

Plot 4, Porthmellon Industrial Estate, is a substantial (by local standards), detached warehouse unit, located at the Eastern end of the Porthmellon Industrial Estate. The building is arranged in five principal bays, with an additional office/laundry facility positioned on the South West corner, in front of Bay 1.

The building is sub-divided and occupied on the following basis:

Bay One:	Occupied by Sibleys Fuel & Marine Services, largely redundant and under-utilised, for general storage.
Bay Two:	Occupied by Her Majesty's Coastguard and used as an Emergency Response Centre.
Bay 3:	Occupied by Her Majesty's Coastguard and used as an Emergency Response Centre.
Bay 4:	Let to KOR Electrical as an office / workshop /store.
Bay 5:	Recently refurbished, and occupied by Sibleys for vehicle & general storage, office and workshop use.
Office/Store/Laundry:	Occupied by Sibleys, and used as a management office, linen store, ironing facility, etc.

With the exception of the rear section of Bay 1, the entire building has recently been upgraded, including the installation of new automatic sectional doors, roof repairs & renewals, improved thermal & sound insulation, internal partitioning, installation of kitchens and wc's, improved services (including full re-wiring, fire alarm systems, etc) and disabled access.

Background to the Application

Sibleys is a small family-run business, operated by Ian & Gail Sibley, providing a range of services on the islands, including:

- general fuel merchants, supplying petrol, diesel, bulk oils & bottled gas, as well as fuels to visiting yachts and local boats.

- marketing and sale of residential & commercial property.
- management of a range of self-catering properties.
- cleaning and property maintenance.
- provision of laundry and ironing services to our management clients, commercial businesses on the islands (including major hotels) and private individuals.

These business activities are labour intensive, and rely heavily on good, reliable staff to enable us to provide the high-quality service our visitors, and indeed local customers, deserve.

In addition to the partners, we currently employ 10 staff on a variety of different contracts. Most of these are permanent roles.

We endeavour to employ local staff wherever possible, who are already adequately housed. However, as our range of services has increased, we have not always been able to satisfy our staff requirements through the local market.

To recruit and retain quality, reliable personnel, we need to offer them secure, adequate accommodation. It is a well-known “secret” that many staff on the islands are put up in sub-standard accommodation, such as converted garages and garden sheds. In common with most others, we understand why this happens but do not consider it to be an acceptable situation.

We believe there is a direct relationship between the quality of staff accommodation provided, and the quality of work those staff members produce. If you are fair to your staff, they will repay that in commitment, reliability and standard of work.

Sourcing quality accommodation is increasingly difficult, and whilst in the past we have been fortunate enough to offer accommodation at Holy Vale, this will no longer be available going forward. It is owned by a wholly separate legal entity, which has decided to sell the holding piecemeal. We have no control over this decision. We predicted the potential loss of this accommodation last year - hence our attempt to “future proof” the business by taking control of the accommodation problem by submitting a planning application for two staff flats at Porthmellon. That planning application was turned down by officers, without going to committee, and as a direct result of that refusal we have been unable to offer housing and secure the staff we need.

For the record the accommodation above our Porthcressa filling station is let long term to the Five Islands School, housing teaching staff. Even if we had access to this accommodation, would it really be desirable to evict such important key workers? As it is, we receive frequent calls from the Council’s housing department looking for accommodation – emphasising the lack of available accommodation on the island.

We do not have access to any other accommodation options.

This year we have lost key staff directly as result of inadequate affordable housing, and have been unable to secure permanent, quality replacements. Other existing staff, on whom we rely heavily, are in insecure accommodation and could be forced to leave the islands at short notice.

As a result of not being able to offer accommodation during 2019:

1. We have been unable to recruit suitable staff, which has adversely affected the quality of service we can offer.
2. We have had to turn away new property management contracts (because we cannot guarantee a satisfactory level of service).
3. We have therefore been unable to grow the business despite opportunities arising.
4. At times we have barely been able to fulfill our current commitments, and have struggled through the season relying on the goodwill and overtime of existing loyal staff. This is unsustainable.
5. Operating on the current basis is unsustainable. Without being able to provide secure, self-contained staff accommodation we have no confidence we will be able to recruit and retain staff and will have to restrict the range of services we offer in 2020 and beyond.

On the laundry side of our business alone, we support in excess of 50 other self-catering, guest house and hotel businesses, in addition to offering services to locals, visitors and seasonal workers alike.

This does not take into account the pivotal role we play in providing fuel services to the islands.

(i) We were instrumental in keeping the power station running during the 2017 severing of the undersea cable.

(ii) During the disrupted winter sailings when the Mali Rose was in service it was our forward planning that kept the hospital, Park House, airport, Fire Brigade and inter-island launch fuelled.

(iii) We provide a lifeline to the off-islands, including Tresco Estate.

(iv) We keep the inter-island boats running year round.

(v) We fuel a large number of domestic homes, hotels, guest houses and other businesses.

We are not over-dramatising by saying that, if our business were to fail, the repercussions throughout the islands would be substantial. This is not a problem just facing Sibleys – we would argue that the inability to recruit and retain quality staff is the biggest challenge facing businesses on the islands. It is worse in 2019 than ever before. Brexit seems to be exacerbating the problem, reducing the number of European workers available. The problem seems unlikely to improve in 2020 and beyond.

Our Proposal

Our proposal for the creation of two-bedroom staff accommodation will:

- increase the supply of modern, purpose-built staff accommodation on Scilly
- erode the need for sub-standard accommodation
- support the local economy by supporting local business
- assist in the creation of a sustainable community
- allow us to recruit and retain quality staff
- support the businesses operating from the remainder of Plot 4 Porthmellon
- avoid the need for “green field” development to provide much needed staff units

At 68 sq m overall floor area, spread over ground and first floor, the proposed accommodation is compliant with the minimum required by the Technical Housing Standards: Nationally Described Space Standards. We have sized this accommodation to provide quality living space, whilst minimizing the loss of commercial floorspace. In accordance with Policy 3 (b) of the new Draft Local Plan, we suggest that the proposed accommodation is “appropriate to the functional and operational needs of the business”.

