

| Item No. | Application and Parish | No. | Statutory Date | Target | Proposal, Location, Applicant |
|---|------------------------------------|-----|----------------|--------|--|
| (2) | 25/00827/FULMAJ Parish: Welford | | 30.06.2025 | | Use of land for wedding ceremonies and receptions for 6 months a year (April - September), including the temporary erection of tipis, catering tent, ceremony tent, toilet block and associated car parking (for a temporary period of 5 years). Welford Park, Welford, Newbury RG20 8HU Forest Edge Tipis |
| ¹ Extension of time agreed with applicant: None. | | | | | |

The application can be viewed on the Council's website at the following link:

<https://publicaccess.westberks.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=documents&keyVal=SUT9K2RD0NK00>

Recommendation Summary: To delegate to the Development Manager to REFUSE the application

Ward Member(s): Councillor Dennis Benneyworth
Councillor Denise Gaines
Councillor Tony Vickers

Reason for Committee Determination: Councillor Call-in (Cllr Vickers)

Committee Site Visit: 17.07.2025

Contact Officer Details

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is for the Committee to consider the proposed development against the policies of the development plan and the relevant material considerations, and to make a decision as to whether to approve or refuse the application.
- 1.2 This application seeks planning permission for the use of the site for wedding ceremonies and receptions for 6 months per year (April to September), including the temporary erection of tipis and associated car parking for a temporary period of 5 years.
- 1.3 The 5ha application site is located within 2 ancient woodlands (Tree Preservation Order 201/21/1086). The location of the tipis would be within a clearing within the ancient woodland measuring approximately 2ha in extent. Access is taken via 2 access points along Welford Road. There would be a large parking area located to the west of the site on arable land, which would measure approximately 0.3ha. Public Right of Way WELF/2/1 runs along the internal access track between the 2 access points along Welford Road. A small portion of a second PROW, WELF/3/2 is located along the southern-most access point. The M4 Motorway is located approx. 450m to the south. The site is located within the grounds of Welford Park. The site forms part of the North Wessex Downs National Landscape.
- 1.4 The site is currently being used by Forest Edge Tipis for wedding ceremonies and receptions under permitted development (PD) rights (Schedule 2, Part 4, Class B of the GPDO). This restricts the use of the land for wedding ceremonies to 28 days in total per calendar year. According to the agent, 8 weddings can be accommodated per year under PD rights. The planning statement states that the site has been used on this basis for the past 5 years.
- 1.5 This proposal would allow for an increase of wedding ceremonies and receptions for an unrestricted number of weddings for 6 months per year (April-September), for a period of 5 years.
- 1.6 The planning statement states that the proposal would allow for a larger number of weddings to take place per year. It takes up to 2.5 days to erect the tipis and 1 day to take down. Permitting the tipis to remain in situ for 6 months of the year would reduce labour time and amount of traffic to and from the site to set up and dismantle. Additional equipment such as the bar and furniture would be able to remain in place.
- 1.7 Forest Edge Tipis provide a bespoke tipi set up for wedding receptions. Their clients have flexibility to choose the format of entertainment and food, which are often food trucks, hog roasts and barbeques. Some couples opt for traditional sit-down meals where caterers are used.
- 1.8 The development comprises 4no. tipis, a ceremony tent, a catering tent and a mobile toilet block. There would be 2no. woodchip paths. The first would be from where the tipis are located towards the parking area and the other would be between the tipis and the ceremony tent.
- 1.9 The ceremony tent would measure approx. 12m long and measure 3.5m high. 3no. tipis would be interconnected to provide a single larger structure, with an additional 1no tipi. The interlinked tipi can accommodate a maximum of 120 guests with tables, a bar area, dance floor and a stage. 1no. tipi would provide a breakaway space for guests to sit outside of the main tipi structure. At its maximum size, the tipis measure 30m x 20.4m, with a height of 6.8m. The sides of the tipis can be rolled up to create large openings to height of 2.1m. The catering tent would measure 6m x 6m, with a height of 6m. It would be connected to the larger tipi structure through a tunnel. The mobile toilet block would be a renovated shepherd's hut measuring 5.5m x 2.3m with a height of 3m. A

drainage connection would not be required for waste disposal. A parking area would be located southwest of the venue lining the Ancient Woodland to accommodate 40 vehicles.

- 1.10 A parking area is located on the outside edge of the woodland and can accommodate 40no. vehicles. This area is pastureland, and no physical works are proposed. Paths and signage would direct guests to the tipis. Access would be taken via 2 single-width and direction access points along Welford Road.
- 1.11 The tipis would be removed between October and March. Between events, the side flaps would be opened and the flooring removed.
- 1.12 Paragraphs 10 and 11 of the Town and Country Planning Direction (2024) states that any development affecting an ancient woodland must be determined by the Secretary of State. Where a local planning authority does not propose to refuse an application for which the direction applies, the authority shall consult the Secretary of State for a final decision. Should the planning authority however seek to refuse the application, then the Secretary of State need not be consulted.
- 1.13 Members attention is therefore drawn the fact that if they are minded to approve the application, then the application will need to be referred to the Secretary of State. The usual rules would then apply: the application must be forwarded to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and the LPA must not grant planning permission until the SOS has either stated that she does not intend to call it in or a period of 21 days has elapsed without a response from the SOS.

2. Planning History

- 2.1 The table below outlines the relevant planning history of the application site.

| Application | Proposal | Decision / Date |
|-----------------|--|-----------------|
| 24/02426/FULMAJ | Use of the woodland for wedding ceremonies and receptions for 6-months a year (April - September), including the temporary erection of tipis, ceremony tent, catering tent, toilet block and associated car parking. | Withdrawn |

- 2.2 For the above withdrawn application, the application was submitted without an Ecological Impact Assessed. As such, the potential impact of the proposal on the natural environment had not been adequately explored.

3. Legal and Procedural Matters

- 3.1 **Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA):** Given the nature, scale and location of this development, it is not considered to fall within the description of any development listed in Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017. As such, EIA screening is not required.
- 3.2 **Publicity:** Publicity has been undertaken in accordance with Article 15 of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015, and the Council's Statement of Community Involvement. Site notices were displayed on

28.04.2025 at the application's site's northern-most access along Welford Road with a deadline for representations of 20.05.2025. A public notice was displayed in the Newbury Weekly News on 24.04.2025. Notification letters were sent to the relevant consultees.

- 3.3 **Local Financial Considerations:** Section 70(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended) provides that a local planning authority must have regard to a local finance consideration as far as it is material. Whether or not a 'local finance consideration' is material to a particular decision will depend on whether it could help to make the development acceptable in planning terms. It would not be appropriate to make a decision based on the potential for the development to raise money for a local authority or other government body.

| Consideration | Applicable to proposal | Material to decision | Refer to paragraph(s) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) | No | No | 3.4 |
| New Homes Bonus | No | No | N/A |
| Affordable Housing | No | Yes | N/A |
| Public Open Space or Play Areas | No | Yes | N/A |
| Developer Contributions (S106) | No | Yes | N/A |
| Job Creation | Yes | Yes | N/A |

- 3.4 **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL):** Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) is a levy charged on most new development within an authority area. The money is used to pay for new infrastructure, supporting the development of an area by funding the provision, replacement, operation or maintenance of infrastructure. CIL will be used to fund roads and other transport facilities, schools and other educational facilities, flood defences, medical facilities, open spaces, and sports and recreational areas. Subject to the application of any applicable exemptions, CIL will be charged on residential (Use Classes C3 and C4) and retail (former Use Classes A1 – A5) development at a rate per square metre (based on Gross Internal Area) on new development of more than 100 square metres of gross internal area (including extensions) or when a new dwelling is created (even if it is less than 100 square metres). CIL liability, and the application of any exemptions, will be formally confirmed by the CIL Charging Authority under separate cover following any grant of planning permission. More information is available at <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/community-infrastructure-levy>

- 3.5 **Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED):** In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The Council must have due regard to the need to achieve the following objectives:

- (a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Equality Act 2010;
- (b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- (c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

