

No. 38 Oxford Road and 3-5 Cheapside, Reading, RG1

CHANGE OF USE OF UPPER FLOORS TO SIX DWELLINGS (CLASS C3) WITH USE OF PART OF GROUND FLOOR FOR CYCLE PARKING, REFUSE AND RECYCLING STORE; ALTERATIONS AND REAR EXTENSION TO LISTED BUILDING



APPLICATION SUPPORTING STATEMENT SEPTEMBER 2021

Ref. 9072/5

INTRODUCTION AND APPLICATION CONTEXT

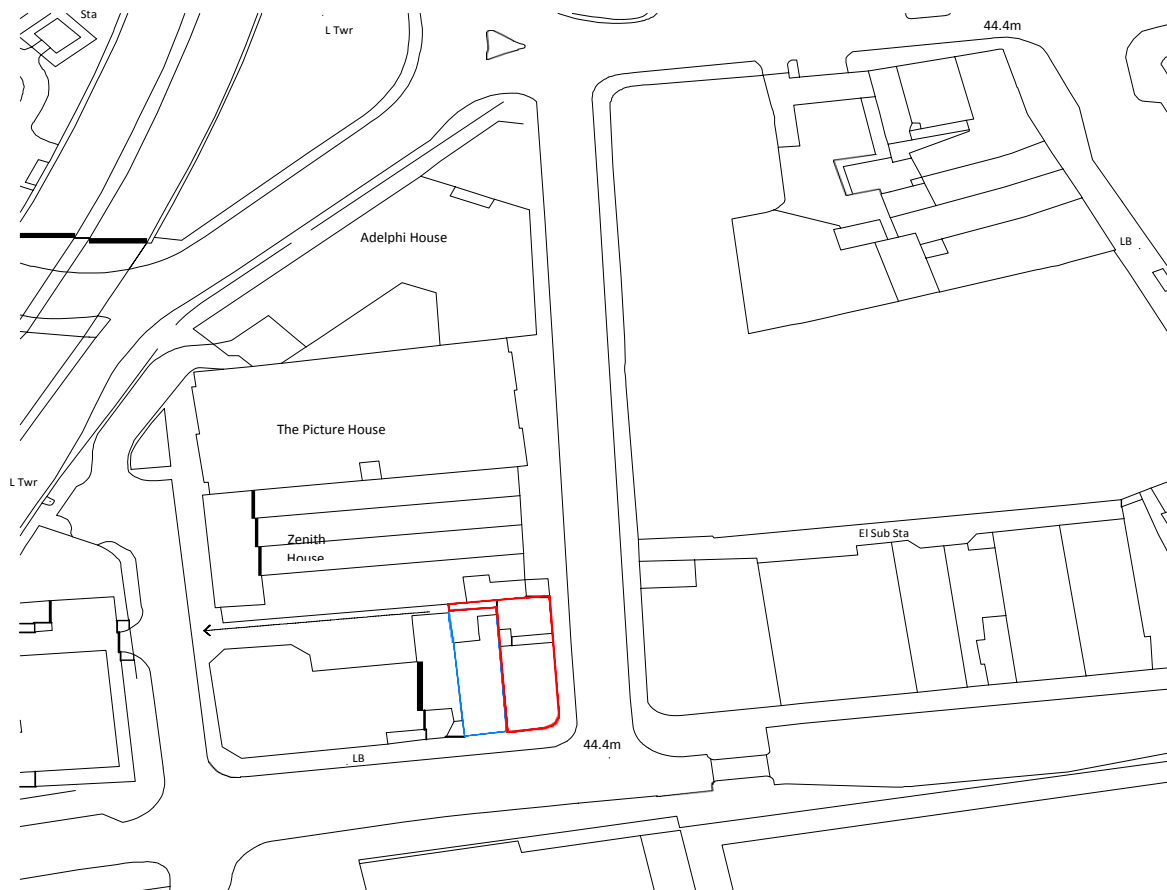
1. This statement is submitted in support of a planning and listed building application for the change of use of the upper floors of the property from vacant office and residential space (one unit) to wholly residential use (C3) with associated alterations and a modest rear extension. The proposals will create 6 new homes at No. 38 Oxford Road and Nos. 3-5 Cheapside, Reading RG1 (the site) which is a 4-storey, Grade II listed building within the town centre.
2. This statement should be read in conjunction with the full planning application and listed building consent submission, including the following documents:
 - Application form;
 - Scheme drawings;
 - Design and Access Statement;
 - Heritage Assessment;
 - Air quality assessment;
 - Noise impact assessment;
 - Energy and sustainability statement;
 - s106 HoT's statement;
 - Affordable housing financial viability appraisal; and
 - CIL form
3. The upper floors of the building have remained vacant for many years. As with other upper floors of older commercial premises in the town centre there is difficulty in securing viable business tenants due to lack of demand for such space. It has a lack of exposure to passing trade and the general nature of the building that has an older, inflexible layout, means that it is unsuited to contemporary office workspace.
4. This application for planning permission and listed building consent proposes that the use of the three floors above the existing ground floor commercial units is changed residential (C3 use). It requires only minor alterations and additions. Part of the first floor already has a lawful residential use (one bedroom unit). Notably, planning permission and listed building consent has already been granted in the past (most recently in 2010) for a similar conversion to that now proposed. The main existing ground floor commercial unit and its shopfront fronting Oxford Road would be retained and sit outside of the application proposals. The smaller vacant commercial unit to the rear (on Cheapside) would be utilised to accommodate cycle parking and refuse store for the residential units.
5. The introduction of a wholly residential use to the upper floors over the main commercial unit will help ensure that the vitality and viability of the town centre is maintained whilst providing much needed new housing at an appropriate location. The scheme will make the best use of the

