



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 8 March 2023

by M Russell BA (Hons) DipTP MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 7 July 2023

Appeal Ref: APP/B1930/W/22/3296895

63-77 Aecom House, Victoria Street, St Albans AL1 3ER

- 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 Matthew Meaden - COIF Charities Property Fund against the decision of St Albans City Council.
 - The application Ref 5/2021/2557, dated 3 September 2021, was refused by notice dated 14 December 2021.
 - The development proposed is construction of a one storey upwards extension to part of the upper floor and four storey rear extension, upgraded plant, alterations including new front entrance and roof terrace, and revised parking layout.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Main Issue

2. The main issue is whether the proposal would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the St Albans Conservation Area (CA).

Reasons

3. The evidence before me confirms that the CA is subdivided into 27 Character Areas. The appeal site is situated within the 'Victoria Street Character Area', one of 12 Character Areas contained within the wider 'Victorian and Edwardian' part of the town from which the significance of this part of the CA primarily derives. Victoria Street's straight alignment provides long distance views and this is identified as a positive characteristic of the CA within the 'Character Area 7c – Victoria Street' chapter of the Council's Conservation Area Appraisal (CAA).
4. In views from the bridge, which rises steeply over the railway by the station at the eastern end of Victoria Street, the appeal building is appreciated as siting amongst a group of buildings of comparable scale where the topography rises towards the ridge at St Peters Street and St Albans' commercial centre. The predominant material in this group of buildings is brickwork. In instances where the buildings to this section of Victoria Street are more than three storeys, top floors are generally either recessive in the street scene, for example the predominantly glazed structure at No 60 Victoria Street, or integral to the roof form, such as the mansard style storeys at Saxon House and King House. There is a notable step in the roofline of these buildings, but it is their comparable scale and prevailing materials which gives them a cohesive presence in the wider streetscape.

5. The appeal building turns the corner with Liverpool Road which is mainly lined by the locally listed, two-storey, terraced dwellings dating to c1885. In this respect, the appeal building sits within a transitional part of the CA as the roofline progressively reduces down the hill towards built form of a generally lower height as one moves further east beyond the site. Even so, the overriding semblance of scale and materials between the appeal building and others of a similar height on Victoria Street ensures that it is a neutral contributor to the CA.
6. My attention has been drawn to a recent planning permission¹ for a similar development at the appeal site. This fallback position is a material consideration which carries significant weight in my assessment of the appeal scheme.
7. The proposal before me carries some similarities with the fallback scheme in terms of the fourth storey comprising of a flat roofed, recessed structure. However, a comparison of the two schemes reveals that the extension before me would sit closer to the front elevation on Victoria Street and its external elevations would incorporate less glazing with a prevalence of angled, light grey concrete cladding panels. Furthermore, the acoustic screen to the rooftop plant together with the 'stair pop-up extension' would combine to form a more substantial protruding element above the fourth floor when compared with the more modest extents of the plant screen on the existing planning permission.
8. As a result of the above factors, the proposal would have a bulkier and more visually striking appearance than the lighter weight, extensively glazed design of the fallback scheme. The 'Key Views' at 3.12 of the appellant's Design and Access Statement and the photomontages dated 11 February 2022 demonstrate that the mass, form and materials incorporated would form an unduly prominent addition which would jar with the general cohesiveness of the built form to this part of Victoria Street. It would also have a more pronounced presence within the CA than the fallback position in long views from the east on Victoria Street from where the rooftop elements would also be visible. Therefore, the development would not respect the character or appearance of buildings within its immediate context and would neither preserve or enhance the CA.
9. The appellant has drawn my attention to the Civic Centre Opportunity Site in terms of an example of large-scale development in the CA. I am not aware of all the material considerations which led to that particular development. However, I note that it sits at a higher part of the topography towards the commercial core and is more offset from the Victoria Street frontage than the appeal proposal. Therefore, the material considerations would not have been identical. I also accept that there are higher buildings in the wider backdrop, as is depicted in the proposed street scene provided. In any case these matters do not overcome my concerns that the form, mass and design of the appeal proposal would appear discordant within its more immediate context on Victoria Street both in close up and more distant views.
10. Having regard to the requirements of the National Planning Policy Framework (the Framework), the proposal would result in less than substantial harm to the character and appearance of the CA. The Framework states that where a development would lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a

¹ LPA Ref 5/22/1713

designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use. The development plan policies provided do not include this requirement. However, I attach more weight to the policies of the Framework in this particular regard.

11. I have seen the appellant's evidence which suggests that the availability of office space in St Albans City Centre is critically low with a projected need of approximately 39,500 square metres of office space during the next plan period (2018 – 2036). The application forms confirm that the proposal would result in net additional gross internal office floorspace of 812 square metres. Therefore, the proposal has the potential to make a modest but positive contribution towards addressing this need. The potential jobs that would be created, both through the construction of the development and its future occupation by office workers, are public benefits to I which attach moderate weight.
12. However, I find that there are not public benefits in this instance that outweigh the less than substantial harm identified having regard to the great weight I must attach to the conservation of the CA.
13. I conclude, the proposal would not preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the St Albans CA. In that regard it would conflict with the design, context, materials and conservation requirements in Saved Policies 69 (General Design and Layout), 70 (Design and Layout of New Housing) and 85 (Development in Conservation Areas) of the St Albans District Local Plan Review (1994) and the Framework.

Other Matter

14. The appellant suggests that the construction process for the proposal would be less intensive than the fallback scheme. However, no specific details have been provided in this regard, and this in any case would not justify the harm I have identified to the CA which would be enduring.

Conclusion

15. The proposal would not preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the CA. The proposal therefore conflicts with the development plan taken as a whole. Furthermore, the proposal would also conflict with the policies of the Framework. There are no material considerations that indicate the decision should be made other than in accordance with the development plan. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

M Russell

INSPECTOR