

DELEGATED APPLICATION REPORT

Ward:

App Ref: 230095/TEL

Address: Junction of, Whitley Wood Road and Whitley Wood Lane, Reading

Proposals: Proposed 5G telecoms installation - H3G 15m street pole and additional equipment cabinets

Case Officer: Beatrice Malama

Applicant: CK Hutchison Networks (UK) Ltd

Date received (valid from): 25 January 2023 **Target Decision date:** 22 March 2023

1. SITE DESCRIPTION

The proposal site is on highway land located south of Whitley Wood Road/ Whitley Wood Lane roundabout. There are residential dwelling houses adjacent to the site. The wider area has a mixture of residential and commercial properties with commercial properties concentrated on the northern side of the roundabout. The site does not fall within a conservation area neither is it located near a listed building.

2. PROPOSAL AND SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Prior approval is sought for the proposed installation of an H3G 15m street pole and additional ancillary equipment cabinets and associated ancillary works by telecommunications code systems operators.

Plans and Documents Considered:

- RDG20366_RDG210_89985_RG6855_GA_REV_B_Issue B - 002 Site Location Plan dated 13 January 2023, received 25 January 2023
- RDG20366_RDG210_89985_RG6855_GA_REV_B_Issue B - 265 Proposed Site Elevation dated 13 January 2023, received 25 January 2023
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- The Declaration of ICNIRP Compliance dated 6 January 2023, received 25 January 2023
- Developer's Notice to Planning services and Highways Services ref: RDG20366 - WHITLEY WOOD ROAD, dated 23 January 2023, received 25 January 2023

- 5G Site Specific Supplementary Information and Planning Justification Statement ref: RDG20366 dated 23 January 2023, received 25 January 2023.
- Government Statement on digital connectivity dated 7 March 2019, received 25 January 2023
- 5G Health and Network Briefing received 25 January 2023
- Application Form dated 25 January 2023, received 25 January 2023

3. RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

None

4. CONSULTATIONS

4.1 Internal:

- RBC Natural Environment - No objection to this proposal
- RBC Environmental Protection - commented as follows:
- *“A noise assessment has not been submitted with the application and therefore I cannot determine the likely noise impact of the proposal and whether the proposals are acceptable. I therefore recommend refusal unless a noise assessment can be submitted and considered by us before the application is determined”.*
- RBC Transport - the following comment was received:
“The proposal results in the need to re-route the footpath into the grassed verge. To compensate for the loss of the verge, the scheme must include the provision of a tree within the verge as advised in pre-submission correspondence. In addition, any increase in tarmac must be in the form of permeable tarmac material.

Until the above points are addressed the Highway Authority would be unable to agree to the proposed siting of 5G mast and cabinets”.

4.2 External:

Members of the public were consulted from 3 February 2023 and were given 21 days for comments to be received by the Local planning Authority. One objection letter was received and the following concerns were raised:

- Visual Harm
- Harm to TV reception
- Harm to children’s health

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
- EN14: Trees, Hedges and Woodland
- OU3: Telecommunications Development
- 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.

6.1 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.

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.

6.2 Siting and Appearance

The proposed site lies on highway land south of Whitley Wood Road/ Whitley Wood Lane roundabout. This part of the area is predominantly residential however there are some commercial properties located north of the site on Whitley Wood Road and Whitley Wood Lane. Within the site’s immediate surrounding are two storey detached, semi-detached and terraced properties. There are existing street poles dotted around and a mature tree located at least 11m south-west of the site. Due to the site’s prominent location with no adequate screening, it is very visible from all directions.

The proposal is for the installation of an H3G 15m high street pole and additional equipment cabinets and ancillary works. The proposed equipment is required for improved network coverage and capacity, particularly in relation to 5G services. In addition, the proposed equipment is required in order to assist with meeting the Governments aims to roll out 5G technology.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (Feb 2021) 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 submitted Site Specific Supplementary Information (SSSI) on page 6 states that *“the proposed design has been selected to minimise visual impact upon the*

streetscape by integrating with the existing built environment. It further states that *“The design of the proposed antenna and ground-based cabinets is considered to be the least visually intrusive option available”*.

