



PLANNING, DESIGN & ACCESS STATEMENT

THE HAVEN, OKEHURST ROAD, BILLINGSHURST

March 2026

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CLIENT:

Laura Perez

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement has been prepared on behalf of Laura Perez ("the applicant") and supports a retrospective full planning application for a secure dog walking field, known as 'The Haven Secure Dog Field', on land north of Okehurst Road, Billingshurst.
- 1.2 The description of development ("the proposal") being applied for is:

"Retrospective change of use of agricultural land to a secure dog walking field with parking area and improved access via Okehurst Road."
- 1.3 The application site covers approximately 2 hectares, comprising a rectangular field parcel north of Okehurst Road, Billingshurst.

Figure 1: Site Images

View 1: Looking north east from the south western corner of the site



View 2: Looking north from the first internal gate



View 3: Looking east along the 1.2m internal fencing



View 4: Looking east from the north eastern corner of the site, showing the separation between the dog field perimeter fence and woodland.



View 5: Looking at the north western corner of the site along the northern perimeter fence.



View 6: Looking south down the eastern boundary of the site, showing the wildlife corridor separating the site and the woodland.



View 7: Looking east at the parking area



View 8: looking west at the parking area entrance



View 9: Looking south from the parking area to the entrance gate



View 10: Looking north from Okehurst Road at the entrance gate



View 11: Looking left from the access onto Okehurst Road



View 12: Looking right from the access onto Okehurst Road



1.4 The following sections of this statement identify the relevant issues pertinent to the consideration of the application submission and include:

- A description of the application site and the surrounding area;
- A description of the application proposals;
- An overview of relevant planning policy; and
- An assessment of the application proposals against the development plan and relevant material considerations such as the National Planning Policy Framework.

1.5 In accordance with statutory and local information requirements, the following supporting material is submitted, alongside this statement, and will enable a full assessment of the proposals to be undertaken:

- Completed application forms, including ownership certificates
- Location Plan
- Site Layout Plan
- Preliminary Ecological Appraisal
- Operational and Environmental Management Plan

1.6 Overall, this statement will assess in detail all the planning aspects associated with the application proposals, with reference to the above supporting information which forms the retrospective planning application. It will be shown that the proposals are in overall accordance with national and local planning policy.

2. THE SITE AND SURROUNDING AREA

- 2.1 The Site Location Plan submitted with the application shows the site in its immediate context. The application site edged in red comprises approximately 2 hectares of land north of Okehurst Road, approximately 3km north of Billingshurst.
- 2.2 The application site is relatively flat and comprises open grassland currently operating as a secure bookable dog walking field (known as The Haven). This includes areas of mown grassland as well as areas left as longer grass, including a wildlife margin and wildflower bund. The field is interspersed with 12 newly planted individual trees and approximately 200m of new native hedgerow planting. There is an existing vehicular access to the field and associated car park via a gap in the hedgerow along the southern boundary where there is an entrance from Okehurst Road.
- 2.3 The field was in agricultural use prior to its use as a dog field, forming part of the Wagtail farming estate. The field formed part of a wider parcel extending to the west. The dog walking field forms the eastern half of the former agricultural field parcel.
- 2.4 The northern and eastern boundaries are defined by well-established woodland, the western boundary adjoins the wider field parcel and the southern boundary neighbours Okehurst Road.
- 2.5 All boundaries of the dog field are made up of an existing 1.9m high post and wire mesh fence with a wildlife corridor beyond. There is also a 1.2m high timber stock post and rail fence separating the parking area and the three individual sections of the field.
- 2.6 The surrounding landscape primarily consists of agricultural land, farmsteads and areas of woodland, typical of the wider countryside setting.
- 2.7 Okehurst Road is an unclassified rural road. Okehurst Road extends to the small hamlet known as 'The Haven', approximately 1.3km to the north with the outskirts of Billingshurst, approximately 2.2km to the south.
- 2.8 The nearest residential dwelling, Shortloes Farm House, is located on the opposite side of Okehurst Road, approximately 40m from the site access. The road, along with tall hedgerows and trees, screens the site from this dwelling and provides a level of audible and visual separation.

- 2.9 The Haven, Five Oaks and Billingshurst are located approximately 1.5km, 2.5km and 3.5km from the application site, respectively.
- 2.10 The closest Listed Building is Grade II Listed 'Hoglands', located approximately 400m south west of the site. Given the separation distance, there is no intervisibility between this heritage asset and the site.
- 2.11 There are no footpaths or public rights of way (PROW) that run across the application site. The closest bridleway (Ref. RUD 1352/1) is located beyond the eastern boundary, through the woodland. This connects into the wider PROW network around The Haven.
- 2.12 The bridleway is currently closed, and has been for some time, due to a broken bridge near Rudwick (see image below).

