

Standing up for Hertfordshire's countryside

Ben Glover
Planning and Building Control
North Hertfordshire District Council
Council Offices
Gernon Road
Letchworth Garden City
Herts SG6 3JF

Our Ref:

Your Ref:

6th December 2019 (by email)

Dear Mr. Glover,

Application No. 19/02620/FP

Use of land for outdoor adventure camping between the 26th April and the 15th October in any calendar year for up to 360 children on the site including the provision of temporary camp areas, storage areas, shower and toilet areas, drop off, turning and parking areas

At Graffridge Wood, Three Houses Lane, Codicote, Hertfordshire

We are somewhat surprised by the opening paragraph in the Planning Design and Access Statement which says that "*The Bushcraft Company had not considered that planning permission was necessary for use of the site, due to the limited seasonal use and the demountable facilities proposed.*" While it is true that paragraph 145 (b) of the National Planning Policy Framework considers outdoor recreation to be an appropriate use in the Green Belt, there are other policies in the NPPF which apply to such uses in woodland areas, particularly those in Section 5, which we will return to below.

Section 269 of the 1936 Public Health Act requires an operator to obtain a licence from the local authority for land used as a campsite for more than 42 days in a row, or 60 days in total during any 12-month period. That requirement applies to this proposal. Similarly land used for tented camping for more than 28 days a year usually requires planning permission. This should be known to Bushcraft as, following a similar situation at a site south of Hertford, in June 2018 a spokesperson for East Hertfordshire Council said the local authority had advised Bushcraft it would either require full planning permission for the site or a certificate of exemption from Natural England.

Graffridge Wood is a Local Wildlife Site (No. 29/005) containing ancient woodland. As such it is covered by the provisions in NPPF Section 5 Paragraph 175.

Sub-Section (a) of that paragraph states that "*If significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused.*"

The Ecology Statement accompanying the application says that *“As well as the loss of understorey and ground flora vegetation and soil compaction in camp and activity areas, there has been, and is potential for further, impact on habitat at the Site as a result of the erosion of rides from vehicle use.”* (para 5.10) and *“ Overall, without mitigation, some degradation of the ancient woodland habitat at the Site (most of which is also Habitat of Principal Importance) is likely to have occurred and will continue to occur due to Bushcraft activities.”* (para 5.11). Clearly, in the view of the consultants employed by the applicant, there has already been harm to the biodiversity of the wood as a result of Bushcraft’s activities and that harm will continue. There is no demonstration in the documentation that this activity can only take place on this site, that alternative sites with less harmful impacts have been assessed, or that mitigation and/or compensation will be forthcoming.

Similarly Sub-Section (c) of para 175 says *“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 (i.e. where the public benefit would clearly outweigh the loss or deterioration of habitat.) and a suitable compensation strategy exists.”* There is no demonstration here of an overwhelming public benefit through the provision of this facility on this site, nor is there any proposed compensation strategy.

We are concerned that in relation to transport, the Planning Design and Access Statement merely says *“The access and hardstanding was already in existence and as the use has commenced and been in operation for the summer it was not considered to be necessary to produce a Transport Statement.”* That does nothing to appraise the Local Planning Authority of the likely impact of the proposal on the local road network. The use may have resulted in considerable problems during the course of the summer, but without proper data, the LPA won’t be able to judge. (In May 2017 Brickendon Liberty Parish Council expressed concern to East Herts Council, Herts County Council and ourselves about the problems caused by multiple coaches accessing the Bushcraft Hoddesdon Wood site up a single track lane with no passing points. Three Houses Lane is similar in nature.)

Section 5 of the Planning Design and Access Statement, in its entirety, says: *“Policy on inclusive access is set out through NPPF, Planning and Access for Disabled People: a good practice guide (ODPM). These policies supplement building regulations and require all future development to meet the highest standards of accessibility and inclusion. This Planning, Design and Access Statement explains how the principles of inclusive design have been incorporated into the scheme. The proposed camps all have level and wide access.”* This is not sufficient. The shower facilities are raised off the ground and accessed by three steps. There is no demonstration of how a disabled person can access these facilities. In fact nowhere else in the document does it outline anything about provision for the disabled, whether physically or visually impaired, or how the proposal meets the requirements of the NPPF or ODPM.

In determining the planning balance the Council will have to consider whether the harm to the ancient woodland is outweighed by the benefit of the use in providing access to the countryside for school children, supporting well-being and rural business.

Yours sincerely,

David Irving