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15th June 2020

RESPONSE TO PLANNING APPLICATION 20/01127/F

HATCH END OLD POULTRY FARM, MIDDLE ASTON ROAD, MIDDLE ASTON: DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS. ERECTION OF REPLACEMENT BUSINESS UNITS, ANCILLARY HUB AND ASSOCIATED EXTERNAL WORKS.

Thank you for consulting MCNP Forum on this application. We have the following comments:

1. The proposals involve the continuation of an established employment site, which was originally constructed in 1958 as part of an experimental agricultural establishment. The site is in the parish of Middle Aston and is also immediately adjacent to Steeple Aston parish and its Conservation Area. The site occupies a sensitive rural gap between the two parishes, and any tendency towards coalescence is discouraged by policies of the MCNP. The buildings have never been particularly suitable to be used as business units, and their replacement with new ones that meet contemporary expectations and regulations is understandable. The MCNP supports such change, in principle, with its **policy PC1: Local Employment** which states: *“Continued commercial use of premises providing local employment within the neighbourhood area or otherwise benefiting the local economy will be encouraged.”*
2. However, policy PC1 continues with criteria that must be satisfied in order to gain that support:

“Proposals for the establishment of new small businesses will be considered favourably where they:

- a) provide diverse employment opportunities for people living in the neighbourhood area or otherwise benefit the local economy, or enhance agricultural production.*
- b) do not have an adverse effect on the surrounding built, natural or historic environment that is not clearly outweighed by the economic benefits of the development.*
- c) are unlikely to generate a volume of goods traffic that would have a significantly harmful effect on road safety or congestion or cause unacceptable noise and disturbance for local residents or to the rural environment and would not adversely affect on-street residential parking.”*

The proposals involve the creation of 29 new business units in use class B1, which is likely to predominantly comprise office usage. Taking the criteria in turn:

- a) We have been unable to establish from the applicants what types of business are likely to wish to locate here. It seems unlikely that any will be associated with agricultural production, and it would also seem unlikely that people living in the Mid-Cherwell parishes will represent the majority of those that set up businesses at Hatch End. There should, however, be benefits to the local economy, regardless of where staff come from, in terms of increased usage of local pubs, shops and other facilities.
- b) The scheme as submitted has an increase in floor area over that currently on site of some 38%. More importantly, the increase in the number of businesses is from 5 at present, to 29 – a six-fold increase. In order to attract and accommodate these businesses, the design of the new units is one that is familiar in many new business parks which have appeared across England. The appearance is deliberately contemporary, with materials, forms and colours that are found in urban and industrial contexts. Whether they are appropriate for a highly rural setting immediately adjacent to a Conservation Area is questionable. Of equal importance is the fact that the proposed new units are significantly taller than the existing ones, with ridges typically 6.59m. above datum, instead of 4.2m. This is principally the result of the units having mezzanine floors. As a result, the new development will, in our view, fail to enhance the local environment, and will instead have a harmful effect on it. We understand that the applicants are prepared to consider modifying the design, but have so far chosen not to follow our suggestion that the application should be withdrawn in order to do so.
- c) This criterion refers to the impact of “goods traffic”. This was drafted as such because the authors of the MCNP assumed that any commercial development proposals would be likely to be for uses commonly found in some rural areas – namely light industrial and storage activities. We believe that this application will – unexpectedly – consist mainly in introducing large numbers of office-based staff to the site. This belief is supported by the configuration of the units with mezzanines and an absence of suitable external doors for transfer of goods, etc. Using predicted occupancy rates, based on those published by industry bodies, the typical average occupancy for B1 business parks is around 11 sq.m. per person. Excluding the proposed hub building, the proposed lettable floor area is 2,924 sq.m. NIA, so that if fully let the new development could house 266 people.

Despite attempts in the applicants’ framework travel plan to convince the reader that a significant number of people will travel to work by public transport, bike or on foot, MCNP Forum is unconvinced of this. Public transport connections are poor, not close enough to be convenient, and (as previously stated) we do not think many of the businesses will employ people living within walking or cycling distance. It would be reasonable therefore to assume that, if successful, the new business park will have up to, and possibly more than, 200 people travelling to and from work by car, mostly on their own. This could easily generate more than twice the number of cars that can be accommodated in the proposed car park for 97 vehicles (already an alarmingly large number of vehicles for a small rural site). This estimate takes no account of additional vehicles delivering and collecting goods and supplies, vehicles of clients and other visitors, or those servicing the units and the site.

The essence of criterion c) is the avoidance of safety problems and disturbance to residents. The applicants are aware that there is already a considerable safety and traffic management issue relating to Dr. Radcliffe’s primary school, adjacent to the development site. At school drop-off and pick-up times, there are already far too many cars, parents and children walking in or crossing Fir Lane, with consequent congestion and safety concerns. Numerous attempts to

control the situation have been mooted and some attempted, with none so far having a beneficial effect. The introduction of up to 266 additional travellers attempting to pass the school gates during these critical periods is likely to be chaotic at best, and highly dangerous at worst.

