

COMMITTEE REPORT

BY THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT CULTURE & SPORT
READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE: 4th March 2009

ITEM NO. 21

Ward: Out of Borough

App No.: 09/00163/ADJ

Address: AWE Burghfield

Proposal: Construction of main process facility and support building with 16 lightning protector towers, associated plant building, gates houses, vehicle inspection bays, sub-station buildings, security fence, access roads, hardstanding and sustainable drainage system infrastructure.

Applicant: Ministry of Defence

Date consultation received: 5th February 2009

RECOMMENDATION

That West Berkshire District Council is informed that this Council raises no objection in principle to the planning application.

The Council remains concerned that the construction traffic route is appropriately managed and monitored and request that Reading be consulted when any application is made to West Berkshire to discharge any relevant condition imposed by West Berkshire on the Planning Application.

A copy of this report and representations received will be sent to West Berkshire District Council for their information.

1. INTRODUCTION

West Berkshire District Council did not consult Reading Borough Council as part of the original round of consultations and there is no guidance on how widely neighbouring authorities should consult on this type of application. West Berkshire officers have explained that they normally consult adjoining authorities on major applications if the boundary is within 3km of the application site. Planning history records for this site show that Reading Borough Council has never been consulted on major planning applications here. At your officers request this authority was consulted on 5th February. West Berkshire District Council is holding a special planning committee to consider the application proposal but also on 4th March so there has been no opportunity to present a report to you for your consideration in time for your comments to be heard by their committee.

In view of this timescale officers have sent a without prejudice letter to West Berkshire District Council on the basis of the comments and conclusions reached in this report, and which you are asked to endorse. A copy of this letter is appended to this report.

2. PLANNING HISTORY

This establishment has been used for processing explosives since the WWII and has been used since the 1950.s as part of the UK Atomic Weapons Programme with many of the existing buildings and facilities dating from this period. The application site covers an area of approximately 21.21 hectares and is located within the AWE site at Burghfield, which has a total site area of approximately 87 hectares.

3. PROPOSAL

Background

The application follows the Government's announcement in 2005 to launch an investment programme to secure the replacement and refurbishment of facilities at AWE Burghfield (and nearby AWE Aldermaston) by proposing to replace existing operational warhead assembly and disassembly facilities at the site. This ongoing programme of improvements to the AWE estate is outlined in the long term Site Development Context Plan (SDCP 08). The scheme has been called project MENSA. The submitted design and access statement states that:

..the site has been used by AWE for many years and the intention is to continue this use onsite for the foreseeable future. The SDCP 08 confirms that there are no practical and sustainable alternatives to AWE's continued presence at Burghfield and therefore the proposal is essential for national security reasons. The site has operated under AWE for the last 50 years and therefore the use is well established on the site, the proposed replacement facilities are appropriate within this context.

Project MENSA seeks to consolidate existing operations to a single customised building. These are presently undertaken in separate buildings amounting to about 30,000 m² gross floor area. The application site has already been the subject of a comprehensive demolition and clearance programme, which commenced in August 2007, and completed late 2008. This programme involved:

- Demolition and clearance of over 70 buildings, equalling a total area of about 13,000 m².
- Removal of known legacy contamination, which included the removal of soil contaminated with asbestos, chemicals or explosive residue.

Details of the proposal

The proposed scheme, shown on plans submitted with this application, comprise buildings with a total gross floorspace of about 26,500 m² together with a variety of supporting infrastructure.

The facilities comprise:

- Main Process Facility - 12.6m in height and 131m x 113m, with a gross floor space of 14,760 m² at Ground Floor and 4843 m² at First Floor (Total = 19603 m²);
- Support Building - a single-storey structure 8.5m in height and 58.9m x 57.4m, with a gross floorspace of 3,271m².
- Plant Building - a single storey structure which is 6.7m in height and 58m x 36.1m, with a gross floor space of 2095m². An external compound 38.1m x 24.1m for a cooling plant is proposed for the east end of the building;
- Two gate houses - the northern gate house is a single storey structure which is 4.02m height and 16.4m x 10.1m, with a gross floorspace of 145m². The southern gate house is a single storey structure 4.19m in height and 12.0m x 6.25m, with a gross floorspace of 74m².
- Two electrical sub-stations - both are single storey structures which are 22.6m x 12.0m, with gross floorspace of 269m². The eastern sub-station will be 9.3m in height (55m AOD) and the western sub-station will be 8.1 m in height;
- Two vehicle inspection bays - both are single storey structures which are 6.6m in height and 17.7m x 8.79 m, gross floorspace of 155m² ;
- Sixteen lightning protector towers - Fourteen of these lightning towers will surround the MPF and will be 44.6m in height. The two remaining lightning towers will be located on the Plant Building and will be 13.0m in height;
- Two SuDS lagoons - The north storage pond will be approximately 850m² in area and have a capacity of 550m³. The east storage pond will be approximately 1129m² in area and will have a capacity of 1340m³.

Pre-application discussions

The Site Development Strategy Plan public information leaflet was published to provide the general public and West Berkshire Planning Authority with an explanation of the plans and reasoning behind the future development of AWE Burghfield and Aldermaston. Subsequent updates to this strategy were published in 2003 and 2005 to report on progress on the sites to date and to outline future plans as they take shape. The Site Development Context Plan (SDCP 08) sets out the phased programme of development between 2005 & 2015.

