

WELWYN HATFIELD COUNCIL  
PLANNING CONTROL COMMITTEE – 16 MARCH 2006  
REPORT OF THE CHIEF PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH OFFICER

S6/2005/1604/FP

DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS AND ERECTION OF THREE FOUR-  
STOREY CLASS B1 OFFICE BUILDINGS WITH SERVICING AND PARKING AT  
GROUND FLOOR LEVEL AT GLADE WORKS, SOPERS ROAD, CUFFLEY

APPLICANT: STEPHENS PROPERTY CO. LTD

(Northaw & Cuffley)

**1 Site Description**

- 1.1 The application site is 0.218 hectares in size and is located in the designated Employment Area (EA9) of Sopers Road, Cuffley. This is the second smallest designated Employment Area in the District covering 3.8 hectares. It is served by one vehicular access road, Sopers Road, which in turn is accessed by the classified highway of Station Road.
- 1.2 The application site is located in the excluded settlement of Cuffley, with its east boundary defining the line of the Green Belt and also the district boundary line with the neighbouring Borough of Broxbourne. The application site is located on the east side of Sopers Road and is roughly rectangular in shape with a width of approximately 23 metres and a depth of approximately 96 metres. The east boundary of the site represents the edge of the employment area and beyond this is open countryside. To the north of the application site is an existing office building which is three stories high at the front and increases to four stories to the rear. Directly to the south of the application site is a timber yard with a single porta-cabin type of building and a large steel framed warehouse, both of which are close to the south site boundary of the application site.
- 1.3 The application site itself is currently occupied by an industrial building which is set back from the highway by approximately 11m with a hard-surfaced area for parking. The current building has a single storey frontage, which is white rendered and gable fronted, dating possibly during from the early post war period. A later three-storey rear extension extends the building to the full depth of the site. Close to the rear boundary of the application site and alongside the east boundary of the industrial estate is a public footpath. The premises are currently unoccupied and the existing buildings are showing signs of disrepair and poor maintenance.

**2 The Proposal**

- 2.1 The proposed development is for the demolition of the existing buildings on the site and to replace them with three individual buildings of Class B1 Office accommodation. These three buildings are raised on circular columns at ground floor level and spaced out evenly in a line with a gap of approximately 16 metres

between them. A central two-way vehicular access route from Sopers Road runs down the central line of the application site and underneath each of the raised office buildings. This central access road provides access to the proposed parking bays and also to each of the office buildings before linking up with a shared access road to the adjoining commercial site from which a further 4 parking spaces can be accessed along with three areas for bicycle and two areas for motor bicycle parking and a single space for delivery parking.

- 2.2 Each proposed office building is self-contained and comprises of three levels of office accommodation each served by their own entrances at ground floor level. Each building is identical in design, with the ground floor accommodation comprising of solely the entrance lobby to the staircase, a single lift and a disabled WC. For each building, the first two levels of proposed office accommodation provide 203 sqm of office accommodation, with the top level reduced to 125 sqm. Each level also has 2 WC's and a tea room accessed from a central corridor.
- 2.3 The main windows to each office are to the front and rear of the buildings (west and south facing) with smaller secondary windows on the side serving offices, staircase landings, and tea rooms.

### **3 Planning History**

- 3.1 S6/303/82 - Site for new office building with associated car park – refused 5/8/82 – allowed at appeal 26/5/06

### **4 Planning Policy**

#### 4.1 Government Policy

- PPG4 - Industrial Commercial Development and Small Firms.
- PPG 13 – Transport.

#### 4.2 Hertfordshire Structure Plan Review 1991 - 2011:

- Policy 14 – Development for Employment Needs
- Policy 22 – Reduction of Travel Need and Car Usage
- Policy 25 – Car Parking

#### 4.3 Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005

- Policy EMP1 - Employment Areas
- Policy EMP2 - Acceptable Uses in Employment Areas
- Policy EMP5 – Mix of Unit Sizes
- Policy EMP13 – Design Criteria for Employment Development
- Policy M14 Parking Standards for New Development
- Policy D1 - Quality and Design

- Policy D2 - Character and Context

4.4 Supplementary Design Guidance (February 2005)

4.5 Supplementary Planning Guidance – Parking standards (Adopted January 2004)

## **5 Representations Received**

5.1 The planning application was advertised by means of neighbour notification letter and letter to statutory consultees, and a site notice.

