

Parish: STRATFORD ST MARY

Location: The Old School, School Lane

Proposal: Erection of Staff Recreation, Research and Development Centre and associated landscaping works. Construction of extension to car park

Applicant: Access Accounting

Case Officer: Ben Elvin

Date for Determination: 1 October 2009

A panel of Members visited the site on 15 April 2009 to assess possible over-development, the design and the impact on the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

THE SITE

1. The site lies to the north of Stratford St Mary village, and is accessed off School Lane. It lies within the Built-Up Area Boundary of Stratford St Mary.
2. Access Accounting currently occupy this site and have done so for many years. There are two main buildings; the larger of which is located to the north edge and the second which lies against the east side. A car park is laid out to the west side, though parking also exists alongside and around the existing buildings.
3. The area falls within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, and the frontage of the site is designated as an Area of Visual and Recreational Amenity. This designation is supported by a Tree Preservation Order to some of the trees to the site frontage (fronting School Road).
4. There is a public footpath which cuts through the site, and this also provides a link to a path which runs along the eastern edge of the site.

THE PROPOSAL

5. The proposal puts forward the erection of two buildings to form additional accommodation for Access Accounting. The larger building will be located adjacent to the property known as 'The Rectory' and provides a staff and recreation centre, with the second building proposed between the new building and the existing building on the eastern edge of the site.
6. The buildings are proposed of a modern, contemporary, design and construction including green roofs and significant elements of glazing. They are proposed to achieve a 'Very Good' BREEAM rating and would make use of various renewable energy formats and water collection to provide a sustainable development.
7. A Design and Access Statement has been submitted with the application. This is an extensive document which is available should Members wish to view this prior to the meeting under arrangement with the Case Officer. However, the pertinent points are as follows;
 - The company was founded in Stratford in 1991, and currently employs 270 staff across 8 locations in the UK.
 - The company sees Stratford as the site for its head office operations. They currently also occupy premises at Holton St Mary but this will be relocated to the Stratford site.

- Access Accounting requires better arranged working space which allows some of its teams to work more closely together.
 - The form and arrangement of the buildings has been designed primarily to complement the landscape setting that the site enjoys and to reduce the buildings impact on the landscape.
 - The buildings are formed at a scale that is appropriate to the existing traditional pitched roof buildings, and are arranged with green roofs that provide an effective visual screen to the village and the wider landscape.
 - The planning permission granted under application B/05/00963 for the extension to the existing training building will not be implemented if this permission is granted.
 - Provides a comprehensive landscape assessment from varying viewpoints.
8. The proposal raises a number of issues, and this has meant that the application has to be supported by a number of specialist documents to detail the relevant planning issues. Therefore, in addition to the aforementioned Design and Access Statement, the following supporting information has also been provided;
- Ecological Scoping Survey
 - Arboricultural Report x 2
 - Transport Assessment
 - Biodiversity Report

These documents can be viewed in full in advance of the meeting by prior arrangement with the case officer.

RELEVANT HISTORY

9. B/06/01490 (2006) – Retention of temporary siting of a cabin to provide additional office space for two years – Granted.
10. B/05/00963 (2005) – Erection of single-storey extension to training building (renewal of planning permission B/00/01285) – Granted.
11. B/00/1285 (2000) - Erection of single-storey extension to training building – Granted.
12. B/98/00151 (1998) – Change of use of agricultural land to car park associated with adjoining offices – Granted.
13. B/97/00697 (1997) – Erection of a two-storey building for use as offices with associated facilities and erection of garage/store. Construction of 5 additional car parking spaces – Granted.
14. B/89/01951 (1989) – Retention and continued use of temporary offices and toilet accommodation for a period of two years – Granted.
15. B/88/00646 (1988) – Erection of a side and rear extension – Granted.
16. The history also includes permissions in 1984 for a change of use to light industrial use.