long time vacant and underutilised space. The new homes would be of good quality with no adverse impacts the amenity. The conversion would ensure there is a viable use which will provide long term protection for the heritage significance of the listed building which has seen its condition deteriorate whilst disused. As the proposals are strongly supported by planning policy, this statement concludes that planning permission and listed building consent should be granted.

SITE AND APPLICATION DETAILS

APPLICATION SITE

6. The site is located on the corner of Oxford Road (no.38) and Cheapside (nos. 3-5) within Reading town centre as shown outlined in red on the location plan below.



Not to scale

Existing building

7. The existing building is a 4-storey Victorian building that is Grade II listed (c. 1900). The building is of brick construction with grey and red brickwork, terracotta detail and stepped gables. The ground floor comprises a commercial unit at No. 38 Oxford Road (but sitting outside of the

application proposals) and a smaller vacant commercial unit to the rear fronting Cheapside. The first floor layout includes a one bedroom residential unit (vacant) with the remainder of the first, second and third floors laid out as offices which are also vacant. This past office use in particular has resulted in much of the original interior detail being altered or lost. The entrance to the existing residential unit and office space is located on Cheapside. Neither the office space or the first floor residential unit have been occupied for at least 10 years. The building is in poor condition.



8. The listing description of the building is

CHEAPSIDE 1. 5128 Nos 3 to 7 (odd) SU 7173 SW 2/430 II 2. Including No 38 Oxford Road. Circa 1900. Architects, Joseph Morris and Son. 6 bays corner site. 3 1/2 storeys. Dutch stepped gables to attic dormers. English bond grey brick with red brick or terracotta dressings, transom and lintel level bands and moulded strings to crow steps; terracotta decoration and relieving arches to 2 larger gables. Parapet. Tiled roof. 4 off-ridge chimneys, one to right of corner gable is an external stack, corbelled and with an applied corbelled red brick diagonal shaft. Tall gable of 4 lights on corner, with 3 light gable to left and a group of 3 gables 2-3-2 lights to right, at far end is a wide 5-light gable with coped verge and sash ends. 1st and 2nd floor windows have decorative lintels, moulded transoms and fluted mullions. 4 lights to corner bay; Oxford Road bay has an angled bay flanked by single lights. Two 5-light oriels to Cheapside flanking a 5-light window on 2nd floor, pattern revised on 1st floor with bracketed hood over. Outer bay plainer. Heavy kidney shaped rainwater heads. Modern ground floor shop premises retaining former fascia.

