

Application No: 19/3036M

Location: MERE GOLF AND COUNTRY CLUB, CHESTER ROAD, MERE, WA16 6LJ

Proposal: Proposed alteration and extension to provide additional bedrooms, conferencing and clubhouse floorspace, extension of the Stable Block (Spa) to provide additional leisure and spa facilities, creation of a tennis hut and golf starter hut and other ancillary buildings, alteration and rationalisation of the wider site and car park to provide more parking spaces and additional landscaping and re-development of existing ground store

Applicant: Mere Golf and Country Club Limited

Expiry Date: 08-Jun-2020

## **SUMMARY**

The proposed development involves an expansion and enhancement of existing facilities at the Mere Golf and Country Club.

The application proposes alterations and extensions to provide additional bedrooms, conferencing and clubhouse floorspace, extension of the Stable Block (Spa) to provide additional leisure and spa facilities, creation of a tennis hut and golf starter hut and other ancillary buildings, alteration and rationalisation of the wider site and car park to provide more parking spaces and additional landscaping and re-development of existing ground store known as 'The Cube'.

The site is within the Green Belt where there is a presumption against inappropriate development. As described in this report, the development is classed as inappropriate development. Following an assessment of the proposals along with the business case, the independent assessment of the commercial information, and all of the technical matters it is considered, on balance, that the proposed development does demonstrate the very special circumstances required to justify a grant of planning permission.

The application proposes a strong economic case for the development, which will enhance the existing tourism offer and make a contribution to the Cheshire East economy.

The proposals have been amended during the course of the application to address concerns in relation to residential amenity, trees, ecology and heritage.

It is considered that the key issues of objection raised by consultees have been resolved and, subject to no further objections from United Utilities and Natural England, the application is recommended for approval subject to conditions.

## **SUMMARY RECOMMENDATION**

**Approve subject to conditions**

## **PROPOSAL**

The application is a major application for planning permission for the expansion of the Mere Golf Resort located in Mere. The application proposes alterations and extensions to provide additional bedrooms, conferencing and clubhouse floorspace, extension of the Stable Block (Spa) to provide additional leisure and spa facilities, creation of a tennis hut and golf starter hut and other ancillary buildings, alteration and rationalisation of the wider site and car park to provide more parking spaces and additional landscaping and re-development of existing ground store known as 'The Cube' (as previously approved under 15/0141M).

The proposal includes significant extensions to the main hotel building to provide an additional 64 bedrooms, 41 of which would be located in the new extension. Giving the hotel a total of 145 bedrooms from the current provision of 81. The other extensions provide additional conferencing facilities which cover an area of 700sq.m. The extension providing enhanced conference facilities is located to the east of the building and faces the Mere and wraps around to the north. The extension provides enhanced conference facilities by providing extensions to the existing conference rooms. The extension includes the remodelling of the restaurant area externally, which will comprise brick to match the building. The conference area can be divided up or opened as one space. The extension to the west of the building includes the golf club reception, golf shop, female and male changing rooms, and storage. At first floor the extension includes a terrace area to the east, in addition at first floor a bar and golf club seating area. This replaces the existing facilities at ground floor and allows the existing club lounge to be converted to a larger formal restaurant area. The internal arrangement will be more open plan and legible for guests as a result.

The application proposes an extension to the south of the building, this provides additional hotel rooms. The extension is designed to match that of the existing hotel building. The extension will be constructed on an existing area of hardstanding and tennis court area. The remainder of the tennis courts to the south will become car parking area as the tennis courts are relocated to behind the spa building. The building known as 'the cube' was previously approved under a former application is located to the south of the site. This building will be extended slightly from that as approved and relocated away from a tree that has habitat value. This is proposed to be used as remote office space with ancillary comfort facilities. The application proposes a golf starter hut located to the front of the main building overlooking the Mere.

The Stable Building is the only Listed Building on the site and is Grade II. This building is currently used as the spa, offering treatments and contains wellness facilities and sits independently of the main building. Due to the sensitivities around this building, particularly in relation to its architecture and listed status, the scheme has been amended to reduce the harm to this building. The proposed changes to this building now include a dance studio to the rear which fills in an existing area which is used as an outdoor spin studio. The proposal includes an extended terrace area to the east elevation of the building at ground floor, adjacent to the existing indoor swimming pool. An existing small roof terrace area will be removed. The raised plateau area to the rear of the spa building will now include two tennis courts with floodlighting and a small tennis hut, for equipment. There will be a net loss of one tennis court. The third court will be a multi use area in the car park area to the hotel extension.

The proposal includes the provision of additional car parking spaces. There are currently 325 on site, and this proposal following amendments now proposes an additional 49 spaces, taking it to a total of 374. The access points to the site will remain as existing, with two accesses off Chester Road.

During the process of the application discussions have taken place with input from consultees, and a package of amendments has been submitted. This addresses a number of issues highlighted throughout the process.

The amendments include the following:

- Both remote parking areas have been removed to resolve amenity, heritage, ecology and arboricultural concerns..
- The main car park has been redesigned to resolve ecology and tree concerns
- The extensions to the Stables Building (spa) have been significantly reduced in size and it is proposed to raise the height of the bordering wall to reduce the impact of the remaining extensions
- The entrance to the conference area has been redesigned to reduce visual impact
- The entrance to the hotel has been redesigned to better reflect the character of the building
- The building known as 'The Cube' has been relocated by 2 metres, closer to the main buildings, in order to retain an ecologically important tree.

In addition to amendments to plans, an addendum to the planning statement has also been submitted, which further addresses Green Belt matters and addresses chapter 7 of the NPPF which was not included as part of the original submission.

## **SITE DESCRIPTION**

The application site is the Mere Golf and Country Club which covers an area of 3.4ha. The wider site golf course covers an area of approximately 69ha. The club has two access roads, the southern access, is used as ingress and the northern access is the used as the egress. The site includes the Grade II listed building, which is currently used as the spa building and was formerly stables. In addition, the lodge at the northern access is also a Grade II Listed Building, no alterations are proposed to this Listed Building. The main building was partially

destroyed by fire and has been rebuilt. The site has an extensive planning history and has evolved over time.

The site has the Mere to the east which is 'The Mere SSSI/Ramsar', the mere is bordered by private properties. There are properties along Chester Road located adjacent to the entrances to the site. The red line plan shows the proposed car parking areas. However, these have been omitted from the scheme.

The Golf Course is well established with many mature trees. The built area of the site contained within the red line does contain some trees along its boundaries.

## **RELEVANT HISTORY**

The Mere Golf and Country Club site has been subject to several planning applications in the past.

50071P, Temporary training centre, withdrawn 24.08.1987

71783P Extension to building (stable building), withdrawn 13.10.1992

71791P Renovation of existing outbuildings and infill to form a leisure area incorporating squash courts and changing facilities, withdrawn 13.10.1992

78451P, Refurbishment alteration & extension to form squash courts, Approved, 05.09.1994

81398P, Removal of existing grass area and laying of artificial grass surface, withdrawn, 16.08.1995

04/2341P, Construction of new tennis court, Approved, 03.11.2004

06/0785P, Alterations and extensions to new mere hall to provide 85 bedrooms. conversion and extension of stable block and squash courts to accommodate leisure facilities, alterations to site access, off-site highway improvements and rationalisation of car parking facilities, withdrawn 20.06.2006

06/0786P, Conversion, alteration and extension of stable block to provide additional leisure facilities, Withdrawn, 20.06.2006

07/1518P, Alterations and extensions to new mere hall to provide 86 bedrooms, conversion and extension of stable block and squash courts to accommodate leisure facilities, alterations to site egress arrangements (including demolition of north lodge) and rationalisation of car parking facilities (resubmission of 06/0785P), Withdrawn, 15.09.2007

07/1519P, Conversion, alteration and extension of stable block to provide additional leisure facilities (resubmission of 06/0786P), Withdrawn 15.09.2007

08/1262P, Conversion and extension of stable block and squash courts to accommodate leisure facilities (listed building consent), Approved, 10.11.2008

08/1263P, Alterations & extensions to new mere hall to provide 86 bedrooms, conversion & extension of stable block and squash courts to accommodate leisure facilities. alterations to site egress arrangements (including demolition of north lodge) and rationalisation of parking facilities (full planning), Approved, 18.03.2009

09/3549M, Variation of condition 3 on application 08/1263p relating to various external alterations, Approved, 22.03.2010

09/3818M, Variation of condition 2 on application 08/1262p (LBC) to include some external and internal alterations, Approved, 07.01.2010

10/3745M, Non material amendment to 09/3549M - variation of condition 3 on application 08/1263P relating to various external alterations, Approved, 19.10.2010

10/4444M, Replacement of 1990s front door with glass and minor non-material working amendment relating to application number 09/3549M (variation of condition 3 on application 08/1263P), Approved, 01.02.2011

15/0141M, Re-development of existing ground store/helicopter hanger and addition of new circulation area to house a gym and cafe, and conversion of existing temporary car park to permanent car park, Approved, 18-Aug-2015

## **RELEVANT PLANNING POLICY**

**By virtue of Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004, the application should be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.**