- 3.6 Having due regard to the need to advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it involves having due regard, in particular, to the need to—
- (a) remove or minimise disadvantages suffered by persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are connected to that characteristic;
 - (b) take steps to meet the needs of persons who share a relevant protected characteristic that are different from the needs of persons who do not share it;
 - (c) encourage persons who share a relevant protected characteristic to participate in public life or in any other activity in which participation by such persons is disproportionately low.
- 3.7 The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief. Whilst there is no absolute requirement to fully remove any disadvantage, the duty is to have regard to and remove or minimise disadvantage. In considering the merits of this planning application, due regard has been given to these objectives.
- 3.8 There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.
- 3.9 **Human Rights Act:** The development has been assessed against the provisions of the Human Rights Act, including Article 1 of the First Protocol (Protection of property), Article 6 (Right to a fair trial) and Article 8 (Right to respect for private and family life and home) of the Act itself. The consideration of the application in accordance with the Council procedures will ensure that views of all those interested are taken into account. All comments from interested parties have been considered and reported in summary in this report, with full text available via the Council's website.
- 3.10 Any interference with property rights is in the public interest and in accordance with the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 regime for controlling the development of land. This recommendation is based on the consideration of the proposal against adopted Development Plan policies, the application of which does not prejudice the Human Rights of the applicant or any third party.
- 3.11 **Listed building setting:** Section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires that special regard must be had to the desirability of preserving a listed building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses. Section 16(2) has the same requirement for proposals for listed building consent. The site is not within the setting of the listed buildings in Welford or Wickham.
- 3.12 **Conservation areas:** Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires special attention to be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area. The site is not affected by any conservation areas.
- 3.13 **National Landscapes (AONB):** Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way (CRoW) Act 2000 (as amended) provides a general duty for public bodies: "Any relevant authority exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to effect, land in an area of outstanding natural beauty in England must seek to further the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area of outstanding natural beauty." AONBs have been rebranded to be known as National Landscapes, although their legal AONB status continues.

4. Consultation

Statutory and non-statutory consultation

- 4.1 The table below summarises the consultation responses received during the consideration of the application. The full responses may be viewed with the application documents on the Council's website, using the link at the start of this report.

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| Economic Development: | <p>Support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The proposal represents a strong case for increasing the economic diversification of a primarily agricultural business due to the increased capacity of wedding events. This reduces the economic reliance of farming which is prone to global shock factors. - Reduced planning weight should be given to the diversification benefits outlined by the proposal due to the wider range of measures already supporting the agricultural business. - The 245 jobs already provided by the Estate will help secure the long-term economic viability of the Estate. - Due to the site's location in close proximity to Newbury, Great Shefford, and Chieveley, increase employment opportunities generated by the wedding venue will be able to capitalise on the local labour supply and offer employment opportunities. This helps to ensure their long-term economic viability. - The wedding events will help promote tourism. - The increasing number of weddings would increase the volume of waste and visits to the site. <p>The proposal aligns with economic-related planning policies.</p> |
| Lead Local Flood Authority (LLFA) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No objection. |
| Forestry Commission | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - As a non-ministerial government department, we do not provide an opinion supporting or objecting to planning applications. Advice provided. - Ancient woodlands, ancient trees, and veteran trees are irreplaceable habitats. The NPPF states that development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habits should be refused unless wholly exceptional reasons exist and a suitable compensation strategy exists. - The planning authority should consider the direct and indirect impacts on the ancient woodland resulting from both construction and operational phases. |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The Secretary of State will need to be consulted. - Existing trees should be retained wherever possible, and opportunities should be taken to incorporate trees into the development. - Ancient Woodlands and ancient & veteran trees are already recognised as irreplaceable habitats and as such are exempt from the biodiversity net gain requirement. - A felling licence may be required. <p>The Council should carefully consider the previous usage of sites, including satellite imagery, to consider development that is proposed on recently felled woodland.</p> |
| Archaeology | The temporary tents within an open space in Highwood Copse would have relatively little adverse impact on surviving archaeology, however, general traffic and heavy machinery bringing in the facilities or undertaking forestry operations have the potential to damage earthworks, particularly in wet conditions. It is recommended therefore to proceed with care and finalise the Woodland Management Plan for the wider landscape. |
| Environmental Health | <p>No objection.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There is a large distance from nearby receptors and no noise complaints have been received. Noise complaints under the new proposal are not expected. |
| Public Rights of Way | No objection subject to informatives. |
| Highways | <p>Objection – unsustainable location</p> <p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No concerns regarding the proposed access arrangement. Access to the site is via Welford Road, where there are two existing entry / egress points that route through the site. The northern access is located approximately 300 metres south of the point where Welford Road forks with an unnamed track to Welford Park. The southern access is located just north of the M4 bridge. This access arrangement will remain unchanged with the proposal, but the site will adopt a one way system where all guests, caterers and staff will enter via the southern access, with vehicles exiting via the northern access. I am content with the width of both accesses that are wide enough for a large car with a trailer and a 4.6 tonne van. I am also content that adequate visibility splays can now be achieved for both the proposed ingress and the proposed egress for the proposal. I therefore have no further concerns regarding the access arrangements for the proposed site. <p>Parking:</p> |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are no parking concerns. A car parking area is proposed for 40 cars located southwest of the tipis with internal pathways proposed to guide guests from the parking area to the tents. From previous wedding applications, it is accepted that each car would have 2.5 guests, therefore, for 120 guests, there would be parking demand of 48 spaces. This excludes vendors' vehicles. However, even if the demand is exceeded, there is space for overspill parking. <p>Traffic movements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If the proposed 120 guests are accommodated as 2.5 people per car, this would result in 96 vehicle movements per wedding (48 arrivals and 48 departures). It is also estimated that an additional 14 vehicles would be used by vendors. This would result in a total of 110 vehicle movements per wedding. - If the proposal accommodates 48 weddings per year with 120 guests, this would equate to approximately 5,280 vehicle movements per year. - In this location, there are no footways, adequate cycle routes or bus services anywhere in the vicinity of the site. Therefore, nearly all, if not all journeys will take place to and from the site by motorised vehicle. There is limited population nearby that would be served by this and therefore clientele will travel from potentially great distances to and from the site. The sustainability of the site in transport terms is questioned. A travel plan has been submitted, however, the effect of any travel plan would be very limited. <p>Conclusions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The LHA therefore recommends refusal as the proposal will increase traffic in a rural location that has no pedestrian or bus routes and is linked by rural roads where at times cycling can be difficult. The location of the site will increase traffic where the mode of travel can only be the private car. |
| Ecology | <p>Objection. Significant harm will be caused.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mitigation should not be considered until it has been determined that "wholly exceptional reasons" exist to permit the development within the ancient woodland. - The proposed extension of woodland management from the monies generated from the wedding venue is unevidenced and would likely be inadequate to compensate for the harm. - The application must be sent to the Secretary of State should the local planning authority seek to approve. |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The fallback position, which would see wedding events continuing at the site under permitted development rights, would be less harmful. - The proposal demonstrates unacceptable levels of disturbance that would lead to deterioration of character and habitat of the ancient woodland. This is having considered the Ecological Impact Assessment provided and is consistent with the dismissed appeal by the planning inspector: APP/A1910/W/21/3275429. (Details of this appeal provided further in the report). |
| Trees | <p>Objection. Significant harm will be caused.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No felling licenses have been granted relating to the trees felled in the 'tipi' area. The thinned trees have not been restocked, meaning that the canopy has been significantly reduced in this area. This has resulted in increased sunlight that is compromising the ground layer of the ancient woodland. - The existing flora in the 'tipi' area has been stressed and damaged by vehicle tracking and machine backfilling of dips caused by root removal. - The Tree Officer's site inspection found that a further area into the woods has been cleared of ground flora just as Bluebells had emerged and were yet to flower, causing significant species damage in this location. This area is where the proposed ceremony tent is to be situated. - The arboricultural report is incorrect in describing the area of the site as "parkland" as it is within the boundary of an ancient woodland that has recently been thinned. This part of the Ancient Woodland should be restocked to ensure the continuity of the woodland habitat. - The permanent siting of the structures between May and September (inclusive) would result in no vegetation, including natural tree regeneration, would grow during this time. The specialist ground layer species found in Ancient Woodland are unlikely to survive into the following one or two growing seasons. Rather, it is likely that they will be replaced by opportunistic ruderal vegetation developing on soil gaps once the structures are removed. This has already begun. - It is likely that guests will range beyond the footprint of the temporary buildings and footpaths. - Littering could result, which would have a negative impact on amenity, including from the Welford Public Footpath 2. - The increase in number of guests is a concern in terms of the potential for greater harm than that constrained under PD rights. |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Unacceptable amount of soil compaction through increased footfall will result. This will lead to a higher soil bulk density. This will have a negative impact on the health of tree roots and other vegetation. - It is ironic that the beauty and biodiversity of the woodland acts as part of the business' unique selling point, yet it has been and will continue to be harmed by the proposal. - It is ironic that the Estate supports the proposal, stating that it will expand its conservation efforts, by harming the existing irreplaceable habitat that has existed since 1600AD. Woodland grant schemes are available to support woodland management. - There are no wholly exceptional reasons why the development must be approved in this location. - The Estate is fairly extensive and could locate this activity outside of the bounds of the Ancient Woodland which could be more environmentally acceptable. |
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Public representations

