

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Development and Conservation Control Committee 6<sup>th</sup> October 2004  
**AUTHOR/S:** Director of Development Services

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### **S/0771/04/F - Sawston**

#### **Change of Use of Agricultural Buildings to Hostel Accommodation for Agricultural Workers and Ancillary Office Accommodation Together with Erection of Covered External Area and Use of Existing Bungalow as Warden Accommodation at Dernford Farm, Stapleford**

#### **Recommendation: Approval**

Members of Committee will visit the site on Monday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2004.

#### **Site and Proposal**

1. The application site is a 0.8 hectare parcel of land sited between the villages of Stapleford and Sawston and on the west side of the A1301. The site comprises a range of timber and render agricultural buildings together with a brick bungalow. Beyond the western boundary of the site is a detached farmhouse. The site is accessed via an approximately 450 metre long unmade track.
2. The full application, submitted on 14<sup>th</sup> April 2004 and amended on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 23<sup>rd</sup> June and 5<sup>th</sup> July 2004, proposes to convert four agricultural buildings in order to provide hostel accommodation for up to 50 agricultural workers and ancillary offices.
3. A supporting statement submitted with the application states that the farm workers are employed by Watson Agricultural Ltd, a Cambridge based company supplying temporary and seasonal staff to local farmers and other agricultural businesses across the region. The company recruits, trains, supervises and provides accommodation for these workers, a service that the farms themselves would find uneconomical due to the seasonal nature of the work. There is a growing shortage of people willing to do this kind of work and at least 95% of staff are foreign students and backpackers looking for temporary work. The need for accommodation for these essential workers is not satisfactorily met by current methods. At present, workers are accommodated in shared houses rented by the Company predominantly in Cambridge but this has drawbacks of high rents together with a need to make many car journeys in and out of Cambridge every day to get to the farms.
4. The accommodation will be inhabited on a seasonal basis in evenings and weekends. Workers will be driven to sites in a fleet of fifteen 12 and 6 seater vehicles owned by the applicant. Dernford Farm is ideally situated with easy access to the M11, A11 and A14 – the proposal would therefore not add to congestion in surrounding towns. Public transport and cycles will be used for personal trips outside working hours. It is claimed that Dernford Farm is within walking distance of basic local amenities. Sustainability is a key aspect of the scheme with emphasis on providing enough amenities to achieve a self-contained and self-sufficient site (eg – kitchen and social areas). The accommodation of workers in one place enables the use of larger and fewer vehicles. Farmworkers will not be permitted use of private vehicles.

There would be a full time warden on site accommodated in the bungalow on the north side of the farm buildings together with two additional staff working in the office.

5. Proposed materials draw upon the existing vernacular of the farm buildings. Proposed rooflights sit within the pitch of the roof or form part of the system and profile of the corrugated roofing. The layout of the buildings would allow for the communal area to be furthest from neighbouring properties.
6. Figures comparing anticipated traffic movements with the level of movements associated with the previous use of the buildings have been submitted as has a plan showing the location of farms that the hostel would serve.

### **Planning History**

7. **S/1020/85/F** – Application to change use of part of farm building [building A of the current application] to office refused on the grounds of intensification and consolidation of a commercial activity in the countryside and Green Belt. The application was allowed at appeal subject to a condition restricting the use to a connection with agricultural research/field trials.
8. **S/0344/91/F** – Consent granted for alterations to and use of barn as office and w. c – this application relates to Building A of the current application. A condition of the consent restricts the use of the office to connection with agricultural research/field trials.
9. **S/0812/96/F** – Application to change the use of agricultural barn to B1(b) use approved – this relates to Building A of the current application.
10. **S/0568/99/F** – Consent granted for change of use and extensions to the agricultural buildings to extend existing crop protection trials base.
11. All the above applications were submitted by Cyanamid, a company carrying out trials of agricultural chemicals.
12. **S/1669/02/F** – Application for extraction of sand and gravel in connection with construction of an agricultural reservoir on land to north-west of the site submitted to the County Council. The application has been approved at the County Council's Committee subject to resolving archaeological matters and to the signing of a Section 106 Agreement. The plans show the construction of a temporary access in a position to the south-east of the access serving the application site.

### **Planning Policy**

13. The site lies within the Green Belt and countryside. **Policy P1/2** of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003 states that development will be restricted in the countryside unless proposals can be demonstrated to be essential in a particular rural location.
14. **Policy P1/3** of the Structure Plan states that a high standard of design and sustainability will be required for all new development which minimises the need to travel and reduces car dependency. In addition development is expected to provide a sense of place which responds to the local character of the built environment.

