



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 15 January 2024

by Geoff Underwood BA(Hons) PGDip(Urb Cons) MRTPI IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 31 January 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/P2935/W/23/3332808

1 Wansbeck Street, Morpeth, Northumberland NE61 1XZ

- 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 Peter Robinson against the decision of Northumberland County Council.
 - The application Ref 22/03790/FUL, dated 7 October 2022, was refused by notice dated 11 May 2023.
 - The development is described as *external render removal from North wall. New double door with Juliet balcony at street level. Refurbishment of basement level & external area to make secure & improve appearance.*
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. The development has already been carried out. The description of development on the application form was extensive and included elements that are not acts of development. I have therefore used the description from the Council's decision notice in the heading above. Nevertheless, none of the drawings illustrate a Juliet balcony nor a double door, and correspondence from the appellant indicates that these elements were omitted from the scheme. Also, bearing in mind the Council's reason for refusal and the appellant's statement, it is clear that the development includes not just the removal of render but its replacement, along with the replacement of elements of a previous shopfront and the insertion of a window in the gable elevation. I have therefore determined the appeal on the basis of this scope of development and what I observed on site.

Main Issue

3. The main issue raised by this appeal is the effect the development has on the special interest of the grade II listed Old Bridge and Footbridge (the Footbridge) and on the character and appearance of the Morpeth Conservation Area (CA).

Reasons

4. The CA includes an extensive area of the historic town and its attractive architecture, townscapes, streets and spaces which make an important contribution to its significance as a designated heritage asset. As part of this, the materials, traditional form of buildings, and in many cases their timber

joinery windows and shopfronts add a richness to this special architectural and historic character and appearance. This is evident in the surroundings of the appeal site. Although not a listed building, the traditional form, materials, appearance and former shopfront details of the appeal site made a positive contribution to the CA's significance.

5. The Footbridge consists of an attractive, Victorian metal footbridge partly supported on the stone pier which remains from the former C13 bridge. Its significance as a listed building derives mainly from its engineering and construction, its materials, design, combination of ages and also its attractive decorative features which include lamp standards. However, given its situation within the historic townscape and that it is integral to historic routes through the town and on the site of an old crossing point, its significance also depends to an extent on its setting of the river and the adjoining historic townscape, including the appearance of masonry buildings and structures which surround it and frame views of it.
6. The crisp appearance and bright white colour of the render appears prominent, intrusive and in harmful contrast to the considerably more mellow hues of stone and brick which predominate in the buildings nearby facing the river. This harmful effect is noticeable from both the foot and road bridges, and it stands out as a particularly incongruous element in the streetscape, especially when viewed across the Footbridge deck from Chantry Place. Historic photographs show that the previous render was a later addition and more recently, although it has been subject to some vandalism, the toned down buff appearance of its previous appearance enabled it to blend into the surrounding townscape in a far more subtle fashion than the current appearance does.
7. Seen at close quarters, the beading in which the render is set sits proud of the weathered stone quoins resulting in an awkward appearance. Whilst the Council have not objected to the principle of a new window in the gable, its opening sashes at the bottom have noticeably wide frames giving a bottom heavy appearance, and they lack the finer glazing bars and overall elegance of the traditionally proportioned and detailed timber windows which are typical of surrounding older buildings.
8. The appellant's photographs show the previous shopfront was a simple timber construction whose pilasters displayed plinth and capital details supporting a simple fascia topped by a cornice, with a timber framed window above a stone stallriser. Although not ornate, the former arrangement was not without interest displaying many of the traditional components of a shopfront.
9. By way of contrast, the replacement has no details on the pilaster elements and the horizontal emphasis of the two part fascia has been replaced by a protruding box fascia with vertical timber effect boards. The new windows have wide, flat frames and the materials have a plastic or composite appearance and finish. The overall composition lacks the subtlety of appearance, detailing, materials and proportions of the previous shopfront.
10. The development has consequently not preserved the character or appearance of the CA but has harmed those attributes. Given that the Footbridge relies to an extent on its setting of historic buildings, and their materials and detailing, for some of its significance, its setting has not been preserved and the significance it derives from enabling it to be understood within an historic townscape has also been incrementally harmed.

11. As required by the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (the Act), I have had special regard to the desirability of preserving the setting of the listed building, and I have paid special attention to preserving the character and appearance of the CA. In so doing, and in giving great weight to those designated heritage assets' conservation, the development has failed to preserve these attributes and consequently harms their special interest and hence significance.
12. This harm to significance is less than substantial in respect of both designated heritage assets in the terms of the Framework. These are circumstances where Northumberland Local Plan¹ (LP) Policy ENV7 and the national Planning Policy Framework (the Framework) require such harm to be balanced against the public benefits of the development. The repair and refurbishment of the building to provide for its continued use will have had retained commercial space which in turn will support the local economy. However, any such public benefits will have been modest. The heritage harm carries considerable importance and weight, and the public benefits of the development have not been shown to outweigh this harm.
13. The development is contrary to LP Policies QOP1, QOP2, ENV1, ENV7 and ENV9. Together, and amongst other criteria, these require development to be visually attractive, incorporate high quality materials and detailing, avoid being obtrusive, enhance and reinforce the local distinctiveness of CAs and to conserve the significance, quality and integrity of heritage assets. It is also contrary to Neighbourhood Plan² Policy Des1 which, amongst other criteria, requires the design of development to protect and enhance the quality, distinctiveness and character of settlements, and conserve heritage assets and their settings.
14. I note that the Council did not object to some aspects of the proposal at basement level, but this does not alter the harm I have found in respect of other elements. I can appreciate that the appellant was motivated by a desire to improve the appearance of the building and resolve defects including in the previous render. However, that does not justify the use of materials, detailing and finishes that have had a harmful effect on designated heritage assets. I note that the appellant is willing to change the colour of the render which, if selected sensitively, could go some way to lessening its current jarring effect. Nevertheless, this would only address one of the scheme's shortcomings.

Conclusion

15. For the above reasons the development does not accord with the Act, the development plan considered as a whole or the Framework. The appeal is therefore dismissed.

Geoff Underwood

INSPECTOR

¹ Northumberland Local Plan 2016-2036 (2022).

² Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan 2011—2031 (2016).