

**WELWYN HATFIELD BOROUGH COUNCIL – DEVELOPMENT MANAGEMENT
DELEGATED REPORT**

APPLICATION No: N6/2014/493/FP

SITE ADDRESS: WHBC Council Offices, Campus East, WGC

DESCRIPTION OF DEVELOPMENT: Replacement of brown aluminium sash windows with UPVC sash windows

RECOMMENDATION: Approval with conditions

1. SITE AND APPLICATION DESCRIPTION:

The site is wholly occupied by existing Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council offices and car parking (formed by the Cherry Tree car park). The site is located at the junction of the B159 Bridge Road and The Campus, with the main entrance facing onto The Campus. To the north of the site lies the recently completed McCarthy and Stone development. To the east, Waitrose supermarket and the northern part of the town centre lies directly to the south.

The proposal details the replacement of all of the existing brown aluminium sash windows in the extension part of the Council Offices with new UPVC replacements of a neo-Georgian style

2. SITE DESIGNATION:

The site lies within the Central Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area and town centre boundary of Welwyn Garden City as designated in the Welwyn Hatfield District Plan 2005. The existing Cherry Tree car park is also identified as part of a wider redevelopment site designated as Campus East under Policy TCR5 of the District Plan.

3. RELEVANT PLANNING HISTORY:

None

4. CONSULTATIONS:

No objections have been received from Hertfordshire County Council, Transport, Programs and Strategy; Environment Agency; Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Environmental Health; Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Landscaping and Ecology; Hertfordshire Ecology; Hertfordshire Middlesex Wildlife Trust subject to conditions

5. NEIGHBOUR REPRESENTATIONS:

No representations have been received from the public.

6. TOWN/PARISH COUNCIL REPRESENTATIONS

Not applicable

7. MAIN PLANNING ISSUES AND RELEVANT PLANNING POLICIES:

The main planning issues with this application are:

- a) **The impacts of the proposal upon the character and appearance of the Central Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area and whether, in the light of any harm which might be identified there are any public benefits from the proposal which would outweigh that harm.**

8. ANALYSIS:

- a) In terms of legislative requirements, the site is located within the Central Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area. Section 72 of the Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas Act (1990) states that “*special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of that area.*” It is now accepted case law that preserving the character or appearance of a conservation area can be achieved not only by a positive contribution to preservation, but also by development which leaves the character or appearance of the area unharmed.

In terms of the national planning policy approach, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Chapter 12 is concerned with the conservation and enhancement of the historic environment, paragraph 131 of the NPPF (March, 2012) states,

‘In determining planning applications, local planning authorities should take account of:

- *The desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;*
- *The positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality;*
and
- *The desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness’*

The NPPF goes on to guide that *‘When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation. The more important the asset, the greater the weight should be’*. It is therefore clear that the objective of the policies is to maintain and manage change to heritage assets in a way that sustains and, where appropriate, enhances its significance. That significance is the value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest, which may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. This significance may derive not only from its physical presence but also from its setting and this means that the wider

implications of development within the wider conservation area has to be taken into account.

In terms of the District Plan, policies D1 and D2 of the adopted Welwyn Hatfield District Plan apply which seek to provide a good standard of design in all new development and require that all new development respects and relates to the character and context of the area in which it is to be sited. Accordingly, this report assesses the significance of the heritage asset, i.e. the Central Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area before assessing the impact of the proposals on this asset.

Assessment of significance

In planning the town, Ebenezer Howard's basic concern was social reform, yet in calling his town "Garden City" he was also setting an aesthetic standard. As Raymond Unwin, architect at Letchworth Garden City put it, *"The idea of the promoters of the Garden City was not to build an artistic town. We must first see that our citizens are decently housed."* However because previous standards have been set, changes that are perceived to be 'outside the norm' can be seen as significant or even threatening. In many respects the aesthetic significance of the conservation area has changed over time whether through the use of modern materials such as UPVC, glazed shop fronts and variations in building form, scale and designs ranging from the dominant form of the Howard Centre through to the contemporary/traditional hybrid that is the recently constructed Sainsbury's supermarket.

The original designation boundaries of the Conservation Area (1968) appear to have been drawn to largely embrace the area of the pre-war Garden City west of the railway line; the intent being to preserve the architectural unity of the town. The more recent Conservation Area Appraisal (2007) ('CAA') seeks to define the historic importance of Welwyn Garden City. It concludes that the town's principal significance lies in the associated spatial interrelationships which are at the heart of its planned layout and the way in which this expresses the visionary ideals of the Garden City Movement, rather than in its architecture and its global interest in this respect are acknowledged. The significance of this unity is best described in the CAA *"...the outstanding hallmark of Welwyn Garden City is the spectacular layout of the town centre with the spacious Parkway and Howardsgate.....and the vista from the White Bridge"*, the latter vista being across and encompassing the Campus.

