

# North Hertfordshire District Council

## Building Conservation comments

**File Ref:** 24/01426/FP

**Date:** 03/10/2024

**Planning Officer:** AMCD

**Address:** 9 – 10 High Street, Hitchin

**Subject:** Demolition and redevelopment to provide 44 residential apartments (in four part 4 storey / part 5 storey linked blocks) 325 sqms of Class E floorspace at ground floor fronting the High Street, landscaping, amenity and associated parking.

### 1.0 Recommendation

1.1 By reason of the following:

- The amount, scale, bulk, massing of the proposed development with an ascending hierarchy towards the centre of the site (the 'core' buildings),
- the lack of a break in the continuous built form east-west not taking the opportunity to create a more legible and enhanced sense of place and public realm,
- The façade of the replacement building onto the High Street accentuated by the use of a zinc roof, pale brickwork, reconstituted stone detailing, zinc balustrades, tall zinc-clad dormers and contemporary glazing, and
- The larger of the two curved arch openings on the front elevation of the replacement building leading to an incongruous appearance to the commercial ground floor element, standing out from the 'crowd' of listed buildings, Buildings of Local Interest and positive buildings in the vicinity,

it is considered the proposal will harm the setting of adjacent and nearby listed buildings and harm the character & appearance of the Hitchin Conservation Area. I, therefore, raise an **OBJECTION**, on the basis that the development will fail to satisfy the provisions of Sections 66(1) & 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the aims of Section 16 of the NPPF, Policies SP1, SP9 and HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 – 2031 and the aims of the Paynes Park Planning Brief February 2005, particularly 4.13 where it states that any development proposal should be in harmony with the historic medieval grain and scale of the area.

### 2.0 Hitchin Conservation Area

2.1 The site is located within the Hitchin Conservation Area ['HCA'] which is a Designated Heritage Asset. The High Street frontage is defined by nos.9 – 10, a three-storey, Neo-Georgian building of red brick with a truncated hipped clay tile roof. There are several listed buildings in the vicinity.



2.5 At 7.2 of the HCACS it states that Character Area 2a:

*covers the historic town centre from Bancroft in the north to Tilehouse Street/Bridge Street in the south. It is focused on the Market Place and St Mary's Church and its churchyard, and is notable for the high concentration of listed or locally listed buildings. **Of interest is the survival of the medieval (or earlier) street plan and burgage plots which provides the long thin building plots and associated buildings which help to define the special character of this part of Hitchin.** It has been divided up into three sub-Character Areas as follows:*

- *Character Area 2a: High Street, Bancroft south and Brand Street;*
- *Character Area 2b: St Mary's Church;*
- *Character Area 2c: The Market Place, Bridge Street, Tilehouse Street and Upper Tilehouse Street.*

3.0 The Local Plan and NPPF

3.1 Policies SP1 (Sustainable development in North Hertfordshire), SP9 (Design and Sustainability) and HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 – 2031 are relevant.

Whilst noting parts a) and b) of SP1, attention is drawn to C iv) where it states:

*Grant planning permission for proposals that, individually or cumulatively:  
iv. protect key elements of North Hertfordshire's environment including biodiversity, important landscapes, heritage assets and green infrastructure (including the water environment);*

I draw attention also to Policy SP9 C i) where it says:

*The Council considers good design to be a key aspect of sustainable development. We will:*

*c) Require Strategic Masterplans and planning applications for Strategic Housing Sites and **significant development** to (as applicable):  
i. create buildings, spaces and streets which **positively reflect and respond** to the local landscape, townscape and **historic character***

3.2 The following paragraphs of the NPPF (2023 version) are also considered relevant:

- **135** (ensure that developments are b) visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping, c) are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change (such as increased densities) and d) establish or maintain a strong sense of place, using the arrangement of streets, spaces, building types and materials to create attractive, welcoming and distinctive places to live, work and visit)
- **200** (local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting)
- **203** (desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness),
- **205** (great weight should be given to the asset's conservation),
- **206** (clear and convincing justification), and
- **208** (harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use).

