

## SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

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**REPORT TO:** Development and Conservation Control Committee 10<sup>th</sup> May 2006  
**AUTHOR/S:** Director of Development Services

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**S/0364/06/F – Little Wilbraham**  
**Conversion and Extensions to Buildings to Provide Enhanced Veterinary Facilities at**  
**Station Farm, London Road (in the Parish of Little Wilbraham)**  
**For Mr R and Mrs C White**

**Recommendation: Refusal**  
**Date for Determination: 20<sup>th</sup> April 2006**

Members are to visit the site on Monday, 8<sup>th</sup> May 2006.

### **Departure Application**

#### **Site and Proposal**

1. The site, measuring 0.3 hectares, is located off the A1304 (London Road), 150 metres south-west of the village framework within the countryside. It is physically separated from the village by open fields. The Cambridge-Newmarket railway line runs parallel to the north-western boundary of the site, beyond which the embankment to the A11 trunk runs north-south to the west of the site.
2. The site comprises a complex of former farm buildings, including a barn that has recently been converted and extended to provide accommodation for the current owners specialist veterinary practice. To the south-west of this barn is a disused brick stable block with a mono-pitch corrugated sheet roof. Between the main building and these stables the owners have erected dog enclosures behind the stables, and have to the south-west, further timber dog housing with individual enclosures erected. To the east of the barn is a timber cart shed. This is in poor repair, but is used for storage by the owners.
3. The owners occupy the former farmhouse and own a paddock north of the barn and field between the site and village.
4. This full planning application, received 23<sup>rd</sup> February 2006, seeks permission to further extend the converted barn to provide additional consulting rooms, operating areas and dog and cat wards. A covered link will join the main building to the stable block, which it is proposed to convert and extend to provide further consultation rooms, two rooms for medical procedures and further housing for cats and dogs. In addition, it is proposed to refurbish and extend the cart store to provide laboratories, staff facilities and office space. The application is accompanied by a detailed planning statement, which is attached at Appendix 1.

#### **Planning History**

5. In 2001 planning permission was granted for the extension and conversion of the barn into a specialist small animal operating centre (ref. **S/1973/01/F**).

The extensions replaced a storage area that was at the north-east end of the barn, which was demolished as part of the proposals. At this time a link to the stable block was discouraged by Officers, as noted in the agent's letter that accompanied the application on grounds that "the essential corridor link would be more obtrusive than a small purpose-built extension behind the existing barn". At this time it was the owners' intention to manage the facility as they would be living at the farmhouse. They planned to employ two additional staff.

6. Planning permission was subsequently granted for a temporary siting of a log-cabin style building, north-east of the main building (ref. **S/0212/05/F**). This was to house additional medical facilities while planning permission was sought for the conversion of the stables. It is conditioned that this building be removed on or before 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006.

### **Planning Policy**

7. **Policy P1/2** of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan, adopted 2003 (Structure Plan) sets out environmental restrictions on development. In particular, 'Development will be restricted in the countryside unless the proposals can be demonstrated to be essential in a particular rural location'.
8. **Policy P1/3** of the Structure Plan requires a high standard of design and sustainability for all new development including:
  - 1) minimising the need to travel and reducing car dependency;
  - 2) providing a sense of place; and
  - 3) making efficient use of energy and resources.
9. **Policy P2/6** of the Structure Plan provides for 'sensitive small-scale employment development in rural areas' where it contributes to one or more of the objectives of this policy, including amongst others, farm or rural diversification; re-use of existing buildings; helping to maintain or renew the vitality of rural areas.
10. **Policy P8/1** of the Structure Plan and **Policy TP1** of the South Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Local Plan 2004 (Local Plans) seek to ensure that new development has sustainable links between land use and transport. Where it is not possible for small-scale development under **Policy P2/6** to be located in a highly accessible area or where it can be made highly accessible by public transport the remaining requirements should so far as possible be met. These requirements include:
  - 1) reducing the need to travel, particularly by car;
  - 2) provides travel choice;
  - 3) provides for the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users; and
  - 4) provides appropriate access to the public highway network without compromising safety.
11. **Policy EM4** of the Local Plan, allows for the development of new research establishments and the expansion of existing research establishments if it can be demonstrated that:
  - (a) such development is intended to provide accommodation for organisations whose primary purpose is to research or investigate ideas, theories and concepts and/or to design and develop instruments processes or products, up to and including production for testing, but excluding manufacture; and

- (b) that the organisations are required in the national interest to be located close to existing major establishments in related fields (such as the universities, the teaching hospital or private research establishments) in order to share staff, equipment or data, or to undertake joint collaborative working for the purposes specified in (a) above.

This policy includes provision for development that conflicts with other policies and requires development permitted under this policy to be regulated through conditions or planning obligation to restrict future occupation and use of the premises for the purposes specified.

