

## Response of Middle Aston Parish Meeting to Planning Application 20/01127/F

1. This application concerns the replacement of the eleven existing buildings at Hatch End Industrial Estate, in Middle Aston Parish, with thirty new units, increasing the floor area from 2297 square metres to 3198 square metres (39% increase). It is noted that the application is for B1 use, which is already permitted. There are currently 15 people regularly working at the site.
2. A substantial majority of Middle Aston Parish residents support the redevelopment of the site in principle, as it could provide increased employment opportunities and avoid the progressive dilapidation of the existing buildings. **However, we regard the scale and design of the proposed development as entirely inappropriate for its sensitive rural location.** In particular, our objections concern a) the generation of significantly increased traffic movements through Middle Aston; and b) the design, height and density of the proposed buildings, which in our view would have a harmful urbanising impact on the character and appearance of the site and locality, contrary to local and national planning policy.
3. **Increase in traffic movements:** We have studied very carefully the Transport Statement submitted with the application, and believe that it seriously underestimates the increase in vehicle movements through both Middle Aston and Steeple Aston.
  - a. Recorded current movements were factored up to account for the under-occupied floor area of the site, setting an artificially high baseline that does not reflect actual experience over many years. The projected traffic flows seem to be based on the built footprint of the proposal, rather than the more relevant projected number of separate businesses occupying the site (up to 28). The combination of an artificially high baseline and low future projections results in only a modest increase in vehicle movements that we do not regard as credible.
  - b. The TRICS analysis used data from 8 sites, only one of which was categorised as a Neighbourhood Centre (the definition of which is rural/village) – the other 7 comparators were in the Suburban Area or Edge of Town categories, which will have very different characteristics from this location.
  - c. We could find no allowance for customer visits to the site, goods deliveries or staff movements to and from the site during the working day aside from their commuting journeys – all forecast movements appear to relate solely to employee commuting.
  - d. If the 28 individual business units were to be used as offices – which would be permissible under the site's current and proposed use classes – the conventional per person space of 10 square metres would permit employment of 294 people on the site (but, we

note, 97 parking spaces). The building design shown in the application supports this projected use, as mezzanine floors and pedestrian-only doors do not readily lend themselves to use for storage or light industrial activity.

- e. We feel that the potential for the use of sustainable transport modes is overstated and it is likely that the development will be heavily car-dependent due to its rural location. The Transport Statement assumes that 18.6% of commuter journeys will be undertaken by alternative modes of transport other than single occupancy car trips and that the site's 'sustainable' location makes non-car dependent modes of transport a realistic prospect for employees and visitors. However, our local bus services are limited (for example the 'Our Bus Bartons' services highlighted by the applicant run only once a day and the service is run by volunteers and not funded by the County Council), Heyford railway station is a 30-minute walk away with a limited service outside of peak commuting hours, there are no footways to support pedestrian access to the site from the north, and those from the south terminate some 300 metres away. The Public Rights of Way connecting the site to Middle Aston run through fields and woodland making them unsuitable as a route to walk to the site all year round, which is suggested in the applicant's Transport Statement and Framework Travel Plan. Cycling may be feasible for some employees, but given the low population density of the area, the number of employees potentially working at the site and living within a reasonable cycling radius of 5 miles is likely to be limited.

4. **Impact on the local highway network:** The roads in Middle Aston are not well suited to the likely significantly increased levels of traffic, either from goods vehicles or increased commuting journeys. The road into the village from the A4260 to the west is narrow, designated as unsuitable for HGVs (as noted at paragraph 5.2.6 of the Construction Traffic Management Plan) and has several pinch points. Middle Aston Lane, the road entering the village from the north, is a single track lane with high verges and few passing places. The road between Middle Aston and Steeple Aston has sharp bends and one blind summit. There are no footways or streetlighting in our village and the roads radiating from the edge of the village to the north, west and south are subject to the national speed limit (60mph). Our concerns therefore relate to this proposal's potential impact upon the safety of pedestrians, and most particularly, our children walking, scootering or cycling from Middle Aston past the site to Dr Radcliffe's School in Steeple Aston. We consider that this proposal would have an unacceptable impact on road safety, noise and disturbance, in conflict with Policy PC1 of the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan and paragraph 109 of the National Planning Policy Framework.

**5. The design, height and density of the proposed buildings and their potential impact on the character and appearance of the site and surrounding area**

The site of the proposed development forms part of the setting of the adjacent the Steeple Aston Conservation Area and forms an important element of the gap between Steeple Aston and Middle Aston and the rural approach to both villages. We note your officer's comments in response to the applicant's pre-application enquiry (a copy of which was included at Appendix B of the applicant's Transport Statement) that the site lies within the setting of the locally listed Park and Garden of Middle Aston House.

The site and existing buildings have an agricultural history and a rural appearance; the buildings are of limited height and use external materials in keeping with the wooded environment in which they sit.

Policy ESD13 of the Cherwell Local Plan states proposals will not be permitted if they would cause undue visual intrusion into the open countryside or be inconsistent with local landscape character. Policy ESD15 states that new development will be expected to contribute positively to an area's character and identity by creating or reinforcing local distinctiveness, in particular within conservation areas and their settings as well as complement and enhance local character through sensitive design and siting. Your officer's pre-application response also highlighted Saved Policy C8 of the Cherwell Local Plan 1996 which *"seeks to resist sporadic new development in the open countryside which is consistent with the NPPF which seeks to ensure that planning decisions recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the open countryside. Saved Policy C15 also states the Council will prevent the coalescence of settlement by resisting development in areas of open land, which are important"*.

