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94 Tilehouse Street, Hitchin, Hertfordshire SG5 2DW
February 2025

Information in Support of Application 24/01623/FP

Evidence has been requested to support the change of use application reference 24/01623/FP to residential :

The proposal to change the use of the property from the existing showroom / workshop to a 3 bed dwelling is not supported by Policy ETC5 as the ground floor will be used for residential purposes, rather than a main town centre use as defined in the Local Plan.

No evidence has been provided as part of the application about any attempts to sell or let the premises for the main town centre uses preferred in the Policy, which would help in considering a departure from the Policy for this application.

The applicants understand and support policies to maintain and enhance the vitality and viability of Hitchin's town centre, indeed they were the two founders of Hitchin Town Centre Initiative which became Hitchin Initiative and which formed Hitchin BID.

The building has been let for the past nine years at a non-commercial rent to support the tenant. Such a level of rental would be insufficient to provide long term sustainability for the building.

When advised that the tenant no longer required the building, all possible future uses were investigated. The applicants are property professionals with a knowledge of the local market but they also consulted local commercial agents. With the retail sector retreating due to the competition from out of town centres and Amazon and other delivery services there is simply no demand for a retail unit in this tertiary location. Office accommodation in Tilehouse Street was delivered a death blow by the closure of the Charlton Road car park. There are a couple of offices of similar size at The Maltings in Bridge Street – modern, well fitted out, in a better location and with the benefit of on-site car parking – which have been on the market for over a year. Offices have gravitated to secondary and tertiary locations in Bancroft and this seems to have worked well.

This really only leaves restaurant or wine bar as alternative potential users to residential. It seems unlikely that any tenant would be found for such uses. Service access is poor and waste disposal difficult and obviously disruptive. Being surrounded by residential properties, noise and disturbance would make such uses difficult to manage (your own Environment Officer expressed concern over the possible noise disturbance of a modern air to water heat-exchanger and comments have been made about even the very limited waste disposal required by use as a

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dwelling). There is also the problem that the cost of converting the building into such uses would not be financially viable bearing in mind the low rental values that such uses would generate – there are many failing public houses available to such tenants.

The applicants therefore concluded that the lack of footfall, no parking and poor servicing/delivery access make the property unattractive and unlikely to produce a rental level which would cover the necessary repair and maintenance of the building. The only sustainable use for the building is conversion to residential as per this application.

All town centres have experienced a reduction in retail demand, policy SP4: Town Centres, Local Centres and Community Shops seeks to prevent non-commercial interruptions in retail frontages. This does not apply in this case as the subject building is the only remaining showroom/retail property in Tilehouse Street.

Tilehouse Street is now almost exclusively residential. The subject property forms part of what were the offices of Francis Newton Builders, comprising 93A and 94 Tilehouse Street and 19 Bucklersbury, subsequently divided to form two showrooms. Consent was granted in July 2001 for 93A Tilehouse Street and 19 Bucklersbury to be converted to residential, your Ref. No: 01/00097/1.

The adjoining building, 95 Tilehouse Street, formerly Barham's Gun Shop with Anthony Bone Tailors above, had its upper floor converted to residential use some time ago. The conversion of its ground floor offices and first floor flat into a 3 bedroom dwelling including internal and external alterations, your reference 13/02078/1, was granted in November 2013 following the change of use of ground floor offices (Class B1) to one bedroom flat (Class C3) including internal and external alterations, your reference 13/01059/1, being granted in July 2013. It seems strange that you have raised a policy objection to this application when you approved a change of use to residential on the adjoining building.

Policy SP4 was enacted in 2004, the Planning Authority have accepted that Tilehouse Street is not part of the town's retail core by the grant of the following permissions since its implementation:

3 Tilehouse Street (immediately opposite number 94) was changed from offices to 3 Bedroom dwelling, your reference 14/00026/1 dated February 2014.

4 Tilehouse Street. Change of use of offices (Class B1) to 4 bedroom dwelling (Class C3) and ancillary works your reference 12/02469 dated December 2012.

13 Tilehouse Street. Internal and external alterations to part of ground and first floors at rear of building to provide self contained 2 bedroom dwelling your reference 05/01041/1LB dated February 2006.

83 Tilehouse Street. Change of use from offices to dwelling, your reference 04/01131/1 dated August 2004.

84 Tilehouse Street. Change of use from office (Class B1) to one two bedroom house (Class C3) your reference 11/02970/1 dated June 2012.

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84A Tilehouse Street. Change of use from office (Class A2) to residential (Class C3) together with erection of entrance porch your reference 10/02970/1 dated March 2011.

85 Tilehouse Street. Refurbishment, internal alterations and extension to existing listed building to enable conversion into dwelling houses and flats following demolition of single storey rear extensions. Construction of 2 no. 'detached' houses in rear yard following demolition of existing buildings your reference 11/02195/1 dated December 2011.

86 Tilehouse Street. Change of use of existing ground floor shop with basement storage and dwelling on two floors over to 2, two bedroom self-contained flats your reference 03/01847/1 dated January 2004.

88 Tilehouse Street. Change of use of basement and ground floor (part) from A1 (Hair Salon) to C3 (residential dwelling) together with internal alterations to facilitate provision of 1 x 2-bed self-contained apartment your reference 16/01786/1 dated September 2016.

The present use of the building does not contribute to the vitality of the town centre, being only open for 6 hours per week – a residential use would clearly generate greater activity. Residential occupation in the town centre, when not interrupting retail frontages, adds to the vitality of the town. People are choosing to live in the centre of our town, without cars, living sustainably and supporting the town's trade and community. This is exactly the type of building and location that this type of person is looking for. There is no better use for both the long-term sustainability of the building and the health of the town.

The alterations to the building have been designed to incorporate a Study/Office with direct access from the entrance door. We anticipate that the occupants of the completed building may well work from home – the designed layout allows for business meetings without disruption to the residential use.

Although only Listed for its group value, 94 Tilehouse Street is an important building and a sustainable use needs to be found for it. As referred to above, the applicants believe that a change of use to residential provides the best possible sustainable use for the future of the building.

During the course of this application the comments of your Conservation Officer have been taken into account and the scheme altered to meet his requirements. The current proposals have been accepted by him. The application provides a sustainable use for this building and will enhance, rather than reduce, the vitality and viability of our town.

We trust that you accept this submission and will approve the current application.