

ST AGNES SHOP: STAFF ACCOMMODATION

Supporting Statement

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PLANNING DEPARTMENT

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INTRODUCTION:

The present-day shop and Post Office on St Agnes has been in existence for nearly 60 years. It was built in the 1950s by island resident Don Hicks, my great uncle.

Over the years the business has expanded considerably to meet the growing needs of the local community and the increasing number of visitors both staying on the island and coming for the day.

The existing lessees are Doug and Jackie Page, parents of my wife Niki. They live next door to the shop at *Langarth*. Doug still does a lot of the paperwork and Jackie works regularly behind the counter. However, since 2011 Niki and I have taken on much more of the day-to-day workload.

Later this year the shop lease is up for renewal when the Pages will be taking the opportunity to retire from the business. The lease is due to be handed over then to Niki and I, but Doug and Jackie will remain next door at *Langarth*.

Once we take on overall responsibility for running this thriving but very time-consuming island business then accommodation adjacent to the shop premises becomes a necessity, if the operation is to be run effectively and efficiently and for the maximum benefit of customers.

DESIGN:

The proposed design of the new property is sympathetic to dwellings in the vicinity both in size and use of materials. It is fully in keeping with the principles of the Council's Design Guide. Its design and layout closely resemble other recent examples of residential property built for the Duchy on Scilly and which have received approval from the Local Authority. It will actually serve to complement the modest number of existing buildings in Middle Town.

The selected location for the property is just behind the shop adjoining Barnaby Lane. It is close to two existing dwellings: *Langarth* and *Avenue House*. It is sheltered from both sight and weather by existing hedges, which are being retained, so it will not overlook either of the other two dwellings and in practice will actually seem quite isolated from them. In fact, Niki and I anticipate the property will very quickly become recognised as a crucial part of the fabric of St Agnes and the community's comparatively modest but vital housing stock.

Today it is fair to say that St Agnes offers a picture of a thriving off-island community. Its population is younger than the Scillonian average. This is to some extent reflected in numbers attending the island's primary school base: less than 10 years ago there were just two; today there are 11.

A new property will mean, the Duchy has confirmed, the release of *Smuggler's Cottage* where we currently live, back into the local housing pool, so benefitting either couples or young families on St Agnes looking to improve their living arrangements.

The proposed new dwelling is to be located on *Westward Farm* land. This farm has been in my family for generations. I am, together with my younger brother Aiden, setting out to diversify *Westward's* output which currently focuses on eggs, soap and honey by introducing a wide range of meat and vegetable products. These will all be sold through the shop. This is something that will not

only serve to reduce the business's carbon footprint and food miles, it will also be in line with the expectations of today's visitors to the island.

COMMUNITY:

The shop and Post Office on St Agnes is situated virtually in the centre of St Agnes. The shop acts as the information hub for the island with notice boards inside and outside the premises where, for instance, all the activities on offer from the Council as well as any job vacancies are advertised.

In so doing it provides effective local access to the range of community services available across Scilly, thus playing a key role in helping to reduce individual feelings of social isolation that can exist in the country's most south westerly community .

By the same token the shop operates at the core of the community in more basic respects, with many residents relying solely on it to supply their grocery needs. Over recent years the range of goods has expanded to meet growing and increasingly fastidious demands.

The Post Office element of the shop's activity is far from being in decline. A number of local businesses on St Agnes mail out large volumes of their produce on a daily basis. In fact the postal service remains essential for businesses as well as individual householders on the island. A number of islanders, particularly the elderly, are also becoming increasingly reliant on the banking services the shop now offers.

Altogether it is arguably more important than it has ever been for staff managing this establishment to be on site so the business can run as smoothly and efficiently as possible. Lately during the season it has employed four or more part-time members of staff behind the counter. This in turn has enabled the Pages and to some extent Ross and Niki to focus on the financial aspects of the business away from the shop itself at *Langarth* next door.

However, once the current lease expires, with Doug and Jackie still living at *Langarth* but no longer involved in the business, then that property will cease to provide the office space it presently offers. Accommodation proposed in the field behind the shop has been designed to include essential office space which will allow Niki and I as managers to be immediately available as required by other staff on duty, while we ourselves are stock ordering or engaged in other office work behind the scenes.

We are fortunate that the field in which we are proposing to build belongs to *Westward Farm*, which is currently worked by my father. Being on the farm just behind the shop, it is our firm plan to utilise farm land in the immediate vicinity of both house and shop to grow high quality produce for sale in the shop.

In effect this development will trigger the integration of farm and shop businesses, thus boosting the sustainability of both: by facilitating agricultural diversification on the one hand and by freshening product choice on the other. By increasing the amount of produce we grow ourselves, we will be reducing freight to the islands, thereby reducing the cost to the customer and vastly reducing wastage.

TOURISM:

The shop is essential in supporting sustainable rural tourism. Feedback from visitors shows that visits to the shop are part of the charm and appeal of their St Agnes holiday. From their arrival to

departure we aim to deliver a high quality, friendly and efficient service. The shop not only provides all the grocery needs for visitors but also sells locally produced gifts.

By seeking to integrate the farm and shop businesses from the convenient vantage point of our proposed new accommodation, we will be ideally placed to offer a wider range of locally grown seasonal produce which will enhance the visitor experience of St Agnes. At present demand far exceeds supply for quality local fruit and vegetables.

St Agnes benefits from consistently high numbers of returning holiday-makers. This remote community has developed a number of innovative micro-business strands to add to its visitor offering. But without the island shop at the centre of the community and in a position to grow its influence rather than see it slacken, St Agnes would be a far less viable and attractive tourist destination than it is currently.

LOCAL SUPPORT:

From the outset we as applicants have sought the advice of the Council's planning department and responded accordingly to queries and suggestions.

The Duchy has been consulted right from the start of the process and been extremely supportive, not least of the need for staff that run the business to have accommodation adjacent to the shop so it can be run as effectively and efficiently as possible.

There is no suggestion that the proposed way forward in terms of providing appropriate staff and office accommodation behind the shop for those charged with managing both it and the Post Office operation is anything other than in complete accordance with 'A 20:20 Vision: the Council's present Local Plan.

Niki and I have discussed our intentions widely within the St Agnes community and outlined them to both local Councillors. Support in principle and in practice has been unanimous.

For staff to manage this vital island business effectively and efficiently, being able to live on the farm next to the shop is universally recognised as being the best possible option in terms of everyone's best interests.

