

DELEGATED APPLICATION REPORT

Ward: Caversham Heights

App Ref: 230523/TEL

Address: St Peters Hill, Caversham, Reading

Proposals: Application for prior notification of proposed development by telecommunications code systems operators.

Case Officer: Beatrice Malama

Applicant: Signal Infrastructure UK Limited

Date received (valid from): 19 April 2023 **Target Decision date:** 14 June 2023

1. Site Description and Surrounding Area

The proposal site is to the rear of 12 St Peters Avenue located south-west of St Peters Hill in a predominantly residential area. The site which is on highway land is surrounded by residential dwellings. There are a few listed buildings located further south of St Peter's Hill approximately 78m from the proposed site. The site is located on the edge of St Peter's Conservation Area and within an Air Quality Management Area. The area has significant vegetation cover and the Reading Borough Tree Strategy Identifies St Peters Hill as a 'Treed Corridor'.

2. Proposal

Prior notification (ref: **220587**) for the proposed installation of a 15.0m Phase 8 Monopole with a wraparound cabinet at base and 3 other ground based cabinets was refused on 13 April 2022 and appeal dismissed on 22 February 2023.

A resubmission has been received for the proposed installation of a 15.0m Phase 9 Monopole and 3 other ground based cabinets. The resubmitted proposal includes the following:

- A change in design and a slight reduction in the size of the antennas
- Removal of a wrap-around cabinet at base
- The height of the pole remains the same as the refused application (ref: **220587**); the pole would appear to be slightly larger in diameter
- Submission of the Arboricultural Impact Assessment and the associated Arboricultural Plan & Arboricultural Layout/Protection Plan

Plans Considered

- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 100 Existing Site Plan dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 150 Existing Elevation A dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 002 Site Location Plan dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 260 Proposed Elevation dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 210 Proposed Site Plan dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Developer's Notice to Reading Borough Planning Department dated 13 April 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Supporting letter to the LPA/Planning Department Ref: RDG18136 - dated 15th April 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Letter of notification to the Highways Department Ref: RDG18136 - dated 13th April 2023, received on 19th April 2023

- Site Specific Supplementary Information – dated 15th April 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Declaration of Conformity with International Commission on Non-Ionizing Radiation Protection Public Exposure Guidelines Reference No. RDG18136_M002– dated 13th April 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Arboricultural Impact Assessment St Peters Hill, Reading RG4 7DN dated March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- ACS Ref No: ARB/4853/Y/100 dated March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Application Form dated 13 April 2023, received 19 April 2023

3. Relevant Planning History

Prior notification (ref: **220587**) for the proposed the installation a 15.0m Phase 8 Monopole with a wraparound cabinet at base and 3 other ground based cabinets was refused on 13 April 2022 and appeal dismissed on 22 February 2023.

4. Consultations

Internal:

RBC Transport – No Objection

RBC Natural Environment comment summarised as below:

Although Arboricultural information has been provided, certain issues such as future tree pruning requirements or the need to fell nearby trees have not been addressed. The AIA also does not comment on where services to connect the mast will be routed from, as this has further potential harm on Root Protection Areas.

Ward Members – No Comments Received

Reading East MP – Mr. Matt Rodda objected as follows:

St Peter's Hill and the surrounding roads sit within St Peter's Conservation Area. This is a quiet residential area characterised by its older houses, established tree cover and green spaces. I would contend that the proposed large telecoms pole would therefore be out of keeping with the street scene.

The previous application failed in large part due to the assessment that the erection of a large telecoms pole at this location would result in harm to the character and appearance of the area.

More careful selection of sites for masts is required to avoid creating eyesores for residents.

External:

Nearby residents were consulted by letter on 28 April 2023; 4 support letters and 12 objections were received.

