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BY EMAIL ONLY

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Dear Mr Williams

Planning consultation: Redevelopment of existing hotel to provide new tourist accommodation including: 30 hotel bedrooms, apartment and villa accommodation and associated leisure and dining facilities
Location: Knoll House Hotel Ferry Road Studland Swanage BH19 3AH

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

The application proposes the following :

- 30 hotel rooms
- 22 apartments
- 26 villas
- 79 parking spaces
- 36 cycle spaces
- Restaurant and spa complex including indoor/outdoor pool
- Associated landscaping, public realm, biodiversity enhancements, drainage, access and servicing infrastructure.

Summary

- The proposal represents a change in use classes from C1 to include C1 and 48 C3 units contrary to Local Plan policy and the SPD
- The proposal increases guest capacity from 273 to 296 and on site staff from 57 to 116 FTE
- Visitor and Staff surveys indicate a high level of access to the surrounding designated heathlands (53-56% & 80.8%) and Poole Harbour (23-25% & 57.7%)
- Mitigation is proposed but much is uncertain or unagreed with the landowner
- The application has insufficient detail to confirm that impacts on designated sites from surface water (quality and quantity are avoided)
- It cannot be concluded there would not be adverse effects on nationally/internationally designated sites at the Dorset heathland and Poole Harbour
- The proposal is a major development in the Dorset AONB and will give rise to adverse effects on the character of the AONB, no measures to enhance the AONB are presented

Objection further information required

The applicant acknowledges that the proposal represents a change in use classes from C1 to include some C3 with the caveat that the C3 will be restricted to holiday uses. Natural England defer to the planning authority on a consideration of the veracity of the mechanism by which a C3 use could be constrained in this location, which is highly sensitive and for which use C3 within 400m is

specifically contrary to the adopted Local Plan as well as in the SPD advice. The previous decision notice correctly cited the C3 use as a reason for refusal. This proposal indicates a net increase in 48 units of C3 within the 400m distance of the heathlands SAC, SPA and Ramsar sites.

Visitor/guest survey information

Natural England note that following advice provided on 4/8/2022 a new survey of visitor use of the nearby heathland has been carried out. This survey confirms that 53-56% of guests visit the nearby heathlands and 97-100% visit the beaches especially Knoll Beach with 23-25% visiting Poole Harbour. The report shows that guests access a significant part of the designated heathland sites with only the most western areas less accessed which is reflected in 57.9% spending 1-2 hours on a visit. Visitors had a high level of ownership with 20 dogs recorded across 18 questionnaires (24%).

Guest and Staff capacity changes and impacts

Chapter 5, Table 5.9 confirms that the applicant estimates 152 jobs to be created which are the same as 116 full time equivalents (FTE) compared to up to 57 staff currently of which the staff survey shows 77% are year round and 23% are resident up to 6 months with a 2 month minimum. Other evidence from the previous application shows that the current hotel operates a variable number of staff onsite over the year (59 to 26). It is not possible to compare numbers of FTE staff directly however it is clear that there will be a substantial number of additional staff on site above what is present currently.

The survey confirms that 80.8% of staff visit the local heathland sites whilst 57% visit Poole Harbour.

Natural England conclude that the application will result in an increase in guest capacity from a max of 273 to 296 and that there is no evidence to enable a conclusion that the 110 FTE staff would not access the nearby designated sites, either the heathlands or Poole Harbour. Whilst this may be a lower proportion than at present the number of staff on site is significantly greater. In addition, whilst a bus is provided there is no way to ensure that staff do not use their own transport and the recent introduction of Beryl bikes at Studland provides a further opportunity.

The staff visitor survey (Table 2. Frequency of visits to sites for recreation in spare time) shows that around 50% visit the heathlands whilst 2/3 visit Knoll and Studland beach respectively at least 1-3 times a week), clearly visits 1-3 times a week from 152 staff compared to 57 staff will result in greater adverse effects.

ES chapter 7.2 : Draft HRA

At paragraph 5.14 the document states no change in the type of development is proposed however the proposal is to change the use from C1 to a mixed use of C1 and C3. This is contrary to Local Plan policy and the Councils SPD.

Paragraph 5.18 : since no information is provided as to the location of survey features such as refugia it may not be concluded that no species typical of the nearby heathland sites are present on the application site.

The applicant proposes a number of measures in the dHRA, a circular walk of 1.72km, closure of an access point, an enclosed dog exercise/training area, unspecified restriction on rooms where dogs are allowed, wetland/mire restoration, a restriction on cats precise method unspecified in dHRA.

- The proposed circular walk is noted as a deliverable mitigation measure, the route is likely to be less than indicated due to topography in the woodland area.
- The access point closure is not likely to be deliverable because the land abuts Open Countryside and access may not be prevented – this must be considered uncertain.
- The enclosed area for dog exercise/training is appropriate and may be deliverable – Natural England note that the land owner has objected which leads to uncertainty. In addition the

applicant is indicating on Plan 2 that this would be within an area of restored heathland which would be inappropriate. This remains unresolved.

