PROPOSALS AT OAK FARM, BARLESTONE – JUSTIFICATION STATEMENT

1.0 National and Local Planning Policy

1.1 The policy context for consideration of this application is provided by the development plan, national planning policy guidance and various other local policies and strategies wherever relevant to the proposal. The planning policy context is provided below and an assessment of the merits of the development follows thereafter.

1.2 Section 38(6) of The Planning and Compensation Act 2004 requires regard to be made to the development plan and for the determination of an application to be made in accordance with the plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. In this instance the development plan includes the Regional Spatial Strategy for the East Midlands 2005 (RSS8), the Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland Structure Plan 1996 - 2016 which was adopted in March 2005 and the Hinckley Borough Local Plan which was adopted in February 2001. Policies of the Local Plan were reviewed in September 2007 and where appropriate were "saved" in accordance with the provisions of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, 2004. Only two policies of the Structure Plan have been 'saved', both relating to housing; the remaining policies expired in March 2008.

1.3 Whilst it will be dealt with in greater detail below, it is fair to say that there is general support for the development of leisure and recreational facilities in appropriate countryside locations at all levels of planning policy.

1.4 At the national level, in recognition of the role the planning system has role to play in terms of facilitating the development and improvement of tourism in appropriate locations the Government issued a good practice guide in 2006 - the Good Practice Guide to Tourism, which is designed to ensure that planners understand the importance of tourism and take this fully into account when taking planning decisions. This document replaced PPG 21: Tourism. For the purposes of this document 'tourism' includes not only the annual family holiday but also a wide range of shorter visits, weekend breaks and day trips. Without going in to great detail here, the guide identifies the value of local tourism and the contributions that can be made to the economic and social well being of local communities as well as individuals. Amongst the benefits identified are employment opportunities, support to local services and facilities, and rural diversification.

1.5 Another national policy document relevant to consideration of this application is PPS 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas. PPS 7 recognises that diversification into non-agricultural activities is vital and encourages local planning authorities to be supportive of well-conceived farm diversification schemes for business purposes that contribute to sustainable development objectives and are consistent in their scale with their rural location.

1.6 However, it is also recognised that a supportive approach to farm diversification should not result in excessive expansion and encroachment of building development into the countryside. It further states that planning authorities should encourage the re-use or replacement of existing buildings where feasible, having regard to paragraphs 17-21 (wherein it states that re-use for economic development purposes will usually be preferable) and also have regard to the amenity of any nearby residents or other rural businesses that may be adversely affected by new types of on-farm development.

1.7 In a similar way to the Good Practice Guide to Tourism, PPS 7 also recognises the role that tourism and leisure activities have to play in supporting the rural economy. With particular reference to planning policies, the PPS states that Local Development Documents should '*support sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments that benefit rural businesses, communities and visitors and which utilise and enrich, but do not harm, the character of the countryside, its towns, villages, buildings and other features'*

1.8 At the regional level RSS 8 (East Midlands Regional spatial Strategy) recognises the importance of the contribution that rural areas make to the economy of the region. In particular Policy 24 – Regional Priorities for Rural Diversification, encourages Local Authorities to promote the continued diversification and further development of the rural economy, where this is consistent with a sustainable pattern of development and the environmentally sound management of the countryside.

1.10 The justification to 'saved' Local Plan Policy REC 26 New Visitor Attractions reflects this advice wherein it encourages proposals based on a particular feature or attraction within the Plan area so long as it is consistent with the natural surroundings.

1.11 Local Plan Policy REC 9 seeks to improve access to the countryside, principally through promoting walking, cycling horse riding etc, safeguarding rights of way and extending footpath networks. However, the policy also states that proposals for development in the countryside should have regard to improving access generally but in particular for vulnerable groups including disabled people.

1.12 Local Plan Policy NE12 requires proposals for development to take into account the existing landscaping features and make further provision where appropriate.

1.13 Local Plan Policy NE5 in common with most countryside policies seeks to protect the countryside for its own sake. Whilst new house building in the open countryside, will be strictly controlled, it is accepted that some forms of development can be appropriate in a countryside location and help to sustain a healthy rural economy. For example, developments that can be shown to be for the operational requirements of agriculture, horticulture, forestry, recreation, public utilities or tourism, will normally be acceptable. Policy BE20 also acknowledges that in a similar way the re-use and adaptation of existing buildings in the countryside can also play an important role by

providing rural employment opportunities and helping to reduce demand for new buildings in the countryside.

