

Full Council

Title:	H & C Pearce & Sons Ltd Aylesbury Road OX9 3AS (P22/S4155/FUL)
	Full planning permission for the erection of 21 dwellings with associated parking, landscaping and open space.
Date:	17 January 2023
Contact Officer:	Graeme Markland, Neighbourhood Plan Continuity Officer

Background

- Pearce's Yard is approximately 0.6 ha in area. Current and recent uses on the site include an agricultural retail store, a veterinary practice (focussed on large animals) and a small works offering lawnmower repairs and sales. The site provided access to the historic woolyard, originally in the same ownership and management as the main site.
- Members will recall that a planning application submitted in February 2021 proposed the demolition of the agricultural retail unit and other buildings. This was refused permission in March 2022, primarily for the scheme's negative impact on the Thame Conservation Area (TCA) and nearby Grade II and Grade II* buildings but also for the proposed loss of a non-designated heritage asset.

Proposed Development

- It is proposed to retain all of the buildings with conservation / character value but demolish the agricultural retail unit and store.
- Seventeen homes would be built and four converted from existing buildings to the following mix and tenure:

	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed	4 bed	5 bed	Total
Market	1*		8	3**	3	15
First Homes		1*	1*			2
Shared ownership		1				1
Affordable Rent		1				1
Social Rent		2				2
*Within an existing building **One provided within an existing building						21

- One market 4-bed home would be made from the conversion of the two-storey building adjacent to 21 Aylesbury Road (Wool Cottage). One market 1-bed home, and one 2-bed and one 3-bed First Homes would be converted from "The Old Shop" building of local interest / note.
- Some 40 parking spaces would be provided, with 4 of those being available for visitors. In terms of bicycle parking it is proposed that 1 space would be provided for the 1-bed dwelling with all others having 2 spaces.

Employment

7. The District Council accepted the loss of employment land on this site when deciding the previous application for the 70-bed Care Home. The nature of that proposed development would have precluded a mixed-use site. While this could be possible with an alternative scheme, the District decided they were satisfied that no alternative employment use would be viable on this site, that their own Policy EMP3 had been complied with and so the principle of the loss of employment land and floorspace was accepted by them. There has been no relevant change to policy at either a local or national level meaning that we would need new evidence such as an alternative viability report to overturn that decision.

Transport

8. The applicant has provided a Transport Statement which compares expected trip rates from the proposed development with the current uses. The specialist has included the Veterinary Surgery and the agricultural store. The applicant has, however, assumed all of the agricultural store is retail floorspace rather than its known mix of retail and warehousing and this has inflated the number of expected daily trips (in and out) to 954 per day. It is likely that the site has never achieved trips approaching that figure.
9. The applicant has estimated the number of daily trips the 21 homes would generate is 100, based on an assumption that the houses were all market housing for sale or rent. It is suggested that the morning peak would generate similar trips as the current use but the evening peak would be considerably smaller.
10. While the current usage figures present the “worst case” trip rate it is likely that the impact of the proposed scheme would, even if rationalised, be significantly less. There would, for example, be no future commercial HGV movements on site and residents would be able to take advantage of the bus services on Aylesbury Road, with sheltered stops less than 165 metres away. The site is also very well connected to the amenities the Town Centre has to offer with the High Street between 450 - 550 metres away by footpath.
11. The numbers of car parking spaces provided is just in accordance with Oxfordshire County Council’s residential parking standards. Nine spaces are shown to be provided within garages. In terms of bicycle parking, the applicant has proposed fewer than the County’s standards would require, arguing that the site’s location would mean that fewer bicycle spaces will be needed. Instead of matching the number of secure, covered spaces with bedrooms, the applicant has proposed 2 spaces for all dwellings of 2 or more bedrooms. Private, secure bicycle provision is not clearly indicated on any plan, contrary to Thame Neighbourhood Plan (TNP) Policy ESDQ27.
12. The County Council’s Highway Team have submitted a holding objection, pending clarifications and changes regarding bicycle parking provision and site access, which they currently regard as unsuitable / unsafe for pedestrians and refuse vehicles.

