

June 2025

Planning Application for the Change of Use of Buildings and Yard Area for a Firewood Enterprise

at
Hill Farm
Jouldings Lane
Farley Hill
RG7 1UR

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 Mr Russell Butler of Butlers Services Ltd (applicant) has instructed Reading Agricultural Consultants Ltd (RAC) to submit a retrospective Planning Application for the use of a buildings and yard area at Hill Farm, Jouldings Lane, Farley Hill, RG7 1UR for a log splitting/firewood enterprise.
- 1.2 This planning application follows a site visit by Anna Valentine of Wokingham Borough Council on the 22nd April 2025 and subsequent letter dated 29th April 2025 which requested that a planning application be submitted to regularise the use of part of the site for the storage and distribution of logs.
- 1.3 This report provides a background to the planning application, outlines the relevant planning policy and undertakes a brief appraisal of planning policy.

2 Background

- 2.1 The applicant currently farms an area of approximately 810ha which comprises a small area of owned land at Hill Farm, and a much larger area of land rented on short- and long-term tenancies and agreements, and contract farmed land.

Figure 1: Aerial photograph of Hill Farm

- 2.2 Land across the wider holding is used to grow forage for livestock and as a feedstock for a biogas plant at the farm, to grow arable crops, and to run a small herd of beef cattle. The business also undertakes small amount of other agricultural contracting work such as hedge-cutting.
- 2.3 Other enterprises located at Hill Farm include an Anaerobic Digestion plant owned by Ecotricity, and various non-agricultural businesses owned by third parties.
- 2.4 The applicant first started processing and selling logs at Hill Farm in 2006, when it became apparent that there could be a market for selling deadfall and felled trees on land under his control. When the firewood business started, it allowed the part-time employment of some staff during the winter, with logs being cut by chainsaw, the rounds being split using a small log splitter and air dried in barns at the farm.
- 2.5 As the majority of the wood processed by and sold by the applicant is from land not in the ownership of the applicant, the landowner sells the wood to the applicant on a £/m³ basis. The wood is collected by the applicant using tractors/telehandlers with log grab equipment and brought back to Hill Farm in HGVs for processing and onward sale. It is worth repeating that none of the wood processed by the business is associated with clear-felling, other than in specific circumstances such as larger areas of ash die-back.
- 2.6 Since the establishment of the business the amount of firewood processed and sold by the applicant has increased significantly, with it now employing up to six farm workers on a part-

time basis (when not doing agricultural works) throughout the winter months, collecting, processing and distributing firewood to customers in the wider area. These workers are the same which work for the applicant during the summer months; however, they are now no longer laid off during the winter months or on reduced hours.

- 2.7 In order to increase the amount of wood which can be processed the business recently invested £250,000 on a Posch SpaltFix K-700 Vario¹ stationary automatic saw and splitter and has utilised existing buildings at the farm for the storage of equipment and firewood awaiting sale. The applicant's business is now registered with the Government's 'ready to burn' scheme² which aims to reduce pollution from solid fuels.
- 2.8 The increase in volume of wood to be split has meant that wood now needs sourced from land outside the control of the applicant. To this end the applicant now has agreements with two local forestry enterprises: Nick Horn Ltd and Powell Forestry Ltd. The applicant provides a useful market for these two companies due to his ability to process oversized timber. Unlike smaller firewood enterprises, the applicant's sawing and splitting machine has the ability to process 3m lengths of timber, bring with it much greater efficiencies of scale.

Figure 2: Part of Posch SpaltFix K-700 Vario stationary automatic saw and splitter



¹ Details available online here: <https://www.posch.com/en/products/firewood-processors/spaltfix-k-vario/>

² Details available online here: <https://www.readytoburn.org/>

- 2.9 The business now sources approximately 60% of wood from land under its control, with the balance being sourced from local forestry enterprises.

3 Proposed Change of Use

- 3.1 The retrospective planning application proposes to formally change the use of the of the following buildings and land at Hill Farm to a enable them to be used for the storage, processing and distribution of logs for firewood. The location of each of these areas are shown on Drawing RAC/10738/4 (Site Plan) with photographs provided in Figures 2-5.