### **Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy 2010-2030 July 2017**

MP1 Presumption in favour of sustainable development

PG2 Settlement hierarchy – Other Settlements and Rural Areas

PG3 Green Belt

PG7 Spatial Distribution of Development

SD1 Sustainable Development in Cheshire East

SD2 Sustainable Development Principles

IN1 Infrastructure

EG1 Economic Prosperity

EG2 Rural Economy

EG4 Tourism

EG5 Promoting a Town Centre First Approach to Retail and Commerce

SC1 Leisure and Recreation

SC3 Health and Well-being

SE1 Design

SE3 Biodiversity and geodiversity

SE4 The Landscape

SE5 Trees, Hedgerows and Woodland

SE6 Green Infrastructure  
SE7 The Historic Environment  
SE9 Energy Efficient Development  
SE12 Pollution, Land contamination and land instability  
SE13 Flood risk and water management  
CO1 Sustainable Travel and Transport  
CO4 Travel plans and transport assessments

### **Macclesfield Local Plan (January 2004) (saved policies)**

Policy GC1: Green Belt – New Buildings  
Policy NE11: Protection and enhancement of nature conservation interests  
Policy NE12: SSSIs, SBIs and Nature Reserves  
Policy NE14: Nature Conservation Sites  
Policy BE15 Listed Buildings  
Policy BE17: Preservation of Listed Buildings  
Policy BE18: Design Criteria for Listed Buildings  
Policy DC3: Amenity  
Policy DC6: Circulation and Access  
Policy DC8: Landscaping  
Policy DC9: Tree Protection  
Policy DC13: Noise  
Policy DC14: Noise  
Policy DC15: Provision of Facilities  
Policy DC17: Water Resources  
Policy DC33: Outdoor Commercial Recreation  
Policy DC63: Contaminated Land  
Policy DC64: Floodlighting

**There is no neighbourhood plan for Mere.**

### **National Policy:**

The National Planning Policy Framework  
The National Planning Practice Guidance

### **Other Material Considerations:**

Conservation of Habitats & Species Regulations 2010  
Circular 6/2005 - Biodiversity and Geological Conservation - Statutory Obligations and Their Impact within the Planning System

### **CONSULTATIONS** (External to planning)

**Sport England** - The proposed development does not fall within either our statutory remit (Statutory Instrument 2015/595), or non-statutory remit (National Planning Policy Guidance (PPG) Par. 003 Ref. ID: 37-003-20140306), therefore Sport England has not provided a detailed response in this case.

**United Utilities** – Initial comments in relation to original scheme. Following our review of Flood Risk Assessment / Drainage Strategy (Ref: 068742 - CUR -00-XX-DR-C 92500, dated 17/06/19 we can confirm the proposals are unacceptable in principle to United Utilities. We request full extent/details of proposed drainage to be provided.

United Utilities has been consulted on amended drainage plans which are now acceptable to the Lead Local Flood Authority. Updated comments will be provided by way of an update to members.

Conditions have been recommended in the event of an approval, in relation to surface water drainage and foul water.

**Lead Local Flood Authority** – No objections subject to conditions. Comments based on amended plans.

**Economic Development** – No objections. The comments are considered in detail in the main body of the report.

**Highways** – No objection. The comments are considered in detail in the main body of the report.

**Environmental Protection** – No objections subject to conditions.

**Natural England** – As originally submitted, the application could have potential significant effects on The Mere, Mere Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and Midland Meres and Mosses Phase 1 Ramsar Site. Natural England requires further information in order to determine the significance of these impacts and the scope for mitigation.

The following information is required:

- Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA)

Without this information, Natural England may need to object to the proposal.

*Natural England requested re-consultation once this information had been obtained. Additional information has since been submitted by the applicant. Natural England have been consulted. Although the consultation period has since expired, their comments on the additional information are expected and will be reported in an update.*

**Cadent Gas** – The information is related to Low and Medium Pressure Assets. Cadent have identified operational gas apparatus within the application site boundary. This may include a legal interest (easements or wayleaves) in the land which restricts activity in proximity to Cadent assets in private land. The Applicant must ensure that proposed works do not infringe on Cadent's legal rights and any details of such restrictions should be obtained from the landowner in the first instance.

If buildings or structures are proposed directly above the gas apparatus then development should only take place following a diversion of this apparatus. The Applicant should contact Cadent's Plant Protection Team at the earliest opportunity to discuss proposed diversions of apparatus to avoid any unnecessary delays.

If any construction traffic is likely to cross a Cadent pipeline then the Applicant must contact Cadent's Plant Protection Team to see if any protection measures are required.

All developers are required to contact Cadent's Plant Protection Team for approval before carrying out any works on site and ensuring requirements are adhered to.

The above requires an informative on any decision notice.

## **VIEWS OF THE PARISH COUNCIL**

**Mere Parish Council** – Members of Mere Parish Council have studied the proposal and welcome the investment in the area that the Mere Resort is prepared to make. Due to economic circumstances changing dramatically Mere Parish Council now supports the proposal which will enhance Mere and provide more local employment. However, Mere Parish Council still has serious concerns regarding the lack of parking. We believe there is ample parking for the extra bedrooms but not enough for the overflow on the conference facilities, spa and golf members and the anticipated increase in business.

Mere Parish Council has had discussions with the Management and proposers and have been assured that they have permanent contingency plans to cover this problem.

## **REPRESENTATIONS**

**Petition** – 335 signatures. The petition on Change.org and was entitled 'Stop the proposed cutting down of trees and protect The Mere's ecosystem'.

A large number of signatures were from international locations or not local to the region. A number of signatures also stated UK or another country of origin as their address with no further detail.

### **Individual letters of representation**

1 letter of representation has been received following the reconsultation on amended plans – which relates to procedural matters only, stating that the reconsultation period was inadequate to review the amendments, and also requiring hard copies of plans.

For the original consultation exercise 9 letters of objection were received and 22 letters of support.

The objections raised are set out below:

- Traffic increase, cars already drive quickly along Chester Road
- Increased demand for more parking
- Noise pollution, outdoor loud music played until 2am large firework and pyrotechnic displays, detrimental to residents health through lack of sleep and that of pets and disruption to wildlife
- Outdoor smoking and seating areas currently cause huge disturbance as noise travels across the mere to neighbouring properties

- Proposals will bring conference facilities and disturbance closer to properties
- Noise is worse over summer months
- For the past 3-4 years helicopters regularly land at the site causing noise and disturbance to residents
- Concerns over disruption to bats due to noise
- If approved the expansion would destroy neighbours' ability to enjoy their homes
- Amenity concerns over satellite car park immediately adjacent to neighbouring property, due to loss of privacy, noise and disturbance.
- The site has grown too much already especially in Green Belt location
- Loss of trees, habitat and wildlife
- Overdevelopment of the site

The letters of support raised the following points:

- Well designed and would be a big improvement
- Demand for additional/better facilities
- The site is growing more popular
- Supporting of health and wellbeing and there aren't many options locally
- Enhancement for Cheshire region
- Benefit to Manchester region as a whole
- In danger of losing its appeal if it doesn't get investment
- Would like Mere to host international events
- Planning application has taken too long raising concerns over outcome

## **APPLICANT'S SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

- Planning Statement
- Planning Statement Addendum
- Framework Travel Plan
- Transport Statement
- Revised Design and Access Statement
- Habitats Regulations Assessment
- Lighting Impact Assessment
- Flood Risk Assessment/Drainage Strategy
- SuDS Report
- Landscape Strategy
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment
- Arboricultural Impact Assessment
- Arboricultural Survey
- Bat Survey Report
- Addendum Bat Survey Report
- Air Quality Assessment
- Phase 1 Geo-Environmental Assessment
- Heritage Impact Assessment
- Commercial Needs Assessment
- Supporting Statement

## **APPRAISAL**

### **Principle of development**

## *Green Belt*

The site is located within the settlement of Mere, the site is a golf club with additional facilities including hotel, spa and wellness centre, tennis courts. The extremities of the wider golf course site are curtailed mainly by residential development along the roads surrounding the site. The site is located within the Green Belt and The Mere, although not within the red line edge, is a SSSI Ramsar site which is directly connected to the development as it forms part of the grounds. The site has two listed buildings. One, The Gate House is no longer affected by the development following the received amended plans, the second the Stable Building contains the spa and wellness facilities within.

The site is predominantly a leisure facility which provides a large outdoor sport offering in the golf course, which is very well established both physically and historically.

Due to the site's location within the Green Belt there is a presumption against inappropriate development. The application proposes extensions to the existing spa and main hotel/golf club building, extensions to the previously approved (however not built) Cube building, tennis hut, ancillary buildings and the construction of two tennis courts.

The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and permanence.

Within the Green Belt certain forms of development are considered to be not inappropriate and these are set out within PG3 of the Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy.

The construction of new buildings is inappropriate in Green Belt. Exceptions to this are

- i. buildings for agriculture and forestry;
- ii. provision of appropriate facilities for outdoor sport, outdoor recreation and for cemeteries, as long as it preserves the openness of the Green Belt and does not conflict with the purposes of including land within it;
- iii. the extension or alteration of a building provided that it does not result in disproportionate additions over and above the size of the original building;
- iv. the replacement of a building, provided the new building is in the same use and not materially larger than the one it replaces;
- v. limited infilling in villages, and limited affordable housing for local community needs under policies set out in the Local Plan; or
- vi. limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed sites (brownfield land), whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), which would not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt and the purpose of including land within it than the existing development.

