

PLANNING STATEMENT

Laverick Cottage, Fourstones, Hexham, NE47 5DX

**Treehouse for tourism accommodation alongside
improvements to access and woodland management**

Greenhayes Planning Ltd

Introduction/Executive Summary

1. This statement is prepared in support of a planning application for a treehouse which will be used for tourism and ancillary to the wider activities undertaken on the estate at land north of Laverick Cottage, Fourstones, NE47 5DX.
2. The treehouse will offer a unique form of tourism accommodation that distinguishes itself through its innovative design and integration with the surrounding environment. For example, the scheme will deliver a small unit of accommodation, whilst delivering on-site woodland management and biodiversity gains and improvements to local access. The development will also support local employment and skills advancement through the modest growth of the tourism side of the estate business. The project will also support the core functions of the estate including that of agriculture and land management. A supporting letter from the applicant is attached at **Appendix 1**.
3. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) supports sustainable tourism development within the Countryside and recognises that such development often has to take place beyond settlements. It states development should be supported subject to impacts on the countryside character, local character, amenity and that of highways. Policy ECN15 also supports tourism at a local level and recognises that the hinterland in which the site is located has significant potential for generating benefits from tourism. The scheme would comply with this approach and would be a small unit which can be said to be a unique type of development that would widen the diversity of accommodation within the area. Secondly it would be located close to existing development, that of Laverick Cottage, and would utilise the same means of access and other infrastructure. Thus, the scheme can be said to accord with Policy ENV15 which supports tourism development within rural areas.
4. The development can also be said to meet Policy ENV16 which supports tourism development within the Green Belt and will reflect a small building which is linked to the wider open space activities on the estate, securing better access and employment skill development as per the policy requirements. The development will improve wider footpath network and the development can be linked to the woodland management and environmental improvement of the estate and thus can be said to meet the terms of ENV16.

5. As well as being acceptable in principle, the application is supported by the relevant assessments in respect of arboricultural, ecology and heritage/landscape assessments and these confirm that the development will be acceptable in respect of these matters. The development is also well located for such development and will have good access to Fourstones, via the footpath network or cycle routes and further afield in respect of local attractions and amenities. Thus, the development can be considered to be acceptable in planning terms as set out within this statement.
6. The statement will assess the development against the development plan and any other material considerations, including the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and which will ultimately justify the development in planning terms. In summary, the presumption in favour of sustainable development will apply in this instance having regard to the development plan and the wide range of economic, social and environment benefits that will accrue from the development.
7. The statement should be read alongside other reports including the arboricultural report prepared by Arbtech, a Heritage Report prepared by Roger Higgins and an ecological report by Arbtech. The architectural drawings are produced by Blue Forest, the designers of the treehouse development.

The site and its surroundings (including Planning History)

8. The site is an area of replanted young woodland which lies to the north of Laverick Cottage, which is used as holiday accommodation, and within an area known as the Laverick Plantation which has historically been part of a commercial plantation. The site is served by an existing private roadway which runs southwards from the B6319, which is also designated as a national cycle route.
9. The site is located a short distance from Fourstones to the southwest and Hexham to the southeast. The site is well located to national trails and cycle routes, some of which run through the estate, as well as being linked with other rural activities undertaken on the estate including fishing and can support the mixed farming and land conservation that is carried out on the estate.

The Proposals

10. The proposals relate to the siting of a treehouse to provide tourism accommodation which will seek to connect to the existing activities on the estate and support increased and improved access across the estate. The unit will provide a one-bedroom unit and will be accessed via a historic track used for quarrying and forestry which will be upgraded to meet the requirements of the unit. The design

will be of a bespoke and high-quality nature and will be integrated amongst existing trees which will be retained as part of the development.

11. The application will include woodland management measures which will relate to the management of the replanted woodland and will also include ecological enhancements including new habitat such as bird boxes and insect walls. This can be secured by condition via a document such as landscape and ecological management plan (LEMP).

12. The applicant also proposes to improve access for the rights of way across the estate to include new gates, surfacing, drainage and signage to improve existing access for visitors. The applicant would also look to explore new opportunities for improving skills within this growing tourism part of the business.

Planning Policy Context

13. The Development Plan relevant to the planning application is that of the Northumberland Local Plan prepared by the County Council which covers the years 2016-2036 and sets out the strategic and detailed policies for planning decisions within the County.

