

WHITEHEAD PLANNING

Town Planning Consultancy

Planning Statement

**Change of use of land for siting of 14 caravans
for seasonal agricultural workers**

At

Varfell Farm Varfell Lane Long Rock TR20 8AQ

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RTPI

mediation of space · making of place

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 My name is Peter Whitehead. I am a planning consultant, and have traded under the name 'Whitehead Planning' since setting up in private practice in 2008. I have over 30 years of professional experience of town planning, having been continuously employed in the discipline since 1989. I am a chartered town planner and Member of the Royal Town Planning Institute (MRTPI).
- 1.2 The purpose of this Statement is four-fold:
1. It provides a brief introduction to the site and the proposed development;
 2. It provides a précis of current local and national planning policies that have a bearing on the consideration of the application;
 3. It provides a précis of other considerations that are relevant to the proposal; and finally,
 4. It draws some brief conclusions regarding the proposal.
- 1.3 This Statement should be read in conjunction with the other components of the application as submitted.

2. The Site and Proposal

- 2.1 Varfell Farms Ltd, formerly known as Greenyard Flowers UK and Winchester Growers, is a world leading grower, distributor and packer of daffodil flowers and bulbs and the biggest single daffodil enterprise in the UK. It is estimated that Varfell Farms process 35% of the annual global daffodil crop with annual sales revenues of over £15million.
- 2.2 The business, operating from Varfell Farm, Varfell Lane, near the junction of the A30 and A394 at Long Rock, farms some 1166 ha of land, with flowers and bulbs dried, packed and stored in a group of vast sheds.
- 2.3 Varfell Farms Ltd employs up to 52 permanent employees, with up to 650 seasonal workers recruited to pick and pack the flowers and bulbs each Spring.
- 2.4 For the past 10 - 15 years or so, 100-120 of these seasonal workers have been accommodated in single-unit static caravans stationed on the farm. However, the vast majority of the 650 seasonal workers have been housed off-site in various forms of accommodation (e.g. in surf lodges and other forms of holiday accommodation) scattered throughout the area, some as far afield as Newquay and Bodmin.
- 2.5 Even this accommodation is proving difficult to secure, with much accommodation previously used now unavailable to the applicants, being closed during the winter (or, in reality, ill-suited for winter use); still being used by holidaymakers during the winter/spring; or lacking the necessary planning permission to enable its use as residential accommodation by seasonal workers.
- 2.6 Moreover, the applicants are conscious that housing workers in locations distant from their place of work (e.g. Newquay and Bodmin) inevitably lengthens the working day for workers, and necessitates a considerable number of vehicle movements and vehicle miles, with workers ferried around in a fleet of minibuses. Reliance on the availability of cost-effective accommodation off-site also leads to uncertainty when recruiting workers.
- 2.7 For a labour-intensive business like this, it is clearly crucial that a reliable supply of accommodation is secured for workers; and over-reliance on third party accommodation that may or may not be available from year to year, leaves the business vulnerable.
- 2.8 The concerns outlined above are not new, and planning permission was obtained in 2010 to site a further 49 caravans at Varfell Farm on the site of a redundant glasshouse (ref. PA10/05296).
- 2.9 The presence of these caravans would have allowed a further 196 workers to be

housed at Varfell Farm; nearly half the overall workforce of seasonal workers. (26 existing caravans + 49 proposed caravans = 75 caravans x 4 persons per caravan = 300 persons). In the event though, only 5 of the 49 approved caravans were provided, the full implementation of the scheme being shelved due to cash flow constraints that existed at the time and subsequently.

