



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 31 January 2023

by M. P. Howell BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 22 February 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/E0345/W/22/3305239

St. Peter's Hill, Caversham Heights, Reading RG4 7DN

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant approval required under Article 3(1) and Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) (England) Order 2015 (as amended).
 - The appeal is made by CK Hutchison Networks (UK) Ltd against the decision of Reading Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 220587, dated 13 April 2022, was refused by notice dated 14 June 2022.
 - The development proposed is a telecommunications installation: Proposed 15.0m Phase 8 Monopole C/W wraparound cabinet at base and associated ancillary works.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The principle of development is established by the provisions of Schedule 2, Part 16, Class A of the GPDO. I have had regard to the policies referred to, and the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) but only in so far as they are a material consideration that are relevant to matters of siting and appearance taking into account any representations received. My determination of this appeal has been made on this basis.

Main Issues

3. The main issue is the effect of the siting and appearance of the proposed installation on:
 - The character and appearance of the area, including whether it would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of St. Peter's Conservation Area, a designated heritage asset;- and
 - If any harm is identified whether that harm would be outweighed by the need for the installation and the lack of less harmful alternative sites.

Reasons

Character and appearance

4. The appeal site is an area of grass verge located on an incline on St. Peter's Hill in St. Peter's Conservation Area (Conservation Area). St. Peter's Hill is a busy route towards Church Road and the centre of Caversham. Although there are

taller properties in the area, the built form near to the site is generally two storey residential dwellings. In combination with the slope of the road, a small banking with mature trees lines St. Peter's Hill on one side, adjacent to the dwellings on St. Peters Avenue. Opposite the site is a large stone and brick retaining wall, and a more contemporary residential estate beyond. There are elements of street furniture, including a few street lights and highway signs.

5. St. Peter's Conservation Area Appraisal 2018 (Appraisal) indicates that the Conservation Area is centred around Caversham Court and St. Peter's Hill Church at the bottom of St. Peter's Hill. Tree cover and green spaces, especially around St Peters and in Caversham Court are important. The Appraisal outlines that the Conservation Area boundary was extended to take in takes in the trees along St. Peter's Hill, which are important in views up the curve of the hill. As such, the historical buildings, trees, and green spaces reflect the rural beginnings and the verdant character and appearance of the Conservation Area and contribute to its significance.
6. The proposal would be within an area of the public realm that would be highly visible along St. Peter's Hill and its junction with Church Street. From what I saw on site, the road was a well-used route, and the proposed development would be in the context of other vertical features, such as a street lights, a tall retaining wall, and mature trees on the edge of the road. Although it is taller and wider than the nearest street light, such installations are an increasingly common and expected sight on highway verges along well used roads. The lower level of the road and the slim design of proposed development would also help to ensure that the height of the monopole would not significantly contrast with the domestic scale of the surrounding built form.
7. However, I am conscious that despite being a busy road and near to vertical features, St. Peter's Hill is an attractive route within the Conservation Area which is enhanced by the mature trees along its edge. These trees are of significance in visual amenity terms, not least due to their position, size, and prominence within the locality. Furthermore, while individually not all would be notable, as a group they have an amenity value that contributes to both the character and appearance of the area as well as the significance of the Conservation Area.
8. The appellant has indicated that the scheme would be positioned outside the canopy of the trees. I appreciate that the slope of the road and the hard surfacing of the footway could alter the morphology and disposition of the roots. However, limited evidence has been provided to demonstrate that the monopole and associated equipment would not encroach on the Root Protection Areas of the trees. Also, from what I saw on site, several branches from the nearest trees were overhanging the proposed site. As such, due to the proximity and potential growth of the trees, there is a reasonable likelihood that the proposed development would impact on them, either during construction or by restricting the spread of the canopies. This may also lead to considerable pressure to thin or remove the trees in the future.
9. Due to the limited evidence before me, I am unable to determine if the nearest trees to the proposed development would be adversely affected by the development. Consequently, the appellants have failed to demonstrate that the proposed development would not have an unacceptable impact on the nearest trees. Any loss of a tree in this group would be harmful to the character and

appearance of the area, by not only limiting any potential but also by eroding the significant contribution they make as a group to the Conservation Area. Whilst finishing the proposed development in grey may lessen the overall impact, the concerns regarding the effect on the trees, character and appearance of the area and Conservation Area would not be overcome.

10. Paragraph 199 of the Framework sets out that great weight should be given to the conservation of heritage assets. Due to the scale, design, and impact of the proposal together with the lack of sufficient information on the impact on trees, the harm would be 'less than substantial harm' to the heritage asset.
11. Paragraph 202 of the Framework is applicable in these instances and indicates that less than substantial harm to heritage assets should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal. In terms of benefits, I note the support in the Framework for high quality communications, and that advanced, high quality, reliable communication infrastructure is considered essential for economic growth and social well-being. These benefits increase consumer value through improved connectivity, driving consumer and business innovation through devices and services, new internet of things (IoT) solutions and smarter infrastructure and public services.
12. In this case, the considerable benefits do not outweigh the harm to the proposed development would have on the conservation or enhancement of the Conservation Area. In coming to this conclusion, I am giving considerable weight and importance to paying special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the Conservation Area.
13. Accordingly, the proposed development would have an unacceptable impact on the character and appearance of the area, failing to preserve or enhance St. Peters Conservation Area, a heritage asset. Insofar as they are a material consideration, the proposal would also be contrary to the aims of Policies EN1, EN14, CC7 and OU3 of the Reading Local Plan 2019. Amongst other things, these policies seek to ensure that telecommunications development is a high quality in design that protects the character and distinctiveness of the locality. All proposals will be expected to protect and where possible enhance the significance of heritage assets, and individual trees, groups of trees, hedges and woodlands will be protected from damage or removal where they are of importance.

Alternative sites

14. Paragraph 117 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) states, among other things, that applications for electronic communications development (including applications for prior approval under the GPDO) should be supported by necessary evidence to justify the proposal. Where this relates to a new mast or base station, this evidence should include that the applicant has explored the possibility of erecting antennas on an existing building, mast or other structure.
15. I recognise that the 5G cell search area is constrained, and that the location has been selected due to the busy road and elements of vertical street furniture within the context of the appeal site.
16. The appellant has provided a map detailing discounted options. However, all the discounted options appear to be locations at street level. I appreciate that a

large proportion of taller buildings might not be appropriate, but there is limited evidence before me that indicates existing buildings within the locality have been investigated and the reasons for them being discounted. Furthermore, although there are 8 discounted options on the list of those considered, there are 11 options shown on the corresponding map. From the evidence before me, no reasons have been provided to discount 'Option 2' and 'Option 3' shown on Richfield Avenue on the corresponding plan.

17. Consequently, the need for this installation weighs in favour of the appeal, but I am not satisfied that potentially less harmful alternatives on existing buildings and at street level have been adequately explored, contrary to the policy objectives set out in section 10 of the Framework.

Other Matters

18. There is a dispute between the main parties over whether pre-application advice was submitted and responded to. However, I do not find this to impact on the merits of the appeal scheme.

Conclusion

19. The siting and appearance of the proposed development would result in harm to the character and appearance of the area and to a designated heritage asset. In line with the Framework, the harm to a designated heritage asset is a matter to which I attach great weight, while the public benefits of the proposal do not outweigh this harm. Furthermore, there is insufficient evidence to demonstrate that there are no suitable alternative sites for the proposed development.
20. For the reasons given above, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

M. P. Howell

INSPECTOR