

Introduction

These comments relate to a full planning application for development of employment Class E(g) – ‘Commercial, Business and Service Uses that can be carried out in a residential area without detriment to its amenity’.

Understanding of Context

The northern part of the site is allocated in the Cherwell Local Plan (2015) as part of the Bicester 10 allocation and is intended to form the final phase of the Catalyst Bicester Business Park. There is an extant outline planning consent for the site, which was granted in 2017 reference 16/02586/OUT.

The site is in a prominent location at the junction of the A41 and Charles Shouler Way, which leads to the Business Park. Bicester Park and Ride is opposite the A41 to the west. A five storey Holiday Inn Express is on the opposite side of Charles Shouler Way to the north. Wendlebury Road and the wider Business Park lie to the east. The sites eastern, western and southern boundaries are bound by a ditch, which is overgrown with trees and scrub.

National Cycle Route 51 extends along Wendlebury Road connecting the site to the centre of Bicester. Public Footpath 161/8/20 extends through the site’s southern corner. Alcester Scheduled Ancient Monument lies to the south of the Business Park.

Pertinent design policy and guidance includes:

- NPPF Chapter 12 Achieving Well-Designed Places, which amongst other things expects development to function well and add to the overall quality of the area; be visually attractive; sympathetic to local character and history; and maintain a strong sense of place.
- The National Design Guide (2021), which sets out ten characteristics of well-designed places.
- Cherwell Local Plan (2015) Policy SLE1, which requires employment development to meet high design standards, using sustainable construction, are of an appropriate scale and respect the character of its surroundings; Policy ESD 15, which requires development to be informed by an understanding of site context and meet high design standards and Allocation Policy Bicester 10.

Design requirements of Bicester 10 include:

- Structured open spaces and planting that provides a strong landscape setting, support SuDS and improvements to microclimate;
- High quality design and finish, with careful consideration given to layout, architecture, materials and colour;
- Layout that enables a high degree of integration and connectivity;
- Maximise walking and cycling links between nearby development sites and the town centre; and
- The provision of public art to enhance the quality of the place, legibility and identity.

Understanding of the Proposals

The proposals include vehicular access off Wendlebury Road, the construction of three commercial units, associated service yards, parking and landscaping and the diversion of the existing public footpath. The site was visited on the 8th of July and the following design drawings and documents have been considered:

- Design and Access Statement (May 2024)
- Proposed site plan
- Surface water drainage layout
- Proposed site finishes plan
- Soft landscape plan
- Floor and roof plans
- Sections and elevations
- Cycle, refuse and boundary details
- External finishes sample board

Design Appraisal

The layout would address the A41/Charles Shouler Way junction and Wendlebury Road with fenestration to the outward facing frontages with service yards to the rear. The design appearance is functional. The colour palette, scale and massing reflects that of the wider Business Park.

Existing and proposed trees and vegetation are important to provide structure, character, legibility and containment. The landscape proposals indicate existing boundary vegetation would be retained. This aspiration is likely to conflict with the functional requirements of the drainage ditches and widening of the footway alongside the A41. The proposed planting in general does not reflect the scale of the proposed buildings and prominent gateway location.

The landscape proposals should be reviewed and updated with replacement and additional planting where necessary to maintain and enhance the verdant character; screen the rear elevations of Units 13 and 14 from the A41; and ensure planting at the site gateway in particular, will be of an appropriate scale and long-lived.

The proposed car park area adjacent to Wendlebury Way presents a large expanse of parking. This should be broken up with tree planting through the central bays. Trees would provide multi-functional benefits including shade, shelter and soften the appearance of the parking and buildings. It would also contribute to the character and identity of the development in accordance with policy and guidance.

The proposed permissive footpath and diverted footpath would take a circuitous route along the site access and around the car park. The alignment should provide a clear, attractive and direct link between Wendlebury Way and the proposed shared surface track to the south-west. The proposed alignment would not meet the requirements of the National Design Guide, which states at M2 that priority must be given to pedestrian and cycle movement. M2 goes on to state that Public Rights of Way must be protected, enhanced and well-linked into the wider network of pedestrian and cycle routes. Routes are required to be safe and direct with visible destinations or clear signposting to encourage people to walk and cycle.

The proposed open cycle parking provision is not integrated into the design to provide an attractive, enclosed and secure facility. Paragraph H3 of the National Design Guide is clear that cycle storage must be conveniently positioned and sensitively integrated into public spaces, amenity space or buildings. To encourage cycling over car use, site user cycle parking should be provided at a visible location close to the main building entrances, within the built form or stand-alone secure stores

integrated into the public realm landscaping. The proposed Sheffield type stands and canopies are more suited to visitor/short stay cycle parking. Bin stores are also required to be well integrated into the design to minimize visual impact, unsightliness and clutter.

The scheme does not include an outdoor amenity space for users of the units to take breaks etc. I suggest high quality amenity break out spaces are provided. These should be well related to the units main entrances with appropriate shrub/hedge planting for enclosure, tree planting for shade and shelter and furniture for seating. The National Design Guide at H1 requires good design to promote quality of life for the occupants of buildings.

In accordance with the allocation policy proposals should include details of wayfinding signage and public art. The prominent gateway location represents an opportunity to use public art to add character and identity to the Business Park site. Art could be used to provide a prominent visual reference to the adjacent Alcester site.

A retaining wall and guard rail are proposed along the Wendlebury Way frontage – further details of the height and appearance should be provided.

Summary and Conclusion

The general site layout and appearance reflects the wider Business Park and would provide appropriate frontages. To reflect policy and guidance landscaping and public realm requires further refinement to ensure that the scheme has an appropriate Green Infrastructure setting; and is integrated and connected to the wider environment. This should include a more direct footway through the site; well located and secure cycle storage; high quality landscaped amenity for site users; structural tree planting and public art.