14. The Local Plan contains a range of policies that support the provision of tourism including ECN15 and ECN16 both of which support tourism, including within the Green Belt subject to links with open space uses and improvements in respect of access and education/skills for the rural economy. There are other relevant policies including those relating to access, the environment and the economy.

15. 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.

16. 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

17. The applicant's family have owned and farmed the estate over many generations and agriculture and land conservation remain the core functions of the estate business. However, they are required to continually explore opportunities for diversification in order the farming element can continue to remain viable. Indeed, the basis payment scheme (BPS) is being phased out and there are uncertainties under the replacement Environmental Land Management scheme which will replace. Therefore, it is key that farming estates are able to diversify, and government are encouraging farmers and landowners to develop new sources of income. Tourist accommodation is the perfect balance working well alongside farming operations while producing an alternative income stream, reducing risk caused by fluctuations in the agricultural market.

18. The estate has focused on high quality but low key tourism or visitor uses as these can operate without impact on the farming activities and support the key conservation work that they undertake on the estate land which includes woodland and land conservation. The estate also includes fishing and outdoor pursuits, and they are exploring additional visitor accommodation in order to retain visitors in the area for longer and to dovetail with existing uses whilst allowing opportunities to educate visitors on farming and rural life. Laverick Cottage is also a holiday let and the applicant would wish to explore the opportunity for a further unit, within the vicinity of the existing letting unit. The applicant would seek to achieve a high environmental standard whilst improving the existing site through use of renewable energy, biodiversity improvement and woodland management. A supporting letter from the applicant is attached at **Appendix 1**.

19. As well as supporting the wider viability of the estate, the applicant would look to foster links with local businesses, for example to supply produce and other products to support the tourism accommodation. Indeed, they already collaborate with walking and cycle holidays This could be in the form of breakfast or welcome hampers or links with other outdoor activities. Indeed, they are looking to engage with chefs, foragers and dark sky specialists to create specialist retreat weekends. As well as these links, the applicant would be generating additional job opportunities

and skills, potentially creating a position for a trainee to work within this tourism side of the business and it is expected there would be other job creation as a result of the venture. This is set out in the supporting letter and includes marketing, cleaning and maintenance roles as well as those within the digital industries as a result of the growing tourism side of the estate business. The new accommodation will also support local businesses including public houses, local shops and local attractions, further widening the economic benefits. Thus, there would be significant economic benefits as a result of the proposals.

20. The unit would also facilitate the generation of Laverick Plantation which has been replanted with native broadleaved species and any consent can include a woodland management plan to ensure the woodland is managed for the benefit of a woodland environment and biodiversity. This will support the restoration of the woodland area which would on maturity envelope the unit and create a net gain in biodiversity along with heritage and landscape benefits. The wider benefits of this woodland/landscape and ecological improvement are set out in more detail in the applicant's supporting letter at **Appendix 1**.
21. The treehouse would generate additional income which 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 allow there to be viable 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 estate, together with that of Laverick Cottage and parking and access will be taken via the same approach in order that the unit can be seen as an integral element of the wider estate.
22. The unit is well located to access a wide network of footpaths and cycleways and thus the location of visitors in such a location, allows the estate to encourage outdoor pursuits on the estate and beyond. For example, the national cycleway, no.72, runs close to the access to the site. The applicant would also look to improve access across these routes where they cross the estate land with new gates, signage and visitor infrastructure in order to improve access to the wider countryside and the visitor economy in general. A plan of the footpath and cycle links is attached at **Appendix 2**.

Principle of Tourism development

23. The Local Plan recognises the benefits of tourism and employment generating uses and this support is confirmed within Policy ECN15. This states that Northumberland will be promoted and developed as a tourism destination whilst recognising the need to sustain and conserve the environment and local communities. Part One of the policy includes a focus on heritage and cultural visits, cycling and walking holidays and activity holidays. Part two sets out how the development of new visitor accommodation will be delivered.
24. The relevant part of ECN15 is part d which allows for new permanent buildings for visitor accommodation will be supported where they would;
- (i) Demonstrably improve the diversity of the County's tourism offering
 - (ii) Be located as close as practicable to existing development.
25. The scheme is linked to the land-based activities on the wider estate and will provide a distinctive treehouse unit, which would offer a unique holiday experience in this rural location. The development will be landscape led which will include the delivery of integral benefits to woodland, ecology and landscape/heritage as well as improving access for existing rights of way. Therefore, it can be said to be a unique type of development and offer a unique type of tourism accommodation which justifies the development as per Part (i).
26. Secondly in respect of Part (ii), the treehouse is closely located to Laverick Cottage and will share its existing access and use of existing hardstanding for parking. Thus, the development can be supported in respect of Part d of Policy ECN15.
27. In 2018, the NPPF was updated to specifically support 'sustainable tourism proposals where these respect the countryside' and this was included in the updated version. Paragraph 84 and 85. Paragraph 84 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 85 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'

