

Case Study: DriveMe experience centre wins planning approval on appeal



*The proposed eco-friendly Stafford Activity Centre
(courtesy of architects, White Design Associates)*

“The decision [on appeal] vindicates the faith we have had in our advisors ... allowing us to develop the centre as a leading driver experience and training centre destination, operated sensitively, with the community and environment at the forefront of our minds.”

Allan Davies, Director Driveme.net

When, in 2004, Driveme.net, the driving experience and training centre arm of TreatMe.net, started operations at the site of a former RAF airfield near the M6 at Stafford, they very soon realised that there was going to be a future capacity problem.

So, in 2006, the company appointed Planning consultants who brought on board a highways engineer, an ecologist, landscape architects and, with our track record of appropriate expertise, AAD. Development plans included a Welcome Centre, a car park and a series of challenging tracks radiating out from the Centre (see below).



Plan showing hub (left) and circuits radiating outwards from it

During 2007, DriveMe held a public consultation meeting at Sieghford village to inform local residents, many of whom hadn't even realised that the company had been operating from the site for over three years. Although there were no complaints from Sieghford, there were many from a village further away, Ranton, whose residents, led by a retired solicitor, organised themselves to get the planning application refused. They were concerned about what the development might lead to; there were even

headlines in the local press: “Brands Hatch Coming to Stafford”! At another meeting in Great Bridgeford – a village even further away – 100 people from the three villages combined turned up to protest against the development proposal.

After the consultation, DriveMe submitted an application that was rejected on four grounds; whilst the core driving activity was not an issue, the size of the hub building and the workshop were seen to be excessive, and use of the Welcome Centre for weddings and other functions were also failure points. So, all those objections were dealt with: the workshop was abandoned; there was a unilateral undertaking not to hold weddings or similar functions; they were very specific about what the venue would be used for; in particular, driving and corporate driving events and vehicle manufacturers’ launches. This revised proposal was taken back to the planners, with a subsequent recommendation for approval.

And then it went to the planning committee. After a visit to the airfield on an event day, and to the three local villages to witness any effects for themselves, the nine council members rejected the plan, voting five to four against. However, one member thought it should go to full council. This was seconded and so the committee agreed that the decision should indeed be taken by the full council. “The council also served an enforcement notice on us,” explained Allan Davies, Director of DriveMe. “As DriveMe’s turnover was around £1m per annum, a lot was now at stake.”



So DriveMe and the development team regrouped and in 2009 hired a barrister; a decision was swiftly made to appeal on grounds of non-determination.

A team meeting was held in March 2009 and 15 professionals, including AAD, spent six months gathering data for the appeal. “AAD’s Director, Tony Holdich, worked for us at the beginning of the project and did a considerable amount of noise testing on the cars,” explained Davies. “That data was used to construct and calibrate a noise propagation model of the proposals. When the modelling got more intense, John Sim, an AAD Associate, stepped up his workload by creating a whole series of noise models and, of course, expert testimony.”

All the professionals attended the appeal. “John Sim did an absolutely fantastic job for us when he was giving evidence,” Davies enthuses. “During the hearing, the council had a barrister and the parish councils also hired their own barrister. John did a first-class job as expert witness!”

The outcome was a double hit. The enforcement notice was lifted and planning permission was granted; Driveme.net got all they wanted with five-days a week usage, including weekends and bank holidays. Justin Paul, Director of Planning Consultants J10, remarked: “This decision is fantastic news and follows over three years of hard work by the team that culminated in a six-day public inquiry. This exciting £9m project can now be realised, allowing the transformation and regeneration of this airfield site. It involved us co-ordinating a team of leading architects, landscape, design, acoustic and highway engineering specialists (amongst others, including counsel); undertaking community engagement and submitting the EIA compliant application.” Regarding AAD’s input and involvement, he said: “I had to build a team of experts, and as far as the noise levels were concerned, I was looking for an outfit that had hard-core experience in the motor industry and AAD are, I believe, one of the few in the UK that do.”