North Hertfordshire District Council
Building Conservation comments

File Ref: 17/04418/FP
Date: 21/03/2018
Planning Officer: MT
Address: Roysia House, John Street, Royston
Subject: Reconfiguration and change of use of upper floors and additional single storey extension to provide 10 residential flats.

Roysia House is described in the document entitled Royston Conservation Area (with map) 27 March 2007 [Part 1 of 3] under the subheading 'Assessment of the setting, character and appearance of the Royston Conservation Area' as follows:

"This is a three storey, 1960's building with a flat roof and a horizontal (?) emphasised by (i) the white rendered elements and (ii) brown brickwork intersected with concrete panels to the lower sections of the bay running horizontally around the upper floors of the building. The ground floor is divided into shop fronts relating to the upper floor divisions of the building. The scale, form and materials creates a rather incongruous building in this part of the conservation area."

At 4.21 of The Royston Conservation Area Townscape Analysis 27 March 2007 [Part 2 of 3] it states the following:

"The heights of buildings, which are largely two storeys with some three storey buildings. In addition the slight variances in roof heights between buildings of different styles and construction."

A Planning, Design and Access Statement (PDAS) has been submitted and the following paragraphs, in particular, are noted:

2.4 In terms of statutory designations, the building is located within the Royston Conservation Area. The application site has been identified in the Royston Town Centre Strategy (June 2008) and Royston Conservation Area Review (March 2007) as a site for improvement where the existing building makes a negative contribution to the street scene and Conservation Area.

3.2 A written response was issued on the on 28th September 2017 (17/01917/1PRE). Below is a summary of some of the key points raised:

- *The application site lies within the identified settlement boundary of Royston where the principle of new residential development is acceptable;*
- *The building itself is of poor quality and currently has a negative impact on the Conservation Area;*
- *The Planning Officer accepts that there is an opportunity to improve the building's appearance. The design and materials would need to be reflective of those found in Royston;*
- *The response has also informed the supporting documents hereby submitted. A noise assessment was recommended to support any subsequent planning application.*

6.5 It is considered that the current scheme has been developed in a sympathetic manner to compliment the vernacular of the surrounding built form and would be in line with the strategic objectives of the NPPF with regards to reflecting local distinctiveness.

The suggestion that the proposed materials will reflect local distinctiveness is somewhat misinformed. Firstly, due to the variety of built form, building period, materials palette etc. it would be inappropriate to suggest that there is a singular building type that conveys 'local distinctiveness' in Royston. Having said that, under the heading 'SUMMARY OF CHARACTERISTICS AND FEATURES IMPORTANT TO THE SPECIAL INTEREST OF THE CONSERVATION AREA' in the document entitled The Royston Conservation Area Townscape Analysis 27 March 2007 [Part 2 of 3], the following is noted:

4.22 The large mix of walling materials especially red or gault bricks and renders of neutral colours of whites or ochres.

4.23 The predominant use of plain clay tiles and occasional use of Welsh Slate to some 19th century buildings, notably those at the north end of Kneesworth Street and the strong characteristic of plain eaves to most buildings.

4.26 The use of timber joinery to windows, doors, cornices, door surrounds and canopies.

Whilst I consider the use of render & aluminium features (indeed the overall colour scheme) unobjectionable, the building's proposed appearance could not be said to reflect local distinctiveness and I am not so supportive of the flat aluminium panels and vertical white cladding to the third floor as I have expressed my concerns regarding the addition of this floor below.

Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 (Proposed Submission, October 2016) is relevant to this application

Policy HE1: Designated heritage assets.

Planning applications relating to Designated heritage assets shall be accompanied by a Heritage Assessment/Justification Statement that:

i. Assess the significance of heritage assets, including their setting, impacted by the proposal;
ii. Justify and detail the impacts of any proposal upon the significance of the designated asset(s); and
iii. Inform any necessary mitigation measures to minimise or mitigate against any identified harms;

Planning permission for development proposals affecting Designated Heritage Assets or their setting will be granted where they (as applicable):

a. Enable the heritage asset to be used in a manner that secures its conservation and preserves its significance;
b. Incorporate a palette of materials that make a positive contribution to local character or distinctiveness, where it is appropriate and justified.

Whilst a PDAS has been submitted, the applicant has not undertaken a full assessment of the impact of the proposal on Heritage Assets even though the photo montages submitted offer a clear indication as to the visual impact from two vantage points in the conservation area.



There are a number of listed buildings within the immediate vicinity of Roysia House with no.1 John Street (grade II) in particular, sitting immediately adjacent to the west (see photo). Roysia House together with no.1 John Street and the listed building to the left of this form a more or less continuous wall plate/eaves level. There is a concern that the two flats proposed at third floor will unnecessarily increase the mass/bulk of this building as seen from this direction and would have a more dominant impact upon the skyline when looking north from half way up Market Hill i.e. by the library and with no.1 Market Hill nestling in front of this building.

On the opposite side of John Street and to the south is no.1 Market Hill (grade II listed) which is a prominent, two-storey corner building and located to the east of this is the former town hall (also grade II). To the north of Roysia House are two Buildings of Local Interest (nos. 18 and 19 on the adopted Register).

In such a sensitive location with a number of designated and non-designated heritage assets in view, the elevational changes and any additional height to what is currently a poorly detailed building will need to be carefully considered. This scheme reminds me of advice that I have provided in recent times with regard to the introduction of an additional floor to prominent late C20 flat roof buildings in Hitchin (Hermitage Road) and Letchworth (Station Parade) Conservation Areas and in each of these cases the additional accommodation was granted planning permission.

In my opinion, this is an equally sensitive site and the key issue in my opinion is the extent to which the proposed third floor would impact upon the setting of nearby listed buildings and upon the character and appearance of the Royston Conservation Area. No evidence has been provided to suggest that the scheme is not viable without the additional units.

Whether the residential element to this scheme is limited to the first and second floors or not, I am concerned that four of the 8no. units on the first and second floors do not have any storage space. If the third floor is also considered, these two units also have no dedicated storage space and this suggests that there is a relatively tight configuration in layout terms. In addition, with regard to two of the flats (one on each of the first and second floors), the living room space measures only 2.8m wide with the bedroom to these flats only measuring 2.5m wide. In my opinion, I positively discouraged the third floor but encouraged a reconfiguration of the first and second floors to provide more generous accommodation with sufficient storage. This may be best realised in the form of 6no. x 1-bedroom units or maybe 4no. x 1-bedroom units + 2no. x 2-bedroom units.

Recommendation

I raise no objection to the principle of change of use. It is considered that the contemporary cladding to the ground, first and second floors will not harm the setting of nearby listed buildings or harm the character or appearance of the Royston Conservation Area. The additional storey height does, however, give cause for concern and I am minded to conclude that there would be a degree of harm (less than substantial) occasioned to the setting of listed buildings (particularly no.1 John Street) when viewed from the High Street and to the character of the conservation area, due to the four-storey approach. I appreciate, however, that the proposal would deliver at least two important public benefits (additional housing units and the visual improvement to the host building, therefore, an improvement to the conservation area). The question here is whether the degree of harm that would result from

increasing the scale/bulk/height of this building is outweighed by the delivery of public benefits. It is for the case officer to make this balanced judgement in light of concerns raised with respect to Sections 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the aims of Sections 7 and 12 of the NPPF and Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 (Proposed Submission, October 2016).

Mark Simmons
Senior Conservation Officer