



## SUPPORTING PLANNING STATEMENT

New Green Farm, Shorne, Gravesend

January 2024

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In support of an application for the  
**prior notification of agricultural development under The Town and Country  
Planning General Permitted Development Order 2015 Schedule 2, Part 6 (as  
amended)**

*at*

**New Green Farm, Lower Road, Shorne, Gravesend**

*On behalf of*

**AC Goatham & Son Ltd**

Bloomfields is the trading name of Lambert & Foster (Bloomfields) Ltd (company no. 08278915) an owned subsidiary of Lambert & Foster Ltd a Limited Company registered in England and Wales, No 10574225. Registered office 77 Commercial Road, Paddock Wood, Kent TN12 6DS.

## CONTENTS

|                                                    |    |
|----------------------------------------------------|----|
| 1. Introduction .....                              | 3  |
| 2. AC Goatham & Son's Existing Farm Business ..... | 4  |
| 3. Background.....                                 | 5  |
| 4. Planning History.....                           | 12 |
| 5. The Proposal .....                              | 13 |
| 6. Permitted Development.....                      | 15 |
| 7. Conclusion .....                                | 16 |

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1. This supporting planning statement has been prepared on behalf of our client, AC Goatham & Son to support a Prior Notification application for a cold store for the controlled atmospheric storage of top fruit at New Green farm, Lower Road, Shorne, Gravesend, Kent.
- 1.2. The proposed development comprises of an agricultural building to provide a much needed cold store for the controlled atmospheric storage of apples for AC Goatham & Son. Currently all fruit from New Green Farm is taken from the site and stored elsewhere. This application seeks to provide these facilities on site to improve sustainability.
- 1.3. The cold store building is proposed to the south of the existing farmyard, building and seasonal workers accommodation at New Green Farm.
- 1.4. The parcel of land the proposed development is located on amounts to over 1 hectare; the land extends to just over 84 ha and is located on the agricultural unit of New Green Farm.
- 1.5. New Green Farm comprises of 67.5 hectares of owned land and a further 17.28 of tenanted land. The farm is located between the larger towns of Rochester and Gravesend, with Shorne and Higham villages lying to the south-west and south-east of the site. New Green Farm was purchased by AC Goatham & Son in 2018 and includes newly planted and producing top fruit comprising of jazz and reveille.
- 1.6. The farm yard comprises of an agricultural storage building, concrete yard area and the provision of up to six mobile homes for seasonal agricultural workers.
- 1.7. The cold store building is required to store the apples that are grown at New Green Farm in controlled atmospheric conditions conducive to long term storage, to ensure continuity of British apples throughout the year.
- 1.8. This prior notification application is accompanied by the following plans:
  - Site location plan ACG&S-NGF-900
  - Existing block plan ACG&S-NGF-901

- Proposed block plan ACG&S-NGF-902
- Proposed floor plan & elevation ACG&S-NGF-903

## 2. AC Goatham & Son's Existing Farm Business

### The Company

- 2.1. AC Goatham & Son are one of the largest growers of apples and pears in the UK. They farm over 2,400 acres of land all for top fruit (apples and pears) over 16 freehold farms and 13 farms rented on long term agreements across the south east. It is understood that 1 in 4.5 home grown apples and 1 in 3 conference pears sold in Britain is grown and supplied by one of AC Goatham & Son's farms or partner farms.
- 2.2. AC Goatham and Son have been trading for over 70 years (currently spanning three generations of the Goatham family). Over this time, they have focused on extending the fruit growing season to substitute foreign fruit with home grown fruit and producing quality produce at affordable prices. To achieve this, the business has introduced new varieties of apples to allow harvest to start earlier, improved growing methodologies to increase yields and introduced cutting edge cold storage technology to allow for fruit to be stored longer through the year.
- 2.3. Retail customers are increasingly looking toward consolidated sites for distribution of fruit to them. Not only is this logistically easier to manage but it helps keep the overall cost of British fruit down so that it becomes affordable for the consumer. This allows, from a price perspective, the fruit to compete with the imported fruit which is much cheaper to produce (even after factoring in import costs) due to differences in soil and climate conditions.

### Fruit handling

- 2.4. Last year the business dealt with a throughput of circa 150,000 bins of top fruit. Based on existing planting with increased yields and forecast planting, this is set to rise 174,000 bins by 2025.

