

DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE

8 OCTOBER 2015

Present: Councillor R Martins (Chair)
Councillor G Derbyshire (Vice-Chair)
Councillors S Bashir, N Bell, S Johnson, M Turmaine,
M Whitman, T Williams and M Watkin

Officers: Fiona Dunning
Senior Planning Officer
Major Cases and Enforcement Manager
Committee and Scrutiny Support Officer

25 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE/COMMITTEE MEMBERSHIP

There was a change of membership for this meeting: Councillor Watkin replaced Councillor Sharpe.

26 DISCLOSURE OF INTERESTS (IF ANY)

There were none.

27 MINUTES

The minutes of the meeting held on 27 August 2015 were submitted and signed.

28 15/00413/FULM 23, 25 & 25A ST JOHN'S ROAD

The Committee received the report of the Senior Planning Officer including the relevant planning history of the site and details of responses to the application.

The Senior Planning Officer introduced the application, explaining that the application was for the demolition of three existing buildings occupying the site and the erection of two blocks of flats comprising 40 residential units.

The contemporary design would comprise 40 units, 14 of which would be affordable to ensure that the level of affordable housing provision met the Council's minimum 35% threshold.

The Chair invited Mrs Kim Gauld-Clark, a local resident, to speak to the Committee in objection to the application.

Mrs Gauld-Clark advised that whilst residents understood the need for housing in the town and were not opposed to some redevelopment of the three properties, which were not of sufficiently high quality to retain, they remained opposed to the current application on two critical grounds.

First, the design was considered inappropriate. St John's Road, although close to Watford's employment area, retained its own distinct and attractive character. Indeed, residents believed that a case could be made for it to be designated a conservation area. The application involved the demolition of three Edwardian villas to be replaced with a building which was unsympathetic in style and detracted from the overall character of the area.

Second, there was concern that the new development was out of scale and would overlook properties on Albert Road, resulting in a loss of privacy. The buildings were a storey too high in each case and, whilst they might be sited a correct distance away from surrounding properties to comply with planning regulations, would overlook the rear gardens of Albert Road residents.

In addition, Mrs Gauld-Clark outlined briefly residents' concerns about security along the back fences of the new development and hygiene issues surrounding the siting of the bins.

Residents noted that new and future owners of the flats would not be eligible for parking permits, which it was hoped would not exacerbate existing parking pressures in the area.

The Chair invited Mrs Jane Duncan, the architect for the proposed development and current president of the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), to speak to the Committee on behalf of the applicant.

Mrs Duncan advised that her client, the Seventh Day Adventist Association Ltd, had outgrown the current premises and, as a charitable organisation, had wanted to maximise value from the redevelopment of the St John's Road site in order to continue its activities. In addition, there was a desire to leave a legacy of fine architecture.

The current application was in line with planning guidance and had been reached during a positive and collaborative process between the client and Watford Borough Council planning officers. The proposed development exceeded the standards stated in the Council's design guidance and had sought to address a variety of concerns including: the loss of space in the employment zone; the need to provide a transition in the streetscape between the modern office building to the east of the site and the residential properties to the west; the requirement to provide affordable accommodation; sensitivities about overlooking and a loss of privacy; and the need for high quality, durable materials.

Mrs Duncan reported further that, in line with residents' wishes, a memorial stone, which existed currently on the front of No 23 St John's Road, would be relocated to the front elevation on block 1 of the new development.

The Chair thanked the two speakers for their comments and opened the debate to Committee members.

Councillor Derbyshire commented that he understood residents' reservations about the proposed development. The analysis by Mrs Gauld-Clark had been very fair. Constrained by the juxtaposition of the modern office block to the east of the site and the Edwardian villas to the west, the proposed development was not entirely out of place.

He considered that the designated office area included in the proposal represented only a small proportion of the total development site and was a pragmatic approach to an otherwise unusable patch of land.

Whilst sympathetic to residents' concerns about being overlooked by the new development, the distance from neighbouring properties on block 2 was within the Council's guidelines.

Councillor Bell questioned the quality of the materials proposed for the development. In particular, he was concerned about how the corten steel panels would weather over time and how the design would fit in the overall streetscape. He also anticipated problems over car parking. In reality a significant number of the residents would own cars and there would be issues about where they would park.

Councillor Bashir echoed the comments of other members, particularly the design of the proposed development, which he felt resembled an office block with flats inside. He underlined the need for any new development to take into account the characteristics of the surrounding area, although acknowledged the difficulty of the site and the variety of building design in the area.

Reiterating previous comments about the complicated nature of the site, Councillor Watkin expressed additional reservations about the practicality of the balconies proposed. On balance, however, he welcomed the design and cautioned that the Committee was constrained by national and local planning guidelines. It could only reject the application if it had significant concerns about the standard of design.

Following observations by Councillor Turmaine, the Chair asked the Senior Planning Officer to clarify questions about bin storage, a loss of privacy and parking. The Senior Planning Officer advised that:

- adequate provision had been made for the safe storage and easy collection of bins on the proposed site
- the Council's tree officer had recommended that trees be planted along the site boundary with houses on Albert Road North to address residents' concerns about a loss of privacy
- planning policies supported the low provision of parking in developments in the town centre. The development was only a short walking distance from both the town centre and Watford Junction railway station and a wide range of services, facilities and passenger transport options. It should be noted that the owner of the site had entered into a legal agreement which

would ensure that future occupiers of the development would not be entitled to parking permits within the surrounding controlled parking zones.

The Chair queried the light levels in the north facing flats. In response, the Senior Planning Officer confirmed that all units conformed to the necessary building standards. Only six of the 40 units proposed were affected and steps had been taken during the planning consultation stages to alter the depth of the balconies and maximise window heights in order to optimise light levels in the flats. Nonetheless, the Chair voiced concerns that this could mean occupiers of these six units would have poor natural light. The Senior Planning Officer acknowledged that this would be the case, but that he did not consider it a significant problem.

Councillor Johnson welcomed the levels of affordable housing included in the development, however added his concerns about the overall “Lego brick” design, which he felt dominated the surrounding residential properties. He expressed extreme frustration about the lack of parking provision, which, regardless of its conforming to planning guidelines, failed to take into account the reality of widespread car ownership.

Councillor Williams concurred with earlier comments regarding the scale and appearance of the development as well as the lack of parking provision, but questioned the grounds on which the Committee might reject the application.

Summing up, the Chair stated that the proposed development was on a prominent site and its design needed to be of high quality as per the Residential Design Guide for Watford. In his view the proposed development could not be described as being of high quality. He added that the design looked cheap and out of context with the other residential properties in this location.

The Chair moved the proposal that the application be refused on the grounds that it would fail to provide a high standard of design and would be out of character with the residential aspects of the area, having the appearance of being overdeveloped and of poor quality.

RESOLVED –

that planning permission be refused on the grounds that it would fail to provide a high standard of design and would be out of character with the residential aspects of the area, having the appearance of being overdeveloped, contrary to the provisions of the Residential Design Guide (RDG) and Policies SS1 and UD1 of the Watford Local Plan Core Strategy 2006-31.

Chair

The Meeting started at 7.30 pm
and finished at 8.10 pm

