

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.

21/01123/F

Steeple Aston Parish Council (SAPC) held a meeting of its Planning Committee on October 6th 2021 at which amendments to this application made by the applicants in September were discussed with members of the public who were also present. The Committee decided to modify its existing **OBJECTION** to this application, which is now as follows:

1. Intensification of use

The proposals will introduce large numbers of office-based and other staff to the site. The typical average occupancy for business parks is around 11 sq.m. per person (based on rates published by industry bodies). The proposed lettable floor area is 2,215 sq.m., so that if fully let the new development could give employment to up to 201 people. The applicants have not supplied an estimate of numbers of employees, but OCC has advised that only 63 car park spaces are needed. SAPC does not accept that figure and believes that a much larger number of employees will drive to work here. The current buildings have never been suitable for such numbers, and therefore the development proposals represent a significant intensification of the use of the site.

We consider therefore that the requirements of CDC Local Plan policy “SLE1: Employment Development” should apply to this application. The criteria for new rural employment sites in this policy include the following:

Relevant SLE1 criteria	Steeple Aston PC comment
<i>“Sufficient justification is provided to demonstrate why the development should be located in the rural area on a non-allocated site.”</i>	No justification has been given to support intensification of the existing use.
<i>“The proposal and any associated employment activities can be carried out without undue detriment to residential amenity, the highway network, village character and its setting, the appearance and character of the landscape and the environment generally including on any designated buildings or features (or on any non-designated buildings or features of local importance).”</i>	The intensification of employment on the site, and its consequent effect on the numbers of vehicles using Fir Lane and the surrounding rural highway network, will be seriously detrimental to amenity, setting, character and public safety.
<i>“The proposal will not give rise to excessive or inappropriate traffic and will wherever possible contribute to the general aim of reducing the need to travel by private car. There are no suitable available plots or premises within existing nearby employment sites in the rural areas.”</i>	Despite claims to the contrary, employees and users of the proposed business units will undoubtedly increase the use of travel by private car. Current demand for local business premises is already largely met by Lakeside Business Park adjacent to the site.

<p><i>Policy SLE1 also states:</i></p> <p><i>“With the potential for increased travel by private car by workers and other environmental impacts, justification for employment development on new sites in the rural areas will need to be provided. This should include an applicant demonstrating a need for and benefits of employment in the particular location proposed and explaining why the proposed development should not be located at the towns, close to the proposed labour supply.”</i></p>	<p>The applicants have not demonstrated any need for an intensification of employment on this rural site. There might be benefits in this location if significant numbers of people employed could walk or cycle to work instead of using private cars, but no evidence of need or demand by local residents has been provided.</p> <p>A major strategic employment site is however being developed currently at Heyford Park, only a few miles from the application site, with full support from CDC Local Plan Policy Villages 5. CDC Local Plan policy also supports employment development at nearby Bicester, in preference to rural locations.</p>
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As a result of the above comments, Steeple Aston Parish Council requests an independent viability assessment of the need and demand for intensification of employment at this site before the application is further considered.

2. Traffic volumes

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 the intensification of development at the site 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 1.) are completely unacceptable to the two communities most affected.

3. Pedestrian Safety and Dr Radcliffe’s School

The application fails to take note of the proximity of Dr Radcliffe’s Primary School to the site. The school has over 200 children on roll, coming from a wide catchment area. The large number of parents dropping-off and collecting young children already causes a major parking problem locally, and significant congestion of the narrow lanes nearby. Pedestrian safety is already an issue, and there have been numerous near-misses of children walking in or crossing Fir Lane.

There is no pavement between the application site and the School, so that parents with children (and all other pedestrians) are forced to walk on the highway in this narrow lane. Parked vehicles of parents dropping off and collecting children from School exacerbate this situation by forcing

pedestrians into the centre of Fir Lane. Any increase in the level of traffic moving past the school gates as a result of this application will undoubtedly worsen an already unsafe situation.

Many children cross Fir Lane opposite the School gates, getting to and from the well-used playground and recreation field opposite the school. Unfortunately, OCC withdrew support for a person to assist children crossing some years ago. The safeguarding of children remains a serious concern to the school and the local community.

We note that OCC, in its response to the original application, states that *“If the development is permitted then the County will require the developer to provide a footway on the western side of Fir Lane between the site access and the existing footway in Steeple Aston which terminates at the vehicle access to Dr Radcliffe’s C of E Primary School. This will benefit the development by providing a link with the existing footway south of the site and therefore Steeple Aston village centre, amenities and the bus stop. The provision of this safe, continuous connection will promote sustainable modes of travel and make walking to and from the site more accessible for all employees and visitors. This facility can be provided under a Section 278 agreement.”*

SAPC’s Planning Committee, however, also noted that the Applicants now claim that their new proposal for a footpath within the site has been accepted in principle by OCC, subject to detail. SAPC does not accept that this proposal meets the sensible requirements for *“a footway on the western side of Fir Lane between the site access and the existing footway which terminates..... at the School”*. If a new footway is to play any role in improving safety for pedestrians, it must be on the public highway and not on private land, as currently proposed. Pedestrians, including children, will continue to walk in the road, despite the provision of the proposed alternative footpath, because the road is the more direct route to the site. SAPC insists that the original OCC requirement be fulfilled as a condition of approval.