5.2 3 Letters of Objection were received from nearby businesses within the Industrial Estate. These raise concerns in relation to the following matters:

- Insufficient parking being provided by the proposal to accommodate the number of vehicles which will be visiting the site taking into account the lack of current parking availability that currently exists in the public car park in Sopers Road and the existing severe parking problems in Sopers Road.
- Parking provision based on a space per sqm of floorspace does not reflect the level of parking required by existing businesses in Sopers road which have a far higher requirement, for a comparatively low density of occupation. This high level of car use is reflected by the limited availability of suitable alternatives, with the local railway serving central London for example and not the spread of locations where existing staff come from. Local bus routes do not also serve these alternative locations.
- The proposal will lead to an increase in the level of unauthorised parking on Sopers Road raising highway safety concerns.
- Added congestion will result to Sopers road which already serves a large number of vehicle movements from existing businesses and from problems of illegal parking in the highway.
- The proposal will increase in the number of vehicle movements in the shared access road way that serves the adjoining office building including those traffic movements in and out of this access route.
- The submitted Accessibility Statement does not provide adequate review of the likely demand for parking created by the proposal. It also does not provide an adequate review of the likely demand for parking created by the proposed office development and related employee travel pattern. It does not provide an assessment of local public transport capacity or the effects of the proposal on the local highway network. A more detailed assessment should be requested.
- The proposed buildings are too high and are out of scale with neighbouring development (which range from one to three storey) and due to the topography of the site one block will appear lower.
- Matters of design, landscaping, public access for all has not been properly addressed. The submission of a design statement is required to allow this to be adequately assessed.

- Safety concerns over emergency access to the proposed buildings
- Concerns over the capacity of existing sewers
- Environmental concerns over potential pollution from the proposed parking area to the stream at the rear of the site.

**5.3 Highways Authority** – Does not wish to restrict the grant of permission subject to the following conditions:

**5.4 Thames Water** – with regard to the sewerage infrastructure there is no objection.

**5.5 Environmental Health** – Request that details of any noise attenuation measures in regards to fixed plant either in or externally on the building are forwarded to Environmental Health prior to the commencement of the work on site. In addition a Standard Contaminated Land Condition should be attached to any approval granted.

**5.6 Environment Agency** – Unable to respond.

**5.7 Borough of Broxbourne** – No comments on the application.

**5.8 Northaw & Cuffley Parish** – Objection – This is a massive increase in density, the increased number of vehicle movements each day would be considerable. Four stories is too high in relation to its neighbours.

## **6 Discussion**

6.1 The main issues in the determination of this application are whether or not the proposed use is acceptable within the employment area, the design and layout is acceptable taking into account the existing character and context, the impact on the amenity of adjoining businesses and parking and highway safety issues.

### **Principle of Development**

6.2 The application site is located within the designated employment area as identified within Policy EMP1 with Sopers Road being identified as area EA9. Policy EMP2 identifies acceptable uses within employment areas of which Use Class B1 is considered acceptable subject to five criteria. These five criteria are:

- (i) The proposal would not, due to the scale of employment generated, have an unacceptable impact on the demand for housing in the travel work area;
- (ii) The proposal would not have an unacceptable impact on the local and/or strategic transport structure;
- (iii) The proposal would not harm the amenities of any nearby residential properties;
- (iv) The development would provide adequate parking, servicing and access;
- (v) Any retail element of the development would clearly be ancillary to the main business use.

- 6.3 Criteria (v) is not relevant to this application and the application site is located away from any neighbouring residential units. The scale of development is such that it is not sufficiently large to raise concerns in regards to the need for additional housing and so Criteria (i) is not an issue. The two remaining criteria relate to parking, servicing and access and traffic generation concerns which are dealt with in detail below under 'Highway Issues and Parking'. The principle of redevelopment of the site for office development is, therefore, considered to be acceptable subject to these two remaining criteria being satisfied.