Loss of Commercial Floor Space

Bay One at Plot 4, Porthmellon Industrial Estate (where the accommodation will be created, subject to consent), is located to the rear of the warehouse, behind our existing management office / laundry). It is currently unused (other than rough storage), with no vehicular access, no external service doors and limited headroom to the rear. It currently has no lighting or socket outlets and is of little commercial use.

The property in its entirety extends to approximately 350 sq m. The ground floor area required for the two staff units extends to approximately 44 sqm – just 13% of the total floor area, and comprising the least useful of the available accommodation. It has sat empty for many years, and has contributed nothing at all to the economic well-being of the islands.

The proposed scheme is very modest, reducing the overall commercial space by just 13%. We would respectfully suggest that the change of use to residential, in support of the commercial activities in the remainder of the building, is a far better use of this small area of warehouse.

We understand members’ concerns over loss of commercial floorspace, and make the following observations:

- following discussions with the planning authority, we have further reduced the ground floor area required, compared with our previous applications. This has been achieved by (i) altering the scheme from two one-bedroom units to two staff bedrooms sharing a kitchen / lounge, and (ii) incorporating a first-floor bedroom under the apex of the roof, the small section of the property where the ridge height permits two internal floors.

- We feel the proposal for two-bedroom staff accommodation is therefore practical, suitable and proportionate.
- Of course it is essential to maintain commercial accommodation. But equally it is important to be able to recruit the staff necessary to work in the businesses that operate from that accommodation. Without access to these new staff units, we will not be able to run our business properly, and the commercial floorspace may well lay idle.
- The new draft Local Plan identifies challenges facing the islands. On the topic of housing it states *“Building sufficient decent affordable homes for the community is the single biggest challenge. To ensure the long-term sustainability of the islands, more homes are required, to overcome the acute shortages of affordable accommodation. These are necessary to meet the housing needs of the community, which currently exist due to the marked disparity between house prices and rents, given the low average incomes and the high proportion of second and holiday accommodation. The challenge is to build a sufficient amount of decent affordable homes to address this shortage, in the context of exorbitant building costs compared to the mainland UK, within an exceptional environment with limited land and significant infrastructural constraints”*.
- We are encouraged that both the new Draft Local Plan, and the Islands Partnership’s Destination Management Plan, acknowledge the need for quality, secure staff accommodation, and feel our proposal directly supports these policies. In particular, Policy 3 (b) suggests that the provision of staff accommodation should be sited on or near the premises, where possible.
- Whilst we note in the new Draft Local Plan the option to zone Porthmellon as an Employment Area, we feel this needs to be considered in the light of the true nature of businesses on Scilly. Many operate very successfully from farm sheds, residential properties, and peripheral locations such as Porthloo. We question whether it is really helpful to be too prescriptive about zoning areas, when business, employment and staff issues are so inter-related?
- On this point, the new Draft Local Plan acknowledges that business can thrive in non-estate locations, such as former agricultural buildings. It states *“To support growth and expansion of the rural economy, existing buildings that are suitable for conversion should be used for small-scale business uses, to help sustain the rural economy without creating the need for new buildings in the countryside. Employment uses will often require only minor alterations to the structure or exterior of the building, thereby maintaining a traditional appearance in the rural scene; and, in the case of buildings of historic or architectural merit, their original character”*.

Residential amenity

The site enjoys a pleasant rear outlook over farmland, and it is our intention to ensure that the occupants of the proposed units enjoy a private and pleasant outside space. We propose the erection of a close boarded fence along the southern boundary of the property, with gated access from the front pavement.

We envisage only adult occupants, who will be employed by Sibleys, in property management and / or fuel distribution. We are happy to have occupancy restrictions to this effect.

There is already the precedent of residential occupation within the Industrial Estate, as well as the introduction some while ago of a commercial laundry within the residential area at Pilots retreat. This was approved by the Local Planning Authority and deemed an acceptable and compatible use.

In addition, the Gleaner House development at Porthcressa introduced new residential accommodation to what is primarily a commercial area, close to a filling station, commercial kitchen & launderette, and directly above offices, a barber's shop and a bakery. These developments show that residential & industrial uses can sit well together, if properly planned and detailed.

We feel confident that the addition of fencing & high-quality sound insulation on this scheme, will mean that other nearby commercial users can carry on their business without any adverse effects.

A refuse & recycling bin enclosure will be provided adjacent to the access-way.

The units will be fully sound & thermally insulated and constructed to a high standard.

Under the previous planning application for staff units on this site, the Environmental Health Officer inspected and concluded that the accommodation was suitable and appropriate.

Sustainability & Longevity

The new Draft Local Plan encourages the re-use of buildings, stating *"The re-use of previously developed land and buildings is a sustainable way of reducing the need to construct new buildings, and reduces the depletion of greenfield land"*.

We have commissioned a Flood Risk Assessment that has concluded the site is suitable for residential development.

The proposed scheme will incorporate solar thermal panels for water heating, and rainwater harvesting & recycling.

Access

There will be only pedestrian access to the units, which will be through a gate at the front of the property.

Summary

We thank members for considering our application, and very much hope members they will feel able to support this modest application for staff accommodation, and ask for it to be considered in the wider context of the economic and social well-being of the islands. Securing this accommodation is critical for us to continue to provide an efficient and customer-focused service to the local and tourist communities.