

Equestrian Design

EQUESTRIAN NEEDS ASSESSMENT

**SUBMITTED IN SUPPORT OF A REVISED
PLANNING APPLICATION SEEKING THE
RESIDENTIAL CONVERSION OF FARTHING HALL
STABLES, COLE GREEN, HERTFORD, SG14 2NL**

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1.0 Introduction:

- 1.1 This statement has been prepared to support the resubmission of a planning application seeking consent to convert Farthing Hall Stables into two residential dwellings. Its sole focus is on assessing the impact arising from the loss of six existing stables, which the proposed development proposal would give rise to. It should be read in conjunction with the separately submitted design and access statement which provides expanded context and technical details for the proposal.
- 1.2 Equestrian Design have been engaged by the applicant to prepare this statement as an independent expert, drawing on our extensive experience of equestrian needs and demands – developed over past decades. The need for the statement itself has been prompted by the local planning authority, with the loss of stables at the site deemed a key material consideration in determining alternative uses for the land.
- 1.3 Specifically, and in response to direct requests of the local planning authority, this statement seeks to understand:
- the need for the site in terms of its contribution to overall livery capacity in the locality;
 - the prospects of the site viably fulfilling ongoing livery needs; and
 - the prospects of the site viably fulfilling personal, domestic equine needs.

2.0 About Us

- 2.1 As Equestrian Design – a small family run business – we provide a range of services to the private and commercial Equestrian Community, including Planning Consultancy Services, Building Regulation and Project Management.
- 2.2 Based in Warrington, we offer a reliable, efficient and professional planning service throughout England and Wales.
- 2.3 Headed up by Andy Woodward, we possess over 25 years experience in the provision of architectural and planning services to the Equestrian and agricultural sectors. We have a long and established history of successful planning applications and satisfied customers, many of which return time after time.

- 2.4** To continually deliver for our clients we have and continue to immerse ourselves in their world. We possess a detailed understanding and lived experience of the practicalities of keeping, training and enjoying horses whether for commercial or personal reasons.

3.0 Site Context and Background

- 3.1** Farthing Hall Stables are located to the south of Cole Green, to the east of Station Road, being accessed through the car park of the adjacent Cowpers Arms Public House.

- 3.2** The site name suggests that the land subject to the development proposal at one time fell within a larger Farthing Hall estate, with the farmhouse to the northwest of the stables. Like many such estates, it has evidently been broken up and sold off as separate lots over successive years.

- 3.3** The planning history for the site supports that intentions to develop the site for equestrian purposes date as far back as the 1980s. Whilst permission does not appear to have initially been forthcoming, it is evident that commercial equestrian use of the land was made and later regularised through the granting of a certificate of lawfulness for ongoing stable use in the late 1990s (App Ref: 3/97/0602/FR). The planning history also supports that a series of attempts to secure consent to develop additional stables at the site were refused, although notwithstanding this appears to have evidently been developed regardless.

- 3.4** Whilst in the recent past, the site comprised of a cluster of stable blocks of varying sizes, outbuildings, hardstanding and a horse exercise arena to the north – many of these structures now appear to have been demolished. The demolition of these structures reflects that planning permission (App Ref: 3/20/0912/FUL) was forthcoming in July 2020 for:

“Demolition of 5 outbuildings. Construction of garage together with associated boundary works. A ground floor extension to stable block, roof extension with first floor dormers, first floor rear terrace and associated elevational alterations in connection with first floor residential use (in association with existing ground floor residential use, retaining ground floor stables).”

- 3.5** The demolition of outbuildings at the site was a condition of the above approval with a technical start understood to have been made – evident by way of some construction having commenced at the site, namely the demolition of one stable building to make way for its reconstruction as a new detached triple garage to be used in association with the approved residential use.

- 3.6** The site was last in use for equestrian purposes back in 2017. It has sat redundant since the cessation of that use with buildings having deteriorated towards a state of dereliction.
- 3.7** The current development proposal seeks to build on the consented residential use of the site to enable the conversion of the main building for two as opposed to one new dwelling. Achieving this second dwelling would however be at the expense of the proposed retention of six stables inherent in the previous approval for the site.

4.0 Assessment of Supply and Demand (Livery Provision)

- 4.1** There are 14 advertised livery yards within an approximate 20 minute radius of the application site – a high concentration by any means. A list of these yards is appended. The previously submitted DAS referred to a similar list of equestrian yards, some of which were not livery operations, some of which are no longer operational and some are more than 20 mins from the site – in view of the relatively high concentration of livery yards available within 20 minutes of the site, in our opinion, the 20 minute radius is adequate distance to consider.
- 4.2** Contact was made with each of these yards – across January 2023 – with the majority, but not all, willing to disclose basic information on a strictly anonymous basis. A small number refused to engage at all citing a distrust about what the information sought would be used for. For those who did engage, the rationale for anonymity reflected a number of reasons but that most commonly cited was perceived commercial sensitivities (unsurprising given the relative concentration and consequent competition which logically follows).
- 4.3** The nature of the offer varies across these yards, with a healthy mix of full, part-time and do it yourself arrangements on offer. Some of the yards operate as livery only yards, whilst others are incorporated into riding schools, equestrian centres or are being ran alongside agricultural activities on farms which have sought to diversify, most offered a range of DIY, part-time and full livery and most included the use of outdoor arenas, some also had indoor arenas and others offers including solariums, horse walkers and the like. There is evidently a lot of choice on offer in terms of range and quality of offer and also in terms of price.

