PLANNING, DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT

PROPOSED CHANGE OF USE OF LAND TO ACCOMMODATE THE SITING OF 12 NO. SHEPHERD HUTS AT OAK TREE FARM, TICKHILL LANE, DILHORNE ST10 2PL



1. Introduction

1.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement supports an application for the change of use of land to accommodate 12 no. Shepherd huts at Oak Tree Farm.

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 parcel of woodland which sits within the wider site of Oak Tree Farm. The farm complex comprises a range of agricultural buildings; one of which has been refurbished and converted to provide an office and education facility. A planning application has been submitted to extend the use of this facility to include conferencing and limited social functions. This proposal aligns with the proposed extended use of this building to provide ancillary accommodation for guests.

2.2 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).

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 explains that a local planning authority should regard the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt, save for a number of exceptions. One of these exceptions is the provision of appropriate facilities (in connection with the existing use of land or a change of use) for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation, cemeteries and burial grounds and allotments; as long as the facilities preserve the openness of the Green Belt and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within it.

4.3 Paragraph 146 goes on to explain that 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 include material changes in the use of land (such as changes of use for outdoor sport or recreation, or for cemeteries and burial grounds).

4.4 This guidance explains that changes of use and the provision of appropriate facilities for recreation 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

4.5 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'.

4.6 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.

4.7 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.

4.8 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.

4.9 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.

4.10 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.

4.11 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.

4.12 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.

4.13 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.

4.14 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.

4.15 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).

4.16 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.

4.17 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.

5. The Proposal

5.1 The proposal seeks to change the use of a section of woodland within the farm complex to accommodate 12 no. Shepherd huts. The proposal would complement plans to use the existing education centre for conferencing and social functions when not in use for the primary function. The extension of the use of the education centre is the subject of a separate planning application which has already been submitted to the Council.

5.2 The proposal is part of an ongoing diversification plan 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 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 Shepherd huts would facilitate this.

- 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.

- 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, Appearance and Impacts

5.3 The proposal seeks to introduce 12 no. traditional shepherd huts which would be informally arranged within a contained woodland setting. The huts would not be visible from the public domain.

5.4 The application is supported by an Arboricultural Assessment, an Ecological Appraisal and a Bat Survey. In the interests of brevity, the findings of the Reports will not be repeated within this Statement, but the key points are as follows:

- The Tree Survey found that all trees within the woodland area range from young to mature in terms of their life stage and their condition ranges from fair to good. All trees within the subject area are categorised as 'Category B' (of moderate ecological and environmental value).

- The Tree Survey noted that the Shepherds huts would be traditionally mounted on a wheelbase frame and the size and weight of these structures would not be sufficient to cause any detrimental soil compaction. However, the Report recommends that light weight ground protection should be used along with a hand digging method for the installation of necessary services and utilities to minimise any disturbance of the root systems. The Tree Survey concluded that with appropriate safeguards in place, the scheme would have minimal impact on the woodland.

- The Preliminary Ecological Survey (PES) advises that no designated sites revealed by the Ecological Data Search provided by SER fall within the proposed re-development site itself. Therefore, the proposed scheme of works will not be of detriment to any of the surround designated sites.

- The PES advises that no habitats of conservation concern are located within the site itself. Therefore, the proposed scheme of works will not impact upon any rare or valuable habitats.

- The PES observed that the site was found to contain the potential to support protected and/or rare species. It therefore makes the following recommendations:

    1) Although no badger setts were observed on or immediately offsite at the time of the survey, activity patterns of this species can change over a short time. An updated badger survey should therefore be undertaken if works do not commence within 6 months of the survey date (June 2020).

2) Prior to the removal of any trees for health and safety reasons, a Ground Level Assessment (GLA) for potential roosting features should be undertaken to ensure that no bat roosts will be lost.

3) Any trees to be removed for health and safety purposes should be done outside of the breeding bird survey season of March to August, inclusive. If this cannot be achieved, then the trees will need to be inspected no more than 24 hours prior to their removal.

4) Due to the low potential for amphibians and reptiles to be present, a Method Statement should be written, outlining how construction staff should work and measures to be adopted in the event that any species are encountered.

- The PES considers the ecological value of the site to bats to be low. This is due to two common bat species using the site for limited foraging and commuting purposes only, with no bat roosts present within close proximity to the site. The PES noted that the wider landscape also offers further suitable habitat for the local bat populations, meaning that the proposed development site contains common habitats within the local landscape.

- The Bat Survey recommends the retention of as many trees as possible within the woodland and replacement planting if any trees are lost. It also recommends a bat friendly planting scheme including additional roosting features around the site.

Traffic and Parking

5.5 The wider site offers ample parking spaces to accommodate the number of vehicles likely to be associated with people using the Shepherd huts.

5.6 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.

5.7 It is asserted that the proposed 13 no. Shepherd huts would generate limited vehicle movements in the context of the existing working farm and education centre. On this basis, the proposal would not harm the safety of highway users.

6. Summary

6.1 The proposal seeks to further diversify the main farming operation at Oak Tree Farm and would complement the approved and proposed use of the existing commercial building. The proposal would introduce only temporary, movable structures which would be sensitively sited so as not harm any ecological or biodiversity interests. The Shepherd huts would sit within a carefully managed and enclosed woodland setting and they would not harm the openness of the Green Belt or conflict with the purposes of including land within it.

6.2 The scheme would safeguard an existing business which has been dramatically impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, thereby protecting two existing full-time jobs, with the prospect of generating several additional part-time positions.

6.3 The proposed diversification scheme is entirely consistent with the CS which recognises the service and tourism 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 harm the appearance of the site and its surroundings, it would not harm any ecological or biodiversity interests and it would not have a detrimental impact on the safety of highway users.

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.