4.2 Representations have been received from 26 contributors, all of whom support the application.

4.3 The full responses may be viewed with the application documents on the Council's website, using the link at the start of this report. In summary, the following issues/points have been raised:

- The estate needs to diversify and foster economic growth of local businesses.
- The proposal will create jobs and enhance the hospitality sector, benefitting pubs, hotels, event suppliers, taxis and B&Bs.
- Forest Edge Tipis has utilised the event space for 5 years with demonstrable economic benefit.
- The site is well-located with good access away from residential properties.
- The income generated will be allocated towards woodland management and conservation which have become increasingly challenging due to financial constraints.
- Weddings are deeply personal events and couples seek unique touches.
- This diversification project is a sensitive way of using the woodland areas.
- There aren't many opportunities in the rural area of children or young adults.
- The venue provides full and part-time jobs.
- There is no impact on traffic, noise and there is no anti-social behaviour.
- Nothing permanent is being built and can be removed without knowing anyone was ever there.
- The Highways Officer is recommending refusal due to lack of bus stops, sustainable travel etc. Nobody is going to attend a wedding on a bike and the local bus service is very infrequent. This issue does not matter.
- The Tree Officer says that wedding guests will trample flora and fauna and the resulting compaction will be detrimental to the woodland. However, there is a public footpath running through the wood which also causes compaction and nobody has complained.

- The Tree Officer states that there is an unacceptable threat to the woodland. This is not the case. If this were correct, the current case would demonstrate this.
- The site is already operating without any problems.
- Forest Edge Tipis are a small family business that survived through the pandemic through hard work, professionalism, and excellent customer service. They deserve the opportunity to have a permanent summer base at this exceptional site.
- The natural surroundings with their rich and vibrant wildlife, provides a stunning and peaceful backdrop for celebrations.
- The seasonal use ensures minimal environmental disruption.
- The temporary structures are low impact and blend in beautifully within the landscape.
- The site's design and operations have demonstrated clear respect for the environment.
- The flexibility and versatility of the space has made it a sought-after venue.
- The seasonal use of the land for weddings is sustainable and beneficial environmentally, economically and socially.
- The wedding venue creates sponsorship and marketing opportunities for local business.
- The wedding venue presents collaboration and local partnerships with vendors.
- Local pubs would provide a venue for associated wedding celebrations such as bridal showers and post-wedding brunches.
- Forest Edge Tipis are supplied with dancefloors, a range of uplighters and other lighting options.
- A permanent base would reduce travel time for vendors. This would reduce petrol consumption and pollution.
- The woodland is full of bird songs, and a range of wild animals such as deer, partridges, many different insects and pheasants.
- The woodland is well-maintained by Welford Park.
- There has been yearly regrowth.
- Forest Edge Tipis have a strong commitment to sustainability.
- Ancient Woodlands should be celebrated and enjoyed. They need to be looked after and cared for which is a belief shared by Forest Edge Tipis and Welford Park.
- The environmental officers should be thrilled with this application as it is an opportunity for money to be spent on maintaining the woodland with minimal impact by the tents.
- The venue brings people together within a natural setting.
- The Estate has a proven track record and would never allow any event to be detrimental to the area.
- Welford parking has the facilities, skilled staff and reputation to ensure remedial action is taken.
- The public footpaths would not be negatively affected.

5. Planning Policy

- 5.1 Planning law requires that applications for planning permission be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The following policies of the statutory development plan are relevant to the consideration of this application.

| Development Plan Document | Relevant Policies |
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| West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy SP1 The Spatial Strategy - Policy SP2 North Wessex Downs AONB - Policy SP3 Settlement Hierarchy |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy SP5 Responding to Climate Change - Policy SP6 Flood Risk - Policy SP7 Design Quality - Policy SP8 Landscape Character - Policy SP9 Historic Environment - Policy SP10 Green Infrastructure - Policy SP11 Biodiversity & Geodiversity - Policy SP19 Transport - Policy SP20 Infrastructure Requirements & Delivery <p>Development Management Policies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Policy DM3 Health & Wellbeing - Policy DM4 Building Sustainable Homes & Businesses - Policy DM5 Environmental Nuisance & Pollution Control - Policy DM6 Water Quality - Policy DM7 Water Resources & Waste Water - Policy DM8 Air Quality - Policy DM11 Non-designated Heritage Assets - Policy DM14 Assets of Archaeological Importance - Policy DM15 Trees, Woodland & Hedgerows - Policy DM21 Retention of Mobile Home Parks - Policy DM22 Residential Use of Space Above Non-Residential Units - Policy DM23 Housing Related to Rural Workers - Policy DM30 Residential Amenity - Policy DM35 Sustaining a Prosperous Rural Economy - Policy DM36 Farm Diversification - Policy DM41 Digital Infrastructure - Policy DM42 Transport Infrastructure - Policy DM44 Parking - Policy DM45 Travel Planning |
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5.2 The following material considerations are relevant to the consideration of this application:

- The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)
- The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)
- Quality Design SPD (2006)
- Planning Obligations SPD (2014)
- Sustainable Drainage Systems SPD (2018)

6. Appraisal

Activity under PD vs proposed.

6.1 According to the agent, a total of 8 wedding events would be held in 2025 under the 28-day permitted development rules. With a venue holding up to 120 guests, this would amount to up to 960 guests per year. In a similar previous application, 2.5 guests per vehicle was accepted as standard. With 2 catering staff, 3 bar staff, 1 wedding officiant, and one wedding coordinator, there would be a minimum of 8 vendors, although this number would vary. For the purposes of measuring the amount of proposed activity, it is assumed that 8 vendors are being used. This amounts to 896 vehicle movements per year.

6.2 It is proposed to allow for an unlimited number of weddings each accommodating a maximum of 120 guests, within 6 months of the year, for a period of 5 years. In this application 1-2 weddings per week are proposed.

6.3 Three scenarios are unpacked below to determine the approximate increase in activity that would result from this proposal. The first scenario assumes that there would only be 1 wedding per week. This would allow for any 'slow' months such as in April and September when temperatures are at their lowest within the 6-month period and the weather is less predictable. In such case, the proposed 1-2 weddings per week may average to 1 wedding per week in total. The second scenario assumes that the proposed 1-2 weddings per week is achievable. The third scenario assumes that as most of the equipment need not be removed for 6 months, this increases the efficiency of the venue and increases the number of weddings that can be accommodated each week up to 2 per week. The below assesses the anticipated activity based on guest numbers and vehicle trips.

6.4 The amount of activity in the first scenario (average of 1 wedding per week) is as follows:

- 4 weddings per month
- 28 weddings in 6 months.
- 140 weddings over 5 years.

Guests:

- 1 wedding can accommodate up to 120 guests
- For 1 wedding per week, this would amount to 480 guests per month.
- Over 6 months, this would amount to 2,880 guests.
- Over 5 years, this would amount to 14,400 guests within the ancient woodland.

Vehicle trips:

- Vehicle trips of guests as well as 8 vendors (such as a wedding coordinator, 2no. bar staff, 2no. catering staff, 1no. photographer, 1no. music DJ, 1 wedding officiant etc.)
- 2.5 guests per vehicle + 1 vehicle per vendor = 48 vehicles + 8 vehicles = 56 vehicles per wedding and 112 vehicle trips (arriving to and leaving the venue).
- 4 weddings per month amounts to 448 vehicle trips.
- 28 weddings in 6 months amounts to 2,688 trips.
- 140 weddings over 5 years amounts to 13,440 vehicle trips.

6.5 In the second and more likely scenario, it is assumed that over the course of 6 months, half of the weeks will have 1 wedding, and the other half will have 2 weddings (i.e. the proposed 1-2 weddings per week). This wedding frequency is stated in the planning statement. This would be as follows:

- 6 weddings per month
- 36 weddings in 6 months
- 180 weddings in 5 years.

