

DELEGATED OFFICER REPORT



WOKINGHAM
BOROUGH COUNCIL

Application Number:	260120
Site Address:	Cousins House, 1-3 Reading Road, Finchampstead, Wokingham, RG27 0RP
Expiry Date:	30 April 2026
Site Visit Date:	4 June 2024
Proposal: Full application for the change of use of the building to a Patient Transport Service building (Use Class Sui Generis). (Retrospective)	

PLANNING POLICY

National Policy	National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) National Planning Policy Guidance (NPPG)
Core Strategy (CS)	CP1 – Sustainable Development CP3 – General Principles for Development CP6 – Managing Travel Demand CP7 – Biodiversity CP9 – Scale and Location of Development Proposals CP11 – Proposals Outside Development Limits
MDD Local Plan (MDD)	CC01 – Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development CC02 – Development Limits CC03 – Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping CC04 – Sustainable Design and Construction CC06 – Noise CC07 – Parking CC09 – Development and Flood Risk CC10 – Sustainable Drainage TB06 – Development of Private Residential Gardens TB21 – Landscape Character TB23 – Biodiversity and Development TB25 – Archaeology
Joint Minerals and Waste Plan (JMWP)	DM1 - Sustainable Development
Other	Borough Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document

PLANNING HISTORY

Application No.	Description	Decision & Date
O/1996/64043/O	Erection of 13 Dwellings	Approved
RM/1999/68978	Reserved Matters for the Erection of 13 Dwellings.	Approved: May 1999
F/1999/69163	Proposed Demolition Of Existing Buildings And Erection Of 22 Dwellings With Roads And Services	Refused: April 1999

F/1999/69162	Proposed Demolition Of Existing Buildings And Erection Of 18 Dwellings With Roads And Services	Refused: April 1999
F/2007/2672	Proposed first floor rear extension.	Approval: January 2008
F/2008/0928	Proposed first floor side/rear extension to existing offices.	Approved: June 2008
F/2013/0031	Application for the extension of the car park at Masdar House. (Retrospective)	Approved: February 2013
170615	Full planning application for the change of use from B1 (a) to C3 residential, comprising 3x1 bed apartments and 4x2 bed apartments on the existing office building.	Withdrawn: February 2019
240893	Full application for the change of use from an area of grassland to create additional hardstanding parking spaces and access for vehicles.	Refused: June 2024
242418	Full application for a change of use from offices (Use Class E(g(i))) to a Patient Transport Service building (Use Class Sui Generis), along with the extension of the existing car park to provide an additional 5No. parking spaces. (part retrospective)	Refused: May 2025

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Internal

WBC Highways – No objection subject to conditions

External

Hart District Council – No comments

REPRESENTATIONS

Finchampstead Council	Parish	The PC object to the planning application because the site lies within what they believe to be a traffic pinch-point and it is thought that the proposal would likely worsen congestion, contrary to FNDP Policy GA1.1. It would also generate additional traffic and extend operating hours, causing significant adverse impacts on nearby residential properties, contrary to FNDP Policy TC1.1b. If approved, the Committee request conditions to limit operating hours and prevent vehicle parking on the grass verge.
Ward Member(s)		No comments received

Neighbours	One objection letter received, as summarised below: The objector, a long-term neighbouring resident, raises strong concerns about the proposed change of use and 24/7 operation of the site. They state that previous occupiers operated considerately and not around the clock, whereas the current use is out of character with the rural setting. The change from Class E is questioned, with claims that the planning statement contains inaccuracies about local services and community benefit, and that the business operates as a nationwide patient transport provider rather than a local service. Key issues include severe inadequacy and misuse of the car park, obstruction of pavements, parking on grassed and flood-prone land, and overspill parking affecting neighbours. The 24-hour operation is said to cause ongoing noise, light disturbance, loss of privacy, and pollution, resulting in unacceptable harm to residential amenity, with no supporting noise or lighting assessments submitted. Further concerns relate to highway safety due to the site's location on a tight bend on the A327, flood risk from surface and river water, lack of site maintenance, and the absence of clear evidence that the current or proposed use has appropriate permission. Overall, the resident states that the proposal would industrialise and urbanise a countryside location, conflict with planning policies, and should therefore be refused.
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APPRAISAL

Context: The application site comprises an office building that was formerly a residential dwelling but has since been converted to an office. To the rear is a substantial area of hardstanding, beyond which lies a lawned area. The site backs onto the Blackwater River, forming the rear boundary.

