

Assessment Centre requirements and selection of the Thame site

This paper is provided in response to a request for more information regarding the site selection process and suitability of the Glebe Lands site in Thame, for the proposed assessment centre. Planning Application Ref: R3.0086/14

Background

As part of the Placement Strategy Programme within Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) 4 new homes for children are planned; two assessment centres and two move-on homes.

The building of these 4 homes will provide OCC with capacity to provide essential services to vulnerable young people within their home county. This will greatly benefit young people as they can be supported in familiar surroundings whilst simultaneously reducing the need for expensive out of county placements.

Initial Review of Potential Sites

A total of 19 potential sites were identified.

These sites were assessed against their potential suitability for both Move-On homes and Assessment Centres.

The criteria the sites were assessed against were as follows:

1. Degree to which the site meets minimum size requirements for assessment centres
2. Degree to which the site meets minimum size requirements for move-on homes
3. Location outside green belt
4. Potential impact on heritage assets
5. Consistency of site with locational requirements for assessment centre*
6. Consistency of site with locational requirements for move-on home
7. Proximity of site to public transport node or corridor
8. Planning history considerations
9. Planning policy considerations
10. Is the site/property capable of being made secure
11. Does sufficient area of the site lie outside of floodplain zones 2, 3a & 3b
12. Is the site available within 12 months

***Site Location requirements for assessment centres**

Assessment centres cater for children and young people at risk of coming into the formal care system. These children are a vulnerable group that are likely to be going through a traumatic time in their lives.

Therefore it is important for an assessment centre to be located in relative isolation, such as a semi-rural location, in order to provide a spacious and calm environment. This is crucial for the assessment centre and is considered exceptional justification for use of land outside of areas considered typical for development (i.e. outside the settlement boundary).

Despite the semi-rural location desired, assessment centres would also benefit from reasonable proximity to population centres in order to ensure access to town/village centre resources and amenities as well as transportation networks.

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When assessed against each of the criteria, each site achieved two scores; one for suitability for an assessment centre and the other suitability for a move-on home.

The position of the suitable sites in relation to each other was an important factor in their selection as it is desirable to achieve an even spread of developments across the county. This should provide the best possible service coverage for the young people of Oxfordshire and reduce the need for them and their families to travel long distance away from the home area to reach the centres.

Selecting the Thame site

Thame was identified as the joint 3rd most suitable site for a move-on home, but was rated joint 2nd in terms of suitability for an assessment centre. Thame was therefore progressed as a principle location for an assessment centre.

The two other sites ranked the same as Thame were both situated in Eynsham. One of these sites is being taken forward as the location for the other assessment centre. This provides good East-West coverage for the county. The other site is located north of the A40 and is physically disconnected with the settlement rendering it less suitable. Also it was within a search area with potential for a park and ride facility.

Against the scoring criteria detailed above the only site to be rated higher than Thame was a site in Wantage.

Both the Wantage and Thame proposed sites fell outside of the development plans or boundaries for the local areas. Upon closer examination of the planning considerations it emerged that the Wantage proposal was found to be within an area of outstanding natural beauty which tipped the balance in favour of Thame.

Other areas considered

Additional sites were considered alongside those mentioned above. However, these sites were ranked below Thame in terms of suitability for an assessment centre.

The following list indicates a variety of reasons why the other sites were found to be less suitable than Thame:

- Requirement for a new access road, which would significantly delay development and result in high cost increase
- Site has been already been identified as a location for future residential or mixed use development by OCC
- Site was more suitable for a move-on development
- Negotiations with other potential developers already in process
- Sites within conservation area
- Remoteness
- Timescales for delivery
- Sites adjacent to heritage or listed buildings

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Material considerations associated with the application proposal

The planning system operates on a principle enshrined in section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 which states:

"If regard is to be had to the development plan for the purpose of any determination to be made under the planning Acts the determination must be made in accordance with the plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise"

In this case the Thame Neighbourhood Plan, the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy and the 'saved' policies of the South Oxfordshire Local Plan together comprise the development plan. S.38 (6) requires that the planning authority determine any planning application in accordance with the policies in the development plan (which in the case of the land at Thame are protective, with a presumption against many forms of development).