Guests:

- 1 wedding can accommodate up to 120 guests.
- For 1.5 weddings per week, this would amount to 180 guests.
- Over 1 month (6 weddings), this will amount to 720 guests per month.
- Over six months, this would amount to 4,320 guests.
- Over the proposed 5-year period, this would amount 21,600 guests within the ancient woodland.

Vehicle trips:

- Vehicle trips of guests as well as 8 vendors (such as a wedding coordinator, 2no. bar staff, 2no. catering staff, 1no. photographer, 1no. music DJ, 1 wedding officiant etc.)
- 2.5 guests per vehicle + 1 vehicle per vendor = 48 vehicles + 8 vehicles = 56 vehicles per wedding and 112 vehicle trips (arriving to and leaving the venue).
- Over 1 week (1.5 weddings) this amounts to up to 168 vehicle trips.
- Over 1 month (6 weddings), this would amount to 672 vehicle trips.
- Over 6 months (36 weddings), this would amount to 4,032 trips
- Over 5 years (180 weddings), this would amount 20,160 trips.

6.6 In the third scenario, it is assumed that as the equipment is left on site and need not be removed, this increases the efficiency of the wedding venue to regularly accommodate up to 2 weddings per week. While this is unlikely to always be the case, it demonstrates what could result as to measure the maximum amount of activity that could result.

- 8 weddings per month
- 48 weddings in 6 months
- 240 weddings in 5 years

Guests:

- 1 wedding can accommodate up to 120 guests.
- For 2 weddings per week, this would amount to 240 guests.
- Over 1 month, this would amount to 960 guests.
- Over six months, this would amount to 5,760 guests
- Over 5 years, this would amount to 28,800 guests within the ancient woodland.

Vehicle trips:

- Vehicle trips of guests as well as 8 vendors (such as a wedding coordinator, 2no. bar staff, 2no. catering staff, 1no. photographer, 1no. music DJ, 1 wedding officiant etc.)
- 2.5 guests per vehicle + 1 vehicle per vendor = 48 vehicles + 8 vehicles = 56 vehicles per wedding and 112 vehicle trips (arriving to and leaving the venue).
- Over 1 month (8 weddings) this would amount to 896 vehicle trips.
- Over 6 months, this would amount to 5,376 vehicle trips.
- Over 5 years, this would amount to 26,880 vehicle trips.

6.7 Although the vehicles would only travel along established tracks and mostly park outside of the confines of the woodlands, the exit track dissects the southern portion of the ancient woodland. As well be explored below, the hundreds of vehicles per month would generate noise that would disturb the wildlife in this Local Wildlife Site on a regular basis. The amount of activity within the ancient woodland based on the number of guests visiting the site and the number of vehicle trips generated by guests and vendors that could result if this application is approved, is very significant and this is not a small-scale application with little to no impact negative environmental impact.

Principle of development

6.8 The site includes 2no. ancient woodland areas, being "Mantclose Copse" which would accommodate the 2no. access roads, and "Highwood Copse" which would accommodate the wedding venue. While there are 2no. ancient woodlands on the site, for pragmatic reasons, these are both referred to together as "the ancient woodland".

- 6.9 As per Paragraph 193 of the NPPF, Ancient Woodland is regarded as an “irreplaceable habitat” and the site therefore has exceptionally high environmental value. Ancient woodlands, by definition, have existed since at least 1600AD and are important for wildlife, soils, carbon capture and storage, their contribution to seed bank and genetic diversity, recreation, health and wellbeing, and their cultural, historic and landscape values. The ancient woodland also comprises a Local Wildlife Site which increases the environmental value of the site to significant and any impact would carry significant weight, as required by the NPPF.

Principle of development in accordance with the NPPF:

- 6.10 Paragraph 193 of the NPPF states that:

“development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists”

- 6.11 Paragraph 193 of the NPPF therefore indicates that 2 criteria must be satisfied before approval can be granted for a *development that results in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats*. This includes the proposal having a “wholly exceptional reason” to approve, *and* if a suitable compensation strategy exists.
- 6.12 In terms of the first criterion, Footnote 70 of the NPPF describes what constitutes “wholly exceptional reasons”. This includes nationally significant infrastructure projects and where the associated public benefit would clearly outweigh the loss or deterioration of the habitat. Such infrastructure projects are detailed in part 3 of the Planning Act (2008). Such include, for example, on-shore generating stations with a capacity of over 50 megawatts, electric lines, airports and railway lines. Due to the significantly high environmental value of ancient woodlands, any loss or deterioration is only acceptable when large scale development such as these are proposed. The public benefit therefore needs to be exceptionally significant to justify an approval of development *that results in the loss or deterioration of an Ancient Woodland*, and without it, such development should be refused.
- 6.13 As is set out later in the report, the proposal is considered by officers to result in the loss and deterioration of the Ancient Woodland.
- 6.14 Although the following sections will demonstrate that the proposal would deliver a tangible local economic benefit, this benefit is not proportionate to the scale of public interest typically associated with nationally significant infrastructure projects. The local public benefit offered here does not constitute a 'wholly exceptional reason' to justify approving the application.
- 6.15 In terms of the second criterion, a suitable compensation strategy must also exist. The Council's Ecology Team has stated that the nature of compensation, and whether such would be acceptable, would need to be provided in a very detailed and comprehensive management plan in accordance with the Forestry Commission's guidance based on extensive survey data. Various mitigation strategies have been suggested, including in the Ecological Impact Assessment and adherence to the Woodland Management Plan.
- 6.16 A Draft Woodland Management Plan has been submitted with this application. As this Woodland Management Plan is only in draft form and has not been accepted by the Forestry Commission, it has not been deemed that the conservation and woodland maintenance measures proposed are acceptable or affective. Furthermore, the Woodland Management Plan relates to the maintenance of the entire estate, rather than this specific site, and does not propose mitigation or compensation for the harm that would result from the wedding venue. The Woodland Management Plan therefore has very limited weight in the planning balance.

- 6.17 Considering the very high status accorded by the NPPF to ancient woodland, absolute certainty that a suitable compensation strategy exists is required. The Woodland Management Plan in draft form does not meet this requirement. The Ecological Impact Assessment proposes various mitigation measures, including the implementation of a Woodland Management Plan. The various proposed mitigation measures are explored below. There is no evidence that the Ecological Impact Assessment considered the amount of activity estimated above under the 3 scenarios, as such is not reflected in the report. It concluded that “the development will result in temporary impacts to the site with all facilities removed after the wedding season.” As will be explored below, this conclusion is disputed considering the thousands of people and vehicles that will be entering and existing the site over 6-month period during the same time of the year over a 5-year period.
- 6.18 For the reasons above, the proposal does not constitute “wholly exceptional circumstances” based on the anticipated amount of local economic benefit *and* suitable compensation is not guaranteed. The proposal therefore fails to comply with Paragraph 193 of the NPPF.

Principle of development in accordance with Local Plan Review’s Spatial Strategy

- 6.19 Policy SP1 (The Spatial Strategy) is the overarching spatial strategy for West Berkshire. Of relevance to this application, the strategy directs development to areas of lower environmental value. The proposed site is within an ancient woodland which is an irreplaceable habit with very high environmental value. The proposal therefore does not comply with Policy SP1.
- 6.20 Policy SP2 (North Wessex Downs AONB) states that the National Landscape will have appropriate and sustainable growth that conserves and enhances its special landscape qualities. Development will be required to respond positively to the local context, conserving and enhancing local distinctiveness, sense of place and the setting of the National Landscape. The strong sense of remoteness, tranquillity and dark night skies should be preserved. Development will be required to support its local communities and rural economy in a manner commensurate with the statutory status of the National Landscape as a valued landscape. SP2 goes on to add that planning permission will be refused for major development in the National Landscape except in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated to be in the public interest.
- 6.21 In determining what constitutes major development in accordance with Policy SP2, the Council will consider whether the development, by reason of its scale, character or nature has the potential to have a significant impact on the landscape and scenic beauty of the National Landscape. The amount of land considered amounts to 5ha, with the majority being within ancient woodland. The nature of the proposal will result in the further degradation of the ancient woodland as determined by the Council’s Ecology Team and the Tree Team, and the number of people entering and existing the ancient woodland and the number of vehicles would be in the thousands. As such, this proposal constitutes major development in terms of Policy SP2, as well as the Town and Country Planning Act.
- 6.22 Similarly to the NPPF, Policy SP2 states that development will only be permitted in the NWD National Landscape where exceptional circumstances exist and that the development would be within the public interest. While the proposal does present some local economic benefits, the proposal does not present an exceptional circumstance.
- 6.23 It is acknowledged that the clearing where most of the activity would be located is relatively well contained. However, as there would be a detrimental impact on the environmental quality of the ancient woodland which forms an important and special

landscape feature within the NWD National Landscape, the development does not comply with Policy SP2.