This application seeks retrospective planning permission to change the lawful use of the building from office use to a Patient Transport Service (Use Class Sui Generis).

The proposal follows the refusal of applications 240893 (June 2024) and 242418 (May 2025). Both earlier applications sought consent for additional areas of hardstanding. In contrast, the current submission relates solely to regularising the use of the existing building. A separate investigation identified that the Patient Transport Service had commenced operation without the necessary planning permission, prompting the need for this retrospective application.

Principle of Development: The National Planning Policy Framework has an underlying presumption in favour of sustainable development which is carried through to the local Development Plan. The Managing Development Delivery Local Plan Policy CC01 states that planning applications that accord with the policies in the Development Plan for Wokingham Borough will be approved without delay, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The application site is located within the countryside and therefore lies outside the defined Development Limits. Core Strategy Policy CP11 seeks to restrict inappropriate development in the countryside to protect its character and rural setting. However, the policy also supports the re-use of existing buildings. In this case, the proposal relates solely to a change of use, making use of an established commercial (office) building that already forms part of the built environment. As no external alterations are proposed, the use has not resulted in any harmful effect on the rural character or visual appearance of the surrounding area, nor does it create excessive encroachment in the countryside, and therefore accords, in part, with the relevant aims of CP11 in this respect.

The site has a longstanding non-residential function as an office with associated car park, and the Patient Transport Service represents a continuation of employment-generating activity. The use is consistent with the objectives of Policy CP15, which encourages the retention, enhancement, and appropriate re-use of employment sites, particularly where they contribute positively to the local economy. The use maintains a productive use of the building, preventing vacancy or underutilisation.

In addition, a Patient Transport Service provides an essential community-supporting function, contributing to local health infrastructure. The use therefore offers wider public benefit while making efficient use of an existing building, in line with sustainable development principles that promote the re-use of previously developed structures and minimise the need for new construction.

Notwithstanding the above, for the proposal to comply with exception 1 of Policy CP11, the use would need to be associated with, and necessary for, a rural enterprise. While the policy does not define "rural enterprise" there is no clear or intrinsic functional relationship between the business and the countryside location. The nature of the use is such that it could operate equally from an urban site without reliance on a rural setting.

Accordingly, although the proposal may meet exceptions 2 and 3, Policy CP11 requires compliance with all three exceptions for support to be given in principle. As the development fails to satisfy the first, the application is contrary to Policy CP11 and is therefore unacceptable in principle. Nevertheless, this conflict must be balanced against the identified benefits of the scheme and considered in the context of any resulting harm. This balancing exercise is summarised in the conclusion of this report.

Character of the Area: The surrounding area is semi-rural in character, comprising a mix of sporadic commercial premises, and residential linear development. The site itself contains a long-established commercial building with existing hardstanding and parking areas. The proposal involves no external operational development, and therefore the

form, massing, materials, and visual appearance of the building remain entirely unchanged.

The use does not increase the visual prominence of the building, erode the rural qualities of the surroundings, or introduce any features that would detract from the countryside setting. The scheme maintains the established commercial character of the site within this otherwise rural environment.

Overall, the development preserves the openness and visual qualities of the countryside and remains compatible with the area's character, in accordance with Core Strategy Policy CP3 and MDD Policy TB21.

Neighbouring Amenity:

Noise, Disturbance & Vehicular Movements

The primary cause for concern when considering neighbouring impacts for a development of this nature relates to noise pollution. This is reflected by the representations received, whereby concern has been raised by a neighbouring resident regarding potential noise pollution arising from the 24-hour operation of the Patient Transport Service.

It is acknowledged that the nature of the use involves activity outside of typical daytime or business hours. However, in this instance, it is important to assess the impact based on the actual level and intensity of activity, rather than the nominal hours of operation alone.

The submitted Technical Note demonstrates that the level of vehicular activity associated with the current use is relatively low. Recorded operational data indicates that the site experiences an average of approximately 7 vehicle movements per day, with a maximum of 30 movements on the busiest recorded day. This is notably lower than the lawful office use (Use Class E), which is estimated to have generated up to 57 daily vehicle movements, with pronounced peaks during morning and evening periods. This comparison is significant, as it demonstrates that the current use does not represent an intensification of activity, but rather a reduction in overall comings and goings relative to the fallback position.