## **Design**

- 6.4 The proposal is for three separate office buildings on the application site and the design statement comments that this is to allow the possibility for each block to be occupied individually or to allow two or three or all collectively. The aim of this approach according to the applicant is to be consistent with the objectives of EMP5 which seeks a mix of unit size.
- 6.5 This design approach on the site has also allowed for the opportunity for each block to be located in relation to the projecting wings of the adjoining office building to the north so that the open views currently enjoyed by the majority office windows from this neighbouring business can be still maintained. This design approach that has respected the principal windows of this adjoining neighbour is acknowledged and the concept of raising the building at ground floor level also allows for a site layout to fully utilise this area for servicing and parking.
- 6.6 A wide variety of architectural designs exist in this employment area, and the Local Plan encourages the use of innovative, modern and sustainable design in these situations. The current proposal, in my opinion, reflects this suggested alternative approach through its innovative layout and contemporary appearance where the appearance and design of the proposed buildings include features such as flat roofs and simple modular window patterns.
- 6.7 The quality of the proposed design style and site layout is, therefore, considered acceptable in this location, however, Policy EMP13 does require that development sites are not considered solely in isolation to their surrounding context, as proposals should relate to that of adjoining buildings, the topography of the area, the general patterns of heights in the area and to public views, in respect to the scale, massing and heights of proposed developments.
- 6.8 The adjoining sites consist of an office building to the north which is a substantial structure being approximately 76 metres long, and approximately 18 metres wide, with three levels of accommodation at the front, increasing to four levels at the rear as the ground level reduces at this point. In terms of the adjoining site to the south, this is currently a timber yard with a single storey office building close to the front boundary and a more substantial steel framed warehouse building to the rear.
- 6.9 The height of the proposed development fronting onto Sopers Road would be one level higher than the adjoining office building to the north, which has three levels of office accommodation. The proposal would have a flat roof, compared to the adjoining office building, which has a pitched roof, however, if a comparison is made in regards to eaves levels, the difference would then be approximately 5.2 metres, or approximately 3.4 metres if the ridge line of the existing office building is compared with the top of the proposed flat roof.

- 6.10 Policy EMP13 specifically requires the height of proposed development should relate to adjoining buildings, the general pattern of heights in the area and to public views. Within the employment area, there is a variety of building heights, with some being low scale such as the office building on the adjoining timber yard. There is, however, an established range of building heights in the employment area, and I consider that the intention the Policy EMP13 is to consider proposals with respect to this range and also specifically to adjoining buildings.
- 6.11 In this context, the proposed office building fronting onto Sopers Road would be considerably higher than the highest building directly adjoining the site with the same road frontage. In design terms, it is considered that the proposal would appear out of character with the established pattern of building heights within the locality and would also appear over-dominant in the streetscene and to the neighbouring office building.
- 6.12 According to the application drawings, the ground level falls to the rear of the site, and the proposed rear office block is indicated as being approximately 1.4 metres lower than the front block. This natural change in ground level means the difference in heights between the proposed office and the existing adjoining office building is not so prominent as to the front of the application site. Even taking this into consideration, I am not entirely convinced that the proposal would still not look overly prominent to some degree when viewed from open countryside which allows distant and unrestricted views to the rear of the application site.
- 6.13 The applicant has drawn attention to a previous outline planning application which was for a new office building on this site which was allowed on appeal in 1983. The application included an elevation of the proposed office building which was to be located to the rear of the site. Although presented for illustrative purposes only, it showed a building not of a height not dissimilar to that currently proposed. The Planning Inspector considered at the time in his decision letter that the proposed development need not be unduly obtrusive and that it would neither enhance nor detract from the appearance of the area. The applicant is of the opinion that even though this decision is more than 20 years old, it still represents strong support for the current scheme in terms of height and scale of the proposed building.
- 6.14 Although this previous appeal decision is a material planning consideration for the purposes of the determination of this current application, I am wary of the fact that this view was taken nearly a quarter of a century ago, and that in the intervening years Local Plan Policies have been updated. In these circumstances it would appear reasonable to judge any new planning applications in regards to the aims of the current adopted local plan, and so in this instance very little weight can be attributed in my opinion to this earlier decision.
- 6.15 In summary, Policy EMP13 requires a number of design criteria to be complied with and although the proposed architectural style and site layout are considered to be in accordance with the aims of this policy, the proposed heights of the office buildings have failed to take into account the existing patterns of heights in the area and so are unacceptable.

