

CAPRA ARCHITECTS
2467/D+AS01

05 MAY 2012

2012/854

14.04.12

Hertfordshire Constabulary

Planning Application for enlargement of existing external range

SUPPORTING DESIGN AND ACCESS STATEMENT

1.0 Introduction and Description of the proposal.

This Design and Access Statement sets out arguments in support of a Planning Application to enlarge the existing external shooting range at Hertfordshire Constabulary's 24hr Headquarters site on Stanborough Road, Welwyn Garden City. The range provides a facility for Police firearms training. Recent findings of an audit by the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA) require that the bullet catcher and back stop structures be replaced. Consequently an application for replacement bullet catcher and back stop equipment was approved in August 2011 but at the time of writing the replacement has not been carried out. On the basis of further recommendations, while undertaking the replacement of the ballistic safety equipment, the police authority now seek to take the opportunity of enlarging the range in order to keep pace with critical firearms training procedures.

In addition to the replacement ballistic safety equipment approved in the 2011 planning approval, this application involves repositioning the range approximately 13m north-east, further away from the Stanborough Park Boundary, and extending it to become 100m long. The lengthening of the range is accompanied by a small increase in width to satisfy range safety requirements, a small new briefing hut and improved vehicle access to link back to the main facility.

The proposed works are designed to enable the Hertfordshire Constabulary to optimize the training potential of the facility to enable current recommended firearms training practices to be undertaken while meeting all necessary safety requirements. Also importantly, the proposal seeks to ensure and makes specific provisions to avoid any additional impact on the locality, in particular the adjacent public park to the south.

The overall dimensions of the existing and proposed structures are as follows:

Existing ballistic safety structures

Sand Trap = 9.43m wide x 2.75m max height above range floor

Further-most and highest Backstop Screen = 22.16m wide x 7m max height above range floor

Proposed replacement ballistic safety structures

Rubber Bullet Catcher = 16.5m wide x 2.5m max height above range floor

Single replacement Backstop Wall = 41.31m wide x 15.61m max height above range floor

Proposed new briefing hut

Single storey prefabricated briefing hut approximately 4m wide by 9.5 long and 3m tall

The existing range is partially sunken below grade level and surrounded by mature earth embankments. Along the Stanborough Park side embankment exists a zone of significant mature trees and shrubs. This arrangement successfully screens the existing range from any potential views from the adjacent park.

In order to avoid further impact on the locality the planning application seeks to adopt the same successful arrangement to the above. The area of the range would be excavated to provide a sunken range floor that begins at the level of the existing range and ramps down a further 2m to the target end. This ramping lowers the target end and reduces the height of the ballistic safety structures behind the firing line to minimise the visual impact of the proposal.

The proposed enlarged range has been positioned so as not to impact on the existing embankment or vegetation adjacent to Stanborough Park. This strategy ensures that natural screening is maintained, the visual character of the park is preserved and no potential wildlife habitats are affected by the proposed works. Additional earth banking is proposed to the rear of the back stop and extends north to further improve acoustic and visual discretion

As per the existing planning approval, materials and finishes are intended to provide the highest levels of safety and minimise the visual impact of the facility. In place of the existing timber faced structures, exposed surfaces within the line of fire will be clad with state of the art rubber tiles over suitable ballistic substrates. The proposed briefing hut will be located on the sunken range floor level and will offer no views from outside of the site. Suitable materials, finishes and colours will be selected to suit the buildings function and setting.

2.0 The importance of firearms training

The application site provides vital firearms training in a key location within the borough. The shooting range and its location align with and support government objectives and policy on gun related crime. The range is strategically located on the headquarters site to provide effective and efficient training as an integral part of the firearms team facilities. Providing a regular training venue for the Firearms Operations Unit and Armoury on the site is an essential part of the Police ability to continue to deliver first class firearms response services to the City and Borough.

Central Government Policy on Gun Crime and Violence sets out to ensure that the activities of Individuals who are potentially armed, or suspected of being armed with lethal weapons, is limited so that they cannot endanger the public. The Government places a duty on the police to respond to and investigate reports of gun crime to maintain public safety, and ensure that officers are trained to the highest standards to provide this service. However, the requirements of the Human Rights Act apply to all persons.

This includes not only potential offenders but also the public and police officers who are called to respond. Within this Act, Article 2 on the Right to Life places obligations on Police Authorities to ensure that officers responding to incidents where there is a show of force are equipped to protect the public and themselves. Accordingly, it is unreasonable, and could be deemed unlawful, if either the public or unarmed officers are exposed to unnecessary risk due to insufficient training of the police force when faced with a potentially armed or dangerous person. Therefore the speedy despatch of armed resources is a requirement and a more prominent and proportionate response to incidents of this nature

In March 2009, Vernon Coaker, Minister of State at the Home Office, provided statistics which demonstrated a 17.5% increase over the previous year in incidents involving firearms or suspected firearms. When this is taken into account together with recent statistics demonstrating an increase in violent crime, it is imperative that Police authorities maintain appropriate levels of suitably trained armed officers. Additionally, the impending Olympics in 2012 will require unprecedented numbers of armed officers to police, the capital and many other venues across the country.

