

**STAFFORDSHIRE MOORLANDS DISTRICT COUNCIL  
PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE**

**16th November 2023**

Application No:	SMD/2023/0484	
Location	Unit 8a Leek Road Leek Brook ST13 7AP	
Proposal	Change of use from light industrial (Use Class E(g)(iii)) to indoor bouldering, climbing and training gym (Use Class E(d))	
Applicant	Mr S Honick – The Peak Climbing School Ltd	
Agent	Rob Duncan Planning Consultancy Ltd	
Parish/Ward	Leek South Ward	Date registered: 5 <sup>th</sup> October 2023
If you have a question about this report please contact: Benjamin Hurst tel: 07738506367 <a href="mailto:benjamin.hurst@staffsmoorlands.gov.uk">benjamin.hurst@staffsmoorlands.gov.uk</a>		

## **REFERRAL**

This application is presented to Planning Applications Committee because the premises is owned by Staffordshire Moorlands District Council and is to be leased to the applicant.

### **1. SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATION**

<b>APPROVE</b>
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### **2. DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE AND ITS SURROUNDINGS**

2.1 The application site comprises Unit 8A on the Leek Brook employment site, an existing semi-detached factory building that is currently vacant, its adjoining neighbour operates as a commercial laundrette. Planning permission was granted in 1979 (79/07118/OLDDC) to erect the building on the condition (1) that it is only used for light industrial purposes. Albeit, the last use of the unit was, reportedly, to warehouse greeting cards. The factory was provided on land that was allocated, at that time, for employment purposes in the old 'Leek District Plan'. The building comprises a single storey structure of blockwork construction, with extensive rooflight-style glazing and corrugated sheeting to its roofs. Unit 8A provides a gross floor area of 305 sq m.

2.2 Leek Brook is designated as a 'smaller village' within the adopted SMDC Local Plan. Leek Brook is half a kilometre to the south of Leek's settlement boundary and is surrounded by countryside designated by the Local Plan as an 'Other Rural Area'. The building lies on the northeastern side of the Leek Road, and is enclosed along its southwestern and southeastern flanks by established hardstanding that is used for parking, 11 parking spaces in all. The southeastern boundary of the site is

enclosed by a mature hedgerow with intermittent trees, beyond which lies the footway and carriageway of the Cheadle Road.

2.3 Vehicular access to the site is taken from the Cheadle Road via a shared access that serves another industrial premises to the southwest and the other semidetached industrial unit to the immediate northeast of the site. Further industrial development extends to the north, northeast and northwest of the site. A brook lies beyond the northwestern site boundary.

### **3. THE APPLICATION AND DESCRIPTION OF THE PROPOSAL**

3.1 Peak Climbing School Ltd. seek a new planning permission to release the building from the constraint of condition 1 (79/07118/OLDDC), so that the use of the premises at Unit 8A Leekbrook Industrial Estate can change from light industrial to an indoor bouldering, climbing and training gym (Use Class E(d)).

3.2 The applicant states that: *The Peak Climbing school Ltd was established in 2018 and currently attracts around 1000 people per year from all over the country as well as from overseas to its base in Leek. The company provides a number of different services ranging from outdoor climbing and mountaineering courses, activity days for the general public as well as outdoor education courses for schools and youth groups. The company also provides expert Technical Advice for other outdoor companies and indoor climbing facilities as well as First aid courses and DofE for schools. The adventure activities industry is one of the fastest growing industries in the world and as a result of its success the company has outgrown its existing site and needs to expand into larger premises, which will allow them to continue to grow in a sustainable manner. The climbing school are already a current member of the Staffordshire Tourism Boards 'Enjoy Staffordshire' scheme and aim to ensure that the new facility will continue to attract more people to the area and help promote Leek as a tourist destination. As many of the outdoor courses are run over multiple days this promotes local accommodation heavily through their website and links with a number of independent accommodation providers within the local area. The new premises would also offer more to the local schools that they already work with in terms of providing the 'National Indoor Climbing Award Schemes' (NICAS) which is accredited by AQA and Edexcel as part of the GCSE sport programs. There is also an aim to become part of the Staffordshire's 'Space' program to get young people from disadvantaged communities to come and try climbing indoors and out and there have been discussions with the local Police team to see how this initiative can be best facilitated.*