NATIONAL GUIDANCE

17. **PPS1** (Delivering Sustainable Development)
18. **PPS7** (Sustainable Development in Rural Areas)
19. **PPS9** (Biodiversity and Geological Conservation)

20. **PPG4** (Industrial, Commercial Development and Small Firms)
21. **PPG13** (Transport)

PLANNING POLICIES

22. The Development Plan comprises the East of England Plan, adopted 2008, saved policies in the Suffolk Structure Plan, adopted 2001, and the Babergh Local Plan (Alteration No. 2) adopted 2006. The following policies are relevant to this proposal:

East of England Plan - 2008

- **SS1** (Achieving Sustainable Development)
- **ENV7** (Quality in the Built Environment)

Babergh Local Plan (Alteration No.2) 2006

- **CR01** (Countryside)
- **CR02** (Areas of Outstanding Beauty)
- **CR07** (Landscaping Schemes)
- **CN01** (Design)
- **EM20** (Expansion/Extension of Existing Employment Uses)

The relevant documents can be viewed via the internet. Please see Page 4 for details.

CONSULTATIONS

23. PC – recommend refusal on the following grounds;
 - The car park is outside the BUAB, and further extension would encroach on open countryside.
 - The residents of Strickmere would suffer a significant loss of visual amenity. They currently enjoy an uninterrupted view towards Higham.
 - The extension to the car park would intrude on the AVRA and AONB even though additional trees are planted.
 - Access Accounting have confirmed they do not envisage an increase in car numbers so why does the car park need extending? If necessary to extend the car park, the Parish Council would like to see the extension to the rear of the buildings in order that this visual amenity is saved.
 - Concerns with regards to additional surface water and foul water drainage in School Lane.
 - School Lane has a history of flooding, and the properties there have a history of drainage backing up.
 - The design of the buildings are too contemporary and modern and should be in keeping with the AONB.
 - Impacts of traffic in School Lane. Traffic using the road does not adhere to the speed limit, and there is a blind spot when exiting from Access Accounting.
24. LHA – any comments will be reported verbally when received.
25. SWT – Comments regarding potential for protected species on the site to be low. Bats may use the trees for roosting.
26. SCC Rights of Way - make comments regarding the footpaths 3 and 25.
27. HoCAM (Arboricultural Officer) –

- Detrimental impacts to existing trees scheduled for retention should be avoided provided development is undertaken in accordance with the submitted arboricultural report. Removal of other specified trees will have minimal impact on the locality.
28. Dedham Vale Society – have strong reservations about the style and materials of the new buildings. The applicants have gone to extensive lengths to hide the buildings, which suggests that even the applicant appreciates how incongruous and inappropriate they are in the AONB. They are out of place at this site.
29. Suffolk Preservation Society – The Society supports the bold new-build, but has some concern about the car park spreading further into the countryside on the edge of the village.

REPRESENTATIONS

30. 10 letters of objection have been received which make the following comments;
- The car park extension will result in the loss of agricultural land, that lies within an AONB, and parking for nearly 100 cars cannot be justified.
 - The existing buildings are sufficient and the proposal would result in development that increases the offices to almost three times their current size.
 - The proposal would result in nothing less than an industrial site in the middle of the countryside.
 - The application states there would be no impact on protected species. Any wildlife in the area of the car park would be affected.
 - The footpath is to be closed.
 - Drainage issues already result in problems for local residents. Storm water running down the hill could cause further problems.
 - If the business increases further does that mean more parking spaces will be needed on even more Green land? The applicant hasn't considered any other means of transport other than the car.
 - The size and style of the development will be totally out of keeping with the surrounding area. They take no lead from the existing buildings and would be an eyesore.
 - Where will development of this site end? There is already a mix of residential and commercial development which is in danger of becoming an industrial park.
 - The proposal appears to be for the benefit of staff only at the expense of the local people.
 - The site lies on a slope and is part of the world famous Dedham Vale AONB.
 - This development would present the opportunity for further ribbon development along this part of School Lane (precedent).
 - The photographs submitted with the application are biased and selective.
 - The existing car park and night lighting is already invasive.
 - It will be an oversized business in a rural location.
 - The road network is unsuitable for extra traffic.
 - The height of the buildings will restrict natural light into the windows of properties on School Lane.
 - The buildings would impact on the streetscene and are too close to the road.
 - There are protected trees on the site and the buildings are too close to them and will impact on the roots and health of the trees.
 - Loss of privacy from workers being able to see into properties on the other side of School Lane and detriment through additional noise from vehicle movements which may be outside normal working hours.
 - It is unclear as to what materials are proposed to be used.

