THE CITY OF DURHAM TRUST

Web site: http://www.DurhamCity.org

c/o Blackett, Hart & Pratt, LLP
Aire House
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Belmont
Durham, DH1 1TH

29 October 2026

Ms. Lisa Morina
Durham County Council Planning Development
PO BOX 274
Stanley
County Durham
DH8 1HG

Dear Ms Morina,

DM/26/02687/CEU - Cookes West Wood, Alum Waters, New Brancepeth, DH7 7JP

Use of the site as a composite use for the purposes of agriculture, forestry, and land-based operations; a vegetable box scheme, craft and education courses, together with the construction and residential occupation of dwellings (use class C3) and other residential structures available to, and occupied by, persons by reason of and for so long as they are engaged in that use together with their families; such structures being identified on the annexed plan and schedule and marked thereon in green comprising: Houses 1, 2 and 3, the Yurt, the Well, and the Geodome, together with the use of further structures, identified on the annexed plan and schedule and marked thereon in yellow comprising: the Tunnel, the two Caravans, the Field Shelter, the Hen House, the Compost Toilet, the two Timber Stores, the Tool Shed, and the Summerhouse, being either incidental or ancillary to the said use where stated and including the accommodation on a transient basis of volunteers and visitors engaged in or assisting with that use, but excluding any use of the structures numbered [014] Tool Shed and [015] Summerhouse otherwise than as operational development by s171B(1), such composite use, taken as a whole, not falling within any use class specified in the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (as amended) and being accordingly a sui generis use and Operational Development: The erection of the operational development identified in the Buildings Schedule hereto and marked thereon [1] to [15] at their respective locations on the plan.

The Trust appreciates the nature of the businesses on this site and the involvement of the applicants in this community-based enterprise. However, it is concerned about the erection of new houses in the Green Belt and the potential negative impact of new structures. Consequently, it objects to the application as currently submitted.

Context

This section of the Deerness Valley is both an important wildlife corridor and part of the Green Belt. The corridor contains ancient woodland and local wildlife sites, and links to the Browney Valley. The site is part of the green wedge separating the Brandon/Meadowfield /Sleetburn Lane grouping, Broompark and New Brancepeth. It is countryside as relevant to planning policy, and as such is an area that the Trust sees as vital not to be developed.

This is to be contrasted with the presence of the three houses and various buildings used in connection with the businesses and homes of the families and people working on the site. The main business appears to be horticulture with a strong educational and community interest. The occupancy is long-standing having started in 2003 and grown since then. All appears to be serviced off grid; vehicle access is not immediately clear. Management of the site is not illustrated or explained fully.

Unfortunately, none of the uses or constructions seem to have involved planning applications.

The Trust has concerns founded on instances in the County of agriculturally tied residences moving on to the open market as that connection ceased. This is a potential concern on this site. Access to the site is not fully clear, and explanations are needed as to the operation of the current use and particularly future use should this expand further.

Proposals

The documents submitted are incomplete apart from some point-based locations and a schedule. Given that all the proposals exist, demonstration of how the site is used, how the houses and outbuildings appear and their impact are all missing. Most importantly there is no adequate explanation of why residence on the site is essential to the activities and businesses run from the site, this being the sole justification available for the erection of the houses.

There are photographs of the structures and these appear to be of non-intrusive construction causing minimal impact. However, full explanations of the buildings and interconnected surrounding use are not available, while confirmation of the impact on the woodland and wildlife designations as being neutral or positive is needed.

What would happen in the future should all the uses cease is not explained, and this would assist in the Trust's response to its concern about ongoing permanent residential use.

Conclusion

This application presents a dilemma for the Trust. On the one hand it is a land-based use, potentially harmonious within its setting with strong educational and community ethos. On the other it is a retrospective application for houses and structures in the Green Belt and on, or adjacent to, Ancient Woodland and local wildlife sites. The horticultural use and apparent need to live on the site to service it are not explained. Management of the woodland and wildlife is not explained either. If the proposal were to be approved, limitations on residential occupation, further housing and building expansion would be needed, coupled with clear policies on holistic management of the site including the woodland and wildlife values.

