CASE OFFICER'S REPORT

Application Reference: **PL/2023/09220**
Date of Inspection: **31.10.23**
Date site notice posted: **31.10.23**
Consultation Expiry: **22/11/23**

SITE ADDRESS:
St Martins Farm, Zeals,
Warminster, BA12 6NZ

PROPOSAL:
A minor upgrade of an existing telecommunications base station, including installation of three antennae at 9.9m, installation of two cabinets, and the installation of GPS node along with associated steelwork and cabling.

LEGISLATION AND POLICIES

NPPF – Section 10, paras 114-118 (Supporting High Quality communications)

CP50 - Biodiversity

CP51 – Landscape Impact

CP57 – General impacts

Saved policy PS7 – Telecommunications

CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Zeals Parish Council - support

REPRESENTATIONS

2 letters of representation have been received requesting further technical information about the impact of the proposal on residents within 300m of the mast (Officer Note – this matter is addressed in the information submitted with the application), and concerns that the ICNIRP guidelines are obsolete, and that the cumulative impacts of upgraded systems will have an impact on humans and local wildlife.

ASSESSMENT

This Prior Approval application seeks confirmation that prior approval is not required to upgrade the existing telecommunications base station, including installation of three antennae at 9.9m, installation of two cabinets and the installation of GPS node shown on the application drawings submitted with the application.

Paras of the NPPF indicates that applications for telecommunication equipment should:
114. *Advanced, high quality and reliable communications infrastructure is essential for economic growth and social well-being. Planning policies and decisions should*

support the expansion of electronic communications networks, including next generation mobile technology (such as 5G) and full fibre broadband connections. Policies should set out how high quality digital infrastructure, providing access to services from a range of providers, is expected to be delivered and upgraded over time; and should prioritise full fibre connections to existing and new developments (as these connections will, in almost all cases, provide the optimum solution.)

115. The number of radio and electronic communications masts, and the sites for such installations, should be kept to a minimum consistent with the needs of consumers, the efficient operation of the network and providing reasonable capacity for future expansion. Use of existing masts, buildings and other structures for new electronic communications capability (including wireless) should be encouraged. Where new sites are required (such as
for new 5G networks, or for connected transport and smart city applications), equipment should be sympathetically designed and camouflaged where appropriate.

and

117. Applications for electronic communications development (including applications for prior approval under the General Permitted Development Order) should be supported by the necessary evidence to justify the proposed development. This should include:

a) the outcome of consultations with organisations with an interest in the proposed development, in particular with the relevant body where a mast is to be installed near a school or college, or within a statutory safeguarding zone surrounding an aerodrome, technical site or military explosives storage area; and
b) for an addition to an existing mast or base station, a statement that self-certifies that the cumulative exposure, when operational, will not exceed International Commission guidelines on non-ionising radiation protection; or
c) for a new mast or base station, evidence that the applicant has explored the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure and a statement that self-certifies that, when operational, International Commission guidelines will be met.

Paragraph 18 indicates further that:

118. Local planning authorities must determine applications on planning grounds only. They should not seek to prevent competition between different operators, question the need for an electronic communications system, or set health safeguards different from the International Commission guidelines for public exposure.

Wiltshire Core Strategy Core Policy 57 states:

A high standard of design is required in all new developments, including extensions, alterations, and changes of use of existing buildings. Development is expected to create a strong sense of place through drawing on the local context and being complimentary to the locality. Applications for new development must be accompanied by appropriate information to demonstrate how the proposal will make a positive contribution to the character of Wiltshire….

Policy CP51 seeks to protect, conserve, and where possible enhance the landscape character, including the AONB within which this site sits in close proximity, and the policy lists a number of criterion which proposals should seek to demonstrate. Saved Policy PS7 is related directly to telecommunications infrastructure, and indicates that proposal will only be permitted where no satisfactory alternative sites are available, and only if their siting and design minimise the environmental impact of the apparatus.

The application proposes the installation of 3 antennas on the existing 10.8m high telecommunications mast just north of the A303 near Zeals, as well as the installation of an additional ground based equipment.

