



Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 11 November 2010

by Jeremy Youle BA(Hons) MATRP MRTPI DipPSM

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

Decision date: 26 November 2010

Appeal Ref: APP/P1940/A/10/2132628

Former School, Yorke Road, Croxley Green, Herts, WD3 3DW

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant outline planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Leukaemia Research against the decision of Three Rivers District Council.
 - The application Ref 09/1798/OUT, dated 6 November 2009, was refused by notice dated 22 January 2010.
 - The development proposed is residential development up to 5 dwellings.
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Decision

1. I dismiss the appeal.

Procedural matter

2. I have been provided with plans showing a layout for 5 houses along with elevations to Yorke Road and Watford Road. However, the application was made in outline with all matters reserved for future consideration except for access. Consequently, I have considered these plans as being for illustrative purposes only. Nevertheless, they are a material consideration.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is whether the existing building should be retained because of any architectural, historic or visual interest.

Reasons

Architectural, historic and visual interest

4. The former Yorke Road School is a locally listed building. Policy C12 of the Three Rivers Local Plan 1996-2011 states that the Council will encourage the preservation of such buildings. The supporting text explains that the purpose is to safeguard the contribution these buildings have made to the local scene for many years by encouraging their retention.
5. The building does not fall within a conservation area and English Heritage has recently concluded that it does not merit inclusion on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural and historical interest. Accordingly, the building is not a 'designated heritage asset' as defined in *Planning Policy Statement 5: Planning for the Historic Environment (PPS5)*. I have been referred to PPS5 Policy HE9. However, this specifically relates to designated heritage assets. Consequently, it is not directly applicable in this case.

6. However, PPS5 does advise that heritage assets include buildings positively identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions. This can include assets identified by the local planning authority through the plan-making process (including local listing).
7. PPS5 also states that the Government's overarching aim is that the historic environment and its heritage assets should be conserved and enjoyed for the quality of life they bring to this and future generations. It is also noted that such assets are a non-renewable resource and should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance by ensuring that their positive contribution to local character and sense of place is recognised and valued. Consequently, although the building does not meet the national criteria for listing, this does not inevitably mean that it has limited value as a heritage asset.
8. The building dates back to around 1873 with subsequent extensions and alterations in the late 19th century. As noted in the English Heritage Advice Report the completed late 19th century school remains remarkably intact externally. This is despite various 20th century alterations and repairs. The report also advises that the school has strong local historical interest for the intactness of its plan and external appearance, its developing design reflecting the late 19th century expansion of Croxley Green. This is consistent with the advice given in an earlier letter from English Heritage which reported that the building has a local historic and architectural significance. I see no reason to disagree with this assessment.
9. The school is built of yellow stock brick with bands of red brick. It consists of three tall single storey classrooms with half hipped roofs. These are connected by a fourth classroom to the small two storey teacher's house which also has a half hipped roof. The main elevation to Yorke Road is dominated by the gable ends to the two central classrooms both of which contain full height windows. The projecting entrance feature and the form and design of the roof add visual interest.
10. The English Heritage Advice Report states that the design was not innovative and that, due to its regular reactive expansion, the design lacks cohesion. It notes several features which contributed to the decision not to place the building on the statutory list. These include the difference in design between the classroom windows on the Yorke Road elevation leading to a loss of symmetry, the fact that the window of the small north classroom is partly covered by a later extension, the insertion of double doors to the small south classroom, the extent of areas of featureless brickwork to what is described as a very plain house and the lack of surviving internal architectural detail.
11. However, these features do not significantly detract from the overall visual quality of the building and it substantially retains the character and appearance of a late 19th century school. In reaching this conclusion I note that the Historic Buildings Assessment carried out for the appellant advises that, while not exceptional, the exterior architectural quality is of a high standard. Furthermore, while the report considers the building to be inferior to other statutory listed school buildings, it is described as being attractive and as having a positive impact on the surrounding area.
12. The appellant contends that the main contribution to the streetscene derives from the existing trees within the site, some of which are protected. When

these trees are in leaf in summer they will partially screen the building. However, at the time of my site visit in November the building was a noticeable and prominent feature in the local streetscene, particularly when viewed from along nearby stretches of Yorke Road. The lower parts of the teachers house are obscured by the tall boundary fence along the Watford Road frontage. However, from the opposite side of the road the upper parts of the ground floor windows and entrance are visible. Taking all of this into account, I consider that the building makes a strongly positive contribution to the character and appearance of the immediately surrounding area.

