

Briefing

Land at Hoad Way, Theale - 24/00145/FULMAJ – Landscape Response (Planning)

25th June 2024

Introduction

1. The Council's Landscape Response has been prepared by Liz Allen Environmental Planning Landscape Architecture (LAEPLA) who is a consultant to the Council.
2. Much of the LAEPLA response relates to the methodology utilised by the applicant's team in the completion of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) prepared and submitted as part of the planning application. This matter is robustly dealt with by Turley Landscape and VIA in their own rebuttal to the comments received.
3. The LAEPLA review concludes that the proposed buildings will have a *"significant adverse landscape effect on the landscape quality of this area, an adverse effect on the Conservation Area of Theale, an adverse effect on the separate identity of Theale from Calcot and a degrading effect on the approach and gateway into Theale as an historic settlement."*
4. In addition, the LAEPLA review considers that *"the proposals will have an adverse effect on identified valued landscape features and qualities" and that the proposals will exacerbate detractors by proposing large scale buildings within this highly visible area."*
5. The LAEPLA concludes by noting that *"the proposed buildings, car parking, lorry parks and access roads will degrade an important open site at the entrance to the historic village of Theale. The proposals will also reduce the separation of Theale and Calcot creating one continuous area of development. therefore, as detailed above the proposal is contrary to the NPPF and to Local Plan policies, CS14, CS19 and ADPP5 as stated."*
6. It is the Applicants strong view that the LAEPLA response has considerably overplayed the landscape harm and in turn has downplayed the surrounding detracting urban context of the site. It is the Applicants view that the Landscape Capacity of the site is much greater than that posited by the Council's consultant and that in any event this 'harm' should be weighed in the overall planning balance.

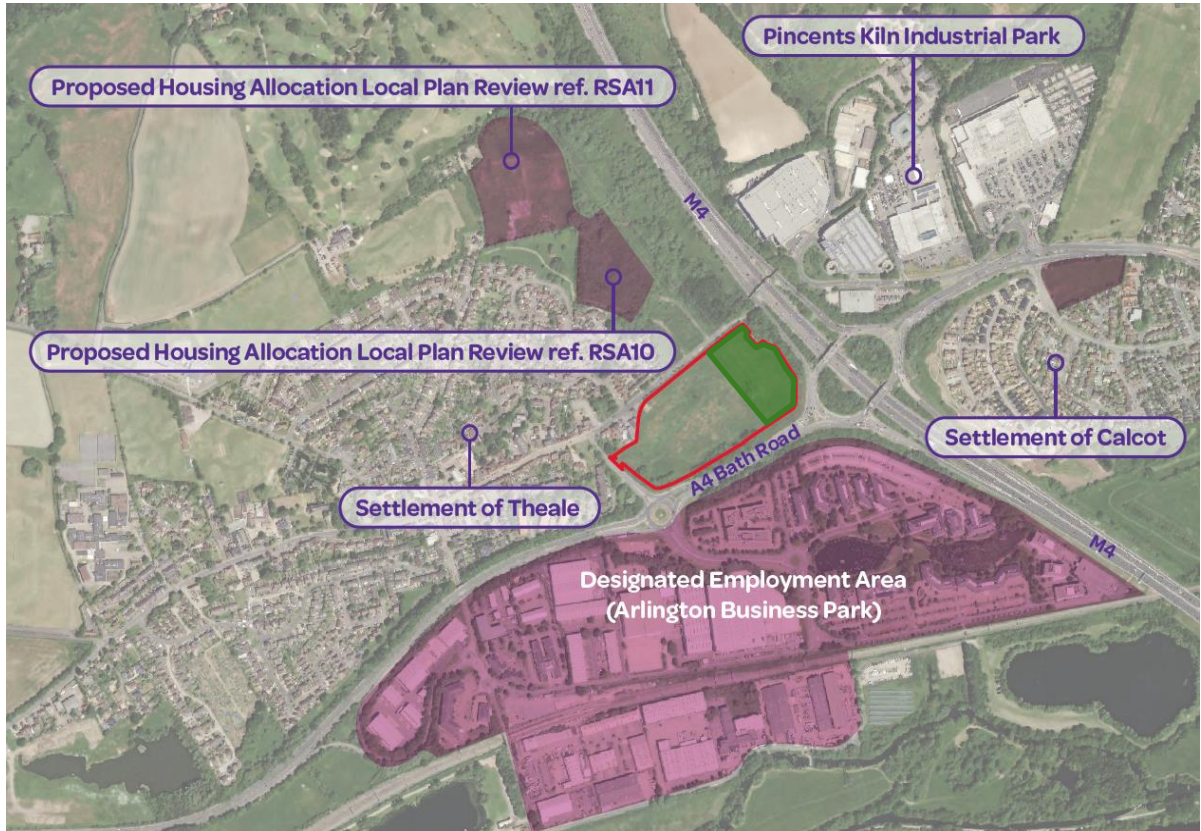
Consideration of the Site and its Context