The effect of all of these requirements is such that the intensity of training is increasing, not only to cater for a greater demand for officers trained to carry firearms but also due to a raising of standards. The public rightly demands that Armed officers are trained to the highest standards, and that they maintain these standards by regular training, assessment and accreditation. These standards are governed by national requirements and all training input, the facilities used and teaching ability of are subject to inspection by the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA).

3.0 Usage

The existing outdoor range is used by Hertfordshire Constabulary and Bedfordshire Police for the delivery of crucial firearms training. Limited use of the site for training purposes is also granted to other associated agencies on an occasional basis, subject to approval by Hertfordshire Constabulary. This is to remain unchanged.

Hertfordshire Constabulary seek to take advantage of the necessary replacement of the ballistic safety equipment which gained planning approval in August 2011 and enlarge the existing shooting range at the same time.

An enlarged range is critical to the Police Authorities ability to enhance their training capability in order to meet current recommendations for firearms training and deliver effective policing that responds to both current and future needs.

Upgrading the existing range at the Police HQ makes best use of the existing range site and benefits from the convenience, time efficiencies and full range of support facilities afforded by its immediate proximity to the main Headquarters buildings. Coupled with this the simplicity of the external range solution and represents the most cost effective solution to providing this training capability at the present time.

The only alternative to the proposed improvements would be to use remote facilities attracting regular rental costs, or to construct a new range at a different site which would bring the additional complications of delays to training during the procurement period, and a reduction in efficiency due to travel and higher costs.

The hours of operation for the range will remain unchanged.

4.0 Protecting biodiversity.

The Police headquarters is immediately adjacent to Stanborough Park. The park includes two small designated County Wildlife Sites to the south-east of the application site. However, the application site is in excess of 350m from site WS50 and over 400m from site WS65. Furthermore, significant earth banking and existing trees and shrubs along the south-eastern boundary ensure that the facility does not impact on the listed Wildlife Sites. The application does not seek to alter the nature or extent of activities on the application site and as such the application will have no further impact on these specific sites or Stanborough Park.

A survey of the existing timber backstop structures which are proposed to be demolished has identified no obvious signs of wildlife habitats.

The proposed location of the enlarged range has been established to avoid interference with the embankment adjacent to Stanborough Park and its existing vegetation. Consequently none of the existing trees, hedges or shrubs situated along the embankment will be affected by the proposed works and measures will be taken to protect them during construction.

Only two trees exist on the proposed site of the enlarged range which would require removing. Regrettably these trees are located centrally within the potential development zone of the site and as such their removal is unavoidable. Two replacement semi mature specimens are proposed to be planted to compensate for the loss of the existing trees with location and species subject to the approval of the Local Authority.

5.0 Visual and Acoustic impact.

The visual presence of the existing range from the adjacent Stanborough Park is very low and the proposal seeks to maintain this low presence.

This is to be maintained by preserving the very effective screening along the south eastern boundary by significant earth mounding, sunken range level, and full retention of the substantial mature trees and shrubs along the embankment. From the Park, the vast majority of the proposed bullet catching structures would be successfully hidden from view by the earth mounding. Only the final ballistic screen would be above the line of the mound as per the existing back stop structure which currently protrudes approximately 2m above the top of the embankment. As per the existing backstop the proposed back stop would be effectively screened year round by the existing tree line and substantially out of view when the trees and planting are in leaf (Refer to Dwg AL(2)P01).

In order to meet the safety requirements for the extended range length it is essential that the height of proposed backstop be increased from that of the Planning Approved replacement of 2011 by further 4.3m to result in a total height above the embankment of approximately 8m. This additional height will continue to be effectively screened by the existing mature tree line along the boundary and as such will result in minimal additional visual impact on the adjacent Park (Refer to Drg AL(2)P01-P05).

Additional grassed earth banking is proposed to the rear of the back stop between it and the existing mature tree lined railway line where the ground currently rises up and inward from the site boundary.

This additional banking then extends north all the way to the Headquarter site's north eastern boundary and also along the top of the northern edge of the proposed range cutting. These proposed provisions are intended to strengthen the existing screening of the site to further reduce the acoustic and visual impact of the facility on the locality.

Where possible material finishes are designed to help reduce the visual impact of the proposed structures. Muted and dark tones including black rubber tiles and grey painted steel work help to obscure them behind the existing tree line.

The application does not seek to alter the nature or extent of activities on the application site and as such the application will have no further acoustic impact on the locality.

6.0 Access

Vehicle access from the main road structure of the headquarters to the existing range is currently gained via a combination of open rubber matting over grass and un-surfaced track. The route is unsuitable for most of the Constabulary's vehicles at certain times of the year.

The application seeks to improve the vehicle access to the proposed enlarged range by providing a dedicated tarmac access road to connect back to the main road network of the headquarters site. This improvement will remove the limitations on vehicle types able to gain access to the enlarged range thus enabling enhanced vehicle related training opportunities, improved utilisation and improved vehicle access safety.