The development proposed includes a number of elements.

Based on the policy, it is considered that the proposed tennis courts to be located behind the spa building although at a higher level than the building, would be an acceptable form of development, as they are appropriate facilities for outdoor sport and recreation and will

preserve openness. The tennis courts will have floodlighting, however this will only be used during the months when bats are hibernating, it is not considered that the light posts will have an impact on openness, in addition it means that the facility can be used all year round. The proposal also includes a small tennis hut.

The proposed tennis hut will measure 2.4x5m and will measure 3.8m in height. It will be constructed from timber with a brick base and tile roof. The proposed hut is considered to be modest in side and will contain an accessible toilet and storage for tennis equipment.

The application also proposes a golf starter hut which will be designed mainly from glass with a tile roof, and timber frame. The hut measures 5.6x6.5m and 3,8 to the ridge of the roof, a clock is proposed on top with a weather vane. The building is ornamental in design as it will be positioned between the main frontage of the building overlooking the lake.

It is considered that both buildings are ancillary to the tennis court and golf course use and are both considered to be an appropriate form of development within the Green Belt. It is considered that the buildings due to their modest form, especially in the context of the scale other development on the site, preserve openness and do not conflict with the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. Therefore are acceptable.

The main proposals include the extensions to the main hotel building and the stable building which contains the spa.

The buildings due to their scale and use go beyond what is considered to be ancillary to outdoor sport and recreation, therefore the extensions must be assessed under part iii of policy PG3 of the CELPS.

The policy requires that extensions and alterations do not result in disproportionate additions over an above the original building. The main building was destroyed by fire in the 1970s and was largely rebuilt. The modern planning history for the site goes back to 1987 which includes various additions. The most extensive approved in 2009 which included alterations & extensions to new mere hall to provide 86 bedrooms, conversion & extension of stable block and squash courts to accommodate leisure facilities, alterations to site egress arrangements (including demolition of north lodge) and rationalisation of parking facilities. This application was approved following a case was put forward for Very Special Circumstances as it introduced significant additions which were disproportionate and resulted in 121% extensions to floor area.

The extensions proposed as part of this application take the additions further and propose a 246% increase in floor area to the main building from the pre-2009 additions (i.e. from the "original" position). For the purposes of Green Belt policy, any further extensions to the building would be considered as inappropriate development and that is clearly the case with this application.

'The Cube' building which received planning permission in 2015 has not been built, one condition in relation to this permission has been discharged, however from visiting the site the development has not commenced on the ground. The principle of development has been established, however this application proposes a larger version, which sees an increase in volume of 143 cubic metres resulting in a volume percentage increase of 11.35%. The extension to the previously approved original scheme is not considered to be disproportionate and is considered to be acceptable.

To help gauge the impact on the openness of the Green Belt from the overall scheme, the extent of the extensions in relation to the existing building on site are also included below.

In terms of the additions to the existing buildings these would result in a 55% increase in floor area over existing for the main building.

For the stable/spa building the increase would represent a 23% increase in floor area from the existing situation.

A series of volume calculations have been provided by the applicant based on the amended plans which break down the individual elements of the site.

<b>Element</b>	<b>Existing Volume (m3)</b>	<b>Proposed Volume (m3)</b>	<b>Difference (m3)</b>	<b>% Increase</b>
Hotel	19700	30370	10670	54.16%
Conferencing	5770	8372	2602	45.10%
Golf Club	2608	3052	444	17.02%
Spa	5105	6566	1461	28.62%
Cube (already approved under 15/0141M)	1260	1403	143	11.35%
<b>Total</b>	<b>34443</b>	<b>49763</b>	<b>15320</b>	<b>44.48%</b>

The impact on the openness of the Green belt as a result of the extensions is discussed in more detail below. In summary the proposals amount to inappropriate development in the Green Belt. This is definitional harm. There will also be a loss of openness and some limited encroachment of built development to the east that would conflict with the purposes of including land within the Green Belt. Substantial weight must be given to this identified harm to the Green Belt. Any additional harm resulting from the scheme must then be considered, before considering whether other considerations in favour of the development exist that clearly outweigh the identified harm.

*Consideration of additional harm and the case for Very Special Circumstances*

Paragraph 144 of the NPPF states that: When considering any planning application, local planning authorities should ensure that substantial weight is given to any harm to the Green Belt. ‘Very special circumstances’ will not exist unless the potential harm to the Green Belt by reason of inappropriateness, and any other harm resulting from the proposal, is clearly outweighed by other considerations.

Following revisions to the proposals, an addendum to the planning statement has been provided which sets out the case for Very Special Circumstances.

In terms of openness, the applicant considered that the development would cause only limited harm to openness, due to development being focussed around existing significant built development. The design ensures that any additional buildings are seen as part of the

existing development and none extend above the current height parameters. No key vistas through the site are interrupted.

With regard to this point, whilst the development is focused around the main building, this would be the case for any extensions to the building. It is true that the proposal does not increase heights across the entirety of the site, however openness has both spatial and visual aspects. The two extensions to the main building in particular as can be seen from the plans are significant and it is difficult to argue that these only have limited harm to openness. The proposed design does not appear subservient to the main building. The conference building and new golf club area design introduces additional bulk and through the bold design and materials and would actually become a key feature of the building and appears as a main focal point of the development as it wraps around the corner of the building providing a conference facility grand entrance. This extension would also slightly encroach to the east towards the lake, however this is considered to be within the main developed site as it currently forms circulation space around the building.

The extension to the hotel whilst mimicking the design and materials of the existing building, is not modest in proportion and will dominate an area which is currently laid to hardstanding and partially tennis courts.

It is considered that both large extension elements would have a significant impact on openness within the site. The loss of openness is contained to the parkland setting within the site itself, this is covered within the landscape section and it should be acknowledged that the development itself will not be prominent from public vantage points outside the site which does help to temper the overall impact on the Green Belt.

Matters relating to other harm have been set out in the addendum planning statement, this includes Landscape and Visual Impact, Ecology, Trees, Heritage/Design, Amenity and Environmental Protection, Flood Risk and Drainage and Highways. It is accepted that these matters are no longer making a contribution to 'other harm' as all issues have been resolved as a result of the amended plans and additional information. The matters are discussed in detail within the report.

The main case for Very Special Circumstances is based on the commercial need for expansion.

This case set out by the applicant argues the following:

- There is a compelling need for expansion given the fully mature nature of the current business;
- This need is supported by the strategic objectives of the Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy (2016-2020)
- Significant benefits will be realised to the local economy, including the creation of jobs and a significant increase in GVA;
- The proposals deliver material heritage benefits; and
- The scheme as amended will secure ecological and landscape benefits.

An independent commercial needs assessment review was carried out by Colliers International. This was commissioned by the Council to fully assess whether the business requires the extensions and multi million pound investment to make it viable for the future and whether the commercial case is robust. The assessment was completed in April during the Covid 19 restrictions however the assessor completed a site visit prior to restrictions coming into place. The assessment was carried out based on pre-pandemic conditions of trading and trading potential.

The initial business case for the development stated that the business would not be as profitable into the future and whilst the business is making a healthy profit, this fluctuates. Further due to the size of less than 100 bedrooms and modest conference facilities, cannot compete on the same level as larger hotels and function spaces. The proprietors routinely turn away large parties due to lack of capacity, which can be damaging. Many nights are sold out due to the facility being at full capacity and the business estimated that £1.5m of events business has been lost due to the small size of the conference facilities since 2015.

The independent commercial needs assessment review states that the revenue has fluctuated over the past four years and the revenue split has remained broadly static although there has been a steady decline in green fee revenue which has been offset by an increase in accommodation revenue.

The room occupancy rate has grown over the past four years, which does demonstrate the popularity of the site with occupancy at the end of 2019 at 83.9%.

Wage costs are considered to be the highest cost to businesses such as these, with a wage percentage in 2019 of 39.7%. This coincides with the business providing a high level of service and an increase in labour costs and the introduction of the National Living Wage. The assessment considers this percentage however to be at the upper end of what might ordinarily be expected for this type of business.

The overheads for the business have remained steady, which is typical of a mature business. The EBITDA (Earnings Before Interest Tax Depreciation Amortisation (and Rent)) value was seen in the assessment to be something the market would view as attractive.

With regard to proposed staffing numbers the figures provided by the business shows an increase in FTE 60 which has an increase in 27% over current staff levels. Based on the experience of the assessor the projected increases in staff which are proposed by the existing management, given the current head count seems high, especially with a wage cost running at nearly 40% of revenue.

The conclusions state that there is no doubt that the proposed development would enhance the product offer, making the Mere one of the finest resorts in the UK which would open up new markets and business opportunities. There is also no doubt that the development would provide opportunities to significantly increase revenues and profit. In addition, the report accepts the applicant's argument that a significant uplift in GVA for the local economy would result, and the reasons why it would be desirable to undertake the development from a business enhancement point of view.

Setting aside the desirability of the scheme the conclusion states that in the view of the independent assessment, should the Mere Resort come to the open market in its current form it would generate significant interest from investors and existing operators who would view the

current profitability as sustainable and may well see opportunities to enhance this through further cost savings.

