

Mr C Sharpe
Ribble Valley Borough Council
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Your ref 3/2014/0326
Our ref CPG/EST/TJ/PA 3/19/8767
Date: 21 July 2014

Dear Mr Sharpe

**PLANNING APPLICATION NUMBER 3/2014/0326
WITHGILL FARM, WITHGILL FOLD, WITHGILL, CLITHEROE, BB7 3LW**

An application for the erection of an agricultural building, has been submitted by Mr Alan Kinder of Avalon Town Planning Ltd on behalf of Mr D Barnes. A site visit was made on 28 May 2014 whilst the Agent Mr Kinder was present. The information provided at this meeting, together with the written submissions, forms the basis of this appraisal.

Background Information

The applicant operates a large scale, intensive dairy unit which has expanded significantly over recent years. Lancashire County Council has been consulted on numerous planning applications in relation to the development of Withgill Farm dating back to 1994. I trust that the detail of those previous consultations are available to you and I do not therefore intend to supply these.

The current application is for a new cow building to facilitate the further expansion of the dairy enterprise.

Agricultural Land

I was informed by Mr Kinder that Mr Barnes owns approximately 343 hectares (847 acres), which is mainly used for forage production. Mr Barnes also has a number of informal spreading agreements in place, which I understand have been in operation for a number of years.

Tracey Jackson Bsc (Hons) MRICS FAAV
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Agricultural Enterprise and Current Situation

The applicant operates a large scale dairy enterprise at Withgill Farm and cattle numbers have recently been increased to 2,200 dairy cows. The cattle are housed continuously throughout the year, with the parlour in operation for 22 hours per day. Calving is undertaken all year round and all calves are sold off the holding at approximately 2 weeks of age, with a maximum of 80 calves being kept on the holding at any one time. Replacement cows are bought in when required, typically being sourced from mainland Europe. The enterprise employs about 30 staff.

In addition, the applicant takes in approximately 750 sheep, for 10 weeks over winter.

Existing Buildings

The farm buildings largely comprise purpose built steel portal framed cubicle buildings constructed with concrete panel walls, Yorkshire boarding to the gables and fibre cement roof sheets. There are three large buildings containing 540 cubicles each and a further two buildings containing 270 cubicles each. Associated buildings at the site include, a large rotary milking parlour, dairy and collecting area, calf building, calving shed, open silage clamp and feed stores. There are three slurry lagoons at the application site.

Proposed Development

The proposed development is for the erection of a livestock building to accommodate an additional 250 cows, with a proposed final dairy herd of 2,290 cows.

The livestock building would measure approximately 67m x 28.8m with an eaves height of 3.49m and ridge height of 6.5m. The proposed building would provide 270 cubicles and would be constructed with a steel portal frame with concrete block and Yorkshire boarding to the east and west elevations to include access gates. The roof would be clad with dark blue fibre cement roof sheets, incorporating roof lights. The northern and southern elevations of the building will be open fronted and provide a feed face.

Assessment

The application site falls within areas subject to policies ENV3 and G5 of the Ribble Valley District Wide Local Plan. Policy ENV3 states that development in the open countryside outside or immediately adjoining the AONB should be in keeping with the character of the landscape area and should reflect local vernacular, scale, style, features and building materials. Policy G5 states that development outside the main settlement boundaries and the village boundaries will only be granted for small-scale developments, and in specific circumstances, which includes for development needed for the purposes of agriculture.

In considering the above, I have the following comments to make:

Whether the development is needed for the purpose of agriculture

Withgill Farm is a well-established site and I have no doubt that the development proposed is for the purposes of agriculture and will facilitate the expansion of the dairy herd at the site.

The additional livestock building is required in order to facilitate the proposed expansion of the dairy herd. The current cattle accommodation at Withgill Farm provides 2,160 cubicles however, this is not sufficient for the number of cattle presently on site, following the recent increase in cow numbers. The increase in cow numbers is attributable to the trial which is presently being conducted to assess whether the dairy system can accommodate an increase in cow numbers. Consequently, if the trial is successful and the applicant retains the increased cow numbers, plus further increases the stock numbers to the proposed 2,290 head, an additional cubical building would be necessary.

