

Appendix A - Conservation Officer comments

14/01552/F and 14/01601/LB

Chancel Cottage, Fir Lane, Steeple Aston

Internal alterations and removal of attached outbuilding to enable new extension

Chancel Cottage is a grade II listed building which lies within Steeple Aston Conservation Area. It is a simple vernacular, two storey cottage of 18th century date.

The property was subject to some pre-application consultation, although it is understood that this was with a potential purchaser and not the current owners.

The application was submitted in September 2014 and dealt with by a different Conservation Officer. A number of issues of concern were raised in relation to the details of the proposals. These were addressed on a number of occasions, most latterly by myself at a site meeting on 13th March 2015.

Heritage Statement - Summary

A Heritage Statement has been submitted as part of the application and the findings are included in discussion here.

The Heritage Statement provides a good background and overview of the cottage itself and its wider context of the village of Steeple Aston.

The document summarises the significance of the building and emphasises the importance of allowing change within heritage assets, but does not attempt to balance the harm against the public benefit of the proposal (this is not expected of applicants).

The Heritage Statement addresses issues outlined in the NPPF and accompanying practice guide, but does not address the local planning policy situation.

National Planning Policy Framework

The key focus of the NPPF in relation to the historic environment is to outline the significance / special interest of the heritage asset and its setting, identify whether any proposed changes cause harm (substantial or otherwise) to this significance and if any harm is caused weighing it against any public benefits, including securing its optimal viable use.

Significance

The Heritage Statement summarises the significance of Chancel Cottage as required by paragraph 128 of the NPPF.

- Physical evidence of development of village during 19th century
- Formality of façade as interpreted by rural craftsman, simplicity of form and absence of elaborate decoration.
- Plan form and earlier function of various rooms can be interpreted from surviving evidence
- House along with others providing a sense of enclosure to the street, framing the green space of the churchyard.
- Views from churchyard where cottage provides a backdrop or visual stop

- Use of natural, vernacular materials

I would agree with all of these elements, but would also add that the following also contribute to the significance of the building.

- Survival of the plan form with the 18th century single pile plan and the later incorporation of the stable building into the domestic accommodation.
- Simple vernacular form of the cottage and survival of historic fabric

Harm versus public benefit

The Heritage Statement has a section on the management of change within heritage assets. It is fully acknowledged that change needs to occur within historic buildings and the entire listed building consent regime is based around the management of this change

The NPPF provides detailed guidance on how the potential harm of any proposed development should be balanced by the public benefit. This is laid out in detail in paragraphs 132-134. In the case of Chancel Cottage the building has been little altered during the latter part of the 20th century, which has ensured the survival of a number of historic features, but has also suffered from a lack of maintenance for a period of time.

The optimum viable use is for the property to remain as a single residential property and in order to make the property suitable some alterations will need to take place. A degree of harm to historic fabric and significance may be acceptable in order to ensure the property can remain in its optimum viable use. This should however be proportionate to both the scale of the building and the historic significance.

I will take each of the items of concern, as outlined in the Heritage Statement, and address the individual issues.

Forming a new doorway

It is understood that this relates to the doorway at ground floor level and this aspect has now been removed from the application and the existing doorway will be utilised.

There is, however, the proposal to form an additional doorway at first floor level. The doorway is between the original stable range and the later 19th century addition, which was constructed as a physically separate structure. The ground floor area of the building has been brought into domestic usage, but the first floor area remains unconverted and unused. There is evidence of a former opening at first floor level which has since been blocked up. There would be some harm to the significance of the site if this element of the building were to be converted, but this would need to be weighed against the public benefit of bringing this section of the building into use with the associated benefits of better maintenance.

Bathroom on first floor

It is understood that concerns were expressed by the previous Conservation Officer relating to the provision of a bathroom at first floor level. There are no objections in principle to a bathroom at first floor level, but it is vital to ascertain the details of the proposal and how this will be achieved

without causing harm to the building. Further details are required about whether or not obscure glazing is required (this would be considered to cause harm if on the front elevation of the building) and the location and dimensions of any proposed waste pipes. This will enable a detailed assessment to be made of the harm versus the public benefit.

