READING AGRICULTURAL CONSULTANTS
Gate House
Beechwood Court
Long Toll
Woodcote
Reading RG8 0RR
[redacted]

Your Ref: 24/02406/FUL
Our Ref: 10647hh-1

18 March 2025

Huntingdonshire District Council
Pathfinder House
St Mary's Street
Huntingdon
PE29 3TN
For the attention of Hannah Hodges

Dear Ms Hodges

Application No: **24/02406/FUL**

Proposal: **Erection of 4 Semi-Detached Agricultural Worker's Dwellings (and Associated Infrastructure)**

Location: **Redwood Farm House, Caxton Road, Great Gransden**

I write further to your email of 19th February 2025 requesting an assessment of the above planning application. This has been submitted on behalf of Mr Jamie Baker of B&S Farming Ltd for permission to erect a pair of workers' semi-detached cottages at Redwood Farm, Caxton. Your email requests that Reading Agricultural Consultants Ltd (RAC) undertake an appraisal of the application with respect to national and local planning policy advice for residential development in the countryside.

In preparing this response, I have had regard to the documents submitted with the planning application including the appraisal prepared by the planning agents Brown & Co. I also visited the site on 17th March 2024 and discussed the application with Mr Baker and Mr Camplin from Brown & Co.

Summary of Assessment

I unequivocally support the provision of the rural workers' dwellings and consider the application **DOES** align with the requirements of Local Plan Policy L20.

Background

The background to this application is set out in an agricultural appraisal prepared by Brown & Co and only a summary is provided here for ease of reference.

1. B&S Farming Ltd is a relatively new trading company that has been established with the express intention of developing a pig breeding and rearing farm.
2. The company purchased Redwood Farm in 2017. It was a run-down pig farm at that time and has been redeveloped with a bespoke, modern pig farming setup. Originally managed with 200 breeding sows, Redwood farm has been designed to house 2,000 sows (in six batches) producing approximately 60,000 weaned pigs for sale at 4 weeks of age, each year.

3. During the site visit I was able to view the buildings, the feed store, the different batches of pigs, and met members of staff. I was impressed by the setup; it is clear that this unit has been designed with a single production model in mind – and is doing so extremely efficiently.

4. The batch system has been designed around a seamless flow of pigs around the building. Sows have a gestation period of 114 days and here they produce 2.36 litters per sow per year. Litter sizes are (naturally) variable but the farm is presently producing 30.6 weaned piglets per sow/yr. The sows are grouped in batches of 288 (housed as a pair of 144 sows) and these animals ostensibly remain together throughout their various gestations (subject to natural variations).

5. The farm is run on a strict "clockwork" rotation, with (approximately):

   - Week 1 288 sows being served with artificial insemination (AI) with 90-95% conception rates.

     These pigs are held as "dry" sows for c.100 days until they are moved to the farrowing bays[1]. Pigs that fail to conceive are "dropped back" to the next group for a further round of AI. The sows are scanned at 4 weeks to check for pregnancy.

   - Week 2 (a different batch of) 270 sows farrow. There are 17.3 farrowing "weeks" per year

     The sows rear the piglets on colostrum and milk for 4 weeks until weaning.

   - Week 3 (a different batch of) approximately 3,000 piglets are weaned and sold.

   And, back to farrowing again

6. The unit specialises in the production of weaned piglets aged 4 weeks. These animals are then sent to others' growing and finishing units with some being sent to the company's own growing units.

7. In terms of timing, the farm was purchased in 2017 and development began shortly thereafter. The buildings were initially stocked with 200 sows and these number have been slowly increased with home-reared replacement gilts[2] up to the present number of 2,000 sows. Looking at the farm accounts it is clear that full capacity was attained in 2023/24 with farm profits exceeding £1m in 2024.

8. The unit is run with 5 full-time members of staff, plus Mr Baker as managing director. Additional staff, including agricultural and veterinary students are also employed and the unit is a leader in the provision of porcine training opportunities.

9. At present two members of staff live on site, sharing accommodation in the house next to the (locked) farm entrance gate. These two members of staff are not related, and thus have to share the accommodation along with their partners – which is less than ideal. The other members of staff live off site and travel in as required, often very early in the morning.

10. The application before the Council seeks permission to erect 4 houses (as a pair or semi-detached units) for occupation by the farm staff. In total the farm would therefore have 5 houses providing various housing options including dedicated houses for individual staff members and their families, and shared accommodation for farm students.

11. For completeness it is noted that planning permission for another dwelling on the farm was granted in c.1990 but was never completed. It is understood that the footings have been

[1] "farrowing" is the name given to the birthing process in pigs
[2] "gilts" are maiden sows (pre farrowing)

constructed and the permission has been materially commenced. This permission will be rescinded in the event this current application is successful.