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

Green Belt

31. Policy ECN16 acknowledges the challenges relating to delivering this tourism agenda due to the fact a large area of the County is washed over by the Green Belt and this presents challenges to realising this economic potential. This includes the areas closest to conurbations and areas which could be enhanced to attract visitors. Having regard to the competing issues of Green Belt policy and the desire to support new tourism and recreational development, Policy ECN16 sets out a pragmatic approach and which is supportive of the current proposals.
32. The pre-text to Policy ECN16 is helpful to understand the application of the policy and paragraph 5.89 states:

All these types of uses have the potential to stimulate the economy and can be associated with business uses and employment generation, as well as significant visitor dwell-time and spending. While the Green Belt limits the scope for substantial buildings, there are ways in which modest built development, necessary for such businesses to operate successfully, can be realised and provide high quality contributions towards the wider economic and tourism strategies:

- Through limited infilling within an existing (washed-over) group of buildings;*
- Through the use of derelict brownfield land;*
- Through the conversion of existing buildings; and*
- Through buildings that are small and discreet that are demonstrably ancillary to open space uses occupying a large expanse of land.*

33. Thus, the policy highlights the Green Belt policy and the difficulties that the provision of new build structures face but allows for the small and discreet structures that are ancillary to open space uses which occupy a large expanse of land. In this case, it is considered the scheme can comply with Part A of the policy. Indeed, the holiday let can be seen in connection with Laverick Cottage and the plantation and will be integral to open land uses with the holiday let offered to walkers/cyclists and anglers on the estate and the development will enhance existing open space uses through the improvement of visitor infrastructure within the estate. The proposals also include woodland management as an integral part of the proposals (which can be secured by a condition or otherwise), the development will also facilitate the restoration of historic landscape improvement and again an open space use that is a key feature of the landscape.

34. The development can comply with Part (i) as the location being within a historic plantation will not affect the ability of the agricultural function as the grazing land and other land will be unaffected. Secondly the scheme will include a significant improvement to public access to the countryside through new signage, gates and trackways to improve access to open space uses on the estate and this can be subject to the condition of the planning permission. Thus, it can also comply with Part (ii) of the policy. This will improve existing access routes from this local right of way network which provides access to the wider countryside, including Hadrian's' Way.

35. Indeed, as per paragraph 5.89, the building can be seen as a modest structure, which is discreet and which is clearly linked to open space uses which run across the associated estate land which can be defined as a large expanse of land.

36. Moving onto Part Two, as set out in the supporting statement prepared by the applicants (as attached at **Appendix 1**), the development will support the estate viability and the provision of an additional unit will support the existing business and allow it to grow modestly in line with Part (2a) of the policy. It will also protect the viability of the primary agricultural and land management policies.

37. In respect of Part (2b), the client will generate new skills and employment opportunities, potentially through a new trainee role, to support the tourism part of the estate business and thus the development will contribute to training and skills that are connected to tourism.

38. In terms of National Policy, the treehouse will sit within a site which will on maturity be wooded with native species and therefore there will be little impact on openness compared to the existing features and will be largely unseen from outside of the site. The treehouse will also positively contribute to the reinstatement and long term protection of this historic plantation. Thus, the implementation of the woodland management plan as part of the scheme is key to this approach and the applicant is content for this to be imposed as part of the consent. The development will also comply with the five purposes of the Green Belt;

- a) to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas; **Not within a built-up area.**
- b) to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another; **Will not affect merging of towns.**
- c) to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment; **As set out below, the building will be contained within the replanted woodland and will secure the long-term management and establishment of this landscape feature. It will also be located close to the existing properties also used as holiday lets and thus will not result in any encroachment.**
- d) to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; **Not relevant.**
- e) to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land. **Not particularly relevant but will regenerate this derelict land for the benefit of the wider landscape.**

39. Thus, having regard to the local policies, which support tourism within the Green Belt and the low-key nature of the development and its wider benefits, it can be said to be acceptable in Green Belt terms.

