

## **STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF CHANGE OF USE OF 283 LODDON BRIDGE ROAD FROM RESIDENTIAL TO DENTAL PRACTICE**

### **1. Introduction**

- 1.1 The proposal seeks permission to change the use of 283 Loddon Bridge Road to dental Practice to be used in conjunction with the existing dental Practice at 281 Loddon Bridge Road. It is proposed to link the two building by means of a simple open-sided glass topped canopy.
- 1.2 The existing dental Practice has been an NHS Practice since 1957 and is the only NHS Practice in Woodley with over 18,000 NHS patients on its register.

### **2. Planning Policies**

- 2.1 The planning policies relevant to this proposal are contained in the National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (NPPF) and Wokingham Council's Adopted Core Strategy, January 2010.
- 2.2 Paragraph 96 of the NPPF states that planning policies and decision should aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places which

“c) enable and support healthy lives, through both promoting good health and preventing ill-health ...”

- 2.3 Paragraph 98 of the NPPF identifies that:

“98. To provide the social, recreational and cultural facilities and services the community needs, planning policies and decisions should:

- a) Plan positively for the provision and use of shared spaces, community facilities (such as local shops, meeting places sports venues open space, cultural building, public houses and places of worship) and other local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments;
- b) take into account and support the delivery of local strategies to improve health, social and cultural well-being for all sections of the community;
- c) guard against the unnecessary loss of valued facilities and services particularly where this would reduce the community's ability to meet its day-to-day needs;
- d) ensure that established shops, facilities and services are able to develop and modernise, and are retained for the benefit of the community; and
- e) ensure an integrated approach to considering the location of housing, economic uses and community facilities and services.”

- 2.4 These aims are embedded in Wokingham's Adopted Core Strategy where paragraph 2.34 states:

"The Community Core Service Vision is to contribute to the health and well-being of all Wokingham residents."

Paragraph 2.35 goes on to say:

"Neighbourhoods will be important in providing facilities and venues that are accessible for older people and those with disabilities and which encourage the inclusion of all members of the community. They will also contribute to the prevention of ill-health and dependency."

- 2.5 Paragraph 2.57 of the Core Strategy refers to Berkshire West Primary Care Trust which is responsible for local health care service within the Borough. It states:

"A key element in the delivery of primary health care is the network of general Practice surgeries and community health facilities, together with dentists, nursing services and opticians."

- 2.6 Policy CP2 of the Core Strategy seeks to ensure that new development contributes to the provision of sustainable and inclusive communities (including the provision of community facilities) to meet long term needs, planning permission will be granted for proposals that address, amongst other things, the requirements of:

"a. An aging population, particularly in terms of housing, health and well-being;

b. children, young people and families including the co-ordination of services to meet their needs".

- 2.7 Whilst these are all positive aspects to this proposal, they need to be balanced against the loss of housing. Core Strategy Policy CP3 seeks to retain existing residential accommodation and to resist proposals that would lead to a net loss of dwellings. In this case bearing in mind the significant benefits of delivering much needed additional dental facilities (as will be considered later in this Statement), the loss of one unit of residential accommodation could be considered as acceptable.

### **3. Background**

- 3.1 Access to dental care is a fundamental aspect of overall health and well-being. The NHS provides essential dental services to the public. However, many individuals face challenges when attempting to find an available NHS dentist. The UK is facing a shortage of dentists, particularly within the NHS
- 3.2 This applicant seeks to provide additional dental treatment rooms to meet increased demand in the face of increased challenges for the NHS. In order to achieve this, the proposal seeks to convert the adjoining residential property into additional dental Practice accommodation to be used in conjunction with the well-established, exclusively NHS, dental Practice next door.