- 2.5. This spring, 220,000 new fruit trees will have been planted across the business in one season, with further plans for the next 5 years for in the order of 800,000 to 1,000,000 fruit trees to be planted. AC Gotham's plans alone have the ability to shift the significance of fruit planting and indicate just how much of an industry leader they are. Although it is imperative they need the labour resource and infrastructure in place to support this.

### **Staffing**

- 2.6. Last season, AC Gotham and Son employed in the order of 1150 staff across all of their farms and sites. Of this there are some 450 full time equivalent staff across the business with the rest being made up of the seasonal labour required to plant and thin trees as well as harvest and pack the apple and pear crops grown across the business. Given the recognised shortfall in labour the ability to provide workers accommodation on site, provides an attractive employment prospect which is needed to attract and retain staff, whilst importantly being needed to meet the functional needs of the business.
- 2.7. The same principle applies for management positions across the site. The ability to provide workers accommodation means the business can retain and attract good staff at all levels. To assist with this, given the long and unpredictable hours associated with the work together with the 'supply and demand' curve it can be difficult to retain staff as the business needs to be able to provide attractive packages.

## **3. Background**

### **General Industry Overview**

- 3.1. The vast majority of top fruit handled in Kent and the UK, perhaps in the order of 75%, is done so by a small number of companies. This includes AC Gotham and Son.

- 3.2. These businesses have all had to adapt their growing techniques in recent years to replant orchards on new rootstocks at closer densities. This is to meet the demands of their customers (the supermarkets) who in turn are seeking to meet the demands of the general public (the consumer) for an increased volume of home-grown apples and pears, whilst maintaining an affordable pricing structure. As well as increasing volume by planting at higher densities, orchards are being replaced with higher yielding clones, whilst the introduction of wire networks encourages fruit growth upwards to better utilise space and allow fruit to be picked at two levels (top and bottom – the latter being done with specialist picking platforms). Again, increasing volume of production per tree.
- 3.3. As a consequence, low yielding orchards (even if they are relatively young in the lifecycle of a fruit tree) are quickly becoming unsuitable and require replacement with more modern, higher yielding stock. To ensure orchards perform at their optimum they need to be closely monitored and suitable action taken depending on weather patterns to optimize yields, but also fruit size.
- 3.4. Monitoring fruit size is critical, as this dictates whether contracts continue or not as customers require specific fruit sizes for optimum prices. It is therefore imperative that the business can monitor water application, thinning, pruning, harvesting and disease in each tree to optimize its growing ability. This is extremely time consuming and is wholly weather dependent so requires last minute decision making to be done.
- 3.5. Similarly, consumer trends in variety preference has meant planting different varieties such as Gala from those previously favoured e.g. Russets and Cox. This has seen growers replacing orchards that have again not necessarily served a full life cycle in order to maintain contracts and meet the changing needs of the consumer. A recent example would be the Braeburn apple, which 5 – 10 years ago was understood to make up circa 20% of the demand from supermarkets. Today, this is believed to have reduced to about 5%, as varieties such as Gala which have a sweeter but comparably crunchy bite are favourable. This then means there is a surplus requirement of Braeburn stock on the market which in turn drives the price of the product down and therefore its viability. So, growers are either faced with the decision of continuing to grow into a market which has an over surplus (which in reality means continuing in an unviable manner) or grubbing orchards and replacing them with varieties which are highly in demand and which are forecast to stay.

- 3.6. The size, shape and colour of apples is also increasingly important to consumers and specific “grading” demands are put on growers by the supermarkets to grow particular classes of fruit; with optimum classes (e.g. Class I) commanding higher prices. Again, this puts added pressure on growers to, as far as possible, control the growth of apples on the trees. One of the main ways of doing this, is by controlling the level of water that can be available to a tree at certain times of the year and to achieve this, modern orchards require drip feed irrigation systems to be installed. Notwithstanding cost, this puts added pressure on the businesses labour to install these systems and to closely monitor them.
- 3.7. Another way of controlling the growth of apples on the tress is to significantly increase labour levels in an orchard to thin trees more regularly and “train” fruit on the wires and to ensure orchards are harvested at optimum times. This improves the grading level of the end product but obviously comes with increased levels of labour demand and cost. Those businesses not giving such attention to their orchards are not being favoured by the supermarkets as the end product is not consistent (which is what ultimately sells with the consumer) and it is therefore becomes increasingly difficult to service and maintain supply contracts. Understandably, this puts added pressure on the applicant for the requirement for additional labour.
- 3.8. The development of rootstocks, planting at closer densities and using wire networks all mean that yields per hectare are considerably higher than they used to be. However, more trees not only mean there is more stock to plant, thin and harvest (which means more labour), harvest volumes per hectare increase which mean the need for infrastructure to support this consequentially increases. This applies to:
- workers accommodation (where the industry norm is the provision of accommodation for the seasonal period to attract workers);
  - the number of fruit bins;
  - the extent of buildings to store increased levels of equipment;
  - the extent of cold storage;
  - the extent of onsite water storage facilities and irrigation systems; and