3.3 The application encompasses the following components:

- Change of use of the existing building to an indoor bouldering, climbing and training gym
- Provision of ancillary café and meeting space
- Installation of new disabled toilets and provision of new store rooms

3.4 No changes are proposed to external appearance of the building, or to the external layout of the site, which will be retained unaltered from existing. Vehicular access to the site via Leekbrook Way will also be unaltered. The only physical

changes would be made to the interior of the building to provide the climbing walls and new toilet / store room facilities and ancillary café. The climbing walls would be self-supporting structures that would sit within the open plan interior of the existing building.

3.5 Details of the application scheme can be viewed at:

<http://publicaccess.staffs Moorlands.gov.uk/portal/servlets/ApplicationSearchServlet?>

#### **4. RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY**

79/07118/OLDDC Details of advance factory units. Approved subject to the condition (1):

*The use of the building shall be limited to the use defined in Class III of the Schedule to the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1972 that is for light industrial purpose only and shall not cause detriment to the amenity of the area by reason of noise, vibration, smell, fumes, smoke, soot, ash, dust, or grit.*

*Reason:- In the interests of the amenity of the area*

#### **5. PLANNING POLICIES RELEVANT TO THE DECISION**

5.1 The development plan comprises the adopted Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan Development Plan Document (September 2020) and supporting evidence documents.

Adopted Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan - Sep 2020

5.2 The following Local Plan policies are relevant to the application:-

- SS1 Development Principles
- SS2 Settlement Hierarchy
- SS9 Smaller Village Area Strategy
- SS10 Other Rural Area
- SS11 Churnet Valley Strategy
- E1 New Employment Development
- E3 Existing Employment Areas, Premises and Allocations
- E4 Tourism and Cultural Development
- C2 Sport, Recreation and Open Space
- DC1 Design Considerations to protect residential amenity
- T1 Development and sustainable transport

Supplementary Planning Document (SPD)

Staffordshire Moorlands Design Guide 2018

Supporting Evidence Documents:

- Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment (2008)

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) revised.

## **6. CONSULTATIONS**

### **Public response to consultation**

6.1 Notification letters were sent to Neighbours. A site notice was posted on the 17<sup>th</sup> Aug 2023, all periods of consultation expire on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Nov 2023.

6.2 No public objections have been received

### **Leek Town Council**

6.3 Awaited

### **Staffordshire County Council Highways**

#### **Site Visit Conducted on: 18-Oct-2023**

6.4 No objection. Application form states that 11 spaces are existing and proposed. There is no drawing showing these but from site visit, it is apparent that 11 spaces can comfortably be provided. It is not immediately clear where this proposed use would fall in SMDC Parking Standards. Planning Statement anticipates 30 to 40 visitors over the course of a day. It is highly unlikely that all would arrive at once. Site has a current B8 use. It is unlikely that the proposed use would significantly increase trip generation. There is unlikely to be a severe effect on the highway. Access onto A520 is existing and in current and regular use. Visibility is good. Current records show that there were no Personal Injury Collisions on A520 Cheadle Road within 120 m either side of the site access in the previous five years.