Landscape and Heritage

40. 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 a Heritage consultant and consideration of landscape matters, to ensure the development is sensitive to landscape character and can secure enhancements. The policy context includes ENV1 and ENV3 of the Local Plan which relate to landscape considerations and Policy ENV7 which relates to the Historic Environment.
41. The unit will sit to the edge of a tract of woodland, which is a longstanding plantation and amongst mature trees to the north and east, which will be retained by the proposals. The scheme will also deliver the re-establishment and management of the replanted the woodland which surrounds the site and on maturity will envelop the unit and will protect this landscape feature over the long term. The new woodland will be a native broadleaved woodland in place of a 20th Century conifer woodland and therefore has benefits from an ecological and landscape perspective. Indeed, the plans would secure the long terms protection of a native woodland and would deliver a significant increase in biodiversity when compared to the situation should the treehouse development not take place. The proposals would secure long term woodland management and ecological enhancements as part of the scheme.
42. The sensitive and sustainable design of the treehouse and its siting will ensure the scheme will preserve landscape and local character on account of the above context and by securing an important landscape feature over the long term. This together with the design and natural materials of the unit will allow the treehouse to blend with these natural surroundings. The access road will utilise a historic track which will align with the route of the stone wall and thus be discreet in terms of location.
43. The development will also comply with ENV4 which relates to dark sky principles and the treehouse will be designed with a limited number of openings and the estate have been recognised as being Dark Sky friendly. Where these are necessary, they will be subject to black out blinds and education documents will be provided in the unit to educate visitors on the benefits of the dark skies. The woodland location also limits the impacts in this regard.
44. In terms of heritage matters, the County itself boasts a wealth of historic features and a roman road runs 150m to the north and the submitted Heritage Report assesses any impact on the identified heritage assets in line with the relevant policies. This concludes the development will have no

impact on Warden Hill, the World Heritage Site or other assets due to the surrounding topography and concludes the development will have a low impact on the wider countryside character and is considered by the author to be unobtrusive and contextual.

45. On account of the modest size and the sympathetic design and the long term management and reinstatement of the woodland, the development can be considered positively in respect of landscape and heritage matters. Thus, the development will accord with the approach within ENV1, EN3 and ENV7 of the local plan and section 15 and 16 of the NPPF.

Biodiversity

46. Turning to ecology, the site has been subject to an initial PEA and no further surveys were deemed necessary by the project ecologist and the relevant enhancement measures can be incorporated into the scheme. The proposals will incorporate the recommendations on mitigation such as minimal lighting and sustainable construction methods in order that no habitat or protected species is affected by the development.
47. Furthermore, there are opportunities for significant enhancement through the woodland management, new planting, and new habitat such as bird, bat and insect housing which can be provided within the development. Indeed, the plans show a significant increase in biodiversity when compared to the situation should the treehouse development not take place as the proposals would secure long term woodland management and ecological enhancements as part of the scheme. The applicant is content for a landscape and ecology management plan to be conditioned which will include the woodland management aspect of the proposals. This would ensure the scheme complies with Policy ENV2 of the local plan.
48. 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 QOP4 of the Local Plan.
49. 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.

50. The proposals would therefore manage and enhance biodiversity in line with Policy ENV2 of the local plan and those policies within Section 15 of the NPPF. It will also conserve the relevant heritage assets in line with ENV7 and Section 16 of the NPPF.

Highways and Accessibility

49. The site lies within a rural area but is within a short distance of Fourstones which has 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 and the proposals seek to maximise use of these existing links and improve these for existing and future visitors. The applicant seeks to improve gates, signage and general access in order to maximise these links for visitors.

50. Indeed, it would be quite possible to access Fourstones and other attractions by these footpaths and these can link the site with key attractions including Hadrian's Wall to the north and the no.72 cycle route runs past the access to the site and thus the scheme can be said to be clearly ancillary to these outdoor pursuits and links. This is shown at **Appendix 2**.

51. The proposals will provide cycle use for the occupants and information on local footpath links. Furthermore, these routes offer the opportunity for occupants to access village facilities, such as pubs and shops, without the need for a car.

52. The site has a good approach road and access via the existing property and will utilise a historic track which was used for the previous quarry and for forestry purposes.