Therefore from the independent review above the proposed development is considered to be a desirable rather than essential expansion. On this basis it is for the desirability for the development within Cheshire East, and the benefits this would likely have on the local economy, to be assessed in the planning balance. It is also important to highlight that it has never been the applicant's case that the existing business will fail in the absence of this proposal coming forward.

The applicant's supporting statement sets what they consider to be the benefits to the local and visitor economy, which are:

- The Mere attracts golf and spa breaks from much further afield than a number of competitors and outperforms them. The business has a good reputation and the site's proximity to Manchester and Manchester Airport, enhance its performance, to the benefit of Cheshire East.
- The proposal would meet a number of objectives set out in the Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy.
- The proposals would increase the size of conference facilities from a maximum of 550 delegates to 950, attracting larger conferences, and will no longer have to turn away larger conferences.
- The proposals will create 60 FTE positions and an estimated 32 additional through the supply chain. Which will result in a GVA to the region of £5.9m.
- The increase in bedrooms and improvements to the spa will enhance the hotel/resort offer within Cheshire East and will add to the reasons to visit the area.
- The expanded facilities would allow the business to sell more bedrooms (which are currently oversubscribed) which will create an additional £7m in annual revenue.

Based on the findings of the commissioned report there is no reason to disagree with the benefits outlined above, although the employment offer shown may be slightly inflated and may not be fully sustainable due to cost.

There are clear benefits to the proposals and the impact this will have on the economy of Cheshire East and have a knock-on effect in the locality and wider region.

The Cheshire East Visitor Economy Team has commented on the proposals.

Cheshire East's visitor economy is worth £921m per year; employing over 11,500 fte's. It is an important economic sector that contributes to jobs, growth and prosperity, both in its own right and in its contribution to Cheshire East's 'Quality of Place'. The ambition is focussed around continuing to maximise growth of the visitor economy, whilst ensuring greater prosperity across the widest number of communities that will lead to greater wellbeing for both residents and visitors. Tourism can be a force for good both in economic terms but also as an essential contributor to the excellent quality of life and place Cheshire East offers. This is a key factor not only in decisions to visit but also in decisions to settle and to invest.

Cheshire East is well positioned to access markets from other parts of Cheshire and surrounding areas, with the highest proportion of visitors being day visitors. Whilst day visitors are welcome, overnight visitors spend more per head, putting more money into the local economy. They also create more job opportunities in the area, meaning Cheshire East

Council's aim is to get our visitors to stay longer. It means giving reasons for day visitors to dwell longer or stay on into the evening and overnight, as well as actively pursuing high level conferences as well as weddings from those parties based outside of Cheshire. Once here the aim is to encourage conference delegates and wedding guests to stay longer or to return to enjoy Cheshire at their leisure.

Working with Marketing Cheshire, the sub-regional place marketing board, Cheshire East Council is promoting the region as a short breaks destination as well as a location for business tourism, activity related tourism, food tourism and weddings. The Cheshire East Visitor Economy Strategy (2016-2020) articulates strategic themes that help to guide the identification of priorities in seeking to maximise the contribution of the visitor economy; including investment in quality attractions and accommodation provision. It also identifies strategic priorities including developing a distinctive rural tourism offer and profiling a quality food & drink offer in Cheshire East. This means attracting more high-spending 'Cosmopolitans', and to meet their high standards and expectations, we need to improve the quality and choice of accommodation and attractions.

There are a number of key priorities related to this proposed development that are set out within the Cheshire East Council Visitor Economy Strategy (2016-2020)

- Encourage investment in quality tourism product and services in Cheshire East to the benefit of jobs and economic growth
- Investment in hotel development
- Position Cheshire East as a convenient and desirable Business Tourism location
- Significantly increase leisure and business visits from International visitors

A crucial area in relation to the above strategy is Business Tourism; which can have a huge impact on the value of the visitor economy, as well as profiling Cheshire East as a place to do business. The proposed increase in the size of the conference facilities from a maximum of 550 delegates to a maximum of 950 delegates is crucial in Cheshire East attracting larger conferences. Mere Golf & Country Club is already the largest conference facility provider in Cheshire East and the additional capacity will mean the Borough and the County will be able to market itself as a prime conference location; no longer automatically turning away many larger and lucrative conferences. Cheshire East is also currently part of a consortium along with surrounding areas, to interact with and attract high quality science association conferences to the area; and the proposed development will allow for the area to offer an expanded offer.

In relation to the proposed increase in bedroom numbers, it is worth noting that Cheshire East's occupancy levels at key accommodation providers have increased by 14% over the past seven years; showing increases year on year. There has also been an increase of 28% in a key performance measure where room revenue is divided by rooms available to give the price received per room. Additionally and especially for hotels in the North of the Borough it is noted that the ability to welcome additional large parties on top of normal occupancy is becoming increasingly difficult with in most occasions potential customers choosing to stay in Manchester rather than Cheshire.

In the context of Marketing Cheshire's strategic vision for the sub-region there are a number of relevant points to note including:

- Identification of the need to improve the quality of the destination product offering.
- The key target markets in terms of profile, behaviour and spend for Cheshire include 'independent' market segments – especially traditionalists and cosmopolitans.
- Marketing Cheshire say that developments such as The Mere Golf & Country Club require significant private sector investment. Their delivery will make a massive statement about Cheshire as a place to invest. Cheshire is passionate about quality – quality of facilities, experience and service. We want quality to define the experience at every stage in the visitor's journey. Quality is not about price – it is about exceeding visitor expectations.

It is also becoming clear that the 'experience' economy is growing as consumers seek out memories in favour of material possessions. The developments planned at The Mere Golf & Country Club will increase the quality offer of experiences within Cheshire East and will add to the reasons to visit the area.

The consultation response above from Cheshire East Visitor Economy Team supports the proposals and states that clearly the proposals and the investment would meet a growing need in the area for bedrooms leading to overnight stays and for larger conference facilities that would attract international conferences. This proposal would accord with a number of aims of the Cheshire East Council Visitor Economy Strategy (2016-2020).

Policy EG4 of the CELPS states that the Local Plan will protect and enhance the unique features of Cheshire East that attract visitors to the area, including their settings whilst encouraging investment.

This will be achieved through various means, two of which are appropriate in this case:

ii. Protecting visitor attraction sites

iii. Protecting the enhancement and expansion of existing visitor attractions and tourist accommodation, and the provision of new visitor and tourism facilities, in sustainable and appropriate locations.

The policy goes on to state that proposals for tourist development outside of the Principal Towns and Key Service Centres will be supported where:

Either c. There is evidence that the facilities are required in conjunction with a particular countryside attraction.

And a. The sales, design and use of the proposal is compatible with its wider landscape or townscape and would not detract from the character or appearance of the area; and

- It would not be detrimental to the amenities of local residential areas; and
- The proposals are served by adequate access and infrastructure; and
- The site has access to local services and employment.

As the site is an existing site which provides an attraction through the hotel, spa and championship golf course it is considered that the policy is applicable to this case. As the site is not within a principal town or key service centre, there needs to be evidence that the facilities are required in conjunction with a particular countryside attraction. The facilities are to enhance the offer provided at the golf course which is well established and is considered to

be an attraction particularly for its hospitality offering. The proposals would not detract from the character or appearance of the area, which is discussed in the heritage and landscape sections of the report. The access and infrastructure is adequate which is addressed in the highways section of the report. The site is existing, and currently provides employment, and the town of Knutsford is a short distance away where there is good access to local services and transport links.

It is considered that the proposal is supported through policy EG 4 and for the reasons mentioned would accord with policy EG 2 which focuses on the enhancement of the Rural Economy outside of Principal Towns, Key and Local Service Centres.

### *Sequential Assessment*

Due to the scale of the proposals which could accommodate up to 950 conference delegates and providing a total of 145 bedrooms, there is a concern that this could take revenue away from town or local centres where development of this scale is encouraged, in order to maintain the vitality and viability of town centres.

Policy EG5 promotes a Town Centre First Approach to Retail and Commerce, and states that Principal Towns will be the main focus for among other things, leisure and tourism, and that town centres will be promoted as the primary location for leisure uses.

Paragraph 86 of the NPPF states that:

*Local planning authorities should apply a sequential test to planning applications for main town centre uses which are neither in an existing centre nor in accordance with an up-to-date plan. Main town centre uses should be located in town centres, then in edge of centre locations; and only if suitable sites are not available (or expected to become available within a reasonable period) should out of centre sites be considered.*

The glossary defines main town centre uses as:

*Retail development (including warehouse clubs and factory outlet centres); leisure, entertainment and more intensive sport and recreation uses (including cinemas, restaurants, drive-through restaurants, bars and pubs, nightclubs, casinos, health and fitness centres, indoor bowling centres and bingo halls); offices; and arts, culture and **tourism development** (including theatres, museums, galleries and concert halls, **hotels and conference facilities**).*

The proposed development is not in accordance with an up-to-date plan as it proposes inappropriate development within the Green Belt. Therefore paragraph 86 of the NPPF is engaged.

The hotel and resort is existing and therefore the offer it provides along with the golf course are locational reasons why expansion of the existing conference and hotel facilities are proposed to take place on this site.

