10th February 2016

Planning Department

Warwick District Council
Riverside House
Milverton Hill
Leamington Spa
CV32 5HZ

Dear Sir/Madam

**Re: RDA National Training Centre, Lowlands Equestrian Centre, Shrewley**

1. **Introduction**

1.1 This is the letter referred to in the Design and Access Statement and Planning statement submitted by RDA as part of the application for a National Training centre at Lowlands Equestrian Centre, Shrewley

1.2 In addition to the papers and plans lodged with our application to create a National Training Centre for RDA at Lowlands Equestrian Centre in Shrewley I am writing to provide some context of the vital importance of this project for RDA and, more importantly, for the 28,000 disabled children and adults that we support across the UK. With this project we have the opportunity to greatly improve our service provision across the whole of the UK and, by doing so, to enable more disabled people to get active and benefit through working with horses.

1.3 RDA is a national charity providing opportunities for therapeutic intervention and achievement for disabled children and adults. The charity works through 500 centres across the UK, supported by more than 19,000 volunteers. The organisation is almost entirely funded through voluntary donations and, as such the charity is keen to plan for the future in a way that meets the needs of its users as efficiently as possible.

1. **Why does RDA need a National Training Centre**

2.1 RDA is very proud of its world class record in training volunteer instructors and coaches. This is of paramount importance in terms of both supporting riders’ progression and ensuring the safety of our participants and volunteers. The proposed centre will enable RDA to train more volunteers as instructors, who in turn will pass on their knowledge to their groups and fellow volunteers. Without these properly trained volunteers RDA cannot function.

2.2 In addition, we will be providing training to people setting up new RDA groups, informing them of the activities they can engage with and ensuring they offer the activity both safely and to a high standard.

2.3 The proposed centre will also enable RDA to increase the amount of activity (ie. the number of rides) undertaken by our participants across the UK, in line with the government’s stated policy of sport and physical activity. This is of particular importance given that disabled people are 30% more likely to be physically inactive than non-disabled people. We also plan to increase the number of rides at Lowlands through the 4 member groups who already operate from the premises and have done so for many years.

1. **Why it is imperative to site RDA’s National office at the National Training Centre**

3.1 Currently RDA’s National Office is based on a business park in Warwick, offering a traditional style of administrative centre for 25 people. From this office, RDA UK co-ordinate activity (and training in particular) for volunteers and disabled riders across the UK. The office, although relatively modern and professional, is not suitable or adequate for RDA’s needs and therefore the organisation is keen to re-locate this office to Lowlands Equestrian Centre, as part of the development of a National Training Centre with improved facilities for its users. The principle reasons being:

3.2 Approximately 75% of the staff at the Warwick office work with, and directly support, one or more key groups of volunteers across RDA – with a clear function. Each of these staff members is inextricably linked to this set of volunteers and is organising support meetings and training for the people (both disabled and non-disabled) who work in their area. These areas include therapy, education programmes, volunteer development and support, coaching, equine welfare, governance, fundraising and communications – in addition we work with teams supporting specific equine disciplines such as show jumping or carriage driving.

3.3 The provision and organisation of training is the key function of RDA UK and this training is currently delivered in numerous sites which is operationally very inefficient for the RDA and considerably adds to the cost of providing training. The office in Warwick is excluded from this list, mainly as it has inadequate space and parking for delegates (which normally consists of groups of between 10 and 20).

3.4 The Warwick site does not allow adequate access and parking for disabled people, who are, of course, central to our work. We have a single disabled parking space and are therefore unable to accommodate any significant number of disabled people. It is very unlikely if we moved to an alternative office within the Warwick area that we would have access to sufficient disabled parking spaces for our needs.

3.5 As a large element of the training has a practical element working with horses, clearly an office within the urban area or on a business park will never be able to provide the RDA with the ability to co-locate its training functions.

3.6 The development of our National Training Centre means that we will be responsible for the welfare of our horses at the new site. It is therefore not desirable but imperative that we have supervisory staff on site.

3.7 The benefit to the RDA of its investment in the provision of improved facilities for training and support at Lowlands would not be maximised if it had to maintain a satellite office for administrative tasks.

3.8 The effect of the current situation is that training and support is very disjointed and inefficient, with team members regularly driving to alternative locations with sufficient facilities and/or parking for us to carry out our activity. A clear example of this is the next induction training for new RDA centres, which will be carried out over two days – the first taking place at the Guide Dogs National Training centre in Ashorne and the second at Lowlands farm – with both days co-ordinated from Warwick. By moving the office to the same location as the RDA Training Centre, both days of training and the co-ordination would happen at the same location, increasing our efficiency and reducing the number of car journeys. This will provide obvious financial advantages for the charity, and give it a more sustainable future.

3.9 From this, it is also clear to see that the induction process will be more effective and impactful if it can be all carried out in an RDA setting. Currently we are unable to carry out the first day at the Warwick office due to lack of space and parking. We are currently working towards an objective of increased involvement of disabled people in volunteering with RDA, meaning that the current office is increasingly unfit for our purpose as they are unable to travel here.

3.10 In addition, there are some clear advantages for us having the office based within a more relevant setting, particularly an equestrian centre. Visitors (particularly potential donors or supporters) will be able to combine meetings in the office with gaining a clearer understanding of our work, from visiting the centre, and we will be able to showcase a centre of excellence to both potential volunteers and riders.

3.11 In short, the current office is a conventional office, in a conventional setting. RDA does not run as a conventional operation and therefore needs to be able to combine its office and training centre in an unconventional way, for the benefit of the disabled children and adults who use our service and who lose out from the current situation.

In conclusion, the development of our National Training Centre is a critically important part of RDA’s future and our plans to expand our service to work with more disabled children and adults, not just in Warwickshire, but across the whole of the UK. It will allow us to work more efficiently and to train and inspire more of our volunteers to support the future of our service.

Yours sincerely

**Ed Bracher**

**Chief Executive**

**RDA UK**