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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

JULY 2014

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1.0 Purpose of the Report

1.1 This Report has been prepared to assist Thame Town Councillors in their consideration of the application (R3.0086/14) submitted 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.

1.2 The Report is intended to consolidate and summarise the information submitted with the planning application and detail the issues that arise therefrom, identifying factors that Councillors may wish to consider when assessing the proposals. Nevertheless, given that Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 sets a statutory obligation for the Local Planning Authority to determine planning applications in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise, reference is necessarily made to the relationship of the proposals with Development Plan policy, and other material considerations.

1.3 Accordingly, the Report is structured as follows:

- The Site and Surrounding Area
- The Proposals
- Policy Context (summary)
- Key Planning Considerations

2.0 The Site and Surrounding Area

- 2.1 The site is located on the western side of Chinnor Road, a short distance to the south of its junction with Wenman Road and Howland Road, and forms the eastern third of a broadly triangular field. The site, which extends to an area of approximately 0.8 hectares, falls away gradually to the south. The field is currently used for the grazing of livestock, with a hedge extending along the eastern boundary of the site with Chinnor Road, from which there is a single point of access in to the site from a farm entrance.
- 2.2 Blackditch Farm, including a farmhouse and collection of agricultural buildings together with separate residential dwellings, is located on the eastern side of Chinnor Road, opposite the southern section of the site. To the north of the farm (opposite the application site) is a large open field, to the north of which are commercial buildings and uses accessed off Howland Road. The southern and western boundaries of the site adjoin open fields, albeit part of the western boundary adjoins a collection of single storey commercial buildings occupied by Diagnostic Reagents, together with a two-storey property (Worcester Cottage). Further to the north are commercial uses on Wenman Road, together with residential properties (Garden City).
- 2.3 There are no specific planning designations that affect the site.

3.0 The Proposal

- 3.1 As noted in the description of the development, the application seeks planning permission for the construction of a Residential Children's Home on the site, together with ancillary works.
- 3.2 The proposal is part of a wider, and emergent, strategy to increase the County Council's capacity to look after vulnerable young children in the County given that, at the present time, a significant number of such children are accommodated outside of Oxfordshire. The strategy will, in time, see the creation of four new Children's Homes around Oxfordshire, two of which (including the proposals) would act as an 'Assessment Centre' with the other two comprising 'move-on' homes.
- 3.3 Accordingly, the proposed centre would provide short-term accommodation for up to six young people aged 12-17, enabling them to stay 'in-County' whilst assessment work is undertaken, providing appropriate support and monitoring throughout. The length of stay of each individual may vary, and it may well be that the individual is placed in local schools over this period with, in addition, other forms of social interaction with the local community encouraged (eg scouts, local sports teams). The facility would be permanently staffed, with four staff in total (two of whom would be resident over night).
- 3.4 The information submitted with the application indicates that the proposed site was considered the most suitable given:
- (a) that, for economic reasons, only existing County Council owned sites were assessed for their suitability (rather than the potential purchase of alternative sites through the open market); and
 - (b) that such sites need to be relatively remote in order to be effectively controlled and managed, yet close and accessible to population centres and related services and facilities.

- 3.5 In terms of the detail of the scheme, the proposed assessment centre, which would be two-storey in scale and of buff brick and timber finish under a pitched, slate roof, would be located on the northern section of the site. The building, which would have gross internal floorspace of approximately 500sqm, would extend across the site on an east-west axis, with paved areas provided around the building with a 'kickabout' area located directly to the west.
- 3.6 The parking area would be located to the front (south) of the building, providing a total of 8 parking spaces, accessed via a long (135m) driveway extending off Chinnor Road further to the south. The position of the access off Chinnor Road is dictated by the need to provide visibility splays appropriate for the speed of the main road¹ and the achievement of such would necessitate the removal (and replacement) of the hedgerow that currently extends along the boundary of site with Chinnor Road. The access way, which would be raised at its southern end relative to the surrounding site levels would be porous block paved.
- 3.7 A new footpath, together with off-site footpath improvements, are also proposed to provide improved access to the site from Thame. The off-site improvements would include a new footpath on the southern side of the Chinnor Road roundabout, with a crossing via the existing splitter island, to the existing footpath network on the northern side of Wenman Road. This new footpath would then extend in to the site at its northern-most point, and extend along the inside of the hedge up to the proposed building.
- 3.8 A soakage basin, dealing with surface water run-off arising from the proposed development, would be located on the southern section of the site in the area between the access road and Chinnor Road.