Surrounding context

9. The site is located within the inner town centre (Reading Central Area) with the surrounding area containing a mix of retail, office, residential and restaurant/drinking establishment uses. The Broad Street Mall lies opposite to the southwest. Oxford Road is a main shopping street and the

Oxford Road frontage is within a primary shopping area although this lies outside of the application site. There is very good accessibility to public transport (bus and rail) in the town centre.

DETAILS OF THE PROPOSAL

10. The full description of the proposed development is:

CHANGE OF USE OF UPPER FLOORS TO SIX DWELLINGS (CLASS C3) WITH USE OF PART OF GROUND FLOOR FOR CYCLE PARKING, REFUSE AND RECYCLING STORE; ALTERATIONS AND REAR EXTENSION TO LISTED BUILDING

11. The proposal excludes the main commercial unit and shop front that occupies part of the ground floor fronting Oxford Road and Cheapside. This unit is occupied and continues to trade. Alterations and a minor addition are proposed as part of the conversion of the upper floors to residential use, creating six self-contained residential units (net gain of 5 units). Access to the proposed residential units on the first, second and third floors would be from the existing entrance stairs from Cheapside. A smaller shop unit fronting Cheapside would be altered and converted to a post room, cycle store (13 spaces) and a refuse/recycling store.
12. A very modest three floor extension (4.3 sqm per floor) is proposed within the existing rear light well to improve access to the adjacent building (No. 40 Oxford Road) where an additional 6 flats are to be provided under a separate and extant consent. A new metal walkway and stair will provide a fire escape route to a rear yard off Thorn Street to the rear of the site. The proposed extension would not be visible from the street and it would be finished in terracotta cladding to relate to the colour and tone of the existing building.
13. Internally, minor alterations are proposed as part of the conversion to residential use. Part of an existing flight of stairs would be removed with new access stairs provided to optimise the layout. It is proposed that all period details of the stairs and balustrades will be retained. The original balustrades removed from the demolished flight will be utilised in the new stairs. The scope of internal works is limited to minimise impacts on the remaining original fabric of the building including architectural detail and room layouts.
14. The proposed dwellings to the upper floors are all one bedroom units as follows:

First Floor	Type	Floor Area (sqm)
Unit 1	1 bed 2 person	39.1
Unit 2	1 bed 2 person	34.9
Second Floor		
Unit 3	1 bed 2 person	34.4
Unit 4	1 bed 2 person	42.0



Third Floor		
Unit 5	1 bed 2 person	39.6
Unit 6	1 bed 2 person	32.0

15. The accompanying drawings and Design and Access Statement provide full details of the layout and design of the proposals.

PLANNING HISTORY

16. The building dates from c. 1900 and originally contained residential use to its upper floors. Later alterations converted parts of the upper floors to office use with this resulting in the loss of original details and layout in some parts of the building.
17. The upper floors space have been vacant for lengthy periods of time with much of the office space disused for over twenty years. The lack of flexible working spaces and modern office facilities has made it unattractive for office tenants. There is an extensive planning history for minor works and advertisements to the building as well as more pertinent decisions relating to the change of use of the upper floors. The most relevant planning history for the site is:
- 190036 - Internal and external works associated with replacement ground floor glazing and entrance doors to 3a/5 Cheapside. Grated 26 April 2019.
 - 190035 - Replacement ground floor glazing and entrance doors to 3a/5 Cheapside. Granted 26 April 2019.
 - 091455 and 091456 - Proposed refurbishment and change of use - Floors 1-3 inclusive change of use of office accommodation to 8 flats and refurbishment of existing first floor flat inclusive of provision of new rear fire escape and associated alterations: with alterations to Cheapside entrance entailing amendments to 5, Cheapside shop shutter and change of use of part of shop to entrance lobby. To rear of 40 Oxford Road - alterations to takeaway extract ductwork to reroute and to acoustically insulate. Granted 18 May 2010.
 - 010674 - Change of use of upper floors to three one-bedroom flats at 5 Cheapside. Granted 25 October 2001.
18. Notably, there is an extant prior approval notification for change of use to residential of the adjacent building at No. 40 Oxford Street:
- 200756 - Change of use from Class B1(a) (offices) to C3 (dwelling houses) to comprise 6 flats. Prior Notification under Class O, Part 3 of Schedule 2 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 2015. Prior Approval Notification – Granted 3 August 2020.

