

APPLICATION NO.	P13/V2140/EZ
APPLICATION TYPE	ENTERPRISE ZONE
REGISTERED	7.10.2013
PARISH	CHILTON
WARD MEMBERS	Margaret Turner Reg Waite
APPLICANT	European Space Agency (ESA)
SITE	European Centre for Space Applications and Telecommunication, Fermi Avenue, Chilton
PROPOSAL	Construction of a new office building with associated car parking within landscape site.
AMENDMENTS	None
GRID REFERENCE	448076/186581
OFFICER	Ms Laura Hudson

1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The application site comprises 1.49 hectares within the Harwell Science and Innovation campus. Fermi Avenue runs to the north of the application site and is the main access road to this part of the campus. To the west lies the Diamond Synchrotron building, which is an iconic part of the campus. To the south and east lay undeveloped areas of ground. The council understands these areas are likely to come forward for development in the future, as part of the expansion of Harwell campus, which falls within the Science Vale UK Enterprise Zone. The site falls within the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).
- 1.2 Science Vale UK was nationally designated as an Enterprise Zone in 2011. It is an area of designated economic growth focussing on becoming a global hotspot for innovation. It is already home to many scientific, research and development and high technology firms. Harwell campus is one of the central parts of the Enterprise Zone. The growth of this nationally important campus is a priority for this council. There is likely to be a particular focus on space applications, an area in which the European Space Agency (ESA) specialises.
- 1.3 ESA are a highly regarded inter-governmental organisation, operating across Europe and jointly owned by 20 European States, including the UK. They have been invited to set up a headquarters within the UK by the government, who see the expansion of the UK space industry to be of national importance. The presence of ESA at Harwell will be a major boost for the UK space industry and also the aims of the Enterprise Zone. It will bring a great deal of prestige to the district. Crucially, the presence of ESA at Harwell would encourage further investment in the campus and the Enterprise Zone. High-tech firms often operate in “clusters” around a prestigious employer such as ESA. Consequently, ESA can be seen as the first stage of a new phase in the evolution of the Harwell Campus.
- 1.4 This application comes to committee in accordance with the council’s agreed protocol for determining planning applications within the Enterprise Zone.
- 1.5 A location plan is attached as **Appendix 1**.

2.0 PROPOSAL

- 2.1 This application proposes the erection of a new office building with conference facilities

that will act as the ESA UK headquarters. The development consists of two linked blocks. The first is a five storey office block in a simple form that will house 120 staff. The ground floor accommodates plant room, social spaces, gym rooms and similar accommodation. The first to fourth floors will contain offices. The total floor space of this building is 3,784 square metres.

- 2.2 The second section of the building is a two-storey conference wing. The ground floor will incorporate the reception area and associated facilities, with the first floor having space for 100 people in the main conference room
- 2.3 The building sits to the eastern side of its plot, with the access road running behind the building directly into the car parking area at the southern part of the site. The western area is left to open landscaping. The two-storey conference wing has a distinctive curved design, which allows for a south facing amenity space behind.
- 2.4 The main five-storey office block will reach a height approximately 19 metres above the adjacent ground level with an additional 1 metre plant structure set in from the edge of the building. The two-storey element is around 9 metres in height.
- 2.5 The facades of the main building will be vertically aligned aluminium panels with integral powder coated aluminium windows. Each window surround will be in differing colours to create a point of interest. The ground floor of the conference room is fully glazed, with vertically aligned aluminium panels at first floor to ensure visual consistency with the main building.
- 2.6 The design of the main office building is consistent in terms of form and detail to other ESA projects within Europe and the organisation are keen to adopt a consistent corporate approach hence the size, finish and appearance. The curved conference facility has been designed to soften the main bulk of the building from the main approach road and mirror the curved form of the adjacent Synchrotron building.
- 2.7 The application is accompanied by a detailed landscape strategy. This seeks to create a high quality external environment, with good connections to the wider campus and a harmonious relationship with the wider setting and landscape character of the AONB.
- 2.8 Extracts from the application plans are attached as **Appendix 2**. Supporting information accompanying the application, including the Design and Access Statement, computer visuals of the finished scheme, Transport Assessment, Travel Plan, Tree Survey, Archaeological Desktop Assessment and the Ecology report can be found on our website.