7. The Site comprises an area of rough grassland adjacent to the east of Theale, adjacent to modern residential development and light industrial uses, immediately abutting the M4 which dissects Theale from Calcot and Tilehurst.
8. The A4 lies to the north of the established and designated employment sites known as Arlington Business Park and Theale Industrial Estate. The site lies at a lower ground level than that of both

the A4 and M4, it is not crossed by any public footpaths (nor is it publicly accessible) and a large electrical pylon sits within the site.

9. Arlington Business Park consists of mainly office buildings within a landscaped setting, whilst Theale Business Park comprises predominantly warehouse development with limited landscaping and a large proportion of loading bays, yard areas and parking associated with the distribution uses. Arlington Business Park and Theale Industrial Estate are also accessed off the A4 Bath Road.
10. To the west of the site lies James Butcher Drive where there are existing three storey residential apartments accessed from Hoad Way. There is a tree belt along the site boundary with well-established trees. Further west lies the centre of the village of Theale which has a range of residential, retail and commercial properties. It is acknowledged that the site falls within the setting of the Theale conservation area and that a very small proportion of the site falls within it.
11. To the north of the site there is a modern residential estate on the other side of the old High Street. This estate abuts an undeveloped field further east (subject to an approved planning application for a 160-bed hotel in 1988, which was never built out). Part of this field is proposed for allocation as a housing site within the emerging Local Plan currently the subject of examination under Policies RSA10-11. This land It is noteworthy that proposed allocation RSA11 is further away from the settlement edge than the proposed development and closer to the National Landscape.
12. The A4 Bath Road also runs to the south of the site, meaning the site is highly connected to major transport routes, principally the M4 Motorway at Junction 12.
13. Beyond the M4 immediately to its east is another established employment area (Pincents Kiln Industrial Park) and the settlement of Calcot. Pincents Kiln Industrial Park comprises an IKEA retail warehouse with a large multistorey car park, a second large retail warehouse (currently occupied by Dunelm), a large Porsche dealership and servicing centre and a large retail park comprising a Sainsburys, McDonalds, Sports Direct, Boots and B&M. There are several other business/industrial units further into the industrial park. These uses sit directly adjacent to the National Landscape. It is of note that during the Local Plan examination the Inspector has instructed the Council to extend the settlement boundary to include this area.
14. This is all clearly depicted in Figure 1 below:

Figure 1: Site surroundings



15. The character of the site is considerably influenced by infrastructure arising from the surrounding road network of the M4 carriageway and Junction 12, as well as the A4 Bath Road and Theale High Street. The site sits adjacent to the strategic road network for West Berkshire and the wider Thames Valley.
16. The site is not within the North Wessex Down Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (now known as a National Landscape) which is located north-west of the application site. An extract of the National Landscape extent is provided below (green hatching):

Figure 2: Extract of Proposals Map showing National Landscape (in green hatching)