Documents submitted with the application

The Applicant, Defence Estates (a division of MoD) is required to seek planning permission for the proposed development under the Town & Country Planning Act. A direction has however been issued by the SoS under Regulation 4(4) a (ii) of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) (England & Wales) Regulations 1999 (as Amended) which directs that the requirements of the EIA Regulations will not apply to the MENSA proposal. In order to ensure that sufficient information is put before the LPA a "Defence Exempt Environmental Appraisal" (DEEA), is submitted instead of a formal ES. This provides a comprehensive analysis of the likely impacts of development and mitigation measures. Precise details of design materials, quantities, environmental conditions and dimensions of internal space and configuration are not included. The environmental impacts arising from these operations have been reported in the DEEA. The operations which take place within the facility are regulated by and subject to operating licences issued by HSE & EA, and other than external environmental impacts arising during normal operations are not relevant to the planning process.

The application is accompanied by a DEEA, a Transportation Assessment, Flood Risk Assessment and a Design and Access Statement together with other supporting documentation. The Design and Access Statement (DAS) also identifies the temporary construction related infrastructure required to ensure the safe, secure and efficient arrangements necessary to implement the proposals, although planning permission is not required for these works.

4. CONSULTATIONS

Adjacent Ward Councillors (Whitley and Southcote), the Chair and Vice Chair of planning applications committee and known interested councillors as well as transport colleagues and the Council's emergency planning officer have been consulted. Responses have not been received at the time of writing this report but will be recorded in an update report for your meeting.

Local residents have not been consulted because it proved impossible to decide where to draw the line and on the basis that West Berkshire have advertised the application in the local press. Notification of the application has been posted on our website and 7 objections have been received so far. Grounds for objection relate mainly to the principle of such a facility being located so close to Reading and the potential risks in the event of an accident or terrorist threat.

West Berkshire District Council has had no objections from Wokingham Borough Council and SEEDA. They have also had confirmation of no objections subject to conditions from the Highways Agency and the Environment Agency. They have received in excess of 800 responses, many from organised anti-nuclear groups from all over the country, objecting to the principle of the proposal. A copy of the West Berkshire committee report will be provided to your meeting as part of an update report, which will give further details of their consultation responses.

5. POLICIES

The Government guidance pertaining to planning is contained within Planning Policy Guidance Notes (PPGs) and more recently the Planning Policy Statements (PPSs). The Regional Planning Guidance relevant to the site is set out in Regional Spatial Strategy 9: The South East Plan (SEP) and The Berkshire Structure Plan (saved policies). The site is located within West Berkshire District and as such the policies contained within the Adopted West Berkshire District Local Plan (saved policies) are also relevant to consideration of this proposal.

6. APPRAISAL

Because the application site falls within West Berkshire, Reading Borough Council's role in relation to this application is that it (Reading) can make comments on it as a "consultee" to West Berkshire District Council.

It is accepted that in planning terms the planning application does not represent a material change in use (this establishment has been used for processing explosives since the WWII and

has been used since the 1950.s as part of the UK Atomic Weapons Programme with many of the existing buildings and facilities dating from this period) nor an intensification of use in terms of resultant floor area (the total new floorspace proposed is 26,573 sq.m replacing an existing 30,000 sq.m of floorspace). It is also accepted that in general the principle of reusing this existing brownfield site for continued employment use does comply with the national planning policy guidance and local plan policies.

Although residents' fears about the possible health risks arising out of the proposed development are (in principle) capable of amounting to "material considerations" a planning authority - in this case West Berkshire - must consider these fears and apprehensions alongside other considerations potentially arising from the proposal when determining the application.

Consultation responses on the application have been received by West Berkshire Council from the Health & Safety Executive. The HSE's research strategy team has confirmed that they have no objection on nuclear safety grounds to this development and the HSE's hazardous installations directorate has confirmed that having considered carefully the type and location of the proposed development it has no objection to it proceeding. They note in their letter that as AWE Burghfield is an explosives site the works would be subject to licensing by the Explosives Inspectorate. It is therefore concluded that health and safety risks have been addressed by the development proposed in the planning application and that its ongoing safety is the responsibility of the other relevant authorities (the HSE and Nuclear Inspectorate).

The most significant issue for Reading relates to the construction vehicle route, which will primarily be via the A4 (Bath Road) and Burghfield Road - both major commuter routes for Reading. The construction phase is anticipated to last for 6 years. The Environmental Appraisal (non-technical summary) submitted with the application explains that the average additional HGV construction traffic generated will be 58 movements per day rising to a peak of 182 HGV movements per day during a 5 week period in the winter of 2010/2011 with car and van trips anticipated to peak at 1,228 movements per day in the winter of 2012/2013.

Transport section officers are still preparing their response, which will be provided for your meeting in an update report.

7. CONCLUSION

It has been concluded that there are no grounds for raising a planning objection to the planning application in terms of the principle of the development or its potential health and safety impacts on Reading. Officers have written to West Berkshire to confirm, on a "without prejudice" basis that we raise no objections but have asked for reassurance that our construction transport related concerns will be considered and that we are included in their consultations when application is made to discharge the relevant conditions. Members are asked to confirm this response.

Case Officer: Julie Williams

Plans: site location and layout plan
Elevations