- Area A – open area to the south of the main farmyard – used for storing unprocessed logs;
- Area B – southern half of building containing log sawing and splitting equipment;
- Area C – Containers used for the drying of firewood to ensure it meets the ‘Ready to Burn’ moisture status;
- Area D – southern end of building used for the storage of dried firewood prior to onward distribution.

Figure 3: Dried wood awaiting delivery



Figure 4: Container used for wood drying



4 Planning Policy

National Planning Policy

- 4.1 National Planning Policy can be found in the National Planning Policy Statement 2024 (NPPF). Paragraph 85 is relevant to the proposed development:

“Planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, taking into account both local business needs and wider opportunities for development. The approach taken should allow each area to build on its strengths, counter any weaknesses and address the challenges of the future...”

- 4.2 Paragraph 88 of the NPPF relates to economic development in the countryside. It states (inter alia):

“Planning policies and decisions should enable:

a) the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well-designed, new buildings;

b) the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses;...”

4.3 Finally, paragraph 89 states:

“Planning policies and decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. In these circumstances it will be important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable (for example by improving the scope for access on foot, by cycling or by public transport). The use of previously developed land, and sites that are physically well-related to existing settlements, should be encouraged where suitable opportunities exist.”

Local Planning Policy

4.4 The Local Planning Policy which is most relevant to the development is Policy CP11 - Proposals outside Development Limits (including countryside). This states:

“In order to protect the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the environment, proposals outside of development limits will not normally be permitted except where:

1) It contributes to diverse and sustainable rural enterprises within the borough, or in the case of other countryside based enterprises and activities, it contributes and/or promotes recreation in, and enjoyment of, the countryside; and

2) It does not lead to excessive encroachment or expansion of development away from the original buildings; and

3) It is contained within suitably located buildings which are appropriate for conversion, or in the case of replacement buildings would bring about environmental improvement;...”

4.5 In terms of the potential impacts of the proposed development on the amenity of nearby residents, and wider impacts, Local Planning Policy CP1 (Sustainable Development) is relevant, and in terms of the potential for the development to impact on local landscape Local Plan Policies CP1 and CP3 are relevant.

5 Planning Appraisal

Development in the Countryside

- 5.1 The firewood enterprise has been operating from Hill Farm for a number of years, albeit in different locations around the farmyard. It has developed from a small business, providing supplementary income for the farm, to a substantial diversification of its enterprise, increasing the employment of the farm workforce from seasonal to year-round. The applicant has also invested significantly in the business allowing it to process larger volumes and sizes of wood, with the business now supporting local forestry enterprises by providing a market for the oversized timber they produce.
- 5.2 Both national and local planning policy are both supportive of rural enterprises such as the firewood enterprise discussed above. The proposal has allowed the farm to diversify its income and retain workers through the winter months thereby increase its '*economic growth and productivity*'. The use of timber from deadfall and selective felling ensures that the supply of materials into the business is sustainable as it is locally sourced and is not related to the destruction of local habitats which would be associated with clear felled woodlands. The proposal therefore accords with the first part of Paragraph 88(a) of the NPPF and criterion 1 of Local Plan Policy CP11.
- 5.3 In terms of the change of use of selected areas of the farm for the firewood business, the proposal utilises existing agricultural buildings, shipping containers and yard areas and therefore has not resulted in '*encroachment or expansion of development away from the original buildings*'. The appropriate use of these structures and existing yard areas clearly accords with the second part of Paragraph 88(a) of the NPPF and criteria 2 and 3 of Local Plan Policy CP11.
- 5.4 Given the above it is clear that the development complies with national and local planning policy with regards to economic development in the countryside.
- 5.5 With regards to NPPF paragraph 89, the location of the business outside settlement limits should be considered acceptable. The business was established by finding an economic use for timber sourced from land which is under its control as part of its wider agricultural enterprise. Whilst not strictly a forestry enterprise, the firewood business has allowed the farm business to significantly diversify its income. It has been appropriate to locate the business at Hill Farm as it is close to the source of the timber and is the centre of the agricultural unit in terms of staff movements and appropriate equipment. Furthermore, it has an HGV operator's licence

associated with the site and is away from sensitive receptors, which is discussed in more detail below. Finally, the use of this site has utilised previously used land.

