

25 September 2024
Our Ref R454/CPW/EE/CW

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Dear All

THE STABLES – ST FRANCIS FIELDS, NORTHIAM

Thank you for inviting us to discuss the future use of the stables at St Francis Field ahead of a planning application for change of use from the existing Sui Generis use. My colleague Emer was able to inspect the property on the 15 July 2024 and I myself have previously inspected the property and have a good understanding of the facilities available at the property. For the avoidance of doubt we will provide commentary on the following:

- General comments on the demand and nature of demand for stables in the area and for this property in particular.
- The range of rental values for appropriate numbers of horses for various areas of paddocks available.
- The optimum position to maximise the attractiveness of the opportunity and rental income.

Situation

We understand that until the end of 2023 the yard and associated paddocks were occupied by a private individual who operated a small scale equestrian business. Historically, the property had been occupied by the Blue Cross as an equestrian rescue and rehabilitation centre. The use of the property by the Blue Cross satisfied the Sui Generis use as permitted, however the use by the private individual was in contravention of this use class and the threat of enforcement action was subsequently raised by the Council.

Northiam Parish Council now seek to obtain planning consent for change of use to allow continued general equestrian use. We have had regard for the relevant planning policies and the relevant transport consultations with East Sussex County Council Highways, Rother District Council and GTA Civils. We understand that the Council is likely to object to any use of the site which would increase the traffic generation above that of the Blue Cross. The GTA Civils & Transport report estimates the typical daily two-way trips to be an average of 17 with increased numbers during the warmer summer months. Given the size of the property and the restrictions on numbers of 8 horses and 2 ponies, we consider this average to also be sufficient to operate an equestrian business offering training, livery and sales services at this site.

Brief Description Of Property

The equestrian facility at St Francis Fields extends to 9.10 acres in total and comprises approximately 7.60 acres of permanent pasture with the remaining 1.49 acres formed of sand arena, all weather turnout pens, stable yard, hay barn and field shelter. There are 10 stables, of which two would be considered as pony size stables, three stables are located in a block built stable block and the remaining 7 are located in a timber framed and clad U-shaped range of stables. There is also a secure tack/feed room. In addition to this is a dual height steel portal frame building with timber cladding extending to approximately 112 sqm and a single height open fronted barn with a small all weather enclosure to the front. We have included a plan of the proposed lease area with this letter.

The grazing is split into six paddocks with an additional smaller rehabilitation paddock. There is parking for several vehicles or horseboxes and sufficient hay and bedding storage. Vehicular access to the property is via the A28 known as Main Street to the west of the property.

The property would benefit from improvement throughout including renovations to the stables and fencing across the holding. Whilst the stables would benefit from minor refurbishment we consider them to be in a condition largely suitable for immediate use.

We would consider this property to be suitable for no more than 8 horses and an additional 2 ponies, totalling 10.. The British Horse Society recommend a stocking density of one horse per 1-1.5 acres or roughly 0.5 hectares. However, this very much depends on a number of factors including grazing behaviour, pasture management, forage species, topography, how much grass is present, the time of year, length of growing season and weather. Other factors that affect stocking density include each specific horse's age, breed, workload, weight and body condition score, and number of hours at grass per day, and whether other species are co-grazing on the pasture. There is therefore no hard and fast way to determine exactly the required stocking density, and we therefore consider the size of this property to be suitable for the aforementioned number of horses or ponies, taking into consideration that horses have varying grazing requirements and there are additional all-weather turnout areas.

We have reviewed Rother Districts Policy DC02: Equestrian Developments which suggests an allocation of one hectare per horse. This is cited from a document prepared by Kent Downs AONB in 2011 which suggests that as a guideline, one hectare is required to support one 500kg (standard) horse where the objective is to provide all year turnout and all of its nutritional requirements are to be met by the grazing itself with no supplementary feeding. We do not consider the property at St Francis Fields to be suitable for year round turnout given the wet nature of the ground during the winter months, nor is it comparable to Kent Downs assessment of grazing requirements due to the different soil types. Therefore we do consider the allocation of one hectare of grazing per horse to be excessive in this instance. It is common place for equestrian properties within the High Weald to have limited turnout during the winter months due to the heavy clay ground and therefore the additional all weather areas are incredibly valuable to this facility. This property is well set up for limited turnout with the large all weather surface used for winter turnout and sufficient stabling.