- 3.3 I concur with 2.7 of the applicant's Heritage Statement where it states that *"the key test in NPPF paragraphs 205-208 is whether a proposed development will result in substantial harm or less than substantial harm to a designated asset. However, substantial harm is not defined in the NPPF"*.

#### 4.0 Paynes Park Planning Brief February 2005

- 4.1 Amongst other matters mentioned, under the subheading 'Purpose' the following is noted, below which are what I consider to be other pertinent sections of 'The Brief':
- *To promote development at Paynes Park which is attractive, interesting and beneficial to the community;*
  - *To improve the streetscene on Paynes Park and introduce a character and quality of development between Paynes Park and Market Place/High Street that will improve the appearance of this part of the town and enhance the overall character of the conservation area*
  - ***To promote an attractive, safe, and convenient pedestrian link between the Lairage multi-storey car park/Waitrose supermarket/library/museum, and Market Place/High Street, and promote movement along this link.***
  - *Promoting first class leisure and cultural facilities to contribute to healthy living for all our citizens.*

- 4.2 At 1.8 it says:

*Historically Paynes Park was the livestock market area of the town, with a sheep and poultry market on the site of the existing Lairage car park and the cattle market directly behind The Cock Hotel. In addition the fire station was located opposite the rear of Woolworths. The site also contains two historic public rights of way: Coopers Alley and West Alley. **It is likely that West Alley is the oldest path in the town. Market Place is the town centre core and is immediately to the south east of Paynes Park. Paynes Park is identified in the Hitchin Town Centre Strategy as a key development site***

- 4.3 At 3.10 it says:

*The Council is currently interested in finding a suitable site for a community facility, particularly for young people, which is accessible to all. Views have also been expressed that the town centre would benefit from an arts/cultural centre. Any such facilities should contribute towards the Council's strategic objectives of promoting first class leisure and cultural facilities.*

- 4.4 At 3.12 it says:

*It may be that in order to make a scheme viable in the northern part of the area, it is necessary to include some residential development, at upper floor level. **The Council would only wish residential to be a limited part of a development scheme in the northern part of Paynes Park.***

- 4.5 At 4.1 it says:

*The area of Paynes Park, particularly along the road frontage on the east side, is generally unsightly. Views along Paynes Park, from the top of Brand Street, are unattractive, and do not contribute to the visual character of the town centre. The main reason for this is the gap in the frontage at the Jackson's Yard and Arcade car parks, and the poor quality buildings, such as Leon Howman Cars and Peter Fish car sales. The buildings on the Leon Howman Cars site, will be replaced when the McCarthy and Stone scheme, involving sheltered apartments for the elderly, is*

*completed. Any future development in the area, must improve the visual character of Paynes Park, make a positive contribution to Hitchin town centre, and promote the Council's strategic priority of protecting the environment and conserving the heritage of the District's settlements.*

4.6 At 4.8 it says:

*Careful consideration will need to be given to the heights of buildings along the Paynes Park frontage. No buildings along this frontage should dominate adjacent ones. However, in order to create an attractive and interesting streetscape, variations in the height of buildings will be encouraged.*

4.7 At 4.9 it says:

*Particular care will have to be given to buildings either side of Paynes Park House. If the northern area of Paynes Park is to be developed comprehensively, development will have to 'wrap around' Paynes Park House. Therefore, development will need to be sensitive to the design, scale and height of this listed building.*

4.8 At 4.13 it says:

*One feature of the area is the survival of the medieval burgage plots. This is an important part of the grain of the centre of Hitchin. Any development proposal should be in harmony with the historic medieval grain and scale of the area.*