The above statements appear to indicate that the proposed development has been designed so as to minimise the visual impact on the street scene by integrating with existing street furniture however the above claim is misleading. Whilst there are existing street poles nearby, none is as bulky and as tall as the proposed telecommunications equipment. The proposed equipment at 15m tall would tower above any nearby street poles which are much shorter in height. In addition, it would be much bulkier than the existing street poles, which have a slender design. Furthermore, the adjacent two storey dwelling houses, at approximately 7m would be much shorter than the proposed monopole. Without any form of screening, the proposed equipment would be clearly visible from a wider radius and would result in harm to the character and appearance of the immediate surrounding area. The visual impact of the monopole would be exacerbated by the site’s prominent location at a junction where its height would be much more pronounced.

Given the design, height, bulk and its prominent position at a junction, the proposed 15m high monopole would appear as an overly prominent, obtrusive structure that would tower above other street furniture and other properties that would surround it. Located in close proximity to a busy four way junction, it would contrast unsympathetically with the existing character of the area.

The applicant acknowledges that *“the proposed installation of additional equipment would result in a localised visual increase”* whilst claiming that *“this will not overly detract from the character of the existing streetscape”*. However, the applicant has not submitted any supporting information to justify the claim that this proposal would not detract from the character of the existing streetscape. It is not clear therefore if any attempts to make the proposed equipment less visually intrusive such as through the use of a more sympathetic design has been made. The proposed telecommunications equipment on this part of the highway would cause a significant change in the appearance of the area and its surrounding in comparison with the existing context. The siting and design of the proposal makes little attempt to minimise its visual impact, through innovative design such as concealment options.

Whilst the Council acknowledges the importance of installing the proposed equipment and the benefits it would bring about within the area 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 the area.

In light of the above, it is considered that the proposed development would detract from the visual amenity and appearance of the surrounding area, contrary to Policies CC7 and OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019). On this basis the proposal is recommended for refusal.

6.3 Amenity and Accessibility

The site is located adjacent to two storey dwelling houses. Given the close proximity of the proposal to dwelling houses and the bulky nature of the equipment, the proposed development would have an overbearing impact on the nearby residential properties particularly the garden(s) belonging to no. 19 to 25 Copenhagen Close. This would result in harm to the living conditions of the nearby residents. Had the proposed development otherwise been acceptable, it is considered that the above concern would have been overcome by relocating the monopole further away from the buildings. This also would have addressed the concerns raised by Reading Borough Council Transport. The applicant expressed willingness to relocate the monopole away from the buildings on to the grass verge to address both the transport concerns and harm to residential amenity. Given that the above concerns would likely be overcome by relocating the monopole, in this instance, the application will not be refused on this basis. The applicant is advised to take this into account for any future resubmissions on this site.

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.

Similarly Policy OU3 of the Reading Borough Plan (2019) requires that alternative sites and site-sharing options be investigated fully and that it should be demonstrated that no preferable alternative sites are potentially available which would result in a development that would be less visually intrusive.

The evidence contained within the Site Specific Supplementary Document shows that a total of six other sites were considered in the area and discounted for various reasons which included unsuitable pavements, visibility splays, location in a residential area and unviable sites. However, information with details of the analysis of various sites was not supplied making it difficult for the Council to assess if a thorough and robust search was conducted. In addition, without this

information it is difficult to ascertain if the selected site is the best possible option available site within the designated search area.

The sites appear focused on highway land without proper consideration of all available alternatives. Given the limited assessment of alternative sites and supporting evidence in respect of each site, and insufficient information provided to justify the choice of the site and the reasons for discounting alternative sites, it is difficult to assess whether this is the best available option 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 second 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 application. This certifies that the proposed development (which also takes account of the cumulative effect of emissions from the proposed installation and all nearby base stations) 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.

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**.

Recommendation

PRIOR APPROVAL REFUSED

Reasons for Refusal:

1. The proposed 15m high monopole and its associated cabinets, by reason of its design, height and bulk, would detract from the visual amenity and appearance of the surrounding area, contrary to Policies CC7 and OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019).
2. 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 other documents considered:

- RDG20366_RDG210_89985_RG6855_GA_REV_B_Issue B - 002 Site Location Plan dated 13 January 2023, received 25 January 2023
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