

Site History

The site has a long and complex planning history – see site number 101084. The most relevant site history is:

04/00945/OUT: Circular 18/84 Notice of Proposed Development for laser research facility (outline). No objections raised by Thatcham Area Planning Sub-Committee on 23rd June 2004.

The reserved matters currently under consideration relate to this outline notification.

Publicity of Application

Site Notice Expired: 7th October 2005

Press Notice Expired: 29th September 2005

Neighbour Notification Expired: 30th September 2005

Consultations and Representations

Parish Council: No objections.

Adjacent Parish No objections.

(Padworth):

Adjacent Parish: No objections.

(Mortimer):

Adjacent Parish Request that work is only carried out during standard working hours as applied to any major construction works i.e. 7.30-18.00
(Tadley): Monday to Friday and 8.00-13.00 on Saturday.

Highways: No comments.

Hampshire County Raise no highway objection.

Council:

Environment No objections, in principle, but recommend 2 conditions to be
Agency: attached relating to surface water control and a site investigation.

English Nature: Advises that the development outlined in the current application does not affect the nearby Sites of Special Scientific Interest and do not wish to comment.

Ecology Officer: No objections.

Thames Water: No objection.

Health and Safety No objection on nuclear safety grounds to this development.

Executive:

Public Protection: No observations to make.

**Slough Borough
Council:**

It would be wrong for West Berkshire Council to consent to this application and given its national significance respectfully request this matter to be referred to the ODPM for determination at a Public Inquiry.

Correspondence:

As at 10/11/05, 224 letters of objection received, together with 4 petitions containing 59 signatures from addresses in Sweden, 20 signatures from the Women's International League of Peace and Freedom and 28 signatures from residents of the Permanent Travellers Site on Paices Hill. The majority of the responses received comprise a standard letter which set out 6 main grounds of objection:

- The laser facility is a major £20 million development which forms part of AWE's Site Development Strategy Plan and as such should not be considered in isolation. No overall Environmental Impact Assessment for the site as a whole has been carried out. This is contrary to the resolution of the Eastern Area Planning Committee meeting on 23rd February 2005 which resolved that the Ministry of Defence should provide an environmental assessment of all of the developments taken as a whole;
- It will have a major negative impact on the character and appearance of the area given the size of the proposed building;
- It will have a massive impact on traffic and no overall Transport Strategy has been provided;
- A dangerous procedure is to take place inside and any additional high-risk procedure at this nuclear warhead production site is unreasonable, both for neighbours and for the local public protection authority;
- There could be accidental discharge of radioactive particles and the possible effects of a serious laser accident are not known; and
- This proposed development is part of a major defence project, is not a local issue and should be referred to the Secretary of State.
- The standard letter ends by calling for a Public Inquiry.

Separate letters have also been received from the Green Party, the Nuclear Awareness Group and the Nuclear Information Service which reiterate and amplify the above points. Specifically the letter from the Nuclear Information Service provides detailed objections relating to the siting being too close to the boundary, the 'bizarre' design of the building and the external appearance which would dominate the landscape and the neighbouring rural community.

Since the date of the Committee of 23rd November 2005, 3 further letters of objection have been received, including a letter from the Public Interest Lawyers. The further grounds of objection relate to the colour scheme and scale of the building making it very conspicuous in the landscape, the building having the potential to distract drivers using the A340, the building providing a large and conspicuous target for a terrorist attack, general issues relating to nature and use of the site and reiteration of the call for a Public Inquiry.

Policy Considerations

Planning Policy Statement 1 2005 – Delivering Sustainable Development.
West Berkshire District Local Plan 1991-2006 – Policy ENV.18 (Control of Development in the Countryside); ENV.25 (Defence and Government Establishments in the Countryside); Policy OVS.2 (Core Policy).

Description of Development

This application is a Notification of Proposed Development submitted under Circular 18/84 and is for the detailed consideration of the reserved matters of design, external appearance and landscaping. The outline notification was considered under reference number 04/00945/OUT and the Local Planning Authority raised no objection to this on 23rd June 2004. This form of application is specifically for applications on Crown Land and Government establishments. Central Government Circular 18/84 sets out the background and procedures to be followed in this type of application. Essentially, it is processed in the same way as a normal planning application and should be determined within the usual 8 week statutory period, or in this case 13 weeks as the notification proposes major development.

The notification includes additional environmental information (AEI), however, this is not intended to represent a formal statutory Environmental Statement (ES) as required under the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 1999, since the proposal is not a planning application and the Regulations do not apply.

