

## **HAR/16731/3 – Four Pillars Hotels/UKAEA**

**Demolition of existing two houses, squash courts and tennis courts. Erection of hotel (land south of Curie Avenue), and leisure club, spa and bar (land north of Curie Avenue). Land to the North and South of Curie Avenue, Harwell International Business Centre, Harwell, Didcot.**

### **1.0 The Proposal**

- 1.1 This application seeks permission for the erection of a 142 bedroom hotel and leisure club on land adjacent to Curie Avenue, Harwell International Business Centre. The application has been submitted jointly by UKAEA and Four Pillars Hotels.
- 1.2 The application proposes 3 separate buildings accommodating the 142 bedrooms in a three storey block to the south of Curie Avenue, with a covered link to the two storey building to the rear which accommodates the conference facilities, lounge and dining area. The leisure facilities consist of a swimming pool, gym, studio, hydro pool and treatment rooms and are all proposed to the north of Curie Avenue in a single and two storey building, distinctly separate from the main hotel complex.
- 1.3 Car parking is provided adjacent to all three buildings and amounts to 263 spaces distributed throughout the site. There is also cycle parking provision with cycle way links to existing pathways.
- 1.4 The site is currently occupied by 4 squash courts, 3 tennis courts, and two vacant houses.
- 1.5 The site is located within the North Wessex Downs AONB.
- 1.6 Extracts from the application drawings are at **Appendix 1**.
- 1.7 The application comes to Committee as Harwell Parish Council objects to the application and due to the number of letters of objection received.

### **2.0 Planning History**

- 2.1 Planning permission was granted in January 1998 for 5,000 sqm of 2-3 storey B1 office accommodation on the hotel portion of the site.
- 2.2 Planning permission was granted in April 2002 for a 140 bedroom hotel (Ref: HAR/16731) on the site which was subject to a legal agreement requiring it to be built in two phases of 100 bedrooms, and then if proven to be required, a further 40 bedrooms. This was dependant in part on the construction of the Diamond Project, which at the time had only recently been granted planning permission.
- 2.3 The approved hotel scheme was proposed on the same site as the current proposal, and included leisure facilities including some replacement squash and tennis provision. This permission has been partly implemented and therefore remains extant. Extracts from the approved plans and the Committee report are attached at **Appendix 2**.

### **3.0 Planning Policies**

- 3.1 Policy H7 of the adopted Vale of White Horse Local Plan allocates the Harwell Science and Innovation Campus for Class B1 and B2 uses subject to a list of criteria. Criterion vi) of the policy states that development involving ancillary facilities will be permitted subject to Policy E13.
- 3.2 Policy E13 permits ancillary uses on key employment sites other than business uses providing the use is ancillary and incidental to the overall business use of the park, is designed to provide for users of the employment site, and would not adversely affect the vitality and viability of any town centre or the social and community vitality of any nearby village.
- 3.3 Policy L1 relates to the protection of existing outdoor playing space stating that the loss of such space will only be permitted if a deficiency will not be created or added to. If this is the case then alternative provision will be expected to be made elsewhere of equal benefit or sufficient to outweigh the space lost. This policy refers only to outdoor provision.
- 3.4 Policy L7 refers to local leisure facilities and states that their loss will not be permitted unless there is no longer a need for the facility or alternative provision is made elsewhere.
- 3.5 Policies DC1 and DC5 relate to design and parking/access considerations.
- 3.6 Policy NE6 refers to development in the AONB.
- 3.7 Planning Policy Statement 6 relates to planning in town centres and lists in paragraph 1.8 the main town centre uses, which include hotels and health and fitness facilities. The government's main objective in such areas is to promote the vitality and viability of town centres by focusing such development in these areas and improving accessibility to these facilities (para 1.3).
- 3.8 Planning Policy Guidance Note 17, "Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation", seeks to retain and where possible enhance opportunities for sport and recreation. Paragraph 10 states that existing facilities should not be built on unless they are shown to be surplus to requirements. Paragraph 13 states that there may be an opportunity to exchange a use to substitute for any loss as the result of a development but that any new facility should be at least as accessible to current and new users, and equivalent in terms of quality and usefulness.
- 3.9 Sport England's Interim Policy Statement "Planning for Sport and Active Recreation: Objectives and Opportunities" seeks to ensure that the recreational needs of local communities are met. Objective 2 of this Statement seeks to prevent the loss of facilities but that where this is unavoidable equivalent provision should be made in an alternative location.

