
Appeal Decision

Site visit made on 14 April 2014

by Matthew Birkinshaw BA(Hons) MSc MRTPI

an Inspector appointed by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government

Decision date: 21 May 2014

Appeal Ref: APP/D0650/A/13/2210716

St. John's Presbyterian Church, Victoria Road, Higher Runcorn, Runcorn, Cheshire, WA7 5BE

- The appeal is made under section 78 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 against a refusal to grant planning permission.
 - The appeal is made by Eccleston Homes Ltd against the decision of Halton Borough Council.
 - The application Ref 13/00280/FUL, dated 9 July 2013, was refused by notice dated 8 October 2013.
 - The development proposed is demolition of existing building and erection of 10 dwellings and associated works.
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Decision

1. The appeal is dismissed.

Procedural Matter

2. I have referred to the site address used on the Council's decision notice and notification of the appeal, as this more accurately describes the location.

Main Issue

3. The main issue is whether or not the existing building should be retained, having particular regard to any local architectural or historical interest.

Reasons

4. St. John's is a vacant former Presbyterian Church fronting onto Victoria Road within a predominantly suburban area of Runcorn. It does not fall within a Conservation Area and English Heritage confirmed recently that it does not warrant inclusion on the statutory list of buildings of special architectural or historic interest.
5. Nonetheless, Annex 2 of the National Planning Policy Framework ('the Framework') defines a heritage asset as a building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions, because of its heritage interest. Heritage assets include designated heritage assets and assets identified by the local planning authority (including local listing).
6. In this case the Council has identified St. John's as a non-designated heritage asset due to its architectural and historic interest. Paragraph 135 of the Framework states that in weighing applications that affect non-designated

heritage assets a balanced judgement will be required having regard to the scale of any harm or loss and the significance of the asset. Policy CS20 of the *Halton Core Strategy Local Plan* also states that buildings and structures of local architectural or historical interest will be conserved and enhanced, with the written justification recognising that it is important to conserve heritage assets as they contribute towards Halton's sense of identity.

7. Evidence provided with the appeal demonstrates that St. John's started out as a Sunday school built in 1894. This coincided with the industrial expansion of Runcorn and development of Victoria Road between roughly 1874 and 1899. The Sunday school was later extended and the front section of the church as exists today was added sometime between approximately 1893 and 1907. Thus, even if St. John's was extended in the early Edwardian era, I agree with the Council that it clearly formed part of, and was associated with, the late Victorian expansion of the immediate surrounding area. For this reason, whilst not particularly old, and not rare in terms of nonconformist churches, the building is still associated with the development of Victoria Road and consequently, has a degree of local historic interest.
8. During my site visit I also saw that the church occupies a prominent position within the streetscene and fronting almost directly onto Victoria Road retains an association with the neighbouring terraced houses and the cemetery. I appreciate that architecturally its detailing is not unique and several of the original features and windows have been removed. The building does not form part of any recognised viewpoints and is not in any published landscape character assessment of Runcorn either. Nonetheless, due to its scale, form and massing, combined with views of the stone tower and spire it remains an imposing building which contributes positively to the streetscene and adds to the visual interest of the area. As a result, I consider that the largely traditional appearance of the building, viewed in the context of its surroundings also contributes towards its significance as a non-designated heritage asset.
9. Furthermore, I recognise that there are other churches in the area and due to falling congregations St. John's no longer serves the local community. However, several representations suggest that the building is valued locally as part of the history of the area, and that it makes a positive contribution to the streetscene. As a result, this indicates that it still holds some social and communal value, with a local affinity towards the church.
10. In summary therefore, whilst the building is vacant, subject to vandalism and several original features have been removed, it does nonetheless have some historic and visual interest and can be regarded as a non-designated heritage asset for the purpose of the Framework. This view is reinforced by English Heritage's evaluation carried out in September 2013. Despite uncertainties regarding the extent of their assessment, and whilst more features have been removed since, St. John's was still considered to be "*undoubtedly of local interest and an asset to the streetscape*".
11. In reaching this view I have taken into account that St. John's is not formally identified on any local list. However, the Council does not have a local list and therefore this omission does not lessen its significance. Whilst a previous draft list did not include the church, this was undertaken by an interested individual and was not subject to any formal consultation. Consequently, this carries only very limited weight.