Flood Risk

13. Only the north-western corner of the site lays within Flood Zone 3 with the rest in Zone 1. A flood risk assessment has been prepared that indicates that all of the new build elements will be within Zone 1 and so will not be at risk from river flooding. It is, however, suggested that the new properties would have a finished floor level above the maximum flood extent level that exists in the corner of the site, anyway.

14. The applicant states that almost 50% of the proposed on-site surfaces will be permeable, compared to 1% on the current site. The applicant also states they will be able to engineer a solution so that green field run-off rates can be achieved on-site. A risk of surface water flooding is theoretically present around much of the site; however, it is claimed that this area has no recorded flooding from surface waters.
15. The District Council's Flood Risk Engineer has issued a holding objection, pending details on alternative use of porous paved surfaces. The District will also require the proposed sewerage pump to be moved further away from dwellings.

Landscaping and visual impact

16. A Visual Impact Assessment has been produced as part of the application. The applicant has looked at the likely impact from viewpoints suggested by the TCA Appraisal as being noteworthy or sensitive and these are considered suitable to help assess the impact of the development.
17. The views look southeast towards the site from the River Thames bridge, on the old Oxford Road; north from the cricket ground; and north-west to the site from the junction of Priest End and Aylesbury Road. As expected, the impact of the development on these views would be most noted in winter months. The bridge and Old Oxford Road provide for a relatively modest increase in height above the river valley and may slightly increase visibility of some of the proposed homes.
18. The agricultural store, while utilitarian, is low-lying and most apparent in winter from the bridge. Its highest point is 7 metres to the ridge of the warehouse element, with the retail element peaks at 6 metres. The homes in the north-west of the site are approximately 9.8 metres in height, while those in the south-west are around 10.3 metres in height. The views of ridge and gables will be more prominent than the agricultural store but will have different setback and breaks between ridgelines. The impact should not be severe.
19. Due to their placement, the semi-detached properties on the south-western boundary (plots 14 and 15) and the detached unit on plot 16 are likely to have the greatest impact when seen from the cricket pitch. While partly screened by trees in summer, a view to the blank end gable of plot 15 will be evident. It is proposed that this will be clad in wood and be either dark grey or black which will help mitigate this. Plot 16 will be screened from view by Lashlake House and its impact lessened; although it, and Plot 15, will both be more evident from Priest End itself.
20. The applicant's own assessment indicates the detached homes on the southern boundary (Plots 16 – 18) will be visible from the junction of Priest End and Aylesbury Road. While this could cause harm to the setting of the listed buildings, the ridgelines would not be dissimilar from the The Old Shop and the scale and spacing between the homes would help ensure the level of harm caused to Lashlake House, Jasmine Cottage and The Old Shop remains low.

Ecology/biodiversity

21. The applicant has submitted an Ecological Impact Assessment, dated November 2022. Most of the site, being covered by a concrete slab, provides little scope for hosting wildlife. The boundary planting and the buildings themselves are likely to provide the main opportunities. Many of the trees on the southern and western boundaries are within the boundary of the TCA, and therefore automatically protected from loss or ad-hoc reduction and trimming.
22. The ecological report that accompanied the original application found the boundary vegetation and bat-roost potential of the buildings provided the only viable habitats. Based on field work including bat surveys, it was found that bat roosts were not likely in any of the buildings.

23. The boundary trees and hedgerow along the north boundary was found to be of value for bird roosting and forage and have been recommended for retention. Aside from the now-usual recommendations for bat boxes and hedgehog corridors, it is recommended that bat access tiles be fitted to The Old Shop and bird (sparrow and swift) boxes to some of the newbuild. Native tree and shrubs are recommended for landscaping purposes. The bird boxes will not necessarily create new opportunities but are proposed to compensate for the loss of bird nesting opportunities from demolished buildings and the “topping” of conifer trees on the northern boundary.