3.0 **SUMMARY OF CONSULTATIONS & REPRESENTATIONS**

- 3.1 **Chilton Parish Council** – *“The Parish Council does not object to this application and note that the colour scheme is better than the first proposal. The Parish Council would like to know what S106 contribution the VWHDC and OCC are requesting both for public transport provision and infrastructure improvement especially for local cycle-to-work-schemes (OCC Cycleways scheme refers). Also does the Parish receive any S106 contribution from the development?.”*

Harwell Parish Council - No objections

Oxfordshire County Council Highways Authority – No objections, subject to conditions relating to the access and financial contributions to a bus shelter on Fermi Avenue and a Real Time Information system within the shelter and the proposed building

Oxfordshire County Council Drainage Engineer – No objections subject to SUDS scheme being secured

Oxfordshire County Council Archaeologist – No objections subject to conditions requiring the submission and implementation of an archaeological watching brief

Oxfordshire County Council Economic Development Team – Supports the application

Landscape Architect – Objects to the proposal. Without a detailed masterplan for the campus, it is hard to assess whether a 5-storey building in this location is acceptable. Currently, the majority of the taller buildings are on the western side of the campus. This building is located within the context of lower buildings on the eastern side of the campus. Mature vegetation contains the view of Harwell Campus from The Ridgeway, providing a landscape setting. The proposed building will be seen above this vegetation from The Ridgeway and closer views. This visual impact will be harmful.

AONB board – Objects to the proposal due to the height of the proposed building. The building will site in a relatively undeveloped and exposed part of the campus. The building will thus be extremely prominent in the immediate locality and from longer views, including The Ridgeway. This will harm the character and appearance of the AONB. We would prefer a building of three floors, spread over a wider footprint.

Forestry Officer – No objections subject to compliance condition

Drainage Engineer – No objections subject to conditions relating to foul and surface water drainage and a SUDS scheme

Contaminated Land Officer – No objections

Environmental Health Officer – No objections

Countryside Officer – No objections subject to adoption of proposed mitigation strategy

Thames Water Development Control – Raises concerns about the proximity of the building to public sewers. General information about connecting to public sewers provided.

Environment Agency – No response received at time of writing

Neighbour Representations – None received at time of writing

4.0 **RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY**

4.1 None

5.0 **POLICY & GUIDANCE**

5.1 **Vale of White Horse Local Plan 2011 policies;**

E7 - Harwell Science and Innovation Campus

DC1 - Design

DC5 - Access

DC6 - Landscaping

DC8 - The Provision of Infrastructure and Services

DC9 - The Impact of Development on Neighbouring Uses

DC13 - Flood Risk and Water Run-off

DC14 - Flood Risk and Water Run-off

NE6 - The North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty

HE11 - Archaeology

5.2 **National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) – March 2012**

Paragraphs 14 and 29 – presumption in favour of sustainable development

Paragraphs 34 & 37 – encourage minimised journey length to work, shopping, leisure and education

Paragraphs 57, 60 & 61 – promote local distinctiveness and integrate development into the natural, built and historic environment

Paragraph 99 – Flood risk assessment

Paragraph 109 – contribution to and enhancement of the natural environment

Paragraph 111 – encourage the effective use of land

Paragraph 119 – presumption in favour of sustainable development does not override the needs of protected species and habitats

6.0 PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

Principle of development

6.1 Policy E7 of the Vale of White Horse Local Plan is the central policy for guiding proposals for development at Harwell Campus. It states that any proposal will be considered in the context of a comprehensive approach to the whole campus. B1 and B2 development will be supported subject to the following relevant criteria:

- *“The development...meets the requirement of the travel plan for the whole campus to make the necessary contributions...to implement sustainable transport initiatives, including minimising car usage and increasing the use of public transport, walking and cycling”;*
- *“Appropriate contributions [are] made to improving/upgrading access to the campus from the A34, the A4185 and the A417”;*
- *“The development...makes the necessary contributions to a comprehensive landscape plan for the whole campus...In considering proposals for new development, a high quality of landscaping will be required, existing important wildlife habitats will be retained...and opportunities for the creation of new wildlife habitats will be taken, where possible”;*
- *“That proposals for buildings...will not unacceptably harm the character and appearance of the surrounding area, taking into account their location, scale, bulk and height”;*

6.2 The Local Plan pre-dates the designation of the Science Vale UK Enterprise Zone. Nonetheless, it takes a permissive stance to new commercial development at the campus that the designation of the Enterprise Zone reinforces. Consequently, it is clear that the principle of the erection of a new B1 office building on this site is acceptable.

