

Application No: 15/1664C

Location: MUNICIPAL OFFICES, MARKET SQUARE, CONGLETON,
CONGLETON, CHESHIRE

Proposal: Demolition of existing Municipal Building, disconnection of services and clearing of site. Existing drainage to be retained. Installation of low level timber diamond knee rail fencing to boundary. Site to be dressed with topsoil and seeded.

Applicant: Robert Edwards, Cheshire East Council

Expiry Date: 04-Jun-2015

CONCLUSION:

The application has demonstrated that the proposal is not suitable for employment use given it is not considered that the proposal is economically viable in its current state and the costs involved in refurbishment would outweigh the costs involved with the proposal.

The application states that there is surplus office space currently available in Congleton, with supply outstripping demand. No enquiries regarding the availability of the Municipal Buildings for office space has been received in the period between 30th November 2012 and 01st December 2014.

The Municipal Buildings have previously been identified within the wider Congleton Town Centre Plan Draft Strategy 2008 as an area required for redevelopment.

The buildings are not sited in a prominent area within the town centre are not considered to contribute to the Moody Street Conservation Area as an existing.

The design and layout of the scheme is considered to be acceptable. The proposal for a grassed area is not considered to appear discordant in this location whilst sufficient landscaping and boundary treatments would be provided as part of the scheme.

The proposal is not considered to adversely impact upon existing levels of residential amenity and would not give rise to any highway implications, subject to conditions.

It is also considered that subject to conditions, the development would not have a detrimental impact upon existing drainage considerations.

The proposal would comply with relevant policies of the Development Plan and is recommended for approval subject to the conditions set out below.

DETAILS OF PROPOSAL

Full planning permission is sought to demolish the building and lay the site to grass. Fencing is proposed around the perimeter of the site.

DESCRIPTION OF SITE AND CONTEXT

The application site is the Municipal Offices in Congleton. Two charity groups currently operate from the building.

The site forms part of the wider Congleton Town Centre redevelopment proposal. The current tenants were offered short term tenancies to cater for the redevelopment, which was proposed for 2012/13. However, the redevelopment has been postponed until 2016/17.

In the interim of future of development, the Local Authority seeks to demolish the existing building.

RELEVANT HISTORY

32934/3 – New pedestrian entrance to existing offices to serve the South Cheshire Economic Partnership. Approved 02nd April 2001.

POLICIES

National Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework establishes a presumption in favour of sustainable development.

Development Plan

The Development Plan for this area is the Congleton Borough Local Plan First Review 2005, which identifies that the site is within the Congleton Settlement Zone Line.

The relevant Saved Policies are:

Policy E10 – Re-use or Redevelopment of Existing Employment Sites

Policy GR1 – New Development

Policy GR2 – Design

Policy GR6 – Amenity and Health

Policy GR9 – Accessibility, Servicing and Parking Provision

Policy BH9 – Conservation Areas

The saved Local Plan policies are consistent with the NPPF and should be given full weight.

Cheshire East Local Plan Strategy – Submission Version (CELP)

The following are considered relevant material considerations as indications of the emerging strategy:

Policy SD 1 - Sustainable Development in Cheshire East

Policy SD 2 - Sustainable Development Principles

Policy SE 1 – Design

Policy SE 2 – Efficient Use of Land

Policy SE 7 – The Historic Environment

Policy EG 3 – Existing and Allocated Employment Sites

CONSIDERATIONS (External to Planning)

Highway Authority: No objection subject to the submission of a method statement stating the location of the contractors plant and how HGV's would access the site.

Environmental Health: No objection subject to conditions securing a dust suppression statement and construction hours.

Congleton Sustainability Group (CSG): Support the proposal, stating that the building is no longer economically viable, is not energy efficient given its age and the building has no architectural merit.

Concerns also raised in regards to the overall use of the site, provision of secure cycle parking, missing information in the application in terms of the relocation of the existing tenants, the costs involved in demolition and reinstatement of the area and management of the future maintenance of the area.

View of the Parish/Town Council:

No comments received at the time of writing.

Other Representations:

None received.

OFFICER APPRAISAL

Principle of Development

Policy E10 allows for the redevelopment of an existing employment site, provided it can be shown that the site is no longer suitable for employment uses or there would be substantial planning benefit in permitting alternative uses that would outweigh the loss of the site for employment purposes.

In considering whether the site is no longer suitable for employment uses, account will be taken of the location and physical nature of the premises, supply of existing employment sites in the area and whether reasonable attempts have been made to let or sell the employment use in question.

The Justification Statement submitted with the application states that the Council's Economic Development and Regeneration Team have received 19 enquiries for office space between 30th November 2012 and 01st December 2014, which is considered to be a low number.

None of these enquiries were made in regards to the availability of the application site.

The Statement submits that there are currently 17 properties offering available space to rent within Congleton and that approximately 75% of the offices currently advertised to let have been vacant for at least 12 months, which highlights the lack of demand of available office space.

The lack of demand is further reinforced by the fact that flexible lease terms, rent free periods and offices as freehold for sale have been offered to prospective tenants however have failed to initiate commercial interest in the properties available.

The majority of enquiries made (6) were in regards to office space measuring up to 23.22m², which gives an indication of the size of office space most sought after in the area.

The Municipal Buildings ground floor area measures 832m² whilst the first floor area measures 371m², providing a total of 1,283m².

