

Planning Statement

Unit 4 Winnersh Fields, Winnersh, RG41 5QS

Mar 2025

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1. Introduction

1.1 This Planning Statement is submitted to Wokingham Borough Council ('WBC') in support of a full application relating to Unit 4 Winnersh Fields, Winnersh, RG41 5QS (hereafter referred to as the 'Site') for the change of use of an existing office building (Use Class E) to an Educational & place of Worship (Use Class F1(f)) and community centre (Use Class F2(b)).

1.2 The planning application to which this statement relates is submitted on behalf of Muslim Community Connect Wokingham (hereafter referred to as the 'Applicant'). The description of development is as follows: "Full application for change of use of existing office building (Use Class E) to a Place of Worship (Use Class F1(f)) and community centre (Use Class F2 (b))".

1.3 A location plan for the Site is provide at Appendix 1.

Background

1.4. These proposals have evolved following an identified need from the Muslim community for a new community centre to serve its community.

1.5 Following consideration of several sites in the local area, the applicant considers the application site and its location to be the most appropriate to meet the need arising from the local area.

Application Documentation

1.6 Alongside this Planning Statement, the application is supported by the following plans and documents:

- Application Form
- Application Fee
- Application Plans (inc. site location plan)
- Flood Risk Assessment
- Transport Statement (Prepared by Mode)
- Marketing Letter/Email (prepared by RICS Registered Expert Witness Surveyor)

Structure of this Statement

1.7 The remainder of this statement is structured as follows:

- **Section 2:** Describes the Site and its surroundings.
- **Section 3:** Describes the Proposed Development.
- **Section 4:** Sets out the relevant planning policy context of the adopted and emerging Development Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework.
- **Section 5:** Provides a planning assessment of the proposal against the relevant considerations; and
- **Section 6:** Provides a summary and conclusions.

2. Site and Surroundings

The Site

- 2.1. The Site extends to approximately 2.47Ha and is located to the west of Winnersh, along Reading Road. The Site comprises an existing office building referred to as 'Unit 4 Winnersh Fields' with associated access and parking.
- 2.2 The Site is bound to the north by a retail unit, to the east and south by an open space land, and to the west by a retail unit.
- 2.3 The Site is located within the settlement of Winnersh. Winnersh is approximately 4 miles¹ southeast of Reading Town Centre and approximately 3 miles² northwest of Wokingham.
- 2.4 A review of the Government's flood mapping tool identifies that the Site is located wholly within Flood Zone 2. A supporting flood risk assessment has been prepared and submitted as part of this application.
- 2.5 The Site is not located within a Conservation Area. Following a review of Heritage England's Map of listed heritage assets, it is considered that the Site is free from known historical constraints that would preclude the proposed change of use of this site. Similarly, the Site is not constrained by an ecological or landscape designations that would prohibit the change of use proposed in this location.

Surrounding Area

- 2.6 Nearby occupiers include Halfords, Wickes, Pets at Home and a Gurudwara & Community Centre, and few retail units in the park.
- 2.7 The Site has strong connections to Reading Town Centre and Wokingham. The Site is serviced by the bus stop just 4 mins walk (0.2mile³). The bus stop provides access into Central Reading and Bracknell.
- 2.8 Winnersh Triangle railway station is located approximately 0.3 miles⁴ from the Site which equates to a walk of approximately 6 minutes from the Site to the station. This line provides links directly to Reading and London Waterloo.

Planning History

- 2.9 A review of the Council's online planning applications search tool only identifies applications pre-1998 and therefore the information is only available upon direct request to the Council.

¹Google Maps

²Google Maps

³Google Maps

⁴Google Maps

3. The Proposed Development

- 3.1 This section of the Planning Statement summarises the proposed development for which planning permission is sought.

Description of Development

- 3.2 Full planning permission is sought for the following description of development: “Full application for change of use of existing office building (Use Class E) to an Educational & Place of Worship (Use Class F1(f)) and community centre (Use Class F2 (b))”

Overview

- 3.3 The proposed change of use seeks permission to change the use of an existing office (Use Class E) to an Educational & Place of Worship (Use Class F1(f)) and community centre (Use Class F2 (b)). The proposals do not seek to make external changes to the existing fenestration or changes to the existing parking arrangement.
- 3.4 The provision of a place of worship in this location will further contribute towards maximising social inclusion for the communities in both Winnersh and Wokingham, and also sustainable patterns of living given the high level of accessibility the site offers.

Design

- 3.5 The proposal seeks to change the lawful use of the building and does not propose to change the external appearance or scale, massing, and height of the existing building.

Access and Parking

- 3.6 The site benefits from an existing gated access to the site, the proposed development seeks to use the existing access.
- 3.7 The site currently provides 14 car parking spaces on site; the proposals intend to retain and utilise these existing parking spaces.

