

CONSERVATION TEAM CONSULTATION APPLICATION RESPONSE

APPLICATION REF:	25/01014/FP
CASE OFFICER:	AH
APPLICATION SITE:	Land at Birchwood and Silverdale and Three Trees and Willow Close, Old Charlton Road, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 2AJ
DESCRIPTION OF WORKS:	Erection three storey building comprising 35no. retirement living apartments with associated communal areas, landscaping and parking following demolition of existing buildings.
RECOMMENDATION: I raise NO OBJECTION on the basis that the scheme satisfies the provisions of Section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF and Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031.	
SHORT SUMMARY: Impact upon the setting of designated and non-designated heritage assets There would be very limited impact upon the setting of nearby listed buildings. The impact upon the setting of the Hitchin Conservation Area and Willam Brown's Almshouses would be significantly greater but unobjectionable. Harm, preserve or enhance. The proposal would occasion a modest degree of less than substantial harm to the character of the area.	
SITE CONTEXT: The case officer has previously described the site as follows: <i>The site comprises four bungalows with pitched roofs and their curtilages, which include notable soft landscaping on their frontages, and young to mature trees on the side and rear boundaries of Silverdale and Three Trees (which are part of a larger belt of trees on both sides of the nearby A602 Park Way).</i> <i>Adjacent properties are dwellings and flats to the north and west, with the dwellings to the north being Buildings of Local Interest. Opposite the site is a three-storey office building, and two other three storey office buildings are to the south and SE.</i> <i>The site is in central Hitchin, a short distance from the town centre. The character of the locality is mixed commercial and residential. The north boundary of the site shares a boundary with the Hitchin Conservation Area, which also continues south on the other side of Old Charlton Road.</i>	
DETAILED ANALYSIS AND CONSIDERATIONS: As noted on the NHDC Uniform mapping below constraints OS map below, there are no listed buildings (purple tint) within immediate proximity of the application site, however,	

further to the east stands Hitchin Priory (grade I – a high value designated heritage asset) and associated with The Priory are a garden bridge, coach house and stable building (all separately grade II listed). Between The Priory and the application site stands the late C20 Radcliffe House (a three-storey building that would effectively screen any view of the proposal within The Priory grounds and has been granted Prior Approval for conversion to 49 residential dwellings under ref: 24/01669/NMA).

Directly to the north of the application site are William Brown's Almshouses (an entry in the Hitchin Register of Buildings of Local Interest 26 July 2011 and therefore regarded as a non-designated heritage asset). The key heritage issues are to consider the impact of the proposal upon the setting of the Hitchin Conservation Area, the nearest listed buildings, and the aforementioned buildings of Local Interest.



Brown's Almshouses	Wratten Road East	Two ranges of almshouses built 1931 and 1938 under the bequest of William Brown. Form a garden and courtyard with a 1990s extension.	
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Whilst I generally concur with the content of Table 1: Significance assessment, Old Charlton Road, Hitchin at pages 16-18 of the submitted Heritage Statement I am slightly surprised that The Priory and its associated listed buildings have not been incorporated into this table.

It is acknowledged that when the following application was submitted, no conservation view was given at the time but for ease I have included the relevant section of the case officer's response and his overall conclusion (my emphasis in bold).

24/00924/PRE - Redevelopment of site to provide one single 3 to 3.5 storey building comprising of 38 units for retirement living (Sheltered Housing Use Class C3), with associated communal facilities, landscaping, and parking for 25 cars following the demolition of 4no existing bungalows.

Case complete 25.07.2024

Extract from Case officer's response

Character and appearance including heritage

The existing bungalows that are proposed to be demolished are not listed buildings or in a Conservation Area. While not visually unattractive and with some character, overall it is not considered that objections could be raised to their demolition.

The proposed development would be new retirement flats, which is considered to be a residential use (albeit not open market). The model of accommodation would be retirement living in a managed block with both private flats and communal facilities, which would be C3 residential accommodation. **Given the location of the site in central Hitchin where it is near residential and commercial uses (including other flats), the proposed use is considered acceptable.**

The proposed building would be primarily four storeys high, with a smaller three storey section. The maximum height would be approx. 14m, with the three storey part being 11.7m. Nearby buildings east of Park Way vary from bungalows to three storeys, with the largest building being a three storey office building opposite the site. Opposite the rear of the site on the west side of Park Way is Girton Court, a four storey residential building, and a recently completed three storey other retirement living building.

The height, size, scale, and bulk of the proposed building is considered to be excessive in relation to its surroundings, mainly due to the inclusion of its fourth floor. A more appropriate height, size and scaled building would be considered to be an upper limit of three storeys, more comparable to the Churchill Retirement Living development NW of the site on the other side of Park Way (address Dovehouse Lodge, Wratten Rd W, Hitchin, SG5 2EJ).