This is not just a problem of timing. Fir Lane is a wooded rural lane, which becomes a single-track road when people park on the verges between the school and the development site, as they do every school morning and afternoon. It would only take a few of the excess vehicles unable to park on site (of which there could be over 100) parking similarly along Fir Lane, to render the route virtually unusable. If those same cars were instead to attempt to park elsewhere in Steeple Aston village, the impact on “on-street residential parking” (as expressed in criterion c)) would indeed be adverse, as there is already a parking problem in the village. Large numbers of additional parked vehicles would have a significantly harmful effect on the village, its residents, and the Conservation Area.

3. Our conclusion is that, while the continued use of the site is acceptable in principle, the alteration of the type of units to be created from the current mixed uses to purely B1 use class, the number of units being proposed being six times those currently on site, taken together with the increase in floor area and its likely occupancy level, leading to a huge increase in vehicle usage, renders the scheme as it currently stands, unacceptable. While we cannot be certain that the application satisfies Policy PC1 criterion a), we suspect that it does not. We are, however, clear that criterion b) is not satisfied, and that the failure to meet any of the aspects of criterion c) is a matter of major concern.
4. MCNP policy **PD5: Building and Site Design** is also of importance in relation to this application. It states: *“New development should be designed to a high standard which responds to the distinctive character of the settlement and reflects the guidelines and principles set out within the Heritage and Character Assessment (see Appendix K).”* While the comments made under 2(b) above are directly relevant here, there are some additional comments regarding the design that should be made in the context of this policy:

The existing sheds are low single storey structures with timber cladding and as a result do not stand out. The proposed replacement buildings are much taller and are to be constructed of materials that are much less sympathetic to their rural setting. Site section drawing PL104 shows the dramatic increase in bulk and height of the buildings compared to the existing ones. The appearance of the new scheme from the road will be much more dominant and inappropriate by comparison, and could lead to the appearance of coalescence of the two nearby settlements.

The proposed building at the entrance to the site (“the Hub”) is strangely asymmetrical and unsuitable for its key location. Replacing the existing clocktower on the new entrance building could provide a welcome connection to the original use of the site.

Criterion d) of policy PD5 requires new housing developments *“to provide new or improve existing footpaths and cycle ways to ensure that new residents of all ages and mobility have safe access to village amenities such as the school, bus stops, shop and green spaces.”* We consider that the large numbers of staff projected to work at the application site should reasonably expect safe access to the same facilities. If the application were to be approved, a footpath and cycle way should be provided to link the site to the existing footway in Fir Lane as a requirement of a planning condition or S.106 agreement.

Appendix K of the MCNP includes a Character Assessment of Middle Aston which lists among its key features: *“The small-scale nature of the village reflecting its historic status as a closed village; rural approaches to the settlement; and the broadly consistent vernacular and use of materials....”* The Assessment for Steeple Aston similarly makes reference to the rural approaches to the village, and to the importance of the Conservation Area (which includes the rural approach to the development site).

As it stands, the development does not respond to the distinctive character of the nearby settlements, nor does it respect the identified key features of the parishes set out in Appendix K. We therefore consider that the requirements of MCNP policy PD5 are not met.

5. Finally, although the MCNP was not permitted at examination to include policies solely related to traffic concerns, Section 5 of the “made” Plan relates to such community concerns, and includes a number of potential actions on traffic that would be desirable. The increase in traffic volumes throughout the MCNP area was, and remains, a worry underpinning many aspects of the Plan. One of the key Plan Objectives (T1) addresses this issue.

The growth of Heyford Park, close to the application site, has already had an adverse impact on the rural lanes of the neighbourhood. Hatch End is accessible only from narrow unclassified lanes that pass through the two neighbouring villages of Middle and Steeple Aston, all of which contain lengthy stretches of single-track road. The likely numbers of vehicles generated by this development are incompatible with its location; this is compounded by the location of the adjacent primary school. There are no alternative routes to the site that do not have the same problems. While a modest increase in vehicle movements as a result of this development might be tolerated, the numbers of vehicles generated by industry standard occupancy rates (see 2(c)) are completely unacceptable to the two communities most affected.

The construction period of about one year presents a particular concern. Large vehicles including HGVs will have to regularly negotiate the conditions described above, causing disruption and possible danger to local residents and schoolchildren, and vibration to the 80 dwellings that front the route through Steeple Aston village recommended by the applicants. Again, no workable option through Middle Aston is available.

Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan Forum therefore objects to this application on the grounds that it does not satisfy the criteria associated with our Policy PC1: Local Employment, and gives rise to serious concerns regarding the impact of the scheme on the locality, such that the application cannot be supported by the policy. We point out that locally-specific Development Plan policies have full weight alongside the Cherwell Local Plan, and as the more recently-adopted of the two, take precedence over any relevant Local Plan policies.