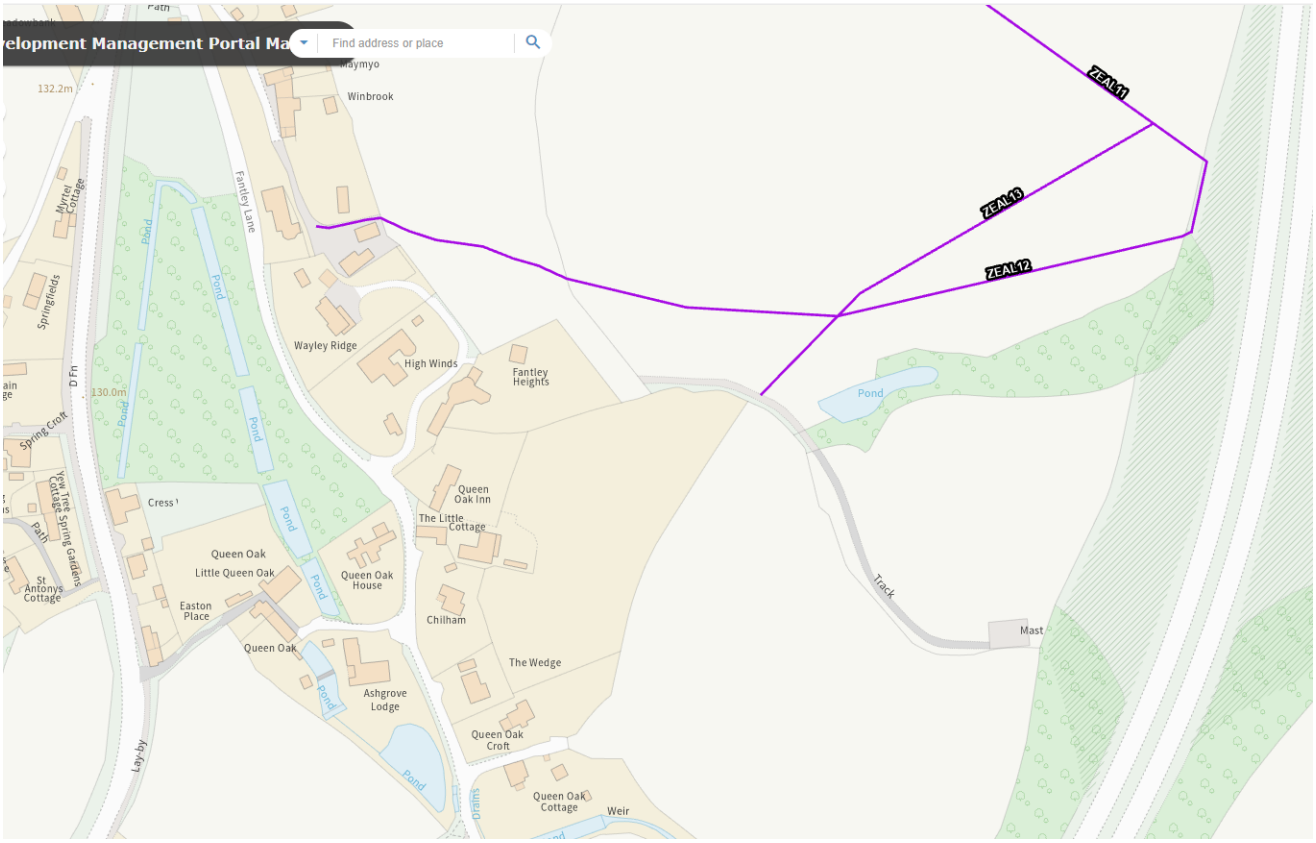
The site lies outside of the Cranborne Chase AONB boundary and the Zeals Conservation Area, contrary to what the supporting information with the application states, and there are no Listed Buildings in the vicinity of the site.

The existing mast is set back from the highway to the rear of a significant area of tree planting along the verges of the A303, see photo below of the vicinity of the mast where it is not visible from the highway:-



The nearest dwelling is more than 230m away to the west. There is a line of trees immediately adjacent to the dwellings and another one surrounding the mast site to the east of the dwellings. The access leading to the site slopes up and around the edge of a field and the mast is not visible from the site access onto Fantley Lane.