Landscaping

- 3.8 The application does not propose to make changes to the existing landscaping on site.

4. Planning Policy Context

- 4.1 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2001 (as amended) ('The Act') provides as follows:

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

- 4.2 This section of the Statement identifies the national and local planning policies and guidance which are relevant to the consideration of the proposed development having regard to the statutory test set out above.
- 4.3 The Site is under the jurisdiction of Wokingham Borough Council and the relevant Development Plan documents at the time of submission of the planning application in this case consists of the Core Strategy (adopted January 2010) and the Managing Development Delivery Plan (adopted February 2014).
- 4.4 Other material considerations include the following:
- National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF);
 - National Planning Practice Guidance (PPG); and
 - Relevant adopted Supplementary Planning Documents.

The Development Plan

Core Strategy (2010)

- 4.5 Wokingham Borough Council adopted their Core Strategy in January 2010. Relevant policies from the adopted plan are set out below:
- Policy CP1: Sustainable Development
 - Policy CP2: Inclusive Communities
 - Policy CP3: General Principles for Development
 - Policy CP9: Scale and location of development proposals
 - Policy CP15: Employment Development

Managing Development Delivery Plan (2014)

- 4.6 The Council adopted their Managing Development Delivery Plan in February 2014. Relevant policies from the adopted plan are set out below:
- Policy CC02: Development Limits
 - Policy CC09: Development and Flood Risk 7

Community Infrastructure Levy

- 4.7 The Council introduced their Community Infrastructure Levy in February 2015. As the proposed development relates to the change of use to a place of worship, there is a nil charge incurred.

Material Considerations

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) ('the Framework')

- 4.8 The Framework was published in July 2021 and sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these are expected to be applied. The following key paragraphs are considered to be of relevance to the determination of this application:
- 4.9. **Paragraph 85** further states that *'Planning policies and decisions should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport. In these circumstances it will be important to ensure that development is sensitive to its surroundings, does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits any opportunities to make a location more sustainable (for example by improving the scope for access on foot, by cycling or by public transport). The use of previously developed land, and sites that are physically well-related to existing settlements, should be encouraged where suitable opportunities exist.'*
- 4.10 **Paragraph 93** states that planning decisions should plan positively for community facilities such as places of worship and other local services to enhance the sustainability of communities and residential environments.
- 4.11 **Paragraph 120** states that planning decisions should give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for identified needs and to promote and support the development of under-utilised land and buildings.
- 4.12 **Paragraph 123** states that "Local planning authorities should also take a positive approach to applications for alternative uses of land which is currently developed but not allocated for a specific purpose in plans, where this would help to meet identified development needs."

National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)

- 4.13 The DCLG published the Planning Practice Guidance ('PPG'), a web-based resource to reflect and support the NPPF on 6th March 2014. The following sections of the PPG are considered relevant to this proposal:
- Effective use of land
 - Healthy and Safe Communities

Supplementary Planning Documents

Sustainable Design and Construction SPD (May 2010)

- 4.14 The Council adopted their Sustainable Design and Construction SPD on the 28th May 2010 and provides an up to date and comprehensive approach to considering sustainable design and construction in new development.
- 4.15 Of relevance to this application is 'Sustainability Issue 2: Minimising Energy Consumption' which states the following:

“All developments (including new builds, extensions, conversions and change of use) should seek to achieve the highest practical standards of sustainable design and construction to reduce energy demand throughout the lifetime of the development. The Council will encourage all developments to be built to higher standards than those required at a regional or national level. The Council will encourage developers to set new standards of excellence.

It is also important that the sustainable design aspects of planning applications must be balanced with other Council design guidance.”

Emerging Local Plan

- 4.16 Wokingham Borough Council are currently in the process of preparing its new Local Plan. The Council’s latest Local Development Scheme was adopted in July 2021 and anticipated submission of the Local Plan in December 2022 with Examination during 2023, however we understand that the Local Plan is yet to be submitted.
- 4.17 **Paragraph 48** of the Framework states that Local Planning Authorities may give weight to relevant policies in emerging plans according to the stage of preparation of the emerging plan (the more advanced its preparation, the greater the weight that may be given).
- 4.18 At the current time, it is considered the draft Local Plan carries limited weight in the assessment of the application.

5. Planning Assessment

- 5.1 This section of the Planning Statement assesses the proposed development against the adopted Development Plan and other material considerations as outline in Chapter 4 of this Statement.

