



My Ref PF/18/00086
Your Ref N/A

Mr Silas Willoughby
Rapleys
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London
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By email: silas.willoughby@rapleys.com

20 December 2018

Dear Silas,

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ACT 1990

PRE APPLICATION SUBMISSION AT: Panda House, 628-634 Commercial Road, London, E14 7HS

PROPOSAL: Demolition of the existing building and construction of a 7 storey building (plus basement) to provide 123 rooms for short-term hostel accommodation.

Introduction

This letter provides a formal written response following the meeting held on the 10th August 2018 at the Council offices. The following officers were present at the meeting:

Lizzie Donnelly	LBTH Principal Planning Officer
Jane Jin	LBTH Team Leader, East Team

Design advice was provided by Kim Louis, Urban Design, in advance of the meeting.

The advice given is based on a review of the following documents:

- Pre-application Report, dated May 2018 – Rev 01 (prepared by CREATE)
- Letter relating to highways and transport matters dated 7th June 2018 (prepared by Odyssey)
- Supporting statement, dated 18th May 2018 (prepared by Rapleys)
- Residential space schedule, dated 18th May 2018 (prepared by CREATE)
- Proposed floor plans and elevations (prepared by CREATE)
- Heritage Appraisal, dated October 2018 (prepared by KM Heritage)

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This letter provides a written note of matters discussed in the meeting. Since the meeting, the applicant submitted further information in the form of an updated Heritage Appraisal dated October 2018.

Background

The site is located on the south side of Commercial Road, between Mill Place to the west and Island Row to the east.

The site comprises an existing building which is part 3 part 4 storeys in height to the front, stepping down to 2 storeys at the rear. Surrounding existing development is mixed in character and of varying scale.

In terms of policy designations, the site is located within the St Anne's Church Conservation Area and sits in close proximity to the following listed buildings:

- Former London and Blackwall Railway viaduct, to the west of the site – Grade II listed.
- Terraced houses on the northern side of Commercial Road, opposite to the site: Nos 683-691 and 699-711 Commercial Road – Grade II listed
- The drinking fountain under the railway bridge at the junction with Lowell Street, to the west of the site – Grade II listed
- The Limehouse District Library, its railings and gate piers to the east of the site – Grade II.

Immediately neighbouring the site is the Our Lady Immaculate Limehouse RC Church. This is referred to directly in the Conservation Area Appraisal and is therefore considered to be a non-designated heritage asset.

In terms of the existing land use, the building is in operation as a hostel. Planning history demonstrates that the lawful use is C1. It is understood that the existing building operates on the following basis:

- No limitation on the duration of stay
- Majority are short-term clients (less than 90 days)
- Some are on short-term courses (more than 90 days)
- Not assured shorthold tenancy occupants.

Planning history

PA/01/01481 – Planning permission was granted on 21st January 2002 for the 'retention of use as a hostel for the occupation of homeless persons' (Retrospective Application).

PA/11/02318 – Planning permission was granted on 25th June 2012 for the 'refurbishment and extension to the existing hostel building to increase the height to between three and five storeys with set-back upper floors to provide an additional 33 rooms (resulting in an increase from 41 to 74 rooms) with associated improvements to communal areas, elevations and landscaping, together with provision of enhanced refuse / recycling storage, cycle storage and motorcycle parking'.

This scheme was not implemented.

PA/15/01882 – Planning permission was refused on 13th July 2017 for the ‘demolition of existing building and erection of a building of up to six storeys plus basement for use as short term accommodation (100 rooms)’. It was refused for the following reasons:

- The proposed development fails to demonstrate there is a need for additional hostel accommodation in the Borough and the size is proportionate to its location within the town centre hierarchy.
- The proposed part three to part six storey building, by virtue of its height, bulk and detailed design would be visually intrusive on and harmful to the St Anne’s Church Conservation Area. The proposal would fail to respect the character and appearance of the conservation area, creating a visually incongruous development.
- The proposed part three to part six storey building, by reason of its height, scale and mass and relationship with the neighbouring properties at Regent Court on 626 Commercial Road and Rose Court on Mill Place would have an adverse impact on residential amenities in terms of loss of outlook and unneighbourly sense of enclosure.
- In the absence of a servicing and delivery plan and provision of off-street blue badge spaces, the proposed development fails to demonstrate adequate servicing and delivery arrangement including adequate blue badge spaces to accommodate the scale of the proposed development.
- In the absence of an air quality assessment including an air quality neutral assessment, the proposed development fails to demonstrate adequate measures can be incorporated to minimize public exposure to air pollution.

