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COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO THE POTENTIAL DISPOSAL BY OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL OF NORTH FARM, ASTON

Headline

1. Of the illustrative options provided by Oxfordshire County Council (OCC)¹ for the community-led future of the North Farm site in Aston (assuming its continued unviability as a farm), the most favoured by the local community is the '9 Houses' option², albeit this will need further refinement and consultation.

Introduction

2. Owned by OCC, North Farm in Aston has lain vacant since 2016 and ceased operating as a farm in 2014. Community uncertainty and concern over the site led the Parish Council to initiate discussions with OCC in Aug 2020, subsequently forwarding a community development proposal in Nov that year. Having declared North Farm surplus to requirements and considering it no longer economically viable as a farm, OCC would prefer to dispose of the site with no residual responsibilities. However, WODC as the Local Planning Authority (LPA), will not consider any housing development on the site as this would be contrary to the Local Plan - unless it can be demonstrated that such development is exemplary in its design and has the support of, and offers benefits to, the local community. OCC support this approach but are obliged under Section 123 of the Local Government Act (1972), are obliged to maximise its value. They therefore proposed 5 illustrative development options for consideration by the local community and the Parish Council has conducted public consultation accordingly.

3. Three rounds of public consultation have occurred in the Parish, culminating in a definitive third round conducted between 8 Dec 21 and 18 Feb 22 that sought, inter alia, the specific views of residents on the 5 illustrative options provided by OCC. With 15% of residents (20% of households) responding - very good for public consultations of this nature - the Parish Council is confident that they have both a mandate and consensus with which to formally respond to OCC on behalf of the local community.

Results of Public Consultation

4. Fuller details of the results of public consultation are enclosed. The principal points are as follows:
- a. The risks of doing something now are outweighed by the risks of doing nothing.
 - b. Any development solution must be permanent and for the whole site (including the paddock).
 - c. Development on the site must be kept to a minimum.
 - d. There must be on-site sewage disposal for the site with no connection to the mains system.

¹ OCC (Powerpoint) presentation to Aston, Cote, Shifford and Chimney Parish Council, 4 Nov 21.

² Bluestone Planning Sketch Layout Plan (4), Job Ref 052A/0717JF NFA-06.1.

- e. The following illustrative options provided by OCC are not considered acceptable: 6 houses (not a permanent solution for the whole site), do nothing (presents a greater risk to the community), 23 houses (too 'expensive' in terms of the benefits offered), 16 houses (no appetite for affordable housing).
- f. **The most favoured illustrative option was '9 houses'** - maximises the available open space (gifted to the community) and represents least impact on the Conservation Area, preserving heritage assets in perpetuity.
- g. Alternative options proposed by the community include reactivating as a (sustainable 21st Century) farm; relocation of the proposed OCC children's home in Back Lane; an extension to the village school; retirement properties; light industrial units; and a 'green blueprint' for rural development. Subsequent informal discussions indicate that for varying reasons, these alternates are not likely to be viable for OCC.
- h. Of the potential community benefits on offer, the provision of affordable housing was considered least important and should be discounted - as should a community hub and public parking. Most important are the complementary benefits of minimising development and maximising community open space. These benefits will need to be better defined and developed by the Parish Council
- i. Common concerns and 'red lines' include the following: traffic and safe access - North Street is already extremely busy and there is no footpath on the farm side on the street; a range of environmental issues, including provision for wildlife (bats and a family of barn owls reside in the 2 barns); respect for the Conservation Area; the need for continued public consultation by OCC.

Way Ahead

5. Assuming the site's continued unviability as a farm, the project should proceed using the '9 houses' option as a foundation for further refinement, negotiation and continued (binding) engagement between all 3 levels of local government and the local community. The immediate involvement of WODC as the LPA is considered critical to project development and is probably overdue. For its part, the Parish Council will need to further develop and better define the relevant and tangible community benefits of the project for consideration by the LPA. Planning refusal by the LPA will result at best in a de facto 'do nothing' situation - not acceptable to the community - and could at worst see OCC dispose of the site at market value albeit without planning permission, very likely to a developer for 'land banking' for future intensive development - the worst outcome of all for the community. The Parish Council is most grateful to OCC for their candour and collegiate approach thus far.

Yours sincerely,

Original Signed

Enclosure:

1. North Farm, Aston - Public Consultation Stage 3 Results (Powerpoint Presentation).

Copies to:

██████████, Bluestone Planning
Councillor Dan Levy, Oxfordshire County Council
Councillor Steve Good, West Oxfordshire District Council
Councillor Lysette Nicholls, West Oxfordshire District Council