Sustainable Development in Impacts on Amenity

- 5.6 With regards to the potential impact of the development on nearby sensitive receptors, the issue associated with the operation of the site for the firewood business most likely to impact on local amenity relates to noise from the sawing and splitting operations. Other noise impact could also relate to movements of vehicles associated with the handling of uncut and processed timber.
- 5.7 When the business was becoming established at the site, it used chainsaws to cut the logs down prior to splitting. This very noisy activity was undertaken outside on open yard areas and had the potential to impact on the amenity of local residents. However, since the applicant purchased the stationary automatic saw and splitter, the level of noise from these operations has greatly reduced as the equipment uses quieter circular saws and is driven by silenced engines. Furthermore, the sawing and splitting equipment is housed within a building further reducing sound emissions.
- 5.8 The nearest dwelling to this area is approximately 150m to the east of the sawing building. However, it is located at a higher elevation, it is screened by other buildings, and perhaps most importantly, is associated with agricultural and non-agricultural noise generating activities of its own. The next nearest dwelling is approximately 290m to the south of the site, and unlikely to be affected by noise.
- 5.9 With regards to noise from vehicles at the site handling timber, as Hill Farm is an existing farmyard, there are numerous large traffic movements already associated with the operation of the unit. Given this, it is not considered that the use of part of the farm for the firewood enterprise brings about any greater or more frequent noise impacts over and above what might already be expected from the site.
- 5.10 In terms of traffic impacts, the site already has adequate highway access via Church Road onto the A327 Reading Road and has an HGV operator's licence associated with the farm. Furthermore, the number of traffic movements associated with the business is minimal compared to the existing operation of the site. The firewood enterprise requires a limited number of HGVs on an occasional basis through the winter months, with deliveries of wood being made in small tipper vans and numbering a only 2-3 a day.

- 5.11 Given the above, it is considered that the use of the part of the farm as part of the firewood enterprise complies with national planning policy and policy CP1 of the Local Plan.

Landscape

- 5.12 Finally, in terms of the impact of the proposed development on the local landscape, other than the storage of unsawn and split logs, all of the other elements of the business are housed within existing buildings. The stacks of logs, which are a common site in the countryside, are stored for a short period adjacent to a track which runs to the south of the main farm. This track is at one of the lowest parts of the site and is bounded for the majority of its length by soil stores and hedgerows. Furthermore, in terms of visibility from the wider area, the farm is bounded by established trees and hedgerows in all directions.

Figure 5: 3m lengths of stacked timber prior to cutting and splitting



- 5.13 Given the relatively low overall height of the stacks, their regular occurrence in a countryside setting, the location of the stack on lower ground and the screening provided by the adjacent and wider established vegetation, it is not considered that the use of part of the farm for these purposes has a detrimental effect on the local landscape.
- 5.14 Given this, it is considered that the proposal complies with policies CP1 and CP3 of the local plan.

6 Conclusions

6.1 In light of the forgoing appraisal, it is concluded that:

- a) the use of part of the farm for the storage of uncut timber, the processing of timber into firewood and the storage of the firewood for onward distribution fully complies with national and local planning policy with regards to economic development in the countryside;
- b) the firewood enterprise is an important employer, allowing the farm to retain staff through the winter months;
- c) the majority of the firewood processed at the site arises from land under the control of the applicant, and that which is not is sourced from local foresters, meaning that all of the wood associated with the business is sourced locally. None of the wood processed and sold from the site is associated with clear felling operations;
- d) there are no significant noise impacts associated with the operation due to the equipment used, the siting of noise generating equipment inside farm buildings and the distance to nearby receptors;
- e) the site has good highway links and the volume of traffic associated with the business is negligible compared to the operations across the wider farm; and
- f) the storage of uncut logs out-of-doors does not give rise to a landscape impact due to the low overall height of the stacks and the surrounding established vegetation.