

Reference number: 17/506613/FULL

Comments from Councillor Harwood – Received 03/04/2018, which have been summarised as follows:

- The application site is highly visible on the scarp slope of the Kent Downs AONB and the scale and mass of the utilitarian structures proposed will inevitably have a detrimental impact upon the protected landscape (equivalent in planning terms to a National Park);
- Hay is a very low value product, and the hayfield sites described in the report are a very long way from the proposed barns - therefore the viability and sustainability balancing exercise needs to be much more rigorous if such a development is to be permitted within the AONB (the council's agricultural advisor's input is clearly required);
- There is a clear landscape change north and south of the Pilgrims Way in this area, which differs from the Marley site to the south;
- The proposed landscaping along the south and east boundaries is inadequate for the scale of the development, the protected landscape and wildlife. A far more effective screen is required in the AONB, such as a broad crescent of new woodland fronting Pilgrims Way and Flint Lane;
- The biodiversity of the farmland and site needs further attention, as a number of farmland birds and brown hare in the arable field surrounding the Pilgrims Way. Some biodiversity enhancements will be required such as the woodland belt suggested and integration of a barn owl box into the development.

Officer Comments

The views of the Council's agricultural adviser have been sought and are contained within paragraphs 5.01 and 6.04 of the main report. To summarise, the agricultural adviser concludes that:

'Having regard to all the above, whilst much of the related agricultural activity takes place on various parcels of rented land elsewhere, I consider there is a justifiable agricultural requirement for the proposed additional barn storage, so that Gipps Oast can function efficiently as the applicant's operational farming and contracting base.'

In regards to landscape, the Kent Downs AONB is an area of national importance whose natural beauty is to be conserved and enhanced. Within the AONB, landscape quality should be given the greatest possible protection and priority.

There is a balance to be struck between the need of the agricultural business and the national importance of conserving and enhancing the AONB. As set out within relevant planning history within the main report, the application was accompanied by six other applications (Plots 1-6) for agricultural barns at the site. These plots have now been refused planning permission under delegated powers.

Condition 3 requires a 10m strip of planting along the north and west boundaries, but it is recommended that this condition is amended to also require a 10m woodland strip along the south and east boundaries to ensure a satisfactory appearance to the development along Pilgrims Way and Flint Lane.

These landscape enhancements would provide for a new native species landscape buffer of a density of 10m as recommended for large buildings by the Maidstone Landscape Character Assessment Supplement 2012. It is considered that the proposed landscaping scheme and landscape management of the site would assist in conserving and enhancing the AONB and provide an improved and potentially connected denser wildlife habitat.

Amend Condition 3 to the following:

The development hereby approved shall not commence until a landscape scheme designed in accordance with the principles of the Council's landscape character guidance has been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The scheme shall specifically address the need for a landscape scheme of at least a 10m deep strip of planting to the immediate north and west of plots 7-8 and along the southern and eastern boundaries of the site. The landscape scheme shall include appropriate mixed species hedgerows interspersed with individual hedgerow trees and shaws. The species mix should include a small proportion of native evergreens and species that hold their leaves over winter. The landscape scheme shall also show all existing trees, hedges and blocks of landscaping on, and immediately adjacent to, the site and indicate whether they are to be retained or removed and include a planting specification, a programme of implementation and maintenance and a 5 year management plan.

Reason: In the interests of landscape, visual impact and amenity of the area and to ensure a satisfactory appearance to the development. Details are required prior to commencement as a satisfactory landscaping scheme is of importance to the visual amenity of the development in this sensitive location in the AONB.

In regards to ecology, an additional condition is recommended as follows:

Condition 11

The development hereby approved shall not commence until details for a scheme for the enhancement of biodiversity on the site shall have been submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The scheme shall consist of the enhancement of biodiversity through integrated methods into the design and appearance of the building by means such as barn owl boxes, bird boxes and bat tubes. The development shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details and all features shall be maintained thereafter.

Reason: To protect and enhance the ecology and biodiversity on the site in the future.

Recommendation remains unchanged.