

Planning Meeting 16th July 2020

Application 19/02708/OUT Bicester Aerodrome

Members are likely to be influenced by the desire to promote more employment and especially some proposed high technology that could be placed almost anywhere but members should give greater credence to the location of the application. The area proposed is part of the very rare LWS plus the Historic Conservation area and the items of Scheduled Ancient Monument that will all be destroyed if members are minded to approve.

The height of the proposed building at the eastern end of the application is 11.5 metres! The rest are not much lower at 10.5 metres making a wall of buildings in contravention of the Conservation and Historic England requirement for an open view from the Watch Tower to the open countryside beyond across the flying field. The plan to make the roofs green by planting could be construed as an endangerment to aviation as the latest Bicester Aerodrome Company plan is to have one of the two fixed runways pointing directly over the application site. Camouflaging the buildings would be a hazard to aviators!

Historic England has concerns, as many do, about the sheer size of the proposal and the way this would affect the Scheduled Ancient Monument setting of the pill boxes and slit trenches.

Paragraph 9.9, page 89 the officers assess the application as

“The Planning Brief for the allocated site identifies the application site as comprising part of the flying field, with part of the application site within an ‘open vista to the bomb stores’. The Brief is not supportive of development on any part of the flying field, on the grounds it would harm the Conservation Area. Accordingly, the submitted proposal cannot be considered to accord with the Planning Brief. “

Ecology report by Charlotte Watkins:

“The site is part of the Local Wildlife Site some of which will be lost to this development if it approved. The applicants have submitted a Biodiversity Impact Calculator, which shows that despite the proposed habitat creation on site and enhanced management of areas of grassland there would be an overall net loss in habitat value on site”. The application does not comply with ESD 10 of the Local Plan.

Bicester Heritage knew when they purchased the site that the area has a very important Local Wildlife Site designation and yet they have so far totally ignored this and are proposing to build a hotel on one area and have further plans to destroy even more of the wildlife site to the north of the site. An attempt to replace the very rare calcareous grassland with a few bits of green roofs in this application is just playing at dealing with the obvious loss of even more of the Local Wildlife Site. They have already destroyed part of the application site by stripping the land to use as a site compound for the technical site that is being completed. The valuable flora in this area cannot be reinstated even though the approval for that application requires them to do so!

Worse still, far from reinstating they wish to make the area a car park!

The report of Dr Alison Smith of the Environmental Change Institute, previously submitted to officers, refers to the importance of areas of very rare calcareous grassland in the Bicester Airfield LWS and the TVERC map in her report shows that it is present in this application site. There is no information to show how this important ecology is to be protected or its destruction mitigated. In fact BH in their email to Councillors shows their total disregard for the importance of the site where they stated:-

“The site consists of a degraded edge of the former RAF Bicester along Skimmingdish Lane”

Dr Alison Smith confirmed that this area is fully within the local wildlife site according to her maps. It is also (or was) all unimproved calcareous grassland, which is not only a locally distinctive habitat with high cultural and biodiversity value, but also extremely rare across Oxfordshire. There is only 0.3% calcareous grassland remaining in Oxfordshire according to the CEH Land Cover Map 2015. The only remaining calcareous grassland in Bicester is around the airfield. This forms a high proportion of all the 7.3 ha of calcareous grassland in the Cherwell District area. The grassland is variously described as MG5 or CG3 in ecology reports. Both these types of grassland are representations of Priority Habitats under the NERC Act 2006 (Lowland Meadow or Lowland Calcareous Grassland, respectively). Their loss requires full compensation if net loss is to be avoided and Policy ESD 10 is to be complied with, and the NPPF tests as regards acceptable impact on biodiversity is to be met.

Destroying a part of a rare LWS hardly fits the Government 25 year Green plan!

The Officers note in the “Appraisal” on paragraph 9.1, page 87 that one of the key issues is the impact on gliding. It should be noted that the Bicester Gliding Centre only made constructive comments and raised some concerns about the application and not, as shown on paragraph 7.18 on page 86, that they objected. As tenants they knew that it was important for them to work with the owners to produce the best results for both organisations.

As many will be aware, this “problem” has now been resolved by Bicester Motion terminating the lease for the Gliding Club on the 30th June as the offer they made to the club would make the continued operation of the Bicester Gliding Club Ltd completely impossible and they were forced to leave a site that has had gliding operations on it for the last 64 years! The Club had been so successful that the site recently received the impressive accolade of being recognised as a “Nationally Significant Area for the Sport (SASP) of gliding” by Sport England with World champions amongst the members. Sport England agree with the British Gliding Association on paragraph 7.9, page 85, in objecting to this application.

