

SOUTH CAMBRIDGESHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Planning Committee

10th January 2007

AUTHOR/S: Executive Director / Head of Planning Services

S/2040/06/F - LONGSTANTON

**Continuation of the Use of Land and Buildings as an Immigration Centre
(Use Class C2a) for a temporary period to 31 December 2007**

**Recommendation: Approve for a temporary period of use up to the period
31st December 2007 subject to conditions**

Date for Determination: 22nd January 2007 (Major Application)

This Application has been reported to the Planning Committee for determination because of the objections raised by Longstanton Parish Council and three Local residents which do not accord with the recommendation.

Site and Proposal

1. The site is located on the former Oakington Barracks, situated to the south east of Longstanton and to the north of Oakington. The area subject to the application comprises the former main accommodation blocks within the barracks whose boundaries are fenced. It does not include the former industrial units, hangars, runway area.
2. A full planning application was received on 19th October 2006 for continued use of the land and buildings as an immigration centre, for a temporary period of use up to the period 31st December 2007. Permission is sought under Use class C2A (secure residential institutions). The application is accompanied by a Design and Access Statement and Transport Statement.

Planning History

3. In November 1999 the Council raised no objection to the use of Oakington Barracks as an Immigration Centre for a temporary period of between 3 to 5 years. This was received as a notification under Circular 18/84.
4. The Home Office has since submitted two further Planning Notifications to extend the existing planning permissions for a period of two years from November 2002, until the end of November 2004, and from November 2004 to 31st December 2006.

Role and Function of Oakington Immigration Reception Centre

5. The Immigration Centre was opened by the Home Office in 2000 to provide fast track processing for asylum seekers. This enables asylum claims, which upon initial screening appear to be capable of being decided quickly, to be determined in about 7-10 days. Subject to the criteria, applicants whose claims are considered to be capable of being fast-tracked are detained at Oakington for interview, decision and possibly removal. In all situations, detainees are assessed to establish their suitability for detention at the centre, taking into account their history, behaviour, needs and any associated risks.

6. Whilst the use as an Immigration Reception Centre has been principally for fast tracking asylum claimants with accommodation space for 400, the application seeks to increase this to accommodate a further 50 detainees this may include immigration cases displaced from other centres, including those pending deportation following a prison sentence, although the majority of these will still be held at Colnbrook near Heathrow.
7. For the Centre to accommodate such cases the family unit, decommissioned in Spring 2006 will be brought back into use and made more secure. A 5.2 metre fence is to be constructed around this unit and will be the subject of a separate planning application.
8. In the longer term, plans are well advanced for the delivery of a 426 bed centre at Gatwick in Summer 2008 and the capacity of the rest of the estate is being maximised to cope with current, increased demand. The handling of female cases previously dealt with at Oakington has already been transferred to Yarl's Wood as originally anticipated.

Staffing

9. The reception centre requires a range of staff including custodial staff, immigration staff, interpreters, health and occupational staff, and staff for catering, maintenance etc. Many of these are recruited locally. A further 50 staff will be located on the site.

Traffic

10. The applicant has submitted a transport statement as additional information.
11. Though the capacity of the Centre will increase to 450 detainees, there will be no significant impact on traffic movements, because the increase will be counterbalanced by the longer periods of time non-NSA detainees will spend there, thus reducing the rate of throughput.

Planning Policy

12. **South Cambridgeshire District Council Local Plan 2004 Policy EM10**
Employment in the countryside. "Outside village frameworks planning permission will be granted for change of use and conversion of rural buildings to employment use"
13. **Northstowe Area Action Plan Policy E3** Delivering Northstowe "to ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to secure the efficient and timely delivery of Northstowe"
14. **Department of Communities and Local Government Circular 02/2006** 'Crown Application of the Planning Acts' provides guidance on changes to the planning system caused by the implementation of Ch1 of Part 7 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004. Part 7 applies to Planning Acts in relation to the Crown which will generally have to apply for planning permission for development from 7th June 2006. The guidance includes details of special arrangements concerned with national security and defence urgency and enforcement together with new permitted development rights and use classes.

Consultation

15. **Willingham Parish Council** - No recommendation

16. **Oakington and Westwick** - Approve
17. **Longstanton** - Refuse “while the Parish Council has no objection to the previous use as a reception centre continuing, the Parish Council is very concerned at the implicit change of use and particularly by the need for a change of use and particularly by the need for a 5.2 metre high fence around the former family unit directly adjacent to residents of the village. An answer is required from the Home Office as to how they will operate the unit.”
18. **Rampton** - Approve
19. **Bar Hill** - No recommendation
20. **Cottenham** - Approve
21. **Over** - No recommendation
22. **Histon** - No recommendation
23. **Health and Safety Executive** - No comments
24. **Local Highway Authority** - No objection
25. **Highways Agency** - Objection but would like a condition attached that the application submits a travel plan for staff numbers.
26. **Cambridge Constabulary Community Safety Department** - No comments
27. The Home Office has also met with local representatives through the local liaison group and provided regular statistical updates to interested parties. The Home Office has also held a meeting recently with Longstanton Parish Council to explain the Home Office’s proposal for the continued use of Oakington as an Immigration Reception Centre.