- 6.24 Policy SP5 (Responding to Climate Change), of relevance to this application, states that the principles of climate change mitigation and adaptation will be required to be embedded into new development, improving the resilience of land. One criterion (criterion (l)) that must be satisfied is to improve wildlife habitat and species conservation. This is not demonstrated in this proposal and rather, would have a negative impact. In addition, criterion (f) expects development to provide sustainable forms of vehicular and personal transport to and from the site and to reduce car use in accordance with Policies SP19, DM44, and DM45. As will be set out below, the proposal fails on this account due to its unsustainable location. The proposal therefore fails to comply with Policy SP5.
- 6.25 Policy SP10 (Green Infrastructure) addresses development affecting green infrastructure. It states that the Council will strengthen both local and strategic green infrastructure assets across the District. This will be achieved through protecting and enhancing existing green assets. Proposals involving the loss of green spaces and other natural features will not be supported unless there is no longer a need for the existing infrastructure, or an alternative is provided to meet the local needs that is of a greater quality or benefit to the community. There is a clear environmental need to maintaining the quality of the ancient woodland and its being irreplaceable means that no alternative green infrastructure could replace it. There is no evidence that the Ecological Impact Assessment considered the anticipated guest and vehicle trips per week, month, year and over a 5-year period. It recommends, inter alia, that a Woodland Management Plan be utilised. A draft Woodland Management Plan has been submitted as part of this application, however, there are no mitigation measures directly associated with this development. The other mitigation measures proposed are insufficient to reduce or compensate for the harm. The proposal does not accord with Policy SP10.
- 6.26 Policy SP10 also requires that proposals for major development will be required to consider the long-term management and maintenance of the Green Infrastructure and should clearly demonstrate how these considerations have informed site proposals. Details of maintenance requirements and arrangements will be required to be set out, including who is responsible for these requirements. Appropriate funding arrangements for delivery of the long-term maintenance requirements should be clearly demonstrated to the Council. As the Woodland Management Plan is only in draft form which would provide this detail, and it is listed as a compensation strategy in the Ecological Impact Assessment, such details have not been confirmed. The maintenance provisions presented to the Council are insufficient and the proposal does not comply with Policy SP10.
- 6.27 Policy SP11 (Biodiversity and Geodiversity) states that development will be required to demonstrate how they conserve and enhance biodiversity and/or geodiversity, including their long-term future management and, where required, delivery Biodiversity Net Gains. The proposal will not conserve or enhance biodiversity on the site, rather, the Council's Ecology Team and Tree Team have determined that it would further harm it. As ancient woodland is irreplaceable, it would be very difficult to compensate its loss.
- 6.28 The site is within a Local Wildlife Site. Policy SP11 states that where a proposal is likely to result in harm, developers will be required to undertake a sequential approach. This involves:
- (1) Firstly, seeking an alternative site in the District with a lesser impact than proposed;
 - (2) Secondly, if an alternative site with a lesser environmental impact in the District cannot be found, effective on-site mitigation measures should be demonstrated;

- (3) Thirdly, and as a last resort, seek appropriate compensation measures, on site wherever possible and off site where this is not feasible, including long term management and maintenance.
- 6.29 It has not been demonstrated that the sequential test has been done by the applicant. It is very possible that the wedding could be located in other wooded areas that are not within an ancient woodland and do not form part of a Local Wildlife Site. The proposal therefore does not comply with Policy SP11.
- 6.30 Like the NPPF, Policy SP11 states that proposals that are likely to result in a loss or deterioration of an irreplaceable habitat will only be permitted where wholly exceptional reasons exist. What constitutes a “wholly exceptional reason” is elaborated. Such wholly exceptional reasons exist where:
- The need and benefits of the development in that location clearly and unambiguously outweigh the loss;
 - It has been adequately demonstrated that the irreplaceable habitat cannot be retained with the proposed scheme; and
 - Appropriate compensation measures are provided on site wherever possible and off site where this not is feasible. The scale and quality of the compensation measures required will be commensurate to the loss or deterioration of the irreplaceable habitat and will be considered on a site by site basis, including long term management and maintenance.
- 6.31 A “wholly exceptional reason” to approve this application does not exist. The proposal does not comply with Policy SP11.
- 6.32 It has not been demonstrated that the sequential test has been done by the applicant. It is very possible that the wedding could be located in other wooded area that is not within an ancient woodland and does not form part of a Local Wildlife Site. The proposal does not comply with Policy SP11.
- 6.33 The proposal does not comply with spatial policies SP1 (The Spatial Strategy), SP2 (North Wessex Downs National Landscape), SP5 (Responding to Climate Change), SP10 (Green Infrastructure), SP11 (Biodiversity and Geodiversity), or the NPPF.
- 6.34 The principle of the application is unacceptable and, as per the NPPF, should be refused.

Nature of Harm to the Ancient Woodland (Ecology and Trees)

- 6.35 The site is located within a clearing within the ancient woodland, “Highwood Copse”. This site is not a natural clearing. Prior to 2016, the site contained tree coverage of a similar density to the tree areas to its north and south and the clearing did not exist. The ancient woodland therefore has already significantly deteriorated at this site through recent tree felling. The thinned trees have not been re-stocked, resulting in a significantly reduced tree canopy.
- 6.36 The reduced canopy has resulted in increased sunlight on the woodland floor and a lack of dappled shade, which has resulted in grass encroachment onto the ground layer replacing pre-existing natural woodland flora such as Bluebells, Wood Anemone, Primrose and Celdandine. Recently, the flora has been further stressed and damaged by vehicle tracking and machine backfilling of dips caused by rootplate removal (i.e. the process of eliminating a tree root system after felling). A recent site inspection carried

out by the Tree Officer found that a further area into the woods had been cleared of ground flora just as Bluebells had emerged and was yet to flower, causing significant damage of this protected species. This clearing is where the planned ceremony tent is to be situated.

- 6.37 It is proposed to locate the 4 tipis, a ceremony tent, catering tent and toilet block permanently between May and September. Woodchip paths are also proposed (presumably over a longer period). As a result, because of shading trampling and soil compaction, no vegetation, including natural tree regeneration, will grow under the footprint of these structures during that time period. This is likely to be the case even if the flooring is removed and the sides of the tipis kept open, as there would be shadowing that does not currently exist. The specialist ground layer species found in ancient woodland, which require longer periods without disturbance as they establish and colonise areas extremely slowly, are unlikely to survive into the following one or two growing seasons. Rather, it is likely that they will be replaced by ruderal vegetation developing opportunistically on bare sole and gaps in the vegetation once the structures are removed. As such, there would be a long-term negative impact on this portion of the ancient woodland.
- 6.38 It is likely that despite the proposed signage directing guests away from the surrounding woodland, some guests will range beyond the clearing to take photographs or wander through the woodland and socialise away from the activity and loud music within the clearing. This will result in trampling of specialist ground vegetation and may result in littering.
- 6.39 The thousands of guests that would frequent the clearing and beyond (both within the ancient woodland), would further compact the woodland soil, leading to higher soil bulk density, reduced root respiration and penetration, more anaerobic conditions, poor soil structure, plant water and nutrient deficits, reduced soil biota and soil water movement. Such would have a negative impact on the health of the tree roots and other woodland vegetation.
- 6.40 A supporter has indicated that they have seen deer, partridges, pheasants and different kinds of insects many times when they have visited. The Ecological Impact Assessment indicates that the surrounding woodland and mature trees may support bat roosts and are likely used by the local bat population for foraging and commuting across the site. The woodland also provides a high-quality breeding habitat for nesting birds as well as potential habitats for dormouse with suitable understory and foraging species present. Wood white butterflies were found within 1 km of the site and the site presents potential habitat for this species. There is also potential for reptiles, with large wood piles located on the site. The amount of wildlife has resulted in its being designated a Local Wildlife Site.
- 6.41 The additional regular bright lighting at night, the noise and associated vibration as well as the thousands of people and vehicles frequenting the site, would disturb the local wildlife in the area.
- 6.42 Regardless of the above likely impacts on the ancient woodland detailed above, the Ecological Impact Assessment does not believe that there would be any habitat loss. This is at odds with what has been determined by the Council's Ecology Team and Tree Team.