Principle of Development

- 5.2 Section 38 (6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires applications for planning permission to be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 5.3 Section 70 (2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 states that the Local Planning Authority shall have regard to the provisions of the Development Plan, so far as material to the application, and to any other material considerations. In the case of Wokingham Borough Council, the Development Plan is the Core Strategy (adopted January 2010) and the Managing Development Delivery Plan (adopted February 2014).
- 5.4 The Development Plan should be read as a whole, rather than seeking compliance with every policy. In any event, the assessment undertaken within this Planning Statement demonstrates that the proposals are consistent with the relevant policies contained within the Development Plan when read as a whole.

Location

- 5.5 Paragraph 120 of the Framework advises that planning decisions should give substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for identified needs and to promote and support the development of under-utilised land and buildings.
- 5.6 The building currently had been used as an office premises and was purpose built. It has available for sale to the public for the past 12 months.
- 5.7 The Site is not located in an identified employment area. The site is however located within the development limits of Winnersh (as identified by Policy CC02) which is also identified as a 'Major Development Location' within Core Strategy Policy CP9, which advises that development proposals will be acceptable in principle.
- 5.8 Core Strategy Policy CP1 states that permission will be granted for development proposals that demonstrate how they support opportunities for reducing the need to travel, particularly by car. The site is located within a sustainable location with good access to public transport links including by bus, train and pedestrian links.
- 5.9 Notwithstanding this, the location of the site to provide a new place of worship & community use is in response to the identified need in the local community who live close by, and therefore the chosen location at Winnersh Fields will allow those in the surrounding area opportunity to attend the site on foot or other non-car means.

- 5.10 On the basis of the above, it is considered that proposal complies with the requirements of Policy CC02, CP9 and CP1 and the location of the site is considered to be appropriate and acceptable in principle.

Loss of Employment Use

- 5.11 The Site is not identified as falling within a Core Employment Area, as reflected in Policy TB11 of the Core Strategy. However, we do note that Core Strategy Policy CP15 does stipulate that “changes of use from B1, B2 & B8 should not lead to an overall net loss of floorspace in B Use within the Borough.” It should be noted that this policy is not clear about the timeframe over which the net loss of floorspace would be measured, and it is apparent that there has been significant employment land growth in the Borough over the time since the Core Strategy was adopted.
- 5.12 Notwithstanding this, we consider that policy CP15 does not reflect paragraph 123 of the Framework which states that “Local planning authorities should also take a positive approach to applications for alternative uses of land which is currently developed but not allocated for a specific purpose in plans, where this would help to meet identified development needs.” The Framework continues by stating that Local Authorities should support proposals to make more effective use of sites that provide community uses.
- 5.13 The existing office building has been actively marketed for since September 2024 and was previously marketed in March 2023. This is detailed further in the supporting email by RICS Registered Expert Witness Surveyor
- 5.14 On the basis of the above, it is considered that the conversion of a small quantum of vacant employment land outside of a Core Employment Area, in order to provide a community use with an identified need within the local community, would not be detrimental to the wider supply of employment land. It is considered that the proposals are in compliance with paragraph 123 of the Framework and general compliance with time dated Core Strategy Policy CP15.

Provision of Community Facilities

- 5.15 Within the adopted Core Strategy, there is a specific focus upon ensuring that new development addresses the needs of all sectors of the community through ‘the growth of ethnic and cultural mix within the population’. This is reflected within the Core Strategy’s Vision which envisages that everyone will ‘have improved access to high quality services such as schools, open space & recreation, health and community facilities to maintain social wellbeing, health and the quality of life’.
- 5.16 These elements of the Core Strategy are particularly relevant given the proposals relate to addressing a long term identified need for a place of worship to serve the existing Muslim communities around Winnersh and the wider Reading and Wokingham areas, Woodley, Finchampstead, Arborfield, Barkham, Lower Earley...). Such an approach is also reflective of the policy approach taken within

the Framework which advises that 'planning decision should plan positively for community facilities such as places of worship'.

- 5.17 When considering the acceptability of the proposals within the context of the Core Strategy policies, the provision of a new religious building falls within the definition of 'community facilities' as set out at paragraph 4.17 of the Core Strategy which states: "Community facilities include development for health (including preventative social care and community support services), education, play and leisure or culture together with libraries, village/community halls and religious buildings. It also includes burial sites."
- 5.18 Paragraph 2.25 of the Core Strategy identifies the need to "ensure that the wider needs for service delivery and the needs of all sectors of the community are addressed in particular through the growth of ethnic and cultural mix within the population."
- 5.19 The above definition assists in identifying the relevant adopted planning policies to assessing the principle of the land use proposed. Therefore, the proposal is assessed within the context of policy and CP2 and CP3 of the Core Strategy below.