Figure 2: Closed Bridleway (Ref. RUD 1352/1) close to the eastern boundary of the site.



- 2.13 According to the Environment Agency flood risk mapping, the site is located in Flood Zone 1, the lowest risk of flooding. The majority of the site is not susceptible to surface water flooding; however, some areas along the southern boundary have a 1 in 30 chance of surface water flooding in any given year. The proposed use is 'water compatible'.
- 2.14 There are no ecological designations on the site. The woodland to the east (Lannard's and Long Corpses) is classified as ancient woodland and designated a local wildlife site.
- 2.15 The site is located within a Bat Sustenance Zone, according to the Council's policy map.
- 2.16 The application site is currently being used as a secure dog walking field with access via Okehurst Road leading into a parking area in the south eastern corner. The 1.9m high gates and fencing around the site were erected using permitted development rights.
- 2.17 The Applicant has planted trees on the site as part of the dog field use. This includes 12 new native specimen trees dotted throughout the site, approximately 200m of new native hedgerow planting and overseeding of approximately 11,000sqm with a nectar-rich grass mix. A wildflower bund has also been developed to enhance biodiversity value.
- 2.18 The application seeks retrospective permission for the change of use of the site including a parking area, with the details of the dog field described in the next chapter.
- 2.19 There is no relevant recent planning history on the application site.

3. THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

Use, Amount and Scale

- 3.1 This application seeks retrospective planning permission to change the use of this land to a secure dog walking field. The field can be booked for dog walking and exercise, with a secure parking area provided for users within the site.
- 3.2 The dog walking field is available to rent for exclusive use and offers 50 minute booking sessions with a 10 minute crossover period in between each session. The field is open daily with seasonal times, the maximum being between 06:00 and 22:00 (being the longest operating hours), including weekends and bank holidays. Note that the field will only operate in daylight hours, closing at dusk to avoid the need for external lighting and to minimise any potential disturbance. The opening hours therefore differ by season, as set out in the accompanying operational and environmental management plan.
- 3.3 A dog walking field provides professional dog walkers and private households with an exclusive, safe and secure recreational space to let their dog(s) off the lead without fear of poor recall, attacks on livestock or mixing with other dogs. They also provide a useful facility for those with mobility issues or young children, or for those who need to exercise their dogs safely without covering large distances, as well as being a safe space for any anxious dogs, service dogs or dogs with behavioural issues which may not be suited to public open spaces.
- 3.4 A maximum of 6 dogs are allowed in the field at any one time (per single booking), thereby ensuring that activity levels remain low intensity.
- 3.5 An existing 1.9m post and mesh deer fence marks out the perimeter of the secure dog field (as shown on the Site Plan). The existing fencing is appropriate to ensure that the field is fully secure all around and is safe for all dogs. There is an existing secure gate which provides vehicular access from the access track into the parking area where dogs can then be safely let out within a contained environment.
- 3.6 Internal pedestrian gates and timber stock fencing are provided to allow for users to move through different areas of the field in a safe and controlled manner.

Appearance and Landscaping

- 3.7 The overall appearance of the site is rural, given its location within the countryside. The site comprises and appears as a typical area of rural grassland, with approximately 11,000sqm of nectar-rich grassland mix, interspersed with recent tree planting. The site's northern and eastern boundaries are marked by woodland, while the southern boundary is defined by existing belts of mature hedgerow and trees. The western boundary is made up by the 1.9m high perimeter fence and an approximately 200m strip of new native hedgerow. The existing vegetation provides strong physical boundaries which screen the site from the wider area with limited long range views into the site thereby providing natural visual containment.
- 3.8 The fencing and gates are characteristic and commonplace in rural areas and have a discreet appearance appropriate to their countryside context.
- 3.9 The parking area can accommodate up to 2 cars with space to turn. The parking area and access track is surfaced with loose aggregate. Loose aggregate is commonly used in rural areas and minimises any alterations to the natural drainage of the field whilst maintaining a soft rural appearance. The parking area is located via the existing access track that leads from Okehurst Road, in the south eastern corner of the site.
- 3.10 The applicant has undertaken additional planting within the field, introducing 12 specimen trees to enhance the landscape and biodiversity value of the site. The tree planting includes 3 x *Acer rubrum*, 1 x *Betula utilis*, 3 x *Betula pendula* multi-stem, 3 x *Betula pubescens alba* and 2 x *Betula Jacquemontii*. Additionally, around 200m of native hedgerow have been planted along the western boundary of the site. Overseeding approximately 11,000sqm with a diverse grass mix across the site, along with a wildflower feature, has also been included.
- 3.11 The dog walking field makes use of an existing access point in the south eastern corner that previously served the agricultural field, ensuring no hedgerow loss and minimal physical alterations to the landscape and retaining the established field pattern.
- 3.12 The grassland is currently managed and includes open mown areas as well as longer areas of grassland to enhance its value from a biodiversity perspective, as well as offering variety and interest to users of the field.
- 3.13 The area now used as a dog field was previously in agricultural use. The applicant has improved the biodiversity value of the land through the new planting, with the only change relating to the change of use of the land and a

