

**WATFORD BOROUGH**

**PROPOSED RELOCATION OF WATFORD FIRE STATION, 223-229  
LOWER HIGH STREET, WATFORD, HERTS**

Report of the Director of Environment

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**1. Purpose of Report**

To consider planning application ref. 9/0634-03 for a new fire station at 223-229 Lower High Street, Watford.

**2. Summary**

- 2.1 This is an outline application for a proposed new fire station at 223-229 Lower High Street, Watford, with all matters to be reserved except for the means of access, which is included with the application.
- 2.2 The existing fire station is located in Whippendell Road. In considering its replacement, the applicant considered 25 alternative locations in Watford. The site at Lower High Street is considered the only appropriate site in order to meet the required attendance times to South Oxhey.
- 2.3 The application proposes a fully-crewed, 24 hour station employing a total of 12 officers and 40 firefighters on 4 separate watches plus some 12 ancillary staff.
- 2.4 The fire station development would comprise a three storey ancillary accommodation building in the centre of the site, adjoined by a two storey appliance bay and garage and maintenance accommodation, a three storey training building towards the rear of the site with parking at the front and rear of the main buildings. The appliance bay would be capable of housing 3 fire appliances plus an hydraulic platform, together with a washdown area and the ancillary accommodation to contain changing rooms, dormitory, training and fitness rooms, offices etc.
- 2.5 The existing access from Lower High Street would be used for inward fire appliance movements and for all other traffic. A new access onto Lower High Street would be created for outward fire appliance

movements. Warning signage and lights (“wigwags”) would be installed on Lower High Street.

### **3. Conclusion**

The report concludes that, subject to no new issues being raised by Watford Borough Council in their formal response, the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant outline planning permission and approve the means of access (as set out on drawing number 1395/2/C), subject to conditions to include the subsequent approval of reserved matters (details relating to siting, design, external appearance and landscaping to be submitted within three years of the date of this permission); land remediation, mitigation of any visual impact of the facility; submission of a code of practice to mitigate potential noise and disturbance; hours of construction; details of refuse storage and the submission of details of all external lighting prior to construction. In addition a Grampian style condition should be imposed requiring the relocation of the bus stop prior to the development coming into use.

## **1. Description of the site and proposed development**

- 1.1 Hertfordshire Fire and Rescue Service are proposing to relocate the Whippendell Road, Watford fire station from its existing location to a site in Lower High Street, Watford. Members of Hertfordshire County Council Community Services Committee resolved to relocate the existing fire station to a more strategic location in the Lower High Street area on 25 March 1999.
- 1.2 The application site is 0.49 hectares, located to the north eastern side of the Lower High Street, near to Watford town centre and the ring road. Located to the north of the site is Waterfields Retail Park with the 'Next' retail store being in closest proximity to the proposed site. To the east (rear) of the site is 'Tesco Extra' superstore and to the south side public footpath 39 leads from the Lower High Street through to the Retail Park. On the opposite side of the Highway to the site is a mix of uses including a Jaguar car showroom, residential uses and offices.
- 1.3 Part of the site is currently leased to Stapletons Tyres Limited. A small area to the rear of the site let on a licence to a car repair business.
- 1.4 Lower High Street stems from Watford High Street to the north and leads onto Waterfields Way to the south. The proposed site for the fire station lies in a central position along Lower High Street which itself is a fairly straight stretch of road. Between the highway and the site boundary is a wide grass verge with a few trees and flower beds. The site frontage with the highway has partial screening with bushes. There is a bus stop and shelter located on the pavement outside of the site between the existing access and footpath around the site. This bus stop would have to be relocated if the development were to be implemented. This stretch of Lower High Street in close proximity to the site is dominated by double yellow lines markings on both sides of the road.
- 1.5 The nearest residential properties are located on the opposite side of Lower High Street to the site opposite the existing access and Crosfield Court which is located just south of the proposed exit from the site.
- 1.6 The application proposes that the fire station will be a fully-crewed, 24 hour station employing a total of 12 officers and 40 firefighters on 4 separate watches plus some 12 ancillary staff. The fire station buildings would comprise a 2 storey appliance bay capable of housing 3 fire appliances plus a hydraulic platform together with a washdown area, an ancillary accommodation building of 3 storeys in height containing changing rooms, dormitory, training and fitness rooms and offices, a 3 storey training building and garage accommodation for a variety of support vehicles and units for maintenance and fire demonstrations.

