

CASE OFFICER'S (MBB) REPORT ON APPLICATION NUMBER 20/02966/COMIND



**Site: AWE Burghfield
Burghfield
Reading
RG30 3RP**

Member expiry date: 20th January 2021
EOT: 16th April 2021
SuDS pre-commencement condition agreed: 7th April 2021

INTRODUCTION

This application seeks planning permission for a Multi Materials Facility [MMF] at the north western portion/sector of the present AWE Burghfield site. It has a site area of just under 2.4ha. The building will be an important component of the overall Site Development Context Plan [SDCP] for AWE which seeks to optimise the future production of the UK capability for nuclear warhead production. As such this new modular building will make such production far more efficient and cost effective.

The MMF building would comprise a structural steel frame building occupying an area of approximate 6,553 m² (gross external area). The building would be approximately 94 metres x 69 metres in plan, with a maximum built height (excluding ventilation flues and stacks) of 18.7 metres. The flue height will be 25.5m above the local ground level. The eaves height will be 15.5m. The AOD level at the barrel roof apex will be just over 62m, whilst the height of the catenary towers to the rear [south] are 87m to provide some comparison.

The facility will comprise several distinct areas over two-storeys, with the main features comprising the following:

- Front of house accommodation. Ground floor to contain reception and exhibition space, production office and restaurant/seating. First floor to contain conference and VR suite with gym and changing facilities, occupational health, multi-faith room.
- Production areas, comprising co-located manufacturing capability processes within secure and modular reconfigurable production cells.
- Plant rooms, forming the roof of the production cells.
- Curved roof structure, with photovoltaic cells.

In addition there is to be 991m² of ancillary space supporting the new building, which will comprise such uses as substations, bin stores and waste compounds.

There is however to be no additional car parking laid out on the site for the additional staff required [about 50 in number who are to be largely transferred from the Aldermaston site] as the site has sufficient capacity already. The red line notes that access will be taken from the existing Pingewood Gate access to the east. HGV construction traffic will also use this principal access point.

In association with the scheme there will be a new SuDS basin and landscaped area around the building, with associated cycle parking.

PLANNING HISTORY

The history of the site is very considerable since the sites inception and there is little point in replicating all of this in this report.

However the most relevant is a pre-application enquiry number 20/00131/PREAPP, issued on the 1st October 2020. This concluded that the application was likely to be acceptable in both principle and scale.

PROCEDURAL MATTERS

EIA: On the 8th December 2020 the Council issued an EIA screening opinion letter under reference 20/02635/SCREEN which noted that NO ES was required to be submitted to accompany the planning application.

Publicity: Three site notices displayed around the site perimeter on the 23rd December 2020. Allowing for the intervening 3 bank holidays the expiry date was posted as the 16th January 2021. A public notice was also published in the Reading Chronicle on the 7th January 2021.

CIL: Whilst CIL liability would be confirmed separately by the CIL Charging Authority, the application submissions indicate that the development is unlikely to be CIL liable.

CONSTRAINTS AND DESIGNATIONS

Within the open countryside as designated in the WBCS of 2006 to 2026.
In the East Kennet Valley designation.

PLANNING POLICY

Planning law requires that applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. The relevant policies of the statutory development plan for West Berkshire are listed below. These policies can be read online at www.westberks.gov.uk/planningpolicy.

West Berkshire Core Strategy 2006-2026

Policies: ADPP1, ADPP6, CS5, CS9, CS10, CS13, CS14, CS15, CS16, CS17, CS18 and CS19.

The following are relevant materials considerations:

- The National Planning Policy Framework (Feb 2019) (NPPF)
- The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)
- West Berkshire Landscape Character Assessment 2019

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Wokefield Parish Council: No response.

Burghfield Parish Council (adjacent): No objections.

Highway Authority: No objections raised.

Lead Local Flood Authority: After some negotiations on the proposed outfall detail, the application is recommended for conditional approval.

Environment Agency: No response received.

Office for Nuclear Regulation: Does not advise against the proposal.

Conservation Officer: No assets of heritage importance will be harmed / affected by the scheme so no objections are raised.

Tree Officer: No TPOs or conservation areas affected. The application will require the removal of one or two small trees, however this loss will be significantly offset by the planting proposed. No objections subject to landscaping being completed.

Thames Valley Police: Do not raise any security concerns in regard to the application.

Archaeology: No implications hence no objections.

Emergency Planning Officer: Accept the application as being appropriate.

Thames Water Utilities: Initially advised that a condition be placed on any permission to ensure that if any additional foul waste arose from the site a pre-condition re capacity was required. The applicant has since confirmed that all waste produced on site will be dealt with via an existing waste treatment plant, so the condition is not needed. Case officer concurs.

Environmental Health: No objections/ no conditions recommended.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Total received: Nil.

PRINCIPLE OF DEVELOPMENT

According to Policy ADPP1, most development will be within or adjacent to the settlements in the hierarchy, and related to their transport accessibility and level of services. The urban areas will be the focused for most development. The scale and density of development will be related to the site's accessibility, character and surroundings. Only appropriate limited development in the countryside (outside of the defined settlement boundaries) will be allowed, focused on addressing identified needs and maintaining a strong rural economy.

