



FAO: Planning Department,
Uttlesford District Council

Ref: UTT/22/1040/PINS
Date: 17/05/2022

Built Heritage Advice

Dear Sir / Madam,

RE: Former Friends School, Mount Pleasant Road, Saffron Walden, Essex, CB11 4AL

Built heritage advice pertaining to a Consultation on S62A/22/0000002 for conversion of buildings and demolition of buildings to allow redevelopment to provide 96 dwellings, swimming pool and changing facilities, associated recreation facilities, access and landscaping.

The Former Friends' School is locally listed building (ref 288) and is considered to be a non-designated heritage asset as a building of local architectural and historic interest. It was constructed in 1879 to designs by Edward Burgess as a Quaker day and boarding school. It is a handsome red brick building with tiled roof, tall chimney stacks, refined architectural detailing and a central tower providing a focal feature. It occupies large grounds on a prominent site within Zone 6 of the Saffron Walden Conservation Area. This zone was developed from the 1880s and is dominated by the School site, with semi-detached Victorian villas forming a residential cluster around Mount Pleasant Road.

Pre-application advice was provided in October 2021 (UTT/21/2631/PA).

Principle of conversion

The school closed in 2017 and the buildings are currently standing empty. The application does not include an assessment of whether the school is surplus to local requirements or include any analysis of future need for good quality educational facilities in a central site, given the ongoing expansion of Saffron Walden. The optimum viable use for the site is as a school, as this would best preserve the historic interest of the site and the architectural character of the school buildings. Residential conversion would cause harm to the historic fabric, plan form, understanding and experience of the locally listed main school building by dividing it into separate units. It would also cause harm to the Conservation Area through the conversion of a distinctive historic educational building which is a key contributor to the character and appearance of Zone 6 of the Conservation Area and through fragmentation of the site and increased intensity of use (e.g. parking requirements).



The local authority would need to be satisfied that the school building is surplus to requirements as a school as this use would be most compatible with the heritage asset's conservation. This would be in accordance with NPPF (2021) para 197a, which requires authorities to take account of the desirability of putting heritage assets to viable uses which are consistent with their conservation. As the Planning Practice Guidance indicates, the optimum viable use is one likely to cause the least harm to the significance of an asset, and may not necessarily be the most economically viable one (para 15). Clear and convincing justification is required for any harm to the significance of a Conservation Area (para 200).

The following comments are based upon the premise that the conversion has been adequately justified.

Main school building

At pre-application stage, the local authority assessed that parts of the original layout are still legible and the interior of the building contained elements of heritage significance. Further analysis was recommended, which has not been included as part of this application. While it is acknowledged that internal alterations do not require planning permission, the proposed changes form part of the application and would have an impact on the building's heritage interest. The proposed changes being acceptable is also fundamental to justify the change of use. Without a phasing plan, identifying what elements of the plan form are original and which are later insertions, it is not sufficiently clear what the impact of the internal alterations would be on the significance of the building. The level of detail is insufficient to understand the potential impact of the proposal on the building's significance, therefore does not satisfy NPPF para 194.

Nevertheless, the proposals include extensive subdivision of larger classroom spaces to form domestic accommodation, which will cause harm to the legibility of the plan form of the historic building. A balanced judgement will be required, having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset (para 203).

Pine building

This block is proposed as a replacement for a modern two-storey building abutting the main school to the west. The existing block is of low architectural quality and there is no objection to its removal. As discussed at pre-application stage, the existing block has an impact on the appreciation of the architectural quality of the main school building, detracting from the setting of the locally listed building. The proposal to replicate built form in this location, whilst increasing the height of the proposed building, is not the most sensitive approach and would reproduce the harm of a large, modern block abutting the main school building.

No visualisations of how the proposed buildings would relate to the existing have been provided as part of the application, therefore there is insufficient information provided to assess how the new building forms would appear next to the existing building.

A contemporary design language has been adopted for the new building, following pre-application discussions, but the design is bland and fails to respond successfully to the existing building. The proposed building is bulky, with a large crown roof which is not a traditional roof form and would fail to preserve the character of the Conservation Area. Overall, the proposed design is insufficiently high quality to overcome the harm caused to the setting of the locally listed building by a new block in this location. NPPF para 197c states the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness, while para 206 requires local authorities to look

for opportunities for new development within Conservation Areas and within the setting of heritage assets to enhance or better reveal their significance.

To draw comparisons: at the Skinner's School in Tunbridge Wells, a site with similar constraints, the new building within the setting of a Victorian Gothic revival school building used contemporary detailing while responding to the materiality and proportions of the adjacent building, resulting in a high-quality modern building which respected its historic context. It is considered that the proposals in this application are insufficiently high design quality for this sensitive site. The design lacks distinctiveness and does not respond well to the detailing, proportions or massing of the main school building.