#### 4.0 **Consultations**

- 4.1 Harwell Parish Council objects to the application for the following reasons: "The Council welcomes the provision of new leisure facilities in the parish, but deplores the loss of existing facilities. In a development of this size, surely some provision could be made for new premises for the long standing sports clubs which already exist? Although tennis facilities are still to be available, they will be reduced in number and there seems no likelihood that squash facilities will be available at all. The Council

asks that planners look carefully at the proposal with a view to keeping existing sports facilities. The Council would also like to ask that membership of the new leisure amenity is made available to local people and not just hotel customers/campus staff. The Council requests that 150 family membership places are allocated to the three parishes of Harwell, Chilton and East Hendred, and that membership is offered to local people at a favourable rate.”

- 4.2 Chilton Parish Council objects to the application on the grounds of the loss of the squash club although they are not objecting to the hotel or its design. They state that the club membership is higher than that quoted in the application. They also state that they would like to see a condition attached allocated 15% of membership of the leisure club to local residents. Concern was also raised in relation to an increase in traffic to the site, and car parking provision.
- 4.3 The County Engineer has no objections to the application given the extant permission, subject to conditions relating to the provision of visibility splays at the access and ensuring implementation of the parking, and cycleways and footways.
- 4.4 The Environment Agency has raised no objections in relation to the application subject to conditions.
- 4.5 The Council's Arboriculturalist has no objections to the loss of some trees which are shown to be removed. The most significant trees on the site, 6 mature Beech trees, are to remain.
- 4.6 The Harwell Labs Lawn Tennis Association originally objected to the application due to the loss of the 3 tennis courts. They have, however, submitted a further comment in response to the re-surfacing of the existing grass courts which they have welcomed as these can now be used all year round. They have stated that they ideally require 4 courts in total, which UKAEA have agreed to provide when the current site of the three courts is eventually re-developed. On this basis they have agreed that they will withdraw their objection. (This alternative and increased provision cannot be secured under this current application as it relates to an alternative site. However the Council will be seeking the replacement courts when this alternative site is redeveloped).
- 4.7 Harwell Squash Rackets Club objects to the application due to the loss of the squash courts stating that they have a membership of over 180 members and not the 70 referred to in the application. They have requested that the lost courts are replaced elsewhere on the site.
- 4.8 Sport England objects to the application. Their full comments are attached at **Appendix 3**.
- 4.9 The Chairman of Harwell Laboratories Recreational Association has commented on the application. His full response is attached at **Appendix 4**.
- 4.10 93 letters of comment and objection have been received raising the following:
  - The squash and tennis facilities should be replaced.
  - The squash club is well used during lunchtimes and after work.
  - The hotel should be built on a different site so the squash courts can be retained.
  - The squash club has been running for 60 years.
  - There is no time to travel to alternative facilities at lunch time.

- The proposal should include at least 2 replacement squash courts.
- The squash club is not a private facility but is open to members who do not work on campus.
- The location of the squash courts is not on the site of the proposed buildings, therefore they could be retained.
- Increase in traffic to the area.
- There is plenty of hotel accommodation in the area.
- The site is currently residential and should be re-developed for housing and not commercial purposes.
- The hotel should be within the fenced area of the site.
- The development phase will have a harmful impact on the children at the adjacent nursery.
- The proposed cycle way should be constructed before development begins to avoid disruption to cyclists.

## 5.0 **Officer Comments**

5.1 The main issues to consider in determining this application are: i) the principle of a hotel and leisure use in this location in terms of current Government Guidance and adopted policy; ii) the loss of squash and tennis facilities on the site; iii) the design of the proposed development and its impact on the character of the area; and iv) parking and access provision.

### *Principle of the development*

5.2 The Harwell site has been identified by the Government as one of two key locations within the country for Science and Innovation and will therefore be the subject of significant growth in the coming years.

5.3 The hotel is proposed to serve the existing expanding business community at the Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, which currently has little accommodation on site. Although there is a recently constructed hostel providing long-term accommodation for scientists working at Diamond, this serves an altogether different market to the proposed 4\* hotel which would cater for short-term visitors and conferences. The location of the proposed hotel is therefore entirely linked to the business use which it has been designed to serve.

5.4 There is an extant permission for a 140 bedroom hotel and leisure facility on this site which has been partly implemented, and a thorough assessment of demand in this location was made at the time. Details are set out in the attached Committee report at **Appendix 2**. Officers consider that there would be no impact on the vitality and viability of nearby towns and villages, as the hotel is required to serve the needs of the campus alone and could be classed as an ancillary facility to this use. It is therefore considered that the requirements of Policies E7 and E13, and PPS6 have been met.

5.5 The previous scheme was to be phased in order to assess the level of demand and the uncertainty of the Diamond project. The second phase (40 bedrooms) was dependant on the Diamond project being implemented. As this has now been realised Officers consider that the whole development in a single phase is now justified.

5.6 Officers therefore consider that the principle of a 142 bedroom hotel and leisure facility in this location has been established and is therefore acceptable. It would be a valuable facility for the business park and offers the potential to minimise journeys.