parking area. These minor changes do not adversely impact the landscape character and the proposed recreational use is compatible with the rural landscape and preserves the character of the countryside.

Access

- 3.14 Access to the dog field is via a short track leading west from Okehurst Road. This leads to the private parking area for the dog field.
- 3.15 This is an existing access point on Okehurst Road, which has always been used to access the agricultural field when it was part of the Wagtail agricultural estate. This access was included in the land bought by the applicant and is therefore within the applicant's ownership.
- 3.16 The existing access to the dog field is made up of loose hardcore. The parking area is secured by a locked gate and 1.9m deer fencing. The parking area is within the field, allowing dogs to be let out of the car safely.
- 3.17 The parking area accommodates up to 2 vehicles with space to turn within the parking area and leave the site in a forward gear.
- 3.18 The dog field is unstaffed so the gate into the parking area will be locked with a combination padlock, with the code sent to the customer on the day of their booking session. The code is also changed regularly to prevent unauthorised access.
- 3.19 The applicant's online booking system controls the number of visitors and traffic movements to and from the site ensuring that vehicle activity remains evenly distributed and limited throughout the day.
- 3.20 There is also a 10-minute crossover period between bookings to ensure that there are no conflicting vehicular movements in the car park. This also prevents unknown dogs from coming into contact with one another.

Waste

- 3.21 There are a number of dog waste bins located throughout the field in convenient locations. The applicant has a waste licence.
- 3.22 Waste collected daily is deposited in a large secure wheelie bin provided by a leading animal waste management service provider. This bin is kept away from customer facilities.

3.23 A waste management company makes scheduled collections from the premises.

4. PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

- 4.1 The following section provides a breakdown of local and national policies considered relevant to the application.
- 4.2 National guidance comprises the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024) and the Planning Practice Guidance.
- 4.3 At the local level, the development plan for Horsham District Council consists of the Horsham District Planning Framework (HDPF).
- 4.4 Horsham District is currently in the process of preparing a new local plan for the area to guide development. The emerging Local Plan is currently at examination in public.
- 4.5 Rudgwick Neighbourhood Plan was formally made on 23rd June 2021. The site is in this plan area.

National Planning Policy Framework

- 4.6 Paragraph 8 defines three overarching objectives that the planning system should pursue in order to achieve sustainable development. These, it says, are interdependent and should be pursued in mutually supportive ways:

“an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right types is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure;

a social objective – to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be provided to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by fostering well-designed, beautiful and safe places, with accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities’ health, social and cultural well-being; and

an environmental objective – to protect and enhance our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, improving biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.”

- 4.7 At the heart of the NPPF is a presumption in favour of sustainable development, defined by Paragraph 11. This applies to both plan-making and decision-taking. In respect of the latter, Paragraph 11 states:

"For decision-taking this means:

c) Approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay; or

d) Where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date, granting permission unless:

i. the application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for refusing the development proposed; or

ii. any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole, having particular regard to key policies for directing development to sustainable locations, making effective use of land, securing well-designed places and providing affordable homes, individually or in combination."

- 4.8 Paragraph 39 requires local planning authorities to approach decisions on proposed development in a positive and creative way. They should use the full range of planning tools available and work proactively with applicants to secure developments that will improve the economic, social and environmental conditions of the area. Decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.
- 4.9 Paragraph 48 confirms that planning law requires that applications for planning permission be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 4.10 Paragraphs 56-58 concern the use of planning conditions and obligations, setting out how conditions should be kept to a minimum and only imposed where they are necessary, relevant to planning and to the development, enforceable, precise and reasonable in all other respects.
- 4.11 Paragraph 88 states that decisions should enable the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas as well as the development

and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses. Decisions should also enable the retention and development of accessible local services and community facilities.