Oak and Lime houses

These houses would replace the modern nursery school block at the southern end of the site. Given the relatively recent date of construction, it is regrettable that a sustainable reuse has not been pursued for the existing building stock. However, the existing buildings are not of heritage significance and there is therefore no objection to their removal. The proposed new houses utilise a contemporary design language, referencing the commended new-build estate to the south, which will help to integrate the new development on the Friends' site with the wider townscape. They are considered to preserve the character and appearance of the Conservation Area.

Ash houses

These houses replace the modern gym block, which is a detracting feature because of its low-quality architecture, blank elevations and bulk. The proposed design is for a split terrace of three and four houses. This is considered to be a somewhat incongruous design for the location, as terraces would traditionally line a street, creating a dense urban streetscape. This design is less appropriate for a more generous, landscaped setting, especially given that this part of the Conservation Area is characterised by semi-detached villas set within generous plots. The shared roof set behind a parapet means that the roofscape of the individual dwellings is not articulated. Overall, there would be no objection to the proposal to replace the detracting gym block with residential here, but it is considered that the detailing of the proposed dwellings could be more sympathetic to their context and within the setting of the locally listed building, therefore NPPF para 206 is relevant.

Parking

The proposal includes a large quantity of car parking which infills the open landscape setting of the school building, detracting from its setting and the open character of this part of the Conservation Area. At pre-application stage, discussions included the desirability of moving parking away from the immediate vicinity of the locally listed building to better preserve its landscape setting. The application includes parking directly to the rear of the school building by the new Pine building. This is considered to be an unsympathetic location for additional car parking.

Similarly, the inclusion of parking spaces at the front of the site around the semi-circular lawn is considered to detract from the designed setting of the building and views from the Conservation Area. The Conservation Area Appraisal identifies the semi-circular green sward to the front of the school as an important open space in the area, which is otherwise characterised by tight urban form (para 1.304 on p.76). The introduction of parking around this lawn would be an urbanising feature which would cause harm to the open characteristics of the Conservation Area identified in the appraisal.

The overall quantum of parking on the site would cause harm to the setting of the locally listed building and the verdant, green character of this part of the Conservation Area, indicating that the density of development at this site is harmful to the character of the Conservation Area.

Overall design quality

Regionally, Saffron Walden is one of the most important towns in the county with a sustained level of high-quality design contributing to its special architectural and historic interest. If adequately justified, the new build massing and quantity could be considered reasonable, but it is considered that the overall design quality of the development is of insufficient quality to preserve or enhance the character of the Saffron Walden Conservation Area.

The existing school buildings developed in a piecemeal fashion responding to the school requirements of the moment, without a clear overarching strategy. Several of the existing buildings do not relate sympathetically to the main school building in their size or location. The site masterplan largely replicates areas of existing built form, continuing the piecemeal approach without implementing an overarching strategy for reimagining the site in its new incarnation as a housing development.

Of relevance are NPPF para 130, which recommends the value of good quality design and architecture and that developments should be sympathetic to local character and history; para 206, which emphasises the importance of high-quality design within the setting of Conservation Areas and heritage assets; and para 197c, which stresses the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

Conclusion

If the redundancy of the existing buildings can be adequately demonstrated, then the conversion of the site to residential is considered reasonable and the approach is broadly supported. There are several positive aspects to the scheme, including the retention and sympathetic conversion of the Croydon Building and Assembly Hall. However, there are concerns over the quality of the proposed buildings, including their rather piecemeal insertion into the site, and the overall quantum of development leading to intensification of the site.

Overall, the proposals are considered to cause less than substantial harm to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, through the conversion of key contributor within Zone 6, the design of the proposed buildings, the fragmentation of the site and increased intensity of use, including parking requirements. The application should therefore be assessed in line with NPPF para 202. The proposals are also considered to cause harm to the significance of the locally listed school building, a non-designated heritage asset, and therefore a balanced judgement will be required regarding the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the heritage asset, in line with NPPF para 203. The harm should be considered in the context of paragraphs 130, 206 and 197(c).

Conditions

Were permission to be granted, I recommend the following conditions are attached:

- Construction shall not be commenced until samples of the materials to be used on the external finishes have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. The development shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details and permanently maintained as such.

- The rooflights shall be of low-profile conservation type, the specification to be approved by the local planning authority before work starts.
- Construction shall not be commenced until additional drawings that show details of proposed new windows, doors, eaves, verges and cills to be used by section and elevation at scales between 1:20 and 1:1 as appropriate have been submitted to and approved in writing by the local planning authority. Works shall be implemented in accordance with the approved details and shall be permanently maintained as such.
- Details of all hard and soft-landscaping and boundary treatments must be approved in writing by the local planning authority prior to works commencing.

Yours sincerely,



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Note: This letter is advisory and should only be considered as the opinion formed by specialist staff in relation to this particular matter