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Planning Committee

21st April 2016

Present:

Members (15)

Councillors Barnes, Chair (GB); Fletcher, Vice-Chair (JF); Chard (AC); Fisher (BF); Colin Hay (CH); Lillywhite (AL); McCloskey (HM); McKinlay (AM); Savage (LS); Seacome (DS); Stennett (MS); Sudbury (KS); Thornton (PT); Wheeler (SW).

Present as an observer: Councillor Babbage.

Officers

Tracey Crews, Head of Planning (TC)
Martin Chandler, Team Leader, Development Management (MC)
Michelle Payne, Planning Officer (MP)
Nick Jonathan, Legal Officer (NJ)

1. Apologies

Councillor Baker.

2. Declarations of interest

- i. Councillor Sudbury: has campaigned in support of the former Axiom Centre and pre-determined this application. Will address the meeting in objection to the application and then withdraw from the Chamber for the duration of the debate.

3. Declarations of independent site visits

- i. Councillor Stennett: has made several tours of the site since it became vacant and knows it well.
- ii. Councillor Thornton: has visited the site on numerous occasions.
- iii. Councillor Savage: has visited and familiarised himself with the site.
- iv. Councillor Hay: walks past the site almost every day, and was involved with carpentry work in its redevelopment many years ago.
- v. Councillor Chard: has been inside the building on a couple of occasions.

4. Public Questions

There were none.

5. Minutes of last meeting

Resolved, that the minutes of the meeting held on 24th March 2016 be approved and signed as a correct record *without* corrections.

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6. Planning application

Application Number:	15/02268/FUL		
Location:	57-59 Winchcombe Street, Cheltenham		
Proposal:	Partial demolition and mixed-use conversion to 11no. apartments and commercial/retail unit (Use classes A1, A2 or B1a) with associated external alterations, fourth floor extension, car parking, cycle and refuse storage		
View:	Yes		
Officer Recommendation:	Permit		
Committee Decision:	Permit		
Letters of Rep:	2	Update Report:	None

MP introduced the application as above, for alteration and extension to the former Axiom Centre. This building is locally indexed for its architectural value, historic interest and unusual brickwork, and the proposal will involve the addition of a fourth floor and undercroft car parking. It is at Committee at the request of Councillors Sudbury and Babbage. Officers welcome the scheme which will bring the building back into sustainable and active use, and the recommendation is to grant planning permission.

Public Speaking:

Mr Colin Pemble, agent, in support

The former Axiom Centre has been empty for many years and is in poor condition; it is a locally indexed building, of historic and architectural interest, but people walking past may not be aware of the historic warehouse/grain store behind the frontage building. The current application follows a pre-application process, in which much discussion with officers resulted in the original proposal being greatly altered and the number of units reduced, through the input of the previous Heritage and Conservation Officer. The Civic Society has been supportive of the scheme and recognised the difficulties in bringing forward the proposals for the building. The applicants intend to convert the building into 11 good-sized apartments with car parking and cycle storage. To facilitate this, a lot of remedial work and some alteration to the external appearance of the building need to be made, but these have been designed to retain its essential characteristics. In consultation with the current Heritage and Conservation Officer, the finer detailing of the scheme has been further amended and will be conditioned, to allow the Council further control over the final appearance of the scheme. A commercial unit is proposed for the ground floor, to ensure an active frontage and with the potential for a variety of uses. During the application process, issues raised by the Heritage and Conservation Officer and Highways Engineer have been addressed, and both the Civic Society and Architects' Panel are now fully supportive. The scheme represents good re-use of the building, with units which will provide sizable accommodation and a viable opportunity to ensure the long-term future of the building, ensuring its character is retained and a good standard of residential accommodation in the town centre is created.

