

Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 30 January 2018

by Simon Warder MA BSc(Hons) DipUD(Dist) MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 26 February 2018

Appeal Ref: APP/P1750/W/17/3181436

Wellington Centre Site, Wellington Centre, Aldershot GU11 1DB

- 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 London and Cambridge Investments Limited against the decision of Rushmoor Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 16/00905/FULPP, dated 3 November 2016, was refused by notice dated 31 March 2017.
 - The development proposed is residential development above the existing Boots shop and Multi-Storey Car Park comprising total of 43 dwellings units (15 x 1 bedroom (2 persons), 23 x 2 bedroom (3 persons), 2 x 2 bedroom (4 persons) and 3 x 3 bedroom (5 persons), to include new access cores and alterations to the entrance of Victoria House.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matter

2. The application was refused for reasons including the absence of a Planning Obligation to secure financial contributions to mitigation and avoidance measures in respect of the Thames Heaths Basin Special Protection Area, public open space and the transport impacts of the proposal (reasons 2, 3 and 4). The appeal submissions include a signed and dated Planning Obligation. The Council has confirmed that this Obligation would overcome reasons for refusal 2, 3 and 4. Since the appeal is being dismissed for another substantive reason, it is not necessary for me to consider the Obligation in detail. However, I have framed the main issue accordingly.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area, including the setting of nearby heritage assets.

Reasons

4. The Wellington Centre is mixed use building comprising a two storey shopping centre with a 13 level multi-storey car park (MSCP) above, a two storey retail block (including a Boots store) with a single level of parking above and a 10 storey office block (Victoria House). It is, therefore a large building in the context of Aldershot town centre. The appeal building has a primary frontage onto Victoria Road and secondary frontages onto Cross Street and Union Terrace. By virtue of its bulk and height, the building is prominent in a number
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of short and medium distance views, including from Aldershot West Conservation Area (CA). These factors, together with the elevated position of the town centre as a whole, mean that the building is also prominent in longer distance views. This prominence is made more stark by the building's simple, blocky massing, limited articulation and rather austere white and brick external finishes.

5. At its closest, the boundary of the CA runs along Cross Street north of its junction with Upper Union Terrace. The heritage significance of the CA lies mainly in its collection of 'confident and striking'¹ Victorian buildings, many of which act as landmarks at cross-roads. These include the Grade II* listed Wesley Chambers. The tower of this building is an attractive terminating feature in the view west from the site along Victoria Road. This is identified as an important view in the SPD. Consequently, notwithstanding the distance between them, I consider that the appeal site falls within the setting of this listed building.
6. The appeal proposal would add two floors of residential accommodation over most of the width, and the full length, of the MSCP. Two floors would be erected over the Boots car park and external staircase/lift cores added on the Victoria Road (core 1), Cross Street (core 2) and Union Terrace (core 3) elevations. The Victoria Road entrances to Victoria House and the MSCP would be re-modelled. The height of the extension over the MSCP would still be slightly lower than Victoria House. However, as a result of its length and orientation, it would add significantly to the scale and bulk of the building. The extension over the Boots car park would have similar effects, although to a lesser degree, given its position and height.
7. The existing buildings in Victoria Road opposite and to the east of the site are predominantly two storeys. To the west, beyond the Frederick Road/Cross Street junction they rise to three and four storeys. The exceptions are Victoria House, although this presents a narrow frontage to the street, and the MSCP, but this is largely set back behind the Boots block. Therefore, by virtue of its length and siting on the back edge of the footpath, the Boots block is the most conspicuous part of the appeal building in the Victoria Road street scene. The extension to this block would significantly increase the scale of the building in short range views along Victoria Road. The road and footpaths are relatively narrow and the extended building would, therefore, have an overbearing presence in this confined space.
8. The western end of the extension over the MSCP would also be seen in views along Victoria Road. In particular, it would increase the scale of the appeal building relative to Wesley Chamber tower, appearing to close down the space within which the tower is viewed. As such the proposal would diminish the contribution of the tower as a landmark in views along Victoria Road.
9. The extension over the MSCP and core 2 would increase the height and bulk of the building in views from the edge of the CA as well as from the north end of Frederick Street. This would uncomfortably amplify the disparity between the scales of this part of the building and its neighbours, including those within the CA.

