



REGULATORY SERVICES COMMITTEE

30 April 2013

REPORT

Subject Heading:

P1537.12:Chaucer House & Hexagon House, 28 Western Road, Romford

Part demolition of Chaucer House and Hexagon House, construction of two new fire escapes, relocation of air handling plant and reconfiguration of existing parking (application received 17 December 2012; revised plans received 18 and 21 February 2013).

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Policy context:

**National Planning Policy Framework
The London Plan
Local Development Framework
None**

Financial summary:

The subject matter of this report deals with the following Council Objectives

Ensuring a clean, safe and green borough	[]
Championing education and learning for all	[]
Providing economic, social and cultural activity in thriving towns and villages	[X]
Valuing and enhancing the lives of our residents	[X]
Delivering high customer satisfaction and a stable council tax	[X]

SUMMARY

This application is for the partial demolition of Chaucer House and Hexagon House, together with the provision of new fire escapes and relocation of air handling plants and reconfiguration of the car park. The works are required to be undertaken in order to enable the construction of a proposed new leisure centre on the car park adjacent to Chaucer House (application P1492.12). The proposal is considered to be acceptable in all material respects and it is recommended that planning permission is granted.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that planning permission be granted subject to the following conditions:

1. Time Limit: - The development to which this permission relates must be commenced not later than three years from the date of this permission.

Reason: To comply with the requirements of Section 91 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended by Section 51 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004).

2. Accordance with Plans: - The development hereby permitted shall not be carried out otherwise than in complete accord with the approved plans, particulars and specifications (as set out on page one of this decision notice).

Reason: The Local Planning Authority consider it essential that the whole of the development is carried out and that no departure whatsoever is made from the details approved, since the development would not necessarily be acceptable if partly carried out or carried out differently in any degree from the details submitted. Also, in order that the development accords with Development Control Policies Development Plan Document Policy DC61.

3. Timing of Commencement: - No development shall commence until it has been demonstrated, to the satisfaction of the Local Planning Authority, that contractual arrangements are in place that would lead to the construction of the new leisure centre subject of planning application reference P1492.12

Reason: The development is only acceptable having regard to its connectivity with the proposed new leisure development on the adjacent car park, approved under planning permission P1492.12.

4. Hours of Working: - No construction or demolition works, or construction related deliveries into the site, shall take place other than between the hours of 08.00 to 18.00 on Monday to Friday and 08.00 to 13.00 hours on

Saturdays unless otherwise agreed in writing with the Local Planning Authority. No construction works or related deliveries shall take place on Sundays, Bank or Public Holidays unless otherwise agreed in writing by the Local Planning Authority.

Reason: To protect residential amenity, and in order that the development accords with the Development Control Policies Development Plan Document Policy DC61.

5. Construction Methodology: - Before development is commenced, a scheme shall be submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority making provision for a Construction Method Statement to control the adverse impact of the development on the amenity of the public and nearby occupiers. The Construction Method statement shall include details of:

- a) parking of vehicles of site personnel and visitors;
- b) storage of plant and materials;
- c) dust management controls;
- d) measures for minimising the impact of noise and ,if appropriate, vibration arising from construction activities;
- e) predicted noise and, if appropriate, vibration levels for construction using methodologies and at points agreed with the Local Planning Authority;
- f) scheme for monitoring noise and if appropriate, vibration levels using methodologies and at points agreed with the Local Planning Authorities;
- g) siting and design of temporary buildings;
- h) scheme for security fencing/hoardings, depicting a readily visible 24-hour contact number for queries or emergencies;
- i) details of disposal of waste arising from the construction programme, including final disposal points. The burning of waste on the site at any time is specifically precluded.

And the development shall be carried out in accordance with the approved scheme and statement.

Reason: To protect residential amenity, and in order that the development accords the Development Control Policies Development Plan Document Policy DC61.