The application site is located within the East Kennet Valley, the name given to the rural south-east of the district that lies east of Thatcham and outside of the AONB. Policy ADPP6 is the spatial strategy for the East Kennet Valley. According to the policy, the character of all the settlements in this area will be conserved and enhanced by ensuring that any development responds positively to the local context. Development in the open countryside will be strictly controlled. The supporting text identifies that the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) has two bases in this area, at Aldermaston and Burghfield. AWE is an important provider of local jobs but has implications for the future level of development in this area.

According to Policy CS9, business development will be supported on existing employment sites, particularly on those sites seen as strategically important for the District's economy, including, amongst others, AWE. The policy provides that proposals for business development should be in keeping with the surrounding environment, not conflict with existing uses, and promote sustainable transport. More efficient use of existing sites and premises should be made in order to attract inward investment, respond to modern business requirements, and meet the demand for employment land over the plan period. The Council will promote the intensification, redevelopment, and upgrade of (amongst others) existing employment sites and premises for business development.

Paragraph 5.60 of the supporting text notes that the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE) is one of three strategically important employment locations for the West Berkshire economy. It comprises a large amount of business floorspace and is a large local employer. The Council will support business development within these sites, particularly that which enhances the contribution to the local economy.

Policy CS10 identifies the need to support the rural economy. Although this policy is predominantly directed towards smaller scale schemes, the principle remains relevant in this context, given the rural location of the AWE site.

In addition, the policy in para 95[b] of the NPPF specifically encourages local planning authorities to recognise and support development for UK operational defence capability and security purposes, which the proposed MMF is one. In addition it is very clear that the application site location is brownfield, and within the context of the existing AWE site. So although it lies in the rural area in policy terms, this makes the principle of the development acceptable.

In addition the Council's Economic Development Strategy 2020-2023 was adopted in April 2020 and is thus a material consideration. It notes the importance generally of supporting the wider economy in the district, for reasons of future regeneration, prosperity, and job creation. The strategy states that the AWE is an important provider of local jobs, and that the Council will consider how it can support sustainable growth on these sites, ensuring that AWE's status as a world leader in innovation and employment opportunities is allowed to grow. In all these ways the proposal is accordingly supported, and the economic benefits are integral to the support within the Local Plan for supporting development at AWE. In addition it is clear that the new facility functions to maintain the UK Nuclear Deterrent, which is in accordance with current Government policy. In addition it is understood the DEPZ will not alter from the present situation.

DESIGN, CHARACTER AND APPEARANCE

Policy CS19 states that particular regard will be given to (a) the sensitivity of the area to change, (b) ensuring that new development is appropriate in terms of location, scale and design in the context of the existing settlement form, pattern and character, and (c) the conservation and, where appropriate, enhancement of heritage assets and their settings.

The case officer has visited the application site, and has examined the submitted plans. It is acknowledged that the new MMF is a large building given its floorspace and height of nearly 19m, rising to almost 26m with the stacks. This is a scale of building which would not normally be acceptable in the open countryside designation, but exceptionally it lies within the AWE site, will be relatively well screened visually by surrounding buildings to the east, west and south [but not the north], and will be also well screened across the wider landscape given the local topography and natural features. At the specific request of the officer a "field scene" from the north elevation has been submitted based on LIDAR which provides a modelled accurate visual representation of the new building from the north elevation if it were to be viewed from the public footpath which runs to the north east of the application site. It also provides a useful benchmark against which other buildings to the east can be seen in the overall context, and the relative height of the catenary towers, which are substantially higher than the proposal [over 20 m greater]. Although this building would be lower, it would have solid mass that would increase its visibility within the landscape.

The application is accompanied by a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA), which is informed by the relevant landscape character assessments applicable to the area. It provides a landscape strategy for the site, and gives an assessment of the construction and operational effects of the development.

It is clear, notwithstanding the well prepared LVIA which the officer has examined, that there will be a degree of visual impact arising from the new MMF, which to a degree will be harmful. This in itself

would be contrary to policy CS19, which seeks to protect the nature and character of the quality of the countryside across the district. Having said that, the new building will be viewed in the context of existing built form, notably the catenary towers, and the fact that it is understood that the height of the building is specifically required in order to facilitate production processes for nuclear warhead purposes. This of course is in the National Defence interest so a degree of harm, is accepted on balance by the officer, in recommending approval to the application on this [part] basis.

In terms of design, the building makes no pretence of being a functional/industrial unit, which is considered to be appropriate in the context of the military-industrial and commercial character of the AWE site. The barrel roof assists in reducing the overall impact particularly on the important north elevation, i.e. the principal public view from close-range viewpoints. The proposed materials are acceptable, providing a modern and relatively attractive appearance, notwithstanding its functional design. It will certainly help to modernise the present AWE site. The flues will be an "unfortunate" but clearly necessary addition to the roof scape, but the additional harm is limited by their slim profile. In addition the introduction of the PV cells on the roof will not be viewed from "street" level so reflectivity will not be a problem in this regard.

