

Planning, Design and Access Statement

Proposed Change of Use of First, Second and Third Floors from Residential (Use Class C3) to Commercial (Use Class E) 7 Highbury Road, Hitchin, SG4 9RW

1. Introduction

This Planning Statement supports a full planning application for the change of use of the upper floors (first, second, third and fourth floors) of 7 Highbury Road, Hitchin, from residential (Class C3) to commercial (Class E) use.

Hitchin Dental Practice has been serving the people of Hitchin since 1965. The practice provides NHS services as well as private dental services. The proposal enables the existing dental practice at ground-floor level to expand into the upper parts of the building, providing additional treatment rooms as well as other ancillary rooms to meet growing patient demand and to enhance the range of services offered.

The building is a substantial semi-detached building on Highbury Road, within the Hitchin Conservation Area, and lies within walking distance of Hitchin town centre, the railway station, and several public transport routes.

2. Existing Site and Context

The building is a substantial semi-detached building on Highbury Road, within the Hitchin Conservation Area, and lies within walking distance of Hitchin town centre, the railway station, and several public transport routes. The building is noted as making a positive contribution to the conservation area in the council's Conservation Area statement.



3. Description of Proposals

The proposed development comprises the change of use of the first, second, third and fourth floors to Class E (commercial, business and service) use, associated with the existing dental practice at ground level.

Proposed layout (refer to floor plans provided)

- First floor: Reception/waiting area and two consultation rooms
- Second floor: One consultation room and ancillary accommodation
- Third floor: Staff facilities

The scheme involves minor internal reconfiguration only, with no external alterations to the building or its elevations other than the introduction of new signage.

Cycle parking will be provided within the site for both staff and patients. The existing three on-site parking spaces will remain available for use by the practice.

4. Planning Policy Context

The proposal has been assessed against the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2023) and relevant policies of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011–2031 (adopted November 2022).

National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2023)

Key relevant paragraphs include:

- Para 81: Planning should support economic growth and productivity by enabling businesses to expand and adapt.
- Para 93: Planning decisions should ensure an integrated approach to the location of community and health facilities to enhance accessibility and well-being.
- Paras 130–134: Encourage development that is visually attractive, sympathetic to local character, and maintains a high standard of amenity.
- Paras 194–202: Require that development preserves or enhances designated heritage assets, including Conservation Areas.

North Hertfordshire Local Plan (2011–2031)

Relevant policies include:

- Policy SP1 – Sustainable Development in North Hertfordshire

Supports development that contributes to the economic, social and environmental well-being of the district, making efficient use of land within sustainable settlements.

- Policy ETC2 – Employment Uses Outside Employment Areas

Allows Class E uses outside designated employment areas provided they are compatible with surrounding uses and contribute to the local economy without adverse amenity impacts.

- Policy D1 – Sustainable Design

Requires that development achieves a high standard of design, integrates well with the surrounding context, and ensures good standards of amenity for occupants and neighbours.

- Policy D3 – Protecting Living Conditions

States that development should not cause unacceptable harm to the living conditions of nearby residential occupiers through noise, disturbance, or other impacts.

- Policy HE1 – Designated Heritage Assets

Requires that development within Conservation Areas preserves or enhances the character and appearance of the area, and that any harm is clearly justified and outweighed by public benefits.

- Policy T2 – Parking

Seeks appropriate levels of car and cycle parking provision, taking account of the accessibility of the site, the type of use, and opportunities for sustainable travel.

The existing on-site parking is retained. The site is within a short walk of Hitchin

5. Planning Considerations

a) Principle of Development

The proposal represents the efficient and sustainable reuse of existing urban floorspace to accommodate a local healthcare service within an accessible location.

In line with NPPF paragraphs 81 and 93 and Local Plan Policies SP1 and ETC2, the proposal supports economic growth and improved access to health and community services.

The site lies within a mixed-use area close to the town centre, where commercial and professional uses are common. The proposed use is fully compatible with surrounding activity, and the limited loss of upper-floor residential space is outweighed by the significant social and community benefits arising from enhanced dental and health facilities.

b) Design and Appearance

No external works are proposed. The change of use involves only minor internal alterations, meaning the proposal will preserve the external appearance of the building and maintain its contribution to the surrounding streetscape.

This accords with Policy D1 (Sustainable Design) of the Local Plan and Paragraph 130 of the NPPF, both of which seek to ensure that development is visually appropriate and sympathetic to local character.

The proposals do include the provision of new signage for the building which is indicated on the proposed front elevation. This will be subject to a separate Consent to Display an Advertisement application in due course where more details will be provided.

c) Heritage and Conservation

The building is located within the Hitchin Conservation Area, which contains a mix of historic residential and commercial properties. The building itself is identified as one that makes a positive contribution to the character of the conservation area.

