



Planning and Heritage Impact Statement

**Site: Building 102
Engine Test House
RAF Bicester**

Applicant:



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1.0 Introduction

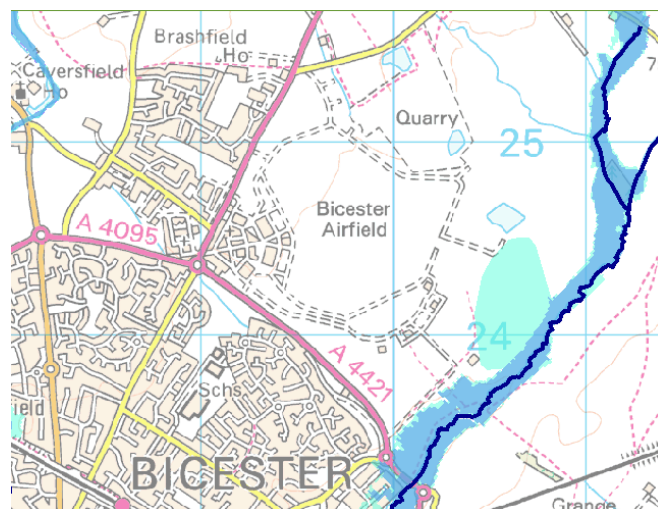
- 1.1 This statement has been produced by JPPC to accompany the application by Bicester Heritage seeking planning permission for the change of use of Building 102 at RAF Bicester from a sui generis use to a B1 use (workshop with ancillary office and storage).
- 1.2 With reference to the character of the application site and surrounding area, an appraisal of the prevailing planning policy and planning history specifically, and assessment of the planning issues raised by the proposal, this statement sets out why the development is considered acceptable.
- 1.3 The application should be read in conjunction with the plans and design and access statement produced by Gaunt Francis Architects.

2.0 Site Description, Planning History and Proposal

- 2.1 RAF Bicester is sited on the north eastern side of Bicester, north of the A4421, which is part of the “ring road” around Bicester. It extends to some 141.5 hectares and includes various buildings and a flying field. It does not include the residential site to the west of the A421.
- 2.2 RAF Bicester is a conservation area. Within the technical site there are 22 listed buildings and around the fringe of the technical site and flying field there are a number of structures which have scheduled monument protection.
- 2.3 The basis for designating the site as a conservation area, and listing or scheduling most of the existing structures, derives from the fact that it is one of the best preserved airfields of its age and has a long history of military flying.
- 2.4 Indeed, its flying field origins date back to its use as a Royal Flying Corps aerodrome towards the end of WWI and, from 1925 onwards, as a military airfield by the newly formed Royal Air Force. Whilst many of the buildings have not been actively used for decades, English Heritage identify that the site’s importance relates to the fact that it retains: ‘...*better than any other*

military airbase in Britain, the layout and fabric relating to pre-1930s military aviation...it comprises the best-preserved bomber airfield dating from the period up to 1945...It also comprises the best preserved and most strongly representative of the bomber stations built as part of Sir Hugh Trenchard's Home Defence Expansion Scheme'.

- 2.5 In addition, it is relevant to note that the technical site layout has not been affected by later infilling, as at Upper Heyford for example, nor have the structures been significantly altered. Indeed, as confirmed in the RAF Bicester Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA), the special interest of the site lies in the fact that a number of the buildings on the site are the only remaining examples of certain types of Inter-war airfield buildings and many of the remaining are the best preserved examples.
- 2.6 The site generally falls outside the areas liable to flooding on the Environment Agency website and there are some public rights of way to the eastern side of the site.



- 2.7 The building the subject of the application, building 102, is situated centrally within the site, and is known as the Engine Testing House. Whilst this building is not statutorily listed, it is one of the buildings shown on the proposed layout for the newly created RAF Bicester base dating from August 1926 and was built as a three cell aircraft engine testing station.

- 2.8 As constructed, the building has an asymmetrical pitched roof. It was constructed in red brick in three bays with simple collar beam timber trusses, clad with artificial slate. The building is largely unaltered save for the fact that air louvers which were provided above the original timber door openings on the south-west elevation have subsequently been bricked up.
- 2.9 There is no relevant planning history for building 102.