4.9 Whilst at 4.17 under the subheading 'Public Space' it says:

*The Council wish to see the creation of public spaces within new developments. Within the northern part of the site, there may be the potential to create a small square as part of the development scheme. There may also be the potential for a townscape feature at the apex of the Peter Fish site.*

## 5.0 The Proposal

5.1 As I stated under ref: 22/00976/PRE on 11 August 2022:

*First and foremost, I am not opposed to development of this site per say and in fact there is an opportunity here for new development to make a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness. However, I make the following comments. I appreciate that some form of development between High Street and Paynes Park would 'generally' be in keeping with the grain of existing built form at West Alley and Brand Street i.e. running south-east to north-west, but it is the scale and continual massing that concerns me. Interestingly, historic map evidence (see below) suggests that Paynes Park has had an established 'open' frontage but that does not mean to say that this is significant to the character and appearance of the HCA.*

Revised: 1897, Published: 1898



Revised: 1922, Published: 1925



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5.2 As stated at 2.21 of the submitted Heritage Statement, the site is located within the vicinity of several listed buildings which include:

- *The Cock Inn, 8 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *Paynes Park House, 2 Paynes Park and 8 West Alley – Grade II Listed*
- *Green Hythe, 2A Paynes Park – Grade II Listed*
- *and 4 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *5 and 6 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *19 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *21 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *22 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *26 High Street – Grade II Listed*
- *Church of St Mary – Grade I Listed*

5.3 At 4.3 of the HS it is noted that:

*In 1964 the shop was demolished and redeveloped for Woolworths. Woolworths occupied the site from 1964 until December 2008 when the shop closed. In 2011, the former Woolworth's was split into two stores on the ground floor. This is how the site remains today. The façade treatment sought to reflect the former Georgian character of the original building albeit with less discipline and quality, albeit that the existing building is considered to make some positive contribution to the conservation area, mainly as a brick and tile building forming the continuous frontage to the high street, mock Georgian-style windows and tiled roof.*

5.4 The following is noted at 5.5 and 5.6 respectively of the HS:

***In response to the feedback received from officers, the scheme has been re-designed to reduce the scale of the new building and increase the amount of open space.*** *In addition, having examined the existing building at 9-10 and its history, along with the historic photographs, whilst the façade is considered to be a positive building on the High Street (probably because of the extensive use of red brick and the large mock Georgian style windows) that the evidence demonstrates that it is poor copy of the far superior building that once occupied the site.*

*The existing roof is fake as the top floor has a concrete ceiling and details on the front façade do not reflect the quality of architectural design of the older 19th century building that once occupied the site. The evidence supports the demolition of the whole of the existing building. The historic photographs supplied mainly by the North Herts Museum, show that the 1960's replacement building for 9-10 High Street, was of inferior quality and traditional proportions to the historic building that once stood on the site (see photographs at paragraph 4.2 above)*

5.5 I have assessed the table provided at 5.13 of the HS and whilst I concur with several of the commentaries, I make the following points:

- It may be little disingenuous to suggest that the 1960's building has largely created a '*poor environment for example to Green Hythe*' when the current proposal is likely to also have a significant impact upon the environment to Green Hythe?
- It is claimed that the mock Georgian character of nos. 9-10 High Street provides a neutral contribution to the character of the High Street, whereas, I suggest that this contribution is slightly more positive than neutral.

5.6 At 5.16 of the DAS it says:

*The Paynes Park elevation is treated as a different building architecturally reflecting **the modern character of this street**. There is no particular historical character to reflect on this street frontage. The “street” created through the scheme enables the new development to provide space and relief to Green Hythe previously encased by the large wall of the existing building. There is no impact on the character surrounding Paynes House, which remains fronting the street and widely viewed across the expanse of the existing car park adjacent.*

Whilst it is acknowledged that there is much late C20/early C21 development in the vicinity there are two early/mid C19 grade II listed buildings (no.2 Paynes Park and former Hitchin Museum) which ensure some historic presence remains.