12. Similarly, the appellant has referred to the recently published national Planning Practice Guidance which states that, ideally, buildings should be judged against published criteria which may be generated as part of the process of producing a local list. I agree that this would certainly be useful for assessing buildings at the local level and recognise the appellant's frustrations in this regard. However, the Council has identified why they consider St. John's has a local heritage value and substantiated this through their written evidence. Consequently, I find nothing to suggest that inclusion of the church on a local list is necessary to warrant a consideration of its demolition.
13. I have also taken into account the appellant's comments that the church has no viable alternative future use and is likely to fall into a further state of disrepair to the detriment of the area. It has also been put to me that given the assessment submitted with the planning application showed that affordable housing would be unviable, it is questionable whether any alternative use would result in a reasonable return for the landowner. With this in mind, both the Framework and the national Planning Practice Guidance reinforce the need to ensure competitive returns to a willing land owner and a willing developer to enable development to be deliverable.
14. However, the viability assessment provided at the planning application stage related to the appeal proposal, and does not provide any detailed, comparable assessment against other alternative uses of the church. Moreover, in seeking to substantiate that other uses would be unviable only a letter from a local estate agent has been provided. Whilst this indicates that the returns likely to be generated by offices and apartments in Runcorn would be limited, it was made without sight of any detailed scheme for conversion of the church. Likewise, I have not been provided with any details to indicate what, if any alternative uses are possible, the costs involved or the returns likely to be generated. Consequently, this letter falls significantly short of a robust case to demonstrate that demolition is the only viable option for the site.
15. Similarly, the appellant states that the appeal site was marketed for a considerable period of time with no interest for alternative uses or the previous scheme which retained the front section of the church. However, no comprehensive marketing details have been provided, only details of the asking price and confirmation that the site was on the market up until the appellant purchased it in 2013. Whilst grant funding and other community uses may be unlikely, I find no convincing, substantiated evidence to reach a robust conclusion that all alternative options for the church have been exhausted. Balanced against the harm that the demolition of the church would cause, in this instance only limited weight can be attributed to these factors.
16. I have also taken into account that the Council has previously granted planning permission for demolition of the original Sunday school. However, this is contained to the rear and does not command the same street presence as the much larger, front section of the church. Consequently, the scheme before me is materially different to that which was approved previously.
17. The appellant also suggests that the Council's 7.21 years' worth of housing land supply set out in the *Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment* is significantly over estimated given previous rates of delivery. However, no further evidence has been provided to expand upon this, or to demonstrate any alternative position. As a result, whilst noting paragraphs 45 – 47 of the

Framework and recognising the benefits that the scheme would make to contributing towards local housing land supply, on the basis of the evidence provided this does not outweigh the harm identified.

18. Consideration has also been given to the sustainable location of the appeal site, that the scheme would contribute towards providing new family housing, and that it would be consistent with local and national planning policies which seek to promote growth in urban areas and encourage the reuse of brownfield land. Moreover, the Council has not raised any other concerns with the scheme and confirm that the design would harmonise with the area. Compared with the current use of the site there would also be several social, economic and environmental benefits to allowing the appeal. These factors all weigh in favour of the proposal.
19. On balance the proposal would have several benefits, including the reuse of a brownfield site within an urban area which has been vacant for several years and is subject to vandalism and anti-social behaviour. However, the church is a heritage asset which has local historic, architectural and visual interest and this would be lost by the demolition proposed. Without any robust evidence to suggest that this is the only viable option available, I therefore conclude that in this instance its retention is justified, and the harm resulting from the loss of the church would not be mitigated by building recording. As a result, the scheme conflicts with *Halton Core Strategy Local Plan* Policy CS20 and the Framework which seek to conserve buildings of local architectural and historic importance and sustain the significance of heritage assets. For the same reasons, it is not the sustainable development defined by the Framework.

Other Matters

20. In reaching my conclusion against the main issue I have taken into account that identification of the church as a non-designated heritage asset was not raised at the pre-application stage, and only brought to the appellant's attention relatively late in the process. However, whilst I appreciate the appellant's frustrations, the Council's process of determining the planning application is not a matter for me. Instead, I am required to consider the proposal on its specific merits having regard to the requirements of the development plan and other relevant guidance and I have determined the appeal on this basis.
21. Finally, the appellant also indicates that the church could be demolished without requiring planning permission. However, I am unaware of any plans in place for demolition through the prior approval process. Nonetheless, the proposal would cause material harm from the loss of a local heritage asset. Consequently, whether or not the building could be demolished outside of the planning process, this does not justify granting planning permission given the material harm that this would cause.

Conclusion

22. For the reasons given above, and having had regard to all other matters raised, I therefore conclude that the appeal should be dismissed.

Matthew Birkinshaw

INSPECTOR