The applicants have also told the Parish Council that it is their aim to make a staff canteen in the hub building on site available for community use as a café. A safe route from the village, by extending the existing footpath, would be a basic necessity if this idea were to be implemented.

4. Parking provision

The applicants now intend to provide a total of 74 parking spaces, apparently exceeding OCC criteria for the floor space proposed. However, as stated in 1. above, SAPC is of the view that when fully let the new development could employ up to 201 people. According to the Travel Plan, 81% of employees will initially drive to work each day – requiring 163 parking spaces. The parking provision proposed is therefore clearly inadequate for the potential number of drivers and additional visitors to the site.

If permitted with 74 spaces, it is inevitable that parking will overspill on to Fir Lane either side of the business park, possibly as far as the School, where existing parking problems and consequent disruption would become unbearable for many residents and others. The character of the Conservation Area in this location would also be seriously compromised. Photos are attached to this submission to illustrate existing problems.

SAPC is pleased to see, however, that the parking area has been moved from the front of the site, in line with the criticism voiced in our May 2021 submission.

5. Travel plan and vehicle movements

The applicants have submitted a Travel Plan which suggests that significant numbers of employees will walk, cycle, or use buses or trains to get to and from work at Hatch End. These are not credible proposals in view of the following:

- No evidence is provided that there is significant need or demand from local residents to work in businesses located here. On the contrary, the great majority of staff and visitors will travel from local towns, or from further away.
- Public transport stops are a good distance from Hatch End, are infrequent or badly-timed, and will be unattractive in inclement weather when the convenient alternative is to drive.

The result is that an unacceptable volume of traffic will be generated by the development, especially when visitors, deliveries and suppliers, and maintenance vehicles are taken into account. These additional vehicle movements along Fir Lane, past the Primary School and through the Steeple Aston Conservation Area, have been completely overlooked in the Travel Plan.

The increased levels of pollution generated by these vehicles are also unacceptable to the Parish Council and to the School, in view of well-documented effects of pollution on schoolchildren (and adults).

The application will cause a detrimental impact from increased traffic on the residents of Steeple Aston and on the character and amenities of the village and its Conservation Area. As a result it fails to satisfy policy PC1 of the Mid-Cherwell Neighbourhood Plan and CDC Local Plan policies ESD13 and ESD15.

6. Construction period

The proposed routing of construction vehicles through Steeple Aston will cause significant disruption to the residents of the 80 dwellings which front South Side, Paines Hill and Fir Lane. Vibration will affect large numbers of these old dwellings, many of which have shallow or no foundations. Residents' parking on these narrow streets already makes for difficulties with through traffic, and tight bends are already problematical for larger vehicles. A year or more of construction traffic on top of all this will cause serious stress in the village.

The alternative of routing through Middle Aston is considered to be equally unacceptable, especially as the only viable route is designated as unsuitable for HGVs.

The Parish Council has concluded that there is no suitable access for construction vehicles to reach the application site. Photos are attached to this submission to illustrate this.

7. Proposed Uses

SAPC welcomes the statement that "it is the applicant's intention that buildings 2,4,5 and 6 will be occupied under use classes E(g) (i), E(g) ii and E (g) iii and Building 1 under Class B8." SAPC requires that this "intention" be made a condition of approval, and that any flexibility permitting future changes to these stated uses be subject to a full planning application.

8. National Planning Policy Framework

NPPF para. 84 specifically applies to applications of this type and location:

*“Planning policies and decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. **In these circumstances it will be important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable (for example by improving the scope for access on foot, by cycling or by public transport).** The use of previously developed land, and sites that are physically well-related to existing settlements, should be encouraged where suitable opportunities exist.”* (bold text - our emphasis).

It is clear to Steeple Aston Parish Council that this application is exactly what the NPPF guidance seeks to avoid – a development that has an unacceptable impact on local roads; the current footpath proposal also fails to facilitate safe access to the site on foot.

AS A RESULT OF ALL THE ABOVE, STEEPLE ASTON PARISH COUNCIL URGES CHERWELL DISTRICT COUNCIL TO REFUSE PLANNING PERMISSION FOR THIS APPLICATION.

Steeple Aston Parish Council, revised October 2021

APPENDIX:

PHOTOS ILLUSTRATING EXISTING TRAFFIC CONGESTION, PARKING ISSUES AND PEDESTRIAN SAFETY CONCERNS.

See separate document