- 5.7 At 4.121 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 – 2031 it says:

***Design is central to good planning. The achievement of high quality, sustainable design is required by Government guidance. Planning policies should promote high quality, inclusive design in layouts and buildings in terms of function and impact. Design which does not make the most of opportunities to improve the character and quality of an area should be refused.***

- 5.8 At 5.19 of the HS it says that:

*The new architectural treatment of the replacement 9-10 High Street property will **make a positive contribution to the High Street and adjacent listed buildings**. Whilst the existing building is considered to make a positive contribution, its existing architectural detail is considered to be lacking in character and quality. The new design will **repair the effect of the existing building** and deliver a lasting quality to the High Street heritage and important local view.*

- 5.9 At 6.2 of the submitted HS it states that “*The existing building whilst considered by the Council to make a positive contribution to Hitchin conservation area, is rather lacking in quality and is a poor-quality pastiche of the former Georgian property that once occupied the site*”. Whilst acknowledging the Heritage Consultant’s suggestion that the existing building on the High Street is ‘pastiche’, the use of clay tile, vertically sliding sash windows with smaller windows at second floor and facing red brick, nonetheless ensures a reasonable relationship and assimilation with the surrounding built form. The pre-app scheme followed a broadly similar approach as seen in the image below right.



- 5.10 To suggest that the proposal will ‘repair’ the current High Street streetscene is questionable as this iteration incorporates a zinc roof set back behind a frontage of pale brick and reconstituted stone with what appears to be standing seam zinc balustrades to deep balconies, zinc clad dormers and contemporary glazing with no glazing bars. I do, however, concur with 6.4 of the HS that the design is ‘modern’ and not ‘pastiche’, but do not agree that

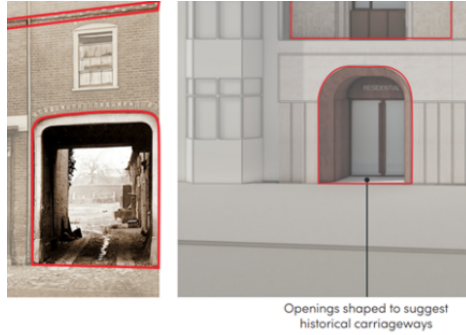
the design *‘positively contributes to the setting through high quality materials, detailing and reflecting the future uses of the property’*.



- 5.11 At 6.3 of the HS it says that *“The new design is considered to reflect the changing character of the site as it moves from the High Street through to Paynes Park”*. Whilst I understand the point being made, I do not agree that the design reflects this change in character. The two large built forms (core buildings) proposed towards the centre of the site do not take their cue from similar buildings in similar locations. In fact, I suggest the ascending hierarchy of built form towards the site’s centre runs counter to the often-found case of backland buildings either being equal to or of diminishing scale on these historic plots. This would potentially set a precedent for substantial buildings in such locations, thus not respecting local character.



- 5.12 It is interesting to note that at page 30 of the DAS, the original building which included Merrick, Perks Chemist and Culpine’s Boot Warehouse, was an 8-bay building with a ninth, lower bay to the left. The furthest two right-hand bays (Culpine’s) did not form part of the 1960’s Woolworth redevelopment but the scheme did include the lower bay, so was 7-bays in total. Although multiple bays remain in the current scheme, two bays are omitted resulting in wider bays with balconies.
- 5.13 The resulting built form would be unlike any built form in the vicinity and the question remains: Is this good quality contemporary design that will preserve or indeed enhance the character or appearance of the HCA? There is a case to suggest that if the left-hand bay is recessed then it should be recessed through to ground floor level. This bay would in my opinion be improved if the deep reconstituted stone fascia was omitted and replaced with a simple band as shown between first and second floors.