However, concerns were raised by a colleague back in 2010 about the ability of the milking process to cope with the expansion of the dairy herd proposed at that time, when an application was submitted for additional cubical housing, under application number 3/2010/0747. This application was subsequently approved, as my colleague was satisfied that improvements to the efficiency of the milking parlour could sustain the proposed increase in cow numbers.

This subsequent proposed increase in cow numbers is presently the subject of a trial which is being undertaken by the applicant at the site. I am informed that the applicant believes the existing milking regime can be adapted to enable additional dairy cows to be milked within the present 22 hour cycle and cow numbers have recently been increased to test the process, with 2,200 cows presently going through the system. With the trial ongoing, it has not been concluded that the milking process can sustain the proposed increase in cow numbers to 2290 and the application is proposed on the basis that the building is likely to be required.

Planning permission was granted in 2008, under application number 3/2008/0129, for the erection of a feed store, this building has not been constructed as I am informed that it proved unnecessary to expand the facility. At the time of the application for the proposed feed building the farm had 1600 cows and the storage provision for feed was felt to be unsustainable and, we were informed, contravened requirements of the Dairy Farm Assured Scheme. I am informed that the applicant does not envisage the requirement for such a feed facility would arise with the addition of the proposed cow building, neither is it anticipated that further silage storage would be required. Nevertheless it was demonstrated at the time that there was a need for the building and with the increase in cow numbers since that time, I would anticipate that this may subsequently be required in due course.

A number of slurry lagoons have been constructed at the site in recent years, with additional capacity being provided in connection with the use of Lime Ash bedding. I am informed that the system of using Lime Ash bedding is to cease and the applicant intends to return to the use of rubber matting, with husks as a bedding

medium. I am satisfied that the slurry storage available is adequate in respect of the proposed increase in cow numbers, taking into account the change in bedding medium.

I am informed that land available for spreading the slurry comprises land owned by the applicant together with land being made available through spreading agreements.

Whether the design, scale and materials suitable for the proposed use

The construction materials proposed for the building are concrete block walls with Yorkshire boarding and a fibre cement roof. The northern and southern elevation will be open with feed barriers along the edge. These materials are typical for an agricultural building and reflect the materials used for other buildings at the site.

The design of the building allows for good ventilation, natural lighting and cow movement around the building. However during my site meeting, discussion was had about the movement of the cows around the site and the system for taking cows to the parlour, including the importance of the central passageway between the buildings. On the plan submitted with the application, reference BARN/23 Dwg 04, there are no access gates shown in the West elevation or indicated on the Plan and I would advise that these should be included.

I consider the size of the proposed building to be appropriate in order to accommodate the increase in cow numbers at the site and takes into consideration best practice for dairy housing.

Whether the siting appropriate

The proposed siting of the building is to the north of the farmstead adjacent to existing cubicle buildings. The proposed siting makes good use of the available space and the siting is appropriate from an operational perspective, fitting in well with the established system of cattle movements throughout the site.

Summary

This is a unique enterprise in the Ribble Valley, in terms of its scale and intensive nature however the proposed expansion of the herd by 250 cows is not insignificant. Undoubtedly the increase in cows will result in an increase in feed and storage requirements and put pressure on existing infrastructure, and in particular the operation of the milking parlour.

The applicant is presently undertaking a trial to establish whether the milking regime can operate with increased cow numbers. The system is presently being run with an additional 160 milking cows, it is proposed to bring a further 90 cows into the system. Should the trial fail, there will be no requirement for the additional livestock building as proposed and I have concerns that the need for the building has not been sufficiently demonstrated, particularly as the trial is still on-going at this present time.

I would be obliged to receive a copy of your Decision Notice in due course.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Jackson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Tracey Jackson BSc (Hons) MRICS
Senior Assistant Estate Surveyor