Impact on heritage buildings

24. As discussed above, the southern elements of the proposed development would sit relatively well with the adjacent Listed buildings and Buildings of Local Note. The reuse, rather than the demolition of the two buildings that straddle the site’s access is welcome and will provide a positive indication of the site’s former, mixed agricultural / retail past.
25. The greatest change will be to the building fronting Aylesbury Road. This building is part-stone, part brick with a rear elevation made entirely out of timber boards. It is proposed that this building be changed into a 4- bedroom home, with a “frontage” accessed from within a new garden curtilage from within the site. The current timber rear elevation will be replaced with a new energy efficient wall and a small 2-storey, gabled extension that will be covered with timber boarding.
26. It is also intended that the current metal roof is replaced with tiles and that four windows, including two ground to ceiling ones are fitted on the southern elevation, fronting the site entrance. The front elevation, roof aside, would remain similar although the current metal sheeting covering the double front entrance would be replaced with a brick infill that would match the existing.
27. It is proposed that The Old Shop would see its rear single-storey extension demolished to help provide a garden for Plot 19 on the southern elevation. An external staircase on the western elevation would be removed and ground floor windows extended to form a front and side doorways for plots 19 and 20. All of the windows would be removed and replaced with grey, metal alternatives and doors formed from cedar / oak. The roof materials would remain the same, slate and tile.
28. The proposals, while not always referencing traditional materials, are considered acceptable and in keeping with the wider development.

Design and amenity

29. The SODC and Vale Joint Design Guide provides sound guidance for redevelopment sites. The development is having to be brought forward alongside a constrained access and heritage and townscape concerns.
30. The SODC Local Plan Policy STRAT5 requires that homes are built to at least 45 dwellings per hectare, unless there is a justified reason for a lower density. The proposal would result in development of 35 dwellings per hectare but the site’s proximity to and part-inclusion within the TCA, and neighbouring buildings of Listed and local importance means this could be appropriate, or even high.

31. As discussed above, it is not considered that the listed buildings are unduly harmed by the proposal. What is less fitting is the scheme's contribution to the setting of the listed buildings and Conservation Area. The Priest End / Aylesbury Road area is dominated by the river floodplain, with larger buildings (including modern housing) adjacent to the higher grounds next to the roads. The development is constrained and therefore compromised, as suggested by the separation of the shared garden from the plots it would primarily serve, 20 and 21. While it is meant to be communal, its position behind parking spaces and sandwiched between the parking space and garage of Plot 18 and the rear garden of Plot 19 will not make it feel inviting, nor necessarily "owned" by residents or available for visitor use. This is contrary to TNP Policy ESDQ28 in failing to provide good quality outdoor garden amenity space, shared or otherwise.
32. The applicant states that amenity space standards have been met, although it is notable that Plots 20 and 21 would share that space with other visitors. It is not considered that the standard has been met for these plots.
33. The north-facing gardens of plots 8-11 will be shaded by the homes themselves. The stepped nature of the northern boundary means the gardens will not receive direct sunlight in the morning and the trees on the western boundary, in the evening. This would also be contrary to TNP Policy ESDQ28, the supporting text of which particularly notes the impact of shadowing.
34. There is no reference to any play facility or provision, which is contrary to the Design Guide and may be contrary to Local Plan Policy CF5. Visitor bicycle parking is hardly evident, being more or less concealed behind parking areas and trees. Again, these matters are suggestive of an overly constrained scheme.
35. In terms of internal space, all properties appear to meet the nationally described space standards. This is particularly important for the affordable housing and 1 and 2-bed market homes, in order to be in conformity with SODC Local Plan Policy H11.
36. Detailed plans of the housing types do not show bicycle stores, gutters, downpipes etc., contrary to TNP Policy ESDQ27.

Discussion

37. The proposal does not cause undue harm to the listed buildings. The scheme would, however, harm the setting of the Conservation Area in failing to reinforce what makes this part of the TCA special. The development contrasts with the relaxed nature of the surrounding TCA and offers little green space and planting to offset the relatively high density. It is possible that more thought has been given to screening the development rather than integrating it to make a positive contribution to the TCA. Regardless, it is contrary to SODC Local Plan Policy ENV6 and TNP Policy ESDQ16.
38. The failure to provide quality amenity space for two dwellings, provide a quality play / open space is contrary to Local Plan Policy CF5 and TNP Policy ESDQ28. In failing to provide adequate proof of secure bicycle parking and other design matters, and proper visitor bicycle parking, the proposal is contrary to TNP ESDQ 27 and SODC Local Plan Policy DES1.

Recommendation

39. For the reasons given above, it is recommended that Thame Town Council objects to this application.