Where stabling is available it is common place to keep horses 'in' for extremes of the weather which includes the summer months where horses are likely to be turned out overnight and come in out of the heat and fly in the day. This further limits the time the animal is dependant on the grass and will be fed hay during the time in the stables.

We caveat this by saying that we are not planning consultants and cannot say with certainty how RDC planning officers will assess the application at St Francis Fields with regarding to grazing provision. That said the guidance in the RDP DC02 is derived from an area that is not directly comparable to the facilities available at St Francis Fields.

Use

Given the size of the yard and the facilities offered we consider it to be suitable for professional or amateur use. As we discussed on our call last week we consider the following scenarios to be possible for the property:

- Letting to a private individual who would then run their business from the site, possibly offering lessons, schooling or sales livery, breeding or to keep their own horses. However this would require unrestricted use of the site for commercial equestrian uses. Having reviewed the transport report we would not consider this use to exceed the traffic movements produced by the Blue Cross during their occupation. We would consider in the region of 10 two-way trips per day to be reasonable for this use. But in any case we would not anticipate daily trips to exceed that of the Blue Cross use. Yards such as this are not often brought to the market and we would anticipate there being a good level of interest within the local area.
- Secondly, it is also a possibility that the yard could be rented by private individuals either as a whole or in two parts. This could be a suitable option if it is not possible to obtain consent for commercial equestrian use on the site or find a suitable commercial tenant as outlined above.
- We note that there has previously been discussions regarding the use of the property be used as a 'community' livery yard offering DIY services, however this would mostlikely constitute a considerable increase in daily visits to the site above that of the existing Blue Cross use and we understand that the Council do not wish to take on the management of such. We therefore consider this to be an unsuitable option for the ongoing use of the property.

Lease Terms

At your meeting with Emer you also discussed the need for NPC to secure an income from the stables for the next 10 years to manage the loan commitments. We do however consider it unrealistic to expect any incoming tenant to sign a 10-year lease at this stage, particularly if they are a starting a business as we discussed. Due to the nature of equestrian businesses such as the ones we have discussed, I would anticipate an initial term of 3-5 years might be more suitable. We would also look to incorporate break clauses within this term which would

allow both you and the tenant to end that lease if needed at specific times. We would consider it unlikely that any incoming tenant would be willing to sign a lease of longer than three years without the option of including a break clause. Particularly as this would be a new venture with no proven commercial history.

With that in mind, if a tenant is to invest in the property to improve the condition and facilities they may be willing and indeed prefer to sign a longer lease. At this stage there is no way to say for certain and we recommend that the Council keep an open mind regarding the initial lease term. It is better to allow an unsuitable tenant to break from the lease after 3 years than be tied into an agreement with an unsuitable party for a longer fixed term.

We also note the following requirements for any such occupation from Northiam Parish Council:

- Weekly removal of dung from the holding, to be arranged by the tenant
- Clearing of dung from the paddocks every week

We do not consider these issues to negatively impact the likelihood of finding a suitable tenant as they are fairly standard equestrian management terms. However, weekly dung removal from the holding is potentially too onerous and monthly or quarterly might be more achievable.

During our call we discussed the exclusion of Field 1 within the lease area. We understand that this is to reduce poaching of the field during the winter months and also to reserve the use of the field for council/village event parking. We would advise against the complete exclusion of this field from any future lease but instead you could employ certain mechanisms within the lease terms which can be used to prevent or restrict use of this field during the winter months when it is particularly wet and also to reserve the right for the Parish Council to use it for parking or other village events if required during the summer. This would involve the inclusion of certain clauses within the lease preventing use during certain months and allowing the council use of the field within the summer months upon service of sufficient notice, say 14 days for example.