The Proposal

- 2.10 Bicester Heritage is seeking to create the nation's first business park that is dedicated to historic aviation and motoring excellence and to create a campus of leading specialists. In this context, the overall vision is the creation of a mixed use development, with continued aviation activities from the flying field, and a range of campus uses related to the storage, maintenance, repair, sales etc of historic vehicles and aircraft, together with ancillary activities including office uses, training facilities and the provision of overnight accommodation.
- 2.11 These proposed uses are to be the subject of a masterplan which is in the process of formulation and will be submitted to the Council in due course.
- 2.12 The application proposes a B1 use of the building for workshop and associated office and storage purposes. The prospective tenant is a company called Historic Race Support Ltd who intend to use the building for the maintenance and preparation of historic racing cars which, self-evidently, is a use which fits very well with the vision for the site.
- 2.13 With reference to the physical changes proposed to facilitate the proposed new use of the building, none would necessitate the grant of planning permission on the basis that they are either internal works or are works would not materially affect the external appearance of the building. It will, however, be noted that the internal plan form will be unaltered and that the external changes – consisting of the repair or like for like replacement of windows and doors, the replacement of damaged diamond slates, the replacement of plastic rainwater goods with cast iron rainwater goods, re-pointing of brickwork etc – will significantly refresh and enhance its appearance.

3.0 Planning Policy

- 3.1 Under Section 38(6) of the Planning Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 there is a statutory obligation to determine planning applications and appeals in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 3.2 The Development Plan in Cherwell District presently consists of the saved policies of the Adopted Cherwell Local Plan 1996.
- 3.3 The Council has a non-Statutory Local Plan dating from 2004 which was adopted by the Council for development control purposes but which carries no statutory weight.
- 3.4 The Council has also issued a new Proposed Submission Cherwell Local Plan. It was recently submitted to the Secretary of State for Examination and whilst it is not yet a development plan document its proposed policies and guidance do potentially comprise relevant material considerations.

National Planning Guidance

- 3.5 Government Guidance and Policy is also capable of being a material consideration to be taken account of in decision making. This is very up to date with the publication of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on 27th March 2012.
- 3.6 The NPPF presents a presumption in favour of sustainable development. In terms of proposals for development, this means that proposals which accord with the relevant development plan should be approved without delay, unless the effects of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the associated benefits (Para 14).
- 3.7 The core planning principles (para 17) underpin plan making and decision taking and state that planning should, *inter alia*, proactively drive and support economic development, encourage the re-use of existing resources and conversion of existing buildings, encourage the effective use of land that has been previously developed, promote mixed use developments and conserve heritage assets.

- 3.8 One of the central aims of the NPPF is to build a strong and competitive economy. It states that the Government is committed to securing economic growth in order to create jobs and prosperity (para 18) and that planning should operate to encourage and not act as an impediment to sustainable growth (para 19).
- 3.9 Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development and is indivisible from good planning – it should contribute positively to making places better for people (Para 56). Policies and decisions should not attempt to impose architectural styles or tastes, although it is proper to seek to reinforce local distinctiveness (Para 60). Paragraph 73 recognises that access to high quality open spaces and opportunities for sport and recreation can make an important contribution to the health and well being of communities.
- 3.10 Local planning authorities should aim to conserve and enhance biodiversity by applying certain principles, as set out in the NPPF.
- 3.11 The NPPF also sets out the Government’s approach in using the planning system to conserve and enhance the historic environment. Where applying for planning permission, applicants should be required to assess the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution which is made by their setting. The level of detail provided should be proportionate to the asset’s significance and no more detailed than sufficient to assess the potential impact of the proposal upon this significance.
- 3.12 As a minimum, the relevant historic environment record should have been consulted and the assets assessed using appropriate expertise where necessary. Local planning authorities should identify and assess the particular significance of any assets which may be affected by a proposal, taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise (Para’s 128 - 129). In planning for the historic environment, local planning authorities should have up-to-date evidence about the significance of heritage assets and the contribution they make to their environment (Para. 169).
- 3.13 Finally the NPPF encourages pre-application engagement and front loading to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the planning system.