17. It should also be noted that the boundary of the National Landscape was drawn prior to the construction of the M4 Motorway and that the element on the western side of the M4 is now an outlier.
18. The site is cut off from the wider countryside (including the National Landscape to the north and north-east) by these areas of development and by the network of roads which encloses the site on all four sides. The site currently forms an area of undeveloped land on the edge of the settlement and has no demonstrable attributes which elevate it above the ordinary in landscape or visual terms.
19. With consideration of the above it is the Applicants view that the proposed site does not sit within a high category of visual sensitivity and that a number of characteristics and factors are present which reduce the visual sensitivity of the site. These include:
 - Partial enclosure of the site by belts of mature vegetation and hedgerows and existing buildings. The site is not, as Ms Allen suggests, 'visually prominent'; whilst there are some open views across the site, they are intermittent and from much of the surrounding roads the site is well enclosed which reduces the appreciation of its

openness. This sense of enclosure will be increased by the proposed development through a substantial landscaping strategy which will seek significant planting on the boundaries of the site and at key view point locations including the north-eastern and south-eastern corners of the site. In addition, the site lies at a lower topography than the M4 and boundary vegetation, therefore meaning development of the site will be further screened by the difference in levels

- There is an absence of rights of way passing through the site or any public access to the site (the site is not an area of recreational importance) and there is limited visibility across the site from the public footpath to the north of the site due to the presence of a dense hedgerow. The proposals will however incorporate a footpath from Hoad Way to the High Street improving the accessibility of the area;
- Views across the site are primarily experienced by drivers on the roads around the edge of the site which are generally of lower sensitivity than users of recreational routes or public open spaces;
- Few residential properties overlook the site (despite its proximity to the settlement edge). The closest properties to the Site are in commercial use or set back from the site by long gardens or roads. For most of the properties which do look across the site, trees are present between the site and the properties which provide partial filtering of views of the site, particularly in summer;
- Absence of landmarks within the site which contribute to local visual amenity and the presence of detracting elements including pylons and high voltage power lines, surrounding commercial developments and notably the M4 Motorway and A4 Bath Road;
- Visual and scenic quality of the site is not high and does not make an important contribution to the character or identity of Theale;
- Site does not contribute to the local skyline (other than the electricity pylons which are detracting elements on the skyline); and
- Views across the site are not identified in published documents as being valued or key views. Views across the site from the roundabout junction with the motorway were only recently opened up when vegetation was removed to accommodate changes to the road junction (in c. 2016). Replacement planting has recently been implemented which, as it matures, will screen the site again;

20. As per the Turley LVIA Response Note (dated June 2024), the LVIA visualisations demonstrate that the development would not be visible from the AONB. These viewpoints (which were agreed whilst out on site with Liz Allen) have been extracted below (please refer to the LVIA Appendix 1, Figure 5 for the viewpoint locations):



Figure 3: Viewpoint 14 – view north-east from Hoad Way – the National Landscape is not discernible in this view



Figure 4: Viewpoint 9 – view towards the Site from within the National Landscape – visualisation demonstrates that the proposed development would sit below the tree line and would not be visible



Figure 5: Viewpoint 12 – view towards the Site from within the National Landscape – visualisation demonstrates that the proposed development would sit below the tree line and would not be visible

21. In relation to the proposals impact on the perceived coalescence of Theale and Calcot, the Applicant would again argue that this has been overstated. The M4 Motorway is already a significant element of separation between the two settlements. The proposals accommodate a greater than 120metre green buffer between the edge of the proposed built development and the M4 Motorway. Notably this is the same size buffer as that of the proposed allocation RSA10-11 in the emerging Local Plan, as outlined on Figure 1 with the extent of the retained greenfield land washed in green.
22. The Council appear to have taken an inconsistent approach in their consideration of the impact of the proposed development vs the proposed allocation of sites.
23. The delivery of the allocated sites RSA10 and 11 will result in the site becoming an island on the edge of Theale. It will be surrounded on four sides by built development, namely:
 - To the south by the A4 and Arlington Business Park, immediately beyond;
 - To the east by the M4 Motorway, and Junction 12, and then Pinsents Kiln Industrial Estate and Calcott beyond;
 - To the west by the settlement of Theale; and
 - To the north by the settlement of Theale and the proposed allocations of RSA10 and 11 in the emerging Local Plan.
24. This is plain from Figure 1 above.
25. Further as part of the Local Plan examination, the Inspector has requested that the Council redraw the settlement boundary around Pinsents Lane Industrial Park, which includes IKEA.

