

acorus



Proposed Conversion of Golf Club House
To Dwelling

PREPARED FOR

Ms S Moore and Mr P Clapperton
Clare Park Lake Golf Course
Stoke Road
Clare
Sudbury
CO10 8HG

September 2023

PREPARED BY

BRIAN BARROW BSc (Hons) MRICS
Rural Planning
Acorus Rural Property Services Ltd
Old Market Office
10 Risbygate Street
Bury St Edmunds
Suffolk, IP33 3AA

DIRECT LINE:

07774 972627

EMAIL:

brian.barrow@acorus.co.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

This report has been prepared at the request of Ms Susan Moore and Mr Peter Clapperton, to outline the facts considered relevant to the proposed conversion of an existing club house to a dwelling at Clare Park Lake Golf Course, Stoke Road, Clare, Sudbury, Suffolk, CO10 8HG.

This is a resubmission following withdrawal of application DC/22/1971 on the advice of the planning officer in order to provide further information on potential alternative uses for the site as well the building not being redundant at the time of application.

These issues have been addressed with this submission and attached to the application are a Financial Statement and Alternative Uses Statement as well as a Personal Statement from the applicants.

Regarding the building not being redundant from its use, planning permission was granted in February 2023 for a new reception building (ref: DC/22/1971/FUL which will provide the reception facilities currently housed in the existing clubhouse. The clubhouse will therefore subsequently be redundant of its use.

2. BACKGROUND

Clare Park Lake Golf Course is a 9 hole, parkland course which is sited around a lake beside the River Stour on the outskirts of Clare. It has been owned and operated by the applicants, for over 29 years. Built in the 1950's for private use the golf course was subsequently owned by BP as a leisure site for its staff before being sold to Ms Moore and Mr Clapperton.

With no club house, one of the old 1950's prefabs on the premises was brought into service. As the business took off the old building had to be replaced with a purpose-built facility. The currently colonial style clubhouse was built in the late 1990's and financed by the partners.

The course is ideal for beginners as well as more experienced players and is convenient for those who only have a short time available to play as it can be completed in approximately 1.5 hours.

The club house offered a fully licenced bar, tea shop and changing rooms with showers although these facilities are now only open occasionally.

DISCLAIMER

This report is for the sole use of the named client. While it may be shown to other professionals acting for them, the contents are not to be disclosed to nor made use of by any third party without our express prior written consent. Without such consent we can accept no responsibility to any third party.

A meeting room is also offered in the club house as a standalone facility and for those wishing to combine playing golf with a meeting.

The visitor reception area is also housed in the club house with an old hut previously used for storage currently being empty.

Employees include part-time green keepers and bar/club house staff although the applicants to save cost now do a lot of the work unpaid.

In 2016 planning permission was granted for a modest manager's apartment upstairs in the club house, as well as the meeting room and office. With someone on site it was possible to make the most of income opportunities. It was decided to market the clubhouse as a tea-room as the kitchen is too small to offer anything other than tea-room type refreshments, i.e. sandwiches, scones and cakes etc.

Being on the A1092 it was easy to advertise the tea-room to passing traffic and did initially manage to reach a level of sales which would be considered worthwhile. However, with the extra staff required it was not financially viable and at best broke even. The investment in the clubhouse has never been rewarded with increased business so in terms of rate of return the venture was uneconomic.

Golf was a popular sport in the 1990's but began to slip into decline from the early 2000's onwards. The decline was put down to the high cost of playing, the difficulty of the courses for casual, non competing golfers and the sport's incompatibility with contemporary lifestyles. Busy lifestyles meant there was less justification for the time to play. The increase in popularity of cycling as a more health conscious sport with similar spend and demographic, further heightened the decline as golfers became cyclists. Numbers decreased and many courses closed with the land given over to development.

Catering at Clare Golf Course only played a small part in the income of the business as players playing a short 9 hole course which takes about 1.5 hours to play (as opposed to an 18 hole course which can take upwards of 5 hours) tend to only require a snack, if anything, after their round. Both golf and tea room catering are highly seasonal and it is likely that the Clubhouse will be closed throughout this winter except for use of the toilet facilities.

In addition, the opening of the larger facilities such as Willow Farm Café at Glemsford and Tarka's at Baythone End has taken trade away from Clare where notorious parking issues have reduced business from the town to these types of 'destination' sites.

2020 saw the COVID pandemic, with the ensuing changing economic circumstances damaging what little had been achieved. The club house now only opens for 3 -4 hours a day, weather dependent and makes an unsustainable loss.