The notification has been submitted for a replacement laser research facility to replace an existing laser research facility on the site which is 25 years old. The development proposes research facilities, offices, workshop areas and laboratories. The development has been designed to meet modern standards and to accommodate approximately 50 staff who would be transferred from the existing facility. It should be noted that no increase in staff is anticipated and there will be no new jobs created. The building has been designed with a 50 year minimum design life.

The site of the proposed development has been established by the outline notification and is located to the west of the AWE site. This site previously had industrial buildings on it. At its highest point the main building would be 26 metres high on the eastern elevation. On the western elevation, that which would be most visible from Paices Hill and from outside the site, the main building would be 21 metres in height. The footprint dimensions are 96 metres long by 60 metres wide. The development would comprise space for laser generation plant, a target hall for the laser experiments, preparation rooms, laser diagnostics, laser development, optical coating and photometry. There would also be

general office areas, a conference room, a control room, clean rooms and a visitor/exhibition area all contained in the main building.

In addition to the main building there would be 5 minor buildings and compounds to house plant immediately adjacent to the main building. These include a transformer compound of 13m x 10m, a chiller compound of 11m x 8m, two bottle stores each 6m x 4m and a cycle shed 4m x 2.5m.

The replacement laser facility would be used to conduct experiments on minute particles of matter for the study of plasma physics.

Consideration of the Proposal

Paragraph 2.52 of the West Berkshire District Local Plan 1991-2006 refers specifically to defence and Government establishments in the countryside and states at 2.52.1 that *“applications submitted for Crown development relating to existing establishments would be supported where required for the continuation of operational activities related to the use of the establishment within the context of the other policies in the Plan”*.

The Site Development Strategy Plan September 2003 Update published by AWE advises that the Ministry of Defence has stated the need for the Aldermaston site to continue its operation and therefore the principle of further development to allow the continuation of operational activities is acceptable, subject to compliance with other policies of the Development Plan.

The main issue in this case is consideration of the design, external appearance and landscaping and how this impacts on the character and appearance of the area. This application was reported to the Eastern Area Planning Committee on 23rd November 2005 where Members’ resolved to defer the decision subject to further information, actions and further time for Members, Parish Councils and other interested parties to consider the Site Development Context Plan and Strategic Sustainability Appraisal published by AWE plc in November 2005. As a first task it is therefore necessary to address Members’ concerns relating to these issues.

Addressing Members’ Concerns Raised at the Eastern Area Planning Committee on 23rd November 2005.

At the Committee meeting on the 23rd November 2005 Members deferred making a decision on this notification. The reason given was to allow Members, Parish Councils and other interested parties time to consider the notification in the context of the recently released AWE Aldermaston & Burghfield Site Development Context Plan 2005-2015 (SDCP) and the Strategic Sustainability Appraisal of the Site Development Context Plan (SSA). It should be noted that these documents provide the context for future applications and relate to the wider development of the site.

Since this Committee meeting these documents have been distributed to all Members of the Eastern Area Planning Committee and Substitutes; undertaken on the 1st December 2005. Similarly, these documents were sent to all affected Parish Councils on the 8th December 2005 and to Newbury, Thatcham, Burghfield Common, Mortimer, Theale and Tadley Libraries on 11th January 2006. Three copies of the documents have also been provided to the Cross Border Working Party.

At the Committee meeting on 23rd November 2005 Members also raised three specific actions. These were to ask the applicant:

1. To justify the notification in relation to the recently submitted Context Plan and Sustainability Appraisal;
2. To expand on landscape impact and traffic impacts;
3. To provide further information on emissions from this particular development.

Members also asked for a considered officer view on these documents and how they meet Members' previous resolution from the Eastern Area Committee on 23rd February 2005 for a comprehensive Environmental Statement in respect of all proposals in the previous Site Development Strategy Plan (September 2003 update). In relation to this point it is Officer's opinion that these documents are separate and distinct from the consideration of the reserved matters notification currently before Members. The documents relate to future proposals, whereas the principle of the Orion laser facility has been agreed by the Council raising no objection to the outline notification dated 23rd June 2004. Additionally as notifications under Circular 18/84 are not planning applications, the provision of the Town and Country Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 1999 do not apply. The Council does not have any power to demand an Environmental Impact Assessment in relation to proposed development at AWE, however a document equating to an environmental statement accompanied both the outline and reserved matters notifications. The SDCP and SSA are considered to represent an appropriate response to the Council's request for comprehensive environmental information.

