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# Appeal Decisions

Site visit made on 25 February 2013

**by Simon Berkeley BA MA MRTPI**

**an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government**

**Decision date: 22 March 2013**

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## **Doubletree by Hilton, Granta Place, Cambridge CB2 1RT**

- Both appeals are made by Ability Hotels (Cambridge) Ltd against the decision of Cambridge City Council.

### **Appeal A reference: APP/Q0505/A/12/2179861**

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
- The application reference 11/0988/FUL, dated 2 August 2011, was refused by notice dated 11 April 2012.
- The development proposed is demolition of existing single storey leisure centre and erection of three storey extension to provide 31 additional bedrooms and a new leisure centre.

### **Appeal B reference: APP/Q0505/E/12/2179863**

- The appeal is made under sections 20 and 74 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 against a refusal to grant conservation area consent.
  - The application reference 11/0975/CAC, dated 2 August 2011, was refused by notice dated 11 April 2012.
  - The description of the proposal is given on the application form as "demolition of existing single storey leisure centre and erection of three storey extension to provide 31 additional bedrooms and a new leisure centre".
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## **Decisions**

1. Appeal A is dismissed.
2. Appeal B is dismissed.

## **Application for costs**

3. An application for costs was made by the appellant against the Council. This application is the subject of a separate decision.

## **Procedural matter**

4. Notwithstanding the description of the proposal given on the application form in respect of Appeal B, it is apparent from the evidence that the Conservation Area Consent sought is the demolition of the existing leisure centre building. The Council determined the application on this basis, and I have dealt with Appeal B accordingly.

## **Reasons**

5. These two appeals both relate to the Doubletree by Hilton hotel, which is in the Cambridge Central Conservation Area. At present, the hotel has a single storey leisure centre element projecting from its southern elevation. It is proposed to

demolish this and replace it with a three storey extension to the hotel to provide a new leisure facility and additional bedrooms. Appeal A seeks planning permission for this development and Appeal B seeks Conservation Area Consent. The main issue in Appeal A is the effect of the proposed development on the character or appearance of the existing hotel and Conservation Area. The effect of the proposed demolition on the character or appearance of the Conservation Area is the main issue in Appeal B.

### **Appeal A**

6. The Doubletree by Hilton hotel is close to the edge of the city centre. The wider site, which comprises the leisure centre element and the hotel's car park, extends generally southwards from the main hotel building in a linear fashion. The River Cam forms the western site boundary with the hotel.
7. Sheep's Green and Coe Fen are generally grassed open green spaces of considerable size. The former is immediately beyond the river to the west of the site, and the latter forms the eastern site boundary. They effectively merge to the south of the site, such that they surround it on three sides. The overall effect is that the existing leisure building and the hotel's car park protrude from the city centre fringe as a finger of developed land into an otherwise largely open area of green space.
8. Both Sheep's Green and Coe Fen are in the Green Belt and the Conservation Area. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) reaffirms that openness is an essential characteristic of Green Belts. Such is the case here. The openness of Sheep's Green and Coe Fen is a readily evident attribute of this quarter of the city, and is among the special qualities which define this part of the Conservation Area.
9. In addition, the two green spaces are crossed by a number of public paths interspersed with benches, providing pedestrian and cycle links connecting the parts of the city surrounding them. Views from the pathways traversing Sheep's Green include vistas of the built envelope of the city centre and some of the historic buildings therein, including the Fitzwilliam Museum and Peterhouse College. While not noted in the Conservation Area appraisal, from my site visit I consider these to be rather striking views. The function of Sheep's Green and Coe Fen as pleasant routes through the city and places to linger and enjoy the surrounding environment, including the views of the city centre, also makes a strong positive contribution to the Conservation Area.
10. Currently, the presence of the hotel's leisure centre building and car park disrupts the openness of the two green spaces and interrupts some of the views from Sheep's Green towards the city centre. However, the single storey height of the building helps to limit the degree to which it detracts from the general sense of openness in the locality and prevents it from impeding on views entirely. In the latter respect, the degree of intrusion quite rapidly lessens with distance, such that the building only marginally interferes in the longer views from many parts of Sheep's Green.
11. The proposed development, though, would significantly worsen matters. According to the Council's measurements, it would protrude an additional 16 metres from the main hotel building, and would rise to three storeys in height. Whatever its precise dimensions may be, it is clear to me that it would be

substantially larger than the present leisure centre and would be a building of considerable size. To my mind, the problem here is threefold.

