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Hertfordshire Constabulary

Planning Application for the enlargement of existing external range and new range support building

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 and provide a new range support building at Hertfordshire Constabulary's 24hr Headquarters site on Stanborough Road, Welwyn Garden City. The shooting 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. Following a review of the constabulary's firearms training needs, a second application was submitted in 2012 to enlarge the existing range and provide a briefing hut for essential classroom based training activities. This second application was approved in August 2012. Neither approval has been implemented. Following a comprehensive value engineering review of the project, the police authority now seek planning approval for the enlarged shooting range in a slightly altered and more cost effective location and for a an enlarged range support building.

This application seeks to deliver maximum value for Hertfordshire Constabulary. Developing on the previous and current planning approval, this application provides a more cost effective location for the enlarged range and replacement ballistic safety equipment to allow for a more comprehensive and better equipped range support building.

The application includes: demolition of the existing range including structures, range floor, sand trap and timber back stop; extension of the range to the north west as opposed to the east; new grassed earth bunds to enclose the north west end of the range with double banked acoustic gates allowing access to the existing substation; new range lighting; provision of a new tarmac access road back to the existing site road network; a new single storey range support building located adjacent to the existing headquarters buildings with foot path link to the range. As per the current approval the lengthening of the range is accompanied by a small increase in width to satisfy range safety requirements.

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. The proposal is designed 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 = 23.60m wide x 6.25m max height above range floor
Single replacement Backstop Wall = 36.05m wide x 15.50m max height above range floor

Proposed new range support building

Single storey pitched roof building = 9.35m wide by 18.9m long and 5m ridge height

The existing range is partially sunken below grade level and surrounded by grassed 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 of the existing range. The area of the range would be excavated to provide a sloping sunken range floor that begins 2m below the level of the existing range at the target end and ramps up toward the range entrance behind the 100m line. 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 2012 planning approval gives consent for a range enlargement to the east of the existing in the same sunken arrangement and would require extensive excavation works. This application proposes maintaining the target end in approximately the same location as the existing and extending the range to the north-west on to the largely unused, lower, grassed field, thereby achieving a significant reduction in the amount of excavation works required and an associated cost-saving over the 2012 approval.

In order to maintain visual and acoustic screening of the range from Stanborough Park the proposal includes the provision of 2m tall grassed earth mounds around the north-west end of the range where it would extend onto the lower area of site.

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.

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 application proposes a new range support building to be located adjacent to the existing site road network on the south east corner of the existing built up area of the headquarters site. This location has been selected to provide ease of access from the range and headquarters buildings, to make best economic use of existing services infrastructure following the road way and access to existing car parking.

Alternative locations for the support building nearer to the headquarters buildings have been investigated as part of the preparation of this application. Of these, one site of a suitable size and proximity to the range was identified but had to be discounted due to extensive underground services rendering it unviable. Potential locations on the lower field adjacent to the proposed range extension were also considered and discounted on the basis of extra works needed to extend services to this un-serviced part of the site, having to provide localised parking and poor access to the headquarters facilities.

The proposed location of the support building has also been selected to ensure that the application would have the minimum impact on views from Stanborough Park which lies to the south-west of the site.

Sitting on the corner of the existing built up area of the site and to the immediate south-east of a recently upgraded existing building, the support building in its proposed location would be viewed within the existing zone of buildings on the site, the majority of which being substantially larger. A low profile, single storey design with low pitched roof and site partially sunk into the sloping site have been selected to minimise the visual mass of the building in its setting.

Additionally, most views would be heavily screened by the layers of mature trees and hedges which line the site boundary and sit in clumps within the park itself or out of view due to the varying topography of the park and the substantial existing and proposed mounding within the site.

The proposed materials for the buildings have been selected for their function and to reflect the character of the site and its existing buildings and to further minimise its presence. These include muted, earthy toned brickwork, dark grey windows and doors and a grey-white coloured metal roof.

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, at the time the 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.

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 and enlarge the existing shooting range, both of which gained planning approval in 2012, and develop a more substantial and better equipped range support building.

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.

The use of the lower grassed field proposed for the range extension has been reviewed and found to be unsuitable for use as playing fields and receives only occasional use for external training exercises. These exercises may either continue to be carried out unaffected on the smaller remaining field or may be carried out elsewhere on the site.

A purpose built range support building would provide key accommodation and facilities to enable activities essential to effective firearms training including briefing, weapons cleaning and range maintenance to be carried out in an appropriate and safe environment. The new building would replace the existing range stores to provide increased storage capacity and maintenance facilities in a convenient location for deliveries. A garage is included for an electric maintenance buggy for the safe handling of replenishables and training equipment to and from the range.

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.

A small number of trees would require removal for the proposal to go ahead all of which are marked on the proposed site plan. Four mature trees are located well within the proposed development zone of the range and as such their removal is unavoidable. Five small, semi mature trees are located in the proposed location of the support building. Replacement semi mature specimens are proposed to be planted to compensate for the loss of all 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. The proposed replacement bullet catching structures are located in the same approximate location as those of the existing range and from the Park the vast majority of the new 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. The vast majority of 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)P09).

Where the range is proposed to extend out on to the lower grassed field to the north-west, the proposal includes the provision of 2m tall grassed earth bunds around the edge of the range to maintain its visual and acoustic screening. The south-western bund lies approximately 30m from the boundary line and a substantial distance from the existing tree line helping to obscure it from any views from within Stanborough Park.

In order to meet the safety requirements for the extended range length it is essential that the height of proposed backstop be increased to the height set out in this application and which is slightly lower than that of the 2012 approval. 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 Drgs AL(2)P01-P07).

Where possible material finishes for both the range and support buildings are designed to help reduce the visual impact of the proposed structures. Muted and dark tones including black rubber tiles and galvanised steel for the bullet catching structures and earthy brick walls and grey-white metal roofing for the support building 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. Where a break in the south-western bund is required to provide a vehicle access point to the existing substation a double line of acoustic gates will be provided to maintain the acoustic line afforded by the earthworks.

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.

Access from the proposed range support building to the existing site facilities will be via the existing road and footpath network. Pedestrian access to the range would be available by either the proposed paved footpath with ambulant disable steps down to range level or by the proposed access road via the existing road network.

Vehicle and pedestrian access to the range would be controlled by security gates with warning lights and signs.

A gated vehicle access point in the south-western would provide access for a range of vehicles sizes to the existing substation located adjacent to the south-western site boundary.