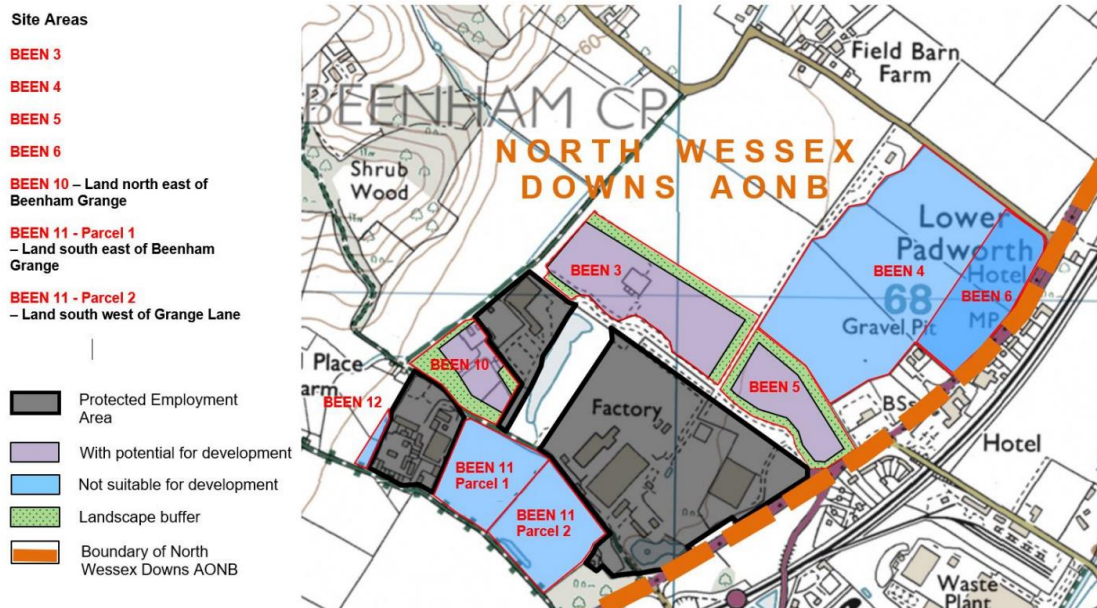
26. Importantly the application site is not defined as an important gap by either the adopted or emerging Local Plan. In the context of the emerging Local Plan this is especially important due to Policy DM2 considering the need for the separation of settlements around Newbury and Thatcham, principally due to coalescence concerns. Important gaps have therefore been enshrined in policy by the Council. The site therefore has no policy status beyond an 'ordinary landscape'.
27. It is the Applicants strong view that the sensitivity of the site has been overstated and its capacity to accommodate development has been considerably understated by LAEPLA and that Officers should take a more balanced view of the surrounding characteristics of the site as set out by the Landscape and Visual Impact Appraisal prepared by Turley.

Emerging Local Plan Context

28. It is essential at the outset to remember that the site was identified by the Council in the December 2020 Regulation 18 version of the emerging Local Plan as a draft employment allocation under Policy EMP6 for 20,000 sqm of floorspace.
29. The Council at that time found the site suitable, available and achievable.
30. This position was only altered as a result of the Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Assessment undertaken by LAEPLA¹. The Applicant reviewed this work and provided a technical response to the Council and also submitted this as part of their Regulation 19 Representations. This work was not taken into account as part of the Council's consideration of sites, nor was any response received by the Applicant to this additional work.
31. Furthermore, the Council have at no point acknowledged the positive changes made by the Applicant to the scheme and the reduction in the mass and quantum of development.
32. This is especially concerning when consideration is given to the sites the Council have identified for allocation in the Local Plan. Four of the six sites identified (ESA2, ESA3, ESA4, ESA5) are situated within the National Landscape. With a further one directly adjacent to the National Landscape. It is plain that the Council has allocated sites within 'designated' landscapes, and therefore afforded a higher status of sensitivity than the applicant site but have discounted this site.
33. The Applicants' concern is compounded when consideration is given to the Landscape Sensitivity Work undertaken by LAEPLA as part of the examination process for the allocated sites. For example, in the consideration of Beenham Industrial Area, sitting within the National Landscape, consideration was given to where development could be accommodated and appropriate mitigation through landscape buffers to facilitate development (see extract below). The same approach was not adopted with the application site and instead it was simply disregarded, despite being outside of the National Landscape. There is a clear inconsistency in approach.