Compensation strategies

- 6.43 Various mitigation strategies have been suggested within the Ecological Impact Assessment, which concludes that there will be no significant impact. These include:

- Signage to restrict movement outside of the clearing and the mowing of clear pathways.
- Ensuring that guests are concentrated by the tipis.
- Car-sharing to reduce vehicle trips.
- A points reward scheme which is currently being used where couples are awarded £100 to limit the number of cars to 20 or less.
- Lighting being focussed away from the trees to reduce light-spill on key features
- Music being turned off by 23:45 and the site vacated by midnight.
- The use of a Woodland Management Plan.

- 6.44 The Draft Woodland Management Plan has not yet been accepted by the forestry commission. Regardless, the Woodland Management Plan does not consider the proposed amount of activity as a baseline, which will result in substantial additional woodland management being required to re-establish what will be lost. It has been indicated that the Draft Woodland Management Plan did not form a significant part of this application when it was submitted and does not carry significant weight in terms of mitigation and compensation for any environmental harm.
- 6.45 The planning statement contains details of the Welford Wildlife Reserve Rewilding and Conservation Project. The map on the front of the document does not include the ancient woodland or the application site, and there are no references to specifically maintaining ancient woodland.
- 6.46 As mentioned above, the Ecological Impact Assessment advises that signage be used to keep wedding guests within the clearing and outside the surrounding woodland. However, it is possible that guests may ignore such signage rendering them ineffective, and adherence to the signage would not be monitored at each event.
- 6.47 According to the planning statement, Forest Edge Tipis use a 'Green Book Incentive Scheme'. This incentive scheme includes a list of local suppliers that according to Forest Edge Tipis, shares their environmentally sustainable values. A point-based reward system is used, whereby for every local supplier within the incentive scheme is booked, this adds up to prizes, with the largest prize being worth an extras package worth £650. This incentive scheme is commendable and, to a very limited extent, would provide some environmental benefit. However, this environmental benefit would not directly impact on the ancient woodland and therefore is not a compensation strategy.
- 6.48 Any loss or deterioration to the ancient woodland is very difficult to compensate, as an ancient woodland is an irreplaceable habitat. The compensation strategies put forward do not work on the assumption that there would be environmental degradation as a result of the proposal, and mitigatory and compensatory efforts do not form a meaningful part of the application, as assessed above.
- 6.49 The compensation strategies therefore are insufficient. Therefore, in accordance with the NPPF, this application should be refused even if it is determined that a "wholly exception reason" to approve the application exists.

Climate Change

- 6.50 Policy SP5 (Climate Change) states that principles of climate change mitigation and adaptation will be required to be embedded into new development, improving the resilience of land, buildings and existing and future communities and impacts arising from climate change. Depending on the nature and scale of proposals, development will be expected to satisfy various criteria. In terms of this application, the following criteria are relevant:

- (a) To withstand the predictable effects from climate change for its expected lifetime;
- (b) Take advantage of the latest zero-carbon technologies and innovations
- (c) Achieve net zero operational carbon development through the use of renewable, low and zero carbon energies.
- (d) Achieve the highest viable levels of efficiency.
- (e) Provide sustainable forms of vehicular and personal transport from the site and reduce car use.
- (f) Enable recycling and waste reduction.
- (g) Improve wildlife habitat and species conservation and connectivity to allow for movement in response to climate change.

6.51 A Sustainability Statement is required to demonstrate that the above principles have been embedded into the development. Such has been submitted, which states that environmental sustainability is central to Forest Edge Tipis. In this regard:

- Forest Edge Tipis promote environmentally sustainable values as part of their wedding package, as set out in their Green Book Incentive Scheme.
- The business partners with carefully selected local suppliers who share their environmentally sustainable values and have created a point system where for every local supplier that couples use from the Little Green Book, couples get points which can be transferred to wedding extras.
- The business delivers events without negative environmental impacts.
- Guests are encouraged to share cars and use taxis with rewards offered for less than 20 cars. As such, sustainable transport is promoted as far as possible for events that would typically use cars regardless of their location.
- The provision of an outdoor wedding venue supports the health and wellbeing of the Council's residents and providing opportunities to enjoy the outdoors.
- The use of tipis has a lower carbon footprint than built form.
- The applicants collect and dispose of all waste materials and recycle.
- At the end of each wedding, the floors of the tipis are lifted so that the ground beneath can breathe.
- The proposal is only for 5 years and as such will have a temporary effect.

6.52 Importantly, the Sustainability Statement does not demonstrate that the development will improve wildlife habitat and species conservation and allow for movement in response to climate change. This is a key consideration as the site is located within a Local Wildlife Site and an ancient woodland. While it is accepted that the development is only for a five-year period, the level of harm will set back conservation efforts and harm the local wildlife habitat and species.

6.53 The proposal therefore does not comply with Policy SP5.

Visual character and appearance

- 6.54 Policy SP7 (Design Quality) states that new development will be required to strengthen a sense of place through high quality locally distinctive design and place shaping. This will enable healthy place making, creating places that are better for people, taking opportunities where available for conserving and enhancing the character, appearance and quality of an area and the way it functions.
- 6.55 Aside from the large 40-vehicle parking area directly west of the ancient woodland, the 2ha site where the events would take place is relatively well-contained and could not be easily seen beyond the confines of the ancient woodland. The beige canvassing material of the tipis would not detract from the rural aesthetic and would not detract from the visual character of the surrounding woodland.
- 6.56 The view from the Public Right of Way will not be significantly impacted provided that the activity is contained within the site and there is no littering. The Public Right of Way Officer has not objected.
- 6.57 Although a subjective matter, couples will not seek to create a wedding that is not visually pleasing, and most would seek to capitalise on the natural environmental character created by the woodland. It is unlikely therefore that there would be a negative impact on the visual character and appearance of the development.
- 6.58 In the above regard, the application complies with Policy SP7.

Farm diversification

- 6.59 Policy DM36 (Farm Diversification) states that proposals relating to the diversification of existing farms in the countryside will be supported where the proposal complies with certain criteria. The proposal does not fulfil all the criteria.
- 6.60 Criterion (b) states that it must be demonstrated that the development can make a long-term contribution to sustaining the farm business as a whole. As this permission is only to allow weddings for 6 months per year for a period of 5 years, the proposal would not amount to a long-term contribution. It should be noted that the Estate has already diversified in this manner and offer 2 other events venues. Given that the farm already has farm diversification measures, the Economic Development Officer has stated that farm diversification carries little economic weight.
- 6.61 Criterion (f) states that the proposal must be high quality design, appropriate in scale, bulk, form, impact and siting to the character and local distinctiveness of the surrounding rural area and its setting within the wider landscape. In consideration of criterion (f), the scale of the proposed wedding venue accommodating up to 120 guests and additional staff, as well as its siting within the ancient woodland would cause a negative environmental impact. While there would be no negative visual impact, its siting is inappropriate.
- 6.62 It is acknowledged that some of the listed criteria of farm diversification are met, such as the activities being subsidiary to the agricultural operation and that it does not cause severance or disruption to existing businesses. However, Policy DM5 is clear that farm diversification will be supported where all criteria are met. Two criteria are not met.
- 6.63 Paragraph 88 of the NPPF states that policies and decisions should enable the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural business. Paragraph 89 elaborates on this to state that decisions should recognise that sites to meet local businesses and community needs in rural areas may be beyond existing settlements and in locations not served well by public transport. In such cases, it is important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings. The nature and

scale of the proposal and its siting within an ancient woodland is at odds with Paragraph 89 of the NPPF.

- 6.64 The proposal does not comply with all the criteria that must be filled to constitute farm diversification contained within Policy DM36 and the proposal does not comply with the provisions for farm diversification within the NPPF.