¹ Aldershot Town Centre Prospectus Supplementary Planning Document 2016 (SPD)

10. There would be articulation in the elevation of the Boots extension which, together with the fenestration and use of quality materials, would add interest to the street scene. The public realm adjoining Victoria House would also be improved. Nevertheless, I consider that the overall effect of the proposal on the settings of Wesley Chambers, the CA and short range views along Victoria Road and Frederick Street would be moderately negative.
11. The appeal building breaks the skyline in, for example, medium range views from the north at Hospital Hill and longer range views from the south at Hogs Back near Tongham. In these views, Victoria House is the tallest built component, although, due to its proportions and orientation appears relatively slender. In contrast, the full length of the extension over the MSCP would be visible. Therefore, whilst it would be slightly lower than Victoria House, it would be considerably more bulky.
12. Moreover, given the fairly narrow gap between Victoria House and the MSCP extension, other than when viewed directly from the north or south, they would overlap to give the extended building a single, monolithic profile. I recognise that the detailed design and materials used in the extension have been carefully considered. However, viewed from these ranges, that would do little to mitigate the overall increase in the bulk of the building. Such an escalation in the dominance of the building on the skyline would prevent it from successfully integrating into its wider townscape and landscape settings.
13. Consequently, I find that the proposal would have a harmful effect on the character and appearance of the area, including the settings of the Aldershot West Conservation Area and the listed Wesley Chambers. Therefore, it would conflict with Rushmoor Core Strategy 2011(CS) Policies SP3, CP1 and CP2, Rushmoor Local Plan Review 2000 saved Policies ENV16 and ENV35 and the SPD. Amongst other things, these policies require proposals to achieve a high quality of design which respects the character and appearance of the area and protects and enhances heritage assets. Nor would the proposal accord with paragraph 129 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) which requires the settings of heritage assets to be taken into account when considering the impact of a proposal. In accordance with Framework paragraph 134, I consider below whether the less than substantial harm to the heritage assets would be outweighed by the public benefits of the proposal.

Other Matters

14. The proposal was the subject of extensive pre-application discussions. As a result, the scale of the scheme was reduced and amendments made to its elevational design. The submitted proposal was supported by the Council's planning officers. Nevertheless, members of the Council are entitled to reach their own conclusions of planning applications, provided they are based on sound reasoning. I have considered the submitted scheme on its planning merits.
15. There is no firm evidence to indicate that the proposal would be objectionable with regard to the living conditions of future or neighbouring occupiers, ecology or surface water drainage. However, the absence of further harm does not amount to a positive benefit of the proposal. The transport objection to the proposal is capable of being overcome.

16. Nor is the principle of residential development in dispute. Indeed, CS Policy SP3 and the SPD seek to regenerate the town centre by, among other things, supporting the introduction of residential uses. The proposal would provide 43 new dwellings and, therefore, is also supported by paragraph 47 of the Framework which seeks to significantly boost the supply of housing. However, the appeal site is not identified as a key site for residential development or regeneration in the SPD. Nor have I been made aware of any wider regeneration benefits of the proposal. Furthermore, there is nothing to suggest that the Council is unable to demonstrate a five year supply of housing land. As such, whilst the harm to the heritage assets would be less than substantial, I find that the regeneration and housing public benefits of the proposal do not outweigh that harm or the other harm identified above.
17. I have had regard to the other concerns expressed locally, but none has led me to a different overall conclusion.

Conclusion

18. For the reasons set out above, the appeal should be dismissed.

Simon Warder

INSPECTOR