- the extent of grading and packing facilities (and areas associated with storage of packaging).

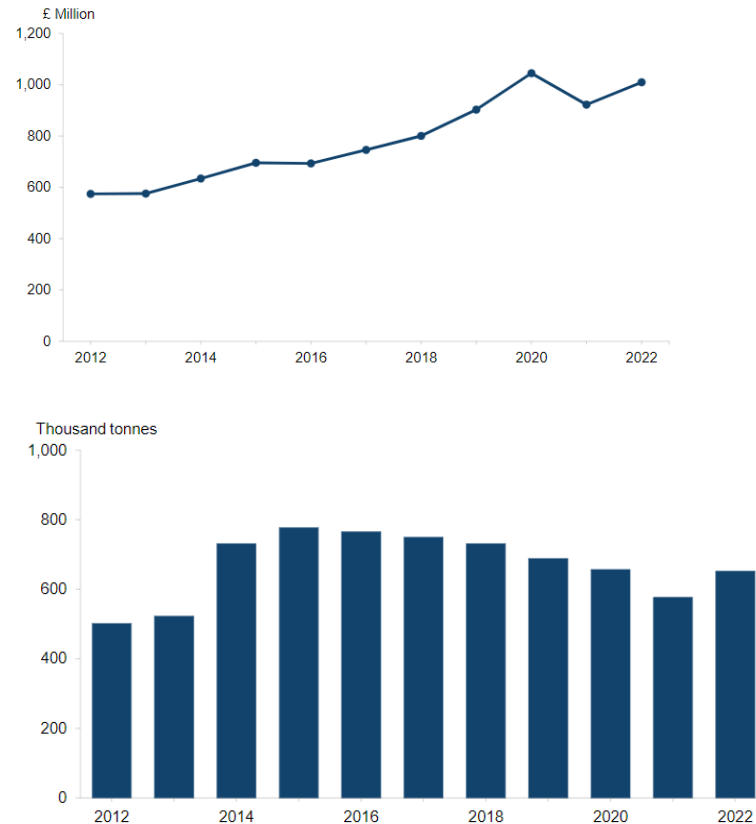
### **The Fruit Growing Season**

- 3.9. Typically, the fruit growing season commences after harvest period - which is usually completed by the end of November - and will begin with the removal of old/dead or dying trees and their subsequent replacement with new stock through till early February.
- 3.10. The labour requirement during the planting season is high for a couple of months, especially during the early years when trees are being closely monitored to ascertain whether they are taking to their new environment.
- 3.11. Across the business, when new orchards are planted, the opportunity to incorporate the latest technology in drip feed irrigation is now taken; whilst the trees are now planted on a wire network to optimise growth and increase yields.
- 3.12. Pruning will occur post-harvest through to the end of March.
- 3.13. The main spraying cycle then commences from March through to the end of June as does the preparatory work in anticipation of the harvest period commencing in June and ending in November. This can include thinning but also the reinforcement and repair of wire networks.
- 3.14. The harvest period has the greatest labour requirement though the fruit season and it is during this time from May/June to the end of November that staffing levels will be at their highest both on the farms and in packhouse.

### **Home Grown Produce**

- 3.15. On the 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023, DEFRA released and updated their 2022 Horticultural Statistics. Although it is appreciated that this covers various sectors of the horticultural industry, certain elements expressly relate to the topfruit industry.

3.16. In the report it can be identified that, home produced fruit has risen in value from its 2022 figure to £1 billion, an increase of 9.5% compared to 2021, with production volumes also rising by 13% to 652 thousand tonnes).