- 4.4** The yards range in size in terms of their capacity – stabling between 23 and 58 horses. The majority of yards are focussed on operating models between 30 and 50 horses, which based on experience is commensurate with the scale ordinarily needed for such an enterprise to viably function, reflecting economies of scale in terms of staffing, feed, energy, insurance and other running costs. Margins in such enterprises are often tight, with enterprises often dependent on the sufficient take up of additional services on offer such as schooling or riding lessons, which as well as varying the offer to customers, also gives opportunities to generate additional financial income.
- 4.5** Only three of those yards contacted had vacant stables and in each of these cases only a single stable was available. The majority of other yards confirmed that they had waiting lists ranging from between 8 to 17 horses. Whilst there will inevitably be duplication across those lists, reflecting individuals will likely have registered an interest at more than one yard, it supports that there is latent high demand for livery provision within the locality.
- 4.6** Whilst extremely difficult to quantify, it is highly likely that there is also a supply of ‘unofficial’ livery opportunities in the locality open to horse owners. These result from people who have their own small, domestic scale stables for personal use and who opt to rent out a surplus loose box or two in a bid to share costs. Such opportunities aren’t openly advertised, instead being shared through closed groups on social media or more commonly word of mouth.
- 4.7** Whilst on one hand, the evidence supports that there is latent demand for additional livery stables, it would be unreasonable to conclude that the loss of six stables (assuming they were viable for livery purposes) in the context of an approximate supply of 576¹ in the locality would be significant i.e. six stables equates to only approximately 1% of the supply. It is our professional opinion that in these circumstances, their retention could not be justified on the basis of need and demand alone.

5.0 Assessment of the Potential of the Site for Livery Purposes

- 5.1** The value of the site in contributing to an unmet livery need obviously depends on the site being deemed suitable and viable for such purposes. In

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¹ Arrived at by multiplying the average capacity of livery yards in the locality (32 horses) by the number (18) of livery yards within an approximate 20 minutes of the application site.

our opinion, we however harbour significant concerns as to whether this is achievable.

- 5.2** An obvious constraint at the outset is that the wider land holding extends to just over three acres. This is inclusive of buildings on the site, hardstanding and the former arena and hence consequently grazing land is likely to be approximately two – two and a half acres. British Horse Society and DEFRA guidance² recommends that between 1.25 and 2.5 acres of grazing is available per horse. This means in practical terms the site could support a likely maximum of two equines, unless access to additional grazing land could be secured – unlikely given that the surrounding fields are evidently in active arable cultivation (and in value terms generating in excess of that which grazing pasture alone would give rise to).
- 5.3** Even if grazing concerns could be overcome, the number of stables themselves – at six – is also a significant concern, being a scale which is simply unlikely to be financially viable, certainly as a free standing, rate and tax paying official enterprise at least. In scale terms it can be seen to fall well short of other livery yards in the locality (the smallest of the livery yards that would speak to us, which was 28), with lack of access to an arena and other infrastructure constraining opportunities to generate additional income and limiting appeal.
- 5.4** Linked to scale are the likely investment costs – given the poor condition of the buildings – and the associated payback period. To bring the buildings back up to a useable standard including the stables themselves and access to W.C. and welfare facilities, coupled with the reintroduction of a horse exercise arena (access to which is a pre-requisite in terms of modern-day expectations of livery users), would require a substantial investment. In our opinion, the financial return on that investment – based on an operating model of six horses – would be significantly short of being a viable financial investment proposition.
- 5.5** We also have further concerns focussed on practicalities concern the position and proposed construction of the stables. The consented conversion of the primary former stable building is unusual in that it has sought to retain the stables within the structure of the building on the ground floor, with family living accommodation adjacent and above. This is an extremely uncommon

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² See Para 1.2 of DEFRA's [Code of practice for the welfare of horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/672222/Code_of_practice_for_the_welfare_of_horses_ponies_donkeys_and_their_hybrids_publishing.service.gov.uk) (December 2017)

arrangement – perhaps wholly unique – in terms of the stables being so closely integrated into living accommodation in this way. It is not unheard of to see this ‘type’ of arrangement on a stud farm or racing stables where employees such as a groom may live this close to the equines, in an apartment/flat arrangement (perhaps only during their normal working week), but that is not an option for this site because it could never be developed into that type of commercial enterprise. We would harbour concerns about how practical this is – for domestic let alone commercial livery purposes – given scope for conflict between the uses in terms of noise, odour and general disturbance. The practicalities of the proposed configuration are perhaps the reason why it has not proven to be attractive to potential end users or the current owners of the site as a development opportunity.