¹ It should be noted that there are currently attempts being made to reduce the speed limit on this part of Chinnor Road in which case the access may move northwards as lesser visibility splays would then be required - the application includes details of such potential

4.0 Planning Policy Context

4.1 The principal planning policy context is set by the following:

- Development Plan:
 - Saved policies of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan 2011 (SOLP)
 - South Oxfordshire Core Strategy (2012) (SOCS)
 - Thame Neighbourhood Plan (2013) (TNP)

- Supplementary Planning Documents
 - South Oxfordshire Design Guide

- National Planning Policy Framework
- Planning Practice Guidance

4.2 The above list is not intended to be exhaustive, nor is it proposed to review relevant policies as part of this Report. However, where appropriate, cross-referencing to such policy documents will be incorporated in to the commentary at Section 5.0

5.0 Key Planning Considerations

5.1 This Section of the Report highlights the key planning issues connected with the proposals, providing commentary on each with reference to relevant Planning Policy and the information submitted with the application. The key issues are identified as:

- Principle of the Development
- Effect on the Landscape and Character of the Area
- Impact on Neighbouring Amenity
- Impact on Existing Landscaping and Proposed Landscaping
- Highways, Access and Parking
- Archaeology
- Pipeline
- Sustainability
- Other Matters

5.2 These issues are considered in turn below.

Principle of the Development

5.3 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004) requires that decisions on planning applications should be made in accordance with the policies of the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

5.4 In this case, the application site is located beyond the built-up limits of Thame, within an area identified in the adopted Local Plan as Open Countryside, and outside any spatial allocation in the Thame Neighbourhood Plan (TNP). In such areas related Development Plan policies generally seek to protect the countryside for its own sake and, in so doing, impose a policy context that acts as a restraint to new development, including that of the type proposed in the application.

5.5 Accordingly, and in the context of Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act (2004), it is evident that the proposals are contrary to the policies of the Development Plan. In such circumstances, and as outlined above, it is necessary to consider whether there are any other material considerations that point to a decision contrary to the Development Plan.

5.6 In this regard, whilst the application is accompanied by a relatively lengthy Planning Statement, the matter of compatibility with the Development Plan (and the Thame Neighbourhood Plan in particular) and the material considerations that justify the development (as a departure from Development Plan policy) are dealt with in a single paragraph which states:

It is acknowledged that this proposal is located outside the Thame Neighbourhood Development Plan but there is an urgent need for OCC to comply with forthcoming legislation and policy changes noted above. This site is one of a very small number of sites that is appropriate as an Assessment Centre and one of only two in OCC possession (both sites are proposed for development as Assessment Centres) which meet the unique restrictive requirements of an effectively managed and controlled Assessment Centre which requires a degree of remoteness whilst still being appropriately close to an urban environment that is important when looking after the Children during their assessment and as noted above purchased sites would be at considerable cost to the tax payer.

5.7 Whilst the material in the Planning Statement that precedes the above paragraph provides a clear, rational and positive justification for the provision of Assessment Centres within the County, the justification for the appropriateness of Glebe Lands - both in terms of the site selection process (which is has evidently been limited to County Council owned-sites only) and the site specific analysis - is sadly lacking in terms of the written prose contained within the application.

5.8 However, it is acknowledged that there have been pre-application discussions with the Town Council and that during such discussions greater detail and justification has been provided for the provision of an Assessment Centre at Glebe Lands, to the extent that there has, perhaps, been a mutual understanding that these factors are sufficient to justify a Departure from the Development Plan. It is, therefore, unfortunate that

the detail of those discussions and the justification therein, is not clearly and succinctly reflected in the matters set out in formal submission.

- 5.9 Conceivably, therefore, Councillors may well consider that the evidence they have to date is sufficient to justify such a Departure from the Neighbourhood Plan (and to therefore accept the principle of the development) or, alternatively, a request could be made of the County Council for a clear Statement setting out the factors that they consider justify the development as a Departure from the Development Plan and these factors could then be re-considered by the Town Council and the 'balancing' exercise required by Section 38(6) of the Act undertaken.

Effect on Landscape and Character of the Area.

- 5.10 As outlined previously, the proposed development would be contained to the eastern section of an existing open field that, although a short distance from the built-up edge of Thame, is within open countryside and, to that extent, part of an important and clear edge between town and country.

- 5.11 The proposals would inevitably impact on that open, rural character to varying degrees as a product of a range of factors, including:

- The two-storey scale of the proposed building on the site (that, in design terms, is also fairly standardised in format, layout and appearance);
- The formalisation of the site access on to Chinnor Road;
- The extent and form of the proposed access way;
- The removal and re-alignment of the existing hedgerow on the Chinnor Road frontage;
- The new footpath link in to the site from the north; and
- The provision of external lighting along the length of the access.

- 5.12 In overall terms, and having regard to the landscape qualities of the immediate surroundings and the built context set, in part, by the commercial buildings to the

north of the site, it is considered that these factors would give rise to a landscape impact that would be slight-negative. That slight-negative impact, it is acknowledged, may well be reduced by the provision of a high quality landscaping scheme across the site and through the use of appropriate external materials to both the building and access way / parking areas.

- 5.13 Furthermore, Councillors could take the view that the positive, social aspects of the proposed development outweigh the slight-negative harm on the landscape character of the area, and therefore also justify a departure from the Development Plan in these respects.