Three enquiries were made in the period of two years for an office space with up to 2,857m², of which the overall size of the application site would satisfy. However, the enquiries were not made in direct relation to the Municipal Buildings and the total amount of enquiries requested for this floor space is considered to be low within this two year period.

At the time of writing, Local Commercial Lettings Agents (Timothy Brown) confirm that there has been one enquiry for office space in Congleton Town Centre since January 2015.

Two charity groups currently operate from the building. The Justification Statement advises that both pay a rent of £1,533.60 and £6,926.40 inclusive of service charge, rates and value added tax. The Authority currently pays the sites building rates, which amounts to £55,376.55 per annum. This results in a loss of £46,916.55 per annum.

Given the age and current state of repair of the Municipal Building, the costs involved in the refurbishment is estimated at £528,000, as set out in Appendix A of the Justification Statement. The applicant has confirmed in writing that the overall cost of the demolition works and reinstatement of the site to grass would be estimated at £155,000.

The Municipal Buildings have also been incorporated in the wider Congleton Town Centre Redevelopment Plan and were identified in the Congleton Town Centre Delivery Strategy Plan 2008 as an area for redevelopment.

The applicant confirms that assistance would be provided to the charity groups which currently occupy the building in finding suitable alternative accommodation.

In taking the above evidence into account, the site is not considered to be viable in its present state and the costs involved in refurbishment would outweigh the costs involved with the proposal, particularly given the lack of demand for office use within Congleton. The proposal would comply with Policy E10 of the Congleton Borough Local Plan 2005.

Character and Appearance

The application site lies to the North of Moody Street Conservation Area and adjacent to a Grade II* Listed Building. The site is visible when viewed from within the conservation area and from a number of listed buildings.

The building is dated in its appearance having been built circa 1969 and is considered to offer a limited contribution to the overall character and appearance of the surrounding area.

It is considered that the demolition of the building and the sites reinstatement to grass would enhance existing views when viewed from within the conservation area.

The current boundary treatment comprises low concrete pillars adjoined by metal link chains.

The proposed timber diamond knee rail fencing is considered to be an improvement to the existing boundary treatment, having a more contemporary appearance and being reminiscent of fencing commonly found in parks and gardens.

The fencing would also help to provide an element of natural security by enclosing the boundaries of the site.

The application states that existing planting beds would be retained, which would add further visual interest to the scheme.

Overall it is considered that the proposal would not adversely impact upon the character and appearance of the Moody Street Conservation Area or the surrounding locality and would comply with Policies GR1, GR2 and BH9 of the Congleton Borough Local Plan 2005.

Residential Amenity

It is not considered that the proposal would adversely impact on existing levels of residential amenity.

Hours of construction would be conditioned as part of any grant of planning permission as would a scheme to secure dust mitigation measures.

Environmental Health raises no objection.

The site would be maintained by ANSA.

The proposal is considered to comply with Policy GR6 of the Congleton Borough Local Plan 2005.

Access and Parking

Access to the site would be via Market Square with the existing site entrance utilised.

Highway Authority raises no objection to the proposal, subject to a condition to secure a method statement relating to the site location of the contractor compound and the way in which HGV's would access the site during waste removal.

The proposal would accord with Policy GR9 of the Congleton Borough Local Plan 2005.

CONCLUSIONS AND REASONS(S) FOR THE DECISION

The application has demonstrated that the proposal is not suitable for employment use given it is not considered that the proposal is economically viable in its current state and the costs involved in refurbishment would outweigh the costs involved with the proposal.

The application states that there is surplus office space currently available in Congleton, with supply outstripping demand. No enquiries regarding the availability of the Municipal Buildings for office space has been received in the period between 30th November 2012 and 01st December 2014.

The Municipal Buildings have previously been identified within the wider Congleton Town Centre Plan Draft Strategy 2008 as an area required for redevelopment.

The buildings are not sited in a prominent area within the town centre are not considered to contribute to the Moody Street Conservation Area as an existing.

The design and layout of the scheme is considered to be acceptable. The proposal for a grassed area is not considered to appear discordant in this location whilst sufficient landscaping and boundary treatments would be provided as part of the scheme.

The proposal is not considered to adversely impact upon existing levels of residential amenity and would not give rise to any highway implications, subject to conditions.

Subject to conditions, the development would not have a detrimental impact upon existing drainage considerations.

The proposal would comply with relevant policies of the Development Plan and is recommended for approval subject to the conditions set out below.

RECOMMENDATION

APPROVE subject to the following conditions:

- 1. Standard time 3 years**
- 2. Plans**
- 3. Submission of a Highway Method Statement**
- 4. Submission of a Dust Suppression Statement**
- 5. Construction hours**
- 6. Boundary treatments**

In order to give proper effect to the Committee's intentions and without changing the substance of the decision, authority is delegated to the Principal Planning Manager, in consultation with the Chair (or in his absence the Vice Chair) of Southern Planning Committee, to correct any technical slip or omission in the wording of the resolution, between approval of the minutes and issue of the decision notice.

Should this application be the subject of an appeal, authority be delegated to the Principal Planning Manager in consultation with the Chairman of the Southern Planning Committee to enter into a planning agreement in accordance with the S106 Town and Country Planning Act to secure the Heads of Terms for a S106 Agreement.