5.6 Given the insulation standards required for a domestic residential property in the modern day, as well as the linear configuration proposed and brick construction, we also harbour concerns as to whether suitable ventilation could be achieved – with adequate ventilation in any equine housing essential³.

5.7 In conclusion the site will not, in our opinion, support a scale of livery option likely to prove viable, nor will the re-use of the existing building for ongoing stabling likely – at least in the absence of significant investment – accord with modern day needs and expectations. Whilst noting the building has previously served such purposes, of note is that planning permission to do so (and therefore the opportunity to exert control over standards including DEFRA’s code of conduct) was never forthcoming. The reality is that the previous use of the site for commercial livery purposes was most likely on an unofficial basis with standards, we would contend, evidently failing to keep pace with those required (which is very likely a factor in the demise of the previous enterprise).

6.0 Assessment of the Potential of the Site for Personal Equine Purposes

6.1 Based on the reasoning provided in the preceding section, the site could accommodate one or perhaps two horses maximum and would in theory,

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³ See Para 1.14 in DEFRA’s [Code of practice for the welfare of horses, ponies, donkeys and their hybrids \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/671117/Code_of_practice_for_the_welfare_of_horses_ponies_donkeys_and_their_hybrids.pdf) (December 2017)

given the adjacent paddock, be well suited to and appeal to someone looking to co-locate their horses alongside their own residence.

- 6.2** Again, owing to the aforementioned reasoning and particularly to reduce scope for conflict between residential and equine use, it is our opinion that a far more practical and hence realistic arrangement would be to introduce timber stables much closer to the paddock, achieving an adequate separation between the house and the stable building (subject of course to securing any necessary planning consents).

7.0 Conclusions

- 7.1** In conclusion, the retention of the stables does not in our opinion appear to be justified. This reflects that the site is not – and arguably never was – well suited to accommodating more than one or two equines, with the lack of available grazing land close at hand a very evident constraint.
- 7.2** Even if access to additional grazing land could be secured, it is our opinion that the use of the site would have to be significantly intensified in order to accommodate an adequate number of horses (somewhere in the region of a minimum of 20) to prove viable – both in terms of an ongoing basis and in terms of a reasonable return on the required investment. It is clear additional structures would need to be introduced at the site to achieve this objective, likely to prove challenging given the sites inclusion within the Green Belt.
- 7.3** Whilst permission to convert the existing building to residential is in place, albeit including the retention of six stables within the same building envelope, it is our opinion that even if for domestic / personnel equine use, such an arrangement is unusual, impractical, unlikely to appeal and hence unrealistic.
- 7.4** Testament to many of the above conclusions is that the site has over time been extensively marketed with little interest for ongoing equestrian use – either in whole or in part – forthcoming. This point is covered elsewhere within the other submitted information.
- 7.5** Whilst noting that there is unequivocally latent demand in the locality for additional livery provision – notwithstanding a high concentration of providers – it would be unreasonable in the circumstances to rely on this alone to justify retention of the six stables.

APPENDIX ONE – EXISTING LIVERY YARDS WITHIN APPROXIMATELY 20 MINUTE DRIVETIME OF THE APPLICATION SITE

Stables	Proximity	Drive Time
Bayford Hall Farm, Bayford Lane, Bayford SG13 8PR	4 miles	10 mins
Danecroft Stables, 1A Vera Lane, Welwyn Garden City. AL6 0EW	5.2 miles	11 mins
Petasfield Riding School, Mangrove Rd, Hertford. SG13 8QQ	5.8 miles	13 mins
Freedom Farm, Mangrove Road, Hertford, SG13 8QJ	7.1 miles	17 mins
Homestead Farm, Elbow Lane, Hertford Heath, Hertford, SG13 7QA	8.1 miles	21 mins
New Park Farm Stables, New Park Rd, Newgate Street, Hertford, SG13 8RF	5.3 miles	13 mins
Barley Mow Stables, Barley Mow Lane, St Albans, AL4 0RP	8.2 miles	15 mins
Mymms Hall Livery Stables, Warrenagate Lane, Potters Bar, EN6 3NW	9.3 miles	17 mins
The Node Stables, Mansells Lane, Codicote. Hitchin, SG4 8TJ	8 miles	19 mins
Woodhurst Farm Livery Stables, Cattlegate Road, Crews Hill, Enfield, EN2 8AU	9.7 miles	21 Mins
Sandridgebury Livery Stables, Sandridgebury Farm, Sandridgebury, St Albans, AL3 6JB	9.3 miles	20 mins
Coursers Farm Stables, Coursers Road, St Albans, AL3 6JB	10.2 miles	19 mins
Northshaw Manor, Northshaw Road, West Northaw, Potter Bar, EN6 4NT	8 miles	17 minutes
Moat Farm Stables, Bramfield Road, Ditchworth SG3 6SA	6 miles	12 mins