If this field were to be excluded entirely, the Parish Council would then be required to maintain it and undertake regular mowing, weed management and maintaining of the fences, whereas this could be effectively managed by the tenant, grazing horses during the summer months and providing additional grazing during the summer also. We note that there was concern that the previous tenant grazed the land quite heavily and we would urge you to consider that removing Field 1 from any future lease further reduces the amount of grazing available during the summer months. We consider the inclusion of Field 1 within the lease area to be a key factor to creating a viable equestrian facility here.

We also discussed creating a right of access from the buildings across the retained land to Beales Lane to the north. We also note the Council's preference for horses to be walked in hand across this right of access. In reality this may be difficult to enforce and unrealistic for

the day to day running of an equestrian enterprise. However, if it is the intention of the Parish Council to prevent horses using the main drive to access the public highway, we consider it imperative that another access to the main road is maintained for hacking and riding. RDC policy regarding equestrian developments makes reference to access provisions for stabling proposals and where possible any such developments should have satisfactory access to the public bridleway network without the use of unsuitable roads and in all cases not adversely impact on road safety. There are several bridlepaths in the locality which whilst not directly accessible from the property are available via the network of lanes, particularly to the west of the property.

Rental Value

When considering the rental value obtainable for the property it is useful to consider the current going rate of DIY livery within the local area. For a single horse this could range from £30-£50/week depending on the quality of the facilities and whether any further services are offered.

What needs to be taken into consideration as this relates to the subject property are the repairing obligations that are placed upon the tenant. As we discussed, the Council would be best placed undertaking some minor improvements prior to the commencement of the new lease such as weed killing, cleaning and painting of the stables, pressure washing the inside of the stables and ensuring the fences are in a suitable condition. The tenant can then be asked to repair and maintain the property in the same condition as it is at the start of the new agreement. If the Council are not in a position to make these improvements, the cost of such could be deducted from the first year's rent and the obligation placed on the tenant to make any improvements.

With this in mind, we consider a suitable rent for the yard, assuming it can be let in a reasonable condition with unrestricted use for training, sales and livery to be in the region of £1,400 pcm at a capacity of 10 horses (being a maximum of 8 large horses and 2 smaller ponies). This equates to £120 pcm for the larger stables and £100 pcm for the smaller, pony stables. This figure is based upon a number of factors:

- A) We take into consideration the going rate for livery places and the margin that any incoming tenant would look to make per stable.
- B) We assume that the tenant takes on the property in a reasonable condition as discussed above and is thereafter required to maintain the property as such.
- C) This rental level therefore assumes that the tenant is not limited in their earning potential whilst occupying the property and is able to offer livery, sales and training from the property within the confines of the traffic movements from the previous Blue Cross Use.

Business Rates

We also discussed business rates for the property. The previous tenant was able to obtain Small Business Rate relief on the property owing to the rateable value being less than £15,000 or in this case less than £12,000 meaning that the relief was 100%.

Any occupier of non-domestic property, which has been rated, is liable for the business rates unless a relevant exemption is applicable. In the case of the stables at St Francis Fields we do not see any reason why a future occupier would not also be able to obtain relief via Small Business Rate relief. To the best of my knowledge this relief is not dependent on the tenant being a trading entity but assuming the use is in line with our recommendations, this is unlikely to be an issue.

The exception to this would be if they are also occupying other rated premises which would bring their overall rateable value to a value greater than £12,000. In any case, it is reasonable to place the responsibility for obtaining the relevant relief on the tenant.

I hope this letter and our call last week have been of use in informing your decisions regarding St Francis Fields but please do let me or Emer know if you have any further questions or if we can be of further help.

With kind regards

Yours sincerely



Charlotte Pearson Wood MRICS FAAV

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