

JPPC ref: 8544

Planning Registration
West Oxfordshire District Council

SUBMITTED VIA PLANNING PORTAL

30 March 2023

Dear Sir or Madam

RE: Planning application- use of land to station mobile home as dwelling for farm worker for a fixed period of two years
AT: Coopers Croft Barn, Priory Road, Heythrop

Please find enclosed an application for planning permission submitted on behalf of our client Mr Cooper. The application seeks permission to use land to station a mobile home as a dwelling for a farm worker. Planning permission is sought for a fixed period of two years.

The proposed dwelling is to be provided in the mobile home which is already on-site, having first been introduced as a farm office and welfare building. Planning permission was not required for its original siting as this agricultural use did not involve a material change of use of the land.

However, the applicant is aware planning permission will be required if a worker is to reside in the mobile home, thus we make this application. The applicant seeks planning permission for a limited period to allow the business to be established and economic viability demonstrated before a permanent dwelling might be considered.

Site and proposal

This application is made by Mr Cooper who owns the application site which is the operating base for his farming company. The applicant farms an area of around 370 acres of grassland made up of land in his ownership and that farmed under agricultural rental agreements. The applicant's Rural Payments Agency County Parish Holding number is 33/089/0026.

The application site is to the north of Priory Road, Heythrop with the mobile home nestled against mature trees to the southwestern corner of the site. The land benefits from existing access to Priory Road.

Cont...

The John Phillips Planning Consultancy

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The proposal site is not within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), nor land designated as green belt or a conservation area. There are no listed buildings or scheduled monuments in the vicinity of the proposed building. The extended grounds of Heythrop Park, a registered park and garden, are around 500m to the east. It is in Flood Zone 1, the area of lowest risk, on the Environment Agency's online Flood Map for Planning. There are no public rights of way across or adjacent to the proposal site.

The mobile home is already on site, having initially been introduced to provide a farm office and welfare building (lavatory, wash space, etc.) for the farm workers. This did not require planning permission as it did not involve a material change of use of land.

Mr Cooper now seeks planning permission to use the mobile home as a dwelling for a farm worker (himself) to support livestock enterprises on the land. These involve the rearing of animals, including very young calves, which require close supervision to ensure their welfare. This submission includes a Business Plan from Ceres Rural which sets out the viability of the livestock enterprise and its requirement for a full-time resident worker.

For the avoidance of doubt, we confirm the applicant only seeks permission to use the mobile home as a dwelling for a temporary period (two years) while the enterprises which are reliant upon it become established. Following the 'proving period' an application would be made for a permanent dwelling, which the Council could then support as part of a proven business.

This application has benefitted from pre-application consultation with Council officers in which it was acknowledged the applicant's business had an essential requirement for a resident farm worker. The applicant was encouraged to make a planning application for the mobile home to provide the home needed for a worker for a fixed period of two years in order that the viability of the farm business could be established.

Discussion

Principle of development

The West Oxfordshire Local Plan (WOLP) sets out the locations in which new dwellings are supported in principle. The proposal site is outside of an established settlement, therefore the acceptability of the proposed home falls to be considered under the following provision of policy H2:

"New dwellings will only be permitted in the small villages, hamlets and open countryside where they comply with the general principles set out in Policy OS2 and in the following circumstances ...

...where there is an essential operational or other specific local need that cannot be met in any other way, including the use of existing buildings. Where appropriate, new homes provided (other than replacement dwellings) will be controlled by an occupancy condition linked to the operational need and/or to the 'rural exception site' approach for permanent affordable dwellings"

This policy acknowledges that while the WOLP preference is for new homes to be in towns and larger settlements, some development is necessary in rural areas to maintain the rural economy and communities. This includes situations where there is a functional need for a farm worker to reside at their place of work. The provision reflects paragraph 80 of the NPPF which states:

“Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

a) there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside”

The NPPF also strives to support a prosperous rural economy requiring planning policies and decisions to enable *“the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses”* (paragraph 84).

The applicant operates an established farm business with a long-term business plan. They are reaching the end of their initial establishment phase of the business and entering the next phase increasing operations to sustain and grow a profitable business. This phase is dependent on resident supervision; thus, this application is being made to provide a home for the essential worker. The proposal is driven by agricultural needs and is necessary to ensure proper care and supervision can be provided to livestock, particularly at times when they are most vulnerable to illness and stress.

The dwelling is fundamental to the future of the business. The applicant is keen to broaden the farm’s operations in order that it is more resilient. Presently it is reliant on arable and grassland farming means it is vulnerable to the markets of those products and volatilities in input costs (fertiliser, seed, etc.). Introduction of livestock will allow the business to be more stable. A mixed farm can benefit from the inverse correlation between crop and livestock finances. For example, if grain prices are low it is bad for an arable farm’s sales, but good for a livestock farm’s feed bill.

