

PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

1. The Development Plan relevant to the application is made up of the following
 - (1) Mid Suffolk Core Strategy
 - (2) The saved policies of the Mid Suffolk Local Plan 1998.

2. The Core Strategy was subject to a focussed review in 2012 following the adoption of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). However, this plan still predates the latest version of the NPPF which was updated in 2018. Since that time, the council has merged with Babergh Council and the authorities are now working on a joint Local Plan which is being examined in 2021. The relevant policies relate to farm diversification, tourism development, landscape, biodiversity, heritage and these are covered in more detail in the main body of this statement.

3. The Core Strategy includes an updated policy FC3, which supports farm diversification and tourism projects where these cannot be located close to the existing settlements and that they are appropriate to a rural setting. Core Strategy policies are more spatial in nature, with policies relating to climate change, the environment and the economy. The 1998 Plan includes policies relating to tourism and farm diversification and a raft of other policies.

4. The emerging joint Local Plan includes a policy SP07 which actively encourages new development in respect of tourism as well as other policies including Policy LP16 which supports new tourist accommodation. The plan also includes policies in respect of the environment, access and the economy which will be discussed further below.

5. Also, the NPPF is of relevance to this application as the framework is a material consideration in decision making in terms of its policies and the presumption in favour of sustainable development and its influence in terms the weighting of existing policies. The NPPF also contains a presumption in favour of sustainable development within Paragraph 11 of the document, which provides a positive context to decision making. Section 6 relates to supporting economic growth and the rural economy including a new part directly supporting sustainable tourism in rural areas. The application has also had regard to the principles of Section 15 of the NPPF including the protection of the intrinsic beauty of the countryside, Section 16 which relates to the historic environment respectively.

6. This summary seeks to discharge the main policies that are relevant to the development and provide a summary of a positive planning case that can be reached and we welcome discussion with the council on the application of these.

THE PLANNING ASSESSMENT

7. The applicants reside at Monks Hall, a significant property within the local area and which extends to an extensive land holding, including areas of active farmland. The estate also has tracts of woodland, including an area that flanks the residential grounds of the hall. The applicants are seeking to explore the possibility of expanding the facilities on the farm estate and wish to discuss the potential for a sustainable treehouse unit, within the area of woodland adjacent to their gardens. This would be used for guest accommodation/holiday purposes and would be managed by the applicants at Monks Hall.
8. This would support the viability of the wider farming activities in order to widen the income streams and at the same time promote the sustainable approach to the farming activities on the site. Like many land-based activities, there is considerable pressure and uncertainty within the industry and the opportunity to broaden its wider economic base will continue to support the principal farming element of the business. Indeed, tourism is a use commonly found on estates and farms due to its low-key use and compatibility with farming activities. The unit will be fully managed by the occupants of Monks Hall and parking and access will be taken via the same residential access in order the unit can be seen as an integral element of the farm estate.
9. The pertinent matters will now be discussed below;

Principle of Tourism development

10. The council's Local Plan documents date from 1998 and 2008 and which are based on the previous PPS4 and PPS7. However, Policy CS2 of the Core Strategy and Policy RT16 of the Local Plan both accept and support tourism as a use that was acceptable in the countryside. Indeed, RT16 supports new tourism facilities subject to the development not affecting landscape, amenity or wildlife habitats.

11. The Core Strategy was subject to a focussed review of the Core Strategy has been undertaken and Policy FC3 was updated to align with the 2012 NPPF. This policy seeks to support the rural economy and states the council will support tourism and farm diversification proposals subject to the development which cannot be located closer to existing settlements and that it is appropriate to its rural setting. The location is considered to be appropriate on the basis, it will support the farm estate on which it is located and the development is sensitively designed and sited to preserve its rural setting.

12. In 2018, the NPPF was updated to specifically support 'sustainable tourism proposals where these respect the countryside'. The emerging plan further supports the principle of tourism development through policy SP07 and encourages new tourism proposals alongside Policy LP16. This supports new proposals subject to an overriding business case and the proposals are sympathetic to the character of the area.

13. The development is considered to be a low key and sustainable eco-tourism project which can unlock a range of benefits to the local economy which supporting the long-term future of the farm estate, its landscape, biodiversity and viability. The proposals reflect a very sustainable form of tourism accommodation, seeking opportunities for enhancement in the environment as part of the development, which both has benefits to the site and the visitor experience which furthers understanding of the natural environment.

14. As well as the support of current policies, the scheme is also supported by the NPPF, including Paragraph 83 and 84. Paragraph 83 states planning decisions should enable;

'The sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well-designed new buildings; and enable;

'Sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside'.

Paragraph 84 states;

'Planning policies and decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. In these circumstances it will be important to

ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable'

15. Indeed, this document seeks to show the scheme represents a sustainable form of tourism development and the development is sensitive to its surroundings, will not affect local roads and it will maximise the sustainability of the site through cycle provision for occupants and encouragement of the local footpath network.
16. Thus, the principle of the proposals can be supported and the other relevant issues will be discussed below.