The CAA also states that *'The institutional and civic buildings around the north side of The Campus display a variety of styles, ranging from the Modernist Campus West building (1973-5), to the 1935 neo-Georgian Garden City style of the Council Offices building located at the south east corner. Between the two buildings lie the c. 1958 Oaklands College campus and the Police Station of c. 1965. Although the architectural styles vary, the use of materials sympathetic to the theme of traditional Garden City architecture, together with the well treed and spacious settings of the buildings, integrates well with the surroundings. Their role as interface between the commercial architecture of the town centre and the residential areas to the north is well conceived and generally effective'*. Although Sir Nikolaus Pevsner was somewhat more critical of the area stating *'the Campus...was intended to have important public buildings. They have been built at different dates, and the result is somewhat lopsided.'* The appraisal also goes on to conclude that the original

element of the Council Offices is a key building and should be considered as buildings that potentially could be locally listed which essentially is to try and raise awareness of buildings that are of a 'higher than average' importance. The original building was not recommended for a statutory listing.

The Council Offices were designed by the young architect CH (Cecil Harry) Elsom (1912- 2006), who won the competition in 1933 and are distinctly characteristic of the Garden City language of the neo-Georgian style, though with a dash of neo-vernacular and Arts and Craft influence. As set out in the comments from BEAMS, *'The symmetrical 7-bay, 2 ½ storey principal west elevation frontage of the 1935 building to The Campus is classically understated and somewhat bland in appearance, though relieved with a strong central vertical axis, emphasising the subtly designed stone surround to the entrance and formal doors to the shallow balcony above, culminating in the focal point of the rather quirky domed clock tower, placed on a zig-zag base, set on the ridge of the roof. Five dormer windows, above the parapet line and string course, follow the vertical proportions and rhythm of the neo-Georgian fenestration below. The other elevations of the building are subordinate but follow the same neo-Georgian principles and proportions for the most part. The main feature of the rear (east) elevation is the elegant, slim campanile, to approximately the same height as the clock tower. The integrity of the 1935 building has, to some extent, been retained, despite what is considered to be a rather awkward, 20th Century side extension to the north, by articulating it as a linked addition. None-the-less, the original building remains as the key architectural reference for any future development or extension, being attuned to the low-key, discreet Garden City design approach that seeks to harmonise with the formal commercial buildings to the south.*

The proposal seeks consent to replace all of the brown aluminium sliding sash windows with white UPVC sash windows of a neo-Georgian appearance. There would be a difference in appearance between the new dormer windows and the existing dormer windows in the original building. This is because the size of the openings in the extension element dictate a 2 x 4 pane arrangement whereas the original building has a vertical 4 x 2 arrangement. There would also be a slight difference in the profiling between the new and old windows because the windows in the original building are not sash windows and are of a slightly different profile. Whilst the difference in the arrangement and emphasis of the panes would be noticeable in the front street elevation and the profiling in the other elevations it would not be so harmful to warrant refusal and ultimately the overall the appearance of the building would be greatly improved.

The scheme is of high quality design and would make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. It would only serve to enhance the significance of the Central Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area and improve the appearance of the existing building. Therefore the tests in the NPPF that require any development that leads to less than substantial harm to the significance of the heritage asset to be weighed against the public benefits is not engaged

9. CONCLUSION:

The proposed replacement windows would improve the appearance of the buildings and enhance the significance of the heritage asset, in this case the Central Welwyn Garden City Conservation Area. Subject to a condition relating to agreement of the final window designs, it is recommended that permission be granted. A condition to require development be carried out in accordance with approved plans is necessary for the avoidance of doubt and in the interests of good planning.

10. CONDITIONS:

- 1. C.2.1 – Standard Time Limit
- 2. C.13.1 – In accordance with plans and details: A100 & A101 & A102 & A103 Rev A & A104 Received and Dated 17 March 2014
- 3. C.5.1 – Samples of windows

SUMMARY OF REASONS FOR THE GRANT OF PERMISSION:

The decision has been made taking into account, where practicable and appropriate the requirements of paragraphs 186-187 of the National Planning Policy Framework and material planning considerations do not justify a decision contrary to the development plan (see Officer’s report which can be inspected at these offices).

INFORMATIVES:

None

Signature of author..... Date.....