- 4.12 Paragraph 89 goes on to add that decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. In these circumstances, it will be important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable.
- 4.13 Paragraph 96 requires planning policies and decisions to aim to achieve healthy, inclusive and safe places, whilst paragraph 98 also requires policies and decisions to provide the social, recreational and cultural facilities and services the community needs.
- 4.14 Paragraph 110 confirms that significant development should be focused on locations which are or can be made sustainable, through limiting the need to travel and offering a genuine choice of transport modes. However, opportunities to maximise sustainable transport solutions will vary between urban and rural areas, and this should be taken into account in both plan-making and decision-making.
- 4.15 Paragraph 115 requires applications to ensure appropriate opportunities to promote sustainable transport modes can be taken up, that safe and suitable access to the site can be achieved for all users and any significant impacts from the development on the transport network or on highway safety can be cost effectively mitigated to an acceptable degree.
- 4.16 Paragraph 135 states that planning decisions should aim to ensure that developments:
- Will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development;
 - Are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change;
 - Create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible and which promote health and well-being, with a high standard of amenity for existing and

future users, and where crime and disorder, and the fear of crime, do not undermine the quality of life or community cohesion and resilience.

- 4.17 Paragraph 187 requires policies and decisions to contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity value and soils. Decisions should also recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside and minimise impacts on the countryside while providing net gains for biodiversity. New and existing development should not be put at unacceptable risk from, or be adversely affected by, unacceptable levels of soil, air, water or noise pollution.
- 4.18 Paragraph 193 concerns biodiversity and confirms that if significant harm to biodiversity resulting from a development cannot be avoided (through locating on an alternative site with less harmful impacts), adequately mitigated, or, as a last resort, compensated for, then planning permission should be refused. The Framework adds that development on land within or outside of a Site of Special Scientific Interest, and which is likely to have an adverse effect on it, should not normally be permitted. The only exception is where the benefits of the development in the location proposed clearly outweigh any impacts.
- 4.19 Paragraph 231 confirms that the policies contained within the NPPF constitute material considerations which should be taken into account in dealing with applications from the day of its publication.

Horsham District Planning Framework (2015)

- 4.20 Policy 1 (Sustainable Development) reflects the NPPF's focus on the presumption in favour of sustainable development to secure development. It states that where planning applications accord with the policies of this Local Plan (and Neighbourhood Plan policies), they will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 4.21 Policy 10 (Rural Economic Development) encourages sustainable rural diversification and enterprises within the district in order to generate local employment opportunities and economic, social and environmental benefits for local communities. Any development should be appropriate to the countryside location and must:
 - 1. *"Contribute to the diverse and sustainable farming enterprise within the district or, in the case of other countryside-based enterprises and activities they must contribute to the wider rural economy and/or promote recreation in, and the enjoyment of, the countryside; and either*

- a) *Be contained wherever possible within suitably located buildings which are appropriate for conversion or, in the case of an established rural industrial estate, within the existing boundaries of the estate; or*
 - b) *Result in substantial environmental improvement and reduce impact on the countryside, particularly if there are exceptional cases where new or replacement buildings are involved. New buildings or development in the rural area will be acceptable provided that it supports sustainable economic growth towards balanced living and working communities and criteria a) has been considered first.*
2. *Demonstrate that car parking requirements can be accommodated satisfactorily within the immediate surroundings of the buildings, or an alternative, logical solution is proposed."*

4.22 Policy 24 (Environmental Protection) protects the district's environment by minimising exposure to and the emissions of pollutants including noise, odour, air and light pollution.

4.23 Policy 25 (The Natural Environment and Landscape Character) protects the landscape, landform and development pattern, together with protected landscapes and habitats.

4.24 Policy 26 (Countryside Protection) protects the countryside against inappropriate development. *"Any proposal must be essential to its countryside location and in addition must meet one of the following criteria:*

- 1. Support the needs of agriculture or forestry;*
- 2. Enable the extraction of minerals or the disposal of waste;*
- 3. Provide for quiet informal recreational use; or*
- 4. Enable the sustainable development of rural areas.*

In addition, proposals must be of a scale appropriate to its countryside character and location. Development will be considered acceptable where it does not lead, either individually or cumulatively, to a significant increase in the overall level of activity in the countryside, and protects, and/or conserves, and/or enhances, the key features and characteristics of the landscape character area in which it is located, including:

- 1. The development pattern of the area, its historical and ecological qualities, tranquillity and sensitivity to change;*
- 2. The pattern of woodlands, fields, hedgerows, trees, waterbodies and other features; and*
- 3. The landform of the area."*

