

Conservation Team Advice

Date: 13th February 2025
Application Ref: SMD/2024/0509
Site Address: The Old Court House, High Street, Leek
Proposal: Proposed Change of Use of use / conversion of un-occupied first and second floor accommodation into 12 residential units

Heritage assets affected:		
Designated Heritage Asset(s):	☒	Leek Conservation Area
Non-Designated Heritage Asset(s):	☐	

Conservation Advice

Summary of Significance

The proposal would be situated in Leek Conservation Area, which was designated for its medieval origins as a market town and growth in silk production and brewing industries from the 17th century. The area is characterised by its medieval planned settlement origins, overlaid with 18th to 20th century buildings, predominant construction in bricks and gritstone with Staffordshire blue tiles and eclectic mix of architectural styles illustrative of the different phases of development.

The development site involves a former early-20th century Co-Operative building which was later converted to a courthouse. The building is a distinctive landmark building along the street, evocative of the eclectic revival styles popular at the turn of the century. Although some alterations to the ground floor shopfronts are not particularly sympathetic, the building still retains a high architectural value and makes a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area.

Assessment and Impact

This proposal would involve the conversion of the upper floors of The Old Court House to 12 residential apartments, the building of which is an early-20th century former Co-operative building. The external works would involve the removal of some existing rooflights to the north and west elevations, installation of 3 dormers to the front elevation, installation of a flat roof extension and smoke vent at second floor level and replacement of all external windows.

We are supportive in principle of the proposed reuse of the upper floors as this will contribute to the long-term conservation of a building which makes a positive contribution to the significance of the Conservation Area.

The proposed alterations to create new dormers and a rooftop courtyard extension appear to have been sensitively designed to minimise sightlines of these additions without negatively impacting the overall character of the building. However, the proposed replacement of the leaded light windows to the front and side elevation with a different design, new windows to Salisbury Street elevation and installation of a large metal clad smoke vent would diminish the building's architectural interest and harm the significance of the Conservation Area as a result. From the information provided, there does not appear to be clear justification for this level of heritage harm.

It is recognised that there are many other examples of timber sliding sashes in the Conservation Area. However, in these other instances the sliding sashes are either reflective of the period of construction or a period of historic improvement to the building influenced by changing fashions and technologies. The design and detailing of the existing leaded lights is a distinctive feature of this particular building. It is not clear why double-glazed replacements which replicate this detailing could not be utilised in the conversion to retain the overall appearance of the building and, thus, minimise the heritage harm.

In addition to the above, there are some new windows proposed to the Salisbury Street elevation. The first-floor windows would likely be hidden from public vantage points by the adjacent building. However, the proposed second floor windows (W.2.23, W.2.34 & W.2.25) would be quite prominent from street level. Their proposed design does not relate to the architectural design or fenestration pattern on the building, notably the soldier course headers, are particularly unsympathetic. It would be recommended that if windows are required to this elevation from an amenity perspective, that these are redesigned.

To the rear elevation, a large zinc clad smoke vent is proposed. The scale, design and finish of this would be overtly industrial in character. Although this would be situated on an elevation of lower architectural significance, its prominence and harsh visual appearance would still diminish the overall appreciation of the Conservation Area. It is recognised that upgrading the building to meet Fire Regulations is a crucial part of any conversion scheme. However, it has not been clearly demonstrated how other more sensitive solutions could not be incorporated into the scheme to lessen the visual harm and impact on the Conservation Area.

Legislation and Policy

Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990

The local planning authority should have a desirability of preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of the Conservation Area (s.72).

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) 2024

In determining applications, local authorities should take account 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, the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness (par.210).

Any harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset (from its alteration or destruction, or from development within the setting), should require clear and convincing justification (par.213).

Where a proposed development would lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal, including securing its optimum viable use (par.215).

Local Development Framework

Consideration should also be given to the following documents and local development framework policies:

- Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan (Adopted 2020) – DC2 The Historic Environment
- Leek Conservation Area Appraisal (2017)

Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, the proposal would result in a minor-moderate degree of harm to the overall character and appearance of the Conservation Area. This would be contrary to s.72 of the Act. With reference to the planning policies, this would be ‘less than substantial harm’ to the designated heritage asset (par.215 of NPPF and policy DC2 of the local development framework). As set out in the NPPF, great weight should be given to the conservation of a designated heritage asset (par.212) and any harm should require clear and convincing justification (par.213). There does not appear to be clear and convincing justification for the level of heritage harm, and it is not clear that this scheme would be the optimum viable use for the building (par.215 of the NPPF) – i.e. the one that causes the least amount of harm to the significance of the heritage asset (par.15 of the PPG). Therefore, we object to the proposal from a conservation perspective. We would recommend that the design of the windows and smoke vent are altered to be more sympathetic to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area.

Conservation Officer: Megan Atkinson