Councillor Sudbury, in objection

To start on a positive note, welcomes the proposal to re-use this building, and recognises that the amount of work needed to bring it back to sole commercial/community use makes it unviable, but has a number of objections about the detail of the proposal which is why she has requested a Committee decision. The main concern is the undercroft parking and addition of an extra floor. There was a previous plan for a restaurant and 14 apartments, demonstrating that it could be workable to create that number with no parking space and no additional penthouse floor. Objects to the application because the character and history of the building are socially important to Cheltenham. The council is good at protecting posh houses but bad at protecting ordinary working buildings such as the Odeon and Christ Church Annex – this isn't just about the Axiom, although it was historically used as a horse repository, the largest grain merchant in the town, and was right at the epicentre of the Cheltenham hubbub. Since the decline of the grain market in the 1970s, the owners of the building have not invested in it which on one hand is depressing but on the other means that it is not much changed from when it was first built – the paint is peeling and the floor falling through, but it is still possible to read the building as it originally looked. The undercroft parking and additional level will change and spoil that, which is disappointing.

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Another concern is the recycling and refuse arrangements, situated in the old kitchen area from the former café use. The flat and commercial unit proposed for above this area will suffer from the smells, and would also question whether the space provided will be big enough for this many apartments. In her ward, this is a frequent problem, and it is important that enough provision is made. Is disappointed that there is no proposal for a coffee shop on the ground floor – it is important for Winchcombe Street to have some sort of use which will breathe life into the area. If the space is used for financial services or something similar, it will not create any buzz.

Member debate:

MS: was disappointed when the Axiom closed and was sold off, but the building has now been vacant for many years and has fallen into total disrepair. This proposal is an innovative way to use the building, keeping its character without flattening the whole thing to build modern flats. Considers the proposed undercroft parking both logical and sensible, and the elevations from Winchcombe Street will look much the same as they do now. Has no problem with the addition of an extra level, and will support the proposal.

SW: knows that Members aren't really supposed to speak in support of the officer recommendation unless they have good reason, but would like to say that he is very pleased with this application: there is something lovely about the proposal for the courtyard, which he feared was going to be lost, and with the additional unbricked window, the building will look as it originally did from the outside. Regarding the undercroft parking, members are often told by officers that there is no need for parking provision in town centre residential developments, but this is very welcome here. Notes that the exterior character of the building will remain much as it is, and there is very little of the interior left to protect. Is pleased that the proposed units are of a good size and suitable for living, not like some of the matchboxes proposed by developers. Is very much in favour of the application, which will preserve the building as one we can be proud of for a long time.

AM: reiterates what the previous two speakers have said. Remembers the earlier application for 14 flats as poorly designed and cramped. This does a much better job at retaining the integrity of the existing building. The proposed flats are of a good size and fit for living, and one car parking space per flat is very much to be welcomed as many flats don't have any parking at all. The building has been empty and derelict for a long time, with no prospect of rescue. This proposal will be beneficial to the area, and provide high-quality accommodation in the town centre. The council has permitted poor-quality proposals in the past because it had no choice and needed the accommodation, but this high-quality scheme should be welcomed.

HM: has noted the Civic Society's comments about the small size of some of the units, and assumes that these comments were made before the plans were revised. Can officers confirm that these are acceptable now? KS commented that she would not wish to see an office on the ground floor; if members agree, can a condition be included to ensure that the space is used for retail, for example?

BF: also welcomes the application, and feels that a difficult set of circumstances has been dealt with well by the developer and officers to ensure a good outcome. Remembers the building as a grain and seed merchant, and also as a farrier and seller of grain and skins. The Odeon site has been developed as an excellent accommodation site with retail units at ground level, to regenerate this part of town, and the student accommodation on the corner will also lift the area. The Odeon also stood empty for years, and now the site next to it is also being renovated. This proposal follows the same line, and will look good; it is sympathetically done, particularly welcome as the developer could have applied to simply demolish the whole building. Has fond memories of the arts centre, but this proposal is the best use of a nice building, preventing its demolition. Praise is due all round for this scheme; has no problem in supporting it.

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MS: is a lift included as part of the proposal? If not, there should be one, as the market will be limited for apartments on the fourth floor. Suggests that Stairwell 2 could be used for a lift.

JF: KS mentioned concerns about refuse storage – the small space provided and the possibility of this affecting the flats above. Can officers comment on this please, and also on HM's question re use of the ground floor – would also prefer a café or retail use to financial services or something similar. Like BF, also remembers this building as a grain store.