Pre-application Advice

19. Pre-application advice was obtained in December 2020 for a similar proposal to the current application for a change the use of the upper floors to six dwellings with associated works (Ref. 201459/PREAPP). In respect of this proposal the pre-application advice concluded that it was *"...likely that the principle of development for residential use will be able to be justified from a land use perspective should supporting evidence be submitted"*. The advice also concluded that due consideration would need to be given to the effects of the proposal on the heritage significance of the listed building and other policy criteria including the suitability of housing quality and environmental constraints.

PLANNING POLICY

National Planning Policy Framework

20. The National Planning Policy Framework ("NPPF") was revised in 2021. It sets out the government's planning policies for England. At its heart is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. Decision makers should look to approve development proposals that accord with up to date Development Plan policies without delay.
21. Paragraph 60 states the Government's objective of significantly boosting the supply of homes.
22. Paragraph 86 says planning decisions should support the role that town centres play at the heart of local communities by taking a positive approach to their growth, management and adaptation to promote their long-term vitality and viability by allowing them to grow and diversify, allowing a suitable mix of uses that including housing.
23. Paragraph 119 says planning decisions should promote an effective use of land in meeting the need for homes and other uses, while safeguarding and improving the environment and ensuring safe and healthy living conditions.
24. Of particular relevance is Paragraph 120 which says planning decisions should:

"...promote and support the development of under-utilised land and buildings, especially if this would help to meet identified needs for housing where land supply is constrained and available sites could be used more effectively (for example converting space above shops)".
25. In respect of heritage, paragraph 197 says that in determining applications, local planning authorities should take account of:
 - (a) the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation;
 - (b) the positive contribution that conservation of heritage assets can make to sustainable communities including their economic vitality; and
 - (c) the desirability of new development making a positive contribution to local character and distinctiveness.

26. Paragraph 199 says when considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be).
27. Paragraph 202 says that where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use.

Heritage Duty

28. Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 provides that in considering whether to grant permission for development which affects a "listed building" or its setting, the local planning authority shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

Development Plan

29. The current Development Plan is the Reading Borough Local Plan (adopted November 2019). The most relevant policies applicable to the proposal are detailed below.
30. **CC1: Presumption in Favour of Sustainable Development** – Says a positive approach to considering development proposals will be taken to planning applications that accord with the policies in the development plan and that these will be approved without delay unless material considerations indicate otherwise.
31. **CC2 and CC3: Sustainable Design and Construction and Adaption to Climate Change** – looks for development to address climate change and energy efficient building, with conversions to residential being required to meet the most up-to-date BREEAM 'Very Good' standards as a minimum.
32. **CC5 Waste Minimisation and Storage** – requires development to include layouts and designs that provide adequate, well-designed space to facilitate waste storage and recycling.
33. **CC7: Design and the Public Realm** – requires all development to be of a *"high design quality that maintains and enhances the character and appearance of the area of Reading in which it is located."*
34. **CC8: Safeguarding Amenity** – says development should not cause a detrimental impact on the living environment of existing residential properties or unacceptable living conditions for new residential properties.
35. **EN1: Protection and Enhancement of the Historic Environment** – requires historic features, areas of historic importance and other elements of the historic environment, including listed buildings and their settings to be protected and where possible enhanced.
36. **EN15: Air Quality** – requires developments to have regard to the need to improve air quality and reduce the effects of poor air quality.