¹ Available here - [LCA for land off Hoad Way Theale ref THE8 Sept 2021.pdf \(westberks.gov.uk\)](#)

Figure 3: Beenham Industrial Area - potential for further development



34. The Applicants' concerns are compounded further when consideration is given to paragraph 11(b) of the National Planning Policy Framework, which states that "strategic policies should seek to meet anticipated needs over the plan period, unless:

"i) The application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a strong reason for restricting the overall scale, type, or distribution of development in the plan area; or

ii) Any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole."

35. The Council have accepted through the current Local Plan examination process there is an acute and identified employment need within West Berkshire, that they cannot meet with the sites currently proposed for allocation
36. The Inspector has requested that the Council amend the emerging Local Plan to state and define the employment requirement as a minimum in emerging Policy SP20. The emerging Policy now states:

"Through the LPR the Council will seek to facilitate the growth and forecasted change of business development over the plan period through site allocations and by promoting the supply of office and industrial space across the District to meet the identified needs. For the plan period 2023 – 2041 there is a requirement across the District for a minimum of 57,531sqm (NIA) of office space and a minimum of 98,196sqm (GIA) of industrial space."

Our Emphasis

37. Based on a supply of 58,400sqm of industrial land over the plan period, this leaves a shortfall of 39,795sqm of floorspace, equal to circa 40% of the overall minimum requirement.

38. Furthermore, we are aware that Arlington Business Park is at close to full occupancy, and as a result the Applicant has had multiple tenants enquiries for the space proposed by this application. This crystallises that this need is real and tangible and needs to be met in the short term not over a 20 year plan period.
39. It is not yet clear whether the Inspector will identify shortcomings in the Council's plan which will require further work, including potentially finding additional sites for allocation or whether he will find the Plan sound, but it is plain that this level of shortfall is exceptional and helping to meet that shortfall should be afforded substantial positive weight in the decision-making process.
40. This is reinforced by the Council's own evidence through the SA/SEA Environmental Report November 2022 which in Table 55 states that *"there is an overriding need for additional employment for industrial uses within the district and therefore, exceptional circumstances (NPPF Para 177) can be demonstrated regarding the allocation of the site within the AONB."*
41. The Council evidently accept that there are exceptional circumstances for identifying proposed allocations within the National Landscape. Within this context we would posit that these same exceptional circumstances exist in justifying a grant of planning permission for the application site, which sits outside of the AONB and in what the Applicant would argue as 'ordinary landscape'.