A sequential assessment has been carried out by the applicant and includes a review of sites in Knutsford, Wilmslow and Altrincham which are the closest town centres to the site.

The following criteria were used to search for alternative sites:

- At least 1.5ha in size, in order to accommodate a similar scale form of development (the totality of the floorspace, bedrooms and required ancillary development)

- To be within walking distance to a train station
- To be within a visible and prominent location for visitors to the town for both leisure and business purposes.

Based on the criteria, no sites were currently deliverable within Knutsford. The sites that met the criteria were both green spaces, The Moor and Knutsford Heath where built development is restricted.

No suitable sites were deliverable in Wilmslow, the land part of Wilmslow Cricket Club and fields associated with Wilmslow High School are designated as open space and are protected.

No suitable sites were deliverable within Altrincham. No sites met all criteria, further it does not fall within the drive-time area and was included for robustness. The assessment states that the location within Greater Manchester proximity to sporting venues, the M56, close to the city centre and airport means that in reality it serves a different tourist accommodation market and catchment.

It is considered that based on the information set out above there are no alternative sites suitable for the level of development within or on the edge of the main towns within close proximity to the site. The findings from the information provided are acceptable.

It is considered therefore that the location of the expansion is acceptable and would not detract from local Town Centres due to the nature of the development and what it currently offers on site. The proposal meets the requirements of policies EG2 and EG4 as set out earlier in the section and will therefore make a positive contribution to the Cheshire East Economy.

#### *Very Special Circumstances Conclusion*

In order for the proposals to be acceptable the harm to the Green Belt through disproportionate additions resulting in a loss of openness, and minor encroachment of built development which conflicts with the purposes of including land within the Green Belt, and any other harm, must be clearly outweighed.

In terms of “other harm”, the loss of trees has been largely mitigated for through a landscape scheme and through amendments to the proposal, as such this is no longer weighing against the proposals. The impact on the heritage asset is now considered to be neutral as the scheme provides some heritage benefits through the design which compensates for any minor impact to its setting. As noted in the report, all other site planning issues such as residential amenity have been addressed and do not add any further additional harm.

The harm caused to openness is considered to be significant due to the growth of the site in recent years and the proposed further growth, which is well in excess of what could be considered proportionate. Whilst this carries substantial weight the harm is largely limited to the spatial dimension of openness.

In terms of visual aspects of the Green Belt and the impact of the development, the harm is more limited. The landscape officer has concluded that the proposal would not have a detrimental impact on the landscape. The site is clearly visible from private properties, as are the private properties from the site. However, the site is not readily visible from public vantage points, due to its location along a long driveway and within a parkland setting.

It is considered that whilst the extensions are significant and the new entrance and wrap around extension would dominate the northern corner of the building, the design would give a greater sense of arrival, which is currently not experienced due to the current arrangement which is not particularly legible. The extensions to the bedrooms area would be significant, however would be located on an existing area of hardstanding so would not encroach beyond the built development of the site. The design compliments the existing hotel building.

The economic benefits of the scheme are a considerable factor in the planning balance. The proposal would enhance the visitor experience, would provide facilities suitable for international conferences, and provide a level of accommodation to support this, in addition further improvements to the spa offer and golf club offer are proposed through enhanced facilities. The proposal would create full time employment of around 60 jobs. It is considered that this site presents a unique opportunity to enhance the leisure and tourism offering locally, which would be of regional significance. The site would make a significant contribution to the local economy which has support of the Council's visitor economy team, stating that the amount and type of development is required within the borough.

It is concluded that the proposed opportunity to enhance the site and the economic and social benefits arising from it clearly outweighs the definitional harm by way of inappropriateness and the identified harm resulting from loss of openness and encroachment. As such it is considered that very special circumstances do exist to justify a grant of planning permission.

### **Highways/Accessibility**

The site is currently in use as Hotel & Spa and also Golf, the proposal is to increase the number of bedrooms by 64 and provide additional conference areas by 643 Sq.m.

A number of objections have been raised in relation to car parking and current problems occurring at the site.

A revised plan has been submitted that has removed some of the parking areas within the site, the total number of spaces is now 374 spaces across the site. The total number of bedrooms is 145 including the additional 64 and the number of spaces far exceeds the CEC standard of 1 space/bedroom as set out in the Cheshire East Local Plan.

Appendix C (Parking Standards) of the Cheshire East Local Plan states that for hotels, other uses within should be accounted for.

The proposal therefore requires 145 car parking spaces for the hotel use and in addition, due to the other facilities on site including the restaurant, retail, leisure areas an additional 134 parking spaces are required.

This gives an excess of 95 spaces which is considered to be acceptable for the remaining uses on the site.

This is an established use and the proposed additional facilities on the site would not result in material traffic impact problems on the local road network.

There are no objections raised to the proposals.

### **Heritage and Design**

The site contains 2 listed buildings - the gate house and the stables. These are designated heritage assets.

The first is the Gate House a Grade II Listed Building with the following list description:

*4/47 Entrance arch and gates to Mere Country Club and golf course, Mere New Hall*

*Entrance arch and lodge. c1840. Red, Flemish bond brick with stone dressings and tile roof. 2-storey gateway with single storey lodges to either side. Road frontage: stone plinth with stone quoins and caps to turrets and surrounds to windows, some diapering in blue brick. Central Tudor-arched gateway. Tudor-arched passenger walkways to either side in slightly projecting square turrets which die to octagonal turrets with domed caps. Lancets to first floor of turrets with a 2-light casement window over central archway with shaped gable above. Lateral one-storey wings have 3-lights casement windows, with shaped gables above. Cast iron gates to central and pedestrian arches of diamond lattice pattern with armigerous shields imposed. Rear: similar to road frontage save that pedestrian walkways exist under the central archway instead of under the turrets on this side. C20 single storey additions to left and right.*

The second listed building is the Stable Block used as the spa a Grade II Listed Building with the following list description:

*4/48 Stable block at Mere Country Club and Golf 5.3.59 Course at Mere New Hall*

*Stable block. c1834. Red Flemish bond brick with stone dressings and blue brick diapering. Single storey courtyard plan with tower over entrance arch. East front: central Tudor archway. Square turrets to either side with stone quoins, dying to octagonal turrets. Slightly recessed tower stage above with stone quoins. One-light casement window with hood mould and stone surround. Circular clock face above, the lower half embedded in brick wall, the upper half in a lead cupola which is square in plan and of two moulded quadrant stages with a small semi-circular cap and weather vein above. To either side are brick walls divided by pilaster buttresses with stone quoins and cornices with octagonal domed tops. Central bays to either side have single-light casements with stone surrounds and small decorative gables. Small octagonal turrets to left and right-hand corners also with stone quoins, cornices and domed caps.*

The hotel itself has a historic core, which has been extended and remodelled following fire damage in the 1970s. This can be considered as a non-designated heritage asset. The impact of the proposed development/works on the designated and non-designated heritage assets and their setting based on the revised scheme has been assessed by the Heritage Conservation Officer.

With regard to the Gate House, following the removal of the car parking area there is now no concern as there is no adverse impact.

For the Stables Building, following the reduction in height and mass, the proposals have a neutral impact. The elegant stables building with its imposing main elevation depicting diaper brickwork features, a clock tower and stone details to the elevation creates historical context to the site along with a remaining 19th Century element to the hotel.

The revised proposal seeks to extend the leisure and spa facilities by enclosing more of the open elements at the rear and extended it sideways to create more usable indoor space.

However, it excludes the first floor café element of the previous scheme, which is an improvement. There are no concerns regarding the proposed rear alterations/extensions.

The applicant has suggested an increase in wall height and a reduction in the proposed extension to the stable block such that the wall would now screen any impact of the extension. This part of the stable building is a modern addition and the impact of this when seen from the car park would be neutral.

For the Hotel, part of the hotel is made up of historic fabric. This has been extended and modernised to adapt to hotel use. The proposed 3-storey extension is large and would create a very large building that would dominate the setting of the stable block. Whilst this building would have always been subservient, the original hall would not have extended as far.

For the landscaping, the proposals include the creation of a path and reinstatement of a wall to divide the spaces of the car park. The suggested illustrations appear acceptable and the council would seek quality natural materials to ensure that the landscape design does.

The applicants have submitted details of walls dividing the large expanse of car parking area located between the listed stable building and the hotel to 'break up the area' and this would generally reflect the historic layout. It is noted that there would have been a form of enclosure from the stable block to the original Mere new hall. This is evident from the historic maps as lines/broken lines. In my view this would improve the appearance of the car park and reduce the dominance of the car park on the setting of the listed buildings. This is a positive impact subject to a condition matching materials to the stables and using traditional bond, mortar mix and natural stone details.

In conclusion, the revised design is an improvement on the previous scheme.

In terms of the impact of the hotel extension on the setting of the listed stables, it does have a slight negative impact when viewed in context with the stables as one enters the car park as it is much bigger, however this is considered to be outweighed by the improvements to the car park which will have a positive impact on the setting of the listed building, therefore the proposals overall would have a neutral impact on the setting of the listed building and paragraph 196 of the NPPF is not engaged.

In terms of the proposed changes to the listed building itself, the extension would have a minimal impact over and above the existing extension that has had permission. The proposals are therefore in accordance with Cheshire East Local Plan policy SE7.