Representations

28. **CAMOAK** - (Cambridge and Oakington Concern) expresses concerned about the fence and disingenuous name of ‘reception centre’
29. **English Partnerships** - (Land owner) objects to the proposed application, as it is currently unable to grant the tenant the right to occupy the site beyond 30th June 2007.
30. **Gallagher Estates** - Support the objection raised by their Joint Venture Promoter English Partnerships for the continued usage of the Immigration Centre beyond June 2007.
31. Letters have been received from 4 residents. One raises no objection, three express concerned about the need to erect a 5.2m fence and nature of use proposed moving away from a fast track 10 day immigration reception centre to accommodating detainees awaiting deportation.
32. A letter has also been received from Andrew Lansley MP stating the following “it is clear that they are now operating outside the previous conditions eg. As regards

length of stay or past criminal records. I hope you will be able to ensure that there is a clear reporting structure and that the status of the inmates is disclosed”

33. The level of objection is much reduced compared to previous planning notifications.

Planning Comments – Key Issues

34. The application seeks to continue the use of the centre as an Immigration Reception Centre for the fast-track processing of asylum seekers for a further temporary period for a year to 31st December 2007.
35. The applicant has submitted the application under Use Class C2A. This is a new use class for secure residential institutions introduced in The Town Country Planning Act (Use Classes) 2006. This enables changes between similar types of premises (but with different uses) eg. An Immigration Reception Centre to an Immigration Detention Centre to be made without requiring planning permission for a change of use. However, planning permission is still required for works some constituting development.
36. The applicant is seeking an increase in the capacity of the centre to allow accommodation for an additional 50 detainees. To allow for this, the old family block will be reconfigured and security improved. The additional capacity at Oakington will allow for greater flexibility within the Immigration Estate nationally as additional detainees will be able to be accommodated. This will also allow for the detention of Foreign National Prisoners at Oakington pending deportation following a prison sentence, if required.
37. The increase in the capacity of the Immigration Reception Centre to accommodate a further 50 detainees will be accommodated through the re-use of the family block previously used for detainees and will not require further development. As such, it is considered that as this additional capacity can therefore be absorbed within existing site capabilities and does not involve an intensification of the use.
38. The nature of some of the detainees retained at Oakington Immigration Centre may change as the need arises to accommodate Foreign National Prisoners. However, the numbers involved is likely to be such that the general profile of existing male detainees will remain broadly the same, that is asylum seekers who can be fast tracked through the system. I am therefore satisfied that there is no material change to the nature or use of the site.
39. Whilst it is anticipated that the increase number of detainees will not have an impact on traffic movement, the additional 50 staff required are likely to increase traffic movement in the area. Though the site is accessible by a variety of transport modes, the majority of staff currently travel to the site by car and it is not anticipated this will change. There are no proposals to increase the number of parking spaces from 170 to accommodate new staff parking. The Highways Agency have asked for the application to be conditioned to ensure a travel plan for staff numbers is submitted, this will be a condition of any consent.
40. The previous notifications were subject to ‘conditions’ relating to nature of detainees, and operations. These would not meet the tests of Circular 11/95 and as such will be attached as informatives.
41. The supporting report makes reference to the erection of a 5.2 metre security fence around the building, this will form part of a separate planning application to be submitted early in the new Year.

Timescales

42. The site forms part of the wider site for the development of the new town of Northstowe, as proposed in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan 2003 and Submitted Northstowe Area Action Plan (AAP) 2006. With the emphasis on delivery as well as the quality of new communities, it is imperative that any proposal does not impede this work. The Northstowe AAP examination is underway with an Inspector's Report expected in March 2007. The recent timeline from English Partnerships and Gallagher Estates indicate a revised application for the new town being received in June 2007, with advance works and infrastructure expected to commence in spring 2008.
43. The Home Office is aware of the importance of the proposed new settlement at Northstowe, of which the Immigration Centre site forms a part and has given an understanding that it will not hinder the orderly development of the new settlement and this remains the case.
44. Notwithstanding the objections from English Partnership and Gallagher Estates, I am minded to recommend that approval be granted for the full year, until 31st December 2007, to avoid the need to submit a further planning application after just six months. The grant of planning permission does not override the landowner's right to renew/terminate any lease and as such that control will remain with English Partnership.

Recommendation

Approval for a further period up until 31st December 2007, subject to conditions.

- (i) Standard Condition A – Time limited permission 31st December 2007.
(Reason A)
- (ii) Submission of Staff travel plan.

Informatives

45. There shall not be accommodated at the Centre any persons known to have an infectious, notifiable disease.
46. No detainee shall be allowed to leave the Centre other than under escort. (Reason – To minimise the risk of prejudicing public order and to allay public concern about the possible affect of significant numbers of strangers without support within the local community).
47. Detainees not deported will not be placed in South Cambridgeshire District. (Reason – To avoid difficulties in integration, there being no identifiable equivalent to a local ethnic community).

Reasons for Approval

1. The development is considered generally to accord with the Development Plan and particularly the following policies:

South Cambridgeshire District Council Local Plan 2004 Policy EM10
Employment in the countryside. "Outside village frameworks planning permission will be granted for change of use and conversion of rural buildings to employment use."

Northstowe Area Action Plan Policy E3 Delivering Northstowe “to ensure appropriate mechanisms are in place to secure the efficient and timely delivery of Northstowe”

2. The development is not considered to be significantly detrimental to the following material planning considerations which have been raised during the consultation exercise:
 - Residential amenity issues
3. All other material planning considerations have been taken into account. None is of such significance as to outweigh the reason for the decision to approve the planning application.

Background Papers: the following background papers were used in the preparation of this report:

- South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2004
- Planning files: S/1172/04 and S/2040/06/F

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