53. 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

53. The design aspirations are set out in the accompanying Design and Access Statement, but the scheme will represent a high quality and innovative design and one that will incorporate local materials and sustainable measures which will meet the aspirations of Policy QOP1 and QOP5 of the local plan. This includes high water and energy efficiency and other measures that are deemed necessary.

54. The site is also located in Flood Zone 1 and thus follows the approach of the NPPF in development of areas at the lowest risk of flooding.
55. Thus, the sustainable design and the location of the development means the scheme will contribute to climate change in line with the local plan and Section 14 of the NPPF.

CONCLUSION

56. The development will contribute to meeting the need for tourism accommodation in the area which will support the existing farm estate and represent a sustainable diversification scheme, improving access for visitors, and which will link to existing open space uses on the estate.
57. 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.
58. The treehouse unit is unique and bespoke and is located close to existing tourism uses and will reflect a type of development that can be supported by ECN15 and 16, with the latter supporting such development within the Green Belt. The unit will be linked to other open space uses whilst significantly improving access to the local countryside area and providing education and skills for young people within the rural economy.
59. The development is supported by relevant assessments in respect of arboricultural, ecology and landscape/heritage assessments and can deliver a wide range of enhancements in this regard.
60. Paragraph 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 the framework.
61. The above clearly demonstrates that the proposals are sustainable and thus the presumption in favour of sustainable development lies in support of the scheme. In short, the scheme meets the terms of the development plan.

Appendix 1

Dear Sir/Madam,

We are writing to you, asking for your support of our application for a treehouse to add to our tourism business. We are part of a small rural farming estate looking to diversify to provide a sustainable source of income to enable us to care for and maintain the beauty and nature of this special part of Northumberland.

As Jeremy Clarkson has proven and the government are encouraging, farm diversification is a necessity for small rural farming estates. We need to compensate for bad harvest or unfavourable commodity prices, along with numerous other influences that effect farm revenue on a year-by-year basis. Currently diversification is more important than ever due to the basic payment scheme being phased out and the Environmental Land Management scheme yet to be defined. Alternative revenue streams are a must.

Established in 2019, Stay on the Hill was our first diversification into the holiday accommodation sector. We believed there was a need for high-quality, affordable accommodation options for tourists in our region. Accommodation that offers something extraordinary. We have witnessed a significant increase in visitor numbers year after year, consistently achieving an impressive 70-80% occupancy rate. Our proven concept is both viable and well-received; we take pride in our remarkably high review ratings on Google, surpassing all other accommodations within the area.

As avid travellers ourselves, we recognize that the shepherd's hut and glamping markets have become saturated in recent years, with their popularity beginning to wane. Today's discerning travellers seek a comfortable experience alongside exceptional access to nature – footpaths and panoramas – while still feeling at one with their surroundings.

Our business also provides economic benefit to the surrounding communities and local businesses. We are continually fostering links with local suppliers, offering local produce to guests, working closely with cafes, restaurants, other hotels, wedding venues, transport companies and Hadrian's wall holidays. We store luggage for guests before and after their stay and offer bike storage for those on the Coast 2 Coast trail.

We are seeing a huge increase in guests looking to explore the area while enjoying a bit of an adrenaline thrill, maybe Robson Green has been an influence on this! We are working with local bike hire companies, river activities, gorge walking, kite buggy & surf lessons, paddle boarding, kayaking etc. For the more relaxed holiday goer we are looking to offer bespoke and organised retreats including dark skies, bird watching, cooking demonstrations, art & photography holidays and yoga retreats. We already offer excellent fishing on the river. This part of the river Tyne is becoming increasingly popular amongst the fishing community and is now rivalling some of the more famous Scottish rivers.

We work hard to upkeep the river banks and continually improving footpath surfacing, replacing gates & catches, adding signage so everyone can enjoy this part of Northumberland with ease and pleasure.

The addition of a treehouse into our business would provide additional opportunities for skill-based roles along with potential for a trainee position. This venture would generate other employment including cleaners, maintenance, gardeners, plumbing, electrical, cooks along with pr and marketing specialties.

It is with these considerations in mind that we strongly believe there will be an immense demand for treehouse accommodations at this particular location. With your support, we can provide visitors with an unparalleled experience that combines comfort and closeness to nature, setting a new standard for the industry.

Kind regards,

James and Emma Middleton

Appendix 2