37. **EN16: Pollution and Water Resources** – says proposals for development that are sensitive to the effects of noise or light pollution will only be permitted in areas where they will not be subject to high levels of such pollution, unless adequate mitigation measures are provided to minimise the impact of such pollution.
38. **EM3: Loss of Employment Land** – seeks to retain the overall level of employment land except in certain circumstances including where there is no prospect of any viable re-use for employment with the supporting text referring to long term vacancy (being 5 years or more).
39. **H1: Provision of Housing** – sets out the housing target in Reading Borough with provision to be made for at least an additional 15,847 homes (averaging 689 homes per annum) in Reading Borough for the period 2013 to 2036
40. **H2: Density and Mix** – relates to density and housing mix and states that this will be informed by character and mix of the area; accessibility; the need to achieve high quality design; maximise efficiency of land; and need to minimise the environmental impacts including detrimental impacts on the amenities of adjoining occupiers. Wherever possible the Council's preferred unit mix should be met with a range of unit sizes recommended.
41. **CR6 - policy CR6 (Living in Central Reading)** – Recognises the centre of Reading is an important residential location and looks to ensure a good mix of unit types and living conditions are achieved. It seeks that residential developments within the town centre area should incorporate a maximum of 40% of 1- bedroom units and a minimum of 5% of 3-bedroom units.
42. **H3: Affordable Housing** – Requires a financial contribution to off-site affordable housing, with this to equate to 20% of the development, on sites of 5-9 dwellings (10% of the gross development value), subject to this being viable.
43. **(H5: Standards for New Housing** – This policy does not apply to the proposal but pre-application advice indicates its provisions provide a useful guide for housing quality.)
44. **H8: Residential Conversions** – Says proposals to convert buildings into self-contained units will be assessed against the impact on the amenity and character of the surrounding area, particularly in terms of intensification of activity, loss of privacy, loss of external amenity space, the provision and location of adequate on-site car parking and the treatment of bin storage areas and other related servicing.
45. **H10: Private and Communal Outdoor Space** – States dwellings will be provided with functional private or communal open space including green space wherever possible. However, the supporting text notes that in Central Reading, housing is less likely to attract families and the ability to walk to public open space nearby reduces the need for private open space.
46. **TR5: Car and Cycle Parking and Electric Vehicle Charging** – Says development should provide car parking and cycle parking that is appropriate to the accessibility of locations within the Borough to sustainable transport facilities, particularly public transport.
47. **RL1: Network and Hierarchy of Centres** – This states residential use of upper floors is acceptable in all centres.

Supplementary Planning Guidance

48. Relevant Supplementary Planning Documents (SPD's) are:

- **Affordable Housing (March 2021)** – This SPD provides specific guidance on how affordable housing will be secured in Reading, but forms part of a wider planning policy framework, and should be read in conjunction with other relevant planning policy documents, particularly policy H3 of the Local Plan.
- **Revised Parking Standards and Design (2011)** – This SPD provides guidance on the levels of parking required as part of new developments.
- **Planning Obligations under Section 106 (2015)** – Sets out how planning obligations under Section 106 for new development will be secured.
- **Sustainable Design and Construction (2019)** – This SPD provides more information about how sustainable building design, climate change, energy efficiency and renewable energy will be addressed.

PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

49. Section 38(6) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires applications for planning permission to be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless there are material considerations that indicate otherwise.

50. The main planning considerations associated with this planning and listed building consent application are:

1. Principle of Change of Use of Upper Floors to (wholly) residential use
2. Townscape and Design
3. Heritage Impacts
4. Unit Mix and Affordable Housing
5. Housing Quality
6. Environmental Conditions
7. Impacts on the Amenity of the Area
8. Traffic, Parking and Servicing
9. Sustainability

Principle of Change of use of upper floors to wholly residential use

51. The application seeks to change the use of the vacant upper floors of the premises to residential use, which along with the associated alterations and additions would create six new one-bedroom homes.
52. Apart from the existing one-bedroom residential unit on the first floor, the upper storeys of the building have an office use. However as explained above this space has been vacant for a significant number of years. In respect of the change of use of this employment space to residential use, the proposal is compatible with Reading Local Plan ("RLP") policy EM3 as the existing office space has been vacant for over 5 years (in fact approximately 20 years). There is no realistic prospect of the space being viably let. The layout and condition of the office space makes it highly unattractive to contemporary occupiers since a more flexible and higher standard of accommodation is necessary.
53. The proposed residential use would create six new one-bedroom homes adding to the housing supply in the Borough which is consistent with RLP policy H1 and, additionally, RL1 where residential use to upper floors in centres is accepted. New residential use will bring additional residents to the town centre providing further activity that will add to the vibrancy of the area and create casual surveillance aiding safety and security in the area. Supporting text to RLP policy CR6 says residential use adds vitality to the centre at all hours and ensures that there is some feeling of ownership of the streets and spaces. Additionally, this policy says housing development in Central Reading will continue to occur over the plan period with 7,600 new homes expected to 2036.
54. Significantly, the change of use from offices to residential use has been previously agreed in 2001 and more recently in 2010.
55. The return of the upper floors to active use would also make best use of the building which has been underutilised for many years. This lack of activity has contributed to the decline of the building and its condition. Refurbishment and conversion would therefore make a positive contribution to the locality.
56. The proposed change of excludes the main ground floor commercial unit and its shopfront. This would preserve the shopping function of the general location and retain an active street frontage. Conversion of the rear shop unit on Cheapside is acceptable as this is not designated as primary shopping frontage. In any event it has not been able to be viably occupied for many years. Its re-purposing as part of the residential conversion would be a more efficient use of the building.