- Potential light pollution from the buildings.
 - What would happen if Access sold the site and moved?
 - Construction traffic would not be easy to control and could result in accidents.
 - If permission is given, it should be made on the condition that no further extension or expansion be allowed.
31. A petition has been received, which is signed by 34 local residents, opposing the change of use of agricultural land to form the car park. The receipt of this petition was reported to Development Committee at its meeting on 6 May 2009).

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

32. The site lies within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), and the front part of the site is set within an Area of Visual and Recreational Amenity (AVRA). There are protected trees to the front of the site, and the site is bordered on 3 sides by open countryside. Part of the site lies within the Built-Up Area Boundary.
33. It is apparent from the letters of representation received and the aforementioned constraints that there are a number of issues that this proposal raises. In order to fully consider these issues, it is necessary to look at these in turn.

Principle of Development

34. Policy EM20 provides the relevant criteria in considering the extension and expansion of existing business operations. The supporting text in the Babergh Local Plan Alteration No.2 (2006) states that in the interests of providing further employment opportunities, safeguarding the future of local businesses and strengthening the local economy, there will be a strong presumption in favour of permitting the expansion of an existing firm or other employer. Policy EM20 supports this approach, providing that such proposals will be permitted where there is no material conflict with residential and environmental amenity or highway safety.
35. Therefore, the principle of this development can generally be supported, with necessary assessment of the impacts on residential amenity, environmental quality and highway safety forming the basis for considering the merits of the proposal further.

Landscape Impact

36. Policy CR02 provides the relevant criteria in terms of looking at development proposals in the AONB. The importance of the Dedham Vale AONB is recognised within the policy and the merits of this proposal need careful consideration in this respect.
37. The site forms the edge of the Built-Up Area Boundary and it is apparent that the proposal will impact on the character of the area through the change of use of an area of agricultural land to form an extended car park and through the visual impact of the buildings. It is therefore necessary to consider in detail the extent of this impact, in terms of the existing character of the area, the resultant change in that impact and in assessing the character of the proposal in its context.
38. The site is accessed off School Lane and the roadside boundary along this edge is well screened with a mixture of scrub and trees. The physical impact on the trees is considered later. The existing buildings are characteristic two storey red brick structures in a linear form across the site. An existing single-storey structure to the south of the eastern-most building is to be demolished.

39. These buildings are visible from the open countryside beyond the site and can be seen against the backdrop of the trees and hedging beyond. They can also be seen in longer views alongside the rear elevations of some of the properties in Strickmere, which lie on the opposite side of School Lane.
40. It is apparent that the new buildings would be visible to some degree from outside the site, though the design of the buildings has been proposed to include green roofs with a view to reducing the impact on the landscape when taken in context from outside the site. The buildings themselves are contained within the existing site, within the Built-Up Area Boundary, and make use of the existing screening that exists to the School Lane boundary. It is therefore difficult to justify a case in respect of the detriment that the buildings cause to the AONB from this aspect. It therefore returns to the impact of the buildings from longer views outside the site.
41. The new buildings would be sited between the existing two-storey development and the existing landscaping surrounding the Rectory and the road edge. The ridge of the building would be below that of the existing building and it is mainly in views from the east and west that the buildings would be visible. It is not considered that these views, set against the backdrop of the existing buildings and trees, are such that would cause such detriment to the character of the area so as to warrant refusal of the proposal. The Council's Countryside Officer has visited the site and does not consider that the scheme would have an adverse impact on the character of the AONB.
42. When looking at the extension of the car park, it is apparent that this will result in projection of the area of hardstanding into the countryside. The proposal makes provision for hedge planting along the edges of this part of the scheme, and the provision of hedge planting would be sufficient to screen the car parking area from views from outside the site. The consolidation of the car parking into one particular area, removing the existing parking arrangements from the front of the existing buildings and providing additional landscaping opportunities, needs to be considered both in landscape terms and highway safety implications. The existing arrangements are far from desirable in highway terms and lead to particular operational difficulties that cause unfortunate additional manoeuvring on the site, particularly where double parking occurs. The business has existed on this site for a number of years and the intensification of the business has meant that the business requirements have changed. The parking is considered to be unsuitable for the long-term aims of the business, and could lead to parking outside of the site in adjoining roads.
43. In considering the impact of the proposal on the designated AVRA, it is necessary to understand what character it is that the designation looks to sustain. The AVRA designation lies to the front of the site, and includes the protected trees. It is clear that the AVRA relates largely to the character of this area relative to School Lane, in terms of the green screen that lies adjacent to the road. The proposal does not erode this character, it retains the existing trees and looks to remove only those that are of little merit. It is not therefore considered that the scheme would be at odds with the aims of the AVRA designation, where the visibility of the green roof at some points along the road edge would also not be so harmful to this character.

