



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 24 March 2021

by Rory MacLeod BA (Hons) MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 23 April 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/E0345/W/20/3260313

1A Stanley Grove, Reading, RG1 7NS

- 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 Mr Phillip Portch against the decision of Reading Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 200429, dated 13 March 2020, was refused by notice dated 26 June 2020.
 - The development proposed is change of use from storage distribution (B8) unit to a one bedroom residential dwelling (C3).
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issues

2. The main issues are
 - (a) the effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area,
 - (b) the impact of the proposal on the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers,
 - (c) the adequacy of living conditions for occupiers of the proposed dwelling and
 - (d) the capability of the proposal to incorporate appropriate measures to adapt to climate change.

Reasons

Character and appearance

3. The appeal concerns a detached single storey building erected in the original back garden to 2 George Street, but which has long since been separated from that property. No.2 George Street is an end of terrace residential building arranged over 4 floors and now retains only a small rear yard accessed from basement level. The terrace 2-14 George Street extends to the junction with Stanley Grove and has a design and mass matching details at No.2. It is residential in nature with other dwellings retaining full back gardens. Access to the appeal building is via a pedestrian path between these back gardens and the flank wall to 1 Stanley Grove. Stanley Grove is a residential cul-de-sac formed mainly by terraced houses. Abutting the appeal building to its rear and western flank is a hard surfaced playground to Oxford Road Community School.
4. The Council indicate that the building has been used for light industrial and storage purposes, but do not object to the loss of employment floorspace. The

present use whilst modest in scale is not in keeping with the character of the surrounding area. A residential use would better reflect surrounding uses. The backland location of the building is at variance with the predominant pattern of houses fronting a road, but as the proposal is for a conversion of an existing building it would not change the area's established pattern of development.

5. Policy H1 of the Reading Borough Local Plan (2019) (RBLP) confirms that there is a pressing need for additional housing in Reading. The proposed conversion would have the benefit of making a modest contribution towards helping meet that need but has to be examined in the light of other relevant policies. Policy CC7 of the RBLP relates mainly to new buildings but requires all development to be of high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area. Policy H8 covers residential conversions. Its details relate to more conventional conversions but aims to enable assessment of the impact of proposals on the amenity and character of a surrounding area.
6. A residential use would be likely to result in a different pattern of activity to the current employment and storage use, but a one bedroom unit would not result in an intensification of activity that would be harmful to the character of the area. The physical changes to the building would make a positive response to the site's immediate context and circumstances. The two windows in the principal northern elevation abut the boundary with the back garden to 4 George Street and their replacement with an external courtyard terrace would address this problem. The building would not have an active frontage in the conventional sense with windows and doors facing a road or other public area, but this is an existing building in a backland location. The entrance door would face directly on to the path from which access would be gained.
7. The residential use of the building would be in keeping with the predominant residential nature of the area and the physical changes to the building would be of acceptable external design quality having regard to the site circumstances. The proposal would maintain the character and appearance of the area and there would not be conflict with Policies CC7 or H8 in these respects.

Neighbouring occupiers

8. The use of the pedestrian access path by residents of the building would be likely to result in a different pattern of activity to previous commercial access but would not be so intensive to materially impact on the living conditions of the occupiers at 1 Stanley Grove. Neither would use of the access adversely affect occupiers of the terrace fronting George Street given the separation distance to the dwellings here.
9. Noise arising from the use of the proposed external terrace courtyard by future occupiers would be comparable to activity by residents in adjacent back gardens. There would not be undue noise or disturbance for the occupiers of 2 and 4 George Street. No changes are proposed to the eastern elevation of the building to the remaining back garden to 2 George Street. The building would be likely to be occupied during evening hours when the previous commercial use would have been quiet but the impact of any domestic noise for neighbouring occupiers would be similar to that arising between adjacent dwellings in George Street. The issue of sound attenuation could also be addressed by glazing measures to the proposed windows facing the terrace courtyard. The residential use of the building should not therefore result in undue noise nuisance for the nearest neighbours.

10. The proposal would not have an adverse impact on the living conditions of neighbouring occupiers. There would not be conflict with the parts of Policy CC8 of the RBLP that seek to safeguard the living environment of existing residential properties in relation to matters including privacy, noise and disturbance.

Future occupiers

11. Policy H5 of the RBLP, referred to in the Council's third refusal reason, requires adherence to the nationally described space standards, but this policy is of limited relevance as it relates to new build housing. Policy H8 on conversions is more applicable. This requires the resulting property to provide adequate internal floorspace and headroom for residents without specifying a minimum floorspace figure. According to the appellant, the unit would have a floor area of 34m², excluding the courtyard, a little below the minimum floor space of 37m² set in the national standards.
12. The unit has adequate headroom and a rectangular layout which facilitates the conversion. Yet the layout proposed would nonetheless be cramped. Provision of the courtyard would enable habitable areas to benefit from adequate natural lighting and an acceptable outlook given the site's constraints, but the courtyard's size and position would limit the floor area available for the bedroom, bathroom and corridor kitchen making these areas unduly tight. The internal store for bikes and bins would also limit the overall living space. It may be possible to adjust the layout in these respects, but this is not a matter that can be addressed by a planning condition. The layout of the unit on the plans before me would not provide adequate internal floorspace and so would be contrary to Policy H8.
13. Inclusion of the external terrace courtyard as part of the living space as well as an external amenity area would not address the tightness of space in parts of the indicated layout. The courtyard would provide a useable outside amenity, larger in size than a balcony to many flats. It would allow daylight into the living areas and also outlook from them. Outlook could not be through conventional flank windows, given constraints imposed by the building's location, but would be similar to that provided by rooflights to some flats.
14. It would be possible for occupiers at upper floor rear windows at 2 and 4 George Street to look down on to the courtyard and the living room window, but the angle of overlooking would be oblique. There would not be a consequent material loss of privacy; any future occupier could mitigate privacy concerns with a net curtain. The proposal would not be contrary to Policy H10 which requires dwellings to be provided with functional private or communal open space not compromised by the relationship with other buildings.
15. A future occupier of the dwelling would be vulnerable to noise from the school playground adjacent to the southern and western walls, but this would be for limited times on school days. There is currently a similar noise impact for the occupiers of 2 and 4 George Street. Any potential occupier would be aware of the issue. There would not be a noise problem in evening hours when occupiers would most likely be in the building. Sound attenuation measures would also help to limit daytime noise impacts from the school.
16. The access from Stanley Grove has a lockable gate which would help with security but the path beyond the gate would be unlit for access during hours of

darkness. If the proposal was otherwise acceptable a planning condition could have been used to address security and lighting concerns. As such there would not be any substantive conflict with Policy CC8 which seeks to safeguard amenity in relation to matters including privacy, noise and disturbance and crime and safety.

Climate change

17. The conversion of an existing building to a new acceptable use is a sustainable measure. If the internal floorspace layout had been acceptable it would have been possible to utilise a planning condition to address the Council's concerns relating to sustainable design and construction, including incorporation of water conservation measures as set out in Policy CC2 of the RBLP. The proposal is capable of incorporating appropriate measures to adapt to climate change.

Planning balance

18. The proposal would have the benefit of providing a small additional residential unit in a location close to everyday services and public transport facilities. It would bring a long established backland building into a new use that would not be out of keeping with the nature of uses in the vicinity. However, these benefits would be outweighed by the inadequate living conditions for occupiers of the proposed dwelling in relation to the cramped internal floorspace layout. Moreover, this shortcoming would be contrary to a recently adopted policy in the development plan.

Conclusion

19. For the reasons given above I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Rory MacLeod

INSPECTOR