Townscape and Design

57. The existing building has an architectural and townscape quality as recognised by its listing. However the long term vacancy of the upper floors and rear commercial unit have contributed to its relatively poor condition. Restoring an active use with the associated minor alterations will help enhance its contribution to the townscape. The proposed rear infill addition is to a lightwell

and is very modest in size. It would be finished in materials that complement the existing building and will not be readily visible from the street. Alterations to the rear shopfront to create a new entrance and refuse/recycling store area add contemporary detail that will appropriately distinguish these elements from the original building fabric. As such there would be no adverse impact on the townscape.

58. Further explanation of the design rationale is provided in the Design and Access Statement but, in summary, the proposal will complement the streetscene and improve the town centre environment which is consistent with the objectives of RLP policy CC7.

Heritage Impacts

59. Detailed consideration of impacts on the heritage significance of the listed building is provided in the accompanying Heritage Assessment. The proposed works to listed building are limited and will preserve its special interest as they relate sensitively to the period and architectural detail of the original building. Original detail is protected where this exists. It is noted that the former office use has resulted in the loss of much of the original detail to the upper floor interior spaces which would have originally been residential accommodation. The assessment concludes that:

- The proposal will provide a building of quality and one that visually contributes to the architectural diversity of the location;
- The conversion of the upper floors will provide a viable use and one for which it was original designed; and
- The proposed scheme is similar to that previously approved.

60. Given these conclusions the development would not result in any harm to the significance of the listed building. If there were to be any heritage harm identified, it is considered that this would be clearly and convincingly outweighed by the public benefits of the development i.e. the provision of 6 new good quality homes at a highly sustainable location and the refurbishment and re-use of the existing vacant upper floors of the building which have fallen into disrepair.

61. There are some minor impacts on the historic fabric or features because of the internal changes. However these are necessary to facilitate the conversion and re-use of the building and are similar in scope to the works previously granted listed building consent in 2010 (see application 091456). Details of the method of work and materials will be able to be secured by conditions.

62. Overall, the restoration and refurbishment work that will result from the proposals will be positive. The active re-use of the upper floors will contribute to the ongoing conservation and preservation of the building and so the proposal would satisfy RLP policy EN1.

Unit Mix and Affordable Housing

63. RLP policies H2 and CR6 relate to housing mix and require proposals to meet the needs for a range of housing sizes and types. In respect of the Central Reading area, policy CR6 says proposals for residential development should ideally provide a mix of one, two and three bedroom units. However, for smaller schemes (under 10 units) there is more flexibility.

64. This application proposes 6 one-bedroom units, which will contribute to the mix of units in the town centre. In this instance the ability to provide larger is constrained by the nature of the existing building. Extensive alterations to the internal layout and building fabric has been deliberately minimised given the Grade II listing of the building. Larger units are likely to require significant intervention and alterations to the existing building. Additionally, the central location of the site within the inner part of the town centre where there is no off-street car parking or amenity space makes the site unsuited for family accommodation (two or three-bedroom units). Advice from local estate agents indicate that larger units (e.g. three-bedrooms) would be less viable than the one-bedroom units proposed. The market for the larger units in this location is fundamentally limited as buyers are looking for larger units preferring homes with gardens and parking.
65. In respect of affordable housing, RLP policy H3 seeks a contribution towards affordable housing from developments of 5-9 dwellings to provide off-site provision elsewhere in the Borough. The Financial Viability Appraisal ("FVA") from Beresfords confirms why it is not viable to provide any affordable housing contribution.
66. The FVA considered the viability of the current proposal as well as an alternative proposal for three larger units. It concludes that the development proposal for the site in both scenarios is in deficit. As such the development proposal is unable to support any contribution in lieu of on-site affordable housing provision as this will make the development unviable and it will not proceed.