The Business Plan prepared by Ceres Rural sets out the long-term vision for the business, along with financial projections, within which the livestock enterprises are vital but reliant on a resident worker. The expanded livestock enterprises will allow the applicant to add greater value to the farm’s (current) principal products (crops and fodder) and so increase profitability and, as noted above, provide a more stable business.

The cattle enterprise has necessity for a resident worker. Young calves require close supervision from a stockman to ensure they are healthy, happy, and productive. Young animals are particularly vulnerable and labour intensive as they require regular feeding with milk, and close supervision as they transition to dry food. The applicant will care for the animals through their principal development phase as their bodies and immune systems develop. If an animal develops an illness or reacts badly to a change in diet immediate intervention is needed from the farmer.

Woodland pigs also require supervision to ensure their wellbeing. The pigs are reared free-range rather than in a controlled environment (i.e. an enclosed barn). The woodland environment means pigs can better enjoy their natural behaviours; however this does require closer supervision from the farmer. The rotation of animals (4 crops per year) means there are frequently young animals on the holding which require sustained attention.

The applicant presently rears chickens, however this is to be turned over to free range turkeys reared for meat. The enterprise will receive sexed stag turkey chicks which will then be reared on-site to slaughter age. A resident worker is needed to ensure the welfare of the birds and the profitability of the enterprise throughout the year. Even in a free-range flock illness can quickly travel through a group, thus close supervision is needed. If an issue arises and is not immediately addressed, it can lead to substantial losses.

In view of the above there is a functional need for a dwelling on the site to support the applicant's business, accordingly it is considered this can be supported under WOLP policy H2.

It is acknowledged that policy H2 also states that a new-build dwelling will only be supported if there is no other means of providing the home, including through the re-use of the building. We confirm there are no dwellings on the farm. There are also no buildings which could be re-used to provide a dwelling. The only buildings are portal frame barns which are required for the storage of hay and machinery. Based on the functional need, and in the absence of any alternative opportunity it is considered the proposed (temporary) dwelling is supported by policy H2.

Amenity impacts

WOLP policy OS2 sets out general principles all developments are expected to satisfy for a proposal to be supported. The proposal is considered to meet all relevant requirements.

The mobile home is of a modest size and proportionate to the farm holding. It is relevant that this application is not to introduce a mobile home to the site, the unit can be (and was) sited on the land for agricultural purposes (i.e. farm office, welfare space, etc). It is the impact of residential use which is relevant to this application.

The unit has been sited to minimise its visibility being located against a thicket of mature trees to the edge of the farmyard. The provision of a farm worker's dwelling will not cause the coalescence of settlements or undermine the character of the area; indeed the home can contribute to the character of the working countryside.

The site is not in an area at risk of flooding and the site is provided with safe access to and from Priory Road.

The mobile home is a moveable chattel and its siting in the surfaced yard is not to the detriment of any habitat or species, nor does it impact on trees.

The modest nature of the development means it will not impact upon the designated heritage assets of Heythrop Park the closest part of which is around half a kilometre to the east.

The application site benefits from an existing access to the highway. Having been provided to accommodate large vehicles associated with the farm it can easily accommodate residential traffic. There is ample space in the vicinity of the mobile home for vehicles to turn and leave in forward gear.

The single dwelling should not give rise to a substantial level of traffic and so should not be problematic on local roads. The proposal will remove the need for the farmer to commute to the site from a home elsewhere. The reduction in traffic to/from the working farm will offset movements associated with the home.

There is clearly an economic benefit from the proposed home in supporting the growth of an established farm business, and with it the myriad of businesses with which it trades. The development of the applicant's agricultural business is clearly supported by the NPPF (paragraph 84) and aligned with the WOLP's commitment to support the rural economy.

The provision of a home for a young family, working in the countryside, can also assist in maintaining the rural community and character of the area as working countryside.

Summary

In summary, the proposed use of the mobile home as a dwelling for a farm worker for a temporary period is supported in principle by policy H2 of the WOLP and is actively supported by E2 which seeks a prosperous rural economy.

The temporary use is aligned with the general principles for development set out at WOLP policy OS2 and so should not cause harm to local amenity or the character of the area. It will allow the profitability of enterprises which necessitate the home to be proven, following which a permanent dwelling of suitable design could be supported by the Council.

In view of the proposal's alignment with Development Plan policy the presumption in favour of sustainable development, as expressed at paragraph 11 of the NPPF, states that planning permission should be granted without delay. We respectfully request that this application be approved.

We trust this submission is in order and will be pleased to discuss further, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

We trust this submission is in order and look forward to hearing from you.

Yours faithfully,



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Associate

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