

Application No.: 19/02337/F

Applicant's Name: Heyford Park Commercial Developments LTD

Proposal: Demolition of Building 457 southern facade and gable end walls. Temporary use and associated works to create public open space.

Location: Heyford Park Village Centre South

Comments from the Economic Growth Service

Summary

The development of the overall Village Centre is welcomed but I am concerned that this proposal removes a potentially important asset that could be managed in the short term and be used in the longer term to add uniqueness and enhanced viability.

Background

The development of the Village Centre is a key component of Heyford Park's infrastructure that will serve the needs of a growing resident population, businesses and surrounding parishes. Progress is underway but it is felt that the commercial viability of the scheme has changed in recent years which necessitates modification of phase 2.

Local Market Viability

The application contains a Planning and Heritage Statement which has more recently been supplemented by a report entitled 'A Commentary on Local Market Viability'. The Commentary concludes that:

".... in order to support both the letting of units in the Village Centre North and the success of Phase 1 of Village Centre South consideration should be given to the complete demolition of the remaining parts of Building 457 and to allow for the temporary use (prior to the delivery of Phase 2 of Village Centre South) as a public realm space. This will help to ensure that the local centre scheme at Heyford Park becomes a success and most importantly that it becomes integrated into the everyday life of the community from its opening. This will ensure that it becomes both a vibrant hub and economically sustainable".

Context

The Commentary provides an overview in considering the past and current market assessment of the retail / food & beverage sectors in general reference to urban and local centres. The downturn in recent years reflects increased caution seen in many sectors of business due to political, technological, economic and social conditions. The uncertainty created is widely reported as delaying investment decisions and it remains to be seen if this is a short or longer-term issue.

Heyford Park Village Centre

The immediate need at Heyford Park is for Phase 1 to be successfully let beyond its anchor food tenant whereby high-quality open space in the public realm is deemed important. The proposal is to create this by demolishing the remaining section of building 457 which has

apparently been retained because, amongst other reasons, it is an asset that could uniquely contribute to high-quality public realm in the long-term. My question therefore is how much public open space required over and above that already provided? Could additional open space be provided anywhere else to satisfy this point made within the Commentary whilst also retaining important built heritage that will add to the unique, holistic public realm beyond the immediate situation?

Phase Two is now being developed in two phases but I am unclear why Building 457 (dating from the 1920s and of noted importance to the unique character of the area) has been partially demolished when it had been e.g. recorded in 2006 as in 'Good Condition'. I cannot understand why it was not secured to ensure it did not conflict with the remainder of the Village Centre now being let and about to be extended?

I agree that the image of scaffolding supporting the façade is poor and would undoubtedly – if left - be off-putting for investors. However, could this be screened better in the short-term? Could alterations be made to the redevelopment of building 457 that would create an attractive and viable asset in an alternative use? Could this therefore enable Phase Two to be developed at the same time – integrating open space with heritage assets to create unique and high-quality public realm?

Conclusion

Successful town and local centres exist and tend to contain unique qualities and activities that cannot be replicated on-line or through characterless, standardised environments. The 1920s buildings at Heyford Park have character and create a unique environment. The highest quality elements of built heritage are retained to form the basis of a place where residents and visitors will choose not only to transact but also to dwell and return to for further high-quality experiences.

Heyford Park is creating those conditions but the recent downturn in the commercial occupier market places challenges in finding occupiers and presents a financial and environmental risk. It is unclear if this is a short-term risk that could be managed or a longer-term issue that necessitates the removal of a building façade that has been deemed as valuable to retain.

The proposed open space is attractive but does not appear unique. Indeed, it appears to remove a potentially unique asset that could be integrated within an attractive scheme. That scheme includes areas of building and shelter which would overcome the seasonality of public realm that does not contain shelter. The viability of that scheme may involve alterations to plans but I remain to be convinced that this proposal is the only way to ensure the viability of the whole scheme, especially when looking beyond the immediate future.

I hope that a positive way forward can be found.

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