I do not have concerns over the detailed design approach of the building and the materials shown. The new wall and railings along much of the front boundary would be of a low height with relatively small visual impacts, would compare favourably to existing boundaries of the site and nearby sites with Old Charlton Road, and is considered acceptable.

The front projecting balconies would be close to the front of the site and are considered to appear incongruous and out of character in the street scene – these balconies should be changed to Juliet balconies.

The proposal would provide 38 units on the site, which would be a density of 122.5 dwellings per hectare (the site measures 0.31 ha). **While this density would be high, it is not considered it would appear out of character in this location on the edge of Hitchin town centre where higher density residential is part of the pattern and grain of development.**

The proposed building would be close to the front of the site, where its excessive height, size, scale, and bulk would be very visible to public views, particularly from Old Charlton Road. The building would also be close to the south and SW boundaries, and the proposed car park. This is considered indicative of the large size of the proposed building, therefore the footprint of the building should be reduced to bring it away from the front and south boundaries of the site.

A new sub-station is shown in the NE corner of the site, which would be close to the front boundary and road, and likely to be visible from public views. Such ancillary/incidental buildings in this part of the street are not that close to their front boundaries, therefore such a building should be sited elsewhere in the site where it would be less visible.

The site is near the Hitchin Conservation Area, and borders its north boundary in addition to continuing down the opposite side of Old Charlton Road. As the Conservation Area is a designated heritage asset, the impacts of the proposed development on its significance and setting are material considerations.

While no comments have been received from the Conservation Officer, the proposed building would be visible from the CA, and would affect its setting. If a planning application was submitted, the Conservation Officer would be consulted, and views given by the CO would be given significant

weight. The CO has been consulted for this application, however due to the time it will take to receive comments, this letter will be sent to you first, and when CO comments are received they will be sent to you separately for your consideration.

Conclusion

Fundamentally, the proposed development is considered too large for the site and its surroundings, due to its size, scale, height, and bulk. There are additional concerns relating to some aspects of the detailed design, neighbour impacts, future living conditions, and potential impacts on trees. The large parking and cycling shortfalls are also a concern, however it is acknowledged that the amounts could potentially be justified under the retirement living model of the development. Overall, for the reasons set out in this letter, it is not considered that the scheme could be supported.

At page 21 of the Heritage Statement, it says that:

An earlier iteration of the scheme was the subject of pre-application consultation with North Hertfordshire District Council in 2024 (ref 24/00924/PRE), and the final designs for the planning submission take account of that process. The Design and Access Statement, drawings, views and other documents prepared by the Design Team have been used in the preparation of the heritage impact assessment presented here.

The retirement living apartments will be provided in a 2.5 and three-storey L-shaped block fronting onto Old Charlton Road and returning westwards at its south end into the southern bungalows' rear gardens. The eastern frontage will be c 2m-4.5m closer to Old Charlton Road than the bungalows, but the northernmost part of the block will be c 13.5m-16m further south than Birchwood/Willow Close (the northern bungalow) and thus much further back from the William Brown Almshouses (c 22m away). This end of the new building is also set at a lower (2.5-storey) height than the rest of the building – a full storey lower than proposal in the pre-application scheme. On-site parking will be provided in the northern part of the site, while the new building will have extensive communal grounds on its other three sides. Balconies will also provide private outdoor spaces for residents.

Although 3.5 storeys tall in places, the pre-ap scheme did appear to have reasonable greenspace offering to the north-west behind the development (see below). Not being within the Hitchin Conservation Area, the extent of heritage interest is limited to the impact upon the setting of designated and non-designated heritage assets.



There is a reasonable case to suggest that the pre-app scheme was *'too large for the site and its surroundings'*. However, the consequence of a reduction in height without significantly reducing the number of units (3no. omitted) is that one is presented with a significantly greater elongated built form, the north-east end of which is located closer to Willam Brown Almshouses. Consequently, it is not readily discernible that the current scheme is 3 units less than that considered at pre-app. It is a challenge to say that the outcome of the pre-app in design terms is a positive one. **In fact, to the contrary, there is a case to suggest that the more compact, yet taller pre-app scheme is better in terms of how the building sits within the curtilage.**



Having said that, the site is outside of the conservation area and there are several substantial built forms nearby (nos. 1-5 Kitchen Garden Court, Midland House and Radcliffe House) to suggest that the height and scale of the currently proposed development would not be incongruous in this context (see Fig 12 below).