1.14 Local Plan Policy BE20 should be read in conjunction with a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) entitled 'Guide to Conversion of Rural Buildings; which was adopted by the Council in June 2004. The general thrust of Policy BE20 and the SPD is to seek to encourage conversion of structurally sound rural buildings into to a commercial, industrial or recreational use because they involve fewer alterations than residential conversions, and these uses would help to maintain a viable rural economy in encouraging new enterprise in the countryside.

1.15 Lastly, Local Plan Policy NE10 has designated Local Landscape Improvement Areas which are areas of poorer landscape quality in the Borough where there is scope for landscape improvement. The designation of Local Landscape Improvement Areas is intended to help to improve the quality of the landscape by providing a focus for environmental improvement measures such as landscaping, tree planting and natural screening. Within these areas development proposals should include areas set aside for native tree planting to enhance the landscape.

2.0 Assessment

2.1 The application proposes the development of a farm park for members of the public, school parties etc, to learn about farming methods and animal husbandry. Despite its countryside location the site is well related to centres of population such as Leicester, Nuneaton, Tamworth as well as smaller towns such as Coalville and Hinckley. In developing their proposal the applicants have sought to re-use all existing buildings on the site, however, in order to be able to provide a range of educational opportunities (including a teaching area) and a place for refreshments and toilets, it is necessary to add to the buildings on the site and it is therefore proposed to erect a barn to the north east of the current equestrian building for this purpose. This building would be well related to the existing buildings and would be screened by existing boundary hedges and trees from views from the north west; views from publicly accessible areas from other directions are generally obstructed by the existing buildings and the woodland area to the southern boundary.

2.2 In terms of national policy guidance and the Regional Spatial Strategy, this proposal is consistent with the stated aims of rural diversification and the role that tourism and leisure activities have to play in supporting the rural economy.

2.3 Turning to the policies of the development plan, Local Plan Policy REC 26, is a positive policy which encourages the development of new visitor attractions subject to environmental and highway considerations. In this particular case the visitor attraction is related to farming and will involve the re-use of a number of existing

buildings in a manner which is compatible with a countryside location. The applicants have commissioned a Transport Statement which notes that the proposed access arrangements have been modified to meet the highway authority requirements and that the impact of the traffic generated on the wider highway network will be negligible. In terms of sustainability issues, there is an inherent conflict in national planning guidance between, on the one hand seeking to reduce the need to travel by private motor car, and on the other hand, the promotion of the wider benefits of rural diversification. In support of this particular proposal it is pointed out that the number of visits estimated at present will result in 20-30 daily vehicles on weekdays with up to 50 on Saturdays and Sundays. These figures will vary seasonally with numbers expected to be reduced in winter months, whilst educational visits are likely to be undertaken in mini buses or coaches, which represents a sustainable form of transport.

2.4 The proposal will improve access to the countryside for disabled people as the attraction will provide for access to all buildings and dedicated toilet facilities (Policy REC9) and will result in the sympathetic and appropriate re-use of rural buildings which are structurally sound (Policy BE20). In terms of the impact on the wider landscape, the proposal will involve improvements to the maintenance of the large area of broadleaf woodland along the southern boundary within which it is intended to incorporate a nature walk, whilst further native tree and shrub planting would take place around the car park area to provide a natural screen (Policy NE12). Also, in recognition of the location of the site within a Local Landscape Improvement Area (Policy NE10), it is proposed to enhance the general appearance of the more open, northern part of the site with additional native tree planting.

3.0 Conclusion

3.1 The application proposal has been developed having regard to national planning guidance and the policies of the development plan. The general thrust of national planning guidance found in PPS 7; Sustainable Development in Rural Areas and the Government's Good Practice Guide to Tourism, is to support development which encourages rural tourism and leisure facilities for the benefits it can bring to the local economy. Policies of the development plan reflect these policies subject to site specific considerations such as the impact on the wider landscape, and other environmental and highway considerations.

3.2 The establishment of a farm park at Oak Farm for adults and children to visit as part of a leisure trip, or for schools and playgroups to visit and learn about farming methods and animal husbandry for educational purposes, will provide both social and economic benefits to the area. The proposal accords with national planning guidance and the policies of the development plan and permission should therefore be granted.