6. Wheelwashing: - Before the development hereby permitted is first commenced, wheel scrubbing/wash down facilities to prevent mud being deposited onto the public highway during construction works shall be provided in accordance with details to be first submitted to and approved in writing by the Local Planning Authority. The approved facilities shall be provided before the development commences and used thereafter throughout the duration of construction.

Reason: In order to prevent materials from the site being deposited on the adjoining public highway, in the interests of highway safety and the amenity of the surrounding area, and in order that the development accords with the

Development Control Policies Development Plan Document Policies DC61 and DC32.

INFORMATIVES:

Statement Required by Article 31 (cc) of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management) Order 2010: No significant problems were identified during the consideration of the application, and therefore it has been determined in accordance with paragraphs 186-187 of the National Planning Policy Framework 2012.

Reason for Approval:

The proposal does not comply with the provisions of Policy Rom13 of the Romford Area Action Plan in that it results in the net loss of office floorspace within the area designated as the Romford Office Quarter. However, it is considered that the proposal is justified having regard to:

- a) the wider economic and cultural benefits that would be generated by the proposed new leisure development on the adjacent site, which cannot be achieved if the works subject of this application are not approved;
- b) the employment opportunities that are able to be created as part of the proposed new leisure development
- c) the current levels of under-occupancy of the existing offices, combined with a downturn in the demand for office floorspace within Romford.

The proposal is considered to accord with aims and objectives of the National Planning Policy Framework and with Policies 2.6, 2.7, 2.8, 2.15, 4.6, 4.7, 6.1 and 7.4 of the London Plan.

The proposal is also considered to accord with the aims and objectives of Policies CP4, CP5, CP7, CP9, CP10, CP17, DC15, DC19, DC20, DC32-36, DC40, DC53, DC55, DC61 and DC62 of the Core Strategy and Development Control Policies Development Plan Document and Policies ROM9, ROM20 and ROM21 of the Romford Area Action Plan are material to this application.

REPORT DETAIL

1. Site Description

- 1.1 The application site is within Romford Town Centre and is located to the south side of Western Road, to the eastern side of its junction with Grimshaw Way. The site is generally flat, although there is a gentle slope towards the southern end of the site and has an area of 0.57 hectares. It

comprises the existing 4/5 storey office buildings, known as Chaucer House and Hexagon House, together with an associated car park of around 200 spaces to the side and rear of the buildings.

- 1.2 To the north of the site lies Western Road, with a multi-storey car park on the opposite side of the road and beyond that the Liberty shopping centre. There are bus stops directly in front of the application site. To the immediate east of the site is Mercury Gardens, which forms part of the ring road around Romford Town Centre. West of the site is Grimshaw Way, which is bordered on the other side by the 5 storey Sovereign House and 4 storey Scimitar House beyond. A narrow private access road lies to the south with the 4 storey St James House and 2 storey Romford & District Synagogue beyond.
- 1.3 The wider area is characterised by town centre activities and includes a number of shopping centres, including the Liberty and Brewery, reflective of the status of Romford as a Metropolitan Town Centre (as identified in the London Plan). The site also lies within the Romford Office Quarter as identified in the Romford Area Action Plan.

2. Description of Proposal

- 2.1 The application is for the part demolition of Chaucer and Hexagon House. This will also require the removal and re-construction of two existing fire escapes, together with associated works to relocate air handling plant. The proposal also includes the reconfiguration of the existing parking arrangements. The proposed works constitute enabling development, required in order to facilitate the proposed development of a new leisure centre on the existing car park adjacent to Chaucer House.
- 2.2 The section of the building to be demolished is primarily to the western end of Chaucer House. A section of the building, 13m long and the depth of the building, affecting all floors, would be demolished, along with an existing fire escape staircase. This would result in the reduction of the office floorspace by 658 square metres to 1311 sq.m. (previously 1969 sq.m.). More limited demolition works would take place to the western side of Hexagon House involving the removal of an existing fire escape staircase.
- 2.3 The western flank walls of Chaucer House would be reinstated, finished with grey coloured cladding and a new open steel fire escape constructed to the south elevation of the building, at its south-western corner. The western flank of the fire escape staircase would also be clad in similar grey panelling. The western flank wall of Hexagon House would be finished in similar materials but would include an external fire door to lower ground floor. A new open steel fire escape would also be provided to Hexagon House, to the south elevation at its south-western corner. A single storey plant enclosure, steel framed with steel mesh finish, is also proposed to the south of Hexagon House, adjacent to the new fire escape staircase.