Visual impact – design, character landscape and AONB considerations

6.3 The supporting text for Policy E7 states that it, *“seeks to maintain, and increase where appropriate, structural areas of open space and perimeter landscaping. This is in the interest of protecting wildlife habitats, securing a high quality working environment and reducing the visual impact of the campus in the wider landscape, which forms part of the designated North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).”* The supporting text goes on to say that structures over 12 metres in height, such as that proposed here, will be subject to particular scrutiny.

6.4 Both the council’s landscape architect and the North Wessex Downs AONB board have objected to the application. The primary concern in both instances is the height of the building, relative to existing development on the campus, and the impact this height will have on the special qualities of the AONB and the surrounding landscape.

6.5 The existing campus has a variety of office and research buildings. There is no particular consistency to the campus in terms of building heights, designs, materials and layout. Generally, these buildings are around 2-3 storeys in height and give the impression of modern structures. As discussed, this is a five-storey building, which is significantly higher than any other office building on the campus. It will lie on the eastern part of the campus, which generally has smaller, lower buildings. The only building comparable in height on this part of the campus is the synchrotron. This is obviously a much larger, unique, structure, designed as a statement building that currently dominates the campus.

6.6 Long distance views

There are long distance views of the synchrotron from The Ridgeway, a crucial National Trail, and from other public vantage points, such as Hagbourne Hill to the north east. It

is one of the defining features of the campus. The proposed ESA office building will, at this distance, be seen in conjunction with the synchrotron and will be another important feature of the campus.

- 6.7 From The Ridgeway, extensive planting off-site to the south helps to soften the view of the campus. This planting helps to ensure a visual separation between Harwell Campus and the wider landscape to the northeast. This is important as on-going residential development to the southwest of Didcot will reduce this gap.
- 6.8 There are few other buildings on the campus that currently break above this tree line in long distance views. The building proposed here will be an exception to this. The applicant contends that the chosen materials will create a modern structure that will blend in with the local context. The landscaping scheme attempts to conceal the development further with new tree clusters creating a natural arrangement when viewed from long distances, such as The Ridgeway and Hagbourne Hill.
- 6.9 The application site sits around 2.4 kilometres north of The Ridgeway. The building is orientated on a northwest to southeast axis. Therefore, it sits at an angle to The Ridgeway in a manner that ensures the full bulk of the eastern and western front and rear elevations will not be easily appreciated. By contrast, the circular nature of the synchrotron means the full bulk of this building can be seen from The Ridgeway. Thus, given the distances involved, the scale of the adjacent synchrotron, and the context in which the building would be seen, the overall impact of this building on the important views from The Ridgeway is considered acceptable.
- 6.10 The next important long distance view of the site from Hagbourne Hill to the northeast. This vantage point is around 1.5 kilometres from the application site, separated from it by the A34. At this closer distance and orientation, the scale of the proposed building is better appreciated. However, again, it will be set against the backdrop of the synchrotron and the full scale of this existing building will be seen from Hagbourne Hill.
- 6.11 At this distance, the height of the ESA building will be visually comparable to the synchrotron. Furthermore, the proposed landscaping will, from here, blend in nicely with the existing planting along the campus boundary with the A4185. This will help create a high quality landscape setting for the new building.
- 6.12 Overall, there can be no doubt this building will be visible from these important long-distant views. As such, there will be an impact on the quality of the AONB and the landscape as acknowledged by the AONB officer and the council's landscape officer. However, this impact must be weighed against the economic benefits of this proposal, as well as the likely future development within this nationally important campus.

Local views

- 6.13 Notwithstanding the above, it is important to highlight the ESA building will be prominent within the campus site, which is accessed from the A4185 that runs to the east of the application site. The ESA building will sit some way in front of the synchrotron and this will be appreciated from these closer vantage points.
- 6.14 The landscaping approach is for clusters of trees surrounding the eastern part of the site, with no formal boundary treatments to separate the site from the public areas of the campus. Between the application site and the A4185 sits an area of open grassland, part of which is closely mown and used as a sports pitch. From the A4185 and the entrance to the campus, the proposed building will be prominent. At these shorter distances, the presence of the synchrotron will not be such an effective mitigation.