The proposed design of the extensions is considered to be acceptable. The proposals come as a package of remodelling, therefore the main focal point of the building will change. The proposed design will give more legibility to the scheme as patrons will have a greater sense of arrival, which is currently toned down and confusing due to several entrance points including a service entrance. The materiality of the main extension providing the conference facilities and golf facilities is very important. The materials must be submitted to the LPA for approval, as the design is bold and therefore must be finished to a high quality standard, this includes the screening for the terrace and balcony areas.

With regard to the extension to the hotel, this mimics the existing design of the hotel bedroom extensions in terms of materiality, proportions and fenestration. This is acceptable however, again, materials must be submitted for approval to ensure that the match is acceptable. The design is considered to accord with policy SE1 of the Cheshire East Local Plan.

## **Landscape Impact**

As part of the application a Landscape and Visual assessment has been submitted, the assessment indicates that it has been undertaken in accordance with Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact assessment – Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment 2013 (Third Edition).

The application site is located in Mere to the north of the A50 Warrington Road, the Chester Road forms the western boundary and further to the east by Mereside Road; there are residential properties along each of these boundaries. The wider application site includes a golf course and two meres, Little Mere and The Mere, the application site also contains a number of listed buildings, a Site of nature Conservation Importance (SNCI), in addition the site is located within the boundary of The Green Belt and is also located within the Rostherne/Tatton Park Local Landscape Designation Area (LLD), Formerly ASCV. The assessment identifies the National Character Area (NCA61) and that the application site is located with the area identified in The Cheshire East Landscape Character Assessment (2018) as Woodland Estates and Meres Character Type, and specifically the Tatton & Rostherne 5d Character Area.

The Landscape Assessment identifies a number of broad character area descriptions, Parkland Estate, Farmland, Residential and the site itself – Golf Course, the sensitivity of these is identified as high, medium, low and medium to low respectively. The magnitude of change for the Parkland Estate, Farmland and Residential areas is identified as negligible, as is the magnitude of effect for the site itself (Golf Course). The assessment indicates that landscape effects would be slight-moderate.

The Visual assessment identifies nine viewpoints (Fig 9), five are residential and these range from no visual effect to a moderate effect, the remaining viewpoints are from paths and road and range from no effect to a moderate effect.

The landscape officer broadly agrees with the landscape and visual assessment. Mitigation as shown on the submitted Detailed Landscape Plans (Drawings 07, 08 and 09) will reduce the overall landscape effects. Therefore no objections to the proposals are raised on landscape grounds.

## **Trees**

The land surrounding the Golf Club is listed on the national inventory as Priority Wood-Pasture, Deciduous woodland and Parkland habitat. There are no designated Ancient Woodland within the application site, nor are any trees listed in the Woodland Trust Ancient Tree Inventory, however it is noted in the Arboricultural Statement that there are a number of substantial trees, some of which from their description and characteristics may have potential veteran status.

Trees within the Mere Golf and Country Club grounds are currently not afforded protection by a Tree Preservation Order or lie within a designated Conservation Area.

The revised Arboricultural Assessment has identified 20 individual trees to be removed to support the development. T62 is to be removed due to its condition.

Following the submission of amended plans, a number of trees set out to be lost will now be retained and there has been sufficient mitigation for the loss put forward through a landscape scheme. The proposal also retains older trees that have a high ecological value for habitat, which is a positive amendment.

The proposal is now considered to be acceptable in arboricultural terms subject to conditions.

## **Ecology**

### *Statutory Designated Sites*

This application falls within Natural England's SSSI impact risk zones associated with the nearby The Mere SSSI/Ramsar.

It is noted that Natural England have made further comments on the application indexed on the 28th February 2020. Natural England are requesting a copy of the Habitat Regulations Assessment for the site, and confirmation the drainage proposals.

It is advised that the required information must be submitted to NE and their further advice obtained and considered prior to the determination of the application.

Natural England has been consulted on the revised proposals and the additional information supplied.

### *Wood Pasture and Parkland Priority Habitats*

The landscape around the golf club is listed on the national inventory of Priority Wood-Pasture and Parkland habitats. The inventory acknowledges that the park has been re-landscaped and used as golf course. I advise that this is however not to the long term detriment of the parkland.

Habitats of this type receive protection under Local Plan Core Strategy Policy SE 3.

The main nature conservation interest of the parkland is the presence of mature trees with deadwood which in turn supports a range of wildlife.

The earlier proposals at this site resulted in the loss of six trees with significant deadwood habitats which made a major contribution to the ecological value of the parkland habitats on site. The proposals have now been revised to ensure that all of these trees are now retained. No additional trees would be lost as a result of the revised proposals.

The proposed development would still result in the loss of a number of trees. Many of the trees lost are ornamental plantings and/or are too immature to contribute significantly to the existing ecological value of the parkland habitats present on site. The loss of maturing trees, such as T56 and T53 would, however, have an impact on the future nature conservation interest of the parkland as these trees have the potential to support significant habitats in the medium term.

Suitable compensatory tree planting is therefore required for the loss of T56 and T53. It is advised that from a nature conservation perspective the proposed planting would be sufficient to compensate for the loss of trees resulting from the proposed development. The revised proposals would not therefore have a significant adverse impact upon Wood Pasture and Parkland Priority Habitats.

Advice should also be sought from the Council's tree officer on the acceptability of the proposed replacement planting.

### *Hedgerows*

Native species hedgerows are a priority for nature conservation. The hedgerows present on site are largely non-native species or defunct and so of limited nature conservation value.

### *Roosting Bats – Trees*

Five trees have been identified on site as having potential to support roosting bats.

Inspection surveys of these trees have been undertaken, and recently a single bat activity survey has been undertaken, no evidence of roosting bats was recorded, it is therefore advised that roosting bats associated with trees are not reasonable likely to be directly affected by the proposed tree removal.

### *Roosting Bats – Buildings*

Three buildings on site were identified as having moderate potential to support roosting bats. Further bat surveys were undertaken of these buildings to establish the presence of roosting bats. Temperatures were slightly low during the second bat activity survey, but on balance, it is advised that the level of survey undertaken is acceptable to determine the level of bat roosting taking place at the surveyed buildings.

A single bat was recorded as emerging from buildings B01 (the main hotel building) during the surveys. The submitted report states that the bat emerged from a part of the building not affected by the proposed extensions. The location where the bat emerged was subsequently confirmed by the applicant's consultant. It is advised that roosting bats are unlikely to be directly affected by the proposed alterations to the existing buildings.

### *Lighting*

Any additional lighting associated with the proposed development has the potential to have an adverse effect on bats and other wildlife.

The application is supported by a detailed lighting strategy. It is advised that there is relatively limited light pollution of ecological receptors resulting from the proposed lighting scheme. The exception to this is the proposed lighting of the tennis courts which will result in light spill onto adjacent trees which is likely to be significant enough to have a localised effect on foraging bats. Whilst the applicant has made attempts to minimise the extent of light spill from the lighting of the tennis courts, the applicant has also proposed that the tennis courts only be lit

during the bat hibernation season. It is advised that this would be an acceptable means of addressing this issue.

If planning consent is granted a condition would be required to secure the submission of a detailed lighting scheme ensure to ensure that the tennis courts only be lit between the period between the 1st November and the 15th March

#### *Great Crested Newts*

Surveys of ponds within 250m of this application have not recorded any evidence of great crested newt. It is therefore advised that this species is not reasonable likely to be present or affected by the proposed development.

#### *Badger and reptiles*

No evidence of badgers or reptiles was recorded on site and it is advised that these species are not reasonably likely to be present or affected by the proposed development.

#### *Bluebell*

This priority plant species was recorded on site associated with an overgrown hedgerow. The proposed car park extension would result in the loss of a small area of bluebells. It is advised that this would have a minor impact upon this species. To reduce the impact on this species the applicant has proposed to relocate the bluebell plants prior to the construction of the car park.

#### *Breeding Birds*

A breeding bird survey report has been submitted in support of this application. The bird survey undertaken was not a systematic breeding bird survey undertaken in accordance with best practice, but rather a series of observation undertaken on site during other ecological surveys on site together with pre-commencement nesting bird checks undertaken on small areas of the site.

It is advised that the application site is likely to support a number of breeding birds, including those species which are considered to be a priority for nature conservation. The proposed development is likely to have a localised adverse effect on nesting birds. This impact would be reduced through further tree retention as described above.

If planning consent is granted standard condition would be required to safeguard nesting birds.

#### *Invasive Non-native plant species*

The applicant should be aware that Japanese Knotweed (*Fallopia japonica* ) is present on the proposed development site. Under the terms of the Wildlife and Countryside act 1981 it is an offence to cause Japanese Knotweed to grow in the wild. Japanese knotweed may be spread simply by means of disturbance of its rhizome system, which extends for several meters

around the visible parts of the plant and new growth can arise from even the smallest fragment of rhizome left in the soil as well as from cutting taken from the plant.

Disturbance of soil on the site may result in increased growth of Japanese Knotweed on the site. If the applicant intends to move any soil or waste off site, under the terms of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 any part of the plant or any material contaminated with Japanese Knotweed must be disposed of at a landfill site licensed to accept it and the operator should be made aware of the nature of the waste.