Rear dormers

Dormers are not a characteristic element of simple, vernacular cottages such as this one and will have an aggrandising effect at the rear of the property. There are no objections to the use of the space and an existing stairway leads up to the attic level. The proposal for roof lights, which are flush to the roof is a compromise which allows light into the space. It should be clear, however, that if further alterations are required to enable the space to be used as a bedroom due to building control requirements these may not be forthcoming. The property could function as a three bedroomed family home with additional, ancillary space to be used as office, study or playroom. The proposed dormers are considered to cause harm to the significance of the historic building and the public benefits are not considered to outweigh this harm.

Proposed extension

It is noted that the previous Conservation Officer had concerns with the visual impact of the proposed extension on the setting of the listed building itself, the neighbouring church and the character and appearance of the conservation area as a whole. My concerns relating to the visual and settings issues include the impact on the principle building of Chancel Cottage itself, on views from the church yard towards the property and views from the east of the property towards the church. These concerns can be provided in more detail, but are not the core objection to the proposal.

The fundamental concern relating to the proposal is that the form, scale and massing of the proposed extension causes harm to the significance / special interest of the listed building. Chancel Cottage originated as a simple, single pile dwelling which was subject to later modification to bring an ancillary wing into domestic ownership. Part of the special interest of the building, as identified above is the survival of the plan form. The proposed extension would completely alter the plan form of the building by creating a U-plan building based around a court yard. The extension is only marginally narrower and significantly longer than the original cottage, thus fundamentally altering the experience of the building and creating a situation whereby the original cottage becomes subservient to its later extensions. The fact that the extension is single storey does not mitigate against its fundamental form and massing. A core principle of the management of sensitive change to heritage assets is that any additions are subservient to the principle building

The use of timber boarding

There are significant concerns with the use of timber boarding in this context. The use of timber or weather-boarding appears to be the latest 'trend' in the district, but does not have historic precedent in the locality. Weather-boarding is historically reserved for detached outbuildings or specific functions in relation to canal side buildings and mill buildings. The proposed extension is not an outbuilding, but a large extension which is physically joined to the property. There are also long term maintenance concerns, particularly with untreated timbers whereby there can be varied

weathering depending on localised conditions. It is important to consider the visual appearance and maintenance issues for the property in the medium to long term. The proposed use of timber boarding on an extension (as opposed to outbuilding) is considered to cause harm to the character and appearance of the conservation area and the setting of the listed building. There is not perceived to be any public benefit to outweigh this harm.

Local Policies

The Heritage Statement makes only brief and very selective reference to locally specific planning policies relating to the historic environment. These are also a material consideration in determining any planning application and / or listed building consent. Local plan policies are vital as they allow interpretation of the national policies to specific local circumstances.

The District is currently in a hybrid situation – the Cherwell Local Plan 2014 has been to enquiry, but has not yet been adopted.

The Cherwell Local Plan 2014 Policy ESD 16 Character of the Built and Historic Environment has a number of parameters relating to high quality design in the historic environment including –

- Contributing positively to an area's character and identity by creating or reinforcing local distinctiveness,
- Conserve, sustain and enhance designated and non-designated heritage assets including buildings, features ... and their setting and ensure new development is sensitively sited and integrated,
- Respect the traditional pattern of routes, spaces, blocks, plots, enclosures and the form, scale and massing of buildings
- Reflect or, in a contemporary design response, re-interpret local distinctiveness, including elements of construction, elevational detailing, windows and doors, building and surfacing materials, mass, scale and colour palette

In the interim period the Saved Policies of the Cherwell Local Plan 1996 are considered current

- Policy C18 of the Cherwell Local Plan, 1996 (Saved Policies) states that development proposals should be 'minor and sympathetic to the architectural and historic character of the building'. This policy remains in place until such time as the Cherwell Local Plan 2014 Submission is adopted.

Conclusion

The application in its current form should be refused. There are elements of the application that have been agreed and others that require further information, but there are concerns in principle with some of the proposals.

The proposed kitchen extension in particular is considered to cause harm to the significance of the heritage asset. The public benefits of bringing the building back into active use do not outweigh this

harm as it is considered that the property could function as a modern family home, subject to minor, acceptable alterations without these substantial alterations.

The proposed development is not considered to be '*minor and sympathetic*' (Cherwell Local Plan 1996) to the historic building nor to '*Respect the traditional pattern of ... and form, scale and massing of buildings*' (Cherwell Local Plan Submission 2014).

The proposal is considered to be contrary to policies in the National Planning Policy Framework, Cherwell Local Plan 1996 and Cherwell Local Plan 201.