**Figure 1** Graphs taken from the Horticultural Statistics released on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2023

3.17. DEFRA’s 2023 report observed that *“The value of orchard fruit increased by 31% to £377m and soft fruit decreasing by 1.1% to £574m. The value of dessert apples increased by £28m to £183m in 2022, a 18% increase on 2021. The value of culinary apples more than doubled in 2022 to £94 million, with market prices increasing by 40% to £1.77/kg and yields increasing by 38% to 49 t/ha.*

- 3.18. The report also highlights *“The area planted for Cox apples continues to diminish at 715 thousand hectares, 14% lower than 2021 (835 thousand hectares) and 64% lower than the area planted in 2010 (1,993 thousand hectares). Cox orchards continue to be grubbed as consumer demand decreases, which along with the lower potential yield when compared to the newer varieties (e.g. Gala, Braeburn) means the area is expected to continue to decline in future years.”*
- 3.19. When commenting upon the growing year, the report confirms that *“Dry weather at the start of the year gave growers the ability to raise polytunnels for soft fruit early and soil conditions were good for planting strawberries, raspberries and orchards. Though some damage to tunnels occurred with the Dudley, Eunice, and Franklin storms in February. Unusual hot days in March and April brought the season forward for both top and soft fruit crops but it left them vulnerable to the late frosts in April which caused some damage. Harvesting of all fruit crops started early due to the continuing effects of the mild spring and the summer heatwave.”*
- 3.20. Fruit exports (including re-exports) were worth £64 million in 2022, a 2.3% increase from 2021. Volumes of exports rose by 1.7% to 38 thousand tonnes (falling the fall of 66% to 37 thousand tonnes in 2021, from 121 thousand tonnes in 2020).

### **British Grower Association Survey**

- 3.21. The British Grower Association surveyed members of the British Apples & Pears Limited (BAPL) in the latter part of 2022. This survey (included at **Appendix 2**) has revealed a major retreat in future orchard investment given the state of poor returns within the industry. This has inherent impacts upon the ability to provide home grown top fruit to the consumer.
- 3.22. The survey was considered to represent an estimated 80% of the British top fruit growers, thus offering a trusted and thorough industry analysis.
- 3.23. The report indicates that 150,000 new apple and pear trees have been cancelled for planting this season, with the original intention of investments for 480,000 new trees in orchards being cut.

- 3.24. The lack of planned ongoing investment is related to the lack of returns from the supermarkets. British Apples & Pears Limited executive chair Ali Capper explained that *“The key reason for the lack of investment is supermarket returns that are unsustainable. Increased input costs of around 23%, for example for picking, energy, haulage and packaging, are being met with almost static average fruit prices paid by retailers.”*
- 3.25. The average year on year increase in what supermarkets should pay the growers for their fruit has been recommended as 12% by an independent report by John Pelham for Andersons Consulting. The actual received increase by growers was 0.8%.
- 3.26. When comparing input costs increases of around 23% by the average increase of payment to growers by the supermarket of 0.8%, the significant shortfall of return is immediately apparent.
- 3.27. The executive chair Ali Capper of British Apples & Pears Limited as part of the report states *“This is the clearest indication yet that the future of apple and pear growing in the UK is seriously in doubt. The industry is on a knife edge. Without long term investment and new tree planting, orchards will quickly go into decline. That's not something any of us wants, least of all the British consumer.”*
- 3.28. Alongside the dire figures demonstrating the industry grower crisis, the report sets out a number of key asks for different stakeholders; namely the government, retailers and consumers. These ‘asks’ are set out in the table below.

#### BAPL asks of retailers:

- A **reset on returns** to recognise the unprecedented **23% inflation in cost of production**. BAPL growers will be discussing fairness of returns with their customers in advance of electricity price changes
- **Long-term partnerships and prioritisation of British apples and pears over imports** to give growers the confidence to plant the orchards of the future with long-term contracts linked to inflation
- **To work with our great growers to reinvigorate the category** with in-store and online 'theatre', and packaging and messaging that attracts shoppers to buy British, and reflects the health benefits, affordability, low food miles and British provenance of our apples and pears

#### BAPL asks of government:

- To **add grower businesses to the Energy Business Relief Scheme vulnerable list** to lessen the impact on cold storage of fruit
- To **convene a meeting of retailers** to discuss the emerging crisis in the British apple and pear sector, seeking fair returns for growers
- To **remove the limit on the number of seasonal workers** allowed into the UK and increase the current permit to a nine-month visa
- To prevent unnecessary inflation by **removing the wage premium linked to the Seasonal Workers Scheme**
- To support the **development of renewables** (wind and solar), especially the storage of renewable energy to help mitigate the energy cost increases facing growers and reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions

#### BAPL asks of consumers:

- **Check the label and make sure you're always buying British apples and pears.** If you can't find them in your supermarket, ask your retailer
- **Eat an apple a day.** Keeping them in the fridge they store really well for at least two weeks and have excellent **health benefits**
- **Support local British farmers and lower your food miles** by choosing apples and pears grown in the UK

Figure 2 British Apples & Pears Limited 'asks'

- 3.29. These 'asks' as well the growers survey highlight the pressures upon the top fruit industry and how drastic change and support is needed to ensure its survival. This support is needed from the top, with planning policy and decision making able to be at the forefront of this.

## 4. Planning History

- 4.1. In January 2019 prior notification (ref: 20181247) was submitted and it was deemed prior approval was not required for the erection of an agricultural building at the holding, with associated hard standing, to store machinery and equipment required to serve the holding. This was approved as there were no other buildings to provide secure weatherproof storage. This building has been erected.
- 4.2. Following on from this, a new access track and upgrading of an existing access on to Lower Road with associated gates and fencing was approved with reference 20190164 April 2019 in order to bring any agricultural traffic away from the residential properties at Green Farm Lane. This too has also been provided on the site.
- 4.3. In 2020 a certificate of lawfulness was issued on 22 July 2020 for six caravans for seasonal agricultural workers, with reference 20200457. These caravans serve some of the labour requirements on the site.

- 4.4. On 14 May 2021 planning permission was granted for the over winter storage of these mobile homes in situ plus all associated operational development needed to provide hardstanding and a sewage treatment plant with reference 20210275.
- 4.5. In 2021 planning permission was refused for the erection of a 4 bedroom detached dwelling to provide accommodation for the farm manager and their family, with associated landscaping, biodiversity enhancements and drainage infrastructure. This has reference 20210970. This application has been appealed and is subject to a hearing on 13<sup>th</sup> February 2024.
- 4.6. A further application for the construction of an agricultural worker dwelling, including the provision of all associated landscaping, biodiversity enhancements and drainage infrastructure was refused on 13 February 2023 (ref: 20221334).

## **5. The Proposal**

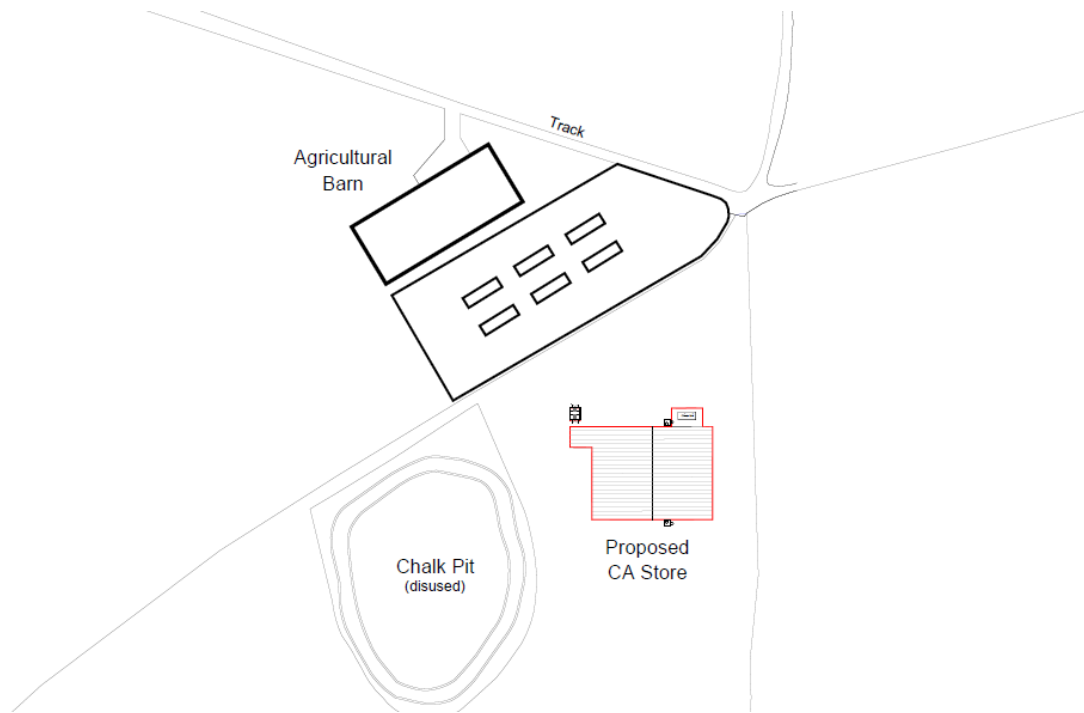
- 5.1. It is proposed that a cold store is provided to the south of the existing farm yard at New Green Farm for the cold and controlled atmospheric storage of apples from New Green Farm. The building is designed to store 3175 apple bins.

