

UPDATE REPORT

BY THE DIRECTOR OF ENVIRONMENT & NEIGHBOURHOOD SERVICES
READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
PLANNING APPLICATIONS COMMITTEE: 6th February 2019

ITEM NO. 13

Ward: Norcot

App No.: 181555/FUL

Address: Grovelands Baptist Church, 553 Oxford Road, Reading

Proposal: Demolition of existing chapel and church hall. Redevelopment of the site to provide a three storey mixed use development comprising of community halls and ancillary accommodation at ground floor level, 2 x one bedroom flats, 6 x two bedroom flats and 2 x three bedroom flats at the upper floor levels, all with associated external amenity space, car parking and cycle storage.

Applicant: The Trustees of the Gate

Date application valid: 1st September 2018

Major Application 13 week target: 1st December 2018

Extended deadline: 29th February 2019

Planning Guarantee 26 week target: 2nd March 2019

RECOMMENDATION

As on main report.

1.0 ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Viability Appraisal

1.1 Following discussions with the Council's Valuer with regard to the submitted Viability Appraisal and specific inputs used, further information was requested and provided by the applicant with regard to:

- a) Estate agent valuations for the proposed residential units for the application scheme (Option 1) and Option 2 - re-use of some/ all of the building; and
- b) Confirmation from a VAT specialist as to whether VAT would in fact be chargeable for Option 2.

1.2 The Valuer has confirmed that the valuations of the proposed residential appear acceptable. He states that the VAT advice received from the applicant, and based on the information provided, shows that Option 2 to retain at least the façade should attract a 20% VAT rate for the community scheme and 5% for the residential element. This has the effect of varying the overall profit/loss for each Option, with Option 2 still showing a negative balance, i.e. the Valuer's advice is that it appears that Option 2 is not viable in the form proposed.

Further Consultation Comments

1.3 Further comments have been received from the two objectors who spoke at the December Planning Applications Committee (PAC), and the Reading Civic Society. These were sent by them direct to the PAC members, so are not copied within this report. In summary these:

- Reiterate their objection to the loss of the building;
- Question the conclusions of the Heritage Statement;
- Consider that the Heritage Statement has not commented or assessed the loss of historic value in the streetscape, nor detailed mitigation for the loss of the building;
- Set out that financial viability should not be a reason to demolish the building;
- Highlight heritage policies from the emerging RBC Local Plan;
- Include a suggestion that the existing building could be retained and another new building constructed on the undeveloped part of the site;

- Identify that the demolition of the existing buildings cannot be justified on the basis of providing additional affordable housing.
- Refer to a recent appeal decision regarding a locally listed building in the Borough.

Response from Applicant to Ancient Monument's Society Comments

- 1.4 The applicant has provided specific comments in response to those submitted by the Ancient Monuments' Society (AMS) (as were included in the appendix of the main report): *“Quoting from their website ‘The AMS is one of the National Amenity Societies, as defined by the government under the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and is consulted by local authorities on Listed Building Consent applications.’ Reading Borough Council is not required to consult AMS for this application. The objection is evidence that somebody opposed to the planning application has sought to substantiate their own personal view point by means outside of the usual and statutory consultation process. As such, we do not believe the objection should be given weight. Some statements contained within the objection are unsubstantiated, speculative (at best) and/or simply untrue. Furthermore, AMS comment on matters of architectural design with seemingly no regard for the nature of the applicant, the brief, the planning history, planning policy or the extensive and collaborative engagement with the council, interest groups and local neighbours.”*
- 1.5 The applicant also comments on some of the specific AMS statements:
- (i) *“Yes there is damp inside but you don't demolish an otherwise sound building if inaction has led to damp.”* This is unqualified and incorrect. Inaction has not led to damp. The building is not otherwise sound - they have not referred to the D&A Statement. What is their basis for this assertion? The church has repeatedly repaired the building over the years, including the roof. The issues of damp are not due to neglect, rather they are a result of a combination of factors related to the historic building fabric in addition to roof issues, namely, the solid wall construction, lack of insulation and difficulties associated to heating and ventilating spaces of this type. An expert in building conservation should recognise this as a common issue associated to buildings of this age/type and this is no way a reflection of the church's upkeep of the building.
 - (ii) *“...it has to be said that the cupola sits very uneasily in its new location.”* The siting of the cupola is a result of engagement with Reading Civic Society and neighbours at the public consultation event.
 - (iii) *“The rear elevation under the catslide roof is of no architectural significance and could be lost, in good part, to allow for a substantial extension.”* The Viability Assessment sets out clearly why this approach is not viable.
 - (iv) *“The separate Sunday School is of minimal interest and can safely be demolished to increase the space at the back (away from the noise of the main road) which can be redeveloped for an entirely new block.”* This demonstrates a clear lack of awareness and understanding of the site, its constraints, planning history and the brief / design objectives including those set out by Reading Borough Council, neighbours and the Design Review Panel.”
- 1.6 Having reviewed the further information submitted by the applicant the recommendation remains as on the main report.

Officer: Alison Amoah