

Ward: Church

Appeal No: APP/E0345/W/18/3209702

Planning Ref: 172045/FUL

Site: St. Patrick's Hall, 20 Northcourt Avenue, Reading, RG2 7HB

Proposal: Construction of 836 new student bedrooms, a cafeteria/bar, bin and bike stores, sub-station and energy centre, together with a new access link and landscaping. Demolition of the existing student accommodation block at New Court, the SETS building, the warden's house, no. 4 Sherfield Drive, the reception and common room, (resubmission of application ref. 161182) (amended description).

Decision level: Committee

Method: Public Inquiry

Decision: Appeal dismissed

Date Appeal Determined: 10 May 2019

Inspector: John Wilde CEng MICE

SUMMARY OF DECISION

The appeal site is located approximately 2km to the south west of the town centre and fronts Northcourt Avenue, which is a predominantly residential street. The site forms part of a wider residential campus containing a number of halls of residence and ancillary support buildings serving the University of Reading.

Full planning permission was sought for:

- i) 836 new bedspaces within the site, a net increase of 654, resulting in a total student population within the wider Northcourt Avenue site of 1735 (compared with 1081 currently).
- ii) Erection of new blocks of student accommodation arranged around a central courtyard ranging in height between four and five storeys (Blocks A to G), in the general location of the existing 1960s New Court complex which was proposed to be demolished.
- iii) Erection of a two and a half storey terrace of four student houses on the existing car park adjacent to the Sherfield Drive entrance (Block H).

The application was recommended for approval by officers but refused by Members of the Planning Applications Committee on 7 February 2018.

The applicant, the University of Reading, appealed against this decision. The appeal was determined under the Public Inquiry procedure and was held over 8 days between 19 and 29 March 2019.

Prior to the Inquiry, the Council decided to withdraw the reason for refusal relating to vehicle parking. The Inspector decided that the main issues were therefore:

- 1) The effect of the proposed development on the character and appearance of the area; and
- 2) Whether or not the proposed development would preserve the setting of Pearson's Court.

Character and Appearance of the Area

The Inspector considered in detail the Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment (TVIA) provided by the Appellant. This Assessment took a technical approach to assessing the visual impact of the proposal. The Inspector disagreed with the Appellant's suggestion that the 'magnitude of change' would be low, instead finding that the change would be 'medium' in TVIA terms and at the very least 'minor adverse' in nature. This conclusion was reached in part due to the loss of the SETS building, the taller height and larger footprint of the proposed blocks, and the flat roofed design of the new blocks.

Turning to the impact on Northcourt Avenue, the Inspector focused on the impact of 'Block H', a 2.5 storey building proposed to be sited immediately adjacent to the street. The Inspector determined that it would exhibit a far greater scale and mass than surrounding buildings on Northcourt Avenue and would have a negative effect on townscape.

The Inspector noted that many views of the development would be screened by trees and vegetation, especially from viewpoints to the northern end of Northcourt Avenue. The view west from Northcourt Avenue along the central entrance would change more significantly but the impact was not considered sufficiently harmful to affect the overall outcome of the appeal.

The view of the largest 4 and 5 storey blocks from Northcourt Avenue across the boundary hedge, "would have a slight adverse effect on the openness of the street scene", the Inspector decided.

The biggest change would be that from the junction of Northcourt Avenue and Sherfield Drive looking across the car park towards Pearson's Court. The Inspector noted that the view of Pearson's Court would be completely obscured by Block H and current views of New Court would be replaced by views of the upper floors of Block E-G. This arrangement, the Inspector found, would be unduly obtrusive and would lead to a loss of a sense of openness and would have an adverse effect on townscape.

The Inspector considered the question of student accommodation density but found that no significant evidence had been produced to show what the actual harm arising from this increase would be.

Trees were considered as part of the effect on character and appearance. By the end of the Inquiry, it had been agreed by the parties that the potential for harm had been narrowed down to a few trees. Overall, the Inspector was satisfied that these trees could be safely retained in the redevelopment and this could be achieved through suitable tree protection conditions.

Heritage Assets

The single storey 'SETS' building forms part of the locally listed Pearson's Court group of buildings. The Inspector did not object to the loss of the SETS building itself, finding that it, "...is barely mentioned within the local listing and is afforded no particular significance in terms of either its historical connections or its architectural merit". The Inspector concluded that the replacement buildings either side of Pearson's Court would not harm the setting of the locally listed building.

Other Matters

The Inspector considered the relationship between the rear of the proposed Combined Heat and Power building and the rear of number 18 Northcourt Avenue (a University-owned residential building occupied by students). He found the lack of distance between the two buildings to be, "...indicative of a somewhat cramped design, and would result in an oppressive outlook from the rear ground floor rooms of No. 18".

The Inspector was also critical of the design of Block L at the north eastern end of the site in that it would, "...essentially be a flat roofed four storey rectangle...completely at odds with the existing Creighton Court". He contrasted this with Creighton Court which, "...has been designed with pitched roofs and projecting gables amongst other architectural features in an effort to reflect some of the characteristics of properties in the area".

The Inspector considered the issue of noise and disturbance from students and agreed that from the evidence produced, incidences of anti-social behaviour do occur. However, he also noted the range of measures proposed by the University to mitigate or prevent this behaviour and concluded that this was not a matter upon which the appeal decision should turn.

The Inspector arrived at a balanced decision, taking into account the considerable benefits of the scheme, for instance agreeing that the extra student accommodation is undoubtedly necessary and relatively urgent and the appeal site is the only immediately deliverable site for this. The Inspector noted the economic benefits of the scheme and improvements to housing for students. He noted the benefit of retaining the majority of Pearson's Court. However, the Inspector concluded overall that the harm identified and consequent policy conflict would outweigh the benefits.

HPDRS COMMENTS ON THE DECISION:

The Inspector acknowledged in his decision that the Council supports the provision of additional student accommodation on this site and this remains the case, as reflected in emerging local plan policy. What is apparent is that this should not be at the cost of the character of the area and that an acceptable solution requires sensitive design, working with the existing townscape.

Arriving at a suitable design will require a careful re-appraisal of the design. Meaningful pre-application engagement with local residents, the Council, and other local stakeholders will be essential to achieving this.

Case Officer: Steve Vigar



View north-west from junction of Sheffield Drive and Northcourt Avenue



Proposed Site Plan (refused)