12. **Policy EM7** of the Local Plan allow for the expansion of existing firms within village frameworks or on suitable brown field sites next to, or very close to, the village frameworks if the firm or business has been based in the Cambridge Area for a minimum of two years prior to the date of any application for development.
13. **Policy EM10** of the Local Plan makes provision for the change of use and conversion of rural buildings to employment use subject to a number of requirements:
- 1) the buildings are of permanent and substantial construction and are capable of conversion without major or complete reconstruction;
  - 2) conversion does not lead to dispersal of activity on such a scale as to prejudice town and village vitality;
  - 3) the form, bulk and general design of the buildings both before and after conversion are in keeping with their surroundings;
  - 4) the buildings are capable of re-use without materially changing their existing character or impact upon the surrounding countryside;
  - 5) safe and satisfactory vehicular access can be provided together with adequate space within the curtilage to accommodate ancillary requirements such as car parking and lorry manoeuvring without significant detriment to the setting of the building and the landscape within which it is located, and
  - 6) the scale and frequency of traffic generated by the proposal can be accommodated on the road system without undue adverse effects.

### Consultations

14. **Little Wilbraham Parish Council** has no comments but recommends approval.
15. The Council's **Ecologist** has no objection to the current proposal having found no obvious signs of a bat roost, although some bat droppings were evident. A number of bird nests were found. A large beech tree near to the cart shed is an important ecological feature and he would not wish to see it lost, as a result of the development, therefore he supports the idea of moving the cart shed away from it. Although the tree may be hollow it had a lot of healthy growth in its crown. He suggests a condition to require remedial tree surgery if the Trees and Landscape Officer is concerned about the safety of tree. The applicants are happy to provide alternative swallow nest sites and bat boxes. Conditions would be required to control damage to nesting birds and to ensure an agreed scheme of ecological enhancement.
16. The **Environment Agency** notes that the site falls within a Zone 1 (low) flood risk area. It has no objection to the proposed development but makes comments which could be added as informatives.

17. The **Council's Trees and Landscape Officer** comments that "the beech tree located adjacent to the existing cart shed is hollow in the basal area and therefore structurally unsound. I therefore have no objection to the works in this location. The ash tree that is situated adjacent to the existing barn and dog run requires a root protection area of 8 metres. The proposals indicates 7m clearance. I would accept this subject to suitable foundation construction being undertaken".
18. The Council's **Building Control Officer** notes, in relation to the proposed conversion and refurbishment of the cart shed: "I have only walked past the barn when visiting other areas on the site, towards the end of last year. From memory the barn appeared in reasonable condition although a full structural survey would be required before conversion".

### **Representations**

19. One letter of support has been received from local residents living at 4 The Paddocks, Six Mile Bottom. They have visited the site and seen the standard of care offered to its patients. They have neighbours who work as clinical and ancillary staff; a further neighbour had a pet treated there and praised the service received. They go on to mention that while on holiday two couples had used the centre and spoke very highly of it. The centre offers a regional and national referral service, is a centre for student and postgraduate training and employs local people in this quite remote rural area. They consider it to be the largest employer in the village.
20. Cambridgeshire County Councillor G J Heathcock has written in support of the proposals, stressing 'the considerable value to animal lovers and owners in and around Cambridge – that this whole venture has in seeking to give absolutely first class care to small animals'. He notes, having used the service for one of his own young cats, that excellent care is provided and should be extended to provide an even wider clinical service to a larger area – 'something that is vital as is the education of our future vets'. He notes the Council's and some local residents' concerns but the centre blends into its surroundings, and the pioneering work provided should be allowed to continue.
21. 53 letters of support have been submitted from veterinary practices; of which 8 are based in Cambridgeshire, 26 within the Eastern Region and 19 nationally. These letters raise in their comments:
  - a) The referral service provided is an invaluable asset to practices and clients.
  - b) The addition of further specialist diagnostic and medical facilities is welcomed.
  - c) The educational courses provided are of huge benefit, high quality, include evening classes that allow staff to attend outside of work hours, and reach, soon to be mandatory, CPD quotas, and are free of charge.
  - d) The level of expertise is not available within local practice.
  - e) Provides options for advanced and complex treatment otherwise not available at local practices.
  - f) Beneficial postgraduate training.
  - g) Dick White Referrals, is known for its excellence and enjoys a national and international reputation.
  - h) It compliments rather than competes with the Animal Health Trust.
  - i) East of access to specialist care.
  - j) Veterinary practices form an important part of local small businesses and provide an essential service to the community.