Policy Framework

12. Policy L20 of the Huntingdonshire Local Plan to 2036 states:

> "*A proposal for a home for a rural worker in the countryside will be supported where:*
>
> *a. it is for a worker who is or will be mainly employed for the purposes of the proper functioning of an economically viable agricultural or other land-based rural business;*
>
> *b. no suitable alternative accommodation is available or could be made available in the immediate vicinity or nearest settlement, taking into account the requirements of the work;*
>
> *c. opportunities to convert an existing building or, where this is not possible, to replace an existing building have been explored and proved to be unachievable; and*
>
> *d. the home is of permanent and substantial construction, unless the rural business has been established for less than three years in which case accommodation will only be supported on a temporary basis to allow time for the business to prove it is viable*".

13. National guidance is set out in the revised National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Paragraph 79 *et seq* deals with housing in the countryside and notes:

> "*To promote sustainable development in rural areas, housing should be located where it will enhance or maintain the vitality of rural communities. Planning policies should identify opportunities for villages to grow and thrive, especially where this will support local services. Where there are groups of smaller settlements, development in one village may support services in a village nearby*.
>
> *Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:*
>
> *a) there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside..*".

14. Further guidance on the NPPF is provided in the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG). The updated text (published in July 2019) relevant to paragraph 80 states:

> "*Considerations that it may be relevant to take into account when applying paragraph 79a of the NPPF could include:*
>
> - *evidence of the necessity for a rural worker to live at, or in close proximity to, their place of work to ensure the effective operation of an agricultural, forestry or similar land-based rural enterprise (for instance, where farm animals or agricultural processes require on-site attention 24-hours a day and where otherwise there would be a risk to human or animal health or from crime, or to deal quickly with emergencies that could cause serious loss of crops or products);*
> - *the degree to which there is confidence that the enterprise will remain viable for the foreseeable future;*

- *whether the provision of an additional dwelling on site is essential for the continued viability of a farming business through the farm succession process;*
- *whether the need could be met through improvements to existing accommodation on the site, providing such improvements are appropriate taking into account their scale, appearance and the local context…*"

15. The remainder of this response uses the phraseology of the Policy L20 to test the appropriateness of the application.

Appraisal

Is the house for a worker who is or will be mainly employed for the purposes of the proper functioning of an economically viable agricultural or other land-based rural business?

Mainly employed

16. Standard labour data in the John Nix Pocketbook, 2025 (55th Ed) suggests that sows require 2.25 units of labour each per annum. This unit with 2,000 sows thus has a "standard" labour requirement of 16 full-time staff. Current staffing is 5 full-time members of staff with students adding to the complement, as required, thus any accommodation will be occupied by workers who are "*mainly employed*" in this agricultural business.

Proper functioning

17. The labour on this unit are engaged full-time in the proper management of the pigs. From:
    - ensuring that the dry pigs are served with AI in a timely manner;
    - managing the automated feed systems;
    - attending to any and every pig giving birth;
    - monitoring the young piglets to ensure adequate consumption of colostrum in the first few hours;
    - ensuring all pigs' health is maintained;
    - attending to office management and deliveries;
    - providing a security and emergency response.
18. The letter from the farm's veterinary surgeon endorses the need for the dwelling and notes:

    "*it would be beneficial if more members of staff could be housed on site so that they can quickly deal with any issues and do night checks etc…*".

Economically viable

19. Although business accounts have not been submitted with the application I note:
    - the business' accountants have submitted a letter with the application that states:

      "*the company has grown the business significantly during that time and is trading profitably which would allow it to finance the construction of the new dwellings*".
    - examination of the Companies House (CH) returns for the business corroborates the statements made by Mr Baker at the site visit that the business is profitable;
20. This farm has been established expressly for the purpose of breeding and rearing pigs. The infrastructure is in place for a 2,000 sow unit and the financial institutions are satisfied that the unit can service the (substantial) loans required. Based on all the currently available data there is no doubt that the unit is economically viable, and sustainable.

No suitable alternative accommodation is available or could be made available in the immediate vicinity or nearest settlement, taking into account the requirements of the work;

21. Having undertaken a site visit, I am satisfied that there is no other alternative accommodation that is available sufficiently close to the site to enable proper supervision – and response times – to ensure the welfare and security of the site.

Opportunities to convert an existing building or, where this is not possible, to replace an existing building have been explored and proved to be unachievable; and

22. There are no other buildings on the site that could be converted.

The home is of permanent and substantial construction, unless the rural business has been established for less than three years in which case accommodation will only be supported on a temporary basis to allow time for the business to prove it is viable".

23. The proposed dwellings are permanent and of substantial construction; the profits shown in the CH accounts are indicative of a business that is able to finance the construction costs.

In this instance, I consider the provision of rural worker's dwelling **DOES** align with the requirements of Local Plan Policy L20.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Peter Williams