Himalayan Balsam another non-native invasive plant species is also present on site.

The applicant has submitted a method statement for the eradication of these species. The submitted method statement includes a number of suggestions including the use of herbicide for the control of these species. Consent is likely to be required from both the EA and Natural England for the use of any herbicide treatment in the vicinity of the SSSI. It is advised that the submitted method statement is currently too vague to be enforceable.

Therefore in the event that planning permission is granted a planning condition is required to secure the submission of a revised method statement for the control of non-native species.

### *Ecological enhancement*

This planning application provides an opportunity to incorporate features to increase the biodiversity value of the final development in accordance with Local Plan Policy SE 3.

The revised ecological assessment includes outline proposals for the provision of bird boxes for priority species that would contribute to this policy aspiration. However, more detail on the number and location of boxes on site is required.

It is therefore recommended that the applicant submits an ecological enhancement strategy prior to the determination of the application or if planning permission is granted a condition should be attached which requires the submission of an ecological enhancement strategy.

Subject to the satisfaction of Natural England with regard to the HRA and additional details which have now been submitted in support of the application, the Council's ecologist does not raise objections to the proposal, subject to a suite of conditions.

### **Sports Facilities**

As part of the application for the remodelling of the site, the site will lose the provision of one tennis court. There are two permanent tennis courts to be provided behind the spa building, and one tennis court will be laid out in the proposed car parking area adjacent to the hotel extension, and will be used for car parking when not in use.

Sport England has commented on the application and stated that it does not fall either within their statutory remit or non-statutory remit. However the loss of any sports facility must be assessed against paragraph 97 of the NPPF which states that existing open space, sports and recreational buildings and land, including playing fields, should not be built on unless:

- a) an assessment has been undertaken which has clearly shown the open space, buildings or land to be surplus to requirements; or
- b) the loss resulting from the proposed development would be replaced by equivalent or better provision in terms of quantity and quality in a suitable location; or
- c) the development is for alternative sports and recreational provision, the benefits of which clearly outweigh the loss of the current or former use.

As the site is a private facility, the loss of the tennis courts could occur at any time. However in this case the applicant has stated that during the early stages of the design process, the Mere undertook an assessment of the sports facilities and deemed that 4 tennis courts are not required, hence the proposal for only 3. This meets the existing demand and proposing 4 would be surplus to requirements.

Due to the private ownership and membership of the club, it is accepted that the operator understands the needs of the business and demand for the facilities within. Therefore it is considered that the proposal does not conflict with paragraph 97 of the NPPF.

### **Amenity**

In order for the proposals to be acceptable, it is important that they do not have a detrimental impact on the amenities of existing residents and that the development is not located within an area which would harm the amenities of future residents, or the proposals would not cause undue harm by overlooking, loss of light or loss of privacy to neighbouring residents.

Objections have been raised by neighbouring properties with regard to noise pollution, this relates to the existing situation and relates to frequent firework and pyrotechnic displays, noise from helicopters, and loud music played externally up until 2am. This is anticipated by objectors to be exacerbated through the expansion of the site.

An objection was raised in relation to the remote car parks at the entrance to and exit from the site prior to the receipt of amended plans. Due to amenity concerns the remote car parks have been removed. It is not considered that the loss of the car parks have had a detrimental impact on car parking provision, as the provision remains acceptable to the Highways Officer.

With regard to noise, an objection was raised by the Council's Environmental Protection team. As a result a noise impact assessment was prepared relating to the potential for noise associated with conferences and events to cause a disturbance to local existing receptors. The statement and conclusions of the report were accepted. For the prevention of public nuisance; the premises operator currently is required to adhere to a site specific Noise Plan. In order for the site to effectively manage their noise output – the Noise Plan shall continue to be applied.

Concerns were also raised with regard to floodlighting as insufficient information was provided with the application. Following initial comments a lighting impact assessment was submitted in support of the application. The methodology and conclusions of the report have been accepted and it is considered that proposed illumination scheme shall not result in light

spillage onto adjoining properties. This concern related to the remote car parking areas which have now been omitted from the scheme.

Therefore following the receipt of amended plans and additional information with regard to noise and light pollution, it is considered that the proposed additions to the golf and country club will not have a detrimental impact on the amenity of neighbouring properties.

## **Air Quality**

Policy SE12 of the Local Plan states that the Council will seek to ensure all development is located and designed so as not to result in a harmful or cumulative impact upon air quality. This is in accordance with paragraph 181 of the NPPF and the Government's Air Quality Strategy.

When assessing the impact of a development on Local Air Quality, this office has regard to (amongst other things) the Council's Air Quality Strategy, the Air Quality Action Plan, Local Monitoring Data and the EPUK Guidance "Land Use Planning & Development Control: Planning for Air Quality January 2017)

This proposal is for the extension and alterations of a golf and country club. In support of the application the developer has submitted a qualitative assessment written by BWB Consulting Ltd dated June 2019, reference MCP2171. The report states that a detailed assessment into the impacts of NO<sub>2</sub> and PM<sub>10</sub> during the operational phase is not required in accordance with EPUK and IAQM criteria based on the predicted development flows, and concludes that the development impacts on local air quality will be insignificant. The report also concludes that the potential dust impacts during construction will also not be significant subject to appropriate dust mitigation measures.

That being said, there is still a need for the Local Planning Authority to consider the cumulative impact of a large number of developments in a particular area. In particular, the impact of transport related emissions on Local Air Quality.

Poor air quality is detrimental to the health and wellbeing of the public and also has a negative impact on the quality of life for sensitive individuals. It is therefore considered appropriate that mitigation should be sought in the form of direct measures to reduce the adverse air quality impact.

Mere has an Air Quality Management Area and, as such, the cumulative impact of developments in the area is likely to make the situation worse, unless managed.

Modern Ultra Low Emission Vehicle technology (such as all electric vehicles) are expected to increase in use over the coming years (the Government expects most new vehicles in the UK will be ultra low emission). As such it is considered appropriate to create infrastructure to allow charging of electric vehicles in new, modern, sustainable developments.

In order to ensure that sustainable vehicle technology is a real option for future patrons at the site a condition is required to ensure that electric vehicle charging points are installed at the site.

## **Contaminated Land**

The application area has a history of commercial/leisure use and therefore the land may be contaminated.

A Phase I Preliminary Risk Assessment (Report Ref: MGR-BWB-ZZ-XX-YE-RP-0001\_Ph1\_P3, BWB Consulting Ltd., June 2019) has been submitted in support of the application.

The Phase I report recommends a Phase II ground investigation be undertaken in order to further assess identified potential contaminant linkages.

It is noted from the report that there has been a fire on site in the past. Depending on the extent and nature of the fire, risks to Controlled Waters from firefighting chemicals should be further assessed, in addition to the potential contaminants of concern listed within the report, we would expect risks from PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances) to also be considered. It would be prudent for the applicant to consult with Cheshire Fire and Rescue Service for further information and for the Conceptual Model to be updated as a result of these enquiries.

As such, and in accordance with the NPPF, this it is recommended that conditions be added to the permission should it be granted.

Therefore the proposals accord with policies in the development plan and the NPPF.

## **Flood Risk**

The site within the red edge is located within Flood Zone 1 indicating that the site is not at risk from fluvial or tidal sources.

The application was accompanied by a Flood Risk Assessment and some drainage details, further information has been submitted as part of the amendments. The FRA has been reviewed by the Lead Local Flood Authority and as a result conditions are required and no objections are raised.

United Utilities (UU) initially commented on the application raising an objection to the initial FRA and drainage strategy and requested that full extent/details of proposed drainage were to be provided. This has now been provided, following re-consultation revised United Utilities comments have not been received at the time of writing the report. Based on the LLFA comments it is expected that the revised FRA and Drainage Strategy are acceptable, however an update will be provided to members on receipt of any further UU comments. If no further comments are received from UU it is considered that this issue has been addressed by the applicant.

It is concluded therefore that the proposals accord with policy SE13 of the CELPS and the NPPF.

## **Representations**

A number of representations have been received in relation to the application, both in objection and support of the application.

With regard to the objections relating to residential amenity for the property directly affected by the satellite car parking area, this area has now been omitted, therefore the concerns raised have now been dealt with.

A large number of objections were from properties located along Mereside Road whose gardens back onto the Mere. These objections related to noise and disturbance through loud music played externally until the early hours, particularly during the summer, catering for weddings and parties. In addition to music, frequent firework and pyrotechnic displays cause nuisance and sleep disturbance to residents and their pets and frequent helicopter activity at the site.

Following the initial submission a noise impact assessment was required by Environmental Protection. Following the receipt of this and the mitigation measures set out currently in the site's Noise Plan, the Environmental Protection Team has removed their objection. This is providing the Noise Plan is strictly adhered to. Should matters of noise and disturbance arise this should be reported to Environmental Protection for investigation and to ensure that the site operates within its licensing parameters and does not cause a statutory nuisance.

Objections also raised in relation to loss of trees and disturbance to wildlife have been addressed in the ecology and tree sections of the report, where both the Council's Ecologist and Arboricultural Officer are satisfied that the proposals are now acceptable following the submission of amended plans, subject to conditions.