- 1.7 The ancillary accommodation building would be located in the centre of the site facing the highway, adjoined by the appliance bay and garage accommodation to the southern side of the site. Visitor and staff car parking would be located to the front of the ancillary accommodation block and staff parking to the rear of this building. The drill yard would be to the rear of the site with the training building in the centre of the drill yard allowing sufficient space for the fire appliances to manoeuvre around this building. A plan showing the proposed layout of the site is attached to this report.
- 1.8 The application proposes to retain the 5.0m wide existing access from Lower High Street to use for inward movement of fire appliances and inward and outward movement for staff and visitors. A new access onto Lower High Street would be created for outward fire appliance movements. Warning signage and lights (“wigwags”) would be installed on Lower High Street. A pedestrian access is proposed to be created between the existing access and proposed new exit from the site, each access having adequate visibility splays to accommodate for the outward movement of fire appliances turning both left and right out of the site. Details of the proposed access and egress are included as part of the application.
- 1.9 Full landscaping details are to be left as a reserved matter as are precise details relating to the siting, design and external appearance.
- 1.10 A geoenvironmental investigation report has been submitted as part of the application, detailing borehole logs, results of percolation, laboratory results and contamination survey report to ascertain the soil conditions so that detailed development requirements can be established. The main feature of the site is that it slopes from the south to the north with an overall fall of 2.5m, predominantly covered with hardstandings and buildings with mature trees confined to the boundaries and the north-east part of the site. A total of 8 boreholes were drilled to a maximum depth of 10m. The report concludes that there are significant potentially contaminative uses in the vicinity of the site and the site is within an area of major groundwater vulnerability. Most soils indicated that groundwater was encountered at an average depth of 3.0m below ground level. Soil gas measurements are generally below the lower gas threshold. Contamination testing shows that there is significant hydrocarbon contamination of surface soils and deeper contamination by high concentrations of heavy metals across the site. In summary there are significant remedial works likely to be required.

#### Need

- 1.11 The need to relocate the fire station has arisen due to the 1997 Standards of Fire Cover Review in Hertfordshire, which highlighted that the recommended standards of provision are not being met. It was discovered that attendance times to parts of South Oxhey could not be

achieved from the existing fire station in Whippendell Road. This was based on a theoretical drivetime of 10 minutes for a full time fire station and theoretical travel times calculated from each station in Watford based on the average speeds recommended in the national guidance of 15 MPH in a congested area, 20MPH in other built up areas and 30MPH elsewhere.

- 1.12 In order to verify the findings of the Fire Cover Review, the applicant conducted a series of timed runs from the existing fire station in Whippendell Road carried out by private motor car at off-peak times obeying all speed limits and restrictions. This confirmed that under normal off peak driving conditions parts of the residential areas of South Oxhey are not being covered within the 10-minute required drivetime.

#### Site search

- 1.13 A total of 26 alternative locations to the proposed Lower High Street site were investigated including areas of school playing fields, areas of public open space, existing commercial sites known to be coming onto the market or on the market and sites subject to current redevelopment allocations. Each site was considered against a series of criteria, incorporating planning policy, suitability of the site according to Fire Service requirements and preparedness of the landowner to enter into negotiations and bring the site forward for a fire station.
- 1.14 As a result of the investigations, the site at 223-229 Lower High Street emerged as the only suitable relocation site for the fire station. A series of timed runs from this site were carried out to confirm that it could meet Home Office Fire Cover standards for South Oxhey and maintain cover for the rest of Watford. The applicant has provided information to show that within a 10 minute drivetime radius from the Lower High Street site along with the fire cover circles for the existing full time fire stations at Watford, Garston and Rickmansworth and the retained fire stations at Bushey and Kings Langley, fire cover for the remainder of Watford and surrounding areas can be retained.

## **2. Consultations**

- 2.1 Watford Borough Council – Watford Development Control Committee will be considering the application on 27 October 2003 and their view will be reported orally. The officer recommendation is that no objections be raised, subject to conditions being imposed relating to the submission of detailed plans showing the siting, layout design, external appearance of the buildings and the landscaping of the site; details of the lighting scheme; details of soil investigation for potential contamination of land; hours of construction; and details of refuse storage.

