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12th October 2021

RESPONSE TO PLANNING APPLICATION 21/01123/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.

MCNP Forum has revised its comments in the light of amendments to this application submitted in September 2021. We now have the following comments:

1. **Established Use.** 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. **Policy PC1: Local Employment criteria.** 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 new business units, most of which will be in use class E, and 1 of which will be in use class B8. Taking the criteria in turn:

- a) The applicants have suggested that new start-up businesses are likely to wish to locate here, although they are unable to predict what types of business these might be. It seems unlikely that any will be associated with agricultural production, and it would also seem unlikely that many people living in the Mid-Cherwell parishes will be represented among 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 shops and other facilities.
- b) The proposals have been amended since the previous application (20/01128/F) such that the design of the new buildings is more acceptable in a rural context. The height of the units and the materials to be used are more sympathetic to their context than before. It is not clear that the economic benefits of the development will outweigh the harm that such urbanisation will cause.
- 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, however, consist mainly in introducing large numbers of office-based staff to the site, and significant numbers of visitors as well. The typical average occupancy for business parks, based on figures published by industry bodies, is around 11 sq.m. per person. The proposed lettable floor area of 2,215 sq.m. NIA could therefore house 201 people. This takes no account of additional users and their vehicles delivering and collecting goods and supplies, clients and other visitors, or those servicing the units and the site.

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 between 100 and 200 people travelling to and from work by car. This could easily generate more than twice the number of cars that can be accommodated in the proposed car park, an alarmingly large number of vehicles for a small rural 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 a large number of 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 parking along Fir Lane because they are unable to use the on-site parking, 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.

Our conclusion is that, while the continued use of the site is acceptable in principle, the number of units being proposed being five times those currently on site, taken together with the increase in 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 consider that criterion b) may not be satisfied, and that the failure to meet aspects of criterion c) is a matter of major concern.

3. **Incorrect statement.** We note that the applicants in their Planning Design Access and Heritage Statement state (paras. 4.3 and 4.45) that: “..... *there were no objections to the previous scheme on highways matters including traffic and parking. The current scheme proposes a reduced floor area and thus it is assumed that it will also be acceptable in highways terms. There is therefore no conflict with policy PC1 of the Neighbourhood Plan.*” It is not the case that there were no objections on highways matters previously, and such matters remain our principal concern with the current application, which we therefore consider does not conform to the requirements of our policy PC1.
4. **MCNP policy PD5: Building and Site Design** is also of importance in relation to this application. 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. The intentions of this policy in respect of housing development can be applied equally to an employment site such as this in a relatively isolated rural location. 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. We support OCC’s proposed requirement for such a footway.
5. **Traffic volumes in the wider neighbourhood.** Finally, Section 5 of the MCNP relates to community concerns beyond the approved policies, 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.

7. **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. No workable alternative route is available.

8. **Permitted development rights.** If this application is, despite our objections, granted planning permission, we would wish the Council to withdraw the right for the owners to convert the buildings in due course to residential use. We understand that Class MA in the 2021 changes to Permitted Development Rights would otherwise allow conversion from Class E to residential use subject to certain conditions. MCNP Forum considers this to be an inappropriate location for residential development, and in particular would not comply with our Policy PD2 criteria a) and d). In the event of approval of the scheme, these Class MA rights should therefore be removed in relation to the Hatch End site.

As a result of the above points, Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan Forum objects to this application, principally 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.

We point out that locally-specific Neighbourhood 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.

Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan Forum, October 2021