15. **Policy GB2** of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004 states that planning permission will not be granted for inappropriate development in the Green Belt unless very special circumstances can be demonstrated. Development is defined as 'inappropriate' unless it comprises (in part):

- Buildings for agriculture or forestry;
- The re-use of buildings provided that (a) the development does not result in a materially greater impact on the openness and purpose of the Green Belt; (b) strict control is exercised over any proposed extensions and associated uses of surrounding land; (c) the buildings are of permanent and substantial construction and capable of conversion without major or complete reconstruction; and (d) the form, bulk and general design of the buildings are in keeping with their surroundings.

### **Consultation**

16. **Sawston Parish Council** objects to the application stating:

"This is residential building within the Green Belt which goes against the Local Plan. This is at the narrowest strip of Green Belt around Cambridge. There will be immense traffic problems with access and egress onto the busy A1301 at a very dangerous junction. The access/egress crosses a cycle-way used by pupils at Sawston Village College and others. There is a footpath which crosses the proposed site and will be covered by the patio of the building. This will cause light pollution through the roof panels onto flat open countryside and the whole proposed development will cause disturbance to the two adjacent properties. The Parish Council would like to request a site visit to this property".

17. **Stapleford Parish Council** objects to the application stating:

"Inadequate accommodation for 41 people, 10 double bunked rooms being applied for. Significant noise nuisance to neighbours both early morning traffic leaving site and number of people living on site. This is an unacceptable change of use. A hostel close to houses is an unacceptable use of these premises. This number of people would impact on neighbours to an unacceptable degree. The increase of traffic together with the lorries to and from the gravel extraction would impact on the lives of the neighbours to a large extent".

18. **Great Shelford Parish Council** objects to the application:

"This proposal is contrary to policies for development and employment within the green belt in that these seek to reduce the need to travel by locating labour close to sources of employment and permit the conversion of agricultural buildings where they would provide local employment. This proposal does neither; it involves transporting workers considerable distances to their work and does not provide local employment. The workers themselves would be remote from local services and it would seem a far more appropriate location could be found nearer to services and to their work. In addition the proposal will cause considerable disturbance to the residents of Dernford House and Bridge End Cottage".

19. **The Local Highways Authority** comments that the upper daily traffic figure of 71 given for the existing use is generous and that daily traffic movements are likely to be no greater than 22-25. If the transport for all workers was definitely secured by minibus then it would be difficult for an objection from the highway point of view to be

sustained because the trips would be only some 12 per day. If the minimum number of cars were used, the trips would increase to some 30 per day. This in addition to the traffic already associated with the leased buildings would result in an intensification of use of the access and, on this basis, it is recommended that the proposal be refused.

20. **The Chief Environmental Health Officer** expresses concern about potential noise from the social area of the accommodation and the early morning movements of vehicles. Cars and vans involved with the early morning transport of workers should be parked immediately adjacent to the new 2 metre high brick wall and vehicles should be started, loaded with passengers and driven directly off site from this location. This will help to reduce vehicle noise disturbance to the adjacent house. Also, a condition should be applied to any planning consent requiring the building to be acoustically insulated in accordance with a scheme to be agreed in writing beforehand.
21. **The County Archaeologist** states that the site lies in an area of archaeological potential and it is considered likely that archaeological deposits may survive on the site. It is recommended that the site be subject to a programme of archaeological investigation which can be secured by way of condition.
22. **The Environment Agency** states that the application does not consider sufficiently issues of surface water drainage and pollution control and appropriate conditions should therefore be applied to any planning consent.
23. **The County Footpaths Officer** raises no objections to the development. Public Footpath No. 2 Sawston runs through the yard and adjacent to the proposed site. It is stressed that the footpath must remain open and unobstructed at all times from building materials and vehicles, that the surface of the footpath must not be altered without the consent of the County Council and that lawful authority is required for vehicles to drive over the footpath.
24. The comments of the **Building Inspector** in respect of the potential for converting the buildings and their suitability for use as accommodation are awaited and will be reported verbally at the Committee meeting.