Support:

- Provided this planned installation is of the more discreet design (not a steel scaffold type pylon) then I welcome an additional mast to cover the area which is poorly served by mobile connectivity.
- Improved mobile coverage which is currently poor
- The plans suggest a very unobtrusive development
- Need to improve telecom infrastructure

Objections:

The objections are summarised as below:

- Visual harm and adverse impact on the conservation area
- Overbearing
- Detrimental impact on natural environment and wildlife
- Harm to human health due high radiofrequency
- The area already has 5G therefore a new mast is not necessary
- Harm to nearby trees
- Impact and safety on surrounding houses
- Any works or maintenance visits would disrupt traffic flow.
- The description of this area as largely commercial is highly misleading
- If permitted, this will set a dangerous precedent for future building conservation areas
- The proposed site photographs in the application wrongly suggest an area without habitation
- There would be no proper screening from the trees during the winter months

CADRA – The tests imposed under Local Plan policy OU3 should be applied: we feel strongly that the positioning of this mast on the outside of the curve of St Peter's Hill, where it is viewed from both directions against an important group of mature trees, means that it is damaging to the Conservation Area, fails the Local Plan's tests and should not be approved. The ad hoc collection of supporting equipment cabins at ground level exacerbates this.

We also point out that the NPPF states: Where new sites are required (such as for new 5G networks, or for connected transport and smart city applications), equipment should be sympathetically designed and camouflaged where appropriate. We also note that the Arboricultural Impact Assessment reports that the installation of the base is not considered WHOLLY DETRIMENTAL to the retention of the important trees in the Conservation Area.

Equality Act 2010

In determining this application, the Council is required to have regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. However, there is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that the protected groups identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application. Therefore in terms of the key equalities protected characteristics it is considered there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

5. Relevant Policies

The application has been assessed against the following policies:

National

Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires that proposals be determined in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Material considerations include relevant policies in the National Planning Policy framework (NPPF) - among them the 'presumption in favour of sustainable development'.

Reading Borough Local Plan (November 2019)

- CC7: Design and the Public Realm
- CC8: Safeguarding Amenity
- OU3: Telecommunications Development
- EN3: Enhancement of Conservation Areas
- EN14: Trees, Hedges And Woodland
- TR3: Access, Traffic and Highway-Related Matters

6. Appraisal

This application has been submitted under the Prior Approval procedure under Part 16, Class A.3 (3) of The Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015 (as amended) and the Local Planning Authority (LPA) has 56 days in which to decide whether prior approval is required or not. If prior approval is required, such approval can either be given or refused by the LPA. As this is not a full planning application, the LPA is unable to impose any additional conditions.

Principle of development

Part 16 Class A (as amended by the 2016 GPDO) only allows LPAs to determine whether the prior approval of the authority will be required as to the siting and appearance of the development.

6.1 Siting and Appearance

In accordance with Reading Borough Local Plan Policy OU3: Telecommunications Development, proposals for telecommunications development will be permitted provided that:

- They do not have an adverse impact on the visual amenity of the surrounding area or on the significance of a heritage asset;
- The apparatus will be sited and designed so as to minimise its visual impact by the use of innovative design solutions such as lamp column 'swap-outs' or concealment/camouflage options; and
- Alternative sites and site-sharing options have been fully investigated and it has been demonstrated that no preferable alternative sites are potentially available which would result in a development that would be less visually intrusive.

In the first instance, the proposed monopole and associated cabinets will be appraised for their impact on the character and appearance of the surrounding area. The proposal will then be assessed to determine if alternative sites (where possible) have been fully investigated within the supporting documentation for this application. The proposed monopole will be assessed from two viewing angles based on the flow of vehicle traffic within the surrounding area.



Fig 1. Aerial image showing the proposed location of the antenna and two different viewing angles to be assessed.

Icon	Icon Name	Description
	Proposed Antenna	The proposed location for the monopole and associated cabinets.
	Viewing Angle 1	The view to be appraised north west of the proposal site on St Peters Hill.
	Viewing Angle 2	The view to be appraised south east of the proposal site on St Peters Hill.

