Hearing Statement

Matter 7 · Issue 1 · Question 7.7
Representation number: PS25-99
Local Plan reference: Absence of a Rural Employment Area designation for Pondside Nursery and Yard (pink-line boundary).
Policy context: Employment designations fall within the Centres and Economy Policies (DM4).The omission is unsound and therefore the plan is not justified.

Pondside Nursery and Yard at Chatham Green comprises several palisade-fenced yards with hardstanding, open outdoor storage and good access to the A131. The site has space for additional yards, for which I have consistently found demand. Designating it as a Rural Employment Area would safeguard existing businesses and facilitate expansion, helping to support a prosperous rural economy.

We prepared a Statement of Common Ground with the Council. Under point 2, 'Common Ground', on page 1 of SOCG048, all parties agree that Pondside Nursery and Yard received a green RAG rating in the 2026 SHELAA and that site 18SLAA3 achieved the highest overall score (98) of all sites assessed for a proposed employment use. This agreement is a material consideration in determining whether the site should be designated as a Rural Employment Area.

In addition to the Statement of Common Ground, we asked the Council 21 questions about the Defined Settlement Boundary at Chatham Green. Question 21 concerns the designation of Pondside Nursery and Yard as a Rural Employment Area and is reproduced below, alongside the Council's answer and our response.

21	Do you agree that the employment/industrial site Pondside Nursery and Yard could be made a rural employment area by having a pink line put around it, the same as Whitbreads Business Centre, thereby safeguarding the employment uses and enabling the site to expand modestly.	Should the Council wish to allocate more rural employment floorspace, it would have to carry out a rural employment area review and assess each potential site against specific selection criteria. Sites to be included are established, consolidated and authorised rural employment areas, generally consisting of more than one building and several individual businesses. See also page 6 of (EB 079A) Rural Employment Areas Evidence Base Technical Note January 2018.	The Council has already assessed sites proposed for residential and employment use through the 2026 SHELAA. SOCG048 records agreement that Pondside Nursery and Yard received a green RAG rating and that 18SLAA3 achieved the highest overall score (98) of all sites assessed for a proposed employment use. Given that evidence, the site has a strong basis for designation as a Rural Employment Area and the Council should provide clear reasons if it considers further assessment necessary.

Conclusion

- Pondside Nursery and Yard is an established employment site.
- It meets the criteria for designation as a Rural Employment Area.
- The Policies Map should identify the site with a pink-line boundary.
- Its exclusion is inconsistent with policy DM4 and the evidence base.

Pondside Nursery and Yard at Chatham Green should therefore be designated as a Rural Employment Area.