**Comments from the Economic Growth Service**

**Application No.: 18/01253/F**

**Site: Bicester Heritage**

**Proposal:** construction of a new hotel with restaurant, conference, and leisure facilities at Bicester Heritage along with associated parking and landscaping.

**Summary**

The proposed development of up to 344 hotel and aparthotel rooms with leisure and conference facilities is a significant investment creating a unique facility that will not only provide employment and add to the viability of Bicester Heritage but will also provide services to assist business, to retain expenditure and add to the development of the wider economy. It therefore represents key infrastructure that contributes to the Council’s economic growth objectives. To ensure its successful development and operation, it should engage with local partners to implement an employment and skills plan.

**Overview**

As explained by JPPC in Para 2.5of the Planning Statement, this proposal by Bicester Heritage is an important step towards “creating an international centre of excellence for motoring and aviation engineering. The site is the nation’s first business park dedicated to historic aviation and motoring offering a campus of leading national and international specialists. The site also provides training for apprentices and hosts events allowing the public to once more access and enjoy the historic environment”.

The uniqueness of this proposal is created through the combination of:

* the juxtaposition and integration of activity – on-site and in the wider area,
* the location in a quality heritage setting in a rapidly growing town and ‘corridor’
* the scale to include large conference facilities

I expand upon elements pertinent to the Council’s economic growth objectives:

**Economic Impact**

According to Para 5.30 of the Planning Statement, SQW expect the development to provide:

* “a substantial number of new jobs (in the region of 180 full time equivalent).
* in the region of £5m GVA annually through its operation.
* substantial benefits in the course of development:
  + an anticipated generation of £19m GVA, and
  + 455 temporary job years through the construction phase”

This estimate appears reasonable and would add to the existing strength of Cherwell’s visitor economy which in 2016 was valued at:

* £396 million
* 7,044 jobs supported by tourism
* Approx. 7 million trips were made to Cherwell

Whilst only 0.4 million trips were ‘overnight’, their value was around £77 million. Therefore this hotel proposal offers considerable scope to increase the number of visitors (business and leisure) staying overnight – multiplying the value of visits to the local economy. It also contributes to Planning Policy SLE3: Supporting Tourism Growth.

**Employment & Skills Value**

The anticipated 180 full time equivalent jobs are expected to “align with local skills sets”. Without sight of the evidence and rationale behind this, it is difficult to comment.

The Planning Statement suggests that “It is relevant to note at times in the last few years

unemployment in Bicester and Cherwell has been higher than Oxfordshire as a whole”. This is a general statement that could be expanded upon in relation to this application.

In August 2018, there were 975 out-of-work benefit claimants (1.1%) in Cherwell: To what extent do those people have the skills to occupy the new jobs (construction and hotel operation)?

Some local employers report difficulties with recruitment but others do not which may be a result of active apprenticeship and staff development schemes to provide for their workforce needs of today and for the future. This includes links with schools whereby placements and workplace experience provide a tremendous ‘pipeline’ of talent.

Bicester Heritage has links with further and higher education institutions for its core (engineering) activities and it would be helpful to identify how this good practice can be expanded into construction and hospitality & catering.

An employment and skills plan should ensure that an appropriate workforce is available for both the construction and operational phases of the development. This would assist all concerned: local residents in developing their skills, capacity within the construction sector and the operator of the hotel with their staffing needs.

**Cherwell Economic Development Strategy**

The economic development strategy adopted in 2011 by the Council remains relevant today in recognising the need to meet projected demand.

The Council’s strategic commitment was to:

* Work in partnership with businesses and tourism bodies to enhance and develop our tourism product, maximising the value whilst minimising any negative effects.

Several new hotels (Travelodge and Premier Inn) have since opened and Bicester Hotel and Spa has been upgraded, adding to the existing stock. High demand has resulted in ‘over trading’ (high demand) but there has also been a notable absence of a major conference facility. This identified weakness will be addressed by this proposal which will not only meet the unmet demand but also attract new business and retain more expenditure within the area.

The business and leisure visitor market is potentially very strong in Cherwell, particularly as it does not suffer from the seasonality of many conference locations. By assimilating with Bicester Heritage, the development is not only an important local asset but also a significant asset (‘hub’) of the wider regional economy being reflected through the emerging Local Industrial Strategies.

In conclusion, the development contributes to regional and local aims. I would amplify the concluding sentence made by the Design and Conservation Team: “A key factor is that the hotel’s success will ensure longer-term conservation and site viability into the future.”

I would also add that the potential benefits extend beyond the fabric of the buildings, contributing to the development of skills and provision of employment to provide opportunities for an expanding population. The early preparation of plans to support employment and skills should ensure that both the physical development proceeds and the operator of the hotel is able to recruit and retain staff to realise the potential of this fantastic investment.

Please contact me if further comments are required.

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Cherwell District Council