

DELEGATED APPLICATION REPORT

Ward: Caversham Ward

App Ref: PL/24/1700 (DEM)

Address: Telecommunications Site CS 13066425 Henley Road, Henley Road, Reading, RG4 5DT

Proposal: Upgrade of existing telecommunications base station

Applicant: Cornerstone

Received date: 19/12/2024

Target Decision date: 12/02/2025

Case Officer: Anthony Scholes

1. SITE DESCRIPTION

The site is located within Caversham a predominantly residential area. The proposal site is on highway land located north of Henley Road opposite 95 Henley Road. The site is adjacent to the boundary of Queen Anne's sports grounds. The site does not fall within a conservation area, however, it is within an Air Quality Management Area.

2. PROPOSAL AND SUPPORTING INFORMATION

The proposed development is for prior notification of the Removal of 1no existing 12.5m pole and 3no existing antennas to be replaced with 1no new 17.5m pole with 6no new antennas and associated works.



Figure 1 - Existing site photo

3. PLANS CONSIDERED

The following plans and documents were considered:

- Location Plan, dated 19 December 2024
- Drawing No. 100 – Site Location Maps
- Drawing No. 200 – Existing Site Plan
- Drawing No. 201 – Proposed Site Plan
- Drawing No. 300 – Existing Site Elevation
- Drawing No. 301 – Proposed Site Elevation
- 'Cornerstone', General background information for telecommunications development (England)
- 'Cornerstone', Supplementary Information document

As received 19 December 2024

4. CONSULTATIONS

The following consultation responses were received.

- Transport Development Control

The proposed location of the additional equipment cabinets and pole will not impact on any visibility splays at the adjacent junction or obstruct pedestrian movement on the footway.

I have reviewed the submitted proposal and I can confirm that there are no Highway objections to the proposal given that it will not detrimentally impact on visibility at a junction and / or pedestrian footway width. A crane license must be obtained for work carried out on the highway in order to erect the street pole.

- Trees - Planning Natural Environment

The lamppost will be closer to the Sycamore tree within QAS's curtilage – comparing the above, it does not appear that the location is plotted accurately in relation to the tree, or the tree is not plotted accurately in relation to the proposed lamppost location. Clarity is required as having a lamppost in close proximity, or under the canopy of a tree, is unwelcome due to the inevitable conflict between the two, especially if solar powered, resulting in the need to prune the tree. I think it would be reasonable to ask for a more accurate plan.

- CADRA Consultations

No response received.

A site notice was displayed on the pole for 21 days. No public comments were received.

5. RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY

There are a number of existing telecommunications masts near the proposed site.

It does not appear to contain any site history itself, two application decisions on telecommunications installations are referenced below including one decision within 65m of the proposal.

Junction of Henley Road and Donegal Close:

PL/23/0313 (TEL) - Application for prior notification of proposed 5G telecoms installation, provision of 15m tall telecommunications monopole mast with associated equipment cabinets. REFUSED 3 May 2023;

Appeal decision 26 January 2024
APP/E0345/W/23/3327407 – Appeal Dismissed

St Peter's Hill, Caversham
PL/23/0523 (TEL) - Application for prior notification of proposed development by telecommunications code systems operators. REFUSED 13 June 2023

6. EQUALITIES ACT

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.

7. LEGAL AND PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

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

8. APPRAISAL

Principle of development

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.

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 will be appraised for its 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 three viewing angles based on the flow of vehicle traffic within the surrounding area.

Siting and Appearance

The proposed site lies on highway land on north of Henley Road. The site is adjacent to the boundary of Queen Anne's sports ground and opposite 95 Henley Road. The area is predominantly residential.

There are a number of vertical elements located near the site on Henley Road which include some trees and street poles. There is one existing mast located to the east of the site near a row of shops. To the west of the site on Henley Road is a grade II listed building (Queen Anne's School main block and chapel).

The proposal is for the installation of an 5G 17.5m high street pole with 6 antennas including the refurbishment of an existing ground level cabinet. The proposal identifies that the existing light on the telecommunications installation would be removed, and not replaced on the proposal. Though shown on the plans, a new light post would not be within the scope of the prior approval application. 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) (December 2024) states that; *"The number of radio and electronic communications masts, and the sites for such installations, should be kept to a minimum consistent with the needs of consumers, the efficient operation of the network and providing reasonable capacity for future expansion. Use of existing masts, buildings and other structures for new electronic communications capability (including wireless) should be encouraged. 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) states that: *"The replacement monopole is designed to be slim in nature to ensure that a bulky appearance is not presented as far as practicable with the required technologies and its relatively thin profile can be likened to the existing mast as well as other street items including lighting columns and telegraph poles."*

The applicant has stated: *"It is acknowledged that the replacement monopole is larger in profile compared to the existing site however it is important to reiterate that the design has been minimised as far as practicable within the technical constraints of the equipment."*

The proposed 17.5m monopole would significantly exceed the scale of the existing monopole within the streetscene. It would significantly exceed the height of dwellings within the area and is located on a higher ground than dwelling to the south of the site. It would be highly visible from a wider radius.

The visual impact of the monopole would be exacerbated by the site's prominent location without any form of screening where its height would be much more pronounced. In addition, there is a Grade II listed building (Queen Anne's School main block and chapel) to the west of the site. The presence of this heritage asset, however, has not been acknowledged and the impact of the proposal on this important heritage asset has not been highlighted.

Although there are a number of existing street poles within the immediate surroundings of the site, the proposed 17.5m high monopole would be much greater in height than any surrounding street infrastructure. In addition, it would be much bulkier than the existing monopole. The removal of the integrated streetlight, with limited explanation of why this could not be accommodated in a larger monopole would further be at odds with Policy OU3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan which states: *"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"*. The proposal would necessitate the local transport authority providing a new light column immediately adjacent to the new monopole, this would increase the visual clutter within the area. This represents a poor design solution which does not seek to minimise its visual impact.

Given the design, height, bulk and prominent position on a higher ground, the proposed 17.5m high monopole would appear as an overly dominant and obtrusive structure that would tower above other street furniture and nearby properties to the south and west. Furthermore, due to the site's prominent location with only one large trees to the east to screen its appearance, would be highly visible when viewed from southern and eastern viewing angles and thus the harm to the character of the area.

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.

Amenity and Accessibility

The site is located adjacent to the boundary fencing of Queen Anne's School Sports ground. Although the proposed monopole would be significantly taller than any nearby vertical elements and in close proximity to residential properties, this is not considered to adversely impact the living conditions of nearby residents. Given the distance between the site and any nearby residential properties, it is considered unlikely that the proposed mast would significantly harm the living conditions of nearby residents to the point of refusal.

In accordance with the accessibility and ease of movement aspect of policy TR3 of the Reading Borough Local Plan, the proposed development is considered to allow for appropriate movements along the adjacent pathway north of the site on Henley Road. This is also confirmed by Reading Borough Council Transport that the proposed development would not compromise highway safety. The proposal would not obstruct pedestrian movement given that the footway is wide in this location, and the equipment would take up a similar footprint to the existing. 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.

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 does not consider it relevant to consider alternative sites as the proposal is an existing site. The site is a new installation, and as such an alternative approach should have been considered.

The applicant has not provided any compelling evidence to prove that other sites were robustly investigated and discounted. The above statement does not provide any evidence to justify that there are no alternative sites within the area that are technically viable. The lack of alternative sites still does not discount the need for less intrusive developments.

In view of the above, 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.

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.

9. 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.

10. RECOMMENDATION

Refuse.