### **Amount**

- 5.2. The proposed agricultural building that will be used for cold and controlled atmospheric storage measures 26.25 metres wide, 33.88 metres long, 8.95 metres at eaves and 12 metres to the ridge. This provides 889 square metres of floor space. An electrical control room providing 35.66 square metres of floor space and electricity substation measuring 10.38 square metres is also proposed. To the north a chiller unit on a 21 square metre pad of concrete is also proposed. The building and associated infrastructure proposes 956.04 square metres of floor space for cold storage, an electrical control room, substation and chiller unit with associated concrete pad.

## Layout

- 5.3. The building is proposed to the south of the existing farmyard and building as well as seasonal agricultural workers accommodation. The building will be orientated in a north to south axis. This is shown in the proposed block plan extract in **Figure 3**.



*Figure 3 Proposed block plan*

## Landscaping

- 5.4. No landscaping is being proposed as part of this scheme due to the existence of existing mature hedges buildings and orchard, which will screen the development. Should the Council consider that landscaping is required, it is proposed that this could be secured by way of a suitably worded condition.

## Appearance

- 5.5. The proposed agricultural building will be clad in green profile metal sheeting with a grey profile metal roof. No additional hardstanding is required as the existing access and yard area will provide adequate access to the building in all weathers.

## 6. Permitted Development

- 6.1. Class A of Part 6 of Schedule 2 of the GPDO, as amended has been given due consideration during the preparation of this proposal. It is put forward that this proposal complies with Class A.1 of Part 6, Schedule 2 in the following ways:
- 6.2. The development is proposed on a piece of land forming part of the agricultural unit which is greater than 1 hectare. The area of land that forms this part of the agricultural unit of land extends to over 84ha.
- 6.3. No development has taken place under Class Q or S of Part 3 (Change of Use) of Schedule 2 on this agricultural unit.
- 6.4. The site is not located within 3 km of a registered aerodrome and the building would not exceed 12 metres in height.
- 6.5. This proposal does not involve the erection, extension or alteration of a dwelling.
- 6.6. The proposed building is designed for the cold storage of apples. The building will not be used for the storage of livestock, slurry, sewage sludge or for storing fuel for a waste from a boiler or system or for storing fuel that is not produced on the land.
- 6.7. The ground area covered as a result of the proposal does not exceed 1,000 square metres, it covers 956 square metres of the 1000 square metres that is allowed at this agricultural unit.
- 6.8. The site is not located on Article 2(4) land and is not connected with fish farming.
- 6.9. The site does not lie within 25 metres of a metalled part of a trunk or classified road.
- 6.10. Under Schedule 2, Part 6 Class A, A.2 (i) of the GPDO 2015 (as amended) a determination is sought as to whether prior approval will be required for the siting, design and external appearance of the building proposed.
- 6.11. Due consideration has been given to the siting, design and external appearance of the building proposed, in terms of Gravesham Borough Council's Policies.

- 6.12. The proposed cold storage building has been designed to limit any perceived harm within the landscape being proposed in close proximity to the existing agricultural building, farmyard and seasonal agricultural workers accommodation. The use of green cladding and grey roof will ensure that it minimises any potential visual impact and is sympathetic to its surroundings.
- 6.13. The development proposed is typical of similar scale farming developments in the area and across the wider borough. It is therefore considered that the proposal would not have any significant visual impact and would respect the landscape character of the area. It is respectfully put forward that prior approval should not be required for the siting, design and external appearance of the proposed agricultural building.

## **7. Conclusion**

- 7.1. It is considered that this proposal is permitted under Class A of Part 6 of Schedule 2 of the GPDO as amended, as it will provide a building that is required to facilitate the cold and controlled atmospheric storage of apples.