### **Representations**

25. Letters of objection have been received from 7 local residents, Dernford House, River Cottage, Dernford Mill House, Bridge End Cottage, Little America Farm Bungalow, Barns Farm and Stapleford Grange. The main points raised are:
  - The public footpath is incorrectly shown on the submitted plans. It in fact runs immediately in front of the proposed accommodation;
  - Security implications for nearby residents due to isolated nature of local houses, poor lighting and absence of local police presence;
  - The proposal will devalue property in the area;
  - The proposal would increase traffic from Dernford Farm Lane onto the A1301. This road junction is very hazardous. The recent approval of construction of a gravel pit with large numbers of heavy lorries using the junction will increase the risk of accidents at a point where a cycle/footpath used by schoolchildren from Sawston Village College crosses the road;

- There is no need to accommodate agricultural workers in this location. It would be more appropriate to house them in temporary accommodation on the farms where they are needed;
- The applicant company is registered under general business services and not agricultural services. This is therefore not agricultural development;
- The development will place unacceptable pressure on local water and sewage facilities and threaten the local ecology;
- Activities in the early hours of the morning when people are driven to work and throughout the evening when there will be little to occupy the workers due to lack of local facilities and amenities would result in serious noise disturbance to the immediate neighbour;
- The problem of noise disturbance will be compounded by the fact that workers will not be permitted their own transport and will therefore be restricted to the immediate area every evening and weekend;
- The lane is narrow and potholed and unsuited to the increase in traffic likely to be generated by the proposed use;
- This proposed change of use will alter the character of this Green Belt area;
- The buildings are not suitable for conversion particularly for human habitation. A report from a structural engineer on the existing condition of the buildings should be required;
- Could the buildings be occupied by non-agricultural workers?;
- The site should be better related to social and other facilities.

26. 3 letters of support have been received from the NFU, Trumpington Farm Company and Dalham Estates. The main points raised are:

- The accommodation is necessary for seasonal agricultural workers in the area;
- The re-use and adaptation of existing rural buildings has an important role in meeting the needs of rural areas;
- The project fits in very well with the current needs of modern agriculture. Farming in this area is highly mechanised but people are still needed to harvest the crops.

With local employment levels at 95%-98%, there is a labour crisis in the countryside to perform short term and seasonal tasks on the farm;

- The proposed location is ideal – a rural location to provide a base for rurally located jobs. It is also a good use of buildings which would otherwise be redundant;
- Trumpington Farm Company has used the services of the applicant (Watson Agricultural Ltd) for 24 years. For farmers employing overseas labour, it is

essential to have a supply of seasonal labour without the administrative problems associated with employing the labour directly;

- Transport to and from farms is an ever increasing cost;
- A properly managed and run hostel would greatly benefit the workers and make the movement of staff around the various farms more efficient;
- Watsons is a well established company and has been trading for 24 years supplying good reliable staff.

### **Planning Comments – Key Issues**

27. The key issues to consider in the determination of this application are:

- The principle of the use of the buildings for the purposes proposed;
- The impact of the development upon the character of the countryside and upon the openness of the Green Belt;
- Neighbour impact;
- Highway safety;
- Effect on the public footpath;

28. The re-use of redundant agricultural buildings is considered within Policy GB2 of the Local Plan to be appropriate development in the Green Belt providing the buildings are capable of being converted without major reconstruction and providing development would not materially affect the openness of the Green Belt. Although the proposal involves the conversion of the existing buildings, doubts have been raised about their suitability for conversion within letters of objection. As such, this Authority's Building Inspector has been asked to clarify whether they are capable of being converted and, in particular, whether they can be used as accommodation without requiring reconstruction. It should be noted, however, that the buildings do have consent to be used for office and research uses in association with the testing of agrochemicals and this use was carried out on the site between the 1980's and 2002.

29. The proposed change of use, although providing residential accommodation unassociated with the needs of Dernford Farm itself, does seek to serve the needs of farms in the Cambridge Region. A list of in excess of 70 farms served by the applicant's business together with a map showing the location of these farms has been submitted as part of the application. This shows that the site is centrally located and well related to the businesses it serves. In bringing all employees together on one site thereby enabling the use of fewer larger vehicles, I consider the hostel to be a more sustainable option, in terms of minimising the need for vehicular movements, than the situation that presently exists (ie – employees are scattered about town in rented houses). I consider the accommodation of agricultural workers to be an acceptable use in a rural area although should Members be minded to grant consent for the scheme, I would suggest that a condition be applied restricting the use of the barns to agricultural workers only.

30. With regards to the impact of the development upon the character of the countryside and the openness of the Green Belt, the proposal does seek to create a number of

new openings in all the buildings, particularly in the north elevations of Buildings A. Whilst the appearance of the buildings would be altered, I consider the contemporary design approach to be acceptable and in keeping with the current treatment of the buildings. The physical additions to the buildings (the verandah to Building A and the covered courtyard between Buildings B and C) would not be prominent within the surrounding area.