13. The appellant has noted that the site is adjoined by a modern double garage and new three storey housing. In addition, there are 1960's flats opposite on Yorke Road and 1930's houses on the opposite side of Watford Road. It is also the case that the nearby houses along Yorke Road have been altered over the years, including through frontage parking. I also appreciate that the appeal building is not visible from nearby conservation areas. However, these matters do not significantly detract from or negate the building's visual and architectural value.
14. As noted above, English Heritage consider that the building has strong local historical interest. I understand that the school was the first in the area and it is evident from the correspondence from local residents and the Residents' Association and from the petition and the articles in the Croxley Green Residents' magazine that the building is valued locally and that many local people have strong historic connections with it. I consider that this local attachment goes beyond mere sentiment. Consequently, the building's local historic value supports its retention. Furthermore, the appellant's Historic Buildings Assessment concludes that the building is of some local interest.
15. Given its sustainable location and size, the site is, in principle, suitable for residential use. Indeed, I understand that it has been identified for such use, albeit as a building conversion, in the Core Strategy Further Preferred Options. In this context I can see no reason why a suitably designed residential scheme would not be capable of complying with relevant current development plan policies. However, even taking into account the illustrative plans, I have not been given any substantive evidence to indicate that a replacement development would be likely to have anything approaching the same visual or architectural value that is found in the existing building. Nor would any new building have the same local historic interest. Consequently, it has not been demonstrated that the likely quality of any re-development would be sufficient to justify the demolition of the existing building.
16. I appreciate that a large number of schools were built in the Victorian period, some of which have since been listed. I also accept that the school does not appear to have been designed as a landmark building. I am also aware that the original architect is unknown and that there is no strong evidence that the building was designed by John Norton who was the architect for the nearby All Saints Church. Later extensions may have been by Charles Melville Seth-Ward but I have no strong reason to doubt the appellant's view that he is not an architect of any particular importance. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above, the current building is a heritage asset which has sufficient local architectural, historic and visual interest to justify its retention. Its removal would cause harm to the character and appearance of the area and its historic

and architectural value would be lost. The demolition of the building would, therefore, conflict with the aims of Local Plan Policy C12.

Other matters

17. It has been put to me that the building could be demolished without planning permission. However, it is currently unused and previous planning permissions for office, storage and mail order use were restricted by condition to the benefit of the Leukaemia Research Fund. In this context I am not persuaded that a developer or owner, even one without the appellant's public interest agenda, would inevitably seek to demolish a potential asset without first having secured permission for redevelopment. Furthermore, I note that the appellant's agent has confirmed that the current owner has not sought to demolish the building and would be unlikely to. Accordingly, I can afford this potential fallback position only limited weight.
18. A firm of chartered surveyors has carried out a study to consider whether a conversion to residential use would be feasible. I appreciate that considerable works would be needed, including to provide insulation, to repair windows and to eradicate damp. It is also possible that the wooden floors might need replacing. However, these costs appear to have been largely factored into the budget estimates. Furthermore, despite the proximity of trees, the building appears to be structurally sound. The study considers a conversion to three houses and concludes that a reasonable estimate of the combined selling prices would be £1,080,000. After building, finance and other costs have been taken into account the study indicates that this would provide a developer profit of £160,000 and a residual value of around £95,000. Given the restrictions on the use of the current building and the lack of any planning permission to redevelop, this analysis does not seem to me to indicate that a residential conversion would be unviable.
19. I appreciate that building conversions are not necessarily straightforward and that the form and design of the existing building constrains options. However, I am not persuaded that the height of the transoms to the windows in the classrooms or the roof heights would preclude inserting a first floor level in parts of the building. Nor do I consider it inevitable that a conversion would inevitably involve large and potentially unsightly dormer windows on the front roof slopes. Despite the proximity to neighbouring buildings, I am satisfied that sufficient space exists around the building to provide occupants with a reasonable amount of useable outdoor amenity space of acceptable quality. While occupants might be aware of traffic noise, it is unlikely that this would be so intrusive that it would lead to unsatisfactory living conditions. I accept that there would be limited space to extend the building. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above, it has not been demonstrated that a conversion to residential use would be unfeasible, that such a project would be incapable of attracting a developer or that the risk would be excessive.
20. Leukaemia Research is a national charity which carries out much needed work, including the funding of research which could well save lives. I understand that the charity had a deficit in 2009, that income is down, that new commitments to research have been cut and that, in the current economic climate, securing charitable income is very challenging. The appellant has argued that redevelopment would secure more income than conversion and it is understandable that the appellant is seeking to maximise the value of a

potential asset in order to support this work. This is a material consideration that carries some weight in favour of the proposal.

21. The proposal would represent an efficient use of currently un-used previously developed land and, in doing so, would contribute to the supply of housing. However, a conversion to residential use would also help achieve these benefits. The re-development of the site could lead to more units than a building conversion. However, the difference to the overall supply of housing would be modest and this matter does not weigh heavily in favour of the development.
22. I have considered all the other matters raised locally and the request from the highways authority for a contribution towards sustainable transport measures. However, none of these matters leads me to any different overall conclusions.

Conclusions

23. I have concluded above that the removal of the former school building would cause harm to the character and appearance of the area and that its historic and architectural value would be lost. I have also concluded that the difficulties and costs involved in converting the building to a residential use do not provide a compelling justification for its demolition. In addition, I can give the potential fallback position described above only limited weight. I have given some weight to the understandable desire of a charity to maximise its income and to the contribution the proposal would make to the supply of housing. However, these matters do not outweigh the harm that would result from the loss of the building, particularly given that a residential conversion would deliver some residual value as well as contributing to the supply of housing.
24. In reaching these conclusions, I note that English Heritage have not categorically ruled out demolition. However, they have emphasised the importance of local heritage assets and have recommended that all options for retaining and converting the school to a viable new use are thoroughly investigated. Taking all of this into account, I consider that the proposal would conflict with the aims and objectives of PPS5.
25. I appreciate that the building could be recorded prior to demolition and that this could be made a requirement of any planning permission. However, this would not adequately compensate for the loss of this non-renewable heritage asset. For the reasons outlined above and having regard to all other matters raised, I conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Jeremy Youle

INSPECTOR