Impact on Neighbouring Amenity

- 5.14 By virtue of the location of the site in open countryside (and, indeed, reflective of a stated locational objective for the development), the site does not have a particularly close relationship to existing residential properties.
- 5.15 The nearest dwellings to the application site are located to the east (on the opposite side of Chinnor Road) at Blackditch Farm and directly to the south thereof (Red Roofs). The dwellings connected with such would be sufficiently distant from the proposed building and related uses that there would be no harmful amenity consequences.
- 5.16 Further, to the north of the site are a range of commercial buildings that, given their use, would not be adversely affected by the proposed development.
- 5.17 Accordingly, it is not considered that the proposals would have a harmful impact on neighbouring amenity.

Impact on Existing Landscaping and Proposed Landscaping

- 5.18 With the exception of the existing hedgerow that extends along the eastern boundary of the site (with Chinnor Road) there are very few landscape features within the site

- that either making a meaningful contribution to the visual amenities of the area or that would be removed to facilitate the development.
- 5.19 The proposals show the replacement of this hedgerow along the line of the new visibility splay (i.e. set further back in to the site). Subject to the use of indigenous plants in this new hedgerow, and recognising that the full screening effects of the hedgerow will only become apparent over time, this approach is considered both appropriate and necessary.
- 5.20 The proposed site plan otherwise shows minimal additional planting within the site. However, in order to afford a reasonable degree of mitigation for the visual effects of the development and the incursion in to the open countryside, it is suggested that either additional landscape details should be provided now (i.e. as part of the application) or such should be controlled by a condition on any planning permission, with the details agreed in consultation with the Town Council.

Highways, Access and Parking

- 5.21 As outlined previously, the proposals would require the provision of an upgraded access on to Chinnor Road. Given the alignment of Chinnor Road, the proposed access would be located 135m to the south of the new building since it is only at this point that the visibility splays required by virtue of the speed limit on this section of the road can be achieved. This, as noted above, would necessitate the removal and replacement of the existing hedgerow that currently extends up to the boundary with Chinnor Road.
- 5.22 In highway terms the location of the access achieves the necessary visibility splays for the current traffic speed on Chinnor Road and that being so, there are not considered to be any objections to the proposed access on highway grounds.
- 5.23 In terms of parking, the development would served by eight formal parking spaces located to the south of the building. This level of parking provision, given the nature of

- the use and scale of the building, is considered to be reasonable and appropriate - and, indeed, in the event that such spaces are fully utilised, there would be sufficient scope within the development (i.e. the turning head area and along the length of the access) to provide additional parking without giving rise to off-site highway safety implications.
- 5.23 That being so, there are not considered to be any highway, access or parking constraint to the proposed development.

Archaeology

- 5.24 An archaeological field evaluation has been undertaken on the site, comprising a single trial trench dug broadly in the location of the proposed building. This revealed negligible features of archaeological interest and, accordingly, the Report concludes that there are no matters of archaeological significance in connection with the proposed development.

Pipeline

- 5.25 An existing pipeline leading south-westwards from BOC bisects the northern third of the site. Whilst, as standard, a minimum 6.0m wayleave is required to the pipeline, ground investigative works have indicated that within a 30.0m zone from the centre of the pipeline piled foundations would be required - that are considerably more expensive than traditional trench foundations. Accordingly, the positioning of the building in the middle third of the site is partially explained by this technical constraint.

Sustainability

- 5.26 The Planning Statement supporting the application indicates that the building has been specifically designed and laid-out with a south-facing orientation, thereby facilitating the use of Photovoltaics to the southern roof slope. In other respects,

sustainability objectives would be met through improvements to the fabric of the building.

Other Matters

- 5.27 In all other respects (including ecology, drainage and arboricultural matters), the supporting documentation indicates that the proposals are acceptable and there is no technical or other reason to question the conclusions in relation to these matters.
- 5.28 In addition, Councillors will, no doubt, recognise the potential effect that development in this location may well have in the context of the strategic allocations at Site C (both the allocated and reserve sites), and the section of intervening land that would emerge as a consequence.

6.0 Concluding Remarks

- 6.1 This Report reviews and summarises the information submitted by Oxfordshire County Council in connection with an application for the construction of a Residential Children's Home together with ancillary works at Glebe Land, Chinnor Road, Thame, Oxon.
- 6.2 The report outlines the proposed scheme, identifies the key planning issues and highlights relevant Development Plan policies and other material considerations to assist Councillors when assessing the planning application. Where appropriate, commentary on the key issues has been incorporated to enable full assessment of the issues at the forthcoming Town Council meeting.
- 6.3 In this regard, the key issue for Councillors to consider is (a) whether the evidence submitted with the application is sufficient to justify a Departure from the Development Plan, or (b) whether further more detailed evidence is required, in order to facilitate this judgment.
- 6.4 In the event that Councillors accept either (a) or (b) above, then it is suggested any response to the County Council also includes a requirement for a more extensive scheme of landscaping and that details of that landscaping scheme, together with the proposed external materials for the building and driveway, are agreed in consultation with the Town Council.