

Planning application Ref APP/15/00805 - Supporting statement

LiveLink is a growing company, seeking to increase employment in the area - especially among the younger end of the employable population and technical apprentices, who make up the majority of our team. We have taken over a site which has lain disused for over two years and have been investing a considerable amount of money to restore the building and its grounds to its former award-winning glory. East Street has been blighted by business after business closing down over recent years, and LiveLink is grateful for the encouragement and constructive support it has received as it regenerates the site and endeavours to provide growth and jobs for the benefit of local people, and the town in general. Indeed, the majority of local residents and Billy Trail users have been delighted that a building which was empty for two years and on track to be demolished so that the maximum number of flats could be squeezed onto the site has, instead, become home to a growing UK exporter - and one which has gone out of its way to work with and support other organisations in the town.

We are highly supportive of the local ecology and you will not be surprised to learn that its environs were one of the factors that appealed to us. However, it unfortunately appears that maintenance of the grounds had not been carried out effectively for many years, especially whilst empty. Some companies might have tried hard to avoid the paperwork regarding work to trees on their land, but we have been trying to do the right thing by the system and our neighbours.

So here are some of the key facts underpinning this reluctant planning application:

1. There were 4 reasons given for the removal of the two trees closest to our building out of the dozens and dozens of trees on our site. To provide more light for the solar panels, whilst still a valid and contributory factor, was the most minor of the reasons. If there had been no other factors we could, of course, have just asked for planning permission to reduce the height of the trees or to remove the crown and so on.
2. In particular, the site needs to comply with the growing quantity of disability legislation and tide of 'Health and Safety' paperwork which LiveLink are obliged to submit to by law. The root structures of both trees have created very uneven ground which has led to a trip hazard and would be virtually impossible for a person in a wheelchair to navigate, especially when agitated and/or distracted because of the intensity of an emergency situation.
3. The two trees are very close to the building, the huge Horse Chestnut being just 2.8 metres (9 feet) away and there are serious long term safety concerns. In fact, we are advised that modern building regs would NOT allow this with the foundations put in place in 1987-8. According to the NHBC buildings in this part of the UK are defined as being within in the "*greatest risk area*" from trees (Appendix D of their official standards chapter 4.2). They go on to state that a Horse Chestnut's mature height is 20m, and the Sycamore's is 22m, with both classed as having a moderate water demand. We are advised that the geology of this area means that the underlying soil is Reading and London Clay with a relatively high plasticity and that these factors combined mean that the foundations should to be a minimum of 1.8 metres deep and ideally as much as 2.2 metres deep. According to the building plans and the latest guidance therefore, the foundations are nowhere near deep enough for trees this close... and we were recently warned this could leave us without insurance for structural damage.
4. The close proximity of the Sycamore to the building prevents us from providing the vehicular disabled access to the south side of the building and grounds which we are working towards constructing in a subsequent phase (and as agreed with the council as part of the property purchase and contract).

5. Furthermore, initial landscaping improvements have recently discovered that the 100 amp power cable to supply the lights and ticket machine in the car parking areas is entangled in the Sycamore roots almost directly under the main trunk. This not only creates a potential life-threatening hazard but also proves that there never was any intention for the Sycamore to grow in this position so close to the building.
6. Not previously mentioned but still a factor of consideration to the local community, the Horse Chestnut also prevents us expanding employment opportunities on the site by adding a data centre inside the current floor plan, as it blocks access for emergency generators and server cooling.
7. A number of local residents and neighbours have been actively requesting that we 'take action' on the site's trees as they have been largely neglected for years as the council wound down operations on the site.



8. In the second clause of our planning application, LiveLink has had to ask permission to fell a few ash and sycamore trees in the car parking areas. This was not of our choosing but was required because the council needed to move the car park lights and place many of them very close to the trees. LiveLink has been subsequently informed that the regulations now require us to provide a 2 metre clearance zone around and above each of these new lights in the interests of public safety and security.
9. Some of the trees have been allowed to become very spindly and hang dangerously over the parking areas and local residences. In fact, by pure coincidence yesterday (but making the point quite frighteningly - see photo) a large branch seems to have snapped off purely under its own weight onto and across the Billy Line right of way. We hate to think what would have happened if someone walking their dog or cycling the Billy Trail had been under it at the time.
10. It is, of course, natural and normal for trees to be added and removed over time - the council felled three large trees prior to moving out and without consultation or complaint from anyone to our knowledge. LiveLink is proposing to spend a significant sum of money replacing the Horse Chestnut and Sycamore not with seedlings but with the most 'mature' replacements likely to survive transplantation and achieve full stature most rapidly. We are liaising with a highly respected supplier regarding native species which have been specifically selected for their suitability and biodiversity for the area. Indeed, we are proposing to replace these two trees with at least 3 or 4 new native trees with possibilities including: Alder, Rowan Silver Birch and Hazel. So there will actually be an overall increase, not reduction, in both in trees and species... which we propose should be placed in some of the more open areas surrounding the Billy Trail, thus enhancing this wildlife corridor.