- 3.3 The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the provision of dental services, particularly for NHS patients, with many Practices now only taking private patients. New NHS regulations have meant that the existing Practice has only been able to provide a relatively small percentage of its usual service due to increased clinical regulations such as the need for fallow time (a period of non-use of treatment room between patients) or the type of treatment that can be offered, for example mainly procedures that will not generate aerosols.
- 3.4 Since the pandemic began, NHS dentistry has been forced to reduce delivery due to the Prevention and Control (IPS) Measures put in place which means patient access and wait time are seriously affected. Currently, the existing Practice has a full NHS list of patients totalling 18,000, is at full capacity and has over 4,000 people on its waiting list. Current wait time for potential new patients is over 12 months and this is increasing as is the size of the waiting list. As a committed provider of NHS dentistry and the only NHS dental Practice in Woodley, this delay is distressing for staff of the Practice as well as for patients.
- 3.5 An investigation by the BBC in 2022 found that eight out of ten NHS Practices are not taking on children and young people and that nine out of ten dental Practices are not accepting new adult patients for treatment. A more recent survey by law firm Patient Claim Line in early 2024 found that 26 percent of UK adults say that they have neglected their dental health because they cannot access a dentist. Separate research has shown that more than 4.4 million children in England have not seen an NHS dentist for at least a year, and in 2023 there was a 17 percent increase in the number of tooth decay extractions compared with the previous year. Over the period there were 47,581 total extractions in those ages 0-19. (Source: Express 14 February 2024)
- 3.6 Not only is the existing Practice the only NHS Practice in Woodley, but it is increasingly serving a wider area, as a result of other NHS Practices in the Wokingham District area returning their NHS contracts to the Government and becoming exclusively private Practices. Furthermore, the existing Practice has recently joined the new Government initiative to see emergency patients on the NHS who have no access to a dentist. To fulfil this commitment, the Practice has to open on a Saturday to offer emergency treatment only and has patients coming from as far afield as London and Oxford for this service.
- 8.7 The only option to alleviate this crisis in NHS dentistry is to increase the number of NHS treatment rooms. Even if, and when, the market does return to “normal”, the backlog of patients that need treatment means it could take several years before the level of service meets patients’ needs. In the years that the existing Practice has been established, the population within the local catchment areas has grown and is likely to increase in the future. By converting the adjoining property and providing an extra three treatment rooms, the proposal would enable the existing Practice to treat or even clear the existing waiting list which would not only benefit the people of Woodley but also the people in the wider Wokingham District area.

#### **4. Conclusions**

- 4.1 The proposed three additional treatment rooms will help provide better NHS services for the benefit of the local community and will provide facilities that are built to meet the high standards expected by all patients.
- 4.2 The existing Practice is well established in this area and the additional treatment rooms will ease the challenges faced by the Practice in providing NHS services for the local population.
- 4.3 Furthermore, the additional facilities would not only ease the waiting list and waiting times, but would also provide the opportunity to employ additional dentists and support staff.
- 4.4 The dental health treatments provided by the Practice are inclusive and available to all members of the community. The existing Practice has a portable ramped access, wheelchair accessible treatment rooms and an accessible WC.
- 4.5 This Statement has detailed the extremely high demand for dental care, especially by NHS patients, at a time when such services are not widely available and, in fact, are actually reducing. It is the applicant's aim to increase NHS dental services through the provision of additional treatment rooms for the benefit of the local community.
- 4.6 The benefits resulting from this proposal are substantial and can be summarised as follows:
  - The proposal seeks to deliver much needed dental care facilities during a time when there is a recognised crisis in access to dental care facilities.
  - The Practice provides NHS dental care and thereby meets a recognised and continuing need in the area.
  - The Practice will provide the highest standard of dental equipment to provide the best care possible.
  - The proposal makes efficient and effective re-use of an existing building.
  - The proposal delivers employment and will help to sustain the existing employment provided through the existing Practice.
- 4.7 This Statement has demonstrated the social benefits that arise from the delivery of accessible health services. It has found that both national and local policy are supportive of the provision of such services, and that these are encouraged in sustainable and accessible locations, such as that in which the application property is sited.
- 4.8 Whilst it is recognised that this proposal will result in the loss of one unit of residential accommodation, the background detailed above as to why the additional treatment rooms are needed is a material consideration that should be afforded weight since the health and well-being of the local community are potentially affected.