Design

44. The buildings are of a contemporary design that utilise green roofs and large elements of glazing. They do not take their architectural leads from the traditional building form of the existing buildings, but this is not in itself a reason to refuse a contemporary design on this site. In assessing the design, consideration is also given to the context that the buildings are located within (see above), the use that the buildings are required for, the need for sustainable design techniques and the physical appearance and layout of the built form.

45. The design solution proposed results in buildings that conflict with the existing buildings in terms of their form and appearance, but are not considered to conflict in terms of their scale or overall setting of the site. The buildings are lower than those which exist, and utilise curved green roofs and a basement to reduce their scale. The mix of contemporary and traditional buildings results in an interesting development that is of particular interest when viewed from within the site. The design solution put forward to provide the buildings is not considered to be such that jars with its surroundings to an unacceptable degree and when considered in conjunction with the sustainability benefits and soft landscaping improvements that it proposes can be supported.
46. Indeed, in terms of the sustainability issues, particular attention has been given to the performance of the buildings. They have been designed to be naturally ventilated and to achieve low energy use. They will be able to achieve a 'Very Good' BREEAM rating, and the thermal performance of the building will exceed the Building Regulations requirements. Local materials are proposed to be sourced as far as is practicable, and ground source heat pumps and solar hot water collectors are incorporated within the design as well as water saving devices to reduce water levels used.
47. It is appreciated that the use of landscaping should not be permitted simply to screen a development that would otherwise be inappropriate. However, it does not necessarily follow that the provision of strong landscape barriers are therefore something that should not be considered, nor is it considered that this is necessarily a preclude to the fact that the applicant feels that the design is inappropriate and should be hidden.
48. The landscape assessment submitted with the application (as part of the Design and Access Statement) identifies that the applicant has taken into account the particular character that this part of the Dedham Vale AONB was identified as having in the landscape character assessment. It provides an analysis of the Strategic Context, the Local Landscape Context, a Visual Appraisal, Landscape Appraisal, Arboricultural Appraisal (supported by an Arboriculturists Report) and an Ecological Appraisal (again supported by a formal report). The proposal is well thought out in this respect, and the design has resulted from a balanced appraisal of the needs of the organisation against the constrained landscape setting.

Protected Trees

49. The Council's Arboricultural Officer has considered the Arboricultural Report submitted in support of the application, with particular regards to the removal of some of the trees on the site and the potential impact on the longevity of protected trees. The Report provides particular recommendations in respect of the works to trees which are considered to be necessary and relevant. These recommendations would need to be incorporated into suitably worded conditions to be attached to any planning permission if such permission is granted. The Council's Arboricultural Officer is satisfied that the development can be accommodated without giving rise to detriment to the health and longevity of those trees worthy of retention.

Flooding

50. The site lies outside the designated Flood Zones, which cover a large part of Stratford Village. The proposal will provide for a Sustainable Drainage System, in accordance with the good practice guide attached to PPS25. This element of the proposal is therefore considered acceptable.

Car Parking/Travel

51. The site currently accommodates 93 parking spaces, partly within the existing car park area and partly to the front of the existing buildings, where double parking results. The proposal would see the consolidation of the car parking on the site into one area to the western edge, through the extension of the existing car park area. The opportunity will be taken to make disabled parking spaces adjacent to the existing buildings. This would remove the parking to the front of the buildings, allowing an opportunity for landscaping to be carried out within the site.
52. The applicants have submitted a Transport Assessment which provides recorded figures of vehicle movements at both the Stratford St Mary and Holton St Mary sites for the month of April 2009. This identifies that the vehicle movements at the site would be around 88 movements per day from staff cars.
53. Whilst the comments of the Highway Authority have not been received at the time of writing this report, they have been requested to be made available prior to the committee meeting and will be the subject of a verbal update at the meeting.
54. No changes are proposed to the existing vehicular access.
55. The organisation is currently in the process of producing a Green Travel Plan to encourage alternative methods of travel to work where possible. The provision of showers and changing facilities in the staff building is hoped to encourage walking and cycling, as well as covered areas for cycle parking.

