

To: Scrutiny Committee

Date: 7th June 2016

Report of: Executive Director, Housing and Regeneration

Title of Report: Westhill Farm

Summary

Purpose of report: To update the Scrutiny Committee on the proposed demolition of a derelict building at Westhill Farm

Key decision: No

Executive lead member: Linda Smith, Board Member for Leisure, Parks and Sport

Report author: David Edwards, Executive Director, Housing and Regeneration

Policy Framework: Leisure Strategy, Asset Management Plan

Appendices to the report

Appendix 1: Location Plan

Appendix 2: Planning Correspondence

Appendix 3: Westhill Farm Business Plan

Appendix 4: Westhill Farm Business Plan Review

Background

1. Westhill Farmhouse is a derelict building located in Shotover Country Park. The property is in a remote location approximately 0.6 mile from the main car park and accessed along a disused track which connects to The Ridings, a private road (Appendix 1: Location Plan). The farmhouse is burnt out with only the gable ends remaining. Following engineering reports and concerns for public safety the Council intends to demolish the remains of the structure and make good the site. The Council recently received planning permission to demolish the structure (South Oxfordshire District Council is the Local Planning Authority), but there was a procedural challenge by a third party, and a duplicate application has been submitted. Oxford Preservation Trust, which has restrictive covenants on the Country Park, has no objection to the demolition.

2. The demolition has been deferred following a request through the Scrutiny Committee by a permaculture group. The group approached the Council in 2014 with a proposal to develop a permaculture business on the site. The Council agreed to consider the proposition subject to the receipt of a robust business plan. The Council made clear at the outset that it would not support residential use on the site and the creation of a residential tenancy, nor would it fund the business.
3. The group's business plan was inadequate. The Council agreed to give the group a further year to develop and submit a robust business plan for consideration. In the interim it granted the group a licence on the site for a year, which expressly excluded residential use. The group now argues that residential use is essential to its business proposition.
4. The group initially objected to the demolition of the farmhouse as they wished to rebuild it. More recently the group is advocating the replacement of the existing with a new structure at a lower cost. South Oxfordshire as the local planning authority has made clear to the group that whilst the current structure remains it cannot withhold planning permission for rebuilding the farmhouse, which is the reason given for the group seeking to block the demolition of the property. However, the local planning authority has also made it clear it would oppose any additional use (for example café, teaching, retailing, corporate events) or an increase in the intensity of use or access to the site. (Appendix 2: Letter to South Oxfordshire District Council). These additional uses are central to the group's business case. The County Council Highways Department has also advised that access is unsatisfactory for any intensification of use.
5. A second business plan has recently been submitted by the group (Appendix 3: Westhill Farm Business Plan) and this has been reviewed by the Council's independent internal auditors, BDO. The independent review concludes that: 'we have identified eight critical issues that serve to undermine the information that has been included within the plan. Consequently we conclude that the Plan is not fit for purpose.' (Appendix 4: Westhill Farm-Business Plan Review). The auditors' advice is that the Plan is fundamentally unsound.
6. The Council also has significant concerns as to the accuracy of some of the assertions made in this business plan, for example:
 - The Council has not given its support to the proposals in the plan, which include residential use, and there are no plans for the Parks and Leisure team to use the facilities;
 - Local residents have concerns and are unwilling to see any increase in the current usage of the access, The Ridings, which is a private road.
 - Both the planning and highway authorities have made clear that any intensification of use would not be acceptable. Oxford Preservation Trust has advised it will enforce all the covenants on land use.
7. The Council management policy for its property assets, including parks, is to exclude residential or service tenancies, outside its Council housing. This is because the management risks and the legal protection which apply to residential

tenancies make effective control limited compared with commercial property. The Council does not support the creation of new residential tenancies in this context and the group knew this at the outset.

Next steps

8. In conclusion, the Council proposes to continue with the demolition of the derelict farmhouse on the grounds of public safety and make good the site.

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List of background papers: None



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