- 2.10 Now, with the business under new ownership, that dynamic has changed and Varfell Farms Ltd. see the provision of on-site accommodation to house a greater proportion of its seasonal workers vital to the growth and sustainability of the business.
- 2.11 Thus, in late 2020, planning permission was sought to renew permission ref. PA10/05296, and permission was subsequently granted to extend the permission for a further 10 years (ref. PA20/10046).
- 2.12 All 49 caravans approved by this permission have now been provided, including landscaping to the periphery of the site as per the approved landscaping plan. Indeed, the applicants have actually provided more landscaping than originally envisaged; and the quality of the development is testament to their keenness to provide a high-quality living environment for the seasonal workers. Photographs of the caravan site provided under PA20/10046 are included as Appendix 1 to this Statement.
- 2.13 The current application seeks permission to site 14 additional caravans on the site to house a further 56 seasonal workers (@4 persons per caravan). 2 of these caravans are to be sited in the same field as the 49 caravans, and will be situated on the concrete pad of an agricultural building that has now been demolished to the south-west corner of the field. The other 12 caravans will be situated on an area of hardstanding to the east of this field, that formerly accommodated polytunnels. Photographs of the sites for the 14 additional caravans are included as Appendix 1 to this Statement.
- 2.14 These sites have been chosen because the parcels of land are surplus to operational requirements, and are discrete in views from outside the site given thick hedging and trees to the site's periphery; and indeed within it. (NB: it is noted that these hedges have already been thickened with additional planting as required by conditions imposed on permission ref. PA20/10046, and the applicants have taken the opportunity to introduce additional planting too).

3. The Development Plan and Other Material Considerations

National Policy

- 3.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (July 2021) and complementary National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) comprise the government's national planning policy and guidance.
- 3.2 Paragraph 7 of the NPPF sets out that *"The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development."*
- 3.3 Paragraph 8 of the NPPF explains that, in a planning sense, sustainable development has three overarching objectives; an economic objective, a social objective and an environmental objective. It explains that these three objectives are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways, so that opportunities can be taken to secure net gains across each of the different objectives.
- 3.4 Paragraph 11 of the NPPF sets out a presumption in favour of sustainable stating:-
"...For decision-taking this means:
c) approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay; or
d) where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date, granting permission unless:
i. the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a clear reason for refusing the development proposed; or
ii. any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole."
- 3.5 Paragraph 2 of the NPPF also identifies the primacy of the development plan, advising that *"Planning law requires that applications for planning permission be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The National Planning Policy Framework must be taken into account in preparing the development plan, and is a material consideration in planning decisions..."* The planning law referred to in this paragraph is s38 (6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 and s70(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).
- 3.6 Further references will be made to the NPPF throughout this Statement.

The Development Plan

- 3.7 For the purposes of paragraph 2 of the NPPF, the development plan in this case comprises the Cornwall Local Plan (2016)(CLP).
- 3.8 The following policies of the CLP are relevant to the consideration of this application:-
- Policy 1 - Presumption in favour of sustainable development
 - Policy 2 - Spatial Strategy
 - Policy 2a – Key targets
 - Policy 3 - Role and function of places
 - Policy 7 – Housing in the countryside
 - Policy 12 – Design
 - Policy 13 - Development standards
 - Policy 16 – Health and wellbeing
 - Policy 21 - Best use of land and existing buildings
 - Policy 23 - Natural environment
 - Policy 24 – Historic environment
 - Policy 26 - Flood risk management and coastal change
 - Policy 27 - Transport and accessibility

Other Material Considerations

- 3.9 The NPPF and complementary National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) are important material considerations. These will be referenced where necessary in this Statement.
- 3.10 I would also highlight the Ludgvan Neighbourhood Development Plan (Referendum Version – January 2020). This has progressed through examination, and has only been prevented from proceeding to referendum by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is thus a material consideration attracting commensurate weight. It is highlighted that Policy LUD20 (Business Development) specifically identifies Varfell Farm as a 'business park' and supports "new-build development on land allocated for employment use in the development plan document or within the business park areas." The area allocated for such development specifically includes the current application site.

4. Planning Issues

4.1 Based on my review of the site's planning history, as well as my own appraisal of the site and the development now proposed, I consider the key planning issues to be considered as follows:

- The principle of development
- Impact upon the natural environment
- Impact upon living conditions
- Impact upon heritage assets
- Access, parking and highways

4.2 The discussion below will consider each of these issues in turn, drawing upon the submitted plans and documents, and policy context.