During COVID an online booking and payment system was set up using government grants to be able

to continue trading the golf course whilst the clubhouse had to remain closed. This continues today and covers the periods that the clubhouse is closed.

A New Study outlined in the Golf Monthly Magazine considers UK Golf Participation Figures For 2022, which states:-

To temper expectations going forward, it is expected the cost of living crisis will have a negative impact on the golf industry for the remainder of the year and beyond.

"We do expect growth against 2021 to continue to slow in the second half of the year," cautioned Richard Payne, director of SMS. "Q2 2021 was an exceptional time, with the release from lockdown but still widespread working from home.

"We also expect the cost of living crisis to have an effect on leisure spend, in golf and other sports. This is likely to affect visitor rounds and equipment sales first, with many having already paid memberships for the rest of 2022, but there will undoubtedly be pressure on renewals in the coming months.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of customer demand and the increasing cost of heating and energy it is no longer economic to continue to open the club house. A review of the profit and loss accounts has shown that the course and clubhouse income is insufficient to cover the costs of management time and investment. The owners have always put in a considerable number of hours for which no reward is available, in effect they don't get paid. They are now wanting to reduce their involvement given their age.

A financial statement is inc with the application together with a personal statement outlining some of the difficulties.

The applicants have tried to sell the site as a whole with marketing for about 2 years (see details at appendix 1). Whilst there has been interest no one has proceeded once they see the returns. The main issue being the lack of profit which is insufficient to pay for management time, funding and future investment. There is no base therefore to borrow funds as a business investment.

3. PROPOSAL

There is an existing flat upstairs in the club house which is used by the applicants to manage the facility.

The applicants wish to keep the golf course operational, but can only afford do this if it can be run at a low cost. A separate application has been submitted to replace a building with a purpose built reception and storage building which will require minimal energy and staff to run. It will allow golfers to drop in, pay online and go straight onto the course.

The club house needs a viable use, and it is therefore proposed to convert the whole of the club house to a dwelling. Commercial use as a clubhouse, tea shop and meeting facility having been tried for many years have all failed to provide sufficient return.

4. PLANNING POLICY

“The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

Achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives, which 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):

- a) an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right types is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure;
- b) a social objective – to support, strong vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be provided to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by fostering a well designed beautiful and safe places, with accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities’ health, social and cultural well being; and
- c) an environmental objective – to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.

Paragraph 10 states that “So that sustainable development is pursued in a positive way, at the heart of the Framework is a presumption in favour of sustainable development (paragraph 11).

With regard to housing, paragraph 80 states:

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

- c) the development would reuse redundant or disused buildings and enhance its immediate setting...

Being a club house, the site represents previously developed land. Paragraphs 119 and 120 of the NPPF is supportive of the development of Brownfield sites stating:-

Planning policies and decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuing safe and healthy living conditions. Strategic policies should set out a clear strategy for accommodating objectively assessed needs, in a way that makes as much use as possible of previously developed or 'brownfield' land.

Planning policies and decisions should:

- a) encourage multiple benefits from urban and rural land, including through mixed use schemes and taking opportunities to achieve net environmental gains, such as developments that would enable new habitat creation or improve public access to the countryside;
- c) give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for homes and other identified needs, and support appropriate opportunities to remediate despoiled, degraded, derelict, contaminated or unstable land;
- d) promote and support the development of underutilised land and buildings, especially if this would help to meet identified needs for housing where land supply is constrained and available sites could be used more effectively....

Paragraph 69 is also relevant in this case:-

Small and medium sized sites can make an important contribution to meeting the housing requirement of an area, and are often built out relatively quickly.

Local planning policy is contained in the Joint Development Management Policies Document 2015, as follows:-

Policy DM28: Residential Use of Redundant Buildings in the Countryside

Proposals for the conversion of redundant or disused barns or other buildings in the countryside into dwellings will be permitted where:

- a) alternative uses for employment/economic development, tourist accommodation, recreation and community facilities, in accordance with Policy DM33, have been fully explored to the satisfaction of the local planning authority and can be discounted;
- b) the building is structurally sound and capable of conversion without the need for extension, significant alteration or reconstruction;
- c) the proposal is a high quality design and the method of conversion retains the character and historic interest of the building. In the case of barns the single open volume should be retained with minimal change to the external appearance;

- d) the proposal would lead to an enhancement to the immediate setting of the building, and the creation of a residential curtilage and any associated domestic paraphernalia would not have a harmful effect on the character of the site or setting of the building, any wider group of buildings, or the surrounding area.

