

Response from the Economic Growth Service

Application No.: 20/00293/OUT
Applicant's Name: Mr Cutler
Proposal: Outline application (Phase 1B) including access (all other matters reserved) for approximately 4,413 sqm B1 office space (47,502 sqft) GIA, approximately 273 residential units (Use Class C3) including ancillary gym, approximately 177 sqm GIA of café space (Use Class A3), with an ancillary, mixed use co-working hub (794 sqm/ 8,550 sqft GIA), multi-storey car park, multi-use games area (MUGA), amenity space, associated infrastructure, parking and marketing boards
Location: Bicester Gateway Business Park, Wendlebury Road, Chesterton

Summary

I support the proposed creation of office space and co-working hub to support innovative working practices on part of this strategic employment site to create modern space to enable the 'knowledge economy' to develop. For the 'innovation community' concept to succeed, careful consideration will be needed on the design and management of the on-site residential elements and off-site linkages.

Background

The original 'gateway' concept for Bicester 10 was proposed as a strategic site to drive the knowledge economy by attracting 'blue-chip' companies due to its prominent location beside the A41, supported by an expanding local population as a source of employees.

VSL and P's Market Report confirms that "Bicester Gateway provides an excellent opportunity for a landmark, prominent set of buildings" but that "Due to the fact that Bicester is not yet an established regional office location, the key focus of our marketing needs to be aimed at changing this perception".

In order to proceed, it was argued that the perception could be changed by reflecting upon Milton Park's experience. A hotel was proposed to facilitate the office development on part of the site which was permitted and is now nearing completion.

Once the hotel becomes operational, one would expect the attractiveness of this and neighbouring sites to increase for potential investors. However, the building of the hotel has also led to a reduction in the size of the applicant's site available for B-class uses.

Proposal

Alongside 4,413 sq.m of offices, the concept of an 'Innovation Community' is proposed to feature a co-working hub and café. This could provide a great resource for attracting 'knowledge-driven' residents and entrepreneurs if managed effectively.

The integrity of the whole proposal would rest upon the detail. Indeed, according to VSL&P "The Live-Work Units require significant work to establish the best mix and design to create an innovative and collaborative community".

The detail of the proposal is to be developed but is led by 273 residential units. As with all 'live-work' units, the tenure and design of such accommodation will be an important consideration when assessing how successful this community could become.

Other questions arise on the truly innovative nature of the proposal. For example, the car parking proposal indicates 147 spaces but only 4 electric vehicle spaces. Amongst innovative residents and businesses in an 'eco-town', I would expect this to be a much higher proportion alongside other features.

Conclusion

Given the difficult market conditions for office development and reduced space available on this strategic employment site, I welcome the proposal to provide office space with co-working hub (and café) to support innovative working practices.

However, I would suggest that the detail of the proposed development would need to be carefully considered to ensure a successful concept is realised on this site. This includes:

- Physical and virtual linkages with adjacent sites and facilities, and those elsewhere in Bicester;
- Effective long-term management arrangements; and
- Demonstration of how the residential element of the proposal would support innovation to transform Bicester knowledge economy.

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