PT: the ground floor should be returned to café use – it is ideal and would be a fun place to go. There is the only one thing she would want to ask of the developer: realises the building is only locally listed, so we can not influence on what goes on inside, but has noticed some very ornate white pillars inside the building, and would like to see some or all of these retained – they are an integral part of the building, and a design from years gone by. Can officers encourage the developer to build round them?

CH: agrees with much of what has been said so far. With regard to the possible use of the ground floor, would also like to see a retail or café use, but we should be careful not to be too prescriptive, not yet knowing what businesses are likely to take up the retail units on the ground floor of the Odeon flats. Some types of shops could be very valuable but with a lot of people living in the area, they are likely to generate their own business. If we attach a condition requiring something in particular, it could be a real shame and a missed opportunity for the new residents. On the matter of recycling and bin storage, this is likely to be an ongoing issue around the town with HMOs and blocks of flats etc. Residents of flats are particularly poor at recycling, because it is not easy for them to do it. Would therefore like to see any bin store future-proofed; at the moment, there is a set method of recycling, but this will be reviewed in the future. A third issue is the locked gates; is very disappointed to have missed the installation of these when discussing the Odeon application was being discussed. Would not want to lose the gates in their current position, but has an issue with locked gates and 'gated communities'. It is a problem, and alienates the residents and the development from the rest of the community. The Odeon flats are now being marketed as locked-up flats. Doesn't want to lose the gates or to see the courtyard closed off, and is sure that accommodation of this quality can find some other types of security and protection to install.

Apart from the above, considers this to be a good development; if the building was left much longer, it would collapse. Also remembers the building as a grain store.

MP, in response:

- to HM regarding the size of the flats, this was a concern of the Civic Society, not shared by officers. The dimensions are quite generous, and members have approved a lot smaller ones recently;
- regarding use, and members' desire for the ground floor to be used for retail or as a café, they need to identify why they don't consider office use to be acceptable in the town centre. This cannot be dealt with by condition;
- to MS, there is no lift proposed in the building. If one were to be included, it would be subject to building regulations;
- to PT, the pillars aren't shown as being retained, as the alterations to floor levels make this impossible. If Members wish, an informative can be included to encourage the re-use of the pillars somewhere on the site;
- regarding bin storage, officers consider the provision to be sufficient for the number of flats as it stands, meeting current standards. Environmental Health officers are happy with the location, and do not feel that there will be any impact on residents from unpleasant smells etc;
- to CH, there are currently gates on the site, although these aren't to be retained in their current location. Officers consider it sensible to have gates at the site, but the question remains whether these are kept open or closed.

MS: it is not a reason to refuse, but can officers ask the developer to give sympathetic consideration to installing a lift? At four storeys high, older people may find it difficult to access the

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top flats via so many stairs, and this could be a missed opportunity in future marketing, as well as failing to provide disabled access to the upper flats.

PT: why can't the existing gates remain? What sort of gates will replace them? Like the pillars, these are an integral part of the building and should be retained if possible.

CH: regarding the gates, if these can't be the subject of a condition, then can we at least include an informative about them. Is concerned about the social impact; gated communities are problematic because of the way in which they are perceived by people around them. The agent is present at the meeting, and hopefully he will hear members' concerns; feels this is very important. The committee clearly considers that offices at ground level are inappropriate, and this too should be reported back to the developer, though it may be difficult to condition – if the unit stood empty for ten years as a result of the Members' desire for a café, we would look rather stupid. Is not pleased to hear the officer say that Members have approved smaller-sized dwellings in recent years – they did not have any choice.

BF: the gates are not original or contemporary to the building; they were added in the 1950s or '60s, and are now in a poor state. Tebbit Mews, further along Winchcombe Street, is gated; it's currently an office suite, but there is an application in to convert the upper floors to residential. We have gated communities for security reasons and to control parking. If he was going to buy a flat here, he would want there to be a gate.

JF: agrees that in this town centre situation, the flats should be gated, for security reasons. People who live there will want the added security.

DS: regularly parks his car at a friend's flat, in another town, and can be confident that the car will be safe overnight. Would welcome gates here, which can be opened by remote control. On the same tack, however, where are the letter boxes to be situated? If they are outside the gates, this will be fine, but if they are inside the gates, it will make it more difficult for anyone making any sort of delivery.