Economic benefits

- 6.65 Policy DM35 (Sustaining a Prosperous Rural Economy) states that development proposals that contribute to sustaining a prosperous rural economy will be encouraged. To this end, various criteria must be met. With relevance to this proposal, this includes demonstrating that the business can make a positive contribution to the rural economy, that the use is suitable for a rural location, the proposals are compatible with the uses in the surrounding area, proposals are appropriate in terms of siting, scale, form, massing, character and appearance having regard to the surrounding rural area and its setting within the wider landscape, it would not generate traffic of a type and amount inappropriate for rural roads, and it would have a detrimental effect on the setting of listed buildings.
- 6.66 This application would have a strong local economic benefit. Local suppliers include entertainers, florists and photographers. Most are based in nearby Newbury, Thatcham, Eastbury and Lambourn. Supporters of the proposal include a florist, the local butchers, a make-up artist, a nearby public house, a supplier of the dance floor, music and lighting equipment, caterers and other members of the hospitality sector.
- 6.67 It has been motivated that the proposal creates local job creation for children and young adults that are both part-time and full-time. This would help support the rural community.
- 6.68 The amount of local benefit to small local business is substantial and the proposal is supported by the Economic Development Officer.
- 6.69 In accordance with Policy DM35, the proposal must be appropriate in terms of siting, scale, form and massing, having regard to the surrounding rural area and setting within the wider landscape. The location of the wedding venue being within an ancient woodland and a Local Wildlife Site is inappropriate as it does not conserve or enhance the natural environment and it is anticipated that there would be environmental harm. As such, this type of development, while providing local economic benefit, is not encouraged by Policy DM35.
- 6.70 While there is clear local economic benefit, as outlined above, the level of public benefit necessary to justify granting the application, given the irreversible damage to ancient woodland, must be substantial. Under the NPPF, such public benefit should correspond to that typically seen in nationally significant infrastructure schemes. Although the local economic contribution is meaningful, it falls short of the exceptional public interest attributed to nationally important projects and therefore does not constitute a “wholly exceptional reason” for approving the application.

Highways impact

- 6.71 Policy SP19 states that development that generates a transport impact will be expected to minimise the impact of all forms of travel on the environment in accordance with West Berkshire’s declared Climate Emergency and Environmental Strategy, improve and

promote opportunities for active travel, improve travel choice and facilitate sustainable transport.

6.72 The Highways Team has no objection to the access arrangement, stating the track is sufficiently wide enough and adequate splays are existing.

6.73 40no. parking spaces have been provided. This would be insufficient as it is expected that 2.5 guests would be accommodated per car. For a venue containing 120 guests, 28 spaces would be required. However, Highways do not object to the parking provision as they believe that sufficient space has been provided for overspill parking.

6.74 As indicated above, there would be a substantial amount of vehicle trips entering and existing the ancient woodland. The exist point of the 2-way system runs through the ancient woodland. As listed in previously in the report, the anticipated trips (which include guests and 8 vendors/staff) are as follows:

For 1 wedding per week:

- Up to 112 vehicle trips per week.
- 4 weddings per month amounts to up to 448 vehicle trips.
- 28 weddings in 6 months amounts to up to 2,688 trips.
- 140 weddings over 5 years amounts to up to 13,440 vehicle trips.

For 1-2 weddings per week (as applied for):

- Up to 168 vehicle trips per week.
- Over 1 month (6 weddings), amount to up to 672 vehicle trips.
- Over 6 months (36 weddings), amounts to up to 4,032 trips.
- Over 5 years (180 weddings) amounts to up to 20,160 trips.

For 2 weddings per week (maximum use)

- 224 vehicle trips per week
- Over 1 month (8 weddings) this would amount to up to 896 vehicle trips.
- Over 6 months, this would amount to up to 5,376 vehicle trips.
- Over 5 years, this would amount to up to 26,880 vehicle trips.

6.75 While the parking area is located to the west of the ancient wood and guests would not park within the clearing, each vehicle would drive immediately west, north and through the lower section of the ancient woodland ("Mantclose Copse").

6.76 In this location, there are no cycle routes or bus services within the vicinity of the site, and such would not be expected to be used by guests going to a wedding. There is a limited population nearby, meaning guests would travel potentially great distances to and from the site by car, as guests would not be limited to the surrounding urban areas such as Newbury.

6.77 Due to the nature of the proposal and lack of a regular bus service at this location, guests would need to rely on private cars and taxis, rather than sustainable forms of development.

6.78 Any travel plan would need to be monitored to ensure that any targets are met (e.g. reducing the number of cars to 20 vehicles as per the incentive scheme).

6.79 The £100 pound incentive scheme to couples who reduce the number of vehicles to 20 or less. If this is achieved, then the £100 can be spent on wedding extras. This incentive scheme would only be possible for weddings of up to 50 guests (with a headcount of 2.5 guests per vehicle as has been accepted previously).

6.80 The nature of the proposal and its location does not fulfil all the Policy SP19 (Transport) criteria which requires that development that generates a transport impact will be

required to minimise the impact of all forms of travel on the environment, in accordance with West Berkshire's declared Climate Emergency and Environmental Strategy. This application does not minimise the impact of travel on the environment in a meaningful way.

- 6.81 In addition, the proposal does not comply with Policy SP5 (Climate Change) which requires that the principles of climate change mitigation and adaptation will be required to be embedded into new development. This involves provision for sustainable forms of vehicular and personal transport to and from the site and reduce car use. The location of the wedding venue being within a rural location that is not within close proximity to public transport does not encourage sustainable forms of transport or reduce car use associated with weddings.

Monitoring

- 6.82 As a means of ring-fencing the amount of activity that would result from this proposal, various conditions could be added.
- 6.83 While a maximum number of guests, staff and vehicles accessing the site could be conditioned, this would be difficult to enforce by the council at each wedding, as such would require an enforcement officer to count the number of guests and vehicles accessing the site for each wedding.
- 6.84 It would not be possible for the Council to monitor whether all mitigation measures contained in the Ecological Impact Assessment are being followed at each wedding. Whilst this could be said for any application and conditions that are imposed, as this proposal affects ancient woodland and a Local Wildlife Site, significant caution should be taken.

Other matters

Sheepdrove Organic Farm

- 6.85 This proposal has been compared with an approved application at Sheepdrove Organic Farm, Lambourn (23/00021/FULMAJ). Forest Edge Tipis were operating from this site under PD rights that contained a woodland. This application sought planning permission for the use of the site for wedding ceremonies and receptions for 5 months per year, including the erection of a tipi, the use of a former Shepherd's rest as a Registrar Office, the use of a lambing she to host ceremonies, car parking, and a tipi for overnight accommodation. The site is located within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape and a Biodiversity Opportunity Area.
- 6.86 This application is incomparable to the proposal due to the significant differences between the two sites. Sheepdrove, whilst in the NNZ and a Biodiversity Opportunity Area which does provide weight on the use of an existing building, hardstanding and open agricultural land, is significantly different from development within a nationally designated and protected ancient woodland. The proposal is ecologically more significant than the Sheepdrove site as agricultural land and agricultural buildings will be of substantially lower ecological value than a site designated as ancient woodland and has remained largely undisturbed.
- 6.87 Therefore the comparison of the Sheepdrove site to the current proposal is unsubstantiated and not a direct comparison and cannot be considered as a precedent as no two sites are the same and each application is assessed on its own merits. The constraints and applicable policies are therefore different, different weights in the

planning balance are accorded by the NPPF, and therefore the significance of harm is different.

- 6.88 An average wedding at Sheepdrove would accommodate a maximum of 100 guests and not 120 guests as proposed in this application. In the Sheepdrove application, conditions to mitigate the harm were imposed in the form of bat and bird boxes, planting and sensitive lighting schemes. In this case, as ancient woodland habitats are fragile and irreplaceable, it would be difficult to apply similar conditions as such could not compensate for the irreparable loss.

Contribution to Welford Park's woodland management efforts

- 6.89 It has been argued that the revenue would aid in the estate's management of the ancient woodland and its implementation of the Woodland Management Plan. However, the tree felling that has occurred on the site over recent years and allowing the proposed increase of activity that would see thousands of people and vehicles accessing the site to the woodland's detriment, would be at odds with efforts to maintain the ancient woodland.

"Ring-fencing"

- 6.90 It has been argued that this application would help 'ring fence' what is currently permitted on the site under permitted development rights, which in practical terms amounts to 8 weddings per year. However, what would be permitted in approving this application is thousands of guests and vehicles being able to access the site for 6 months over the next 5 years and significant environmental harm would result. If the number of weddings were to be conditioned, this would still likely be higher than the 8 weddings permitted currently under permitted development and the environmental harm would increase.
- 6.91 However, refusing this application would result in the wedding venue being ring-fenced by only being able to accommodate 8 weddings a year over a period of 6 months.