Not all buildings in the countryside will be suitable for conversion or adaptation to new uses, perhaps due to their unsuitable or unsustainable location or due to the condition or appearance of the structure. Some existing rural buildings are often badly designed and sited or poorly constructed, having been erected before planning controls existed or by using agricultural permitted development rights, or they may be relatively modern agricultural buildings that are of an inappropriate scale and materials to be re-used as dwellings. If converted to an alternative use, and without any significant and appropriate enhancement of the structure, such buildings would be permanently retained as intrusive features in the landscape, in obvious conflict with the aim of conserving and enhancing the rural environment.

5. PLANNING COMMENTS

5.1 General

The proposal is for the conversion of the whole, an existing golf course club house into a dwelling, the upstairs of the property already being a residential flat.

Unfortunately, due to the lack of customer demand and the increasing cost of heating and energy it is no longer economic to continue to open the club house. A review of the profit and loss accounts has shown that the course and clubhouse whilst making a small margin this is insufficient to cover the costs of management time and investment. The owners put in a considerable number of hours for which no reward is available. They are now wanting to reduce their involvement given their age.

Attempts to sell have failed despite being tried over a long period.

The applicants wish to keep the golf club operational, but due to lack of customers and high energy costs, can only do this if the club is turned into a low input/cost facility. The reception and storage of golfing facilities are currently located in the club house. A separate planning application has been submitted to provide a purpose-built low-cost building which will be located next to the car park adjacent to the first tee for this purpose. Short course players do not need full facilities. Hot drink vending, a small dry building with golf consumables and toilet facilities is sufficient.

Alternative uses have been considered and explored including opening a tearoom and providing meeting room facilities. These enterprises have been running for approximately 6 years and although encouraging more visitors to the site, unfortunately do not pay the wages of the staff required to run them or a return for the investment needed. Sub paragraph a) of policy DM 28 is satisfied.

The applicant has also tried to sell the site as a whole for almost 2 years.

At the present time golf courses are a problem to finance. Although they are a real estate transaction, they are not like traditional real estate. They are a business opportunity attached to a piece of land. If, as in the case of Clare Park Lake Golf Course, the land has no other use there is a risk to operating a golf course profitably which is why there are few traditional bank lenders.

Obtaining finance for the purchase has proven to be a stumbling block for potential buyers. As a result, whilst the land and buildings have a good value as property, commercial finance will only support funding based on profit and loss. All the potential buyers of the site have been looking for alternative income streams, but none of these included the clubhouse, with no buyers looking to take this on. The clubhouse has only 32 internal covers, so has limited

scope.

The costs of maintaining the golf course are onerous as they remain the same whether there are 1 or 100 customers. Increasing costs relative to potential income do not make the course an attractive proposition with a full clubhouse facility that needs heating, lighting and staff. Wages, fuel, the provision of pensions, digital online accountancy submissions, annual insurance of [REDACTED] amongst other costs place an unprecedented strain on the business. The golf fees have to be relative to those of neighboring courses and it is a competitive, comparative market, hence the course needs to get to a low cost operation to survive.

5.2 Golf Trends

In line with global trends in golf Clare Park Lake Golf Course show a steady decline in the number of rounds played per year. The highest numbers of players were before the new clubhouse was built, i.e. from 1993 to 2000. Even with new much improved facilities, parking and course improvements, the number of green fees and membership has slowly declined from then on. This is despite the fact that the fees and membership costs of the club were amongst the cheapest in the county, providing good value for money.

The COVID pandemic further impacted the business, whilst although COVID encouraged people to undertake an outdoor sport, the clubhouse had to remain closed. The clubhouse is now open only 3 – 4 hours per day but many players have become used to just turning up, playing and leaving.

In addition to COVID the cost of living crisis is likely to have a negative impact on the golf industry for the foreseeable future.

5.3 Other costs

The golf course itself is at a low level. The Environment Agency now only manage main rivers, which the River Stour is not considered to be.

In the past the Environment Agency regularly maintained and dredged the river, however, they have now relinquished all responsibility, placing this on adjacent landowners.

The Clare River Group was formed to manage the water levels via the Mill down stream of Clare which involves keeping the gates free of debris and raising or lowering as rainfall and water levels dictate.

The potential costs of this in terms of the golf course have further increased the need for it to become a low cost operation without the burden or need for a clubhouse.

5.4 Design

The Clubhouse building is structurally sound and capable of the conversion, indeed a flat has already been created on the first floor and very minimal changes are required. Sub paragraph b) being satisfied.

The design of the dwelling will retain the character of the building with only minimal changes thus satisfying sub para c) of DM 28.

The proposed works will tidy up and enhance the setting of the site. The garden area including parking and a curtilage can all be incorporated within the existing car parking and amenity land around the clubhouse.

