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Dear Tom Rea

Reference: 24/01002/FP

**Proposal: Change of use of existing three barns to office and storage space and the erection of supporting substation and concrete base. | Land At Church Wood Three Houses Lane
Codicote Hertfordshire**

Objection – potential loss and deterioration of ancient woodland

The Woodland Trust is the UK's largest woodland conservation charity and a leading voice in bringing to the attention of government, landowners and the general public the state of the UK's woods and trees. We own over 1,000 sites across the UK, covering over 30,000 hectares and we have over 500,000 members and supporters.

The Trust also campaigns with the support of local communities, to prevent any further destruction of ancient woods and veteran trees. We are an evidence-led organisation, using existing policy and our conservation and planning expertise to assess the impacts of development on ancient woodland and veteran trees. Planning responses submitted by the Trust are based on a review of the information provided as part of a planning application.

Woodland Trust Position

We would like to register a **holding objection** to this proposal due to deterioration, and potential loss of, Crouchgreen Wood (grid ref: TL 21292 20556) which we consider may be unmapped ancient woodland. The proposals may also give rise to indirect impacts on Church Wood (grid ref: TL 21377 20587) which may also constitute unmapped ancient woodland.

Both woods appear on the first edition county series maps published between 1843 and 1893 (Epoch 1). Whilst not present on Natural England's Ancient Woodland Inventory, the long-standing presence of these woodlands suggests that they are likely to be of historical and ecological importance and may be unmapped ancient woodland. The Preliminary Ecological Appraisal notes that these woodlands contain ancient woodland habitats, historic coppice, evidence of ancient and old-secondary woodland habitat, and associated indicator species.

Further mapping research and an ecological study of the site need to be carried out before any decision is made on this application. Natural England is currently undertaking a review of the Ancient Woodland Inventory and should be consulted for their opinion on the application, the antiquity of the woodland and the likely impact of the proposals.

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Ancient Woodland

Ancient woodland is an irreplaceable resource of great importance for its wildlife, soils, recreational and cultural value, historical and archaeological significance, and the contribution it makes to our diverse landscapes. It is a scarce and threatened resource, covering only 2.5% of England's land area, and has a high level of protection in planning policy.

Natural England and the Forestry Commission, the Government's respective bodies for the natural environment and woodlands, define ancient woodland as follows within their standing advice¹:-

"Ancient woodland takes hundreds of years to establish and is defined as an irreplaceable habitat. It is a valuable natural asset important for: wildlife (which include rare and threatened species); soils; carbon capture and storage; contributing to the seed bank and genetic diversity; recreation, health and wellbeing; cultural, historical and landscape value. It has been wooded continuously since at least 1600AD. It includes:-

- *Ancient semi-natural woodland [ASNW] - mainly made up of trees and shrubs native to the site, usually arising from natural regeneration.*
- *Plantations on ancient woodland sites [PAWS] - replanted with conifer or broadleaved trees that retain ancient woodland features, such as undisturbed soil, ground flora and fungi"*

In May 2022, the Government published an updated policy statement on ancient woodland, entitled 'Keepers of Time: ancient and native woodland and trees policy in England'². The Government's 'Keepers of Time' policy accentuates the importance of ancient woodland, stating: *"Ancient woodlands, ancient wood pastures and parkland and ancient and veteran trees are irreplaceable habitats which must be protected. Their long-standing presence, species and form serve as a rich cultural record of past management practices."*

As a result of its great age, ancient woodland is characterised by a unique, complex and irreplaceable ecosystem of plants and animals, both above ground and in the soils. It is therefore impossible to recreate the ecosystem of an ancient woodland by planting new woodland. This is widely recognised by experts and by Natural England and the Forestry Commission in their joint standing advice.

Planning Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework, paragraph 186, states: *"When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles:-*

c) development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons⁶⁷ and a suitable compensation strategy exists;"

Footnote 67 defines exceptional reasons as follows: *"For example, infrastructure projects (including nationally significant infrastructure projects, orders under the Transport and Works*

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-ancient-trees-and-veteran-trees-advice-for-making-planning-decisions>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england/keepers-of-time-ancient-and-native-woodland-and-trees-policy-in-england>

Act and hybrid bills), where the public benefit would clearly outweigh the loss or deterioration of habitat.”