- 2.4 The parking layout is to be reconfigured. The parking area within the 'courtyard' of the office buildings currently provides 35 parking spaces and there are a further 72 spaces in the main car park. The courtyard spaces will be rearranged, primarily to accommodate the loss of spaces on the western edge of the site, and reduces to 27 spaces but parking in the main car park would increase to 79 spaces. Overall there would be a net loss of one parking space. A tree in the 'courtyard' would be removed.

3. Relevant History

- 3.1 There is no previous planning history in respect of Chaucer House or Hexagon House that is of direct relevance to these proposals. There are however proposals affecting the adjacent surface car park that are relevant:
- 3.2 Z0008.12 Screening opinion for current car park to be developed for Leisure Centre to include swimming pool and ice rink. – EIA not required.
- 3.3 P1492.12 Construction of a new leisure centre comprising an ice rink, 25m swimming pool, training pool, multi-purpose dance studio, fitness suite and ancillary café with associated disabled car parking and cycle parking – not yet determined (reported separately on this agenda).
- 3.4 The Council is also considering an application for redevelopment of the existing Romford Ice Rink site to provide a supermarket and residential development (P1468.12). This application is also reported separately on this agenda.

4. Consultations/Representations

- 4.1 The application has been advertised on site and in the local press as a departure from LDF policies. Neighbour notification letters have also been sent to 6 local addresses.

5. Relevant Policies

The National Planning Policy Framework, specifically Sections 1 (Building a strong, competitive economy), 2 (ensuring the vitality of town centres), 4 (promoting sustainable transport), 7 (requiring good design), 8 (promoting healthy communities) and 10 (meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding and coastal change) are relevant to these proposals.

Policies 2.6-2.8 (Outer London: Vision and strategy, economy and transport), 2.15 (town centres), 3.19 (sports facilities), 4.2 (offices), 4.6 (support for and enhancement of culture and sport provision), , 4.7 (retail and town centre development), 5.18 (development waste management), 5.21 (contaminated land), 6.1 (transport), 6.9 (cycling), 6.10 (walking), 6.13 (parking),7.4 (local character), 7.5 (public realm) and 7.6 (architecture) of the London Plan are material planning considerations.

Policies CP4 (town centres) , CP5 (culture), CP7 (recreation and leisure), CP9 (reducing the need to travel), CP10 (sustainable transport), CP17 (design), DC15 (town centres), DC19 (location of cultural facilities), DC20 (access to recreation and leisure), DC32-36 (transport), DC40 (waste recycling), DC53 (contaminated land), DC55 (noise), DC60 (trees), DC61 (urban design) and DC62 (access) of the Core Strategy and Development Control Policies Development Plan Document are material considerations.

Policies Rom 9 (Metropolitan Shopping Centre), ROM13 (Romford Office Quarter), ROM20 (urban design) and ROM21 (urban design) of the Romford Area Action Plan are material to this application.

6. Staff Comments

6.1 The issues arising from this application are the acceptability, in principle, of the loss of existing office floorspace within the designated Romford Office Quarter, the impact on the vitality and viability of the town centre, the visual impact of the proposed works, amenity issues and parking and highway considerations.

6.2 Principle of Development

6.2.1 The site lies within the Romford Office Quarter, designated in the Romford Area Action Plan (AAP). Policy ROM13 of the AAP encourages proposals which will increase the provision of office accommodation within the office quarter and seeks to resist proposals that would result in a net loss of office floorspace. It is acknowledged that this proposal would result in the loss of 658 square metres gross of office floorspace, which represents around 33.5% of the existing floorspace of 1969 square metres. This loss of office floorspace would not be re-provided for within the proposed re-development of the adjoining car park. There is no loss of floorspace proposed to Hexagon House, which remains at 3,804 square metres.