The application site is located to the west of St Peters Hill and to the rear side of 12 St Peters Avenue. The proposal would be located on a grass verge on an area designated as highways land. The proposed site lies within St Peters Conservation Area. The Reading Borough Tree Strategy has identified St Peter's Hill as a 'Treed corridor'. The proposed telecommunications equipment consists of a 15m Phase 9 Monopole and 3 cabinets and would be located approximately 10m north of an existing lamppost.

The submitted Site Specific Supplementary Information states that *"The site selection process has also been influenced by the numerous vertical elements of street furniture distributed around the vicinity of the site including street lighting columns. The height of the pole has been kept down to the absolute minimum capable of providing the required essential new 5G coverage"*.

Whilst the Site Specific Supplementary Information document appears to refer to numerous vertical elements of street furniture including lighting columns as its justification for the siting, the Council does not agree with the applicant's claim. Although the wider street has some street poles dotted around, there is only one lamppost in close proximity to the site, which is located approximately 10m away. Due to the siting of the monopole and its associated cabinets (on a curve and on a high ground), it would be very visible to the users of the highway when viewed from both angles 1 and 2. The proposal would be within an area of the public realm that would be highly visible along St. Peter's Hill and its junction with Church Street. Although the trees would provide some form of screening between the proposed development and the nearby residential properties west of the site on St Peters Avenue, this would not be the case when viewed from the north west and south east on St Peters Hill and during the winter months.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Feb 2019) states that; "Where new sites are required (such as for new 5G networks, or for connected transport and smart city applications), equipment should be sympathetically designed and camouflaged where appropriate".

The proposed telecommunications equipment on this part of the highway would cause a significant change in the appearance of the area, its surrounding and the Conservation Area in comparison with the existing context. This would be exacerbated by its location on a curve and on a higher ground than its immediate surrounding.

The inspector within the appeal statement stated that:

".... the proposed development would have an unacceptable impact on the character and appearance of the area, failing to preserve or enhance St. Peters Conservation Area, a heritage asset. Insofar as they are a material consideration, the proposal would also be contrary to the aims of Policies EN1, EN14, CC7 and OU3 of the Reading Local Plan 2019. Amongst other things, these policies seek to ensure that telecommunications development is a high quality in design that protects the character and distinctiveness of the locality. All proposals will be expected to protect and where possible enhance the significance of heritage assets, and individual trees, groups of trees, hedges and woodlands will be protected from damage or removal where they are of importance".

The applicant claims that:

“The reasons for refusal have been robustly addressed in this resubmission by proposing a much slimmer & discreet Phase 9 Monopole” and that “the New Phase 9 Monopole seeks to both preserve and enhance St Peters Conservation Area”

The above claim is misleading. Whilst some changes have been proposed as part of the current resubmission, the overall size and the bulky nature of the equipment remain the same as the previously refused application. The changes are very minimal and thus do not adequately address the first and second reasons for refusing application (**ref 220587**) as indicated below:

- 1. The proposed development, by reason of its siting, has failed to demonstrate that it would not detrimentally impact on nearby highway trees through direct harm to the root systems or by future pruning requirements to maintain network coverage, contrary to Policies CC7 and EN14 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (Adopted November 2019).*
- 2. The proposed 15m high monopole and its associated cabinets, by reason of its size, design, colour and bulk, would detract from the appearance of the designated St Peters Conservation area and the immediate surrounding, contrary to Policies EN1 and OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (Adopted November 2019).*

Whilst it is acknowledged that the proposed development would bring about benefits in terms of technological advancements in communications, these benefits are not considered to outweigh the adverse visual impact the proposal would have on the character and appearance of St Peters Hill Conservation area and the wider street.

Due to the size, design and bulk of the proposed monopole and its associated cabinets, it is considered that the proposal would be intrusive and would detract from the character and appearance of St Peters Hill Conservation area. The proposed monopole and associated cabinets are considered to have significant adverse impact on the visual amenity of the immediate and wider surrounding area and St Peters Hill Conservation area within which it is located contrary to Policies EN1 and OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019). On this basis the proposal is being recommended for refusal.