There is no wholly exceptional reason for the development in this location and as such, until the status of the woodlands is determined, consideration of the application should be deferred on the grounds that it may not comply with national planning policy.

Impact on Ancient Woodland

This application is for change of use of the existing three barns to office and storage space, together with the installation of a supporting substation and concrete base.

The location proposed for the substation and concrete base may potentially be within unmapped ancient woodland, in which case this aspect of the development would be contrary to national planning policy. If the location is established as being adjacent to ancient woodland it would be necessary to assess and mitigate indirect impacts.

With regards to the change of use of the barns, Barn 1 may be situated partially within unmapped ancient woodland, and Barns 2 and 3 may be in close proximity to unmapped ancient woodland. There does not appear to be any information in the application documentation to clarify the current use of the barns or the nature of the proposed activities. As such it is not possible to assess potential impacts on unmapped ancient woodland that may arise from the change of use.

Natural England and Forestry Commission have identified impacts of development on ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees within their standing advice³ (please see the annex at the foot of this document for the full range of impacts outlined). This guidance should be considered the Government’s position with regards to development impacting ancient woodland.

We are specifically concerned about the following potential impacts:-

- Direct loss of ancient woodland to make way for the installation of the substation and concrete base.
- Encroachment on the root systems and rooting environments of trees within the ancient woodland adjacent to the site boundary from the close proximity of the substation infrastructure.
- Damage to ancient woodland soils, ground flora, fungi and understorey.
- Intensification of activity close to the woodland resulting in increased disturbance to breeding birds and other sensitive fauna.
- Reduction of semi-natural habitat near to the ancient woodland.
- Noise, light and dust pollution, with impacts arising during construction and operation.
- Potential for increased traffic emissions resulting in increased deposition of nitrogen and other pollutants which affect the condition of ancient woodland.
- Where the wood edge overhangs public areas, trees can become safety issues and be indiscriminately lopped/felled. This can result in a reduction of the woodland canopy, threatening the long-term condition of the woodland. It can also result in a greater need for management of important habitat features in the woodland such as deadwood, which reduces the ecological integrity of the site.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-ancient-trees-and-veteran-trees-advice-for-making-planning-decisions>

- Adverse hydrological impacts occurring where the introduction of hardstanding areas and water run-offs affect the quality and quantity of surface and ground water. This can result in the introduction of harmful pollutants into the woodland, affecting the hydrological condition of the woodland and triggering change to soil characteristics and floral composition.

Ancient woodland soils are highly important environments that have evolved over hundreds of years. They support complex relationships between species above and below ground and are sensitive to disturbance. Development within the boundary of an ancient woodland will have a detrimental impact on these soil communities. When land use is further intensified, woodland plant and animal populations are exposed to environmental impacts from the outside of a woodland as detailed above. In particular, the habitats become more vulnerable to the outside influences, or edge effects, that result from the adjacent land's change of use. These can impact cumulatively on ancient woodland - this is much more damaging than individual effects.

It is important to note that poor ecological condition of an ancient woodland is not a justification for allowing further intensification of development. Natural England and Forestry Commission's standing advice is clear that woodland condition should not be factored into the planning balance. This states: *"Where a proposal involves the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland or ancient or veteran trees you should not take account of the existing condition of the ancient woodland or ancient or veteran tree when you assess the merits of the development proposal. Its existing condition is not a reason to give permission for development. A woodland or tree in poor condition can be improved with good management."*

Mitigation

Detrimental edge effects have been shown to penetrate woodland causing changes in ancient woodland characteristics that extend up to three times the canopy height in from the forest edges. As such, it is necessary for mitigation to be considered to alleviate such impacts. Natural England and the Forestry Commission's standing advice⁴ contains guidance on mitigation measures to alleviate impacts on ancient woods and trees (annexed to this letter).

It is not possible to mitigate impacts in relation to the siting of the substation if this is proposed to be located within unmapped ancient woodland. We advise that this element of the development would need to be removed from this location and sited outside and away from any ancient woodland area.