Assessment

The Proposal

The proposal seeks to demolish the existing building. The redevelopment would comprise:

- 7 storey building, with the top 2 storeys set back.
- 115 bedrooms (varying between 20-28sqm and 34-41sqm for en-suites)

Land Use

The proposal seeks short-term ‘hostel’ accommodation. The pre-application document seeks to retain the existing sui generis use of the building. As the proposal seeks to redevelop the site and increase the scale of development, officers are required to assess the acceptability of the proposed land use in its proposed form.

At the meeting, discussions were had in relation to the use of the proposed building. It seemed that the use of the building would be a hybrid between a large HMO (bedrooms with communal kitchen and living facilities), short stay accommodation (stays less than 90 days) and general needs housing (leases longer than 90 days). Officers raised concerns surrounding how this would fit with planning policy.

The potentially relevant planning policies (both current and emerging policies) that the applicant should have regard to are set out below. Any further submission should set out how the proposal fits with the below.

Current policy

Managing Development Document (2013)

Policy DM5 Specialist housing
Policy DM7 Short Stay accommodation
Policy DM4 Housing standards and amenity space

London Plan (2016)

Policy 3.8 Housing Choice
London Housing SPG

Emerging policy

Draft Local Plan

Policy D.H7 HMO
Policy D.H3 Housing

Draft London Plan

Policy H18 Large-scale purpose-built shared living
Policy DM4 Housing quality and standards

It should be clearly demonstrated how the proposal is going to fit with and satisfy the above policy basis for the proposed use.

The main concern however is the inclusion of accommodation that would be offered on a longer term basis (more than 90 days) and the standard of residential accommodation that would be provided by those apartments.

Any apartment that is provided on a longer term basis than 90 days would be assessed in line with housing planning policy, regardless of whether it forms part of a wider sui generis use.

Such units should therefore, in addition to other policy requirements, meet minimum space standards, provide private external amenity space and access to sufficient daylight and outlook.

It is noted that there are units within the current proposal that are located at basement level. These would not be suitable for occupation on a longer term basis.

On the above basis, the applicant is required to carefully consider the proposed use and demonstrate how it would be compatible with the relevant policy requirements.

Design and heritage

Given the surrounding context, any proposal should comprise a design response that has been informed by the local character and context. This is inclusive of important building such as Our Lady Immaculate Catholic Church (a non-designated heritage asset) which is identified within the conservation area character appraisal and management plan as a building "...which completes this grouping of significant buildings".

The urban design advice that has already been shared with the applicant suggested that any proposal should be supported by a meaningful appraisal that demonstrates an understanding of the

character of the conservation area and the buildings (beyond those statutory listed) that contribute to its significance.

Since, the applicant has submitted a Heritage Appraisal. This document provides a detailed appraisal and sets out a design rationale for the scheme presented to officers at the meeting. It does not inform or present an amended scheme that accounts for the design feedback provided at the meeting.

The design feedback provided at the meeting is therefore set out below:

- Height, scale and mass

At present, the Our Lady Immaculate Limehouse church tower forms a key local landmark. Buildings with lower heights on either side provide breathing space and create a deferential relationship that reinforces its visual prominence and importance within its townscape and streetscape setting.

The current proposal increases the height of the building above the height of the refused scheme. At 7 storeys (even with setback), it is considered that the proposal would create an overbearing and overly dominant relationship with the Church and its tower.

The building would also be taller than the building to the west, creating a saw tooth effect which, in this location, is not desirable.

It is further noted that the lift overrun has not been included in sections or plans, making it difficult to gauge the final height of the proposed building. It is however likely that this will result in additional height to the building compared to that shown on the drawings.

It is acknowledged that the current proposal decreases the footprint of the building. Whilst this is welcomed, it is not considered to offset the concerns raised in relation to the building height.

In light of the above, it is maintained that the height of the proposed building should provide a gentle transition in height which retains the prominence of the Church and its tower.

- Plot layout

The proposed building would sit forward of the Church. It is felt that the proposed alignment would increase the visual prominence of the proposed building and as a result, detract from the visual prominence of the tower and give rise to an overbearing and incongruous relationship.

It is further felt that the proposed building frontage alignment misses the opportunity to provide a positive and contextually sympathetic response to the angled building alignments, which are a distinctive characteristic of plot and building arrangements on this side and section the Commercial Road.

With this in mind, the increased separation distance between the application site (along Island Row) and the Church is welcomed, there is concern that the proposed frontage alignment which now projects forward of the Church would limit the effectiveness of this intervention.

As a result, it is recommended that the building is reoriented and set back so that the building better reveals the significance of the tower. It is felt that an angled frontage would also provide a response that better reflects historic building alignments.

- Public Realm

The proposal includes a couple of landscaped sections around the perimeter of the building. Officers seek to understand how the proposed landscaping would appear and how it would relate to the existing public realm.