- 5.14 With respect to the combination of pale brickwork and reconstituted stone detailing, there are several good cases of gault/buff brickwork within the HCA as highlighted by the images below of C19 grade II listed buildings. Of note is the presence of sash windows, doorcases, frontage railings, quoin details and band courses. I am not saying necessarily that pale brickwork would be inappropriate, rather that it will be important to ensure that the colour/texture is right. I advise that consideration is given to omitting the three course of soldier brickwork to first and second floors throughout and significantly shortening the height of the dormer windows. My concern, however, relates more to the handling of the reconstituted brickwork, the balconies, glazing and dormers and this where I consider the proposal to be less successful.

**99 (Orford Lodge)-100 Bancroft  
19<sup>th</sup> Century**



**15 and 16 Bancroft  
early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**



**22 Bancroft  
early 19<sup>th</sup> Century**



**Entrance Block at North Herts and  
South Beds Hospital Bedford Road  
early to mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century**



- 5.15 The image below at Market Place does include some stonework but its use is different to that in the proposed scheme.

*"I would have thought that buildings interspersed with some additional space would create a better overall layout and sense of place? Even in predominantly built-up urban locations, urban space can be very important (if not critical to the achievement of well-designed places)."*

*"There are several issues here that compound my concerns such as: i) the size, form and repetition of the two blocks sitting parallel to Paynes Park (there is a significant amount of 3 & 4-storey built form across the whole site), ii) the development directly behind Paynes Park House (grade II) and iii) the additional two-storey(?) triple-gabled form towards the centre of the site to name but a few."*

*"Towards the centre of the site even some four-storey development is proposed which in my opinion is excessive given the generally two and three-storey built form in the HCA."*

*"Located north of the application site is Green Hythe, 2A Paynes Park (grade II).... This building sits close to the site's northern boundary and faces towards the monumental side wall of the adjacent ramped car park. I have walked down towards this property, and it is apparent that this building would face towards what would a modest green space within the proposed development to the south. There may be opportunity here to better reveal this heritage asset (para 206, NPPF) by exploring the potential to create a more significant urban space opposite Green Hythe."*

*"The applicant is encouraged to consider pulling the development back so the walkway is reasonably open and better still, creating a more meaningful open space at the centre of the site where the large, grassed area is currently shown i.e. creating a clear break in built form. There may be scope here even to create a small square as mentioned at 4.17 of the Paynes Park Planning Brief perhaps enlivened by a café culture on the ground floor facing onto the square. I encourage more consideration of the spaces punctuating this development together with a reduction in some building heights."*

- 5.19 I remain unconvinced that a continuous built form east-west with a hierarchy of built form ascending towards the centre of the site will promote a development that is sympathetic to local character and history (135, NPPF) or would make a 'positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness' (203, NPPF). The image below from page 18 of the HS shows the previous historic arrangement of lower ancillary buildings to the rear of the former chemist.

Historic Lavender Working behind Chemist circa 1890



- 5.20 It could be said that the development would have some impact upon the setting of Green Hythe (2A Paynes Park) and potentially could have some significant impact upon any development proposals (should they come forward on the adjacent land). The three distinct spaces that would be created i.e. 'Secret Garden' courtyard, 'Community' courtyard and the larger 'Open' courtyard ameliorate my concerns to an extent by easing the bulk/massing of development across the site but not to the point of being acceptable.



- 5.21 It is considered that a reduction in the height and massing of the 'Core Buildings' and omitting the building between these, and redesigning the facades that would then overlook a larger central courtyard space, is a key consideration. Or, at the very least, reducing the 'link' building to single-storey to create a built form that responds more positively to the central space even if this is some type of contemporary cloister arrangement.

## 6.0 Public consultation

- 6.1 Finally, I note that 19 feedback forms were received from the public consultation exercise. These numbers are relatively low so I would not place too much weight on the significance of this exercise. I have, however, been able to deduce from this that cumulatively (business / residential / other) 36% (7 respondents) are not supportive of the proposal.

**Mark Simmons**  
**Senior Conservation Officer**