The principle of development

4.3 It is recognised that both the national policy of the NPPF and local policy of the CLP seek to limit new residential accommodation outside settlements and in the open countryside.

4.4 However, paragraph 79 of the NPPF identifies a number of 'special circumstances' where such accommodation is justified, one of which relates to meeting the "essential needs" of rural workers.

4.5 Policy 7 (Housing in the countryside) of the CLP similarly supports the provision of *"Temporary accommodation for workers (including seasonal migrant workers), to support established and viable rural businesses where there is an essential need for a presence on the holding, but no other suitable accommodation is available and it would be of a construction suitable for its purpose and duration"*, as well as accommodation to serve *"Full time agricultural and forestry and other rural occupation workers where there is up to date evidence of an essential need of the business for the occupier to live in that specific location."*

4.6 This is clearly a substantial and long-established business, employing many local people in addition to seasonal workers from abroad. The Council's County Land Agent fully supported the recent application for 49 units of accommodation for seasonal workers, ref. PA20/10046, considering *"... The proposed development is necessary to support the business going forward and to enable suitable accommodation to be provided for staff."*

4.7 Given that over half of the required 650 seasonal staff still require to be accommodated off-site, we are confident that an "essential need" remains to

justify the provision of the additional 14 caravans on the site, which will accommodate a further 56 seasonal workers (@ 4 persons per caravan).

- 4.8 Whilst the applicants have used other accommodation to house most of their seasonal workers in previous years, the reality is that this is not an acceptable solution for the applicants, or their workers, for reasons outlined above, and amplified in the applicant's supporting statement. Such a solution should not be acceptable to Cornwall Council either, given that much holiday accommodation is restricted to holiday occupancy only, and the residential occupation of such accommodation by seasonal workers would breach holiday occupancy conditions.
- 4.9 The most logical means to try and meet the "essential need" is, as proposed, to provide an appropriate quantum of accommodation at Varfell Farm, the applicant's operational base and place of work for many of the seasonal workers employed by the business. This helps provide the applicants with certainty and security, and reduces the vagaries and risks associated with over-reliance upon third-party accommodation.
- 4.10 It is thus trusted that the County Land Agent will confirm that there is an "essential need" for these 14 caravans and will support approval of this application.
- 4.11 On this basis, it is trusted that the Council will concur that the proposal is consistent with Policy 7 of the CLP.
- 4.12 Attention is also drawn to Policy 2 (Spatial Strategy) of the CLP, in particular section (3)(c) which states that "*Proposals will be welcome that improve conditions for business and investment in Cornwall, in particular by:*
c. Supporting the expansion of existing businesses and the indigenous businesses of agriculture, fishing and mining..."
The proposal clearly improves conditions for business, providing the necessary support for an indigenous business; and demonstrably complies with this policy.
- 4.13 Paragraph 2.4 (Business and Tourism) of the CLP also expresses support for agricultural development stating, "*Our emphasis will be on supporting... indigenous businesses including agriculture.*" Para 2.7 elaborates stating "*Supporting the continued growth of the agricultural sector and supporting diversification of the industry will be critical to the Cornwall's future, long term prosperity.*" Given the "essential need" for accommodation to enable the applicant's business to prosper, or indeed function at all, the CLP's support for workers accommodation should be interpreted to be as strong in this case as it would be for machinery sheds, livestock buildings, etc. in other cases. It is, indeed, critical to the future and long-term prosperity of this particular business.
- 4.14 I would also highlight Policy LUD20 (Business Development) of the Ludgvan Neighbourhood Development Plan (Referendum Version – January 2020), which

specifically identifies Varfell Farm as a 'business park' and supports "new-build development on land allocated for employment use in the development plan document or within the business park areas." The area designated for such development specifically includes the current application site. The applicants do not require additional warehousing space, or any other form of business development. The business cannot function without the seasonal availability of large numbers of workers for planting, picking and packing and, to this end, the use of the site to provide accommodation for the business's seasonal workers clearly comprises an appropriate form of development, and accords with Policy LUD20.