- 4.25 Policy 31 (Green Infrastructure and Biodiversity) supports development where it can be demonstrated that it maintains or enhances the existing network of green infrastructure. It continues that development proposals will be required to contribute to the enhancement of existing biodiversity and should create and manage new habitats where appropriate. It sets out the hierarchy of sites and habitats in the district; Ancient Woodland and LWS are identified 3rd on the hierarchy below SPAs, SACs, SSSIs and NNRs. Development which has a direct or indirect adverse impact on sites or features for biodiversity will be refused unless appropriate mitigation and compensation measures are provided.
- 4.26 Policy 32 (The Quality of New Development) states that high quality and inclusive design for all new development in the district will be required based on a clear understanding of local, physical, social, economic, environmental and policy context for development.
- 4.27 Policy 33 (Development Principles) sets out the development principles that development shall be required to meet in order to conserve and enhance the natural and built environment.
- 4.28 Policy 34 (Cultural and Heritage Assets) recognises that heritage assets are an irreplaceable resource and as such the Council will sustain and enhance its historic environment through positive management of development affecting heritage assets.
- 4.29 Policy 40 (Sustainable Transport) encourages and supports development proposals which promote an improved and integrated transport network, with a re-balancing in favour of non-car modes as a means of access to jobs, homes, services and facilities.
- 4.30 Policy 41 (Parking) states that adequate parking and facilities must be provided within developments to meet the needs of anticipated users.

Rudgwick Neighbourhood Development Plan (2021)

- 4.31 The Rudgwick Neighbourhood Development Plan provides vision, objectives and policies to help guide development within the plan boundary. Whilst the site is within the neighbourhood plan boundary, there are no policies which are directly relevant to this application.

5. PLANNING ASSESSMENT

- 5.1 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires proposals to be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Principle of Development

- 5.2 This application seeks retrospective planning permission for the change of use of agricultural land for secure dog walking with associated parking area and access.
- 5.3 By virtue of their very name and nature, a dog walking field requires larger areas of land typically found on the edge of settlements or otherwise in rural locations in the countryside. There is very limited availability of suitable land within, or directly adjacent to, settlements that would be appropriate and large enough for such a use. Dog fields are therefore normally located within the countryside away from settlements, where there are fewer public transport options and are normally only accessible by car, particularly given that customers typically travel to such facilities by car as they need to safely transport dogs to the site. The vast majority of dog walking fields similar to that being proposed here have been approved within the countryside across the UK, including in Green Belt, AONB and National Park locations demonstrating that such uses are widely accepted as appropriate rural enterprises.
- 5.4 Dog ownership across the UK has risen significantly over the past few years and there is now an increasing demand for secure dog walking fields. Such facilities provide a tailor-made alternative and safe and secure option for dog owners meeting specific requirements, whilst alleviating pressures on other public open spaces and recreational areas where conflicts with livestock, wildlife and other users can arise.
- 5.5 Driven by increases in general dog ownership, there has also been an increase in numbers of professional dog walkers particularly post the Covid-19 pandemic, which in turn are driving the demand for more secure dog walking fields.
- 5.6 A dog exercise field is a space that can be hired on an exclusive basis to exercise or train dogs. As a general rule they are enclosed with post and mesh fencing and gates which are up to 1.9m in height and which have a designated and secure parking area for customers.

- 5.7 There are many more reasons that people choose to use dog fields but it simply comes down to the security of knowing your dog cannot get out or come into contact with unknown dogs or people.
- 5.8 The field is rentable for 50 minute slots throughout the day, Monday to Sunday (inc. bank holidays), between the maximum hours of 06:00 and 22:00.
- 5.9 Paragraph 89 of the NPPF is clear that decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas (such as a dog walking field) may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. In these circumstances it will be important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable.
- 5.10 The proposed use would be appropriate to the site and surrounding context given the general recreational activities associated with the proposed use (i.e. dog walking) are commonplace in rural areas.
- 5.11 Paragraph 88 of the NPPF adds that decisions should also enable the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of businesses in rural areas as well as the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses. The proposal represents a small-scale rural enterprise that supports the rural economy and provides a recreational facility serving the local community, without introducing built form or urbanising features into the countryside.
- 5.12 Policy 10 supports sustainable rural diversification and countryside based enterprises that contribute to the wider rural economy and/or promote recreation in and enjoyment of the countryside. The proposed dog walking field clearly promotes informal recreation and represents an appropriate countryside-based enterprise that contributes to the wider rural economy.
- 5.13 Policy 26 protects the countryside against inappropriate development. Proposals must be essential to their countryside location and, amongst other criteria, provide for quiet informal recreational use or enable the sustainable development of rural areas. The proposed use is inherently countryside-based and provides for quiet informal recreation. The scale and nature of the development are modest and appropriate to the rural setting and the use does not urbanise the countryside or introduce an intensive form of activity.

