The Planning Inspectorate

Appeal Decisions

Site visit made on 10 October 2016

by J Flack BA Solicitor

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 27 October 2016

Appeal A: APP/J1915/W/16/3154335
Queen Alexandra House, 2 Bluecoats Avenue, Hertford SG14 1PB

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
- The appeal is made by Bluecoats JV LP against the decision of East Herts Council.
- The application Ref 3/16/0646/FUL, dated 17 March 2016, was refused by notice dated 10 May 2016.
- The development proposed is change of use of B1 offices and internal and external alterations to create seven residential C3 units.

Appeal B: APP/J1915/Y/16/3154330
Queen Alexandra House, 2 Bluecoats Avenue, Hertford SG14 1PB

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 against a refusal to grant listed building consent.
- The appeal is made by Bluecoats JV LP against the decision of East Herts Council.
- The application Ref 3/16/0647/LBC, dated 17 March 2016, was refused by notice dated 10 May 2016.
- The works proposed are change of use of B1 offices and internal and external alterations to create seven residential C3 units.

Decisions

1. **Appeal A:** the appeal is dismissed.

2. **Appeal B:** the appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

3. The main issue in this case is whether the proposed development and works would preserve the Grade II listed building known as Queen Alexandra House or any features of special architectural or historic interest that it possesses.

Reasons

4. Queen Alexandra House is one of 8 identical buildings constructed as dormitory houses in 1904 - 06 for the former Christ's Hospital School. Arranged in two rows on either side of a central avenue, these are impressive three storey buildings designed in a vigorous and richly detailed Queen Anne style. They take the form of a square block fronting the avenue, with a long but narrower rectangular projection behind this, the latter originally providing open dormitory accommodation.

5. The school closed in 1984, and the dormitory blocks are now in office and residential uses. The Council recently granted planning permission and listed building consent[1] for a scheme (the approved scheme) to convert Queen Alexandra House from offices to 6 residential units, and I saw on my visit that a programme of works is well-advanced.

6. The acceptability of the approved scheme has been established by the grant of permission and consent, and my assessment therefore addresses the differences between this and the appeal proposal.

7. The only alteration to the exterior of the building would be the enlargement of a window in the south elevation to form a door. The Council raises no objection to this element of the proposal, and I see no reason to disagree, given its minor scope and noting that it would be sensitively designed and employ matching materials. It follows that the proposal would not diminish, and thus would preserve, the character and appearance of the Hertford Conservation Area within which the building is situated. Nor does the Council object to the proposed alterations to the ground floor layout within the dormitory projection comprised in the approved scheme. I have no cause to take a different view, noting that the amendments would be minor. Moreover, whilst the Council's reasons for refusing the applications cited the effect of the proposed insertion of vents and flues, the parties now concur that this could be satisfactorily resolved by a condition requiring the submission and approval of details. I concur, noting that this approach has been successfully followed in relation to the approved scheme, and the appeal proposal would require the insertion of only one additional boiler flue and two additional vents.

8. The sole remaining focus of the Council's objections to the appeal proposal is the alterations to the plan of the dormitory projection. The appeal proposal would provide a 2 bedroom flat and two 1 bedroom flats within the second floor of the building, rather than the 1 bedroom flat and 3 bedroom flat proposed by the approved scheme.

9. I saw on my visit that this area of the dormitory projection contains no decorative detailing and fittings of note. However, its provision as a single dormitory space was a key element of the design of the building. I saw that the space has been altered in the past by the insertion of a staircase and enclosing partitioning in one rear corner. However, this has had only a minor impact: the space otherwise possesses a largely open and undivided appearance which continues to speak eloquently of the building's history and designed purpose, rendering these plainly legible. It thus makes an important positive contribution to the building's significance.

10. Although the height of the successive floors of the dormitory projection decreases, this is obviated at second floor level by the partial elevation of the ceiling into the roofspace. This is a distinctive element of the design of this space, providing a sense of the building's institutional character, and I do not consider that the contribution made by the dormitory projection at second floor level is appreciably less than at ground and first floor levels. The design also results in the partial exposure of the roof trusses and tie bars. These visually appealing structural elements, and the way in which they can be seen

[1] 3/15/1878/FUL and 3/15/1879/LBC

and read together in one view, also make a materially positive contribution to significance.