- It is understood that the applicant would control dog access in all the hotel rooms but it is not stated in how many of the apartments/villas this would be the case. The control mechanism is unclear and hence this must be considered uncertain.
- The proposal to restore a functional wetland/mire lies in land controlled by the National Trust. I understand this would accord with their intentions and so may be secured through a S106.

Reduction in maximum occupancy of the hotel complex is claimed at Para 6.3, however at Annexe 44 the change is detailed as 273 current to 296 proposed number of guests.

Cat covenant : Natural England advise that this proposed mitigation avoidance measure is not acceptable to Natural England as effective mitigation. It can neither be monitored nor enforced by the Council. A legally binding agreement should be secured with an agreed penalty payment per cat for noncompliance. Natural England would still remain of the view that the Council has no robust mechanism available to detect infringements.

Summary

Natural England advise that the applicant has provided some new and more accurate guest visitor survey information at short notice. Whilst this is not at an ideal time of year the information is welcome and of a more appropriate level of competency than previous work.

The applicant confirms that there will be a change of use from C1 to C3 and C1 with an increase in overall guest capacity. Guests will be able to visit for 12 months of the year, until recently the hotel operated for 11 months of the year.

The applicant has sought to argue that the change from residential based staff to staff travelling into the work place via a provided bus or other means will alter in some way the risk of staff working at the site using the surrounding countryside for recreation. No evidence to support this is presented.

This leaves a current staffing level varying between 26 and 59 seasonally increasing to 152 jobs or 116 FTEs. The staff survey confirms that 80.8% of staff visit the local heathland sites whilst 57% visit Poole Harbour.

Natural England conclude that the Staff Survey provides evidence that visits to the designated sites are undertaken and may not be simply discounted. The significant level of additional staff at the site is likely to act in combination with the higher guest capacity to lead to additional pressure on both the heath and Poole Harbour.

The applicant has outlined a number of measures which could be implemented. Some are reliant upon the adjoining landowner who has in some instances objected whilst others require the land owners agreement which is not secured.

Other measures proposed such as closing access to Open Countryside and a restriction on dogs are not clearly specified or the delivery is uncertain and so cannot be considered in an assessment.

The evidence presented does not show no net increase in pressures rather it confirms an increase in guests and staff at the application site. In the absence of mitigation measures, (as the authority is required to consider), it is concluded that there will be a Likely Significant Effect on the Dorset Heathlands SPA/Ramsar and Dorset Heaths (Purbeck & Wareham) & Studland Dunes SAC as well as Poole Harbour SPA/Ramsar arising from additional recreation related pressures.

Natural England therefore advise that at this time we are unable to confirm to the applicant that the proposal would not have an adverse effect on the integrity of the Dorset heathland sites : SPA/SAC and Ramsar and Poole Harbour SPA/Ramsar.

In the light of the recent ECJ ruling (People Over Wind & Sweetman v Coillte Teoranta (Case C-323/17)) which concluded that the avoidance/mitigation, e.g. as set out in the Dorset Heathlands Planning Framework SPD (2020– 2025) SPD, Nitrogen Reduction in Poole Harbour (SPD 2017) and Poole Harbour Recreation Supplementary Planning Document SPD (2019-2024), cannot be taken into consideration when considering the Likely Significant Effects of proposals on European wildlife sites (and Ramsar sites as a matter of Government policy). Natural England advise your authority to undertake an Appropriate Assessment of the application under Reg 63.

Woodland Management Plan: this plan requires updating in accordance with the comments of the land owner, the National Trust (NT). The authority should require a planning condition to ensure this is secured prior to any commencement.

The use of the land for private helicopters should be restricted through a suitably legally binding agreement eg S106 which will need to include the land owner (NT).

Surface water drainage: is indicated to drain into the designated SSSI, SAC sites to the west of the site, Pibley Swamp and Littlesea. The applicant must bring forward a solution which is agreeable to the NT who have also raised this issue. This aspect alone of the proposal is concluded to have a likely significant effect. Lack of information means that the Council cannot conclude no adverse effect on the adjoining designated sites.

Ecology Ch 7, App 7.1

The information presented is considered to be very weak, there is inadequate detail around survey methodology eg location of refugia on site, location of bat surveyors, lack of bat transect and static bat detector use to support observations, use of standard paragraphs throughout which leads to inconsistent information eg reptile refugia are detailed as tins and felts.

Natural England advise that the NET provide the Council with additional comments/review.