The Evolution of the Proposals

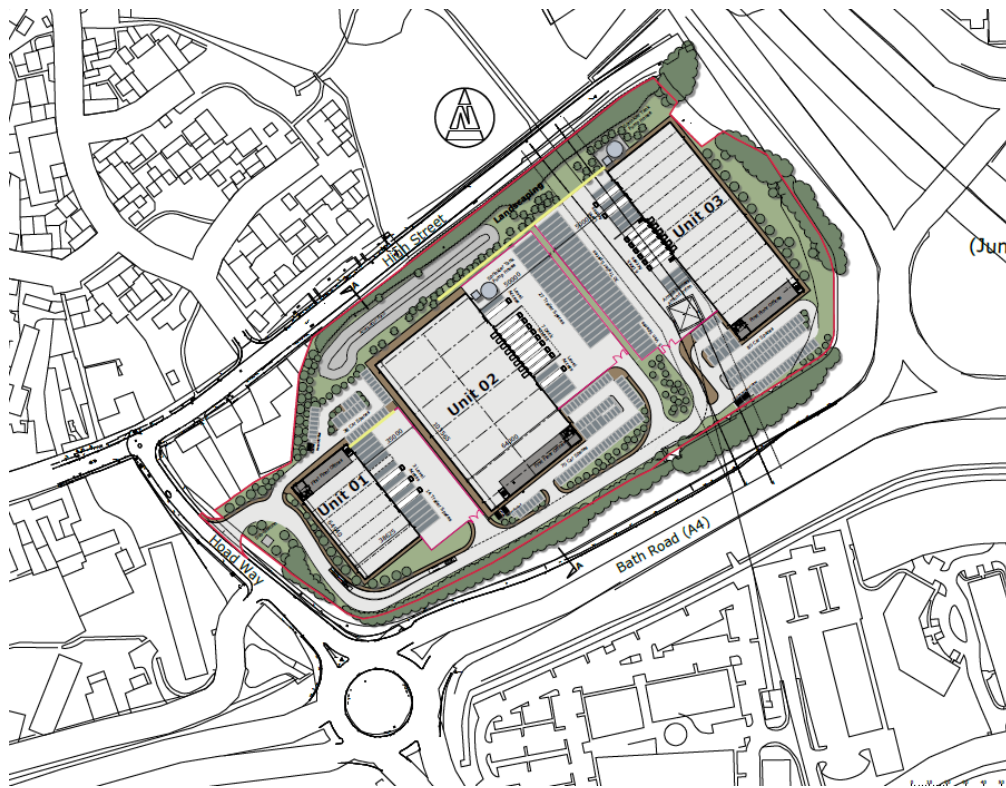
42. Officers will be aware that a previous application (Ref No: 21/02029/COMIND) was submitted on the site for a similar proposal although was subsequently withdrawn following discussions with Officer's prior to determination.
43. It is noteworthy that since the withdrawal of this planning application, the Applicant has made the following significant amendments to the proposals for the site, which were made in direct response to the Landscape and Sensitivity Work undertaken in support of the emerging Local Plan, this has included:
- The number of units has been reduced from three to two. The overall built footprint of the sites has been reduced from 172,976 sq ft to 103,815 sq ft. The building now sits centrally within a landscape-led proposal.
 - The built form has been pulled back from the eastern edge of the Site maintaining more of the Site as open landscape and pulling built form further away from the boundary of the National Landscape. The 'gap' between the built development and the M4 Motorway is now contiguous with the Council own proposed allocations under emerging policies RSA10-11.
 - The offsets between proposed built form and the northern and western boundaries have been increased.
 - The maximum height of built form has been reduced from 18m down to 13m across the Site in order to increase the containment of built form from the wider landscape and from within the conservation area.

- The elevational treatment has been reviewed and measures incorporated to break down the overall massing of built form in views.
- Additional tree and hedgerow planting is provided within the layout to reinforce the landscape structure. We note that the LAEPLA makes a number of references to tree loss, we would note that there is a significant replanting scheme proposed, which overall will increase the level of tree canopy cover within and bordering the site. This appears to have been disregarded by the LAEPLA.
- A footpath is proposed across the Site to provide access between Hoad Way and the High Street, connecting with the Ikea retail park to the northeast and the wider public right of way network within the AONB. This is again disregarded by the LAEPLA response.