11. Any conversion of the building to residential use would involve additional subdivision to some degree. However, the approved scheme would involve limited new partitions within the second floor of the dormitory projection. A substantial proportion would remain open, forming a very large kitchen, living and dining room space, and some of the new partitioning beyond this towards the rear would comprise low level walls with glazed inserts above.

12. The appeal proposal would involve a much more intensive subdivision of the space. Although two of the resulting rooms would retain the original width of the building, there would be no remaining perception of the original long and open rectangular nature of this space. The appellant suggests that the bedrooms and bathrooms could be designed as 'pods', with low ceilings. Although this could be secured by condition, it would allow very limited perception of the space occupied by these rooms in combination with that of the associated two kitchen, living and dining spaces. Moreover, it would do nothing to counter the impact of the full height wall between these two spaces, which would form the party wall between two of the flats and be positioned close to half way along the length of the dormitory projection. Although conditions could also secure the minor repositioning of the party wall so that it would be adjacent to, rather than absorbing, one of the roof trusses, the wall would have an oppressive and awkward relationship with the truss and the present view of all the trusses together would be lost.

13. The appellant points out that the proposed subdivision is in theory reversible, but I attach very little weight to this given that the partitioning is an integral part of a permanent residential conversion scheme. I acknowledge that the internal spaces of the building would be viewed only by the building's occupiers and their visitors, but this also carries little very weight given that listed buildings are designated in recognition of their inherent special interest, not the extent to which this is appreciable by the public. I appreciate that the proposal involves the further subdivision of only one floor of the eight dormitory houses, but I am not persuaded that this renders the proposed works unimportant, given particularly that I have limited information on the internal layout of the other dormitory houses and the proposal is primarily to be judged on the basis of its impact on the subject listed building.

14. I therefore consider that, to a unacceptably greater extent than the approved scheme, the proposal would diminish the positive qualities of the dormitory projection's second floor that I have identified, and their contribution to the listed building's significance. The proposal would thus fail to preserve the special architectural and historic interest of the listed building, the desirability of which is a matter to which I am required to have special regard by sections 16 and 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (the Act). The proposal would also be contrary to the requirement of saved Policy ENV1 of the Local Plan[2] that all development proposal be of high quality design and layout.

15. For the purposes of the National Planning Policy Framework, the listed building is a designated heritage asset. Within its overall context, I consider that the

[2] East Herts Local Plan Second Review, April 2007

proposal would lead to less than substantial harm to its significance, although extending some way beyond a merely minor detriment. Paragraph 134 of the Framework requires that such harm be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.

16. The addition of a single flat to the housing stock of the Council's area would be a public benefit, but of very limited scope. The appellant points to the benefits of the proposal in securing the restoration and renovation of the building. However, I accord very limited weight to the proposal in this respect as it seems to me that the proposal is essentially a scheme of conversion, there being no evidence before me to counter the Council's statement that the building was in good repair as offices.

16. The appellant has produced estate agents' letters, citing experience of marketing units within two of the other dormitory houses which the appellant has also converted. They state that the second floor three bedroom unit comprised in the approved scheme would be unattractive to potential elderly purchasers or families with young children due to the absence of a lift, and would also not be affordable by younger buyers. However, no detailed supporting evidence is provided to support these views. These do not in any case cover all categories of potential buyers, and the situation of the development is attractive, one of the letters stating that there are very few developments offering a similar specification in the immediate locality, which is well-connected to the town centre and rail services. It is clearly important that a secure beneficial use is secured for the building. However, the public benefit it is appropriate to accord the appeal proposal in this respect is very limited, as the estate agents' letters and other evidence before me fall considerably short of demonstrating that the approved scheme would not be viable.

17. I therefore do not consider that the proposal would amount to securing the optimum viable use for this listed building. Noting also that the Act requires that considerable importance and weight are to be given to the desirability of preserving the listed building, I conclude that the public benefits of the proposal are very modest and do not outweigh the material harm which would be caused to the designated heritage asset. Moreover, the great weight to be apportioned to the conservation of designated heritage assets anticipated in paragraph 132 of the Framework affirms this conclusion: it follows that the proposal would be contrary to the historic environment policies of the Framework.

18. I have taken into account all other matters raised in the evidence before me, but nothing arises which disturbs my conclusions on the main issue. The appeals are therefore dismissed.

J Flack

INSPECTOR