Scientific research and conservation practice

- 6.92 It has been argued that approving the application would create a valuable research opportunity with far-reaching value to science and conservation practice, and that to carry out a 5-year research project locally on the causes of decline in ancient woodland presents a local opportunity.
- 6.93 If directly related to this proposal, the research would involve studying the impact of the proposed development specifically on the ancient woodland. Many of Britain's ancient woodlands are already deteriorating as a result of climate change and approving harmful proposals in order to study their impacts on ancient woodlands is not supported by the NPPF or any of the Council's Local Plan policies.
- 6.94 Approving a proposal that would negatively impact on an ancient woodland and a Local Wildlife Site in order to conduct scientific research is not supported by the NPPF.
- 6.95 The specific nature, objectives and hypotheses surrounding this research and which research bodies would conduct the research has not been supplied, and is not being used to justify the proposal, which is only for a wedding venue. Conducting research is also permitted without planning permission. Therefore, very little weight can be afforded to this research 'benefit'.

Fostering relationships with local land and forest managers

- 6.96 It has been argued that authorities need to build trusting relationships with local land and forest managers, and that they must be helped to find sustainable income sources of income from their land.
- 6.97 Your officers agree with the above sentiments. However, an adequate Woodland Management Plan, at a minimum, would need to be in place that is well considered and that speaks directly to managing the activities associated with the wedding venue and with appropriate mitigation. The existing Woodland Management Plan is only in draft form and has not been formally endorsed by the Forestry Commission. Furthermore, it does not reference the ancient woodland being used as a wedding venue and the negative environmental impact that would be realised by this proposal.

Planning Inspectorate's previous approach

APP/A1910/W/21/3275429 ("Lila's Wood")

- 6.98 On 18 May 2022, an appeal was dismissed by an inspector for a site located in an ancient woodland (Lila's Wood, south east of Aylesbury), where a wedding venue had been operating for 28 days per year in accordance with permitted development rights. The applicant applied for this be extended to 45 days per year between May and September. In practice, this would allow for 1 additional wedding event to take place per year above that permitted under PD rights. Similarly to this application, the venue was within a clearing within the ancient woodland.
- 6.99 The Inspector dismissed the appeal and stated that the use of the woodland under PD rights had resulted in the deterioration through vegetation loss and soil compaction. Any increased human traffic on the site along with the more permanent siting of various structures would only further inhibit the plant growth and deter wildlife. This would further deteriorate the ancient woodland.
- 6.100 It was determined that while conditions could be imposed in respect of hours of operation, lighting and noise, this would not mitigate the identified impacts on the ancient woodland.
- 6.101 The inspector found that no wholly exceptional reasons justified the harm and the harm on the ancient woodland was given substantial weight.
- 6.102 The proposed significantly exceeds what was dismissed by the Inspector above in terms of the number of days that would allow for weddings and its resulting impact.

7. Planning Balance and Conclusion

- 7.1 Planning law requires that applications for planning permission be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The National Planning Policy Framework is a material consideration in planning decisions. It includes a presumption in favour of sustainable development which means approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay. However, where a planning application conflicts with an up-to-date development plan, permission should not usually be granted.
- 7.2 The proposed increase activity in the ancient woodland, which would see thousands of people entering and exiting the site, with thousands of vehicle trips, would have a clearly negative environmental impact. The clearing where the wedding venue has been located for the past 5 years has already been degraded through tree felling. The amount

of harm to the ancient woodland, which is an irreplaceable habitat which has existed for over 400 years, carries substantial weight in the planning balance.

7.3 Paragraph 193 of the NPPF states that:

Development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons and a suitable compensation strategy exists.

7.4 Paragraph 193 of the NPPF therefore indicates that 2 criteria must be satisfied to overcome the guidance to refuse. This includes the proposal having a “wholly exceptional reason” to approve, *and* if a suitable compensation strategy exists.

7.5 In terms of the first criterion, Footnote 70 of the NPPF describes what constitutes “wholly exceptional reasons”. This includes nationally significant infrastructure projects and where the associated public benefit would clearly outweigh the loss or deterioration of the habitat. Such infrastructure projects are detailed in part 3 of the Planning Act (2008). Such include, for example, on-shore generating stations with a capacity of over 50 megawatts, electric lines, airports and railway lines. Due to the significantly high environmental value of ancient woodlands, any loss or deterioration is only acceptable when large scale development such as these are proposed. The public benefit therefore needs to be exceptionally significant to justify an approval of development within an ancient woodland, and without it, such development should be refused.

7.6 While it is undeniable that there would be a strong local economic benefit, such is not synonymous with the public benefit that results from nationally significant infrastructure projects. As a result, the amount of public benefit does not amount to a “wholly exceptional reason” to refuse the application.

7.7 In terms of the second criterion, a suitable compensation strategy must be in place to justify the harm. It has been found that such a strategy does not exist, and the proposed mitigation would not have a significant impact and little compensation has been proposed.

7.8 This application does not comply with Paragraph 193 of the NPPF, or most of the relevant policies in the West Berkshire Local Plan Review.

8. Full Recommendation

8.1 To delegate to the Development Manager to REFUSE the application for the reasons below.

Refusal Reasons

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| 1. | <p>Harm to the Ancient Woodland</p> <p>The site affected comprises Ancient Woodland and a designated Local Wildlife Site that forms part of an important landscape feature within the North Wessex Downs National Landscape. The development would have a significantly harmful impact on the ecology of the ancient woodland, resulting in the loss and deterioration of this irreplaceable habitat.</p> <p>Whilst there is clear local economic benefit, this does not amount to the level of public benefit that is associated with large infrastructure projects contemplated in Footnote 70 of the NPPF that would justify a negative impact on the ancient woodlands. The amount of local public benefit therefore does not constitute a “wholly exceptional reason” to refuse the application.</p> |
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| | <p>The proposed mitigation provided in the Ecological Impact Assessment is insufficient to counter and remedy the harm that would result from the proposal on the ancient woodlands. As such, no suitable compensation strategy has been proposed.</p> <p>The identified environmental harm to the Ancient Woodland and Local Wildlife Site is not outweighed by the social and economic benefits of the proposal.</p> <p>The proposal does not comply with paragraph 193 of the NPPF or Policies SP1, SP2, SP5, SP10 or SP11 of the West Berkshire Local Plan Review.</p> |
| 2. | <p>Highways</p> <p>Policy SP19 states that development that generates a transport impact will be expected to minimise the impact of all forms of travel on the environment in accordance with West Berkshire's declared Climate Emergency and Environmental Strategy, improve and promote opportunities for active travel, improve travel choice and facilitate sustainable transport.</p> <p>The proposal would increase traffic in a rural location that has no pedestrian or bus routes and is linked by rural roads where at times cycling can be difficult. The location of the site would increase traffic where the mode of travel can only be the private cars or public taxi when available.</p> <p>The proposal is therefore unsustainable and contrary to Policy SP19 of the West Berkshire Local Plan Review and the National Planning Policy Framework.</p> |
| 3. | <p>Ecology</p> <p>The proposal would result in thousands of people and vehicles cumulatively frequenting the site on a monthly and yearly basis and over the course of 5 years. This poses an unacceptable threat to local wildlife within a Local Wildlife Site through additional noise, light, footfall and vehicle traffic. This would disturb the local wildlife contained within the ancient woodlands and would not improve the resilience of land for existing and future communities or promote species conservation and connectivity to allow for movement in response to climate change.</p> <p>Policy SP11 (Biodiversity and Geodiversity) requires that it must be demonstrated that a sequential test has been carried out where there is likely to be harm to a Local Wildlife Site.</p> <p>It has not been demonstrated that alternative sites within the District which would have a lesser impact than proposed have been considered. If an alternative site was not found with a lesser environmental impact, then effective on-site mitigation measures would need to be demonstrated and that adequate compensation is in place. A sequential test has not been undertaken.</p> <p>The proposal does not comply with Policies SP1, SP2, SP5, SP11 of the West Berkshire Council Local Plan Review or the NPPF.</p> |
| 4. | <p>Inappropriate means of Farm Diversification</p> <p>Policy DM36 (Farm Diversification) states that proposals relating to the diversification of existing farms in the countryside will be supported where the proposal complies with certain criteria. The proposal does not fulfil criteria (b) and (f).</p> |

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| | <p>As this permission is only to allow weddings for 6 months per year for a period of 5 years, the proposal would not amount to a long-term contribution to the farm business. The farm business has already diversified by offering 2 other events venues on the farm. The scale of the proposal and its inappropriate siting within the ancient woodlands and Local Biodiversity Site would cause a negative environmental impact.</p> <p>The proposal represents an unacceptable means of farm diversification the proposal does not comply with Policy DM36 of the West Berkshire Local Plan Review or the National Planning Policy Framework.</p> |
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