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Context is Everything!



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Planning strategy relating to new build development proposals, including extensions to existing buildings requires a balancing act between persistence with the local authority and pragmatism concerning the degree to which you can push a scheme.

However, in all cases, a thorough understanding of the character, context and visual prominence of a site and proposals is often key to getting proposals through and optimising the potential of a site.

A recent case in which we obtained planning permission for a client for eight new flats, close to listed buildings and in a conservation area, demonstrates the process that we went through and the importance of understanding context to unlock the development potential of the site.

The development site

The site is located in High Street, Littlehampton, and comprises a long strip with a vacant shop fronting the pedestrianised High Street, and a large enclosed area for ancillary storage and offices stretching to the rear facing on to a public car park.

The front and rear elevations comprise contrasting characteristics, with the rear elevation clearly less sensitive in terms of its scope for redevelopment, but nonetheless requiring an understanding of form, scale and materiality to surrounding buildings when viewed from the car park and how these might influence the potential for this part of the site.

Pre-application

The initial pre-application proposals were for 10 apartments with a front mansard roof extension and a four-storey new build to the rear. Applications for 11 or more new dwellings in Arun District Council attract affordable housing contributions, so this proposal was below this threshold.

The Council initially pushed back on these proposals for the following reasons:



The proposal for 3.5 storeys to the rear was seen as too high and too bulky relative to the one to two storey buildings that mostly populate the visual context to the rear elevation.

The mansard roof was unacceptable as it was not considered to be discrete enough and would replace a more sympathetic flat roof structure.

Concern was raised by the officer about the impact on the outlook and sunlight and daylight amenity of the upper parts to an adjacent building, which the officer believed to be in residential use.

Although pre-application in my opinion is almost always useful to do in such schemes, limited officer time and resources can lead to advice often being open to question. Most notably in this case, the frontage building can be seen from aerial imagery to comprise a small-pitched roof, not a flat roof (albeit that the need for any roof extensions to be discrete is acknowledged). In addition, the upper floors of the neighbouring building were in commercial, not residential use.

That being said, this does not render pre-application valueless, as it still gives a good steer on how officers might perceive local

context and provides a sound platform for a considered and well-presented visual and design response.

Heritage and Context

Assessment of the impact of proposals on buildings or areas that may be heritage assets also requires a good understanding of context.

Whilst there may be a decent level of initial information relating to the special historic or architectural interest of a listed building (e.g. the listing of the property by Historic England), this can often be harder to come by when considering the key aspects of a conservation area.

Local character statements can provide some insight, but very few local authorities provide a comprehensive guide to all local conservation areas and coverage is often poor. In addition, it is unusual to find character statements exploring the visual impact of the rear elevations of sites located in a conservation area in the sort of detail needed for a planning application, leaving much to the general observations of the client's planning and design team.

Therefore, when undertaking a planning pre-application where a heritage asset is affected, you will usually find that the comments include remarks on the key characteristics to note from the Council's Conservation and Design officers. This can then be used to focus the planning and design strategy when preparing the 'response' to the pre-application remarks through the full formal planning application submission.

Making the case for the front mansard extension

The mansard roof extension proposed to the existing building to the front (facing the High Street) was reduced in height and aligned below the ridge height to the neighbouring roof and set further back from the frontage to the High Street.

This resulted in the loss of one flat from the proposal at the front of the site as the mansard roof void was reduced in area as a result. At the front of the site, the upper floors to the building to the front would provide 2 x 1-bedroom flats and a 2-bedroom flat.

A full set of photographs of the site from different perspectives was provided to the Council's officers with the application and different photomontages presented in the application to demonstrate the very low visual impact of the proposed mansard extension.

In presenting these images, we were keen to emphasise the following:

The buildings along the High Street exhibit a variety of building types, styles and roof heights and varied front building lines.

The elevations of the proposed front elevation indicated by red outline against the mansard proposal where the existing pitched roof is on the building.

There would be hardly any difference in the appearance of the building when seen directly facing the façade from the opposite street.

In views along the High Street, the proposed mansard would be well set-back and mostly hidden from view by the upper floors of adjacent buildings.

Design approach to the rear elevation

The changes in response to the pre-application feedback from officers led to the loss of one apartment from the initial scheme to the rear due to the drop in the height of the top floor and the change from a sloping roof with gable ends to a mansard

roof with pitched sides. We were able to retain a similar storey height to that which was initially proposed but managed to reduce the build height slightly.

The site is in Flood Zone 3 and therefore we were unable to locate habitable residential floor space at ground floor level. Therefore, the rear ground floor was retained for additional commercial floor space and servicing and storage for bins and bicycles, as well as access to the flats above overlooking the rear.

Knapped flint is a traditional material often seen in the design of other older buildings around the conservation area, with other facing materials either comprising white painted render or stucco, or red brick facing. We considered a number of alternative designs with varying combinations and appearance to these materials but settled on a mostly white-painted rendered façade with a combination of inset brick and knapped flint window detailing to pick up more subtly on the variety of materials in the area. The result is an attractive, clean and orderly rear elevation, that is uncluttered but hints at the variety in the area, whilst being proportionate to the varied scale of buildings in the area and to the rear of the site.