The change of use will not affect the external fabric or appearance of the building, nor involve any signage or external plant that might impact the area's special character. The proposal will therefore preserve the character and appearance of the Conservation Area, as required by Section 72(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Local Plan Policy HE1, and NPPF paragraphs 197–202.

d) Amenity and Noise Management

The proposed use is quiet and low-intensity in character. Activities are confined to internal consultation rooms, and patient numbers will be modest and appointment-based.

To ensure protection of residential amenity (as required by Policy D3):

- Operating hours will be limited (see below).
- Internal partitions will provide sound insulation between treatment rooms and neighbouring properties.
- No external plant or equipment generating noise is proposed.
- Appointments will be managed to avoid queuing or external congregation.

The proposal will therefore not result in any material noise or disturbance to nearby residents.

e) Hours of Operation

The following hours of operation are proposed:

- Monday to Friday: 08:00–17:00
- Saturday: 08:00–17:00
- Sunday and Bank Holidays: Closed

The practice currently works Monday to Friday. The above proposals introduce some working on a Saturday to provide more flexibility for customers. These hours reflect standard dental and healthcare practice times and will ensure that there is no evening or late-night activity. This approach accords with Policy D3, which seeks to protect living conditions of nearby occupiers.

f) Transport, Access and Parking

The site benefits from excellent accessibility:

- Located within walking distance of Hitchin town centre, railway station, and multiple bus routes with the nearest stop on Walsworth road served by 6no services.
- Woodside public car park is a short walk from the site
- Cycle storage will be provided for both staff and patients.
- Three existing off-street parking spaces will remain available for use.

The practice operates on an appointment basis, resulting in a controlled and predictable pattern of vehicle movements. The proposal therefore complies with Policy T2 (Parking), promoting sustainable travel and avoiding additional parking pressure on nearby streets.

g) Economic and Community Benefits

The proposal will:

- Support the growth of a local healthcare business, consistent with Policy SP1.
- The proposal will increase the provision of NHS Dental services in the town.
- Enhance local access to dental and health services, improving community well-being (as supported by NPPF paragraph 93).
- Generate local employment and training opportunities.
- Contribute positively to the vitality of Hitchin town centre by maintaining active use of upper floors.

h) BioDiversity Net Gain (BNG) Considerations

The Environment Act 2021 and the accompanying Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) Regulations 2024 introduce a statutory requirement for most planning permissions to deliver a minimum 10% net gain in biodiversity value. However, under Regulation 3(2) of The Biodiversity Gain (Town and Country Planning) (Exemptions) Regulations 2024, certain categories of development are specifically exempt from this requirement, including:

- Changes of use which do not involve operational development; and
- Developments where no impact on existing habitats occurs.

This application proposes the change of use of the first, second and third floors of an existing building from residential (Class C3) to commercial (Class E) use. The proposal involves no external alterations, no demolition, and no engineering or landscaping works.

Although the site includes a small rear garden area, this space will remain unchanged and unaffected by the proposal. No vegetation removal, ground disturbance, or change to land use is proposed. Accordingly, the development will have no impact on existing biodiversity features or habitats.

This approach aligns with:

- Regulation 3(2) of the BNG Exemptions Regulations (2024);
- DEFRA's Biodiversity Net Gain Guidance for Local Planning Authorities (February 2024), which confirms that "applications for change of use only, or those without physical works, are exempt from the biodiversity net gain requirement"; and
- Policy NE1 (Landscape and Biodiversity) of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan (2011–2031), which requires biodiversity enhancement only where a proposal would affect existing natural assets or habitats.

Given that this scheme constitutes a change of use only, with no operational development and no loss of habitat, it is exempt from the requirement to deliver or demonstrate Biodiversity Net Gain.

6. Conclusion

The proposed change of use of the first, second, third and fourth floors of 7 Highbury Road, Hitchin from residential (Class C3) to commercial (Class E)** use fully accords with both national and local planning policy.

The proposal will:

- Support a sustainable and accessible healthcare use in a suitable location.
- The expanded facility will enable the increase in NHS dental services in Hitchin
- Preserve the character and appearance of the Hitchin Conservation Area.
- Maintain a high standard of design and amenity with appropriate management of noise and hours of use.
- Provide cycle parking and retain existing off-street parking.
- Deliver clear social, economic and community benefits in line with the objectives of the NPPF and North Hertfordshire Local Plan Policies SP1, ETC2, D1, D3, HE1 and T2.

For these reasons, it is respectfully requested that planning permission be granted for the proposed change of use.