

Ward: Abbey

Appeal No: APP/E0345/W/20/3263270

Planning Ref: 191792

Site: 71-73 Caversham Road, Reading, RG1 8JA

Proposal: Demolition of former retail warehouse and erection of a mixed-use building comprising 44 residential units consisting of x5 affordable units, 194sqm of retail floorspace (Use Class A1) at ground floor and associated car parking, cycle parking and landscaping.

Decision level: Refused on 16/10/2020 after consideration by Planning Applications Committee

Method: Hearing

Decision & date: Appeal Dismissed 14/05/2021

Inspector: J.P. Longmuir BA (Hons) DipUD MRTPI

1. BACKGROUND

1.1 The appeal site comprises the former Drews building on the corner of Caversham Road and Northfield Road, vacant since December 2018. Smaller buildings to the rear, known as The Brewery and The Malthouse, were proposed to be retained in office use.



1.2 The planning application was submitted in November 2019 after pre-application discussions. The Council notified the landowner that the collection of buildings on the site were added to Reading Borough's List of Locally Important Buildings and Structures on 11th February 2020. The application was considered at the Planning Applications Committee meeting on 7th October 2020. Whilst the officer level recommendation was to grant permission (subject to conditions and a s106 legal agreement), ultimately the application was refused for three reasons, summarised as:

1. *The complete loss of the main building at 71-73 Caversham Road, a Non-Designated Heritage Asset and building of local significance. Substantial harm to 71-73 Caversham Road and failure to demonstrate that retention and reuse had been explored fully.*
2. *The replacement building would be out-of-scale with the neighbouring buildings within and adjoining the site along Caversham Road and Northfield Road and fail to transition down to the west.*
3. *Absence of a completed legal agreement relating to affordable housing, open space, adoption of land for pedestrian/cycle facility, car club, energy, s278 agreement for Highways works and a construction phase employment skills and training plan.*

1.3 The applicant appealed against this decision to the Planning Inspectorate, with a virtual Hearing taking place on 24th March 2021.

2 SUMMARY OF DECISION

2.1 The Inspector considered the main issues to be:

- The effect of the proposal on the character and appearance of the area and;
- The effect of the proposal on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset.

2.2 On the first main issue, the Inspector considered that:

2.3 *"The new building would be substantially taller than the surroundings, particularly in relation to the west side of Caversham Road and Northfield Road where it would appear*

unduly tall, diverting attention from the street level to a new higher skyline. It would appear dominating and out of scale, more appropriate to an urban centre rather than a suburban location.

- 2.4 *The perceived height of the building would also be emphasised by its narrow footprint. This would lead to a pronouncedly vertical orientated building.*
- 2.5 *The proposal would drop to 5 storeys towards Northfield Road. However even at that height it would appear out of context. Additionally, the seventh storey element behind would be visible from parts of Northfield Road”.*
- 2.6 As such, it is evident that the Inspector had substantial concerns with the proposed scale and massing of the proposed development, with the comment that even the smaller 5 storey element would appear out of context being a particularly pertinent point.
- 2.7 The Inspector also raised concerns with some elements of the detailed design, such as the elongated windows on the top two floors accentuating the perception of height, as would eye-catching window mullions. Another concern was the blank façade to the south, which the Inspector considered to lack relief and interest, making the building appear austere and overly dominant when seen from the south. The Inspector concluded that *“the proposal would cause significant harm to the character and appearance of the area”*, contrary to Policies CC7 and EN4, together with paragraph 127 of the NPPF.
- 2.8 On the second main issue, the Inspector commented that *“The existing building reflects the values of the Historic England Guidance, in particular, for its historic significance as an identifiable Victorian warehouse, built for the brewing industry and, aesthetic significance for its massing, form and in part detailing, as a landmark on a prominent corner. I therefore conclude that the building has significant significance as a non-designated heritage asset and its loss would harm the historic environment”*. The Inspector clarified that the proposals would be in conflict with Policies EN1 and EN4, together with paragraph 197 of the NPPF.
- 2.9 Noting that the proposals involved the demolition of the frontage building, but retention of the smaller office buildings, the Inspector specifically commented as follows *“their architectural and historical value is largely as a whole, and the proposal would harm their group value”*.
- 2.10 In terms of the legal agreement, the Inspector concurred that the submission jointly drafted (between the appellant and local planning authority) during the appeal process satisfied the concerns in the third reason for refusal.
- 2.11 In relation to the overall planning balance, the Inspector acknowledged that there were some merits in the proposals, before stating *“However, individually or cumulatively, these benefits do not outweigh the significant harm the proposal would have on the character and appearance of the area and the significance of a non-designated heritage asset”* and duly concluded that the appeal should be dismissed.

Head of Planning, Development & Regulatory Services Comment:

This is a particularly pleasing appeal decision, with the Inspector agreeing with the two substantive reasons for refusal of the application. More specifically, it is welcomed that the significance of the existing building as a non-designated heritage asset has been recognised by the Inspector and has been considered to outweigh any benefits of the proposals in the overall planning balance. Planning officers are grateful for the submissions in advance and in person at the Hearing from Bell Tower Community Association, Reading Conservation Area Advisory Committee and Councillors Page and Rowland.

Case officer: Jonathan Markwell