- 5.14 In summary, this is an acceptable change of use of the land. The dog walking field has specific locational and travel requirements which are supported through the NPPF and are considered to be an appropriate use within the open countryside. The proposal promotes enjoyment of the countryside, supports rural economic activity and accords with the relevant policies of the Development Plan.

Character and Appearance

- 5.15 The overall appearance of the site continues to be rural. The change of use does not result in the land having a materially different appearance to that of a typical agricultural field or equestrian paddock.
- 5.16 The dog field is secured by an existing 1.9m post and mesh perimeter deer fence along all field boundaries. This type of fencing is suitable to contain the dogs within the designated area. The deer fence is open in nature and of an appearance that is rural in character and which does not intrude on the landscape. The use of deer fencing is common in rural areas and is frequently used to contain grazing animals (and keeping out deer from certain areas).
- 5.17 There is a timber gate into the secure parking area. Like the fencing, the gate is rural in appearance and is not intrusive in the landscape.
- 5.18 Internal 1.2m pedestrian gates and fencing are provided within the wider 1.9m perimeter fencing to allow users to move through different areas of the field.
- 5.19 The parking area, gates and fencing are set back into the site behind a line of mature hedgerow along Okehurst Road.
- 5.20 The fencing and gates do not form part of this application given that they have already been erected utilising permitted development rights. There is no restriction on the erection of fencing up to 2m in height (under the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (GPD0), Schedule 2, Part 2, Class A).
- 5.21 The parking area and access is made up of loose hardcore, a material which has a softer appearance in the landscape and which is commonplace in rural areas. The existing access off Okehurst Road was extended internally to form the small parking area, with no changes to the external highway access point. No hedgerow removal was required and the rural character of the roadside boundary has been preserved.

- 5.22 The existing field has strong physical boundaries, with the site's northern and eastern boundaries marked by woodland. The southern boundary is defined by existing belts of mature hedgerows and trees and 200m of new native hedgerow planting has been introduced along the western boundary. As such these boundaries will be retained.
- 5.23 The site is not prominently visible when travelling along Okehurst Road due to the mature hedgerow along the roadside boundary. There is only a brief glimpse of the site's access when passing the entrance and limited public views of the interior of the site. However, as mentioned the interior of the site remains open as a grass field.
- 5.24 The first image below shows the previous field access to the agricultural land from Okehurst Road. The second image shows the upgraded access for the dog walking field.

Figure 3: Historic imagery showing the pervious access compared to a recent photograph showing the upgrades made to the field access

Image 1 & 2: Google Street imagery showing the access in June 2024 and July 2011



Image 3: Photographs of the existing access (looking north at the access gate from Okehurst Road and then looking south at Okehurst Road from inside the field)



- 5.25 No trees or substantial sections of hedgerow were removed as part of the change of use.
- 5.26 The site comprises an area of grassland which is maintained through a seasonal mowing regime, creating a managed but naturalistic and varied grass sward suitable for dog exercise and improved for biodiversity compared to its former state.
- 5.27 Recently, 12 individual trees have been planted within the dog field, comprising native species that will reinforce the landscape character and visual containment of the site. 200m of new native hedgerow has also been introduced along the western boundary.
- 5.28 The development represents a low-intensity, small-scale recreational use which is consistent with the rural character of the area. The number of visitors is strictly controlled through the applicant's online booking system, with exclusive use sessions allowing a maximum of six dogs per booking and a 10-minute crossover period between sessions. As such, levels of activity and vehicle movement remain very limited.
- 5.29 The dog field integrates sensitively into its surroundings, safeguarding the rural landscape character. The proposal also contributes to local biodiversity enhancement through new planting and improved grassland management.
- 5.30 On this basis, the proposal does not give rise to any adverse visual or landscape effects and preserves the overall character, quality and appearance of the countryside.
- 5.31 The development is therefore considered to comply with the National Planning Policy Framework and Policies 25, 26, 32 and 33 of the Horsham District Planning Framework.

Highways, Access and Parking

- 5.32 The dog field is accessed via an existing field entrance from Okehurst Road, with a short section of track leading west into the site and providing access to the on-site parking area. This entrance has always been used to access the agricultural field when it was part of the Wagtail agricultural estate. This access was included in the land bought by the applicant and is therefore within the applicant's ownership.
- 5.33 The dog walking field is unstaffed and the gate into the parking area is kept locked with a combination padlock, with the code provided to the customer on

the day of their booking session. The code is changed regularly to prevent unauthorised access and to maintain site security.