6.2 Amenity and Accessibility

The proposal site is located on the west side of St Peters Hill and east of St Peters Avenue. Whilst there are residential dwellings adjacent and in close proximity to the proposal site, due to the nature of the proposed development and the trees surrounding the site which act as a form of screening, there is not considered to be harm to the living conditions to nearby residents with regards to overbearing development or any other criteria listed under policy CC8 of the Reading Borough Local Plan to the point of refusal.

In accordance with the accessibility and ease of movement aspect of policy CC7 of the Reading Borough Local Plan, the proposed development is considered to allow for appropriate movements along the adjacent pathway to the north and south of St Peters Hill. This is also confirmed by Reading Borough Council Transport that the proposed development would not compromise highway safety. Visibility splays along St Peters Hill are suitably maintained, while the proposed development will also allow for suitable pedestrian movement. This is further confirmed within the submitted Site Specific Supplementary Information which states that “the proposed equipment has been strategically located on the grass verge at St Peters Hill, there will be no impact to pedestrian flow or safety. In this regard, the proposed development is considered to allow for the free movement of highway traffic in accordance with policy TR3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan.

6.3 Tree Matters – Siting

The proposed site lies within St Peters Conservation Area. The Reading Borough Tree Strategy identifies conservation areas as priority areas for tree retention and planting. In addition, St Peter's Hill has been identified as a 'Treed corridor' as such any proposal must not have any direct harm on adjacent trees, that no future pressure to prune would arise from the proposal and that the visual impact is acceptable.

The applicant has provided the Arboricultural Impact Assessment (AIA) dated March 2023 from ACS Consulting Ltd, and the associated Arboricultural Plan & Arboricultural Layout/Protection Plan. The AIA includes an Arb Method Statement for the installation of the pole and tree protection details, which are in themselves acceptable. However, the AIA makes no mention of potential future pruning requirements, as are included in Reason for Refusal 1 of 220587.

The trees plotted are 14m high and have the potential to increase in both height and spread. There is no comment on the future pruning requirements of these and surrounding trees (not plotted in the AIA) or potential removals in order to maintain a signal – it is known that the 5G signal is blocked by foliage. Having to contain the size of surrounding trees such that they can't achieve their full potential or having to fell any would be harmful to the character of the area. The Inspectors decision both accepted the potential to prune or fell and the detrimental impact that would have. Neither have been addressed in Arboricultural submissions.

The AIA also does not comment on where services to connect the mast will be routed from, as this has further potential harm on Root Protection Areas.

Whilst the applicant argues that the location is suitable in that: *'Nearby to the mast are clusters of tall, mature trees which provide natural screening for the mast, seeking to minimise any impact on visual amenity in the area'*, locating it close to trees comes at a potential cost to them.

It is difficult to see how the change in the proposal entirely overcomes Reason for Reason 2 of 220587, as the change is fairly minimal with the pole and cabinets will still be visually intrusive. It is noted that the applicant has indicated that the cabinets are Permitted Development so should not form part of the planning consideration, however they would not be required unless a pole was proposed so it is reasonable to comment on the appearance collectively of all elements.

In light of the above, the proposal is not considered to adequately address all the tree related concerns and as such the proposal is not acceptable in Natural Environment terms.

6.4 Alternative Sites

In accordance with the sequential approach outlined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) consideration should always be given to sharing any existing telecommunication structures in the area, secondly consideration is then given to utilising any suitable existing structures or buildings and thirdly sites for freestanding ground-based installations are investigated.

