



Appeal Decision

Site Visit made on 10 August 2021

by J Bowyer BSc(Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 13 August 2021

Appeal Ref: APP/Y1945/W/21/3271999

Clock Tower Site, Ascot Road, Watford WD18 8AL

- 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 Paul Stacey against the decision of Watford Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 21/00252/FUL, dated 24 February 2021, was refused by notice dated 25 March 2021.
 - The development proposed is demolition of derelict clock tower and extension.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matters

2. In the period since the appeal was submitted, the Government published a revised version of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework). The main parties were invited to comment on any implications for the appeal of this change, and I am therefore satisfied that no prejudice would be caused by my consideration of the appeal in light of the revised Framework.
3. I have noted references to the Council's emerging Local Plan 2018 to 2036, but the evidence before me indicates that the emerging plan has not yet undergone examination. It is therefore subject to change, and because I can have little confidence that policies will be adopted in their current form, it carries limited weight in my decision.

Main Issue

4. The main issue is the effect of the demolition of the Locally Listed appeal building, including on the character and appearance of the area.

Reasons

5. The appeal proposes the demolition of a former industrial pump house building with a clock tower. I have been provided with a copy of a letter from Historic England dated 1 July 2021 confirming that the building would not be added to the national List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest. That the building was not found to merit inclusion on the national List at this time does not however mean that it is of no interest or value. The building is identified by the Council as a Locally Listed Building, and in accordance with the Framework which defines heritage assets as including assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing), it therefore comprises a 'non-designated heritage asset'. As a consequence, the Framework requires that the effect of the proposal on its significance should be taken into account.

6. The Local List entry records that the appeal building was constructed to extract water for industrial purposes for the Sun Engraving Company who had a large printing works on the adjacent site. It is dated to 1934 and is of distinctive Art Deco style including a roof of green glazed tiles, Flemish bond brick exterior walls to the main part of the building, and white coloured render to the central clock tower which is topped by a weathervane. Additional detailing to the tower includes moulded frames around the clock face openings, and the letters 'S U N' pierced vertically down 2 faces. The building no longer holds the water pumps, and the clock mechanism and faces are missing. There is also an unfinished modern blockwork structure to one side, and the Historic England Assessment notes that there have been some changes to its fenestration. Nevertheless, the remaining original features add considerably to the architectural interest of the building, and result in a striking and recognisable feature which is prominently positioned between 2 carriageways of Ascot Road. Despite hoarding to the site, there are views of the building and the tower is readily visible, and for these reasons I agree with the List Entry description of it as a landmark building.
7. In addition, the evidence before me indicates that the printing industry was a major employer in Watford. The appellant suggests that the appeal building is not the only structure associated with the printing industry that survives locally, and I note comments that the artesian well which fed the building has been capped. Be that as it may, these factors do not obviate the building's former role, and it remains a notable symbol of an important aspect of the area's past.
8. In my judgement, the distinctive architectural qualities of the building together with its historic interest contribute much to its significance as a non-designated heritage asset, and I find notwithstanding its current condition that it makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the surrounding area.
9. In weighing applications that directly or indirectly affect non-designated heritage assets, the Framework advises that a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset. In this case, the scale of the harm resulting from demolition of the building would be the total loss of the asset, and its significance. The loss of the building would also erode the distinctiveness of the surrounding area, harming its character and appearance.
10. I appreciate that the building has been vacant for some time, and the appellant indicates that it has been subject to break ins and vandalism. However, there is little firm detail to substantiate the assertion that the building is dangerous; including on account of its structural condition, the well beneath it, asbestos or other materials used in its construction. Nor does the evidence before me demonstrate that it would not be possible to secure the fabric of the building or to bring it back into viable use. While I acknowledge that the building is currently in visibly poor condition, I am not therefore persuaded that this fact justifies its demolition. In the absence of a detailed assessment of contamination at the site and any consequent risks to health or the environment, and identification of firm measures to secure necessary mitigation as part of development, I similarly do not find the suggestion that the site is contaminated to weigh significantly in favour of the proposal.
11. The Framework emphasises the need to make efficient use of brownfield land to meet needs for development, and includes clear objectives to boost the supply of housing and to support economic development. The recent introduction of

permitted development rights allowing for demolition of commercial buildings to provide for new housing also serves to support development of brownfield land. Demolition of the appeal building is restricted by the terms of an Article 4 Direction, but I note that the site is part of the 'Western Gateway' identified by the Council as an area for mixed use redevelopment. Nevertheless, the site schedule extract appended to the appellant's statement lists development considerations for the Western Gateway, including that proposals should *'identify how the locally listed clock tower can be enhanced as part of any development. If the public benefit is greater than the loss or harm to the building then this will be taken into consideration with the heritage asset.'*

12. A 2016 Masterplanning Study for the Croxley View/ Ascot Road area included the appeal site, but I have not been provided with details of any current firm proposals for this site. Irrespective of its accessible location and local housing requirements, the extent of any benefits of redevelopment including potential contributions towards the supply of housing or the local economy are therefore far from clear. Without detailed proposals and bearing in mind the positive contribution that the existing building makes to local distinctiveness, I am also unable to ascertain whether or not redevelopment of the site would benefit the character and appearance of the area. Moreover, I can have little certainty in the absence of a detailed proposal for development that any benefits would in fact be delivered should the building be demolished. In addition, the limited information before me does not demonstrate that demolition of the building would definitely be required in order to support new development to be brought forward either within the Western Gateway area, or nearby, including any future Croxley Rail Link opportunity. The appellant refers to the outcome of a local newspaper poll suggesting general public support for redevelopment of the site and I acknowledge some comments in support of the proposal, but the above factors limit significantly the weight that I give to the benefit of the proposal in supporting potential future development at this time.
13. The appellant states that the Council has previously prevented development from proceeding at the site. I do not know the full circumstances relevant to earlier planning permissions for developments including extensions to the appeal building and their status, but they nevertheless suggest to me that there may also be alternative options to the demolition now proposed that could support a more effective use of the site.
14. For these reasons, I find taking a balanced judgement that the benefits of the proposal are insufficient to outweigh the total loss of the Locally Listed Building and the harm to its significance as a non-designated heritage asset. I therefore conclude that the proposed demolition of the Locally Listed Building would not be justified, and I find that the development would cause unacceptable harm to the character and appearance of the surrounding area. It would accordingly conflict with Policy UD2 of Watford's Local Plan Part 1 – Core Strategy 2013 which seeks conservation and where appropriate enhancement of the borough's historic environment including locally listed buildings. The proposal would also be contrary to the Framework insofar as it seeks generally to conserve and enhance the historic environment and the significance of heritage assets.

Conclusion

15. For the reasons given above, I find that the proposal would conflict with the development plan when it is read as a whole, and material considerations do

not indicate that a decision contrary to the development plan should be reached. I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

J Bowyer

INSPECTOR