However due to the specific issues associated with this application, there are strong material considerations which, when taken together, tip the 'planning balance' in favour of granting planning permission, notwithstanding any conflict with development plan policy.

These material considerations include:

1. The strong background 'need' case as set out above and in previous submissions.
2. The requirement that both assessment centres be located in relatively isolated / semi-rural locations, on a non-shared site – generally ruling out any locations that are likely to be within the settlement boundary of any town or village.
3. The desire to deliver the homes quickly and with certainty, thus leading to the consideration of OCC-owned land and property first.
4. The geographical requirements for an even spread of facilities across the County.
5. The lack of significant constraints affecting the site
6. The development of this site will not set a precedent for development south of the road, as land to the west is already allocated for (housing) development or as a housing reserve site, and there is built development immediately to the north west at Worcester Cottage / Diagnostic Reagents. Breaching the physical boundary of the road has already been accepted as a matter of principle. Notwithstanding this, each application must be determined on its own merits and the justification for this proposal is unique to this particular type of development in the very specific circumstances associated with the application, so it could not be relied upon to give precedent to other forms of development in the vicinity.
7. Oxfordshire County Council will retain control of the adjoining land, thus ensuring it can be properly managed in the future.

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8. Due to the topography of the land, and the physical landscaping features, the site will be visually and physically contained, resulting in minimal landscape and visual impacts arising from the proposals, and providing opportunities to effectively assimilate the development into the surrounding area.
9. Past planning history associated with the site, whilst of interest, is not determinative in the outcome of the current proposals. A different development plan was in place at the time, and the proposals were for a different form of development that it was felt could be located more sustainably elsewhere.
10. The Thame Neighbourhood Plan could not have reasonably contemplated the need to identify a site such as that proposed now, due to the timing of the events which led to the current requirement arising towards the end of the Neighbourhood Plan process. The information held within the Placement Strategy was only made public following Cabinet approval in July 2013.
11. The application site is in what is arguably one of the less 'exposed' locations on the perimeter of Thame, therefore were it to be compared to other locations just outside the existing edge of the settlement it would perform well in terms of its landscape impact.
12. The proposed assessment home will create approximately 23 additional jobs, with a mix of skilled unqualified and professional qualified roles. This supports the need to provide additional employment opportunities for Thame as stated in the Neighbourhood Plan. OCC would welcome applications from suitable individuals from Thame, as well as the surrounding areas. This is a beneficial effect of the proposal.
13. The location of the site is near enough to local services, residential areas and facilities to encourage a number of journeys to and from the assessment centre to be made on foot or by bicycle. This is significant given the need for a semi-rural location, and the general difficulty in identifying sites that are both relatively isolated and yet accessible.

Comparison with Diagnostic Reagents Appeal

The County Council is aware of the above planning appeal, decided on 20 September 2013. It affects a site just to the north west of the application site.

In that case, the appeal inspector identified the main issues to be the loss of an employment site, and the impact on the character and appearance of the area.

The first issue is not relevant to this application as the proposal does not involve the loss of employment facilities or land.

In relation to the second main issue, the 'rural character' that the Inspector identifies is an important locational factor for the current application, as noted above; the inability to locate a proposal such as the application scheme within an urban area

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means that it is important to ensure that any non-urban locations are capable of accommodating the proposed development without leading to harm to the character and appearance of the area.

As noted above, the application site is in one of the less exposed locations on the edge of Thame, where, in the applicant's view, it will be possible to develop an assessment centre which respects the rural character and appearance of the area, and where any harm to the character of the area as a result of the development is limited and is not significantly, and demonstrably, outweighed by the strong material grounds for granting planning permission, as identified above.

Consequently there are good planning reasons for granting planning permission for this proposal in light of the previous appeal Inspector's findings.

The Planning Balance

It is the applicant's view that there are strong material grounds for granting planning permission for the proposals, notwithstanding any harm that may arise as a result of conflict between the proposals and specific development plan policies dealing with development outside settlements. Consequently the planning balance is considered to weigh in favour of granting planning permission, having regard to the material considerations associated with the specifics of this particular proposal and the pressing need to deliver this facility.