Biodiversity/Protected Species

56. The application was initially supported by a scoping survey, which identified the need for additional reports to be provided into the potential for bats and lizards on the site. These documents have been submitted, and summarise that;
 - Physical works to the Oak Trees at the front of the site should be avoided.
 - External lighting should be minimised to ensure no spill into the Oak trees
 - Consider the placement of bat boxes and bird boxes around the site.
 - Undertake clearance of vegetation carefully under the supervision of an Ecologist to protect Stag Beetle larvae
 - Create log piles and dead wood pyramids to encourage stag beetles.
 - Avoid the clearance of vegetation in the bird nesting season.
57. It is considered that the summary made within the above report should be followed, and these matters can be raised with the applicant to advise them of their responsibilities. A condition can be imposed in respect of bat and bird boxes if permission is forthcoming.

Residential Amenity

58. There are a number of objections from residents in Strickmere with regards to the impact of the extension to the car park on the outlook and view from their properties. The landscape impact has already been considered above. The consideration in respect of this impact can only be made relative to a change in outlook, whereby the impact of intrusion to important windows in the neighbouring dwellings is the key consideration. The fact that a development can be seen from a window is not, in itself, sufficient to justify refusal of planning permission.

59. The nearest residential property to the proposed extended car park is No.2 Strickmere. The rear wall of this property lies in excess of 50 metres away from the site and is situated on the opposite side of the road. The properties within Strickmere generally lie adjacent to a field that forms a buffer to the road, and whilst the car park will be visible, the proposal will not intrude on the windows of these properties in terms of dominance or by virtue of an overbearing impact.
60. The lighting of the car park will need to be controlled to ensure that there is no detrimental spill of light into the sky, or into the windows of neighbouring properties. A condition can be imposed to ensure that control is retained over any lighting to the car park, and to the buildings also.

Footpath

61. An existing footpath crosses the site. It is proposed to maintain and improve this footpath, which lies between the two new buildings proposed. Unrestricted access would remain to this path once the development had taken place, and there are no objections to this scheme from the Rights of Way Officer at Suffolk County Council.

CONCLUSIONS

62. The provisions of policy EM20 would support the principles of a scheme such as this, where an existing business premises is to be improved and extended. Stratford St Mary is identified as a sustainable village with a range of facilities and services that can support additional development, and the existing site is included within the Built-Up Area Boundary for the village. It therefore falls for this proposal to be considered on its merits, against the provisions of policy in respect of the landscape character, highway impact, impact on amenity and biodiversity.
63. It is apparent that the existing situation in respect of parking at the site is unfortunate, and leads to both operational and safety issues. The consolidation of the car parking area into one extended car park is considered to be an appropriate solution which, whilst taking in existing agricultural land and having some impact on the character of the area, also allows an opportunity to improve the landscaping around the site. It is therefore considered that the proposal can be supported in this respect.
64. The new buildings are contained within the Built-Up Area Boundary and consist of a development that provides a contemporary and sustainable form that will provide interest to this site. The buildings will allow the continued operation of this important employment provider within an established business site, whilst respecting the character of the area, biodiversity, the protection of important trees and the provision of additional landscaping.
65. The proposal is therefore considered to accord with saved policies EM20, CR02 and CN01 of the Babergh Local Plan Alteration No.2 (2006) and policies SS1 and ENV7 of the East of England Plan 2008.

REASONS FOR APPROVAL

66. The proposal, including the erection of a staff recreation building, research and development centre and construction of extension to car park is considered to be in accordance with the provisions of policies CR02, EM20 and CN01 of the Babergh Local Plan Alteration No.2 (2006) and policies SS1 and ENV7 of the East of England Plan 2008. The proposal would provide for a consolidation of the car parking arrangements on the site and the new buildings are considered to be of a form, scale and detailed design that would provide a sustainable form of development that would be appropriate within the Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The proposal does not give rise to particular harm to residential amenity or to highway safety so as to justify the refusal of planning permission.

RECOMMENDATION

Grant planning permission, subject to the following conditions;

- Materials
- As requested by LHA
- External Lighting
- Bat/Bird Boxes
- Works to Trees/Protection of Trees