JF: returning to the matter of use of the ground floor, is it possible to include an informative to reflect the Committee's request - is not at all sure about a solicitor or financial services company occupying this space, and would like the developer to go back to the drawing board regarding this.

SW: is split on the matter of the gates. From a security angle, can see that they would be a good thing, but this is a wonderful-looking building, with the courtyard and the back of the building being the best view. If this is to be gated and unseen, the developer might as well knock the building down and build a new block of flats. Maybe the gates could be locked at 10.00pm and reopened in the morning, allowing people to see the building during the day? If the building was on the outskirts of town and surrounded by a large garden, the scenario would be similar. This is a nice building, of historic value, and regrets not having been able to get in and take photographs of it early in the morning. There must be a way round this, some sort of compromise. And the letterboxes need to be on the outside.

GB: reminds Members that we are assessing the application before us, not re-designing the proposal. We have the choice to refuse it, but not the power to re-design it.

AC: has two comments to make. Firstly, the gates: is in favour of these, for security and the peace of mind of future residents. Secondly, shares other members' concerns about the lack of a lift, which will severely restrict access to the upper floors for the elderly, disabled, people with small children and so on.

LS: is not overly concerned about the aesthetics of the gates, but agrees with CH in principle that gated communities can be socially divisive. Is mindful of security, but we are talking about Winchcombe Street here, not downtown Johannesburg. Lives in a noisy, busy street nearby, and frequently displays large Conservative Party posters in his garden, but has never suffered any anti-

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social behaviour. Gated communities in this part of town give out the wrong message; this is something we need to bear in mind in the future.

HM: is in favour of the gates being retained, pointing out that there would have been gates when the building was in use as a corn merchant. Members will remember the application at 8 Little Herberts Road in Charlton Kings, on the edge of the AONB, and developed as a gated community. The gates installed are solid and quite inappropriate, making it impossible for anyone to see in or out and thus cutting off the community from the rest of the area. If wrought iron gates, similar to those currently in use, can be installed, this would be ideal. It would be wonderful to keep the façade of the building and the cobbled courtyard available to view, giving the general public the right to see what it is we are trying to conserve.

CH: gates and gated communities are a very important issue in his view, and should be logged as something for discussion in the Local Plan. It is a social issue and should only be used where absolutely appropriate. Will not vote on this, but is glad to have raised the issue, which should be followed up.

BF: this site has been gated for 70 years if not longer. The gates will have to change, but the new ones may be better than what is there now. This will be a private property, and people have the right to put up gates.

MP, in response:

- regarding a lift, this cannot be required by condition, and would require an additional planning application as it would significantly change the proposal; it could be included as an informative, should Members wish;
- to PT, the gates currently in place cannot be re-used as they are in a poor state. In their current location, they have an impact on highway safety, and need to be set further back in the site to allow car access;
- BF is quite right – there have always been gates at this site. We could ask for a detailed design of the gates to be used, but are very much looking for the replacement gates to be of wrought iron design, not unlike what is currently there;
- the request for the gates to be open during the day and locked at night could be included as an informative, should Members wish;
- regarding the commercial unit, an informative could be attached, though any alternative use would need to be subject to a new planning permission; the application currently seeks A1/A2 & B1 office use.

MJC, in response:

- what is currently being proposed gives flexibility. All economic uses generate employment, and is not sure that sending out a message about potential uses of the ground floor is the right one to give. What is currently proposed is a town centre use in a town centre, and members would need to identify what is wrong with this if they want to change it. We need to assess what is before us.

MP, in response:

- to DS, there is no information about letter boxes at the moment.

GB: sympathises with DS's comment about the siting of letter boxes – some are appalling. Architects leave them to the last degree of design, and don't spare a thought for the poor postmen!

Votes on informatives:

- on requesting consideration of inclusion of a lift – **CARRIED**
- on requesting that gates are similar and remain open during the day – **CARRIED**
- on requesting café/retail use of ground floor – **NOT CARRIED**
- on requesting re-use of pillars - **CARRIED**

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Vote on officer recommendation to permit
13 in support – unanimous
PERMIT

The meeting ended at 7.00pm.

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