Housing Quality

67. Although RLP policy H5 does not apply in this instance, the new homes would provide a good standard of accommodation and would meet the objectives of that policy despite some shortfalls from the nationally described space standards. The proposed units essentially utilise the existing layouts (which was originally in residential use) and are provided within the constraints of the building being listed.
68. Significantly the Local Plan acknowledges there are difficulties in fully meeting all standards for internal space for new housing within Central Reading. The supporting text to RLP policy H5 says at 4.4.41 that *"...there is a distinction between what counts as adequate internal space within the centre of Reading and elsewhere. The expectations of those choosing to live in the centre of Reading, in terms of both internal and external space, as well as issues such as noise, tend to be different to those in other parts of the Borough. In addition, in central Reading, applying the space standard could have the effect of reducing the ability of the area to make its expected portion of the housing need, as many existing developments, including some that are well-regarded, would not have gone ahead in their current form were the space standard in force"*.
69. For this proposal, the internal spaces provide good aspect and outlook with appropriate space for furniture and circulation in each unit. The scheme utilises the existing building, whose upper floors had originally been in residential use and include attractive features such as projecting windows and dual aspect to corner units.
70. As already noted above, the provision of larger units is not viable and the location and nature of the development (central town centre, no off street parking or amenity space) means it is not suited to larger units. Amalgamation of the proposed one-bedroom units on each floor would

create a single oversized unit on each level that would likely to require more extensive modifications to the existing room layout. Consequently this would involve greater loss of the original building fabric of this listed building.

71. The proposal includes also includes a dedicated residential entrance, post room and secure cycle storage and refuse storage areas.
72. RLP policy H10 (Private and Communal Outdoor Space) seeks that residential developments are provided with adequate private or communal outdoor amenity space.
73. However there is no prospect or opportunity to provide private or communal space as part of the development as the building footprint essentially covers 100% of the site. In this respect it is similar to other town centre conversions. Significantly the lesser need for amenity space within the town centre is acknowledged in the supporting text to RLP policy H10 which says at 4.4.83 that:

“Flats in central Reading will not require the same amount of outdoor space as houses in other parts of Reading, and the sites are usually more constrained in any case. This is because often the needs of residents within central Reading can be different to those of the rest of the Borough. Flats in central Reading are less likely to attract families, and the ability to walk to public open space nearby reduces the need for private open space”.

- 7.3 Notably the Council’s pre-application advice also considered this aspect of the proposal and commented that *“... as is the case with the majority of town centre dwellings, meaningful amenity space is not capable of being provided on site. It is considered that the desirability of securing a future use of the listed building and of securing residential use of upper floors outweighs any concerns over a lack of amenity space within the site”*. As such, given the site’s accessible location and access to nearby public open space the lack of on-site amenity space is acceptable in this instance.

Environmental Conditions

Noise

74. The site is located within central Reading in a mixed but predominantly commercial area and is adjacent to busy roads. Some residential properties are located above ground floor level in the area. The noise climate is dominated by road traffic along Oxford Road and the A329 to the west. Noise from plant associated with the surrounding commercial properties was noted to be faintly audible though not considered dominant.
75. The accompanying Noise Report identified that the site is of medium risk in terms of noise in both the daytime and at night. The report concludes that with careful consideration of the building envelope construction, the proposed development should avoid future residents being exposed to harmful levels of noise. Significant adverse impacts on the health or quality of life of those future residents would therefore be avoided in line with the aims of the NPPF, related guidance on noise and RLP policy EN16.

Air Quality

76. As with the noise environment, the local context adjacent to busy roads would potentially expose residents to existing air pollution. In response an Air Quality Assessment was undertaken to determine baseline conditions and assess potential effects on future residents as well as any impacts from the scheme itself in order to address RLP policy EN15.
77. This assessment has demonstrated that due to the size and car free nature of the proposals, road vehicle exhaust emissions impacts would not be significant and that air quality factors are not considered a constraint to achieving planning permission for the development.