- 4.15 To end this section, it is important to return to the NPPF and consider the economic objective of sustainable development. As has been highlighted, the accommodation is crucial to the success of the applicant's business. The applicant's supporting statement makes clear that the business cannot function without accommodation for its seasonal workers. The approval of this application thus offers the means not only to ensure the growth and prosperity of this business in the long term but to help secure the jobs of those local persons currently employed there. These economic benefits cannot be overstated.
- 4.16 Significant weight should thus be attributed to the proposal in relation to the economic objective of sustainable development.

Impact upon the natural environment

- 4.17 Issues to be considered in this respect relate to the impacts of the development upon landscape character and ecology.
- 4.18 With regard to the former, it is noted that the site lies within undesignated countryside, several miles from Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) which lie to the south-east and north-west.
- 4.19 Secondly, the site is not undeveloped land, either. 12 of the caravans will be situated on a concrete pad that until recently accommodated polytunnels, whilst the remaining 2 caravans will site on the site of a former machinery store.
- 4.20 Thirdly, the caravans will be sited on discrete parcels of land that are screened from views outside the site by boundary hedging and trees. The development will not, therefore, have a pronounced or harmful visual or landscape impact. Any impact of the caravans must also be compared to that of the buildings they replace.
- 4.21 Fourthly, it is again of note that Policy LUD20 (Business Development) of the draft Ludgvan Neighbourhood Development Plan (Referendum Version – January 2020), specifically identifies Varfell Farm as a 'business park' and would support

"new-build development" thereon; including the current application site. The height and general dimensions of the caravans now proposed are clearly very modest compared to those of typical business/industrial/warehouse units, and logically have less visual/landscape impact.

- 4.22 With all these points in mind, I would submit that the proposal accords with Policies 2, 12 and 23 of the CLP.
- 4.23 With regard to biodiversity, a Preliminary Ecological Assessment (PEA) has been completed, which identified no issues of note on the application site.
- 4.24 It is recognised that the site lies within the impact zone of the Marazion Marsh SSSI, and the development has been designed to avoid any adverse impact upon it.
- 4.25 A mains sewer connection has already been provided to Ludgvan to accommodate all foul and grey water arising from the existing caravans and the additional 14 caravans will connect into this system. In this way, the proposals avoid the risk of groundwater pollution and, thereby, avoid any possible adverse impact upon the SSSI.
- 4.26 The proposal is considered to accord with Policy 23(3)(b) of the CLP in this respect, and also Policies 13 and 16, which seek to avoid water and land contamination/pollution.

Impact upon living conditions

- 4.27 Policies 12 and 13 of the CLP cover design and development standards, and seek to ensure that development offers high quality safe, sustainable and inclusive design.
- 4.28 With regard to the impact of the proposals upon local residents, attention is drawn to Policy 12 (2) which states that:
"development proposals should protect individuals and property from:
a. overlooking and unreasonable loss of privacy; and
b. overshadowing and overbearing impacts..."
- 4.29 The Council's normal expectation to secure privacy by remoteness is a separation distance of 25m between dwellings.
- 4.30 In this case, the nearest residential properties are within the ownership of Varfell Farms Ltd. and occupied by staff members. The nearest dwellings in private ownership lie on Long Lane to the north and north-west of the application site. These dwellings are situated approximately 200m from the site, and screened from it by various intervening hedges and trees. The proposals clearly accord with the Council's guidance vis-à-vis privacy etc., and would not in my view materially

impact upon the living conditions of existing residents in other respects. I am mindful, too, that the Council has already found the siting of 49 caravans acceptable under ref. PA20/10046; and the siting of these caravans has much the same relationship to dwellings in private ownership to the north and north-west of the application site. The existing 75 caravans have been occupied by @ 300 seasonal workers for the daffodil/flower season just passed, and the applicants are confident their occupation had no harmful impact upon local residents.

- 4.31 Accordingly, it is concluded that the proposals will preserve the living conditions of existing residents, and comply with Policies 12 and 13 of the CLP.