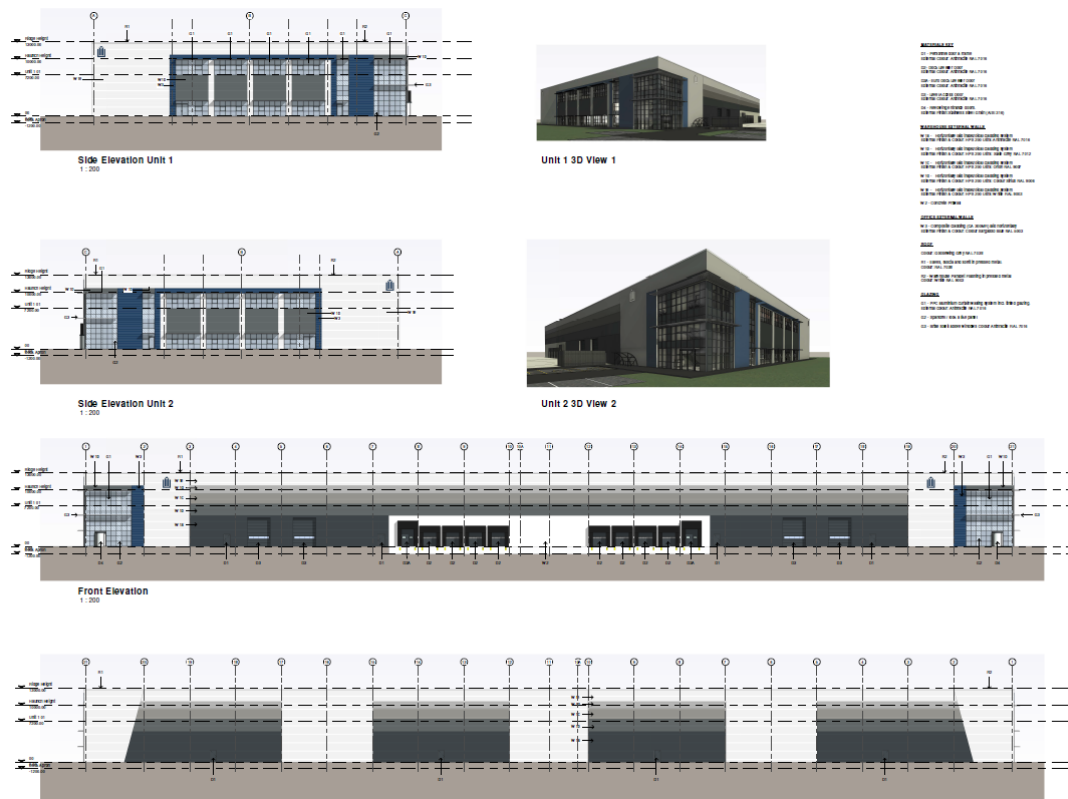
44. In summary the Applicant has taken positive steps to addressing the Council's previous concerns with the proposals and minimising the overall harm from the proposed development.
45. The Applicant notes with concern that the consultee comments received on the application remain the same as those received the earlier submitted scheme (ref. 21/02029/COMIND), despite the above amendments to the proposals following those earlier comments. The amendments in this scheme are clearly distinct from that of the earlier scheme.
46. For ease, a side by side extract of the site plans from both the withdrawn and current applications are overleaf, which clearly illustrate the extent of the positive changes made. It is unclear why the consultee comments have firstly, not acknowledged the changes, and secondly, failed to update their comments as a result.



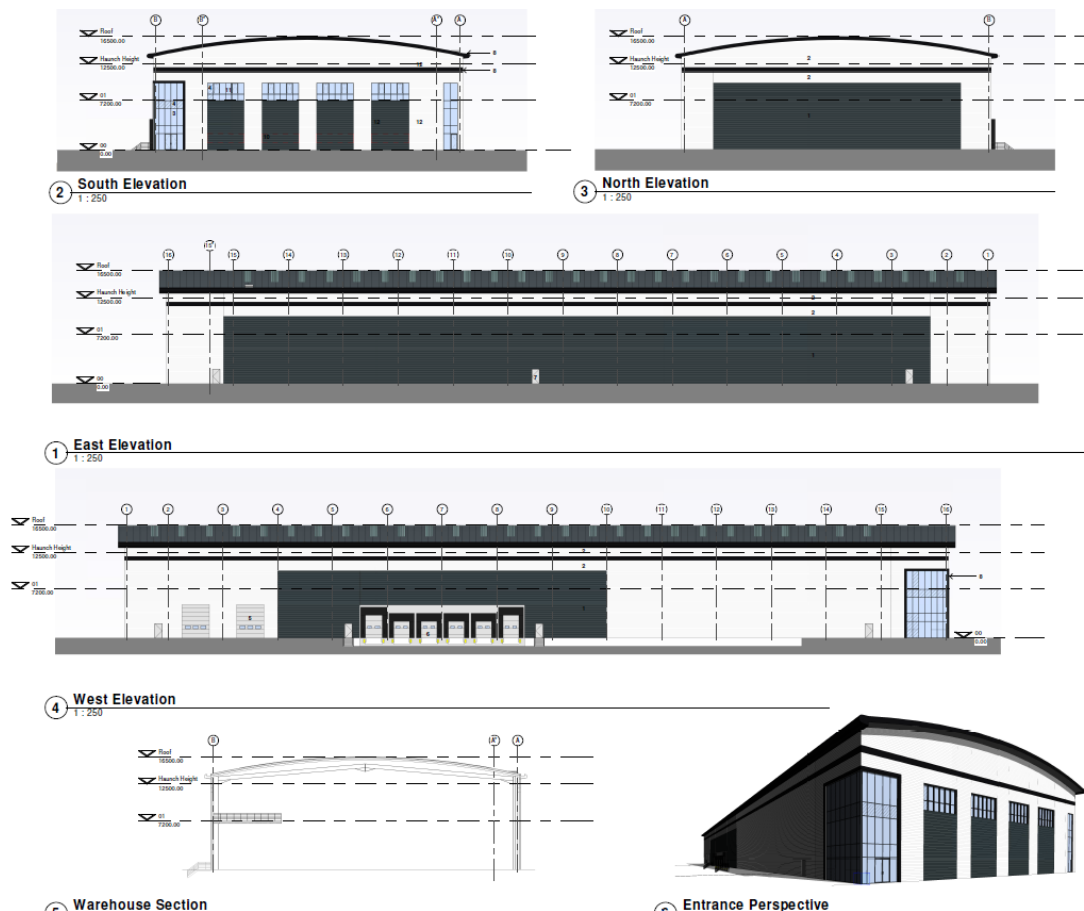
Current Site Plan extract (Rev. P8)