- 5.34 The applicant's online booking system controls the number of visitors and traffic movements to and from the site. Each booking provides exclusive use of the field, with a maximum of six dogs per session and it is typical for most bookings to involve one vehicle. The system ensures vehicle arrivals and departures are staggered evenly across the day, maintaining a low and consistent traffic profile.
- 5.35 There is a 10-minute cross-over period between each booking, allowing one customer to leave before the next arrives. This prevents conflicting vehicle movements along the access track and ensures there is no overlap between users or dogs.
- 5.36 Okehurst Road is an unclassified, typical rural road with relatively low traffic volumes. The site access provides good visibility in both directions along the road and there is sufficient space within the entrance and track to allow vehicles to turn and wait clear of the carriageway. The proposal utilises this existing access and the small scale of the operation means that the development generates a very limited number of vehicle movements, resulting in an immaterial impact on the local highway network.
- 5.37 As explained earlier in this statement, by virtue of its specific locational and travel requirements, it is expected that the majority of customers will travel by private car.
- 5.38 By its nature and location, public transport is not a practical option for customers visiting the field and given the small-scale recreational use and limited visitor numbers, cycle parking provision is not required.
- 5.39 In accordance with paragraph 89 of the NPPF where rural enterprises require countryside locations away from public transport connections, it is important that such developments remain sensitive to their surroundings and do not have an unacceptable impact on local roads. This proposal fully accords with that principle.
- 5.40 On this basis, the proposal is considered acceptable in relation to highway safety, access and parking provision, in accordance with the NPPF and policies 40 and 41 of the Horsham District Planning Framework.

Ecology

- 5.41 A Preliminary Ecological Appraisal (PEA) has been commissioned as part of this application.
- 5.42 This concludes that there are no statutory nature conservation designations on the application site itself.
- 5.43 Coppedhall Hanger Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) is located approximately 2km south of the site. The PEA concluded that no direct impacts are anticipated on this site given the distance between the site and the designated site.
- 5.44 The woodland to the east and north (Lannard's and Long Corpses) is classified as an ancient woodland and is identified as a local wildlife site.
- 5.45 The perimeter fencing has been set back approximately 5m from the ancient woodland to the east and north. This protects it and ensures that the integrity and root protection areas of the woodland are not adversely affected.
- 5.46 In terms of protected species that may be affected by the proposals, the PEA concluded that no impacts are anticipated.
- 5.47 The site is being managed with ecological enhancements as part of its ongoing operation. Measures already undertaken, or committed as part of the site's continuing management include:
- Approximately 200m of new native hedgerow planting;
 - Overseeding of approximately 11,000 sqm with a nectar-rich grass mix;
 - Planting of 12 specimen trees to strengthen habitat value and improve the landscape framework;
 - Retention of deadwood and natural arisings from hedge maintenance within the wildlife corridor to support insects, birds and small mammals;
 - A wildflower bund has been introduced in the north west corner to support insects, butterflies and moths;
 - Seasonal monitoring of vegetation and replacement of failed planting where required; and

- Strategic mowing of the improved grassland on the site to encourage new growth and allow for regenerative ecological processes to contribute as they would in a managed agricultural environment.

5.48 On this basis, the development is in accordance with the NPPF and Policies 25, 26, 31, 32 and 33 of the Horsham District Planning Framework and delivers biodiversity enhancements when compared to the former agricultural baseline.

Amenity and Other Environmental

5.49 The nearest residential dwelling, Shortloes Farm House, is located on the opposite side of Okehurst Road, approximately 40m from the site access. The road, along with verge side tall hedgerows and trees, screens the site from this dwelling. The next closest dwelling is approximately 500m to the south west of the site, separated from the application site by agricultural land, Okehurst Road and mature vegetation which provides substantial screening and separation.

5.50 A bridleway (Ref. RUD 1352/1) runs beyond the site's eastern boundary, through the woodland. Given the nature of the woodland, there is limited intervisibility between the site and the PROW.

5.51 The site is well enclosed by mature hedgerows and trees along its northern, eastern and southern boundaries and new hedgerow planting along the western boundary. These strong natural boundaries help to visually contain the site and act as an effective buffer, preventing any potential noise or visual intrusion to nearby receptors.

5.52 The dog walking field operates at a low intensity. Each booking provides exclusive use of the field, with a maximum of six dogs per session, typically involving 1-2 individuals on site at any one time. The field operates within restricted hours, with 10-minute crossover periods between bookings to ensure that there is no overlap of visitors.

5.53 The use does not give rise to any excessive noise or disturbance. Barking is limited due to the small number of dogs per session and the private, enclosed nature of the site. The applicant also enforces a 'no unreasonable noise' policy as part of their terms of use, which all customers must agree to prior to booking. The applicant has submitted an Operational Management Plan to demonstrate how the site will be responsibly used and managed, this includes measures to ensure noise levels are kept to a minimum.