### **SMDC Asset Management**

6.5 Awaited.

### **SMDC Environmental Health**

6.6 Awaited.

### **SMDC Waste Operation**

6.7 No issues raised

### **Severn Trent Water**

6.8 Awaited

## **7. OFFICER COMMENT AND PLANNING BALANCE**

**Is the Proposed Use Acceptable in Principle?**

7.1 The premises is an existing industrial unit on an established industrial estate within Leek Brook. Planning permission was granted in 1979 (79/07118/OLDDC) to build the unit as a “factory on plot 8”. The permission is subject to a condition (1) that limits the use of the factory to “light industrial purposes only”. It is of note that with recent amendments to the Use Classes Order in 2020, the new Commercial, Business and Service Use Class E includes and covers both ‘light industrial uses’ and ‘indoor sport, recreation or fitness uses’. Normally, therefore, a change between the two uses should not require planning permission and the only reason permission is required in this case is because the condition limiting the use of the premises was applied to the original permission. In the interests of protecting the amenity of the area, the condition also has the effect of prohibiting other employment/commercial uses such as ‘General Industry’ or ‘Storage and Distribution’. The scope of employment uses that can therefore occupy the unit are limited and the proposal presents an alternative use that would bring some employment opportunity but not be inherently noisy or obviously detrimental to amenity.

7.2 Leek Brook is designated as a ‘smaller village’ within the adopted Local Plan. Leek Brook is half a kilometre to the south of Leek’s settlement boundary and is surrounded by countryside designated by the Local Plan as an ‘Other Rural Area’. Local Plan policies SS9 and SS10 set out the area strategies for the ‘Smaller Villages’ and ‘Other Rural Areas’ respectively. Together they seek to sustain rural economy, support rural diversification and sustainability of the rural areas, and promote sustainable tourism. In these respects they provide support for sustainable tourism developments and enable limited development of business for employment uses. The rural strategies limit and restrict development that could be considered unsustainable or harmful to landscape character by reason of remoteness and countryside intrusion. However, here the use would occupy a unit on an existing industrial estate within proximity of neighbouring residential development and the settlements of Leek and Cheddleton, and there would be no conflict in those regards.

7.3 Supplementary to the area strategies, employment policies E1 and E3 support development that improves the local economy in terms of providing diverse employment opportunity for the workforce and meeting business needs on existing employment areas within proximity of the larger settlements. Policy E3 restricts development that would result in the loss of existing employment opportunity. On the applicant’s evidence the proposed use would be an employment generating use, and would involve the creation of jobs for a minimum of 4no. full-time members of staff and a minimum of 6no. part-time members of staff. This presents good employment density against the limited floor area of the unit, particularly in comparison to what might otherwise be achieved with light industry or small scale warehousing. The proposed use would be a compatible employment or business use that would provide diversified opportunity for both business growth and employment provision. It is not considered that the use would conflict with the objectives of employment policies E1 or E3 of the Local Plan.

7.4 Additionally and weighting in favour of the proposal, the new use would deliver other benefits, against the aims of the Local Plan, by virtue of its contribution to local tourism and helping to facilitate greater participation in sport and physical activity. The site is located within the Churnet Valley Master Plan area wherein policy SS11 affords particular support for the provision of compatible new tourist attractions

and facilities. Policy E4 of the Local Plan also confirms support for such development where it offers good connectivity with other tourist destinations and amenities, particularly by public transport, walking and cycling. The location offers good connectivity with other tourist destinations such as Leek and Cheddleton and good association and proximity to the iconic outdoor climbing area at the Roaches. A range of means of transport, including public transport, with bus stops located very close to the site on the Leek Road are acceptable. The proposal is consequently in full accordance with the objectives of policies SS11 and E4 of the Local Plan and the recently published Tourism Strategy.

7.5 Policy C2 of the Local Plan states that new sport, recreation and open space facilities should be located in accessible locations supported by the local transport infrastructure. The proposed climbing centre occupies a sustainable location with easy access to public transport connections. It is also within walking and cycling distance of a large number of residents. The new use would provide new fitness and recreational opportunity to help facilitate greater participation in sport and physical activity. In doing so it will make a positive contribution to the health and wellbeing of residents within the Moorlands.

7.6 In principle, the proposed use is acceptable when considered against the strategies and policies of the Local Plan listed above. The use would deliver considerable benefit that should weigh heavily in favour of the proposal. There would be no conflict with the Local Plan in those regards.