Compliance with Policy CP2

- 5.20 Core Strategy Policy CP2 supports the provision of sustainable and inclusive communities (including the provision of community facilities) to meet long term needs. This policy is particularly relevant given that the Applicant has long searched for an appropriate site to meet its long term needs to ensure that a suitable place of worship for the Muslim community can be delivered within an accessible location between Reading and Wokingham.
- 5.21 Criterion D of Policy CP2 sets out that planning permission will be granted for proposals that address the requirements of: 'The specific identified needs of minority groups in the borough, including Gypsies, Travellers and Travelling Show people and black and minority ethnic groups.'
- 5.22 Criterion D (i and ii) provide the policy criteria that need to be addressed to demonstrate the acceptability of the proposals. The circumstances that the policy states where proposals would be acceptable are: (i) The site is located either within or close to the development limits of a settlement in policy CP9 to maximise the possibilities for social inclusion and sustainable patterns of living; and (ii) The proposed site is not disproportionate to the scale of the existing settlement whether singly or cumulatively with any existing sites in the area.
- 5.23 The Site is located within the identified existing development limits as shown on the adopted policies map. The Site is also located within an area identified as a 'Major development location' within the adopted Development Plan and is considered to therefore fully satisfy criterion (i) as stated above.
- 5.24 On account of the above, criteria (i) of Policy CP2 (Criterion D), is satisfied with the site benefiting from a high level of accessibility by bus or train to surrounding areas particularly Reading and Wokingham for whom this facility will serve, reinforcing social inclusion and sustainable patterns of living as required by the policy. 12

- 5.25 In regard to criterion (ii) of Policy CP2, the proposal is considered to comply as it seeks to change the lawful use of the building and does not propose to alter the external appearance in terms of scale, mass, or height from what is currently present on site.
- 5.26 Notwithstanding this, the Framework at paragraph 84 is also clear that decisions should “enable the development of accessible, local services and community facilities including places of worship.”
- 5.28 On the basis of the above it is considered that the proposals comply with the requirements of Policy CP2 and paragraph 84 Framework.

Compliance with Policy CP3

- 5.29 Core Policy CP3 (General Principles for Development) encourages developments to contribute towards the provision of an appropriate network of community facilities.
- 5.30 Whilst the building will primarily serve the Muslim community, an additional benefit of the proposal will be that the facility will have the potential to offer space for alternative community uses within the area. This offer would be available outside times the building is used for religious occasions and could support local girl guides and boy scouts’ organisations, community healthcare and wellness classes and educational visits.
- 5.31 On the basis of the above assessment and the contents of the supporting documentation, it is considered that the proposals comply with relevant development plan policies, and is the proposed development is considered to be acceptable in principle.

Technical Considerations

Design

- 5.32 This application seeks permission for the change of use of an existing building in office use (Use Class E). The proposals do not seek to amend the visual appearance of the existing facade or alter the scale, height, and massing of the building.
- 5.33 The supporting plans submitted as part of this application demonstrate this further.

Highways and Access

- 5.34 The scheme proposes to use the existing access via Gazelle Close, which is located to the south of the site adjacent to the Halfords car park. There are currently 14 existing car parking spaces on site, the proposed development does not seek to remove or add to the existing provision on site.
- 5.35 The application is supported by a Technical Note (prepared by MODE) and the Unit will retain the existing parking spaces available on the site. For more details see the attached transport note.

Flooding and Drainage

- 5.36 Policy CC09 requires development proposals in Flood Zone 2 to consider the vulnerability of the proposed development. The policy states that the sequential test will not be required if the proposed development involves the conversion or change of use.
- 5.37 Notwithstanding this, the application is supported by a Flood Risk Assessment and concludes that the site is at low risk of flooding from groundwater, sewer, and artificial sources. The report concludes that in the context of flood risk, the proposed development is safe and appropriate and does not increase flood risk.
- 5.38 On the basis of the above it is considered that the proposed development complies with the requirements of Policy CC09 and is not required to undergo a sequential test. 14 6.

6. Summary and Conclusions

- 6.1 This Planning Statement is submitted by M C S DESIGN Architectural Services on behalf of Muslim Community Connect Wokingham, in support of a full planning application for the change of use of an existing building.
- 6.2 The description of development is as follows: “Full application for change of use of existing office building (Use Class E) to a Place of Worship (Use Class F1(f)) and community centre (Use Class F2 (b))”
- 6.3 This application is submitted in order to address an identified community need for this particular use in this location. The site is situated in a sustainable and accessible location and presents an opportunity to utilise a retail building to provide community facilities and a new place of worship.
- 6.4 Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 is clear in requiring that planning applications should only be approved where they accord with the Development Plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
- 6.5 Relevant technical matters including access, parking and flood risk have been appropriately addressed through this submission and demonstrate that the proposed development will not have an adverse impact through change of use to a place of worship.
- 6.6 It is considered that this Planning Statement demonstrates compliance with the relevant planning policies and that there are no grounds that would prevent planning permission from being granted in this case.

Appendix 1:

Site Location Plan