Members have also asked for inaccuracies in the SSA to be corrected and for Officers to suggest to AWE to consider holding a public briefing on the long term plans for the site. These issues lie outside of the remit of determining this notification, however, are being progressed by Officers separately to the consideration of this notification.

As requested by Members, the questions arising from the original Committee have been put to the Ministry of Defence. Below is a summary of the response provided by the Ministry:

1. Relationship between the Orion reserved matters NOPD and the Site Development Context Plan and Strategic Sustainability Appraisal (SDCP/SSA).

The Site Development Context Plan explains that its purpose is "... to define the broad parameters of the Government's July 2005 investment programme in land use terms..." In setting out this land-use picture there are elements of it that are already committed. These include three modular office buildings, two information technology facilities and the Orion Laser. In the case of Orion this received outline permission in June 2004, over 12 months before the July 2005 investment programme was announced by the Secretary of State and 8 months before the Eastern Area Planning Committee requested a comprehensive Environmental Statement in respect of all proposals in the Site Development Strategy Plan.

The status of Orion in the SDCP is thus as an existing commitment in exactly the same way as an outline planning permission would be regarded in a Local Plan. This commitment will be taken into account when other elements of the programme are brought forward but the publication of the SDCP does not change the committed status of the Orion proposal.

Insofar as the Strategic Sustainability Appraisal (SSA) is concerned, in a similar way this operates from a baseline which includes Orion as a commitment along with the other facilities referred to above. It is directed exclusively at future proposals. The environmental issues referred to in the SSA have been addressed during the consideration of the outline notification in 2004. In summary both the SDCP and the SSA provide the context for future applications.

2. Landscape and traffic impacts.

The outline Notification set the dimensions of no more than 26 metres high on the eastern elevation and 21 metres to the west. The maximum footprint was given as 110 metres x 60 metres. The dimensions of the building in the reserved matters Notification are within these parameters, with the length of the building being reduced to 96 metres rather than 110 metres. As such the impact of the proposal on the wider landscape and the visual impact resulting from the size and scale of the building were assessed at the outline stage and considered to be acceptable. *Further issues relating to hard and soft landscaping are considered later in this report.

In relation to traffic impacts, the environmental information supporting the outline notification indicated that there would only be a minor increase in traffic arising from the operation of the Orion facility, principally relating to a small increase in the number of visitors. Permanent staff at the facility are expected to number 40-50 and these staff are already employed on the site. Accordingly there would be no increase in traffic arising from staff vehicle movements.

During the construction period it is estimated that up to about 150-200 workers a day would be employed on the site and 13 HGVs per day would require access. Given the number of access routes to the site, the additional traffic that would be generated by these construction activities would be dispersed across the highway network, thereby diluting the impact. Having regard to this, it is considered that any resulting increase in traffic would lie within typical variations in daily traffic flows. No objections have been received from the Highway Authority or any other statutory consultee.

As additional proposals come forward in the future the cumulative impact of traffic, particularly during construction, will be an important issue. The Strategic Sustainability Appraisal has identified a need for a comprehensive construction management strategy that will address this aspect of the development programme.

3. Further information with respect to emissions.

The supporting environmental information that accompanied the outline Notification dealt with emissions to air, water, noise and radiation. The overall conclusions were that:-

“The potential for release of material onto the environment and consequent contamination is extremely low, given the systems and procedures in place”.

These matters are also covered by a comprehensive system of other regulatory arrangement outside the planning system that will ensure compliance with recognised standards applicable across a wide range of industrial and related activities.

This concludes the response from the Ministry of Defence.

Impact of the Proposed Development on the Character and Appearance of the Area.

The detailed siting of the main building is as agreed in the outline notification 04/00945/OUT which is on the western side of the AWE site, approximately 100 metres from the site boundary with Paices Hill. In this location it was recognised that the building would be seen from outside the site, however when considered in context with the site surroundings and given the backdrop against existing buildings on the site, it was considered that the visual impact would not be unduly harmful.

Design and External Appearance

The design of the building is detailed in the accompanying drawings and computer generated graphics. PPS1 'Delivering Sustainable Development' states that: "Good design ensures attractive, usable, durable and adaptable places and is a key element in achieving sustainable development." It continues by stating that "Planning authorities

should plan positively for the achievement of high quality and inclusive design for all development, including individual buildings...” Whilst this relates to wider issues of design and layout it also states that the visual appearance and architecture of individual buildings are factors in achieving these wider objectives.