### **Impact on Amenity**

7.7 The planning permission granted to erect the factory unit in 1979 was subject to a condition that limited the use in the interests of protecting the amenity of the area. The effect was to limit the unit to light industrial uses and prohibit more inherently noisy activities that might be associated with more general industrial uses and some storage and distribution. The proposed climbing gym would not introduce noisy activity and does not rely upon large vehicles for deliveries or export. The nearest neighbouring occupiers to the application site lie 42 metres to the south on the opposite side of the Leek Road. While there are not currently any conditions that control the premises' hours of opening or operation, the applicant states that generally the climbing centre would operate between the following hours: Monday – Friday: 08:00 – 22:00hrs; Saturdays/Sundays: 09:00 – 18:00hrs; and Bank Holidays: 09:00 – 18:00hrs.

7.8 The climbing centre is not a noisy use and it should not cause any undue disturbance to the amenity of neighbouring occupiers, given their distance from the existing building and the presence of a busy, noisy road in between. There should be no impacts that adversely affect the amenity of the area and there would be no conflict with Local Plan policy DC1 in these regards.

### **Impact on Highway Safety**

7.9 In accordance with policies DC1 and T1 all new development should provide a safe and satisfactory access. Paragraph 111 of the National Planning Policy Framework confirms that development should only be prevented or refused on

highways grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network would be *severe*.

7.10 The proposal would make use of the pre-existing access with Leek Road and the hard standing that surrounds the unit providing areas of parking and space to turn vehicles, there is no proposal to alter or modify the existing arrangement. The highway access is in current and regular use and is described by the Highway Authority as providing good visibility. There are no records of any personal injury collisions within 120m of the access in the previous five years. The application states that the proposal would make use of the existing 11 parking spaces provided comfortably within the site, with an anticipated 30 to 40 visitors using the gym spaced throughout the course of a day. The Highway Authority do not object to the proposal, compared to the activity or vehicle movements that might be associated with permitted and previous uses, the proposal is unlikely to significantly increase trip generation or result in a *severe* effect on the highway.

7.11 The site is also noted to occupy a sustainable location which benefits from accessibility by foot, by bicycle and via public transport. It is consequently concluded that the proposed development will not give rise to any severe residual impacts to highway safety within the locality, and meets the requirements of policy T1 of the Local Plan.

## **CONCLUSION / PLANNING BALANCE**

7.12 The proposed use would be compatible with the SMDC Local Plan Strategies and Policies for the area and would deliver considerable benefit that should weigh heavily in favour of the proposal. It would be a new employment or commercial use that would promote a diversification of employment opportunity and support local business. There would also be considerable benefit delivered by reason of opportunity for the health, fitness and well being of local communities and as a well connected attraction that would promote tourism and attract visitors to the area. There would be no harm to highway safety or the amenity of the area and no conflict with any of the Local Plan policies listed above.

## **8. RECOMMENDATION**

**A. That the grant of a new planning permission be APPROVED for Unit 8A to permit the proposed change of use, subject to the following condition(s):**

**1. The use of the building and site identified in plans submitted with the application shall be limited only to the uses defined in either Classes E(d) or E(g) of the Schedule to the Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1986 (as amended) that is for either 'Indoor sport, recreation or fitness' or 'light industrial or office purposes that can be carried out in a residential area without detriment to its amenity'.**

**Reason:- In the interests of the amenity of the area**

**2. There shall at no time be any outside storage of any nature, except with**

the express written agreement of the Local Planning Authority.

Reason:- In the interests of the amenity of the area

**B. In the event of any changes being needed to the wording of the Committee's decision (such as to delete, vary or add conditions/informatives/planning obligations or reasons for approval/refusal) prior to the decision being issued, the Head of Development Services has delegated authority to do so in consultation with the Chairman of the Planning Applications Committee, provided that the changes do not exceed the substantive nature of the Committee's decision.**