- 2.2 Hertfordshire County Council as Highway Authority – have no objection to the application subject to the access to the site to be as shown on Drawing No. 1395/2/C, in the interest of highway safety.
- 2.3 Environment Agency – has considered the geoenvironmental investigation and has no comment.
- 2.4 Transco and Thames Water – have no objection to the application.
- 2.5 Rights of Way – note that the definitive map shows that Footpath 39 runs across the proposed site although the footpath on the ground has been constructed on another route around the site boundary. They suggest that this would need to be legally diverted should planning permission be granted.
- 2.6 Local Residents - A total of 5 properties were consulted on the application in accordance with the County Council's Code of Practice for publicity. An additional 93 properties were subsequently consulted on at the request of the local member. No letters of objection to the application and no letters of support have been received.
- 2.7 Only one member of public has made contact by telephone regarding this application on 17 October 2003. As a blind resident in the area, concerns were raised regarding conflict between the fire station and a proposed toucan crossing due to be implemented in the near future and the fact that Lower High Street is a constantly busy road. The resident feels that there are more appropriate sites within Watford to locate a fire station.

### **3. Planning Considerations**

- 3.1 The relevant development plan policies are:-

Watford District Local Plan 1993, adopted June 1996 - Policy CS5 (Emergency Services), Policy LHS1 (Lower High Street Policy Area), Policy LHS2 (Design/Landscaping), Policy LHS3 (Public Paths), Policy LHS4 (Residential Frontage).

Watford District Plan 2000, Draft for Deposit May 2000 – Policy CS11 (Emergency Services), Policy LHS1 (Types of Development), Policy LHS2 (Design/Landscaping), Policy LHS3 (Public Paths), Policy LHS4 (Residential Frontage).

- 3.2 The principal issues to be taken into account in determining this application are:-
- acceptability of the outline application in terms of buildings and ancillary accommodation likely to be proposed on site;

- acceptability of the access onto the highway at this point along Lower High Street;
- measures to minimise the impact on the local residents with regard to 24 hour operations at the site.

Acceptability of the outline application in terms of buildings and ancillary accommodation likely to be proposed on site

- 3.3 This Lower High Street area of Watford contains a mix of uses and as such there is no consistent design to the frontages. Surrounding buildings are of two and three storeys in height including the flats at Crosfield Court and other nearby residential properties on Lower High Street. There are also commercial/retail warehouse type buildings directly to the north and east of the site. It is considered that the fire station will not be out of keeping with surrounding uses, scale and size of buildings, subject to the submission of appropriate design and external appearance details.
- 3.4 Policy CS5 of the Watford District Local Plan and Policy CS11 (Emergency Services) of the Watford District Plan 2000, draft for deposit, states that:-

*'The land and locational requirements of essential services such as fire and ambulance services will be taken into account when considering development proposals. (Essential services must locate outside of areas at risk from flooding.) The Council will assist the County Council in identifying and protecting sites as necessary'*

- 3.5 The application site is not within a flood risk area and the site search undertaken in deciding on the most appropriate site for the relocation of the fire station shows that this site meets the land and locational requirements of the fire service. The site is therefore an appropriate site for a fire station with regard to this policy.
- 3.6 Policies LHS1 of the Watford District Local Plan 1993 and Policy LHS1 of the Watford District Plan 2000, draft for deposit, indicates the type of development that will be acceptable in principle in the Lower High Street Policy Area. The siting of a new fire station within an area designated for a mix of uses is not considered to be inappropriate.
- 3.7 Policy LHS2 of the Watford District Plan 1993 and the Watford District Plan 2000, draft for deposit states that:-

*'A high standard of building and landscape design will be required in all developments in the Lower High Street policy area in view of the proximity of the area to the Colne Valley Linear Park'*

Details relating to siting, design, external appearance and landscaping are to be dealt with as reserved matters at present with the layout in-

principle being considered. The proposed layout of buildings makes good use of the site with adequate space for manoeuvring of vehicles in and around the site.