- 6.15 With regards to this issue, it is important to highlight again the “direction of travel” for the campus, now it is part of the Enterprise Zone. It is highly likely this application represents the first phase of a new wave of development within the campus. As outlined in Section 1, the land to the east and south is safeguarded for new development. The council understands that a new masterplan will be produced for the whole campus in the near future. This masterplan will represent a significant increase in the amount of buildings on the site, and also the scale of those buildings.
- 6.16 Therefore, whilst this building may seem somewhat disproportionate to the existing buildings on site, the long-term impacts are likely to be greatly reduced by future development in the surrounding area. This is a high quality modern office building, with sympathetically arranged landscaping, that is typical of a modern technology campus. Its design will not appear out of keeping with the existing office buildings on site. Furthermore, the manner in which the building assimilates into the landscaped grounds of the campus will act as a blueprint for future development on the site. In this regard, this building is an important first step into securing the long-term future of Harwell campus as part of an Enterprise Zone of national importance. The location of the building at the entrance to the site and its scale intentionally seek to create a landmark structure and announce the presence of ESA within Harwell campus and the wider district.
- 6.17 Overall, the impacts of this building in terms of visual impact will be largely localised. These impacts only really relate to its scale, not its design, layout or landscaping. This impact, when balanced against the clear economic benefits this important proposal will bring to the district, is not sufficient to warrant a refusal of planning permission.
- 6.18 Conditions relating to the slab and ridge levels of the building, the materials and the landscaping are necessary to ensure the quality of the scheme. Regarding landscaping, the treatment of the road surfaces, bin store and cycle parking will also be important to ensure the development successfully integrates into the campus setting. These should be off high quality, details of these this will need to be provided.
- 6.19 It is also necessary to have a condition relating to the flags outside the building. These flags represent the countries that contribute to ESA operations. The number of flags could have a landscape impact on their own, and the council needs to retain control of the final details of this arrangement.

Highway Safety

- 6.20 The Highways Authority has offered detailed comments on this proposal. They have confirmed that the position of the access is acceptable. The details of the visibility splays will need to be secured by condition.
- 6.21 One area of concern for the Highways Authority is the amount of car parking spaces provided on site. The applicant proposes 126 spaces, which is appropriate for the amount of floor space of the main office building (1 space per 30 square metres). However, there is no parking provided for the two-storey conference section of the building. The Highways Authority applies a standard of 1 space per 5 conference room seats. Thus, using this standard, 20 spaces should be provided to support the 100 seat conference facility.
- 6.22 The applicants transport assessment contends that, given the nature of ESA’s work, the vast majority of visitors using the conference centre will be international, so will arrive by public transport. This is a long term aspiration of the campus as a whole to encourage the use of public transport as far as possible. As such, the conference centre will not generate additional parking demand and so the proposed 126 parking

spaces are considered sufficient for the entire building.

- 6.23 This is a carefully balanced judgement. As outlined below, the Highways Authority is seeking improvements to the public transport network at the campus from this development. Policy E7 highlights the council's desire to improve access to the campus from the surrounding road network, and this includes public transport. Therefore, it is a question of whether it is reasonable to require the full amount of car parking this development ordinarily requires.
- 6.24 The Highways Authority requires 20 additional spaces, representing a total of 146. Thus, the shortfall in this scheme is around 13%. This is not particularly significant. Furthermore, given the international nature of the ESA business, it is unlikely neither the offices nor the conference centre would be regularly used to capacity. Therefore, the amount of car parking at the site is likely to prove adequate in the vast majority of circumstances.
- 6.25 Overall, given the above, and the agreed contributions to public transport improvements, it is not considered that the shortfall in parking against Highway Authority standards would represent a sustainable reason for refusal.
- 6.26 There is adequate turning and manoeuvring space within the site. Therefore, subject to conditions covering the access, parking, turning space and a construction traffic management plan, this proposal is acceptable in terms of highway safety.

Public transport contributions

- 6.27 A pair of bus stops was recently provided on Fermi Avenue to serve the adjacent "Element 6" building. These stops do not benefit from any form of shelter and do not have any form of real time information about forthcoming services. It is extremely likely that visitors to ESA would use these bus stops. Therefore, the Highways Authority have requested financial contributions to the provision and maintenance of a bus shelter on Fermi Avenue and real time information boards, both within the shelter and the reception area of ESA.
- 6.28 As outlined in Para 6.1, Policy E7 seeks to support new commercial development at Harwell campus provided appropriate contributions are made to sustainable transport modes and to minimise car movements to and from the site. This development will be required to contribute to sustainable transport modes. These contributions will be secured via a legal agreement with the county council.