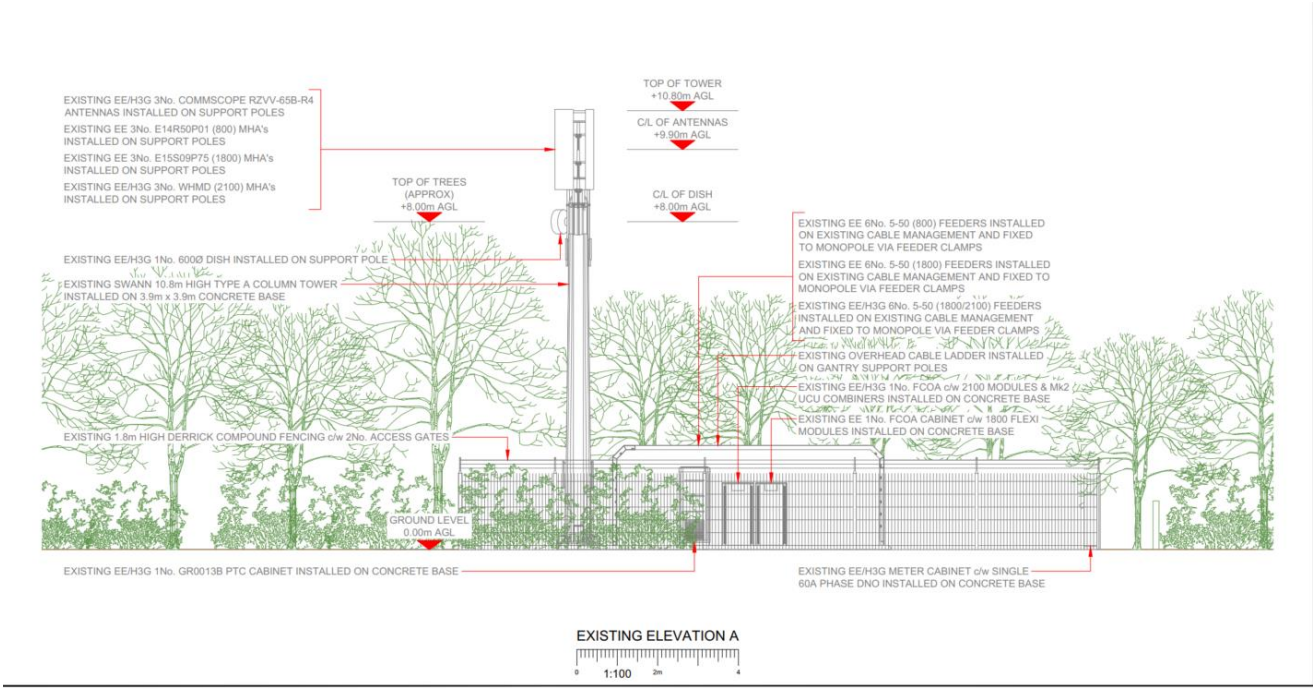
There are no Rights of Way in the vicinity of the mast and there are no footpaths along this stretch of the highway that can be used by the public, as can be seen on the map below:-