Other considerations

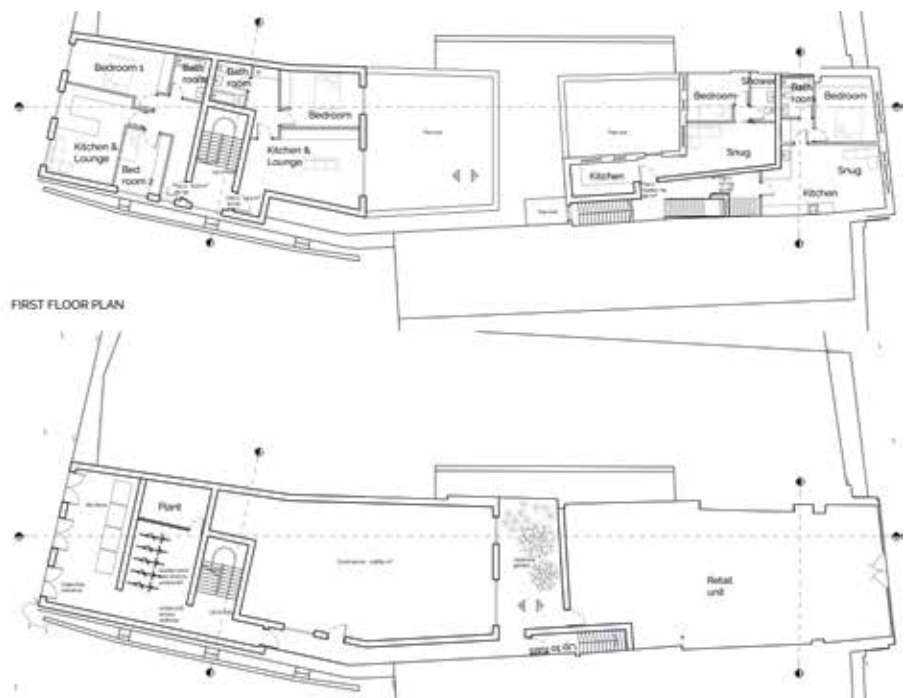
Having pointed out to officers that the upper floors to the adjacent building to the rear did not comprise residential use, this was accepted by officers and the extent to which the proposed rear elevation building

line above first floor would extend was therefore considered to be acceptable in design and amenity terms.

A small 'Japanese garden' was proposed at ground floor to provide urban greening, enhance outlook, break-up the mass between the building at the front and at the rear, and provide a small area of shared amenity for residents. The individual units do not have balconies or terraces of their own, but on such a tight town centre site comprising all small units, this would not be unusual or contrary to local plan policy.

Following the introduction of biodiversity net gain rules earlier this month for such sites, requiring a 10% biodiversity net gain on most sites, had this proposal been put forward now, it may have required more space for shared amenity and garden, or the use of the flat roofs for 'green' or sedum roofs.

As a town centre site in a highly sustainable location with no proposed off-street parking, the Council was satisfied that the proposal would be acceptable in highways, access and parking terms. We provided a parking survey in any event. Such surveys are subject to what is called the 'Lambeth Methodology', which is a form of survey accepted as the industry standard for investigating on-street car parking demand. It cannot be undertaken in school holidays or for 1-2 weeks' either side of holidays, so the timing of such surveys needs some planning and timing so that it does not hold up the submission of the application. ▶



Timing

The planning application took about 2.5 months to obtain consent. It was registered and validated on 3 October 2023 and granted on 20 December 2023.

We submitted for pre-application advice on 23 December 2022, a year before consent was obtained. Allowing for the Christmas and New Year break in between, the Council took just over three months to provide us with the pre-application advice, by early April 2023. This was affected by staff absences and resourcing at their end.

Due to the comments raised on visual impact and context by their officers, and inaccuracies relating to the roof form of the front building and the use of the upper floors of buildings to the rear, we tried (unsuccessfully) for several months to get officers out to site. We had initially requested a site visit as part of the pre-application, but the advice was provided without one - and it still took over three months to get it!

There was probably a further 2-3 months of report preparation and application drafting, following failed attempts to get officers out to site. In this time, we were preparing photo montages, waiting for the Environment Agency to supply necessary flood risk data to the flood risk consultant and the client was considering various options against a challenging build costs market.

Conclusion

A considered and well-thought through design approach to new build development schemes requires an objective approach



to understand, firstly, the patterns and characteristics in uses, heights, building form and materiality and visual impact across an area. It is only through understanding this first, that one can then start to consider the opportunity for additional height or mass on sites in order to add more dwellings or other floor space.

Pre-applications can be useful for establishing common ground with officers on important views or key characteristics,

although some circumspection is required as officers will be commenting at an early stage without an intimate understanding of the site or its context and will inevitably have to be 'spoon fed' a considerable amount of information about the site context. This is especially important if officers are unable to come out to site. Many officers are working from home, which may be for some, hundreds of miles away in a different part of the country!

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