6.2.2 It is appropriate to judge the acceptability of the proposals in the light of two specific issues – firstly, the changing economic conditions since the adoption of the AAP in 2008 and, secondly, the purpose of the application to create on site conditions which will enable the planned redevelopment of the adjoining car park as a new leisure centre. These two factors are assessed further below.

6.2.3 In respect of the economic conditions, evidence suggests a steady decline in the Romford office market over recent years and a consequent over-provision of available office floorspace. The application premises, which currently has a high level of vacancy, is reflective of this trend. Work undertaken in 2012 by consultants URS for the Council to support the review of the LDF has noted that demand in the local office market in Havering has remained at a relatively low level with the existing stock able to satisfy demand albeit with some demand for serviced premises in the Romford Office Quarter. URS consultants noted that where demand has existed it has been for premises from 250m² – 2,500m². The GLA London

Office Policy review (2009) has noted that changes in working patterns through such initiatives as home working is having an impact on the demand for office space. In regard to trying to assess the likely demand for office space in Romford in the years ahead it is worth reflecting that work undertaken by GVA for Crossrail in 2012 concluded that outside of Central London, Crossrail is likely to have a limited impact in terms of generating additional demand for office space.

- 6.2.4 There has been recognition within the Council of the shifting demands for office floorspace within the town centre and the Council has acknowledged (in the Havering Culture Strategy 2012-2014) that a key objective is to encourage major investment in Romford including, inter-alia, to deliver leisure-led mixed-use development in Romford to supplement the office market as a means of generating footfall.
- 6.2.5 As referred to above, the primary purpose of this application is to create the on site conditions necessary to enable the proposed development of a public leisure facility on the adjacent car park to go ahead. The merits of the leisure centre application are addressed in a separate report on this agenda. However, it is appropriate to note that the location of new leisure and recreation facilities within town centre locations is supported in principle by national and local planning policies. The siting of a new public leisure facility in the heart of the town centre reflects the Council's high level objectives to regenerate parts of Romford Town Centre in the light of the significant investment that has been made in other existing, and new, centres in the wider region.
- 6.2.6 The Council is attune to the need to maintain the vitality and viability of Romford Town Centre. Indeed, work undertaken by GVA for the Council in 2012 linked to the LDF review concluded that despite current performance, Romford will have to face significant challenges in the years ahead. GVA have suggested that Romford needs to develop a 'unique selling point'. Staff consider that the provision of a modern leisure facility within the heart of the town centre, creating opportunity for linked trips and encouraging workers and shoppers to spend longer within the town centre may also be a step towards achieving this. The proposed works to Chaucer House and Hexagon House are however critical if the leisure centre development is to go ahead.
- 6.2.7 In view of the cultural and economic benefits to the town centre arising from the provision of a new public leisure centre and the well-documented changing market conditions since the adoption of the AAP, it is considered that the modest loss of some office floorspace could be accepted in this location without materially harming the future viability of the Romford office market. There is already significant vacancy levels within the office building, whereas the development of the proposed leisure centre itself creates employment opportunities and is expected to generate some 50 new full and part time posts. Overall therefore it is considered that the economic benefit arising from the proposed leisure centre development outweighs the impact of the loss of an element of office floorspace. It is however recognised that

there should be a mechanism to ensure that there is a link between the enabling works and the development of the leisure centre and it is proposed that this be secured by condition.

