From:
Sent: 02 July 2023 22:10
To: Planning Comments (SMDC)
Subject: Comment Received from Public Access

Categories:

Application Reference No. : SMD/2023/0276 Site Address: Westwood Hall Farm Westwood Park Drive Leek Staffordshire ST13 8NW Leek Comments by: Cllr Philip Barks
From:

48
The Willows
Leek West
Leek
Staffordshire
ST13 8XF

Submission: Objection
Comments: Cllr Philip Barks

48 The Willows

Leek

Staffordshire

ST13 8XF

2nd July 2023

REF: SMD/2023/0275 ¿ 0276 ¿ 0277 applications at Westwood Hall Farm.

To whom it may concern,

I am writing as a councillor for Leek West to express my concerns with the three applications submitted at Westwood Hall Farm, Leek for an agricultural development.

All three applications state that there are no trees or hedges on the proposed site, nor on land adjacent to the proposed development that could influence the development, or might be important as part of the local landscape character. However, when viewed on SMDC¿s interactive map, aerial photography clearly shows trees within the proposed site boundary and a large site of ancient woodland to the west which is adjacent to or within the fringes of 0276 and 0277 location plan. This piece of ancient woodland is recorded on Natural England¿s database as West Wood, with an area of 3.8 of Ancient and Semi-natural Woodland.

As stated in the planning application, a full tree survey should be provided at the discretion of the local planning authority if both of the above stipulations are present. Natural England and Forestry Commission¿s advice for ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees is that it is a material planning consideration. This is because it is defined as an irreplaceable habitat and a valuable natural asset important for wildlife, soils, carbon capture, recreation, genetic diversity, cultural, historical and landscape value. Therefore, sufficient surveys, assessments and information should be provided regarding the potential impact on the ancient woodland.

Additionally, all three applications stated that there are no designated sites, important habitats or other biodiversity features within, or on land adjacent to, or near the application site which could be affected by the proposals. However, when viewed on SMDC¿s interactive map there is a clear site of biological importance (SBI) to the West that is adjacent to or within the fringes of the site location plans. As such, sufficient assessments and information should be provided regarding the potential impact to the SBI.

In relation to the decision-making process regarding ancient woodland, Natural England and Forestry commission declares that when making planning decisions you should consider conserving and enhancing biodiversity, avoiding and reducing the level of impact of the proposed development on ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees. Permission should be refused if development will result in the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons or a suitable compensation strategy is in place.

Both direct and indirect effects should be assessed that could result in the loss or deterioration of the ancient woodland. The application seeks to alter the current ground elevation. Thus, the potential direct and indirect effects as outlined by Natural England and Forestry Commission I believe are:

Direct:

¿ Damaging root and understorey

¿ Increasing levels of air and light pollution, noise and vibration

¿ Changing the water table or drainage

¿ Changing the woodland ecosystem by removing the woodland edge or thinning trees ¿ causing greater wind damage and soil loss

Indirect:

¿ Reducing the amount of semi-natural habitats next to ancient woodland that provide important dispersal and feeding habitat for woodland species

¿ Increasing the amount of dust, light, water, air, soil pollution

¿ Increasing disturbance to wildlife, such as noise from additional people and traffic

¿ Changing the landscape character of the area

Potentially, the applications could have a negative impact on the ancient woodland. The National Planning Policy Framework 180 (c) states, development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists. Furthermore, SMDC Local Plan policy NE2 argues that planners should resist development that would directly or indirectly damage existing ancient woodland, veteran trees and ancient or species rich hedgerows.

Ultimately, careful consideration is needed because of the potential impact on the designated ancient woodland and sufficient surveys, assessments and information should be provided. If the developments will result in a significant negative effect to the ancient woodland and they are not proven to be for wholly exceptional reasons, then an alternative site should be found. This is unless sufficient mitigation and compensation measures can be agreed such as screening, measures to reduce noise light and buffers zones.

With reference to the site of biological importance, both the NPPF and Local Plan outline several policies relating to biodiversity:

NPPF 174 argues that decisions should contribute to and enhance the valued landscape, sites of biodiversity and geological value, whilst minimising impact and providing net gains for biodiversity.

NPPF 180 (a) states that if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused.

SMDC Local Plan NE1 (4) The Council will not permit development proposals which would directly or indirectly result in significant harm to geological and biodiversity conservation interests. This is unless no appropriate alternative site is available, all statutory and regulatory requirements are satisfied, appropriate conservation and mitigation measures are provided and the benefit of development clearly outweighs that of the conservation site. Where possible, decisions will seek to deliver net gains to biodiversity.

Ultimately, if the proposed development will result in significant harm to the SBI and the criteria in SMDC NE1 is not met, then the application should be amended or an alternative site found.

Even though the development is for agricultural purposes and permitted within the greenbelt as defined in SS10 (6), the Local Plan¿s aim is to maintain the Green Belt within the Staffordshire Moorlands. This is apparent in Policy SS10 (3) which states that priority should be given to the need to protect the quality and character of the area and requires all development proposals to respect and respond sensitively to the distinctive qualities of the surrounding landscape. Measures which protect and enhance the biodiversity, geological resources and heritage of the district should be encouraged.

The three applications when combined, would amount to a large development within the green belt and a significant alteration to the current landscape character. SS10 (2) declares that the rural economy should be sustained by enabling limited expansion of businesses within the green belt. The application proposals amount to a significant business expansion from 25 cattle to potentially 800, which alongside the development plans will undoubtably change the current landscape character.

Ultimately as I have demonstrated, the applications give me concerns with their potential impact to the site of ancient woodland and the SBI. These concerned I believe have not been addressed within the applications. Therefore, until additional information and assessments have been provided and until my concerns have been addressed, I cannot support these applications.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Philip Barks

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