Finally a degree of additional structural landscaping is proposed on the northern boundary, which will assist to a degree in softening the impact of the building, but only to a relative degree given the substantial mass and scale.

On balance, it is considered that given the constraints identified, the design, mass and scale and location is justifiable and so overall accords with policy CS19 and the NPPF despite a degree of landscape and visual harm.

HIGHWAYS

The Council highways officer has formally responded to the proposal. He notes that the site location is reasonably sustainable in that there are number of bus services which pass the site to the west as do a number of Sustrans Cycle Routes. As to projected increase in traffic generation due to the increase in the number of employees on site, this is to be 45 movements in the AM peak and 31 in the PM peak. It is apparent to the case officer that the impact of these additional private vehicle movements on the local highways network will not be severe in terms of paragraph 109 of the NPPF. Accordingly, in principle, the application would not be rejected on the grounds of increased and unacceptable traffic generation.

Turning to wider sustainability issues, the AWE has an existing Travel Plan which applies to all staff and it is noted in the supporting detail with the application that this would continue. The Council Transport Policy team has not however responded to the application. Related to this it is notable that a covered [and obviously secure] cycle store is intended to be provided on the application red line site. The highways officer has accepted the lack of any additional parking on site given the existing high spare capacity already at the AWE site, so there will be no additional parking impact on the local highways.

In terms of the construction phase, there will be a rise of 37 vehicle movements during the AM peak and 27 during the PM peak for light vans etc. Again this is not considered to be significant and in any event will only be on a temporary basis over the construction period. As to HGV movements these are controlled by a Code of Construction Practice which ensures no HGV movements go in or out of the site outside the hours of 8.30am to 4pm, unless of course it is an emergency or for an exceptional need.

Accordingly the case officer considers that whilst of course there will be a degree of impact upon the local network, this will be acceptable, having due regard to policy CS13 and the policy in chapter 9 of the NPPF on highways matters.

DRAINAGE

The sustainable drainage issues on the site have been resolved by the submission of additional details, which will be duly conditioned.

NOISE

The applicants have submitted a noise impact assessment of the impact on local residents of the increased construction traffic, and the noise impacts of the actual construction, involving piling and foundation works. Finally an assessment has been made of the noise impacts arising from the future operational phase of the building as a whole.

The case officer has considered this report, and in addition has noted the response of the Council EHO who has raised no objections/comments on the application.

The conclusions of the assessment all point to the lack of any noticeable impact on local amenity due to noise, and as such it is considered the scheme will comply with the aims of saved policy OVS6 in the WBDLP of 1991 to 2006. In addition the assessment concludes that there would be a negligible to low noise impact from the operation of the MMF. On the basis of the above and in conclusion, noise from the proposed development would be mitigated, through the application of best available techniques, such that it does not cause a significant adverse impact, as defined by the NPSE and PPG. The potential for noise affecting living and working conditions has therefore been minimised, in line with the requirements of the NPPF and WHO guidelines on these issues.

Air Quality

The applicant has submitted a report examining the potential impact upon local air quality arising from the scheme both during the construction and operational phases. This examines the following principal issues: emissions from construction and operational traffic; construction dust; operational emissions from the discharge flues, arising from the gas-fired Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant and four gas-fired Low Temperature Hot Water (LTHW) boilers; and operational process emissions from the discharge stacks.

The case officer has examined the report and notes the EHO response. The conclusions of the report regarding dust emissions and the emissions are accordingly accepted.

HERITAGE

Policy CS19 sets out the need for the Council as LPA to examine any new development in the light of future potential impacts on the archaeological resource, and that of other heritage assets such as listed buildings and conservation areas. The applicants have submitted a helpful Heritage report in this regard.

The conclusions are that no archaeological value is attached to the localised application site itself, given the historic and substantial amount of past works undertaken on the site itself being part of the ROF and then the AWE. The Council archaeologist has accepted this in her response. In addition there are no listed buildings in close proximity to the application site whose setting would be detrimentally affected and so harmed by the MMF. The Council conservation officer has agreed this in his view on the pre-application enquiry. Accordingly, having due regard to the policy in Chapter 16 of the NPPF and policy CS19 it is anticipated that the scheme will not harm any matters of heritage significance.

PLANNING BALANCE AND CONCLUSION

The application before the Council comprises a very significant investment in the national defence infrastructure for the country. The local economic benefit of supporting development at AWE is substantial, and in accordance with the aforementioned policies of the Local Plan. This weighs heavily in the planning balance, in economic terms, but also in terms of wider national defence/security issues having regard to the NPPF.

In environmental terms there will inevitably be a degree of short term impact during the construction phase on local traffic movements, noise and dust, but during the operational phase the principal impact will be landscape and visual. The case officer notes that there will be a degree of harmful visual impact caused by the MMF, but these impacts must be viewed in the context of existing development at the established AWE site. This has to be weighed against the wider benefits noted above, including increased employment, particularly during the construction phase. In social terms the development impact is taken to be generally neutral.

In policy terms the application is considered to be in accordance with the statutory development plan, and the relevant material considerations do not otherwise indicate that permission should be refused.

RECOMMENDATION

Grant conditional planning permission.