The clubhouse is located within a group of existing similar dwellings and there will be no encroachment into the countryside. Sub paragraph d) is satisfied.

5.5 Sustainability

The core thread of the NPPF is sustainability for which there are three dimensions in planning terms:-

- Economic objective
- Social objective
- Environmental objective

These three objectives cannot be taken in isolation. Economic growth can secure higher social and environmental standards and well designed buildings and places can improve the lives of people and community.

The site is on the edge of Clare, a very well served small market town whose facilities include public houses and restaurants, town hall, churches sports ground, primary and secondary schools, doctors and dentist facilities, police and fire stations as well as a country park.

Clare benefits from regular bus services to Cambridge, Haverhill, Sudbury and Bury St Edmunds.

Environmentally the proposed dwelling will make use of a redundant building as well as enhance the immediate setting of the site. It would fully meet one of the exceptions in paragraph 80 of the NPPF albeit the site is not particularly isolated

6. CONCLUSION

The building has no future use as a golf club house, and even though other enterprises have been tried over recent years, remains a loss-making facility. It will be redundant with the alternative hut reception now permitted.

The clubhouse has been given every opportunity to succeed financially, but is too big for the golf course, and too small, without substantial investment, to be financially viable for hospitality.

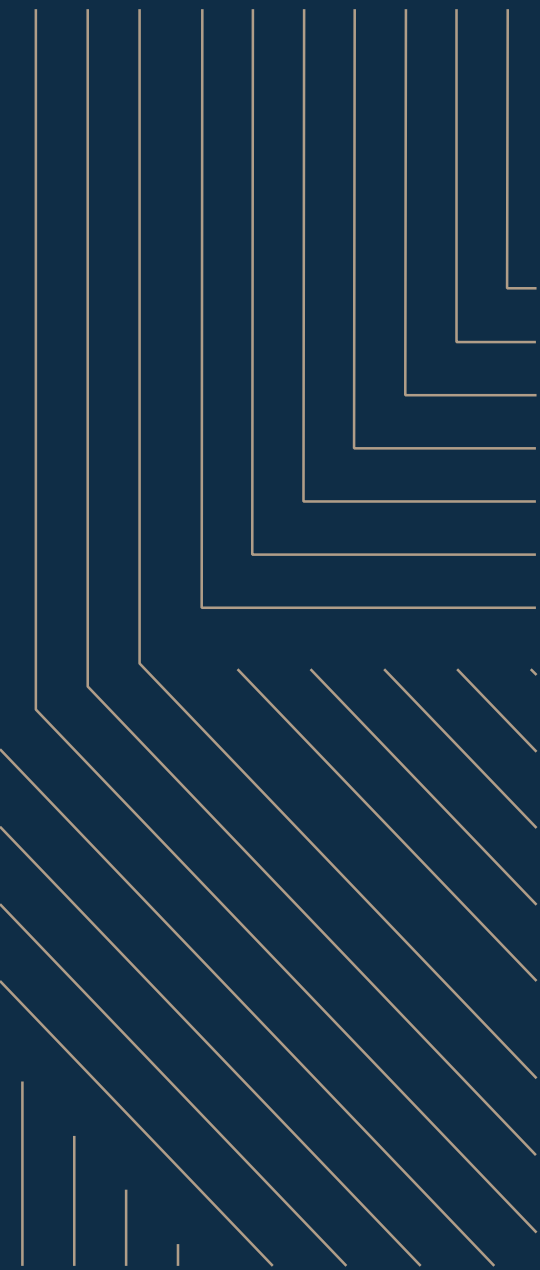
The property has been on the market for nearly 2 years however potential purchasers have been unable to either see an opportunity to create a much bigger business to improve viability, or been able to fund the purchase and any development ideas they may have had.

The changing economic circumstances have added to the pressures on the small business which has been run for 30 years for the pleasure of ownership, and whilst never making a significant profit, had paid its way. Now the clubhouse cannot operate profitably, nor its expenses be covered by golf. Heating and Lighting costs alone are overpowering the income potential. The clubhouse is now 'sucking' income from the golfing receipts.

The clubhouse is now redundant and no longer required for the running of the course. By downsizing to a more financially realistic means of managing the course will hopefully allow it to continue as an important recreational facility for Clare.

There are no other economic business reuse options that are practical or viable or would enhance the setting. Leisure, retail and business uses have all been tried.

A residential scheme would meet Government objectives for reuse of buildings and the change of use to residential is sustainable and will allow the golf course to continue to operate. It is the most suitable use.



acorus[®]

www.acorus.co.uk