

Economic Development Response

28.02.24

Ref: 20240091 - Proposal for engineering works to construct a formal car parking area for Vineyard Farms Ltd office, winery and vineyard workers, and other users of Brookers Farm.

Vineyard Farms Ltd is a relatively large rural employer, that is already an important contributor to the growing food and drink sector, as well as resurgent land-based activities, characterised by an existing partnership with Plumpton College.

110 full time equivalent employees are currently based at Brookers Farm, including a mix of office-based commercial teams (sales, marketing, finance and so on) and a diverse staffing mix engaged in viticulture, land stewardship, conservation and estate management.

Apprentices are currently employed at the site and the economic development lead has recently met with their HR Director, to discuss current and potential local employment and training initiatives – working with Colleges, Higher Education training providers and Armed Forces leavers.

This commitment to the development of a local workforce, is valued highly and looking forward, could be expected to create new career paths in a sustainable, land-based industry.

As an established and growing wine producer, we understand that Vineyard Farms' Silverhand brand is already sold by M&S, Hilton Hotels, IHG Hotel Group and Tesco (from Spring 2024), which is reflective of the quality of its product and is consistent with the vineyard's intention of reaching full production in 2024.

The stated ambition is for the 'Silverhand Estate' (as it's described) to become the largest single vineyard site in the UK and the leading producer of sparkling and still wines. This is an exciting prospect for the economic development of the Borough, given the rapid recent growth of the UK and global market for English wines.

The applicant tells us that investment across the Estate totals £40m to date, which would make it one of the largest programmes of investment in a Gravesham-based business in recent years.

Investment has included ecological and landscape improvements such as hedgerow / tree planting, wildlife cultivation and measures to improve biodiversity which is very encouraging from an environmental and sustainability point of view.

Regenerative farming practices to restore soil health and support organic methods, help in the pursuit of sustainable growth and will contribute to the skills and knowledge of the local workforce.

Staff Car Park

With regard to the proposal itself, to construct a formal staff car park, the economic development team recognises the pressing operational need to secure this formalisation – to reduce pressure on narrow surrounding rural roads which lack formalised parking and to improve staff and vehicular safety, as well as general amenity for a growing workforce.

The location of the proposed car park, adjacent to the main operational hub at Brookers Farm, is sensible and supports relocation of office-based staff from nearby Luddesdown Court, with

the additional benefit of bringing staff parking into a central location, to simplify vehicular movements and encourage car-sharing.

Providing a formal car parking area will help to attract and retain staff while supporting good neighbour principles by reducing the impact of business activities on the surrounding area.

We also note that the design and detailing of the car park are based upon the National Trust car park at Ightham Mote, incorporating environmentally sensitive and sympathetically chosen materials, planting and layout.

The location, design and moderate size of the proposed car park strike us as being entirely consistent with the planned growth and quality / environmental commitments of this rural business.

The Council's emerging Economic Development, Industrial, Jobs & Skills Strategy emphasises the need for a balanced economy across rural and urban locations within the Borough and encourages a focus on high quality job and training opportunities.

In summary, we support the ambition for the Silverhand Estate and would emphasise that this application to formalise high quality parking, is an urgent operational need which is essential to securing much-needed employment and wider economic benefits within the Borough's rural economy.

On the above basis, we support this application as received.

Keith Grimley, Senior Economic Development Officer