

PANEL MEETING REPORT

Scheme:	Planning application 21/01625/FUL
Site address:	Church Hall 6A Chapel Street Cambridge
Status:	Full Planning Application
Date:	Wednesday, 14 July 2021
Venue:	The design review meeting was conducted online via Microsoft TEAMS due to Covid-19
Time:	13:50 – 16:30
Site visit:	A site visit was conducted by officers on 12 July 2021, who filmed the locations for the proposals. Videos of the site visit were viewed by Panel Members.

Panel Members

David Grech (Chair) – Retired Architect, formerly Historic England

Diane Haigh (Vice-Chair) – Architect, Formerly Director of Allies and Morrison Architects

Christopher Davis – Associate, CAROE Architecture

Sarah Morrison - Associate Feilden+Mawson Architects LLP

Zoe Skelding - Partner & Architect, Purcell

LPA Officers

Bonnie Kwok – Principal Urban Designer / D&C Panel Manager

Katie Roberts – Executive Assistant / D&C Panel Support Officer

Lewis Tomlinson, Principal Planning Officer

Susan Smith – Principal Conservation Officer

Observers

Councillor Katie Thornburrow – Executive Councillor, Cambridge City Council

Christian Brady, Historic Environment Team Leader

Introduction

The Panel welcomed the opportunity to review this proposal which is for an ambitious development on a sensitive site, that comprises a Building of Local Interest (BLI) within the Chesterton Conservation Area, and with a number of Listed Buildings nearby. The proposal has been submitted for Planning Permission and it is a matter of regret that the Panel did not have an opportunity to comment on this proposal earlier, such that their comments might then have influenced the design now submitted for approval.

The scheme is for a mixed-use proposal within a partially retained former Baptist Chapel, providing space for a Nursery and 13 Residential Flats. The Nursery currently occupies the building and the new residential provision is required to pay to refurbish the former Chapel and provide the Nursery with accommodation that is both fit-for-purpose and sustainable into the future. The Panel fully understand the economic case that has been made for this proposal, but would have welcomed the opportunity to view other approaches to the development. The current scheme is essentially one of 'façade retention', which is a relatively expensive solution. An alternative approach that worked more closely with the fabric of the existing building might deliver less by way of new residential accommodation, but would also involve less physical change to that fabric. This would therefore also be cheaper to deliver, so might be equally viable.

Key Issues

The Panel identified three key issues:

- Broad subdivision of the building
- Heritage impact
- Technical issues

Broad subdivision of the building

On the basic subdivision of the building between the Nursery and the Residential Flats; the Panel was surprised at the decision to spread the Nursery over so many floors. Whilst this may allow the opportunity to utilise part of the roof as an external classroom, each of the intermediate floors has a very modest area and the staircase takes a disproportionately large amount of the space, leaving only limited residual usable areas. Again, the Panel understands that the Nursery now requires a variety of rooms sizes to meet the evolving goals set by OFSTED, so these smaller spaces form an integral component of the brief given to the Design Team, but the Panel's concern is that, on such a tight site, the vertical circulation is accounting for an excessive proportion of these intermediate floors. The Panel therefore questioned whether a different broad subdivision of the building might have delivered a more efficient use of space, and provided a greater net useable floor area to the Nursery. The Panel also had concerns over the usable nature of the roof terrace, especially in light of Global Warming and rising average temperatures, and questioned whether more needed to be provided by way of solar shading to maximise the usability of this space.

In respect of the flats, the Panel understand that these meet basic spatial standards, but they are relatively tight and, currently, there does not appear to be the storage space needed to accommodate the MVHR units within each flat, as set out in the presentation. The upper floor flats also lack any external amenity space. The west elevation incorporates a series of angled windows to avoid overlooking. The Panel found this rather contrived and questioned whether a more elegant solution might not be found to the problem.

Heritage impact

As noted above, the current Chapel is a BLI within the Chesterton Conservation Area and with a number of Listed Buildings nearby, including the Grade I listed Chesterton Tower that lies immediately to the south of the site. There is, therefore, a requirement for the proposals to preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area and, at the same time, not harm the significance of the nearby listed buildings through impact on their settings.

The Panel were unanimous in their rejection of the proposed 'lantern' that is to be added to the front element of the former Chapel. This appeared unsympathetic to the existing building and the additional height would result in the Chapel visually 'overpowering' its neighbours and harming the appearance of this part of the conservation area. It is understood that this raised roof is required to provide adequate headroom in order to access the roof terrace. However, a more subtle and less visually intrusive solution is required.

The Panel also had concerns over the scale and form of the new-build element at the west end of the site. Whilst not objecting to a contemporary design approach, the Panel found the flat roof to be out of keeping with the locality and visually very intrusive. The Panel would welcome the opportunity to review an alternative design approach based on retaining a pitched roof. The additional height was also of concern, both in respect of the character and appearance of the conservation area and the setting of the Grade I listed Chesterton Tower. The Panel acknowledged that the setting of the Tower had already been greatly harmed by twentieth century developments within its curtilage, but that did not justify further harm to its setting that would adversely impact on the building's significance.

Technical issues

In examining the current proposals, the Panel raised a number of technical issues and the Design Team provided additional information on how these are to be addressed. In many instances the successful resolution of these issues will be down to the build quality and the ongoing management of the building, but generally the Panel accepted those responses. These issues included:

- Fire safety (including the need to separate off the staircase within the Nursery, the escape distance from the far end of the roof terrace to the single stairway, and the wider issue of assisting small children to escape from upper floors and the roof terrace)
- Waste (including constricted access and potential conflict between the Nursery bin store and Nursery cycle storage);
- Daylight and solar control into the flats;
- Overlooking and neighbour amenity;
- Cycle storage (both quantum and accessibility);
- Maintenance of the external envelope and PV panels;
- Acoustic separation of the different building users.
- Lift (disabled children and/or staff will not have access to all areas of the nursery)

Conclusion

The Panel welcomes the principle of retaining the Chapel and adapting it so that it can continue to accommodate the Nursery, but there is a real concern that the current proposals would result in harm to both the character and appearance of the Chesterton Conservation Area and the significance of nearby Listed Buildings through adverse impact on their settings. The Panel accept that this harm would be less than substantial harm (as defined in the NPPF), but notes there remains a requirement on the part of the scheme promoters to, where possible, mitigate that harm. Any residual harm that cannot be mitigated would then need to be weighed against the wider public benefits delivered by the proposal, including retaining the BLI in beneficial use.

CONFIDENTIAL

The Panel believes that it should be possible to mitigate at least some of the harm identified through a revised design, and that the opportunity afforded by that process might also allow some of the other issues raised by the Panel to be addressed at the same time. In undertaking this the Panel would encourage investigating an approach that seeks to retain more of the existing fabric.

Note: *Please note that these comments are informal opinion of the Council's Design & Conservation Panel and relate to the design aspects of the proposals. The comments are produced for discussion purposes only with the applicant. The views expressed will not bind the decision of Council members should a planning application be submitted, nor prejudice the formal decision-making process of the Council.*