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APPLICATION BY OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL FOR PLANNING PERMISSION FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF A RESIDENTIAL CHILDREN'S HOME WITH ASSOCIATED EXTERNAL RECREATION AREAS, CAR PARKING AND NEW VEHICULAR ACCESS OFF CHINNOR ROAD, WITH CHANGE OF USE FROM AGRICULTURE TO RESIDENTIAL CARE PROVISION, AT GLEBE LAND, CHINNOR ROAD, THAME, OXFORDSHIRE.

REPORT TO THAME TOWN COUNCIL

(UPDATE)

OCTOBER 2014

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1.0 Introduction

1.1 Councillor's will recall that this application, which relates to the construction of a Residential Children's Home with associated external recreation areas, car parking and new vehicular access off Chinnor Road, was considered by Full Council in July, with a copy of the Report thereto attached at **Document 1**.

1.2 At the time, Councillors resolved that insufficient evidence had been presented with the application to justify a Departure from the Development Plan and the following response was issued to the County Council:

Councillor's considered that insufficient evidence had been submitted with the application in order to justify a Departure from the Development Plan, namely the policies contained in the Thame Neighbourhood Plan and the South Oxfordshire Local Plan (as Saved). In particular, Councillors considered that additional evidence was required in respect of the range of options considered, the site selection process, and the locational criteria for such centres, much of which had been discussed at pre-application stage but was not reflected in the formal application.

As such, further supporting evidence and justification should be provided in respect of each of these matters. Should such material not be forthcoming for consideration by the Town Council, the Council has resolved to object to the application and recommends refusal of the proposal. In doing so, the Town Council trusts that the County Council will recognise the importance and weight to be attributed to the policies of the Thame Neighbourhood Plan.

1.3 Subsequent to this response, and a similar 'objection' from South Oxfordshire District Council, the applicant has prepared a further Paper - *Assessment Centre requirements and selection of the Thame Site* – that aims to provide further justification for the proposals in the context of the objection raised by the Town Council. A copy of that Paper is attached in full at **Document 2**.

1.4 The key issue for Councillor's to consider is whether this additional information/evidence provides sufficient justification, given the acknowledged social (and to some extent, economic) benefits of the scheme, to justify a Departure from the Development Plan.

2.0 Additional Information/Evidence

2.1 The further Paper prepared by the County Council outlines details of the site selection process, including the criteria against which sites were 'scored' and why the proposed site was considered appropriate in this context, together with a range of other material considerations that the applicant considers, when weighed in the balance, justifies a Departure from the Development Plan.

2.2 In this context, it is very much for the decision-maker to determine the weight to be attributed to these other material considerations when assessing whether there is sufficient justification to approve the scheme as a Departure from the Plan. Councillors should, therefore, carefully review the appended Paper and weigh these factors against any identifiable harm.

2.3 In doing so, however, Councillor's should be aware of the nature of the site selection process that has been followed. In particular:

- Only County Council owned sites have, for economic reasons connected with the purchase of land and speed of delivery, been considered and assessed as part of the overall site selection process. That approach immediately precludes consideration of a large number of alternative sites that may well be preferable for the proposed building/use in planning terms;
- The criteria undertaken in the 'sieving' analysis of the potentially available County Council sites is generally robust and includes logical, planning-based factors set against the established requirements for this type of facility - that is a semi-rural location with close access to a population centre for services and facilities;
- Nevertheless, it should be noted that other County Council sites with some future residential or other development potential were specifically precluded from being 'suitable' for the purposes of the site selection process - which, in itself, perhaps

recognises and reinforces that sites of 'lesser' suitability (in pure development terms) have been taken forward in to the analysis; and

- That none of the 18 other potential sites have been identified, nor has details of the 'scoring/weighting' of those sites against the criteria been provided.

2.4 Normally, where issues of alternative site availability/suitability form part of the justification for a development proposal - and especially where such development otherwise represents a Departure from the Development Plan (and only County Council owned sites have been considered) - one would normally expect the decision-maker (in planning terms) to have access to full information in respect of those alternative sites so that a sound, planning-based judgement can be reached as to whether the evidence is sufficient to conclude that the proposed site is the most preferable and deliverable against available alternative sites (assuming the decision-maker also accepts the inherent constraint arising from the consideration of only County Council owned sites). Although the additional information in the Report is thus helpful in providing further justification for the proposals and the site selection process, the lack of detailed information in respect of those alternative sites does leave a gap in the planning-based assessment/justification.

2.5 Nevertheless, and even in the absence of full information in respect of those alternative sites, the decision-maker may conclude that the information in the Report regarding the site selection process is sufficient, and that the degree of harm by reason of the proposals being contrary to the Development Plan and with a slight-negative impact on the open, rural setting of the site/surroundings, is outweighed by the positive benefits of the scheme in social and economic terms.

2.6 In light of such, it remains for Councillor's to consider whether the evidence submitted with the application and Paper, in terms of the site selection process/criteria and the social/economic benefits, is sufficient to justify a Departure from the Development Plan.

- 2.7 In the event that it is concluded that the justification is sufficient, it was recommended in the July report that such approval should be contingent on the provision of a robust scheme of soft landscaping across the site and the utilisation of appropriate external materials - with such to be agreed in consultation with the Town Council. It is considered that any approval should remain contingent upon these requirements.