#### **Impact on the amenity of neighbouring uses**

- 6.16 As previously mentioned, the design approach on this site has taken into account the existing windows for the office accommodation on the adjoining site to the north and it is considered that sufficient daylight to these rooms will be maintained and that their aspect will not be unduly harmed by the proposal. No details of the location of proposed external plant which may cause a noise nuisance have been submitted as part of the application, however, this can be regulated through the use of an appropriately worded planning condition to any approval granted to ensure that any possible noise generation from such installations can be dealt with adequately through the submission of acceptable details for approval by the authority prior to the commencement of works on site.

### **Highway & Parking**

- 6.17 The level of parking spaces for this type of development is dependant upon the site's accessibility to non-car modes of transport (its zone). Adopted Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) on parking indicates that the maximum standards for office development as 1 space for every 30sqm of gross floor area of office space. The SPG Parking Standards identifies the application site as being in Zone 4 and that the required provision of parking for this B1Class use of building is to be within the range of 75-100% of maximum demand based standard, with a general presumption to impose the lower (more restrictive) end of the range. The applicants have proposed 55 parking spaces for the proposed gross floor area of 2139 sqm on the basis that this would comply with the lower end of the range allowed for based on the maximum demand based standard.
- 6.18 Concerns have been raised by other business users within the industrial estate in the vicinity of the application site, that this allocation of parking is unrealistic in terms of the potential usage of cars by future occupiers of the proposed office buildings. Furthermore, concerns have been raised by the adequacy of the Transport Assessment submitted in regards to the application.
- 6.19 The applicant in support of their approach to seeking the lower end of this percentage range considers that the application site is very close to a railway station, and that there are a number of bus routes passing along Station Road to the north of the site. An accessibility study has been submitted as part of the application, which identifies Cuffley railway station being served by trains running between Stevenage and London King Cross and Moorgate, with further connections available from these. In addition, in close proximity to the application site are bus stops that provide frequent connections on routes which serve destinations such as Cuffley-Turnford/Chestnut and Waltham Cross- Potters Bar.
- 6.20 The SPG advises that employee parking should be restricted in town centre locations where there are opportunities to walk to shops and other services. The application site, although not strictly speaking within a town centre location, is still however within a reasonable walking distance to the shopping area of Cuffley which has a range of services, and as previously mentioned, the site is within an acceptable distance of a range of passenger transport services. Taking into account the current thrust of current government policy as outlined by Planning Policy Guidance Note 13 (Transport) and that the Highways Authority have raised no objections to any part of the proposal, it is considered that the application site is in a location where there is insufficient evidence to justify withholding planning permission solely on the grounds of parking provision when viewed within the current central government policy context with regards to acceptable parking standards.

## **Other Matters**

- 6.21 The Environmental Health Department were consulted in regards to the proposal and due to the previous use of the land, a planning condition is requested to address the possible contamination of the land. The Council has a standard form of condition for these circumstance and it is considered reasonable that this should be attached to any permission granted.

## **7 Conclusion**

- 7.1 To summarise, the principle of the development proposed for office use on this site is considered acceptable, and the architectural design show the innovative approach the Council encourages on this type of site. The impact on the amenity of adjoining users is considered acceptable and the layout and level of parking has raised no highway safety concerns by the Highways Authority.
- 7.2 The proposal, however, falls short of satisfying the detailed designed criteria as specified in Policy EMP13 which requires development to relate in terms of the height to adjoining buildings and the general pattern of heights in the area with the result that it will appear out of character and over-dominant in the streetscene of Sopers Road and surrounding area.

## **8 Recommendation**

- 8.1 I recommend that planning application S6/2005/1604/FP is REFUSED for the following reason:
1. The proposal, by reason of its height, scale and its relationship with the surrounding buildings would result in a form of development having an unsatisfactory relationship with the existing built environment having regard to the established general pattern of building heights in the area, and furthermore, would appear unduly dominant in the streetscene of Sopers Road and surrounding area to the detriment of the visual amenity of the locality in general. The proposal would fail to accord with Policies EMP13 and D1, D2 of the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005 and Supplementary Design Guidance (Statement of Council Policy), which together seek to achieve a high standard of environment.

Chris Conway, Chief Planning and Environmental Health Officer  
Date 1/03/2006

Background papers to be listed S6/303/82