Impacts on the Amenity of the Area

78. The application site is within the town centre which has predominantly commercial uses, though the upper floors of the adjacent building has consent for residential use. The proposed housing would be compatible with the immediate context of the site and is suitable for the town centre. There would be no impacts on privacy or sunlight and daylight to neighbours. Additionally, the proposed 6 one-bedroom units is not an overly intense use of the site and adequate space has been provided within the building for cycle storage and refuse/ recycling. The proposed rear infill extension is of a modest sized, will not be readily apparent in the streetscene and will not affect neighbours' amenity. Therefore, the proposal would satisfy RLP policies CC8, CR6 and H8.

Traffic, Parking and Servicing

79. The site is in the town centre and has very good access to public transport. It is a highly sustainable location making it suitable to be a car free scheme as no off-street parking is provided (in common with the existing (now vacant) uses).
80. The main line railway station and bus interchange is located within 200 metres of the site to the north east with the main shopping centre situated 200 metres to the south. There are public car parks in the locality that would be suitable for visitors if necessary and secure cycle storage is provided for each residential unit. Trip generation from the residential use would be lower than office use during peak hours meaning the proposal would be likely to have a lesser impact on the highway network or public transport. Oxford Street and surrounding roads are heavily restricted in relation to on-street parking.
81. Servicing of the retained ground floor commercial unit is not affected by the proposals. Any servicing of the residential units would take place from the street in common with the current arrangements. The proposed refuse and recycling store is conveniently located at the ground floor with internal access for residents and external access for collection. A separate secure store for 13 cycles for residents is also provided on the ground floor.
82. Therefore, no unacceptable highway or traffic issues would arise from the application proposals and the development would be satisfy requirements of RLP policy TR5.

Sustainability

83. The conversion of the upper floors of the existing building to housing bringing back a vacant building to active use is inherently sustainable. It utilises existing building stock in a highly accessible location which helps avoid development of greenfield land. The refurbished building would meet higher standards for energy efficiency. Other building design features such as new thermal insulation, low energy lighting and efficient water fittings would ensure the development is highly sustainable.
84. The converted residential units would target BREEAM 'Very Good' standard and maximise sustainable design features to satisfy RLP policies CC2 and CC3 (subject to due consideration being given to any constraints applied as part of the listed building consent process.) The initial assessment demonstrates that the proposed development can achieve 63.91%, in line with RLP policy CC3's requirement of a 'Very Good' rating. Further details are given in the accompanying Energy Statement and Sustainability Statement.

CONCLUSIONS

85. The proposal to convert the upper floors of this prominent building within central Reading to 6 one-bedroom homes is consistent with RLP policies and the NPPF which seek to make the best use of underutilised sites and to promote delivery of new housing at the most accessible locations. Restoring these long vacant floors to active use would contribute positively to the activity and vibrancy of the town centre. The proposed residential use of the upper floors would add high quality accommodation to the Borough's housing stock and bring further activity to the town centre by adding to its mix of uses.
86. The associated refurbishment and alterations to the building would enhance its appearance and will improve the townscape. Significantly, the proposal is an opportunity to secure a long term viable use for the listed building helping to protect its special architectural and historic interest which has deteriorated over its long period of vacancy.
87. The nature of the existing site and building means there are some minor variations from the expected unit sizes and preferred mix and no amenity space can be provided. However this is entirely justified given the town centre location and considering the scheme seeks to convert a existing listed building which limits the scope of appropriate alterations and additions. It has been demonstrated that the proposal cannot sustain a contribution towards off-site affordable housing as this would make the development unviable. The proposal is the optimum development for the site.
88. The supporting information submitted with the application demonstrates the site is suitable for housing (indeed permission has been granted for similar proposals in 2001 and 2010) and that the impacts on the environment, the amenity of the area and traffic and parking conditions are all satisfactory.

89. Therefore, the application proposals would have a major beneficial effect on the social, economic and environmental well-being of the area. It will help to ensure that the building contributes positively to the Council's objective of revitalising and supporting the town centre and providing new good quality housing at a highly sustainable location. The application proposals accord with planning policy at all levels.
90. This statement has identified and assessed the key planning issues in relation to the application proposals. They will have demonstrable benefits and there is no policy hurdle to the granting of planning permission and listed building consent. Given that the approach to decision making should be positive it is considered that the proposals should be approved.

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