In noise terms, the former office use would typically generate concentrated peak-hour traffic, including staff arrivals and departures, which can give rise to notable short-term noise events. In contrast, the Patient Transport Service distributes its movements more sporadically throughout the day and night, resulting in a lower intensity and less concentrated pattern of activity.

In providing a balanced assessment, it is recognised that activity outside of ordinary working hours can heighten impacts on neighbouring uses, as noise and light generated during the night may have a greater effect on amenity. However, for the reasons set out above, it is not considered that the relatively low level of activity would be detrimental in this instance.

Furthermore, the use operates as a non-emergency patient transport service, and therefore does not involve the use of sirens or other emergency response equipment that might otherwise give rise to significant noise disturbance.

Taking all of the above into account, it is considered that the change of use does not give rise to a harmful noise environment when compared to the lawful office use of the site. The evidence indicates that activity levels are lower overall, and while more temporally dispersed, they are not of a scale or nature that would result in unacceptable harm to neighbouring residential amenity.

Accordingly, the proposal is not considered to conflict with development plan policies relating to residential amenity and noise.

Notwithstanding the above, given that the acceptability of the use is largely reliant on the modest level activity as evidenced within the Highways Technical Note, it is considered appropriate to condition a maximum level of vehicular movements in order to safeguard neighbouring residential amenity. Should vehicular movements increase in the future, a variation of the condition would be required to allow the Local Planning Authority to fully assess the potential impacts arising from any such change.

Highway Access and Parking Provision: The appraisal above addresses vehicular movements and their acceptability. This was not identified as a concern by the Highways Officer, who concluded that the change of use is unlikely to have significant impacts on the wider highway network.

Nevertheless, the Highways Officer initially raised a separate concern regarding the parking layout and whether it would enable vehicles to enter and leave the site safely in forward gear.

Following extensive discussions between the Highways Authority and the Agent, including amendments to the original parking layout and the submission of a swept-path analysis, the Highways Officer is satisfied that the initial concerns have been addressed and raises no objection, subject to conditions.

Conclusion: The proposal seeks to change the permitted use of the building to facilitate a Patient Transport Service. As outlined above, this results in a conflict with Policy CP11 and is therefore unacceptable in principle.

However, this policy conflict must be balanced against all other relevant material considerations.

The previous lawful use of the building as offices would also have conflicted with the criteria now contained in Policy CP11, had the current policy framework been in place at the time of that conversion. The use therefore does not introduce any new form of development that is more inconsistent with CP11 than the established position; rather, it seeks to regularise the continued use of an existing, long-standing commercial building. This does not conflict with the overall aim of CP11 which seeks to protect the separate identity of settlements and maintain the quality of the environment,

Furthermore, the application would secure the lawful operation of a business that provides a community-supporting function and contributes to local health infrastructure, without resulting in harm to the character or appearance of the area or to neighbouring land uses. These considerations carry substantial weight and, in this site-specific context, outweigh the identified policy conflict.

It is also important to note that the Sui Generis use is restricted to the specific use for patient transport only, and any change to this use would require the submission of a separate planning application in order for any impacts of this change to be fully assessed.

For these reasons, the application is considered acceptable and is recommended for approval

Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL): When planning permission is granted for a development that is CIL liable, the Council will issue a liability notice as soon as practicable after the day on which the planning permission first permits development. Completing the assumption of liability notice is a statutory requirement to be completed for all CIL liable applications.

The Public Sector Equality Duty (Equality Act 2010): In determining this application the Council is required to have due regard to its obligations under the Equality Act 2010. The key equalities protected characteristics include age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation. There is no indication or evidence (including from consultation on the application) that persons with protected characteristics as identified by the Act have or will have different needs, experiences, issues and priorities in relation to this particular planning application and there would be no significant adverse impacts as a result of the development.

RECOMMENDATION	
Conditions agreed:	Not required
Recommendation:	Approve
Date:	29 April 2026
Earliest date for decision:	13 February 2026

Recommendation agreed by: (Authorised Officer)	
Date:	20 April 2026

PLANNING CONSTRAINTS/STATUS

- *Countryside*
- *Contaminated Land Consultation Zone*
- *Green Routes and Riverside Paths*
- *Bat Roost Habitat Suitability*
- *Scale and Location of Development Proposals*
- *Landscape Character Assessment Area*
- *Main Rivers DRN Consultation Zone*
- *Ordinary Watercourses Consultation Zone*
- *Local Wildlife Sites Consultation Zone*
- *Archaeological Sites*
- *Flood Zones 2 & 3*