With regards to the change of use of the barns, the applicant should ensure that the proposals will not result in any detrimental impact on surrounding ancient woodland in line with paragraph 186 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Natural England and Forestry Commission's standing advice.

We are concerned that an arboricultural survey/impact assessment has not been completed to accompany this application. The assessment should consider potential direct and indirect impacts of the proposals on the woodland in addition to identifying any ancient or veteran trees which could be impacted by the development.

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-ancient-trees-and-veteran-trees-advice-for-making-planning-decisions>

Conclusion

Ancient woodland is an irreplaceable habitat; once lost it is gone forever. As such, it should be protected from any form of development that will result in its loss or deterioration.

The Trust **objects** to this proposal on account of potential direct loss, and deterioration, of unmapped ancient woodland. There is no wholly exceptional reason for the development in this location and as such, until the status of the woodlands are determined, consideration of the application should be deferred on the grounds that it may not comply with national planning policy.

We hope you find these comments helpful - if you would like to discuss any of the points raised, please contact us at planningcasework@woodlandtrust.org.uk

Kind regards

Cathy Johannesen
Programme Officer - Woods Under Threat team

Annex

Natural England and Forestry Commission's standing advice:-

Ancient woodland, ancient trees and veteran trees: advice for making planning decisions

Direct and indirect effects of development:-

Development, including construction and operational activities can affect ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees, and the wildlife they support on the site or nearby.

Direct effects of development can cause the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees by:-

- *damaging or destroying all or part of them (including their soils, ground flora or fungi)*
- *damaging roots and understorey (all the vegetation under the taller trees)*
- *damaging or compacting soil*
- *damaging functional habitat connections, such as open habitats between the trees in wood pasture and parkland*
- *increasing levels of air and light pollution, noise and vibration*
- *changing the water table or drainage*
- *damaging archaeological features or heritage assets*
- *changing the woodland ecosystem by removing the woodland edge or thinning trees - causing greater wind damage and soil loss*

Indirect effects of development can also cause the loss or deterioration of ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees by:-

- *breaking up or destroying working connections between woodlands, or ancient trees or veteran trees - affecting protected species, such as bats or wood-decay insects*
- *reducing the amount of semi-natural habitats next to ancient woodland that provide important dispersal and feeding habitat for woodland species*
- *reducing the resilience of the woodland or trees and making them more vulnerable to change*
- *increasing the amount of dust, light, water, air and soil pollution*
- *increasing disturbance to wildlife, such as noise from additional people and traffic*
- *increasing damage to habitat, for example trampling of plants and erosion of soil by people accessing the woodland or tree root protection areas*
- *increasing damaging activities like fly-tipping and the impact of domestic pets*
- *increasing the risk of damage to people and property by falling branches or trees requiring tree management that could cause habitat deterioration*
- *changing the landscape character of the area*

Mitigation measures

Mitigation measures will depend on the type of development. They could include:-

- *putting up screening barriers to protect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees from dust and pollution*
- *measures to reduce noise or light*
- *designing open space to protect ancient or veteran trees*
- *rerouting footpaths and managing vegetation to deflect trampling pressure away from sensitive locations*
- *creating buffer zones*

Use of buffer zones

Buffer zones can protect ancient woodland and individual ancient and veteran trees and provide valuable habitat for woodland wildlife, such as feeding bats and birds. The size and type of buffer zone should vary depending on the:-

- scale and type of development and its effect on ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees*
- character of the surrounding area*

For example, larger buffer zones are more likely to be needed if the surrounding area is:-

- less densely wooded*
- close to residential areas*
- steeply sloped*

Buffer zone recommendations

Where possible, a buffer zone should:-

- contribute to wider ecological networks*
- be part of the green infrastructure of the area*

A buffer zone should consist of semi-natural habitats such as:-

- woodland*
- a mix of scrub, grassland, heathland and wetland*

The proposal should include creating or establishing habitat with local and appropriate native species in the buffer zone.

You should consider if access is appropriate. You can allow access to buffer zones if the habitat is not harmed by trampling.

You should not approve development proposals, including gardens, within a buffer zone.

You should only approve sustainable drainage schemes if:-

- they do not affect root protection areas*
- any change to the water table does not negatively affect ancient woodland or ancient and veteran trees*