A number of objections related to traffic impact of the proposed development, which will arise due to the increase in facilities at the site. The highways officer has commented on the initial and revised proposals and is satisfied that there is adequate car parking to ensure that the proposal is acceptable and the development as a whole will not have a detrimental impact on the wider highway network.

Comments in relation to overdevelopment and Green Belt are addressed in the main body of the report.

A number of letters of support were received for the application. The comments mainly relate to the economic development opportunity for the immediate area and the region, and support to health and wellbeing. A number of the letters were generic text, and several were from members of the club. There is a desire for the facility to be improved and to be able to cater for international events and the investment is welcomed.

Comments relating to this scheme and its merits have been addressed in the main body of the report. Having taken into account all of the representations received including internal and external consultation responses, the material considerations raised have been addressed within the main body of the report.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The site is within the Green Belt where there is a presumption against inappropriate development. As described in this report, the development is classed as inappropriate development. Although the visual impact of the development is acceptable, additional harm is

identified in terms of loss openness and encroachment. Any harm to the Green Belt carries substantial weight.

The application proposes a strong economic case for the development, which will enhance the existing tourism offer and make a contribution to the Cheshire East economy.

The proposals have been amended during the course of the application to address concerns in relation to residential amenity, trees, ecology and heritage.

Following an assessment of the proposals along with the business case, the independent assessment of the commercial information, and all of the technical matters it is considered, on balance, that the social and economic benefits arising from the proposed development do clearly outweigh the identified harm. As such the very special circumstances required to justify a grant of planning permission are considered to exist in this case.

The development is considered to comply with all other requirements of Development Plan policy.

It is considered that the key issues of objection raised by consultees have been resolved and, subject to no further objections from United Utilities and Natural England, the application is recommended for approval subject to conditions.

## **SUBJECT TO**

- No further objection from United Utilities and Natural England.
- Referral to the Secretary of State. As a development including inappropriate development in the Green Belt and comprising new floor space greater than 1,000 square metres the decision to approve the application would be subject to referral to the Secretary of State prior to the grant of planning permission.

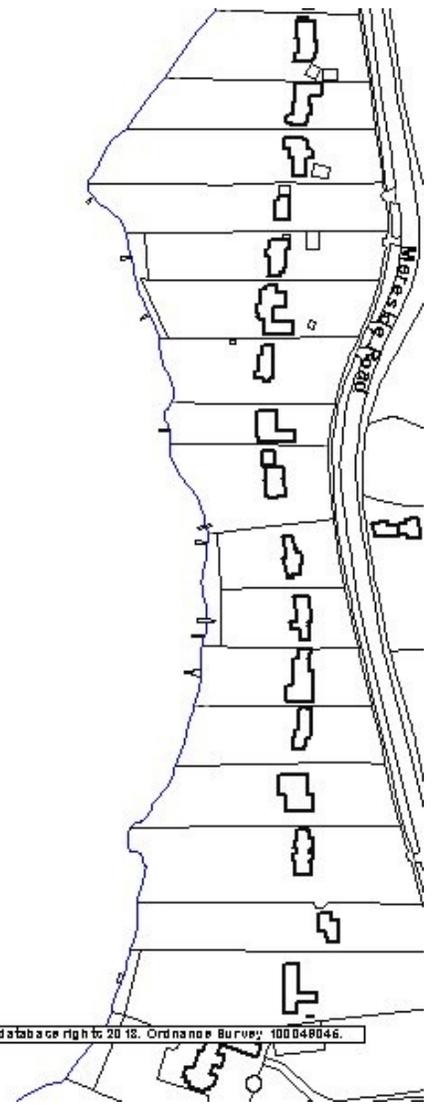
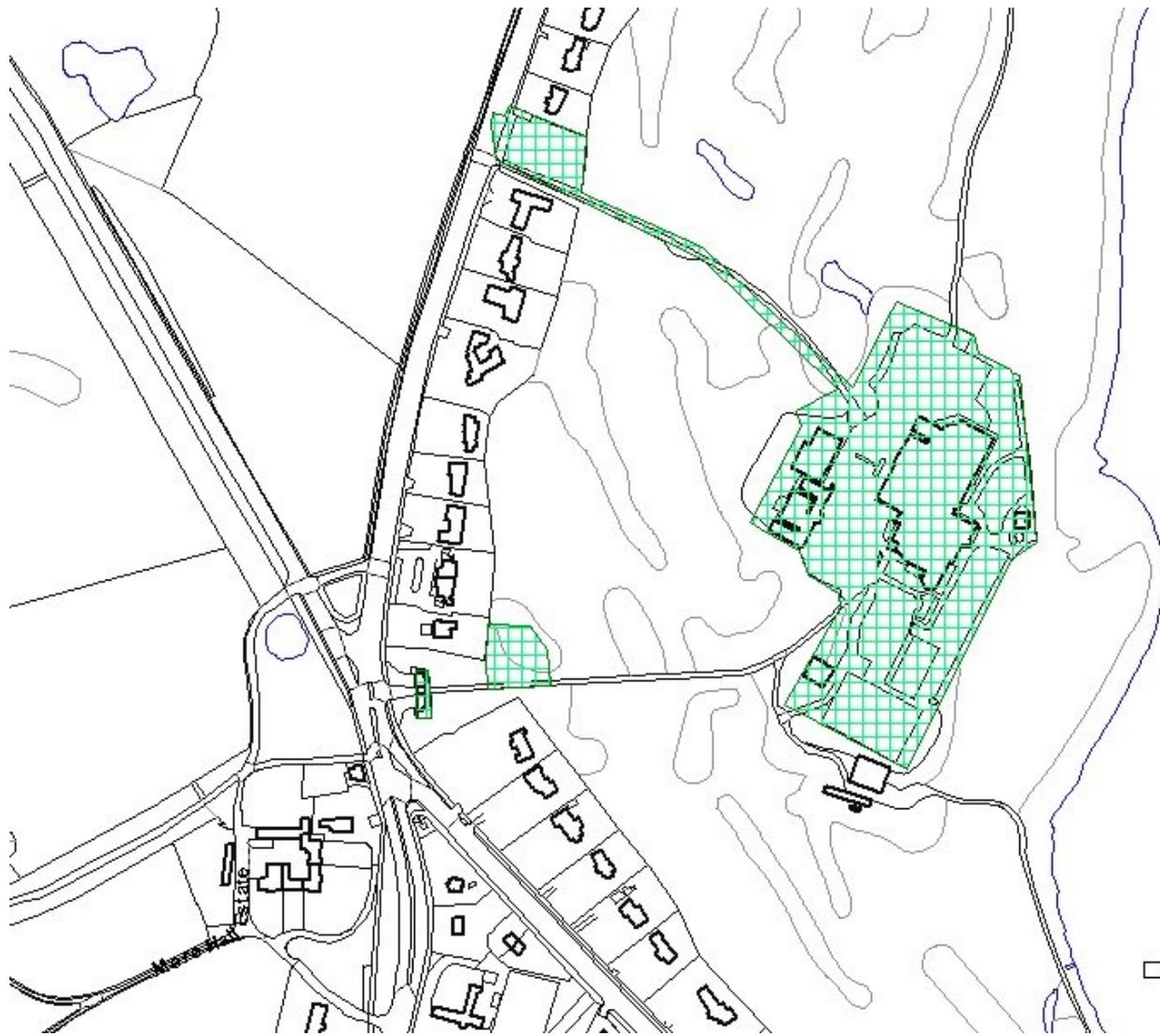
## **RECOMMENDATION**

**APPROVE** subject to the following conditions:

- 1. Time Limit**
- 2. Development in accord with approved plans**
- 3. Submission of materials**
- 4. Matching materials to the stables and using traditional bond, mortar mix and natural stone details**
- 5. Tree Retention**
- 6. Tree Protection**
- 7. Arboricultural Method Statement**
- 8. Levels Survey**
- 9. Hard and Soft Landscaping – Submission of Details**
- 10. Landscaping (Implementation)**
- 11. Implementation of submitted landscaping plans**
- 12. Submission of detailed lighting scheme**

- 13. Restriction of lighting of tennis court to the period between the 1st November and the 15th March.**
- 14. Implementation of submitted bluebell method statement.**
- 15. Safeguarding of nesting birds.**
- 16. Submission of method statement for the control of non-native invasive plant species.**
- 17. Submission of ecological enhancement strategy.**
- 18. The development in accordance with Flood Risk Assessment.**
- 19. Drainage strategy prior to commencement.**
- 20. Foul and surface water to be drained on separate systems.**
- 21. The noise plan shall continue to be implemented in full.**
- 22. Prior to first occupation of each unit, an Electric Vehicle Infrastructure plan shall be submitted to and agreed in writing by the LPA.**
- 23. Updated Conceptual Model and Phase II ground investigation to be submitted.**
- 24. Verification report to be submitted**
- 25. Imported soils to be tested for contamination**
- 26. Unexpected contamination to be reported to LPA**

*In order to give proper effect to the Committee's intentions and without changing the substance of the decision, authority is delegated to the Head of Planning, in consultation with the Chairman (or in his absence the Vice Chairman) of Northern Planning Committee to correct any technical slip or omission in the wording of the resolution, between approval of the minutes and issue of the decision notice.*



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