- 5.54 With regard to odour and waste, the applicant provides a number of dog waste bins located conveniently throughout the field, with one larger secure wheelie bin stored separately from customer areas. Waste is collected regularly by a licensed waste management company in accordance with the applicant's waste licence, ensuring that the site is kept clean and well maintained.
- 5.55 Given the existing vegetation buffers and the low-intensity nature of the use, it is considered that the dog walking field does not result in any adverse impacts on amenity, noise levels, air quality or the general environmental quality of the surrounding area and is therefore in accordance with policy 24 of the Horsham District Planning Framework and the environmental objectives of the NPPF.
- 5.56 The site is not located within or adjacent to a Conservation Area and there are no designated heritage assets within the boundaries of the application site. However, there are a small number of designated assets located within the wider area. The closest Listed Building is Grade II Listed 'Hoglands', located approximately 400m south west of the site. Given the separation distance, there is no intervisibility between this heritage asset and the site.
- 5.57 On this basis, the proposal is considered acceptable in respect of residential amenity, environmental protection and heritage protection and is therefore compliant with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Policies 24 and 34 of the Horsham District Planning Framework.

Operational Benefits

- 5.58 The dog field offers a safe and high quality recreational and community facility within the local area, specifically benefiting dog walkers and dogs themselves, in turn promoting the health and well being of the local community. In addition, the facility relieves pressure on other open spaces, parks and public rights of way across the wider area, including conflicts with livestock, driven by increases in dog ownership.
- 5.59 Due to rising dog ownership there is now an increasing demand for secure dog walking fields which are becoming increasingly commonplace across the UK given their recognised benefits. A recent study by Nature Scientific Reports in December 2024 found that the UK is home to an estimated 13 million dogs, which is much higher than previously thought. This research was led by The Dogs Trust in collaboration with researchers from the University of Leeds and the University of Exeter and combined data from a breed registry, vet organisations, pet insurance companies, an academic institution and animal welfare charities.

- 5.60 In this regard the provision of a recreational facility which increases access to green open space in the countryside and which supports healthy living and well being is a social benefit.
- 5.61 The dog walking field represents rural diversification supporting a new rural enterprise. The development also supports the local economy by providing additional business to local contractors and it provides a venue for local dog walkers to operate.
- 5.62 The dog field is also a recreational facility that brings social benefits to the local community of dog owners and professional dog walkers, whilst managing to respect the intrinsic character of its surroundings.
- 5.63 Environmental benefits are achieved through the recently planted hedgerow, trees and enhanced grassland across the site.

6. CONCLUSIONS

- 6.1 This Planning, Design and Access Statement considers the matters relevant to the consideration of the application proposals. The proposal being a retrospective application for the change of use of agricultural land to one secure dog walking field, with associated parking, on land north of Okehurst Road, Billingshurst, otherwise known as The Haven Secure Dog Field.
- 6.2 The principle of development in this location is acceptable given the nature of the proposed use has specific locational requirements dependent on an open countryside location. The proposals represent rural diversification and bring economic benefits by supporting a new, appropriate rural enterprise in a manner that is proportionate and compatible with its countryside setting.
- 6.3 The proposal comprises one secure dog exercise/walking field which provides a secure and safe recreational space for dogs and owners, alleviating pressures on other public open spaces and in the context of increasing restrictions on letting dogs off lead. The evidence demonstrates that it is a much-needed community facility within the local area. It also supports the local community, including the health and well-being of dogs and owners, with additional opportunities to enjoy the countryside.
- 6.4 Furthermore, the dog exercise field is not an intensive use of the site and respects the character and appearance of the site and its surroundings. There are enhancements through the managed grassland and recent tree planting which result in a net environmental benefit when compared to the former agricultural use.
- 6.5 The proposal does not adversely impact the local highway network, there is no impact on the setting and character of heritage assets and there are no adverse impacts in terms of the amenity of nearby residents.
- 6.6 The proposal therefore accords with national and local planning policies regarding the presumption in favour of sustainable development set out in paragraph 11 of the NPPF.
- 6.7 Dog ownership in the UK has risen over the past few years and there is an increasing demand for secure dog walking fields. There is a clear need for such a facility within the local area.

- 6.8 Therefore, the proposals are in accordance with the National Planning Policy Framework (December 2024) and relevant adopted policies contained within the Horsham District Planning Framework.
- 6.9 Overall, the material change of use of the land is in accordance with the development plan and is supported by the planning system. The proposal is acceptable and it is respectfully requested that retrospective planning permission be granted.

