



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 8 March 2024

by A Tucker BA (Hons) IHBC

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State

Decision date: 24 April 2024

Appeal Ref: APP/R0335/Y/23/3324252

Binfield House, Terrace Road North, Binfield, Bracknell RG42 5JG

- The appeal is made under section 20 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (as amended) against a refusal to grant listed building consent.
 - The appeal is made by Mr Matthew Parry of Beechcroft Developments Ltd against the decision of Bracknell Forest Borough Council.
 - The application Ref is 23/00124/LB.
 - The works proposed are installation of a circular acrylic platform lift.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Preliminary Matters

2. An updated version of the National Planning Policy Framework (Framework) was published on 19 December 2023. Its content is largely unchanged in relation to the main issue of this appeal, so I have not sought the views of the main parties on this matter.
3. The Bracknell Forest Local Plan 2020-2037 (LP) was adopted on 19 March 2024. Although development plan policies do not strictly apply to applications for listed building consent, they can be considered a material consideration in the decision making process. Accordingly, the appellant was given the opportunity to make additional comments and any comments received were taken into account in the determination of the appeal.
4. At the time of my visit construction work was underway to convert the building following the Council's grant of planning permission and listed building consent. Elements of the stairs and hallway were concealed behind protective coverings. Small areas were revealed upon my request at the site visit, to allow me to make a full and thorough assessment of the proposal.

Main Issue

5. The effect of the proposal upon the significance of the grade II listed building known as Binfield House¹.

Reasons

6. Section 16(2) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 (LBCA) requires the decision maker to have special regard to the desirability of preserving a listed building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

¹ List Entry Number: 1390298

7. Binfield House is a substantial dwelling that dates from the 18th and 19th centuries, but was largely remodelled and extended in the 1920s, by the notable English Architect, Nugent Cachemaille-Day. The front of the house was designed in a Gothic Revival style, with similarities to Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill such as the elegant ogee headed sash windows. The 1920s changes included a lavish neo-Georgian interior. Much of this was altered or harmed during subsequent changes to the building; however, the entrance hall and elegant semi-circular stone staircase remain intact. The stair is enhanced by a tall arched-headed window that is curved to follow the shape of the stair, and casts light from behind it towards the hallway. These elements have considerable architectural significance and are principal components of the building's interior that contribute to its special interest.
8. The proposal would see a modern freestanding lift inserted at the centre of the stairs. Although it would be largely freestanding and have a degree of transparency, it would serve to obscure it from the entrance hall and clutter the strong and simple arrangement of entrance hall, stair, and window. It would be harder to appreciate its elegant form from the hallway or when climbing the stair, or to look over from the landing across the stair to the ground floor. It is suggested that the intervention would be discreet; yet it would significantly impact this most important part of the building's interior. From the hallway, the lift would form the new centrepiece, with the stair occupying a secondary position tucked in behind. Its detailing and strong geometric form would be less obvious. This would significantly downgrade this key architectural arrangement, and thereby cause considerable harm to the building's special interest.
9. Additional harm would arise from cutting the balustrade at landing level to provide access to the lift. The section of balustrade would be retained as a decorative gate in addition to the lift door. Plans show that the gate would need to be wide. It is likely that the gate would become a nuisance to those who use the lift regularly, and it may well be fixed back in an open position in time, which would be tantamount to removing the section of balustrade altogether.
10. In terms of the Framework, the harms would be less than substantial but would nevertheless be of considerable importance and weight. Framework Paragraph 208 establishes that any harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal.
11. Evidence before me demonstrates that considerable thought has gone into the provision of a lift to support the conversion into retirement apartments. Level access is obviously highly desirable for such accommodation. The proposal would improve accessibility for future occupiers and may reduce the need for greater levels of care and potentially reduce costs to health and social care services. The provision of accessible housing for older people would accord with a significant need for such accommodation both locally and nationally and the various documents that are before me, including policies of the LP.
12. However, the proposal would not provide step free access. Steps exist at the entrance to the building, and at the first floor steps lead down off the landing to some of the flats. Additionally, the proposed lift would be small and could not be used by a wheelchair user. Therefore, the benefits of the proposal are considerably lessened by these constraints.

13. Additionally, details of alternative locations are before me. These show that a lift could comfortably be accommodated off to the side of the hall, adjacent to the bottom of the stair. This is referred to as Option 1 in the submitted lift options statement. A blocked opening exists here already at ground floor level and the internal space appears to be plain. An area of the floor structure would be lost, but this impact would be far less than the appeal proposal. A re-design of the kitchen layout for the apartments at both levels would be required, but the plans show that sufficient space exists for a smaller yet adequate kitchen to be laid out. Siting a lift in this area would be discreet and would not affect the well composed and intact part of the building's entrance hall and stair, thereby causing a much more modest degree of harm.
14. The appellant suggests that it is not necessary for alternative proposals to be considered as where a proposal is justified it should be considered on its own merits. I accept that there is support for providing a lift for the permitted accommodation. However, Paragraph 206 of the Framework requires clear and convincing justification for any harm to, or loss of, the significance of a designated heritage asset. The appellant accepts that the proposal would cause harm to the significance of the building. To test whether a clear and convincing justification has been made, especially for a proposal like the provision of a lift which is an isolated fitting that could be provided in various ways, it is entirely reasonable to consider alternatives that might be less harmful.
15. The proposal would benefit older persons and those who have a disability. Age and disability are protected characteristics identified under the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) set out in s149 of the Equality Act 2010. Accessibility within the building would be improved by the provision of a lift in either location, thereby working towards the aims of eliminating discrimination and advancing equality of opportunity. This matter weighs in favour of the proposal, however the appeal proposal would not better achieve this aim than the alternative referred to above.
16. The handrail that lines the wall adjacent to the stair is modern. It has a basic level of detailing and does not befit the quality of the stairs. It would be replaced as part of the proposal. An appropriately worded condition would secure details of the replacement if the appeal is allowed, and would ensure that the replacement is more appropriately detailed. This constitutes a conservation related public benefit. It should however only attract modest weight, given that the change would only be discernible on close inspection and the existing handrail only causes modest harm.
17. The benefit of replacing the rail carries modest weight. Whilst the provision of a lift carries considerable weight, particularly in the context of the PSED, this is lessened by the deficiencies of the proposed design, and the potential for less harmful alternatives. I need to weigh these matters against the considerable level of harm that would arise from the proposal and take into account Paragraph 205 of the Framework which states that great weight should be given to the conservation of a heritage asset. On this basis, the public benefits of the proposal would not be sufficient to outweigh the harm.
18. In summary, the proposal would fail to meet the requirements of the LBCA as it would harm the special interest of the listed building. Although development plan policies do not strictly apply to applications for listed building consent, the

proposal would also not accord with Policy 29 of the LP, which seeks to avoid harm to heritage assets.

Other Matters

19. The site is within the Wicks Green and Monks Alley Conservation Area (CA). Section 72 of the LBCA requires special attention to be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area. The proposal only relates to the interior of the building and will therefore have no impact on the CA.

Conclusion

20. For the reasons given above the appeal should be dismissed.

A Tucker

INSPECTOR