12. Firstly, while the proposed extension would be around five metres further back from the river than the present leisure centre, its scale and position between Sheep's Green and Coe Fen would cause it to be a prominent, visually dominant element in the surrounding environment. In my opinion, protruding substantially into an area otherwise largely comprising green open space, it would stand out and appear intrusive.
13. In addition, because of the degree of change involved, it would significantly reduce the feeling of spaciousness in this part of the Conservation Area. This would be particularly noticeable from the public areas closest to the building, including on the footpath through Sheep's Green which runs parallel to the River Cam. It would also be an effect experienced by those punting on the river itself.
14. Furthermore, the presence of the extension's substantial form would reduce the breadth of the views of the city centre across Sheep's Green, and would interrupt many views quite considerably. Consequently, it would detract from the richness of the experience of crossing Sheep's Green and from the pleasure to be had by lingering to appreciate the more panoramic views of the historic centre.
15. The landscaping reconfiguration proposed would help to blend the extension into the surrounding environment, to some extent. However, the effect that the extension would have on the openness of this part of the Conservation Area and the views from Sheep's Green would be the result of its physical presence. To my mind, landscaping could not overcome this. I accept that a number of high trees which currently impede on views between Coe Fen and Sheep's Green would be removed. While this is an advantage of the proposals, I see no good planning reason why removing these trees or replacing them with other, less visually intrusive species should be dependant on the development going ahead. This limits the weight I give to this factor.
16. It is apparent from the evidence that the present hotel has developed incrementally from its original form through a succession of extensions. The main parties do not appear to dispute that, as a result, it presents a mix of architectural styles, with each element reflective of its design era. The extension now proposed would not specifically replicate any of these. As I see it, the differences between the extension and the existing hotel, such as the balance between 'solid and void', would lead to the extension being a noticeably separate addition. This would be in keeping with the existing hotel's legibility as a whole formed by various separate parts. Conversely, the proposed building height would be roughly flush with that of the main hotel building's southern elevation from which the extension would project. This, and the proposed external materials, would introduce an element of continuity.
17. Overall, in my opinion, the proposed extension would both clearly appear as an addition to the hotel but would simultaneously integrate with it. Seen in isolation, its form and design would be appropriate to the existing hotel, and would not detract from it.
18. In conclusion, whilst I consider that the proposed extension would preserve the character or appearance of the existing hotel, I conclude that it would fail to

preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area. As such, it would conflict with the aims of the most directly relevant development plan policies, being Policies 3/14 and 4/11 of the Cambridge Local Plan (2006) (the Local Plan). The former permits the extension of existing buildings if they do not adversely affect the character or appearance of Conservation Areas. The latter requires the design of any new building or alteration of an existing one to preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area by faithfully reflecting its context or providing a successful contrast with it. The scheme would also not accord with the broad principles of the NPPF in this regard.

## **Appeal B**

19. The Council's statement says that the existing leisure centre is not of great architectural merit but does make a positive contribution to the Conservation Area. However, English Heritage has raised no objection to its demolition. I agree with English Heritage's assessment that the building itself is of no architectural or historic interest. Indeed, demolishing the building would result in a greater degree of openness than already exists and would expand views of the city centre from Sheep's Green. On the face of it, it is possible that this could have the advantage of enhancing the character or appearance of the Conservation Area.
20. However, given my conclusion in relation to Appeal A, there are no acceptable proposals before me for the use of the land involved. Allowing Appeal B on this basis would be to sanction the demolition of the building without any firm plans for the function or treatment of the part of the site affected. Moreover, there are no drawings to show how the wall of the main hotel building to which the existing leisure centre is attached would be 'made good' and finished. In this context, it is not possible to make a properly informed judgement about the effect that allowing Appeal B would have on the Conservation Area.
21. I have considered whether the imposition of planning conditions could provide appropriate remedy here. However, there is a risk that alterations to the scheme to deal with these factors may result in changes to the proposal that others may wish to comment on. They should be given that opportunity, in the interests of natural justice. Consequently, I am not satisfied that these matters can be adequately addressed through conditions in respect of this appeal.
22. As a result, I conclude that it has not been demonstrated that the demolition proposed would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area. As such, it would conflict with the underlying aims of Policy 4/11 of the Local Plan and those of the NPPF on this point.

## **Other matters**

23. The Council's decision notice in respect of Appeal A refers to policies in the Regional Strategy for the East of England and in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Structure Plan. However, Orders have now come into force which revoke the former and the directions preserving the policies contained in the latter. I have considered the effect of these revocations, but in the light of the facts in this case they do not alter my conclusions.
24. The Council's second reason for refusing the application in Appeal A relates to the absence of legal obligations to provide contributions towards transport

mitigation measures, public art and monitoring. The appellant has now provided two unilateral undertakings in these respects, and the Council has not raised any specific concerns about them. However, as I am dismissing the appeal for other reasons, it has not been necessary for me to consider this matter in further detail.

25. I recognise that the proposals would have benefits in relation to the tourism and leisure industry in Cambridge, and consequently would help to support economic growth. The scheme would also contribute to sustaining the vitality of Cambridge city centre. These are distinct advantages of the scheme. I also acknowledge the sustainability credentials of the proposed design, including in relation to energy efficiency, the provision of renewable energy and the 'green roof' proposed, and the level of inclusive access provided.
26. However, notwithstanding these aspects of the development, given my conclusions about the effects of the two appeal proposals on the Conservation Area, neither amounts to sustainable development of the sort envisaged in the NPPF. In my view, even in combination, the advantages of the development are not sufficient to outweigh the negative effects I consider would occur in respect of the character or appearance of the Conservation Area.
27. I note the appellant's points about the previous application, the evolution of the design process and the full and lengthy engagement with officers of the Council. The appellant's approach in these respects is laudable. However, these factors do not alter the merits of the appeal proposals, which must, and have, formed the basis for my decisions. While the scheme before me may represent an improvement on earlier plans previously rejected by the Council, that factor in itself is no reason to support the appeals.
28. Local residents have raised a number of other concerns, and I have taken account of all the evidence. However, important though these matters may be, given my conclusions on the main issues in the two appeals, they have not proved decisive.

### **Conclusion**

29. For the reasons given above and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that both of the appeals should be dismissed.

*Simon Berkeley*

INSPECTOR