal would not harm the safety of highway users.

6. Summary

6.1 The proposal seeks to maximise the use of an existing commercial building. It would safeguard an existing business which has been dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby protecting two existing full-time jobs. In addition, the proposal has the potential to generate several part-time positions.

6.2 The proposal would use an existing building, with no external alterations. As such, it would not harm the openness of the Green Belt or conflict with the purposes of including land within it. Accordingly, it does not amount to inappropriate development as defined by the NPPF.

6.3 The proposed diversification scheme is entirely consistent with the CS which recognises the service sector as the main driver of economic growth. It is also in line with the Spatial Aims of the CS which include encouraging a strong, prosperous and diverse economy and promoting economic diversification and tourism.

6.4 In addition, the proposal accords with the detailed development management policies of the CS, in so far as it would not materially affect the appearance of the site and its surroundings, it would not have a detrimental impact on the safety of highway users and the

Acoustic Assessment indicates that with appropriate mitigation measures, it would not harm the living conditions of any residents within the wider surroundings.

6.5 In light of the above factors, it is advanced that the proposal accords with the relevant national and local planning policies identified within this Statement and therefore planning permission should be granted.