

Agenda item 7.
Proposed Pre-Committee Site Visits

1. Request

1.1 A request has been received from Cllr Sibley for a committee site visit to be held for application 22/02922/F. This relates to a proposal for the construction of a Thames Valley Police Technical Services Building (Use Class E) with associated access, car parking and hard and soft landscaping on land adjacent to Bicester Road and South West of Avonbury Business Park, Howes Lane, Bicester.

1.2 Cllr Sibley highlights the following reasons for a formal site visit:

- This planning application has a high level of public interest and concern amongst Bicester Residents.
- A judgement is required on visual impact.
- The setting and surroundings are particularly relevant to the determination or conditions being considered
- To enable a formal site visit to be undertaken by OCC Highways, CDC Planning Officers & Committee Members.
- It is appropriate to make an informed assessment of the proposals which are subject to conflicting claims by applicants and objectors which cannot be adequately expressed in writing, or the proposal is particularly contentious.

2. Officer Assessment

2.1 Section 11.3.6 of the Council's Planning Committee Procedure Rules relates to unaccompanied site visits. It highlights that members of the Planning Committee have a long-established practice of undertaking their own visits to sites before Committee meetings.

2.2 The Procedure Rules highlights that the disadvantage of these unaccompanied, informal visits is that: (i) they can be used by applicants, agents and objectors to undertake unwarranted lobbying; and (ii) where a Member visits private property it can be interpreted as showing favour to the person visited. Therefore Members are advised against entering private land, even if invited to do so, but to view the site only from public vantage points.

2.3 Section 11.3.1 of the Procedure Rules highlights the decision making process to carry out a site visit. This is normally based on one or more of the following criteria:

- Illustrative material is insufficient to convey the issues
- A judgement is required on visual impact
- The setting and surroundings are particularly relevant to the determination or conditions being considered
- It is necessary to experience similar/comparable conditions at another location/site
- The proposal is of particular significance although applications which only raise issues of principle or fundamental planning policies will not normally be appropriate for a formal site visit
- It is appropriate to make an informed assessment of the proposals which are subject to conflicting claims by applicants and objectors which cannot be adequately expressed in writing; or the proposal is particularly contentious.

2.3 The application site is located off Howes Lane in Bicester. The site is currently in use as an agricultural field, with further agricultural fields to the north and southwest of the application site. The Thames Valley Police vehicle workshop and Roads Policing Traffic Base is located to the northeast of the application site. Avonbury Business Park is adjacent to these buildings. Residential development lies to the south of Howes Lane.

