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Oak Tree Farm

Tickhill Lane Dilhorne ST10 2PL

15th July 2020

Businesscase for the siting offree-standing shepherd huts

Background

The Covid-19 pandemic and resulting enforced closure of our existing educational facility has caused a consequential and severe downturn in business. The ability to effectively diversify the current business in a timely way to bring new income streams will play a critical part in ensuring the continued financial viability of the business and enabling us to resume delivering support to primary schools in the future as guidance permits. The existing business model has already created the opportunity for the business to deliver free outdoor learning sessions to almost one thousand children, providing support to some of the most disadvantaged children in the area.

Our diversification plans haveledus to apply for a change of use for an existing building to a leisure venue which would significantly benefit from having supporting accommodation. To effectively implement this change, our research has indicated that by being able to provide high quality, environmentally friendly accommodationwould not only make the venue more attractive to potential visitors, but would also provide a much-needed additional income stream giving access to revenue generated by encouraging additional tourists to visit the area.

Current Government guidelines and restrictions have meant that our projected sales for educational events at our Centre in the next eighteen months have had to be cut by 80%, with school leaders already identifying significant difficulties in resuming educational activities that are away from their own campus.

It is has become important for us to now explore new and innovative ways to ensure the financial stability of the organisation is maintained, whilst also enabling us to continue supporting the local economy by safeguarding and ultimately creating jobs, contributing to the local business community.

The initial objective is to safeguard two jobs by using existing land and buildings to undertake the diversification project which will ultimately provide the opportunity to create an additional four jobs within two years and provide a boost to tourism in the area.

Opportunity

The decision to pursue planning permission to implement change has been madeas a result of research which indicates that for the next two years at least, that there will be a significant shortage of high-quality wedding venues with onsite accommodationand that people will be more likely to look for UK holiday destinations, most notably, those with an outdoor theme. The existing site is ideally located to encourage and promote rural tourism, with allof the features required to facilitate this additional use with minimal impact on the surroundings.

We are looking to provide a limited amount of moveable accommodation in the form shepherd huts which will support the venue as a desirable feature, whilst also providing a local amenity which is currently in short supply.

To maintain the company ethos, we would target guests looking for a destination that has environmental sustainability embedded in all that is delivered and for those with an interest in a setting that encompasses a diverse ecology. Targeting this market would ensure that we attract a clientele to the venue who are most likely to align with our values.

The project will also provide significant opportunities to support the local economy in a range of ways, supporting financial stability in our wider community.

Location

The site is set in Staffordshire Moorlands and is within a green belt area. The quiet setting and proximity to scenic public footpaths and quiet cyclewaysmakes the area an ideal tourist and leisure destination. The proposed location for siting the shepherd huts is in a secluded woodland area surrounded by established trees and shrubs and almost entirely out of view from the public highway. This area of the site already has an existing foul water system, mains water and electricity, so only minimal disturbance would be required to provide all necessaryamenities. The site also has its own one mile long, woodland and meadow trail with a diverse range of flora of fauna over the 20 acre site.

The proposed scheme has been designed to have a light touch on the existing environment, whilst using the opportunity to implement additional habit creation, which also supports the educational value of the sitewhich will continue to be a significant use of the site.

Environmental sustainability and ecology

The proposed plans will continue the Companies long established ethos of promoting environmental sustainability with the scheme also incorporating further enhancement to the ecology. Theprojecthas been designed to have a light touch on the surrounding environment, with a focus on enhancing and promoting the local area as a wildlife haven, with diverse and plentiful flora and fauna. This additional enhancement will also further support our work by providing access to outdoor areas for primary school children, with well-established and diverse ecology providing an opportunity for children, particularly those from inner city Stoke, to be able to visit a location where they can see a range of habitats and gain a better understanding of the importance of habitat protection and creation.Since opening, the grounds have already been visited by almost 1,000 children who have had the opportunity to explore the diverse wildlife.This new project will create an opportunity to further enhance the site for people to enjoy, particularly young children when they are eventually able to return to visiting locations which are off campus.

The proposed shepherd huts will usematerials both recycled and harvested on site, with logs already on site that have been collected and stored following routine woodland management work undertaken on the site over the past two years, ready to be used.

To continue to enhance the existing 10 acres of semi mature trees, a rolling schedule of woodland management exists, systematically developing more healthy, diverse and sustainable native woodlands within the grounds.

Ourwoodland management programme would be accelerated if the planning application is successful and involves selective thinning of trees to allow climaxspecies and ground flora to thrive, with the generated material being milled on site and used as timber to undertake projects including fencing and animal enclosures. The smaller off-cuts would be used to heat the accommodation and the main building. Effective woodland management will promote ecological diversity and will be enhanced by introducing more native species understorey and climax tree plantingsupporting work already undertaken to establish new hedge rows which was funded by the Woodland Trust.