Adopted Cherwell Local Plan (CLP)

- 3.14 The Adopted CLP is of an age which may be considered out of date by the NPPF. There have also been significant material changes in circumstances at RAF Bicester since its adoption, notably the designation of the conservation area, the statutory listing of many of the buildings and designation of scheduled monument status open other structures.
- 3.15 Part of the airfield at RAF Bicester surrounding the existing hangars was allocated for employment generating development with the remainder identified for recreational uses in Policy EMP2 of the adopted CLP. However, the policy was not saved.
- 3.16 Policy EMP 4 refers, more generally, to employment generating development in rural areas. According to Policy EMP4, the conversion of an existing building or group of buildings to employment use in rural areas will normally be permitted provided the form, bulk and general design of the buildings is in keeping with the surrounding area. The relevance of this policy, which was drafted to deal with redundant agricultural buildings, may be questionable, however it is an approach to existing buildings that is consistent with the NPPF and as such the spirit of the policy is relevant.

Non Statutory Local Plan

- 3.17 There are no policies in the NSCLP referring specifically to the RAF Bicester buildings or flying field. However, Policies EMP4 and EMP6 refer to existing employment sites and re-use of rural buildings respectively, with EMP6 supporting re-use provided proposals do not harm the character or the setting of buildings of architectural or historic interest. Again these policies are broadly in line with the thrust of the NPPF.

Cherwell Local Plan (Proposed Submission October 2013)

- 3.18 The emerging CLP has now been submitted for examination, following its approval by Full Council and, as such, provides the most up to date indication of the Council's aspirations for development in the District.

3.19 Policy Bicester 8 relates specifically to the future use of RAF Bicester. It states that the Council '*will encourage conservation-led proposals to secure a long-lasting, economically viable future for RAF Bicester's Technical Site and Flying Field*'.

3.20 It further identifies that the development of hotel and conference facilities will also be supported as part of a wider package of employment uses but makes clear that development proposals must maintain and enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area, protect listed, scheduled and other important buildings, and protect the sensitive historic fabric of the buildings and preserve the openness of the airfield.

Bicester Master Plan (SPD Consultation Draft Aug 2012)

3.21 The Master Plan indicates RAF Bicester as a special mixed use employment area focusing on aviation, conservation and heritage activities and tourism facilities.

RAF Bicester Planning Brief

3.22 The Planning Brief was adopted by the Council in 2009 and, therefore, is a material consideration for future proposals at the site. It does not however have the status of a Supplementary Planning Document.

3.23 The Brief encourages the re-use of the buildings for their original purpose but recognises that, in most instances, a new use will need to be found. It seeks a comprehensive approach to the management of the technical site, which ensures a consistent maintenance regime across the campus style layout and no subdivision of the landscape with means of enclosure.

3.24 The Brief recognises that employment uses would be suitable for many of the buildings, but that care would need to be taken over the level of alterations to facilitate such uses.

4.0 Discussion

- 4.1 This application for planning permission relates to a change of use of building 102 to a use for purposes falling within Class B1 of the Use Classes Order. The building is described in the Design and Access Statement produced by the Architects Gaunt Francis and the nature of the internal and external works proposed to the building are set out in the accompanying scope of works report.
- 4.2 In short, whilst the building is not statutorily listed, the internal and external changes have been very carefully conceived so as not to harm the internal plan form of the building or materially alter its external appearance and, importantly, involve no loss of historic fabric. The significance of the building as a non-designated heritage asset is as part of its group appeal on what is considered (by English Heritage) to be the best preserved airfield base from the Inter-War years. As set out above, and in the supporting documents, the internal or external form of the building will not be harmed by the proposed works – indeed they would be enhanced by the proposed works of renovation and repair - and its positive contribution as a heritage asset would therefore be safeguarded.
- 4.3 Turning to the proposed use, the proposed workshop use for a historic racing company would be wholly compatible with the original use and function of the building and would necessitate no internal plan form changes to facilitate its re-use.
- 4.4 The proposed re-use is, therefore, considered to be in accordance with Policy EMP4 of the Adopted Local Plan, the NPPF and the Council's emerging policies and the proposed use follows the principles set out in the Planning Brief for the site. In accordance with paragraph 14 of the NPPF the proposal should, therefore, be supported.