Withdrawn Masterplan (dwg. no. 18-095 SGP ZZ ZZ DR A 131001 Rev. E)



Current Elevations (dwg. no. 18-095-SGP-ZZ-ZZ-DR-A- 131300 Rev. P9)



Withdrawn Elevations (dwg. no. 18-095- SGP- 03- 00-DR-A- 121131 Rev. A)

The Need for Balance

47. Notwithstanding the LAEPLA response (which is a consultation response, the weight of which is up to the LPA to determine) and our response above, it is important to note that the submitted LVA acknowledges that the proposals would result in some adverse landscape and visual effects (although of a lesser magnitude than the officer response suggests).
48. It is inevitable that there will be a degree of landscape change as a result of the proposals on a greenfield parcel of land. The harm is not however out of the ordinary and is not affecting an area or specific features of high sensitivity.
49. The adverse effects need to be balanced against the other benefits of the proposals as part of the planning balance, which the Applicant has undertaken within the Planning Statement submitted in support of the planning application.
50. The Council is also under a duty to undertake this balance as part of the decision-making process. At present we have seen no consideration given to the benefits of the proposed development, nor have we seen the economic development officer's response despite this being requested.
51. We would remind the Council of the following benefits of the proposals to be weighed in the planning balance:
 - Employment need - The Council has explicitly acknowledged that the allocations proposed in its emerging Local Plan Review will not meet needs in full. There is therefore a substantial unmet need of employment space within the Borough. This need was found to have grown in the Council's latest update to its evidence base. The unmet employment need is a material consideration of very significant weight in the decision-making process.
 - Local investment during both the construction and operation phase as set out in the supporting Economic Benefits Assessment to the planning application. During the operational phase the development will deliver 150 jobs supporting on site (comprising 100 net direct jobs and 50 net indirect / induced jobs), a £11.8 million productivity boost and £500,000 per annum of business rates. The economic benefit should be given significant weight.
 - The prime location of the site and accessibility by public transport means it is a genuine opportunity to provide employment to a local workforce and contribute to the local economy. Further the lack of suitable alternatives for employment floorspace within West Berkshire (as evidenced by the substantial shortfall in proposed allocations in the emerging local plan) means focus should be given on prime location sites such as the proposed development. This should be afforded significant weight.
52. The Applicant submits that the substantial benefits of the proposals clearly outweigh the harm to landscape and visual impact (and the less than substantial heritage harm) from the proposed development to justify a grant of planning permission.
53. We would invite the Council to come to the same conclusion.