Access, parking and highways

- 4.32 Policies 13 and 27 of the CLP seek to secure that developments are served by “An appropriate level of off street parking and cycle parking taking into account the accessibility of the location in terms of public transport and proximity to facilities and services...” and, respectively, that “All developments should: Provide safe and suitable access to the site for all people...”

- 4.33 Whilst the additional 14 caravans will result in around 356 seasonal workers residing on the site, these workers mainly come to the UK from abroad specifically to work under contract at the farm and do not own cars. They are ferried to/from the site in a fleet of minibuses operated by the applicants, and vehicle movements associated with the use are, thus, modest. No objection to the proposals was raised by Highways pursuant to application ref. PA20/10046 (which supported 300 workers residing on the site), and it is difficult to conceive that any objection would be raised to the additional 56 seasonal workers the current proposal will provide for.

- 4.34 It is again of note that the site has accommodated 300 workers for an entire growing season now and no issues of congestion at road junctions, or other highway-related problems have occurred, due in part to the well-managed way the business is operated. This evidence surely supports the view that the few additional minibus movements required to serve a further 56 workers on site will be inconsequential.

- 4.34 It can be concluded that the proposal is consistent with Policies 12 and 27 of the CLP as identified above.

Impact upon heritage assets

- 4.35 Paragraph 189 of the NPPF advises that “In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting.

The level of detail should be proportionate to the assets' importance and no more than is sufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on their significance. As a minimum the relevant historic environment record should have been consulted and the heritage assets assessed using appropriate expertise where necessary..."

- 4.36 In this case, a review of the Council's historic environment record as well as Historic England's online resource reveals the absence of any known heritage assets on the application site, or in the near vicinity. The closest designated heritage assets to the site comprise listed buildings in Ludgvan, several miles to the north. This is clearly some distance from the application site and it can be readily concluded that the proposals will have no impact upon the setting of these heritage assets. The proposals thus comply with the requirements of Policy 24 of the CLP, as well as the national policy of the NPPF.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 The key issue in the consideration of this application is whether the proposal amounts to sustainable development. Paragraph 7 of the NPPF identifies that there are three mutually dependant objectives to sustainable development; it should fulfil an economic role, a social role and an environmental role.
- 5.2 In this case, the proposal will clearly meet the economic objective. The proposal will help ensure the economic growth and prosperity of the business, and the employment of additional permanent staff. The proposal will have a range of economic benefits both locally, and nationally.
- 5.3 The proposal will meet the social objective by fostering a well-designed built environment and, by supporting local employment, will indirectly support prosperity and, thus, improved health and wellbeing.
- 5.4 In terms of the environmental objective, it has been seen that the proposal will have no material impact upon landscape character, and has been designed to avoid any adverse impact upon the Marazion Marsh SSSI. The development also makes efficient use of land, using the footprints of former buildings, and avoids the need to develop a greenfield sites to meet this essential need.
- 5.5 Having regard to the above, and the foregoing, the proposed development should clearly be regarded as sustainable development in accordance with para 8 of the NPPF. The development also offers net gains across each of the three objectives (economic, social and environmental) as per the requirement of this paragraph.
- 5.6 Given the foregoing, mindful of s38(6) and the presumption in favour of development that accords with the development plan as well as the presumption in favour of sustainable development set out at paragraph 11 of the NPPF, it is trusted that the Council, will approve this application.

**Peter Whitehead BSc (Hons) PDip UP MRTPI
August 2021**

APPENDIX 1 – Photographs



Photos 1 & 2 (above and below). 12 of the caravans will be sited on this surplus parcel of land, which formerly accommodated a number of polytunnels





Photos 3 & 4 (above and below). The site is well screened by hedging and trees to the boundary with Varfell Lane, and within the site itself. Even through the entrance off Varfell Lane (below) any view of the caravans will be filtered through hedging and trees.





Photos 5 & 6 (above and below), showing the 49 caravans recently provided on the adjacent parcel of land under ref. PA20/10046. The applicants have gone to great efforts to provide a high-quality living environment for their seasonal workers.