In this instance it is your Officer’s opinion that this building achieves a high standard of design and achieves an unusual but pleasant form resulting from the curved profile of the building. The rectangular and angular Target Hall then provides a stark contrast to the curved profile of the ‘wings’ which provides interesting side elevation profiles. The materials chosen for the appearance complement the modern architectural style. Specifically the materials include light blue, dark blue and silver composite cladding panels, glass, flint coloured polished masonry blocks and natural aluminium for the roof. The design and external appearance combine to create a modern, interesting building that would assist in beginning to improve the appearance of the buildings on this site.

At the outline stage it was recognised that the main building would be visible from outside the site. Given this it is important that the building achieves a high standard of design and uses appropriate materials. It is considered that this submission achieves these objectives and ensures that there is no significant adverse impact on the character and appearance of the area.

Landscaping

The scheme includes significant areas of hardstanding for parking, unloading areas and pedestrian footpaths. However, the proposal seeks to use interlocking concrete blocks, in two different colours, in addition to some areas of tarmac which, due to the variation of materials, would provide a more aesthetically pleasing finish than simply using tarmac or concrete across the whole site. The proposal also includes the grassing of significant amounts of areas around the building to assist in softening the impact of the building.

The building would be screened to a certain extent by existing trees and vegetation on the site perimeter. However, a site wide landscape assessment is currently being conducted and there is extensive planting planned for the whole site in the future. It is considered to be appropriate for any new planting within the site to be implemented as part of the site wide landscaping project currently under development, rather than in a piecemeal fashion. Given the variety in the use of hard surfacing materials, the hard and soft landscaping associated with the proposal is considered acceptable.

Traffic and Access

Given that the proposed replacement laser facility would relocate staff that work on the existing laser facility and no staff increases are proposed, the only additional significant traffic impacts would result from construction traffic. West Berkshire Council’s Highway Authority has raised no issues in this respect. Additionally it should be noted that Hampshire County Council have commented that the highway impact of this development was considered at the outline stage and it was concluded that there would not be an unacceptable impact on the highway network. It is stated that the site itself is well located in terms of proximity to strategic roads which are strategic routes and are considered acceptable to carry the volume of traffic proposed by the development as part of the construction. Hampshire County Council has raised no highway objection.

Other Issues Raised

At the Committee meeting on the 23rd November 2005 there was discussion regarding hours of working and this issue was also raised in Tadley Parish Council's response. As a consultee, the Local Planning Authority cannot add conditions to any decision. However, a letter has been received from AWE stating that documents are being prepared (Construction Logistics Strategy - CLS and Code of Construction Practice -COCP) with one of the key objectives being to ensure that construction activities are managed so as to minimise any adverse impacts upon those who live and work in and around the AWE sites. The CLS and CoCP will address, amongst other matters, hours of working and AWE have advised that it is expected that some standard hours of working would be agreed for routine construction activities. On occasions there will be a need for work to occur outside these agreed periods and in such circumstances, AWE have stated that they will discuss such variations beforehand with Officers and communicate those variations to the local community in an agreed manner.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the reserved matter submissions relating to the outline notification 04/00945/OUT are acceptable. Specifically the design and external appearance of the building are considered to represent an interesting modern design complemented by the use of modern and appropriate materials. Although visible from outside the site, given the high standard of design and materials, this visual impact is considered to be acceptable. The landscaping associated with this development is also considered to be acceptable and will be augmented by the side wide landscaping project currently under development.

Full Recommendation

That the Head of Planning and Transport Strategy be authorised to raise no objections to the Notice of Proposed Development for a replacement laser research facility.

Informatives:

1. Surface water control measures shall be carried out in accordance with details which shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority before development commences.

Reason: To prevent the increased risk of flooding and to improve water quality.

2. No development approved by this planning permission shall be commenced until:
 - a) The site investigation has been undertaken in accordance with details approved by the Local Planning Authority and a risk assessment has been undertaken.
 - b) A Method Statement detailing the remediation requirements, including measures to minimise the impact on ground and surface waters, using the information obtained from the Site Investigation has been submitted to the Local Planning Authority. This should be approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority prior to that remediation being carried out on the site.

Reason: To ensure that the proposed site investigations and remediation will not cause pollution of Controlled Waters.

3. The Environment Agency is not aware of any watercourses on the site, but should there be any, they advise that:
 - a) they should not be culverted; and
 - b) a buffer zone is left on either side of any watercourse; and
 - c) culverted watercourses should not be built over, but should ideally be opened up and made a feature of the site.

4. The applicant's attention is drawn to the informatives attached to the Local Planning Authority's consultation response in respect of Notification 04/00945/OUT dated 23rd June 2004.