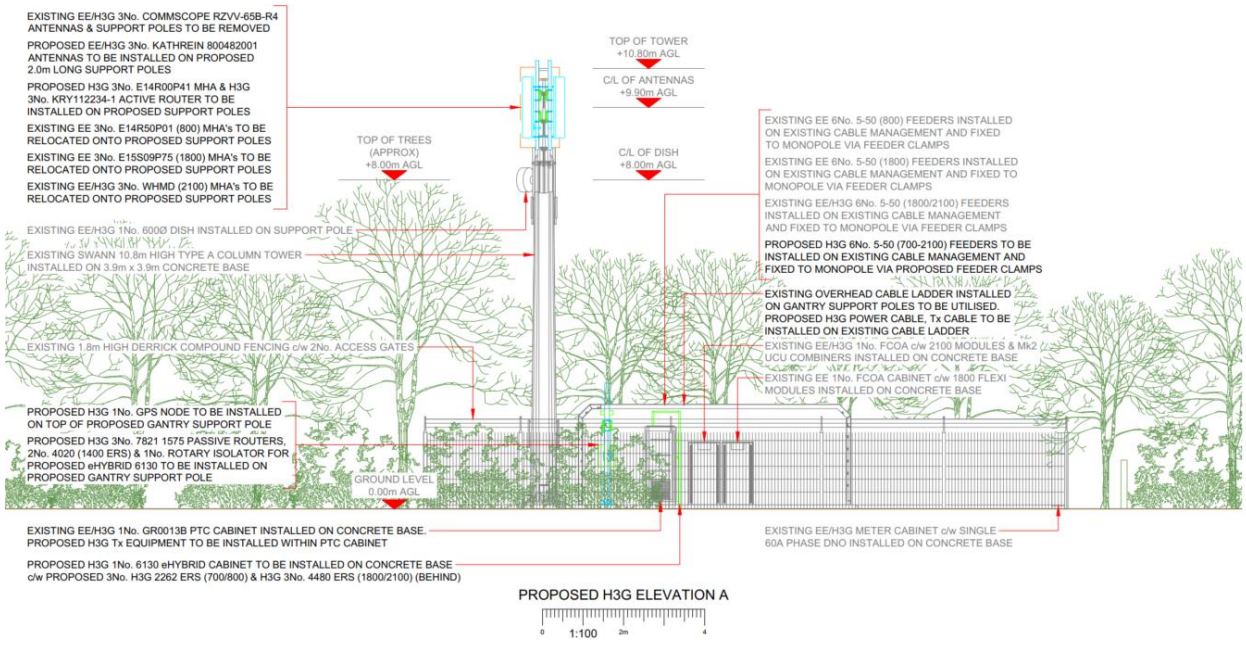


The mast therefore is located in a relatively remote area away from habitation and is not readily visible in the landscape due to the surrounding trees.

The operators of the mast have followed all due processes required in the Code of Best Practise to utilise an existing mast in a location which has a minimal impact on the landscape quality of the area therefore doing away with the need for an additional mast in this locality to provide the necessary equipment to upgrade the 4G coverage and capacity, with the possibility that the equipment will also provide 5G capacity if required.

There will be little visual difference between the existing situation and that proposed, see the plans below:





The application is accompanied by all the necessary ICNIRP (International Commission on Non-Ionising Radiation Protection) certificate and it should be added too that due to its location members of the public cannot get close to the antenna or its equipment.

The proposal will not be visible from any public vantage point and the height of the mast is not to be increased. The comments from the local residents are noted, but as the mast and its antennae have existed on the site since permission was originally granted in 2002 under ref. no. S/2002/1034, and the current proposal is for new equipment in place of existing facilities to upgrade the mast's coverage to meet the needs of the 4G network in accordance with national requirements, and meets all the required safety levels as set out above.

In accordance with the provisions of Part 16, Schedule 2, of the GDPO 2015 (as amended) the proposal meets the requirements of Class A (a) in that it relates to the installation, alteration or replacement of any electronic communications apparatus, which will not exceed 15meters above ground level when installed and the ground equipment will not exceed 1.5sqm in extent, and the scheme also meets the requirements of A.2(1) (b) in that the siting and appearance of the equipment has been designed to minimise its visual impact on the surrounding area. Prior Approval under A.3.(4) only allows the LPA to consider if prior approval is required as to the siting and appearance of the development, and for no other reason.

As set out above the mast is in a relatively isolated location which cannot readily be seen from any public vantage point and the replacement equipment is similar to that that exists on and around the mast at the moment.

CONCLUSION

Therefore it is considered that the health concerns raised are dealt with by the submission of the required ICNIRP Certificate, which is not a matter under consideration as part of the Prior Approval process, and that in planning terms the minor alterations to the appearance of this 10.8m mast in a secluded location in the open countryside is acceptable and meets national and local policy requirements. The application meets all the criteria of Part 16, Class A (a) of Schedule 2 of the GDPO and therefore Prior Approval is not required for the siting or design of the equipment proposed.

RECOMMENDATION: Prior Approval not required.