Habitat survey

The applicant has submitted a highly inaccurate habitat survey eg Fig 7.2 of ES App 7.1 which provides a completely inaccurate assessment of the land within the application site but outside of the main hotel complex. The previous Application 6/2018/0566 provided a suitable level of ecological survey at Fig 8.2 Knoll House NVC portrait. The ES states that surveys were carried out between May and September 2022, it is unclear why the current application should deviate so far from the survey of the previous proposal given this time frame for survey.

Bat survey

This has focussed on the buildings rather than covering the whole site, there are a number of inadequacies in the way the methodology has been carried out as well as deficiencies eg no survey of the woodland area and areas where the lighting regime may change. Given the proposed demolition of the buildings it is anomalous that there was no investigation of the roof voids for bat use during the several months when survey visits were made.

Reptile survey

The survey was carried out in Aug/Sept using refugia. This methodology is likely to have limited success because of the time of year (eg higher temperatures result in less use of refugia for thermoregulation – the ES itself notes optimal weather as being up to 17C but reports surveys on a number of occasions when this is exceeded), size of refugia and location suitability.

Ecological enhancements

Fig 7.7 features such as the proposed green wall are not on the plan. The authority should consider with NET other suitable enhancement measures such as a number of bird and bat boxes including swift boxes.

Biodiversity Net Gain : in the light of the above comments Natural England advise that NET review the proposed calculation.

Summary

Natural England advise that the information provided in the ES is not of a quality that may be relied upon. The information from the previous application provides a firmer basis for assessment of impacts.

Natural England advise the authority that if it is minded to grant a permission there should be a planning condition requiring ecological survey, particularly of bats and reptiles, a methodology should be submitted to the authority and Natural England for prior approval. A Lighting Strategy should also be required through a planning condition in the light of the additional survey.

Landscape impacts on the AONB

The authority previously recognised the prior application as a major development within the Dorset AONB, Natural England would support this conclusion in regards this proposal as well as the advice provided by the AOMB Team. Since the previous application at this site Natural England has not entered into any discussions with the applicant about landscape matters.

Natural England remains concerned that, whilst elements of the new design proposal are welcomed as moderation (the green roofs in particular) the scale and massing of the buildings proposed, the modern design proposed does not fit with the rural character of either the AONB landscape or locally that of the village. In particular there is a very significant level of glazing which is both visually inappropriate in proportion to the existing building but also likely to lead to a wider visual impact due to reflections.

It is a concern that the use of cladding such as zinc will create wider visual impacts as is seen at the visually intrusive roofing at the Purbeck Golf Club.

The current buildings rely on screening from surrounding woodland which is nearing its effective life span and ageing trees are likely to result in a period where the development becomes increasingly visually intrusive from the west and south as well as northern views. The Woodland Management plan requires updating to secure a long term and appropriately maintained feature, for example the phasing out of locally non-native species such a pine.

The AONB Team have provided detailed advice concerning the buildings proposed and their impacts, these are supported by Natural England, in particular the reduction in glazing and favouring the use of local more muted materials such as stonework. Natural England concur with the need to break up the visually dominating blocks proposed, either through design or physical separation.

Given the reliance on the screening of the aging woodland around the application site and the prominent feature on which the site sits, Natural England is concerned that the height of villas on the top of the Knoll site should be reduced to 2 storeys and the apartments kept at a height of not more than 3 storeys with the western villas at 2 storeys. The long term effect of moving from a pine dominated woodland to broadleaved woodland is a reduction in height of the screening vegetation as well as increased visual impacts in winter when leaves are lost.

Natural England would welcome the opportunity to work with the AONB Team and design advisors to more effectively moderate the proposal.

Natural England advise that the applicant should be required (through a planning condition) to produce a lighting strategy to address the light pollution issue from overhead external lighting of the car park areas, access roads and internal foot paths. Lighting should be suitably directed downwards and cowled to minimise lateral light emissions visual intruding into the wider landscape. This should be secured through a planning condition prior to any commencement and it will need to address lighting of a suitable level and quality to meet the Bat Conservation Standards in sensitive locations identified by the applicants ecologist for both bats and foraging nightjar.

Natural England is not aware if the LVIA has adequately considered the effect of the screening woodland changing in structure and height. If this has not been considered the advice of the AONB

Team should be sought concerning the need for a suitable period of compensation relating to ongoing visual impacts whilst the woodland is restored.

Nutrient neutrality

Information previously provided confirmed that occupancy of the existing and proposed facility would alter over the year. The applicant has chosen to present an overly simplistic view of the occupancy level as a maximum relative to 100% year round occupancy. Natural England has reviewed the information in this supporting document against information in the previous application and is able to confirm that within the context of seasonal variations in occupancy as well as staffing levels it would be reasonable for the authority to conclude that it is likely the development would achieve nutrient neutrality as is required.

I trust this information will assist the authority.

Yours sincerely

Nick Squirrell
Conservation and Planning Lead Advisor
Dorset Team
Wessex Area Team
Natural England

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