Landscape and Heritage

17. The policies require development to maintain the wider landscape character and protect heritage assets and their setting. The scheme has been informed from an early stage by input from Heritage consultant and consideration of landscape matters, to enhance they are sensitive to landscape character. The unit will sit to the edge of a tract of woodland, which lies adjacent to the grounds of Monks Hall, and will utilise existing access from Monks Hall and parking will take place on existing areas of hardstanding which is screened from wider view. In short, the treehouse or any associated parking, will not be visible in wider views. The sensitive and sustainable design of the treehouse and its siting will ensure the scheme will preserve landscape and local character. The proposals will also grasp opportunities for enhancement through woodland management and biodiversity measures.
18. The 1998 plan suggests the land lies within a special landscape area but this is not reflected within the new emerging joint plan. However, the plans seek to conserve and enhance the wider landscape character through the sensitive siting and design and wider woodland management.
19. The Heritage Assessment also confirms the siting of the treehouse will preserve the setting of Monks Hall and its significance. Thus, the scheme will meet the Core Strategy Policy CS5 which requires policies to protect and conserve landscape qualities and the historic environment. This also accords with the approach within LP19 and LP21 of the emerging plan and section 15 and 16 of the NPPF. It will also accord with Policy HB1 of the 1998 plan which seeks to protect listed buildings and their setting

Biodiversity

20. Turning to ecology, the site is to be subject to an initial PEA and any further surveys deemed necessary and the relevant measures employed within the proposals. From experience on other similar projects, the ecological aspects will not be constraint for the development on the basis the proposals will incorporate the recommendations on mitigation such as minimal lighting and sustainable construction methods. Furthermore, there are opportunities for significant enhancement through the woodland management, new planting, and new habitat such as bird, bat and insect housing within the development. This would ensure the scheme complies with Policy CS5 of the Core Strategy and ENV4 and LP18 of the emerging plan
21. The application would also be supported by arboricultural advice and assessments, which would ensure the wooded nature and important trees are maintained. This would ensure the scheme complies with Policy CS5 of the Core Strategy.
22. The development would adopt a minimum lighting strategy, with occupants expected to use torch light to and from the unit and minimum lighting on the units themselves. These would meet the bat conservation principles and the unit would have black out blinds for hours of darkness.
23. The proposals would therefore manage and enhance biodiversity in line with Policy CS5 of the Core Strategy and SP09 of the emerging plan and those policies within Section 15 of the NPPF

Highways and Accessibility

37. The site lies within a rural area but is within a short distance of Syleham and Brockdish which have a range of local facilities suitable for visitors. Furthermore, the rationale of the accommodation is to provide an experience, where visitors can leave the car behind and explore the countryside by sustainable means, including walking and cycling. The proposals will provide cycle use for the occupants and information on local footpath links. Indeed, the site has access to a number of footpath routes in the local area, meaning once occupants arrive, the wider vehicle trips will be very low. Furthermore, these routes offer the opportunity for occupants to access village facilities, such as pubs and shops, without the need for a car.
38. Turning the highway matters, the site has a good approach road and access via the existing property and the parking for one vehicle will be on an existing area of hardstanding within the grounds of the property. Pedestrian access will be via a footpath to the unit.

39. The site is served by a safe access and will provide adequate parking and other infrastructure. On this basis, the scheme would accord with Section 9 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Design/Climate Change

24. The design aspirations are set out in the accompanying documents but the scheme will represent a high quality and innovative design that will incorporate local materials and sustainable measures which will meet the aspirations of Policy CS3 of the Core Strategy as far as practicable and LP25 of the emerging plan. This includes high water and energy efficiency and other measures that are deemed necessary.

25. The site is also located in Flood Zone 1 and thus follows the approach of the NPPF in directing development to the lowest risk of flooding

26. Thus, the sustainable design and the location of the development, the scheme will contribute to climate change in line with SP10 of the emerging plan and Section 14 of the NPPF.

CONCLUSION

40. The development will contribute to meeting the need for tourism accommodation in the area which will support the existing farm estate and will represent a sustainable diversification scheme. The proposals will provide a new tourism unit which will contribute to the future of the farm estate whilst facilitating wider woodland management and biodiversity improvements and preserving landscape character.

41. The unit will be integral to the farm estate through the management by Monks Hall and means of access and proximity to the immediate grounds of the property.

42. Paragraphs 11 sets out the presumption in favour of sustainable development which means that where development accords with the development plan development should be approved without delay. The application proposals would fulfil the role required by the planning system and would deliver benefits in respect of the three planning roles which are set out in paragraphs 7-10 of the framework

43. The above clearly demonstrates that the proposals are sustainable development and thus the presumption in favour of sustainable development lies in support of the development. In short, the development meets the terms of the development plan.