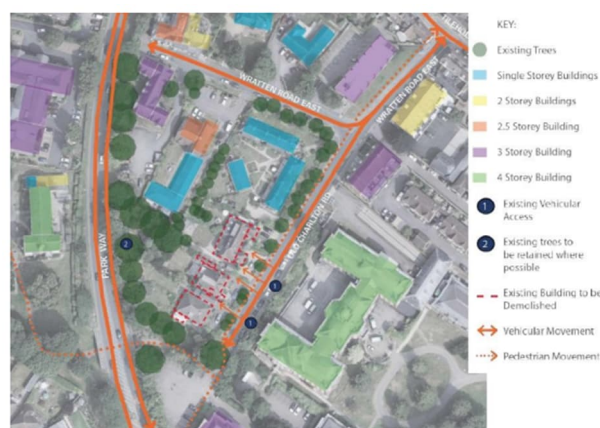
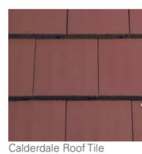


Figure 12: The scale of buildings around Old Charlton Road (based on a drawing by Ridge LLP).

All the hard-standing seating areas are on the north or north-west side of the building and I would have thought it more beneficial to the future occupants to have access to a communal area on the southern part of the site. By moving the building north-east whilst simultaneously shortening the frontage building (may be the right-hand, two-storey end), the building's mass would be eased away from this southern corner allowing more opportunity to create two communal areas (circled in yellow outline on the preceding page). I appreciate that this would probably require the omission of two further units in the lower frontage section.

Finally, from my experience when dealing with McCarthy and Stone Retirement Lifestyles Ltd there have been challenges in seeking good quality materials/detailing. In particular, windows have been a major factor, for instance at 1 Le Jardin, Station Road, Letchworth Garden City (16/01644/1DOC) where an appeal was dismissed and ongoing discussions in relation to the former Morrisons building, Baldock Street, Royston (25/01525/DOC). Unlike these schemes which are located in the Letchworth and Royston Conservation Areas respectively, the current scheme is not within a CA. I anticipate that the intention would be to use 'cost effective' and easy to handle, Upvc windows as per the sample offered recently for the Royston scheme. Furthermore, the proposed roof material - the Sandtoft Wienerberger Calderdale is a strident and uniformed concrete roof tile that would, in my opinion, lack the quality/patina of clay tile roofs found within (and outside) the Hitchin Conservation Area. **There is a reluctant acceptance that a heritage-based objection to materials/window detailing may not be justified in this particular case.**



Calderdale Roof Tile



Red Multi Brick



Mock Brick Windows



White Render



Steel Ballustrades



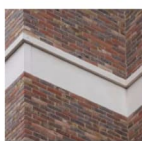
Red Brick Soldier Course



Steel Ballustraded Balconies



UPVC Windows



Stone String Course



Stone Angled Header

The proposed materials and features pick up on architectural influences of the surrounding context and the local character of the area, to blend the scheme in with its surroundings. Whilst also creating a striking and elegant purpose-built development that will provide a high-end living environment for its residents through its built form, amenity led focus and complimentary landscaping that enhances the surrounding context.



Dormers



White Soffit/Fascia

15

Glazing and Window Handle Heights.

Windows in the principal living space (typically the living room), should allow people to see out when seated. In addition, at least one opening light in each habitable room should be approachable and usable by a wide range of people – including those with restricted movement and reach.



Proposed windows meet the low-level window sill height and handle height requirements.

HERITAGE POLICY ASSESSMENT:

Planning (Listed Building and Conservation Areas) Act 1990:
Section 66(1)

North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031:
Policy HE1

NPPF (December 2024):

The following paragraphs are relevant:

- **135 c)** (sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment),
- **207** (local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting)
- **210** (desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness),
- **212** (great weight should be given to the asset's conservation),
- **213** (clear and convincing justification), and
- **215** (harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use).

The Annex 2: Glossary of the NPPF mentions the following:

Setting of a heritage asset: *The surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced. Its extent is not fixed and may change as the asset and its surroundings evolve. Elements of a setting may make a positive or negative contribution to the significance of an asset, may affect the ability to appreciate that significance or may be neutral.*

Significance (for heritage policy): *The value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. The interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting. For World Heritage Sites, the cultural value described within each site's Statement of Outstanding Universal Value forms part of its significance.*

CONCLUSION:

Ultimately the case officer will need to consider the planning merits of the case as the heritage factors are not considered so significant as to be a principal reason for objecting. Yes, the scheme is large and whilst having an impact upon lower buildings nearby, the proposal would not be a dominant built form in the vicinity considering the amount of three storey buildings nearby. Whilst the building's functionality is not in dispute, its design is uninspiring, and size is significant to the point of arguably being excessive.

The scheme would occasion a small degree of harm to the character of the area when compared with the existing built forms, however, the significance of the Hitchin Conservation Area and the nearest listed buildings would not be adversely affected.

Having said that, a slightly shorter frontage building with consideration given to a southern communal space and better choice of roof materials and window type would all serve to improve the proposal but ultimately what is currently before the LPA is unobjectionable in heritage terms.

OFFICER: Mark Simmons

DATE: 18/07/2025