As part of the project we will continue to work with local wildlife conservation groups includingthe Staffordshire Barn Owl Action Group who maintain two Owl boxes on site and The Staffordshire and Shropshire Amphibian and Reptile Group. Our collaboration with such groups is important in providing us with much needed wildlife intelligence, helping us to develop habitats in a targeted and well managed way.

The re-use of harvested rainwater and the effective use of materials on site isalso playing an important part in ensuring best use of the available resources.

Tourism

The need for good value, high quality tourist accommodation in the area has been increasing steadily and this is supporteddemand generated by major, local tourist attractions including Alton Towers and Churnet Valley being within 10 miles of our location.

It is now anticipated that with current restrictions on travelabroad as a result of Covid-19, that tourists will now be actively looking for UK destinations as a safer alternative to international travel. The site is also ideally located for those interested in holidays where outdoor activity is a key requirement, with an abundance of walking and cycle routes literally on the edge of our boundaries. Destinations with localised access to attractive outdoor spaces will be at a premium, not only presenting a tangible business opportunity, but can also provide a boost to wider local tourism.

A neighbouring property that has recently acquired planning permission to convert a barn into holiday let accommodation, had pre-pandemic occupancy rates of almost 80% and was achieved within the first year of opening, demonstrating the high demand for high quality holiday accommodation in the area. The rising demand for rural accommodation has the potential to provide a much-needed additional income source and will be another draw to encourage tourists to visit Staffordshire Moorlands.

The scheme will boost a prosperous rural economy in the area, with sustainable growth and expansion planssupporting local businesses, potentially creating jobs for more local people. The project would support sustainable rural tourism and will be a leisure development of the highest quality, respecting and enhancing the character of the countryside in the area.

Though the site is within the green belt, the project will be used as a further opportunity to not only ensure that its integrity is preserved, but can further catalyse the development of the existing ecology by recognising where there is potential for improvement, embracing professional guidance from wildlife professionals to fill gaps that currently exist, using guidance set out within Natural England's 2019-2020 Action Plan. To support this, we will be mindful of protecting existing flora and fauna in addition helping to restore and enhancewildlife which is often lost in rural locations due to intensive farming.

Tourism is identified as one of the key areas in theLocal Plan, where the District can play a major role in helpinginward investment and diversifying its economy which is significantly more relevant now as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The developmentwould be a driver for economic development, with an opportunity to capitalise on the growth of the 'experience economy' within Staffordshire Moorlands. The project will make a valued contribution to the District's economy,contributing to tourism and by providing opportunities for jobs, attracting investment and bringing additional revenue to the area.

In the current difficult times, the project will help to maintain and promote a sustainably regenerated rural area and the surrounding communities, with the added benefit of potentially providing access to much needed employment opportunities.

The area already has significant natural assets and major tourism attractions which we can support. The visitor economy is worth an estimated £1.6 billion to the Staffordshire economy and the local

area boasts leading attractions including Alton Towers Resort, Churnet Valley and a wide selection of cultural destinations.

The following attractions are within 10 miles of the site.

1km / 10 min walk from Dilhorne Park Railway Station

5miles/10 mins drive from Churnett Valley

10 Miles/20 min drive from Alton Towers

6 miles/15 mins drive from Gladstone Pottery Museum

8 miles / 20 min drive from the historic Leek market Town

The area has seen increase in demand for self-catering accommodation which allows the visitors freedom and flexibility. The siting of the Shepherd huts within a wooded area is ideal to absorb this minor development and will provide a highly desirable destination, attracting visitors similar to those whomay choose to stay at destinations like Center Parcs. The shepherd huts will only have very limited catering facilities which will encourage guests to use local eating establishments.

Local tourist attractions including the Churnet Valley claim that a major weakness in our area is limited tourist accommodationand the development both satisfies this need and helps support a range of sustainable business opportunities locally.

Conclusion

This transformational project provides the potential for a step-change in the local tourism offer and brings an opportunity to transform part of the local visitor economy. The small-scale development will have a positive impact on the tourism economy of the District, potentially catalysing wider development. There are currently no significantly comparable destinations in the area and would satisfy a market that is currently not serviced.

Consumer demand for greener wedding venues and holiday locations is supported by Visit England research which has highlighted that over half of those surveyed recently, expressed an interest in staying in accommodation with environmentally friendly practices, and a similar number are interested in breaks which benefit the local community, an ethos that is already at the heart of all that we have developed and will continue to develop.

The projecthas been carefully planned and would be totally sympathetic to the surroundings, whilst creating a sustainable business opportunity which is critical to initially preserving jobs and equally importantly, enhancing the area for future generations, creating jobs and enhancing the local economy.

Supporting information

Great Grounds Education website https://www.greatgroundseducation.co.uk/