The Site Specific Supplementary Information document shows that 7 options were discounted for various reasons including the following:

- insufficient pavement width
- site would impede on pedestrian flow
- visibility splay issues
- site highly visible from on looking residential properties
- existing mature trees would require pruning

Whilst a list of alternative sites and reasons for discounting have been provided, the submission lack a detailed analysis of the sites. Limited information has been provided making it difficult for the LPA to assess whether alternative sites have been robustly considered and discounted. The applicant appears to focus on sites along the streets and no consideration for other sites such as rooftops. For example there is little or no indication that nearby buildings have been investigated as potential sites and the reasons for them being discounted provided. There is no compelling evidence provided to demonstrate that no preferable alternative sites are potentially available which would result in a development that would be less visually intrusive. Due to insufficient information provided to support the choice of the site and the reasons for discounting alternative sites, it is difficult to assess whether this is the only option available within the area. In view of this, it is considered that the assessment of possible alternatives with reduced visual impact have not properly and robustly been reviewed and discounted by the applicant in line with guidance contained within the NPPF. This therefore forms the third reason for refusal.

6.5 Health Issues

The NPPF states that “Local planning authorities must determine applications on planning grounds. They should not seek to prevent competition between different operators, question the need for the telecommunications system, or determine health safeguards if the proposal meets International Commission guidelines for public exposure”. The supporting text to Policy OU3 states that “ICNIRP declarations should be based on the cumulative effects of electromagnetic fields emitted by other nearby base stations and antennae as well as the proposed development”.

The applicant has provided an ICNIRP certificate to support this planning application. This certifies that the proposed development would be in full compliance with the requirements of the radio frequency (RF) public exposure guidelines of ICNIRP. Therefore, the ICNIRP certificate complies with current Radio Frequency exposure guidelines, as defined in the EU Council recommendation of 12 July 1999 on the limitation of exposure of the general public to electromagnetic fields (0 Hz to 300 GHz).

The ICNIRP guidelines continue both to exclude known health risks and to minimise unascertained health effects. The ICNIRP guidelines are the most up-to-date and relevant tool to ascertain the acceptability of telecommunications development within the planning process. Bearing in mind the Government's view on mobile phone masts and health issues, as expressed in the NPPF, it would not be appropriate for this Council to substitute its own "opinion" on health issues for that expressed by ICNIRP.

On balance, the suggested health risks associated with this development and the fear and/or stress associated with these perceived risks are outweighed by the reassurances provided by the technical information submitted by the applicant. As such, the possible health implications of such apparatus are not considered sufficient reason to refuse prior approval.

6.6 Air Quality

This proposal has been considered against Reading Borough Local Plan policy EN15, as the proposal site is within an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA). As demonstrated in the policy, this proposal does not meet the requirements for an Air Quality Assessment (AQA) and is considered not enough of a detrimental impact on air quality to warrant such an assessment due to the size and scale of the proposal.

7. Conclusion

Whilst the proposed development benefits from permitted development under Article 3 in Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015, the prior approval of the local planning authority required in terms of the siting and appearance of the development. The proposal has been assessed in terms of siting and appearance and has been found to conflict with Local and National Policy guidance as such the development is recommended to be **REFUSED**.

8. Recommendation

PRIOR APPROVAL REFUSED

Reasons for refusal:

1. The proposed 15m high monopole and its associated cabinets, by reason of its size, bulk and location, would detract from the appearance of the designated St Peters Conservation area and the immediate surrounding, contrary to Policies EN1 and OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (Adopted November 2019).

2. The proposed development, by reason of its siting, has failed to demonstrate that it would not detrimentally impact on nearby highway trees through direct harm to the root systems or by future pruning requirements to maintain network coverage, contrary to Policies CC7 and EN14 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (Adopted November 2019).

3. The proposed development, in the absence of sufficient detail on potential alternative sites for the development, has failed to demonstrate that no preferable alternative sites are potentially available which would result in a development that would be less visually intrusive, contrary to Policy OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019) and the NPPF (2021).

INFORMATIVES

I00: Plans

The refusal relates only to the following plans and information as received by the local planning authority:

Plans and Documents Considered:

- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 100 Existing Site Plan dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
- Drawing No: RDG18136_M002 Issue B - 150 Existing Elevation A dated 13th March 2023, received on 19th April 2023
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