Furthermore, Policy PD5 of the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan states that *"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..."*. Appendix K of the Mid Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan 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..."*.

We consider that the proposal, by means of the mass, bulk and design of the proposed buildings, and the materials proposed for their construction, conflicts with these adopted policies. The

proposed buildings are up to 50% taller than those they replace and the urbanising effect of this will be particularly significant given the rising profile of the site away from the road towards the west.

We also consider that the applicant has not responded sufficiently to your officer's pre-application advice that *"The proposed development would replace the existing building on the site with larger and taller buildings. The existing buildings on the site maintain a strong agricultural character and appearance and generally consist of buildings with low eaves and ridge heights which reduce their visual presence. The replacement buildings would be significantly taller, bulkier and of a greater mass than the existing buildings given the proposed increase in ridge and eaves height and the provision of mono-pitched roofs to accommodate first floor accommodation. This would result in the buildings appearing significantly greater in mass, scale and bulk than the buildings they replace and result in the site having a significantly more built up appearance and character than the existing site. It would also be significantly more prominent in approaches to both villages than the existing development. **In my view this would have a harmful urbanising impact on the character and appearance of the site and locality contrary to local and national planning policy in this respect.** In my view any redevelopment of the site needs to maintain the low key character and impact of the existing site and not lead to a significant urbanisation of the site as this would not only be harmful to the setting of the Conservation Area, general character and appearance of the area, but is also likely to raise concerns with Saved Policy C15 which seeks to prevent coalescence of settlements given that the site forms part of the gap of between Steeple Aston and Middle Aston."* (our emphasis).

It is disappointing that the applicant's proposal demonstrates little consideration of the Character Assessment contained within the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan. Furthermore, the Design & Access Statement accompanying the application makes no attempt to identify or analyse local examples of successful B1 use class redevelopment proposals on similar sites or to incorporate elements of them into the scheme to create or reinforce a sense of local distinctiveness. As a result, the proposal appears urban and lacks an appropriate rural and agricultural character. It would constitute an incongruous urbanising influence on the approach to both Middle Aston and Steeple Aston to the detriment of the character and appearance of the area and conflict with the aforementioned Local and Neighbourhood Plan policies and paragraph 130 of the NPPF.

Moreover, in your officer's pre-application response, the applicant was advised that *"any application...needs to be accompanied by a Heritage Statement and Impact Assessment in accordance with the advice in the MCNP"*. Whilst the applicant has provided a 'Planning and Heritage Statement', the heritage component extends to only one page long and provides little detail as to the contribution the site makes to the Conservation Area, such as for example, a

historic map progression. Indeed, it is unclear whether or not it has been prepared by (or has had input from) an appropriately qualified independent heritage consultant.

As such, we support your officer's conclusion in respect of the pre-application enquiry where he stated that he had *"significant concerns over the impact of the scale of the development you propose in your submission on the character and appearance of the area, setting of the village and setting of the Conservation Area. I consider that these pressures largely stem from the overall amount of development you are looking to accommodate on the site and consider a lesser amount of commercial floor space and subsequent reduction in the height and scale of the building(s) and parking requirement would help to address these concerns subject to appropriate design."*

- 6. Summary: Middle Aston Parish Meeting OBJECTS to this proposal on the grounds that it would create an overly car-dependent development leading to increased levels of traffic which will have an unacceptable impact on road safety. We also OBJECT for reason that the scale, bulk, density and design of the proposed buildings are entirely inappropriate to the sensitive rural setting of the site and would comprise a harmful urbanising impact on the character and appearance of the site and local area, including the Steeple Aston Conservation Area. Accordingly, we believe the proposal conflicts with policies PC1 and PD5 of the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan, policies ESD15, ESD18 of the Cherwell Local Plan 2011-2031 and saved policies C8 and C15 of the Cherwell Local Plan 1996 as well as paragraphs 109 and 130 of the National Planning Policy Framework and as such, should be refused.**
7. Other matters: Notwithstanding these objections, should the Council be minded to approve this application, Middle Aston Parish Meeting wishes the Council to note our support for the proposed routing for construction traffic in the applicant's draft Construction Traffic Management Plan. The construction phase will clearly require a large number of HGVs to access the site and the roads through Middle Aston are unsuited to such traffic. The road into the village from the A4260 to the west is designated as unsuitable for HGVs (as noted at paragraph 5.2.6 and Figure 5.1 of the Construction Traffic Management Plan) and has several pinch points. Middle Aston Lane, the road entering the village from the north and another possible access route from the A4260 via North Aston, is a single track lane with high verges and few passing places. We would also be grateful if it could be ensured via the Construction Traffic Management Plan or a planning condition that deliveries to the site during the construction phase will not be permitted between 8.30am-9.15am and between 2.30pm and 3.30pm Monday to Fridays to avoid heavy vehicles passing Dr Radcliffe's School at drop off and pick-up times where many parents park cars along the road on Fir Lane.