- k) There is a need for this service to adapt its facilities to enable essential developments in order to keep up with growing areas of expertise.
- l) Such a facility must add greatly to the overall impression created by the local area and has impressed many clients.
- m) The design is in keeping with the buildings surroundings.
- n) The proposed extensions will blend with existing buildings.
- o) The service needs to expand to be able to accommodate the additional workload and attract high calibre staff.
- p) Dick White has earned a reputation for clinical excellence second to none in the country.
- q) Ease of access from the A11 without adding to congestion in towns or cities.
- r) Creation of local employment.
- s) Investigations and procedures will be able to be undertaken in one location, preventing further stress to patients and clients.
- t) The extension will provide educational facilities.
- u) The existing service is over-stretched within the current building.
- v) The centre avoids the need for clients to travel further a field to London and Hertfordshire.
- w) The site can be developed further without greatly impacting upon immediate neighbours or the landscape due to its location adjacent to the A11 and railway line.
- x) The Veterinary School in Cambridge, because it is primarily a teaching facility, struggles to cope well as a referral centre, with waiting times much longer than clients would wish.
- y) Since the clinic at Six Mile Bottom has opened in July 2003, waiting times have extended from 3 working days to 7-10 working days. Provision of new facilities would reduce this.
- z) The service is an asset to South Cambridgeshire.
- aa) CPD is offered by Dick White Referrals and third-party organisations who are simply renting the facilities.
- bb) The abundance of cases referred was beyond anybody's expectations.
- cc) Dr White consults at Cambridge University.
- dd) Due to the specialist nature of Dr White's activities, the practice will never build up to anything like the level of veterinary general practice, so there will be no risk of expansions causing increased traffic congestion or other nuisance.
- ee) Clients using the facility will use local pubs and guesthouses and restaurants.
- ff) As the service only deals with referrals that take more time, traffic generation is less than that for general practice.
- gg) They provide an essential 24 hour emergency service for all general veterinary practices in the south-east of England.

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

22. It is clear from the level of support received that the service provided by this practice is highly valued, and in demand. However, there remains several key planning issues including impact on trees, wildlife, surrounding countryside and local employment.

#### **Trees**

23. The loss of the beech tree will be a result of the proposed conversion of the cart shed. The long-term health of this tree has been questioned and as such its retention cannot be insisted upon. Further comment from the Trees and Landscape Officer, in response to the Ecologist's recommendations, have been requested and will be reported verbally to the Committee.

24. The ash tree can be protected through conditions, as recommended by the Trees and Landscape Officer.

### **Wildlife**

25. Conditions can be placed, if permitted, requiring provision of bird and bat boxes.

### **Conversion of Cart Shed**

26. There is some doubt about the capability of this structure to be converted without major or complete reconstruction. Insufficient information has been provided with the application to enable Officers to make such an assessment.

### **Conversion of the Stable Block**

27. While in principle there is no objection to conversion of the stables, the application proposes to extend the roof to cover proposed dog and cat areas and to provide roof lights to medical areas. These additions add to the overall bulk of the proposals and are not required to achieve an 'enhanced design' or to 'integrate the scheme with its surroundings' as suggested in paragraph 5.49 of the supporting text to policy EM10.

### **Extensions**

28. The application proposes a number of extensions, these total an additional 277 m<sup>2</sup> of floor space. This represents, including existing extensions undertaken when the building was converted, a 112% increase in footprint. Additional volume is also added through the extension of the roof to the existing stable block. The amount of extensions proposed are not small-scale, and as such cannot be justified under Policy EM10.

### **Employment in the Countryside**

29. While it is acknowledged that the business generating from this site provides an excellent and valuable service it is necessary to consider whether this development is essential to this particular rural location. It is evident from representations that this business provides an important local, regional and national service, however, it is not restricted to operating from this particular location. It was the owner's choice to locate in this area.
30. It is noted that a significant element of the business' activities now include teaching. This is not however, the primary purpose of the business, and as such it cannot be argued that the development proposed is required for research or in order to enable educational links with the university. It is clear from both the application and representations received that this is not the case.
31. The site is not a 'brown field' site, having formerly been a farmyard. It is not well related to the village framework, being separated by fields and set back from the road. Expansion of this Company on this site would therefore be contrary to policy EM7 of the Local Plan.

### **Departure**

32. Having given careful consideration to the application proposals, it is concluded that there are no grounds within the adopted policy framework to permit the expansion of this firm on this site. The site is within the countryside and is prominent within the area, with public views of it from surrounding roads, railways and the village

recreation ground. The extensions proposed will add significantly to the floor area, footprint and bulk of the existing buildings on this site with subsequent harm to the rural location.

33. No provision has been included within the application for additional car parking, despite the proposed increase in areas available for consulting rooms and the level of teaching activities indicated as being undertaken. The site suffers from inadequate car parking at times.
34. The extensions will encroach onto areas that you have been reserved for soft landscaping. The lack of additional replacement landscaping combined with the significant increase in the built area and bulk of the buildings on site will be detrimental to the visual amenities of the surrounding area, and is not sustainable in terms of its location.

### **Recommendation**

35. In light of the above considerations the application is recommended for refusal.

### **Reasons:**

- 1) The proposed extensions and conversions will add significantly to the bulk and footprint of buildings on the site to the detriment of the visual amenity of the countryside. They are not essential to the rural location. Insufficient information has been provided regarding the capability of, in particular, the cart shed, to be converted without major or complete reconstruction. The proposals are contrary to policies P1/2, P1/3, P2/6 of the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003, and policies EM7 and EM10 of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004.
- 2) The business operating from this site predominantly concentrates on providing specialist veterinary care for small animals. It also undertakes teaching activities for students and veterinary practitioners; however, it is clear from the application that this is not its primary function. The proposed development cannot be justified as being related primarily to research and as such is not supported by policy EM4 of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004.

**Background Papers:** the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004
- Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003
- Planning file Ref. S/0364/06/F, S/0212/05/F, S/1973/01/F.

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