6.3 Visual Impact

- 6.3.1 The existing office buildings are not of any significant architectural or historical merit and there is no objection in principle to partial demolition of these buildings. The demolition of a section of the Chaucer House building is not considered to unacceptably detract from the rhythm or character of the building, such that it is considered there would be no material harm to the character of the Western Road streetscene.
- 6.3.2 The western end elevations of both Chaucer and Hexagon House would be finished with a grey panelled cladding material. Whilst this would contrast with the orange/red brick of the existing buildings, it would have a very limited degree of visibility once the proposed leisure development is built and is considered an appropriate choice of material in view of future maintenance and longevity.
- 6.3.3 The proposed new external fire exit staircases are proposed to the south side of both Chaucer and Hexagon House. They would not be visible from Western Road, Mercury Gardens or in Grimshaw Way as they would be screened from view by either the existing office buildings or the proposed new leisure development. They could be viewed from the car parking area and office buildings to the south of the site but in the context of the surrounding environment and given limited wider public view they are judged to be visually acceptable.
- 6.3.4 The proposed single storey plant enclosure, to the south of Hexagon House, would not have a material impact on the visual amenity of the locality owing to its siting and limited scale. The proposals are not therefore considered to conflict with Policies CP17 or DC61 of the LDF.

6.4 Impact on Amenity

- 6.4.1 The proposals effectively reduce the scale, bulk and mass of the existing office buildings so have no material impact on neighbouring amenity in this respect. They introduce new fire escape staircases and a plant enclosure but, owing to the commercial nature of surrounding buildings and the distance from the nearest residential properties in Western Road it is considered they would not materially affect neighbouring amenity, either in terms of visual impact or noise generated.
- 6.4.2 The revised parking arrangements affect commercial properties and are not considered to materially impact on neighbouring amenity. A tree will be lost from the parking area but this has limited visibility outside of the site and so little impact on wider public amenity.

6.5 Parking and Highway Issues

- 6.5.1 The proposed development involves the reconfiguration of the existing car parking provision within the site. Car parking is currently provided within a courtyard-type area, formed by the existing office buildings, and in an undercroft arrangement beneath Chaucer House. There is also a surface car park to the south of Hexagon House. The parking is to be reconfigured as existing spaces to the western side of the site will be lost to accommodate the proposed leisure centre development and undercroft parking will be lost beneath the section of Chaucer House to be demolished.
- 6.5.2 The rearrangement of the parking within the courtyard area reduces the number of spaces from 35 to 27, a loss of 8 spaces. However, the majority of this can be re-provided through works to the car park south of Hexagon House, such that the net loss of parking generated by the proposals is one space. This leaves 106 parking spaces in total.
- 6.5.3 Staff raise no objection to this in principle as the net loss of parking provision is marginal. Furthermore, given the net loss of office floorspace the parking space to floorspace ratio would actually increase. Given the location of the site in a PTAL zone of 6 it is considered that no material highway impact would result from the proposed development.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1 The proposed development is required to create the on-site conditions necessary for the construction of the proposed new Romford leisure centre. It therefore is critical to the ability to deliver a development that will contribute to the economy and culture of the town centre. Whilst the development will result in a net loss of office floorspace, which is contrary to the aims of Policy ROM13, it must be weighed against the overall benefits that the enablement of the leisure centre development will bring. In the light of this and the recent economic downturn, together with the job creation opportunity provided by the new leisure development, the loss of office floorspace is considered to be justified.
- 7.2 The proposal is acceptable in all other material respects, including visual impact, impact on amenity and parking and highway considerations. It is therefore recommended that planning permission be granted.

IMPLICATIONS AND RISKS

Financial implications and risks:

The proposal is directly linked to the ability to deliver the proposed new Romford leisure centre.

Legal implications and risks:

Unless this application is linked to the proposed redevelopment of the adjoining site, the planning justification for the proposal is weak. Condition 3 provides the necessary linkage and resolves the issue without the need for a Section 106 agreement.

Human Resources implications and risks:

None arising from this application.

Equalities implications and risks:

The proposal is integral to the ability to provide a new leisure centre for the Borough on the adjacent site. The leisure centre will provide a facility suitable for use by all members of the community, thereby contributing to the objective of equality of opportunity for all Borough residents.

BACKGROUND PAPERS

Application received 17 December 2012; revised plans received 18 and 21 February 2013.