Archaeology

- 6.29 During the construction of the southern car park on the site, a Romano British farmstead was revealed. In addition during the construction of the Diamond Building evidence of an Iron Age settlement was revealed.
- 6.30 Given these previous finds on the site, the County Archaeologist has confirmed that an archaeological watching brief will be required during construction works. This brief will need to be in accordance with a written scheme of investigation to be agreed beforehand. This can be agreed as a pre-commencement condition.

Trees

- 6.31 The proposed access and car parking area will project close to a couple of important trees that are shown to be retained on the submitted plans. The applicant has submitted a full arboricultural method statement outlining how these trees will be protected during construction. The council's forestry officer has confirmed the proposed measures are acceptable and can be controlled by a compliance condition.

This will require an on-site meeting to agree the precise position of protective fencing, due to the proximity between the car park and the tree.

6.32 *Ecology*

The applicant has provided an ecology report that confirms there are no significant ecological constraints but proposes a number of mitigation measures to improve the potential biodiversity value of the site. The council's countryside officer has no objections to the application subject to the adoption of the recommendation of the report in the construction of the building.

Other Issues

6.33 There are no concerns about flooding with this proposal, as the site falls within Flood Zone 1. Conditions relating to surface water drainage and SUDS are necessary and recommended by the county and district drainage engineers.

6.34 Thames Water have identified that the proposed building may project close to a public sewer. The applicant will need to investigate this further and seek the appropriate consents from Thames Water where necessary. There are no concerns in terms of the building connecting to a foul sewer.

6.35 There is a history of contamination at the campus due to the previous use of the site for atomic testing. The applicant has provided a full contaminated land assessment which has been reviewed by the council's environmental health team and confirmed no concerns.

7.0 **CONCLUSION**

7.1 This is a development of national importance within the newly designated Science Vale UK Enterprise Zone. The expansion of the UK space industry is a key government priority. The location of ESA headquarters at Harwell would be a significant step forward for the industry and the Enterprise Zone. The principle of new commercial development at Harwell Campus is supported by the provisions of the Vale of White Local Plan, in particular Policy E7. Harwell Campus is entering a new stage of its evolution, with a particular focus on space based technology and research. The ESA is an important organisation in this sector and will attract significant additional investment into the campus.

7.2 The development involves a five-storey office building with two-storey conference room wing. The design of the building is considered acceptable, adding to the existing mix of office accommodation at the campus. The main issue with the building is the height, which is noticeably taller than most buildings on the eastern part of the campus.

7.3 Whilst this is a taller building than many existing office buildings on the campus, the overall landscape impact is most keenly felt at local vantage points. From wider, long distance, viewpoints, the building, whilst taller than existing buildings, will appear in the context of the whole campus, in particular the adjacent synchrotron building. When the economic benefits of the development for the district are weighed against the impact on the wider AONB, the scheme does not warrant a refusal of planning permission on visual impact grounds.

7.4 The development will make financial contributions to the improvement of public transport and will provide an appropriate access, road layout and parking provision. There are no technical concerns with the application and so it is considered to be acceptable against the provisions of the Local Plan. Subject to the recommended conditions, planning permission should be granted.

8.0 **RECOMMENDATION**

It is recommended that planning permission is granted subject to:

1: A legal agreement with the County Council in order to secure contributions towards a bus shelter on Fermi Avenue and other facilities to encourage the use of sustainable transport to and from the site ; and

2: Conditions as follows

- 1 : Time limit - Full Application
- 2 : Approved plans
- 3 : Slab and ridge Levels to be agreed
- 4 : Samples of all materials to be agreed including plant cladding.
- 5 : Landscaping Scheme (Submission) to be agreed, including management plan
- 6 : Landscaping Scheme (Implementation) to be agreed
- 7 : Drainage Details (Surface and Foul) to be agreed
- 8 : Sustainable Drainage Scheme to be agreed
- 9 : No Drainage to Highway
- 10 : Access details to be agreed
- 11 : Car Parking in accordance with approved plan
- 12 : Turning Space in accordance with approved plan
- 13 : Construction Traffic Management Plan to be agreed
- 14 : Cycle parking for 16 spaces to be provided as per Transport Statement
- 15 : Submitted Travel Plan to be adopted
- 16 : Archaeological Watching Brief to be agreed
- 17 : Monitoring of Archaeological Watching Brief
- 18 : Wildlife Protection in accordance with application
- 19 : Flood prevention measures in accordance with application
- 20 : Tree Protection as per submitted arboricultural method statement
- 21 : Details of flags to be agreed

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