From the information available at this stage, the proposed landscaped areas feel over incidental and ambiguous spaces that lack clarity of purpose.

- Design appearance

The previous proposals for the site were not considered to present high quality development. Whilst the current proposal marks an improvement to that previously submitted, its insensitivity to, and failure to enhance local character means that it would also not result in high quality design.

The proposed design does not respond to the predominant rhythm and width of buildings. It is acknowledged that the building has been designed to incorporate vertical elements such as large windows. However, the combination of the width of the bays (three sections of the building), the width of the balconies and the addition of Juliette balconies which divide windows in two, place greater emphasis on the building's horizontal rather than vertical proportions. This is considered to increase the building's heavy and bulky appearance.

It is felt that narrower bays, together with a reduction in height, have the potential to reduce the appearance of the massing.

In addition to this, the elevations of the building have large blank areas. The stepping forward of the building is considered to increase the visibility of these blank areas. It is felt that there is an opportunity to add visual interest through additional glazing.

The activation of the ground floor elevations is considered vital to ensuring a positive relationship between the proposed building and the surrounding public realm. However, the current building design presents a ground floor that is predominantly inactive, exacerbated by the introduction of railings to the front of the building. Officers are also mindful that the proposed courtyard would collect litter and become unsightly.

The introduction of activity at ground floor would improve the relationship with the public realm through providing natural surveillance and interaction with the street.

Amenity

It is noted that the previous application was refused on amenity grounds. Unfortunately, the pre-application submission does not provide sufficient detail to assess whether the current iteration of the scheme overcomes these concerns.

Highways

The previous application was, amongst other things, refused on highways matters. A servicing and delivery plan was not provided, nor was off-street blue badge parking provision.

The pre-application submission seeks to address this. The ground floor plan shows adaptations to the pavement to the east of the site and the creation of a shared service to accommodate a loading bay. Further to this, the built form has been pulled away from the site boundary at the south eastern corner of the site to accommodate off-street blue-badge parking spaces.

The lower ground and ground floor plans show that the building would be serviced via a shared lift (refuse/cyclist) which projects from the eastern side of the building. It is not clear how this would appear at street level.

It is however felt that the proposed shared surface and loading bay would result in unacceptable obstruction to the footway. The loss of pavement area and introduction of the bay and parking spaces would impede pedestrian movement and render the walkway an illegible route.

The siting of the disabled bays at the corner would also result in an unacceptable movement of vehicles at the junction. Officers feel that this space may be capable of accommodating one blue badge parking space - it should however be accessed at the furthest possible point from the junction.

In terms of the loading bay, for the reasons set out above, the proposed option is not considered to be acceptable. It is felt that the building design is going some way to create its own constraints with regards to servicing. For example, the inclusion of lightwells and landscaping at the rear elevation means that the building cannot be serviced from the rear.

It is noted that the previous refusal raised concerns surrounding the servicing of the building from Mill Place as a loading bay would result in reduced visibility and width of the carriageway. This concern remains; however, the pre-application submission demonstrates that an off-street loading bay also presents challenges which pull into question its feasibility.

It is therefore recommended that the applicant further explores the servicing of the building from the street. This should be supported by a delivery and servicing plan which demonstrates acceptability, in doing so, regard should be had to how the building is currently serviced. This may include a proposal to move parking bays, or the use of a smaller servicing vehicle that reduces the impact referred to in the previous proposal.

With regards to the refuse storage and cycle storage at lower ground floor level, the proposed arrangement does not reflect an acceptable solution. The refuse storage is accessed via the cycle store. The two stores should be separate and have independent access from the corridor. The shared lift is also not an acceptable solution. It is suggested that the cycle storage is accessible from the lifts in the main core.

It should also be demonstrated that the proposed cycle store is of sufficient size to accommodate the required quantum of cycle storage at an acceptable standard.

Conclusion

This letter demonstrates that there are a series of issues that need to be overcome before the proposal can be considered an acceptable scheme. Much better clarity is required with regards to the nature of the proposed use, the hybrid of uses under the 'sui generis' umbrella must be acceptable in policy terms and compatible with each other.

The design response should be reconsidered, taking genuine account of the surrounding character and heritage value. It is considered that a high quality design response is required to ensure compatibility with surrounding existing development.

Unfortunately, the highways challenges set out with previous refusal remain. The proposed solution presents a series of issues regarding the accessibility and legibility of the footway. Any revised proposal should be supported and fully justified by a robust delivery and servicing plan.

The issues raised should be fully addressed before a planning application is submitted.

Please note that the advice contained in this letter is given at officer level only and is not binding on the Council or any of its Committees during the determination of any subsequent planning applications.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Donnelly
Principal Planner, East Team