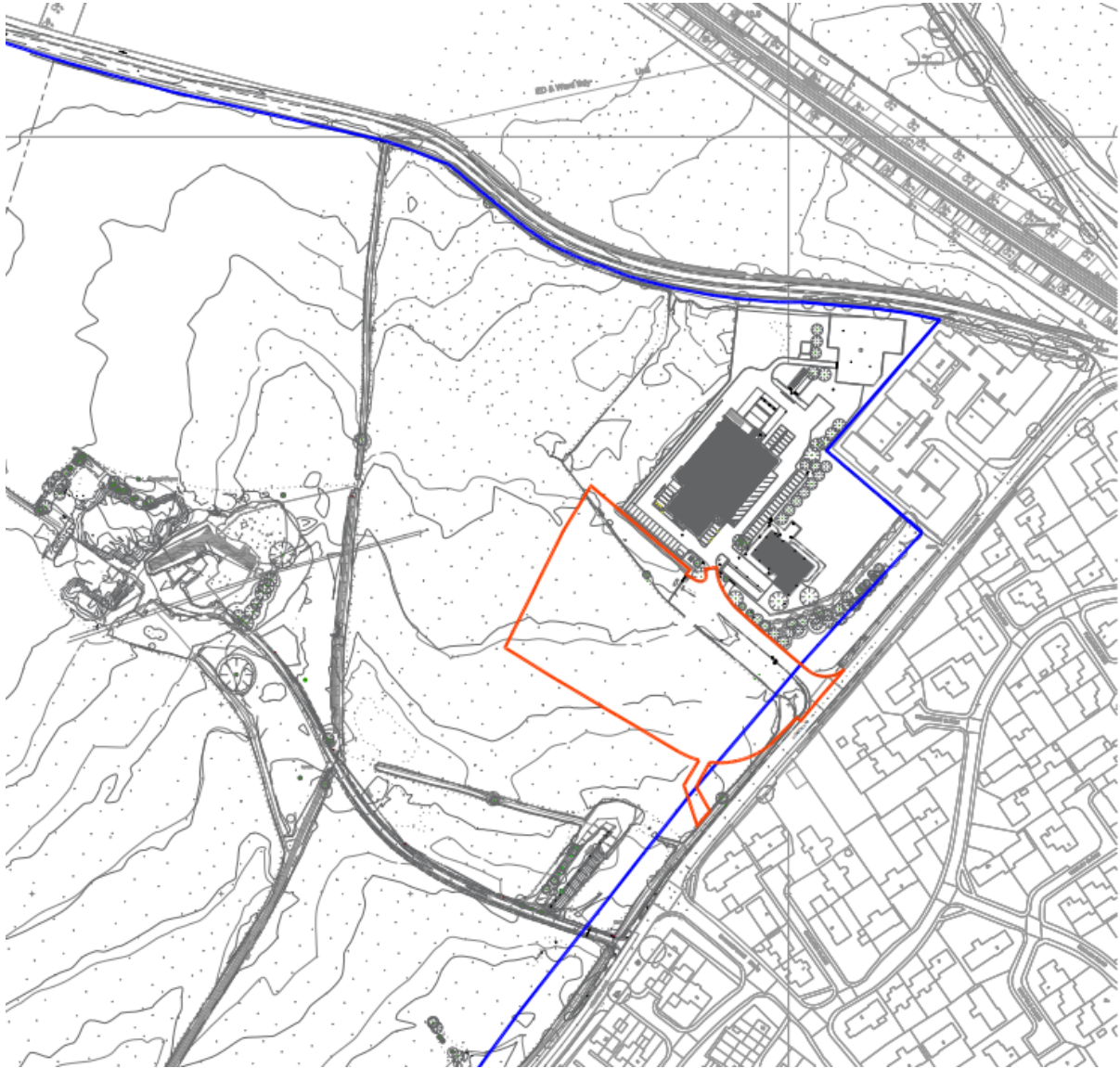


Image 1: Extract of Site Location Plan

2.4 There are no public right of ways to the north, east or west of the site, however the site is visible from Howes Lane. Members will be able to assess the site from Howes Lane, without the need to enter the site, as demonstrated by the street view pictures from Google Maps below.



- 2.5 A request has been made for the Highway Authority to attend a site visit. The main request for a Committee Site Visit is for the visual impact of the proposed development. To date the Highway Authority has not commented on the application.
- 2.6 The requirement for the Highway Authority to attend a site visit is not warranted at this time, especially as the purpose of a site visit is solely to ascertain the facts relating to the physical nature of the site and its surroundings (paragraph 11.3.1 of the Council's Planning Committee Procedure Rules) When the application does come before Members, the response of the Highway Authority will be set out within the Officer's Committee Report.

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 The purpose of site visit is to ascertain the facts relating to the physical nature of the site and surroundings, and it is considered that Members are able to undertake an unaccompanied site visit in this case. The site and its surroundings are clearly seen from the public realm without the need to enter the site, as demonstrated above.
- 3.2 Therefore, it is recommended a Formal Committee Site Visit is not undertaken for the application, as it does not meet the requirements of the Council's Planning Committee Rules paragraph 11.3.1, and members will be able to undertake an unaccompanied site visit to understand the site and its surroundings.