- 3.8 The outline application would not interfere with the existing arrangements for pedestrian access around the site using Footpath 39. Given this and the proposal for a new pedestrian path into the site from the pavement along the public highway, the application realises the potential in providing satisfactory pedestrian routes and as such conforms to policy LHS3 (public paths) of the Watford District Plan 1993 and the Watford District Plan, draft for deposit 2000.
- 3.9 Policy LHS4 (residential frontages) of Watford District Plan 1993 and Policy LHS4 of the Watford District Plan 2000, draft for deposit states that there is a preference towards residential properties being sought in all developments in order to maintain a residential frontage character. Watford Borough Council considers the provision of residential properties would not be inappropriate in this case.

Acceptability of the access onto the highway at this point along Lower High Street

- 3.10 On average the existing Watford Fire Station responds to 7 operational calls on average in any 24-hour period and it is anticipated that this level of response would continue at the new site. The access arrangements shown on drawing 1395/2/C have been submitted to formal safety audit and are considered to form an acceptable design for the site access.
- 3.11 Information regarding a proposed 'toucan' crossing has been submitted but does not form part of the application. All relevant parties have been consulted regarding this pedestrian crossing in terms of any potential conflict that might arise as a consequence of the proposed development. It is concluded that there should be no adverse implications for the 'toucan' crossing in its proposed position in terms of highway safety.
- 3.12 The proposals would require the relocation of the existing bus stop with a new bus bay and proposals for this have been submitted. This would need to be the subject of a Traffic Regulation Order and the precise location would be agreed with the relevant agencies at the detailed planning stage. In order to maintain full visibility along Lower High Street from the site this matter should be covered by a Grampian style condition requiring the relocation of the bus stop prior to the development coming into use.
- 3.13 Measures to minimise the impact on the local residents – The application states that as many of the Fire and Rescue Service's current premises are located in close proximity to residential properties, a voluntary code of practice has been adopted. The application has included possible items for a code of practice that could include:

- appliance sirens not to be activated within the site and only operated within the vicinity of the site where strictly necessary;
- appliance bays to be fitted with doors that open and close automatically in order to prevent extraneous noise;
- external speakers and vehicle radios not to be activated within the site within the hours of 22.00 and 07.30;
- all firefighters to be instructed to respect the amenities of nearby residential properties.

3.14 Whilst it is anticipated that the fire station will continue to respond to an average 7 operational calls in any 24-hour period, the potential for night time disturbance is an issue. On the opposite side of Lower High Street, Crosfield Court to the south of the site and properties just north of the existing access are the closest existing residential properties. A condition attached to the planning permission could require that a code of practice is submitted and approved prior to the site coming into operation based on the above principles.

3.15 Any outline permission granted should be subject to providing details for the external lighting on site so as to mitigate any impact on local residents in the area, given that there residential properties within the immediate vicinity of the site.

#### **4. Conclusions**

4.1 The report concludes that the development as proposed demonstrates a need for the relocation of the fire station within Watford to meet attendance times within South Oxhey and maintain effective fire cover in the rest of Watford. Information submitted with the planning application demonstrates that a lack of alternative suitable sites that fulfil criteria requirements has resulted in this area being the only appropriate site on which the fire station could be located.

4.2 It is accepted that Watford is a developed area of the County and that there is difficulty in identifying an alternative site. This has resulted in the proposed relocation to a site located in an area of mix uses and not primarily residential in character to minimise impacts on the surrounding area. The proposal is considered acceptable in terms of highway safety and conditions could be imposed to ameliorate any adverse impacts on nearby residents.

4.3 The report concludes that, subject to no new issues being raised by Watford Borough Council in their formal response, the Director of Environment should be authorised to grant outline planning permission and approve the means of access as set out on drawing number 1395/2/C, subject to conditions to include the subsequent approval of reserved matters (details relating to siting, design, external appearance and landscaping to be submitted within three years of the date of this permission); land remediation, mitigation of any visual impact of the

facility; submission of a code of practice to mitigate potential noise and disturbance; hours of construction; details of refuse storage and the submission of details of all external lighting prior to construction. In addition a Grampian style condition should be imposed requiring the relocation of the bus stop prior to the development coming into use.

## **5. Financial implications**

5.1 There are no financial implications for this committee.

### *Background information used by the author in compiling this report*

Planning application reference 9/0634-03 and Geoenvironmental Investigation Report;

Consultation responses received in response to planning application ref. 9/0634-03;

Hertfordshire County Structure Plan Review 1991-2011;

Watford District Local Plan 1993, adopted June 1996;

Watford District Plan 2000, Draft for Deposit May 2000