## *Sports Facilities*

- 5.7 The majority of objections received relate to the provision of sports facilities within the site. The application will result in the loss of 4 squash courts and 3 hard surfaced tennis courts, which the extant permission proposed to replace. Part of the reason why this previous application was not implemented relates to the applicant's claim that the additional facilities, particularly the squash courts, rendered the scheme financially unviable.
- 5.8 UKAEA have resurfaced 4 existing grass tennis courts elsewhere on the site to provide 3 full sized LTA standard hard courts. The site of these is due to be redeveloped at some time in the future and UKAEA have agreed to provide 4 LTA standard courts at that time. On this basis, the Lawn Tennis Club has agreed to withdraw its objection.
- 5.9 However, there is no proposal to replace the existing squash courts. The development includes alternative sports/leisure provision of a swimming pool, gym and aerobics studio, which would be available to all employees at the campus and some local residents in addition to hotel guests, thereby maintaining opportunities for sport and recreation as required by Sport England. The campus also contains sports pitches for rugby, football, rounders, cricket, croquet, archery and volleyball, and a newly constructed pavilion with enhanced changing facilities.
- 5.10 Sport England is objecting to the application on the basis that the proposed facilities would not generate the benefits to sport offered by the squash club and current number of tennis courts. Their response is attached at **Appendix 3**. Whilst they refer to their own policy objectives, they do not refer to PPG17 or the adopted Local Plan. It could be argued that a more varied provision of a gym, swimming pool, and aerobics studio provide additional benefits to a wider cross section of the campus community than squash courts alone, and therefore constitute alternative provision, thereby meeting the requirements of Local Plan Policy L7.
- 5.11 In any event, all the individual sports clubs at the Campus are affiliated to the Harwell Laboratories Recreational Association (HLRA) which is a private campus sports and leisure club for staff and their families, although some limited associate membership is available to the wider community. The letter attached at Appendix 4 is from the Chairman of this body and sets out the management arrangements. This letter states that "as a private members club we are unable to receive external funding from any lottery bodies at all and thus need to make strategic decisions with regard to maintaining both the facilities and the financial means of supporting them in the future". Such facilities are heavily subsidised by the Harwell Science and Innovation Campus, funding which could be withdrawn at any time resulting in the closure of many clubs and facilities on the site.
- 5.12 Whilst Officers acknowledge the concern of the Squash Club and welcome any opportunities to enhance sport and recreation in the District, there are no planning policy to require the replacement of these privately run facilities. The new facilities are proposed principally to meet the needs of hotel guests and employees due to the fact that this part of scheme is justified by its location on the business park. However, an accompanying legal agreement will require some membership from the wider community thereby enhancing sporting opportunities locally. A draft of this agreement

is attached at **Appendix 5** and is the same as that accompanying the extant scheme, although the phasing element has been omitted for the reasons explained above.

### *Design*

- 5.13 The extant permission proposed a contemporary design consisting of two buildings fronting onto the main road rising to a maximum height of 16.5 metres (the plans are attached at **Appendix 2**). Whilst the current application proposes a hotel of a similar size, the design is more traditional with the main hotel consisting of two linked buildings to break up the bulk. The three storey element at the front of the site containing the bedrooms is set back from the main road with projecting elements to provide relief along this frontage and with a varying roof profile. This is the highest part of the development with a maximum ridge height of 11.8 metres, nearly 5 metres lower than the extant scheme. The conference facilities are proposed in a separate two storey building to the rear of the accommodation block with a single storey walkway linking the two buildings.
- 5.14 The leisure facilities are proposed in a separate building to the north of Curie Avenue and although projecting towards the front of the site, this element is single storey, with the two storey element to the rear.
- 5.15 Officers consider that the current design is more sympathetic to the character of the area than the extant scheme. The proposal seeks to retain all the mature trees along the site frontage which will soften the visual impact of the buildings when viewed from the main road. Officers consider that the proposal will not be visually prominent from the wider countryside and will therefore conserve the character of the AONB.

### *Parking and access provision*

- 5.16 The County Engineer has raised no objections to the application which proposes sufficient car parking to serve all the elements of the scheme and access from Curie Avenue within the campus. He considers that as the hotel will principally serve employees at the campus. Conditions are recommended to ensure the vehicular and cycle parking, and the proposed cycle ways are provided in accordance with the application drawings.

## 6.0 **Recommendation**

- 6.1 *It is recommended that authority to grant planning permission be delegated to the Deputy Director (Planning and Community Strategy) in consultation with the Chair and Vice Chair subject to the completion of a S106 Agreement securing the use of the leisure club and subject to conditions relating to materials, hard and soft landscaping, tree protection, contaminated land, visibility splays, cycle parking, vehicular parking provision, cycleway provision, and the inclusion of a sustainable drainage scheme.*