

29/2006/028

GORDON WOODALL (FOREST SCHOOL)

**CHANGE OF USE FROM REDUNDANT COACH HOUSE AND ESTATE TO FOREST SCHOOL/OUTDOOR LEARNING CENTRE AT OTTERHEAD ESTATE, OTTERFORD**

322930/113930

FULL

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**PROPOSAL**

Permission is sought for the conversion of an existing redundant coach house to use as a forest school/outdoor learning centre, providing practical rural skills training. The coach house is an attractive building of historic and architectural interest set deep within the woodland. The building would provide an opportunity for the forest school to relocate (previously located at Burnworthy estate) and provide rural skills/activity workshops for children under their supervision. New composting toilets are proposed to be constructed. The application also includes the parking of mini buses within an old quarry accessed along an existing forest track.

The site is located within the Otterhead Lakes Nature Reserve and its management plan has also been submitted with the application. The Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership has instructed Swan Paul Partnership to carry out a detailed restoration plan for the Otterford Estate. In addition a wildlife and structural survey forms part of the submission. Letters and testimonials of support also form part of the application.

The proposed activities within the woodland area as identified by the red line around the application site and includes; forest school (fires, cooking, safe tool use); rural skills; games; camping; team building; orienteering; archery; problem solving, zip wire and belay tree climb course; kayak, raft building; fishing; challenges.

**CONSULTATIONS AND REPRESENTATIONS**

COUNTY HIGHWAY AUTHORITY the access point is a rights of way and therefore imperative to consult Rights of Way Team. On the basis that this is a relocation of an existing use, which will cease operation, it is unlikely that trip generation will differ greatly. The Highway Authority do not raise a highway objection. COUNTY ARCHAEOLOGIST no objections. RIGHTS OF WAY OFFICER no objection providing that there is existing private access for vehicles along the footpath and that the development will not significantly increase traffic upon the track. In addition we require in writing, confirmation that the centre/organization would make significant contributions to repairing the surface of the footpath regarding any damage caused by the vehicular use.

OTTERFORD PARISH COUNCIL does not object. Whilst the Council has no specific objections to raise, it is most concerned as to the nature of the students expected to use the facility. It understands that the students are largely designated as having behavioural difficulties and that these difficulties often lead to anti-social,

aggressive and disruptive actions. The Council is most anxious to preserve the peace and beauty of the estate and would not wish visiting members of the public to be disturbed in their enjoyment of this part of the AONB. The Council has reservations about the number of activities which it is proposed to run all year round, including school holidays (see page two of the Proposed Activities schedule) under the heading of Specific Courses for Young People's Development. Concern has also been expressed regarding activities at the site previously used in a neighbouring parish by the applicants for the running of Forest School. It is alleged that levels of supervision and purposeful direction have apparently not always been sufficiently high. If the Applicants can give assurances that supervision will be maintained at a high enough level to efficiently control the students and that its other concerns are addressed effectively, my Council will be happy to support the Application.

CHURCHSTANTON PARISH COUNCIL has identified a number of reservations which lead the council to seek refusal of the application. Concerns are as follows:-  
Access - The lanes leading to the site are narrow and do not lend themselves easily to the increased traffic this school would generate, also the tracks within the estate itself are not designed for modern vehicles. Loss of amenity for the general public. At present the estate is a tranquil spot for walkers and nature lovers to enjoy a stroll, we are concerned that the presence of the School and its students and the vehicles on the site would discourage visitors and negate the general purpose of the grounds and its leisure value. Periods of use We were initially led to believe that use of the school and grounds would be limited to term time , but this does not appear to be the case and this causes further concern regarding loss of public amenity.

LANDSCAPE OFFICER the proposed use should help to further the aims of the Otterhead Estate Trust who want to restore many of the historic features of the estate as well as managing the woodland for wildlife and amenity purposes. The proposals will have a beneficial landscape impact. NATURE CONSERVATION & RESERVES OFFICER the Otterhead site is an important location for a range of bats and my main concern is that bats will be affected by the change of use. I advise that we will need to agree a robust strategy, including a method statement, to protect bats and their roosts at this site before any work can begin on site. The report was a year old when the application was submitted and identified a minimum of three bat species using the site, with the possibility of others from historical records. I strongly advise that a minimum of three surveys undertaken between May and September will need to inform the strategy. ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER no objections subject to Contaminated Land Note. DRAINAGE OFFICER no objections. LEISURE DEVELOPMENT MANAGER support the application which will provide a natural learning and play environment for children.