In their comments to Bicester Heritage the Gliding Club tried to point out:

“We trust that our input, based on experience, will be welcomed by Bicester Motion. If development of the airfield is permitted without consideration of the

usability of the airfield for aviation, then there is a real risk of sleep walking into a situation where the airfield becomes unsafe or unusable not only for gliding but for the very types of aircraft that Bicester Motion seeks to encourage.”

It has always concerned me that the Officers when drawing up the Local Plan also failed to recognise Gliding as a Sport on this site and to include the area and numbers into the “Sports” Section of the Local Plan. In this time of a Climate Emergency the sport of gliding is flying using the atmosphere to make long distance flights pollution free and should be supported.

The application might be slightly more acceptable if the applicant reduced the height of the proposed buildings and accepted that they are going to continue to destroy part of the Local Wildlife Site in this area that means a negative biodiversity, which they could make up by managing other parts of the LWS on the aerodrome sympathetically.

Regarding the proposed new access onto Skimmingdish Lane, before full approval is given OCC Highways need to make up their mind as to the dualling of this road!

Cllr John Broad

Bicester Gliding Centre – history leading up to the termination of the lease!

Gliding at Bicester airfield began in 1956 when the Windrushers Gliding Club moved from Little Rissington. They were joined in 1963 by the RAF Gliding and Soaring Association, which subsequently merged with the Windrushers Gliding Club and became the operational centre of recreational gliding in the RAF. The RAFGSA Centre provided recreational flying to personnel of HM Forces and their dependants, and they also ran 'Gliding Adventurous Training Courses' for servicemen. In the mid 70s, Oxford University Gliding Club moved to RAF Bicester as well.

The MOD moved the RAFGSA Centre to RAF Halton in June 2004. It was decided to continue the long tradition of gliding at Bicester and the Windrushers Gliding Club was reformed by several RAFGSA and civilian members before the final departure of the RAF. The club was officially re-opened on July 1st 2004 at Bicester Airfield, the day after the RAF moved out. More recently, the Club has been called the Bicester Gliding Centre to better reflect the community within which we operate. Oxford University Gliding Club continues to operate under the umbrella of the Bicester Gliding Centre.

Bicester has been a continuously operational airfield since it was re-opened by the RAF in 1927. The 29 years of RAF powered aviation from 1927 to a 1956 are greatly outweighed by the 64 years of gliding on the airfield from 1956 to 2020.

Today, we are one of the most flourishing Clubs in the country with around 230 glider flying members and a membership which grew by 13% last year. Almost 50% of our members are Juniors, Students or Cadets under 26 who enjoy flying

at subsidised rates. We are financially sound and do not rely on external grants for our operation.

We operate a fleet of around 15 club owned gliders and powered tug aircraft. About 50 privately owned gliders are based on the airfield. Over the past 5 years we have invested over £100,000 updating our fleet. In the last two years, we have spent in excess of £50,000 fitting out the new Club premises that we were moved to by our landlords, Bicester Motion.

Since our formation in 2004, we have introduced thousands of new members to the sport of gliding. In 2019, 16 of our members reached solo standard. 12 of them were under 16, some going solo on their 14th birthday, the first day it was legal! We have gliding world champions amongst our members and, each year, we host one of the biggest gliding competitions in the country. We train a steady stream of our members to instructor standard enabling them to pass on their skills to an upcoming generation. Many of those trained at Bicester have gone on to careers in aviation; Club gliding provides an affordable route to flying and inspires many who go on to become professionals.

We also provide air experience flights to 1000 or more members of the public each year. According to British Gliding Association statistics, we provide more of such experiences than any other Club in the country.

We operate year round. For at least 6 months of the summer we operate 7 days a week largely on the basis of volunteer instruction with the assistance of non-flying volunteers from the Bicester community who enjoy the opportunity to contribute to our activity.

Most of our launching is by environmentally friendly and low cost winching. Aero towed launching is also provided but we are sensitive to the impact of this on our neighbours seeking always to use the safest routes that generate least noise concerns.

There is a limited amount of powered aircraft flying at Bicester, mostly of vintage types. We control all flying from the site in the interests of safety. We also maintain the flying field, provide fuel, insurance, a radio service and so on.

Gliding was recognised as the most appropriate aviation use of the airfield in the RAF Bicester Planning Brief of 2009 and in Policy 8 of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031, which was adopted in 2015.

We are keen to ensure that Gliding can continue to operate at Bicester as a sporting facility providing the same, or better, opportunities for recreation and personal development as has been available in the past. To this end, we seek to offer our experience as the airfield develops.

With the lease terminated on the 30th June 2020, the gliding club had to leave the aerodrome after 64 years of operation! A great loss to the Country and to the residents of Bicester.