Additionally, Sleetburn Lane is currently an area of interest in relation to housing development: the Trust is objecting to a conventional application for five houses on Sleetburn Lane while an adjacent barn is separately proposed for conversion to a house under planning policy.

The Trust considers that at present it has little option but to object and make a strong recommendation that the weaknesses in the submitted case are remedied. Should the necessary clarifications be provided, the Trust would gladly reconsider its response. Relevant policy failures are appended below.

Yours sincerely

Allan Gemmill
Chair, City of Durham Trust
trust@durhamcity.org

Celebrating, Protecting and Enhancing the City of Durham

Appendix – Planning Policies

The Trust considers that the proposals fail to conform with the following policies contained within the County Durham Plan:

Policy 10: Development in the Countryside

Development in the countryside will not be permitted unless allowed for by specific policies in the Plan, relevant policies within an adopted neighbourhood plan relating to the application site, or where the proposal relates to one or more of the following exceptions:

Economic Development
Development necessary to support:
a. an existing agricultural or other existing rural land-based enterprise, including the provision of new or the extension of existing building(s), structures or hard standings required for the functioning of the enterprise;
b. the expansion of an existing business falling beyond the scope of a rural land based enterprise, where it can be clearly demonstrated that it is, or has the prospect of being, financially sound and will remain so;
c. the establishment of a new agricultural or other rural land-based enterprise which clearly demonstrates an essential and functional need for that specific location and where it can be clearly demonstrated that it has the prospect of being financially sound and will remain so; or
d. the undertaking of non-commercial agricultural activity which is located within or directly adjoining the applicant's existing residential curtilage which is of a scale commensurate to the incidental enjoyment of that existing dwelling.

In all instances the resulting development must be of a design, construction and scale which is suitable for and commensurate to the intended use. In respect to (a), (b) and (c) any resulting building(s), other structure(s) and hard standing(s) must be well related to the associated farmstead or business premises unless a clear need to ensure the effective functioning of the business for an alternative location can be demonstrated by the applicant.

Policy 12: Permanent Rural Workers' Dwellings

Proposals for new permanent agricultural, forestry and other rural workers' dwellings outside the built-up area will be permitted **provided it can be demonstrated that:**
a. the nature and demands of the work involved means that there is an essential existing functional need for a permanent full time worker to live at, or very close to, the site of their work in order for the enterprise to function effectively, or the dwelling is required to accommodate a person with majority control of the farm business;
b. the rural business activity has been established for at least three years, is currently financially sound as verified by a qualified accountant, and has a clear prospect of remaining so;
c. the proposed dwelling is not harmful to the rural landscape and character of the area and is physically well related to the activities required;
d. the scale of the dwelling is commensurate with the established functional requirement of the enterprise; and
e. the functional need could not be fulfilled by another existing dwelling on the unit, or any other existing accommodation in the area which is suitable and available for occupation by the workers concerned.

Policy 20: Green Belt

Development proposals within the Green Belt will be determined in accordance with national planning policy (the NPPF).

Policy 29: Sustainable Design

Further submission is required to demonstrate that the development proposals:

a. contribute positively to an area's character, identity, heritage significance, townscape and landscape features, helping to create and reinforce locally distinctive and sustainable communities;
b. create buildings and spaces that are adaptable to changing social, technological, economic and environmental conditions and include appropriate and proportionate measures to reduce vulnerability, increase resilience and ensure public safety and security.

Landscape proposals should:
g. respond creatively to topography and to existing features of landscape or heritage interest and wildlife habitats;
j. create opportunities for wildlife including though the use of locally native species;
k. make appropriate provision for maintenance and long-term management