## **POLICY CONTEXT**

RPG10 (Regional Planning Guidance for the South West), 2001.

PPS1 – Delivering Sustainable Development, PPS7 – Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, PPS9 – Biodiversity and Geological Conservation.

Somerset & Exmoor National Park Joint Structure Plan Review Policies STR1 (Sustainable Development), STR6 (Development Outside Rural Centres & Villages) and Policy 5 (Landscape Character).

Taunton Deane Local Plan Policies S1 (General Requirements), S2 (Design), S7 (Outside Settlements), EC6 (Conversion of Rural Buildings), EC7 (Rural Employment Proposals), EN10 (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and EN12 (Landscape Character Areas).

## **ASSESSMENT**

The main issues in the assessment of the application relate primarily to the following; the visual impact of the proposed development on the rural character and appearance of the area and implications for wildlife and biodiversity.

The site is located in open countryside and designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. As such special consideration should be given to preserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the Area. PPS7 states inter alia that all development in rural areas should be well designed..., in keeping and scale with its location, and sensitive to the character of the countryside and local distinctiveness.

Local Plan H7 (Conversion of Rural Buildings) & PPS7 seeks to give priority to economic uses subject to taking account a number of criteria, such as specific local economic and social needs and opportunities. Planning Policy Statement 7 (PPS7) also urges Local Authorities to promote development in sustainable locations. Sustainable development principles seek to minimize the number of car journeys required to access services, with the focus of developments in existing towns and villages accessible by public transport, walking and cycling. The site is certainly not easily accessible by public transport given the distance from the nearest public transport route; however, it is considered the justification for the proposed use is acceptable in this location. The Highway Authority raises no objection. On balance therefore it is considered that the conversion of the former coach house will provide a positive function and ensure the long term retention of the building and the forest school can help to manage the woodland in a sustainable manner in accordance with the Otterhead management plan.

Moreover, the proposal offers the potential for positive environmental, social and/or economic contributions with public benefit. These include services to the community, economic diversification for the area, and activities aimed at improving knowledge and enhancing the biodiversity of the area. The concern of the Parish Council with regard to loss of amenity for the general public is noted; however, the Forest School is supported by the Blackdown Hills AONB Partnership and it is considered the proposed use would be compatible with its location and help to retain one of the few remaining heritage buildings still standing on the site. The proposed use is therefore seen as appropriate and fits with the overall management plan for the area.

The Otterhead site is an important location for a range of bats and the main concern is that bats will be affected by the change of use. In order to mitigate any impact it is necessary to agree a robust strategy, including a method statement, to protect bats and their roosts at this site before any work can begin on site. The submitted wildlife

report is a year old when the application was submitted and identified a minimum of three bat species using the site, with the possibility of others from historical records. As such it is recommended that a condition be imposed to provide a minimum of three surveys undertaken between May and September to inform the strategy. In order to assess any additional activities within the woodland area it is recommended that a condition be imposed requiring details of any activity or use and should be supported by a wildlife survey where required to ensure that protected species are not disturbed.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Permission be GRANTED subject to conditions of time limit, schedule of activities unless any variance is agreed in writing; details of the siting of any activities or use (other than within the barn which shall be for purposes in connection with the forest school) and any structure or equipment to be installed to be submitted and agreed; prior to commencement of any activities or use (other than within the barn) a wildlife survey should be submitted to ensure the use would have no impact upon protected species and should be in accordance with the Otterhead management plan; emergency bat survey; nesting birds; slow worms; details and samples of materials; and informative with respect to barn owls and contaminated land.

**REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION:-** The proposal is considered not to have a detrimental impact upon the rural character or appearance of the area and is therefore considered acceptable and, accordingly, does not conflict with Taunton Deane Local Plan Policies S1, S2, S7, EN10 and EN12 nor Somerset & Exmoor National Park Joint Structure Plan Review Policies STR1, STR6 or Policy 5.

**In preparing this report the Planning Officer has considered fully the implications and requirements of the Human Rights Act 1998.**

**CONTACT OFFICER: 356586 MR A PICK**