31. Concerns have been raised in respect of noise and disturbance to adjoining residents, particularly to the occupants of the immediately adjacent dwelling, Dernford Farmhouse. The Environmental Health Officer has been consulted on this point and has raised no objections in principle subject to the erection of a wall between buildings B and D (this is shown on the plans) and subject to early morning vehicle movements being restricted to an area on the opposite side of the wall to the adjoining property.
32. With regards to the highway safety implications of the development, the Local Highways Authority has objected to the application on the basis of the scale of the use. These objections appear to be based, however, on the assumption that the use of existing leased buildings would continue – this is not the case. As the submitted traffic figures would not be in addition to those already associated with the site, the Local Highways Authority has been asked to reconsider the application. In addition to this, in order to minimise the number of vehicle movements and to minimise the highway safety implications of the development, the applicants are willing to enter into a Section 106 Agreement stipulating that occupants of the hostel would not be able to own their own motorised transport.
33. Concerns have been raised in respect of the security implications of the development and upon the impact of the development upon house values. However, these are not material planning issues.

### **Recommendations**

34. Subject to the Local Highways Authority raising no objections to the application, to the Building Inspector confirming that the buildings are capable of being converted and to the signing of a Section 106 Agreement to prevent occupiers of the hostel owning their own motorised transport, delegated powers are sought to approve the application, as amended by plans and details submitted on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 23<sup>rd</sup> June and 5<sup>th</sup> July 2004:
  1. Standard Condition A – Time limited permission (Reason A);
  2. Sc5a – Details of materials for external walls and roofs (Rc5a);
  2. Sc51 – Landscaping (Rc51);
  4. Sc52 – Implementation of landscaping (Rc52);
  5. Sc60 – Details of boundary treatment (Rc60);
  6. Before the use, hereby permitted, commences the refectory/social space (Building C) shall be acoustically insulated in accordance with a scheme that shall previously have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. (Reason – To minimise noise disturbance to neighbouring properties);

7. Before the use, hereby permitted, commences, a wall shall be constructed between Buildings B and D (in the position denoted on the attached plan) in accordance with a scheme that shall previously have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. (Reason – To minimise noise disturbance to neighbouring properties);
8. Vehicles associated with the early morning transport of workers shall not be parked other than immediately adjacent to the eastern edge of the wall shown between Buildings B and D (shown hatched on the attached plan) and vehicles shall be started, loaded with passengers and driven directly off site from this location (Reason – To minimise vehicle noise disturbance to the adjacent dwelling);
9. Prior to the commencement of any development, a scheme for the provision and implementation of foul water drainage shall be submitted to and agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. The works/scheme shall be constructed and completed in accordance with the approved plans/specification at such time(s) as may be specified in the approved scheme. (Reason – To prevent the increased risk of pollution to the water environment);
10. Prior to the commencement of any development, a scheme for the provision and implementation of surface water drainage shall be submitted to and agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. The works/scheme shall be constructed and completed in accordance with the approved plans/specification at such time(s) as may be specified in the approved scheme. (Reason – To ensure a satisfactory method of surface water drainage);
11. The hostel accommodation, hereby permitted, shall not be used other than for the accommodation of agricultural workers only and for no other purpose (Reason – To ensure that the use is appropriate to a rural area and in keeping with the aims of Policy P1/2 of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003).
12. Archaeology condition

## **Informatives**

### **Reasons for Approval**

1. The approved development is considered generally to accord with the Development Plan and particularly the following policies:
  - **Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003: P1/3** (Sustainable Design in Built Development) and **P1/2** (Environmental Restrictions on Development)
  - **South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004: GB2** (Development in the Green Belt)
2. The proposal conditionally approved is not considered to be significantly detrimental to the following material planning considerations which have been raised during the consultation exercise:



- Residential amenity including noise disturbance;
  - Highway safety;
  - Visual impact on the locality and upon the openness of the Green Belt;
  - Suitability of the buildings for conversion
3. All other material planning considerations have been taken into account. None is of such significance as to outweigh the reason for the decision to approve the planning application.

**General**

1. The public footpath must remain open and unobstructed at all times from building materials and parked vehicles (it is an offence both at common law and under s137 of the Highways Act 1980 to obstruct a public footpath);
2. The surface of the footpath must not be altered without the consent of the County Council Countryside Services Team (it is an offence under s1 of the Criminal Damage Act 1971 to damage the surface of a public footpath);
3. No vehicles can drive over the footpath unless they have lawful authority (this comprises an offence under s34 of the Road Traffic Act 1988).
4. The applicant's attention is drawn to the comments of the Environment Agency set out in the attached letter dated 28<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report: Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003; South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004; File Ref: S/0771/04/F.

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