

Planning & Environment

Title:	34 Upper High Street (P23/S2462/FUL)
	The erection of a two storey extension to accommodate office space connected to the existing building, and the change of use from commercial to residential dwelling (Amended location plan received 31st August 2023, omitting neighbour's garage from the site area. Further statement received 27th October 2023, together with revised plans altering the proposed rear extension and showing the proposed drainage arrangement.)of part of the existing listed building.
Date:	21 November 2023
Contact Officer:	Graeme Markland, Neighbourhood Plan Continuity Officer

Background

1. The site is approximately 0.046 ha in area. Number 34 Upper High Street is a two-storey building in current use as an office. It sits within the Thame Conservation Area and, like the adjoining 35 Upper High Street is a Grade II* Listed Building. As such, planning permission is required for the proposed change of use. Number 34 is believed to be a 16th century building, extended in the 17th century to form what is now number 35 Upper High Street, and again for the west, jettied wing. A significant extension was added to the rear in the 20th century.
2. Pre-application advice was given to the applicant by the NPCO on 21 April 2023. This was circulated to all Town Councillors on that date. A copy of this advice, and the District Council's comprehensive pre-application advice has been made available as part of this agenda.
3. The Town Council objected to the original application on 22 August 2023 on the grounds:
 - Loss of employment without proof of lack of viability, market interest, or nuisance to nearby residents / the environment contrary to Local Plan 2035 (LP 2035) Policy EMP3.
 - Bicycle parking is not secure for residential use, and not provided for the office use, contrary to LP 2035 Policies DES1 and TRANS5.
 - All vehicles would not be able to leave the site in forward gear.
 - Quality of amenity space is contrary to TNP Policy ESDQ28 and SODC Design Guidance.
4. This report focuses on the amendments and how they would inform the Town Council's objections.

Proposed Development

5. The applicant has proposed an amendment to the north-west end of the roof. This has been reduced in length by one metre, with a hipped roof introduced in place of the gable. As a result of this change, the high-level window has been lost from that elevation. The applicant has submitted a written response to the first round of comments received on the application and states the hipped roof will reduce the impact of the proposed development on both number 35 Upper High Street and Christchurch.

6. This physical amendment does not, therefore, impact on the Town Council's objections.

Employment

7. The proposed loss of employment would be regrettable, removing floorspace that could provide space for at least 6 office workers, using established standards. The SODC case officer has, during the pre-application process stated they are "inclined to agree that the proposal would not result in a net loss of employment particularly if, as you maintain, the new open office space would be more conducive/ to modern working practises".
8. The existing and proposed plans demonstrate that the office space that is proposed to be kept, the former extension, is already open plan. The above comments refer solely to the original part of the building, which could not be meaningfully made more open plan due to the internal walls that would need to be retained for their heritage value. That inflexibility similarly applies, however, to its proposed use design and use as a dwelling.
9. In removing employment space without proof of lack of viability, market interest, or to the use causing nuisance to nearby residents / the environment the proposal remains contrary to Local Plan 2035 (LP 2035) Policy EMP3. Clause 3 of Policy EMP3 offers support for schemes that improve the stock of existing employment land, premises, commercial buildings and the environment of existing employment areas. An improvement could be classed as qualitative, quantitative, or both. Without proof of past vacancy, or lack of market interest in the site, there is no evidence that the building is, in part or whole, unsuccessful as an employment building. As Policy EMP3 does not appear to offer flexibility with this interpretation it is recommended that the Town Council maintains its objection on this ground.

Transport and access

10. The bicycle spaces allocated to the residential dwelling have been amended and described as "covered". It is recommended that the Town Council remove their objection on this matter, as the Local Highway Authority has stated a planning condition would satisfactorily address bicycle parking.
11. Access to the garage that serves number 35 Upper High Street would have to be maintained and crosses between the proposed dwelling and amenity space. The Local Highway Authority states they believe this parking arrangement is reasonable, and have stated:

It is noted that an existing garage accommodation is located adjacent the proposal, however there is sufficient space within the site for the turning of a vehicle egressing this garage albeit this may require multiple manoeuvres these are located away from the public Highway and unlikely to increase the risk to Highway Safety.

12. Members may wish to consider removing the Town Council's objection on this matter.

Amenity

13. In response to the Town Council's concern regarding the quality of the proposed amenity space for the dwelling, the applicant has supplied commentary given by the case officer as part of their pre-application advice:

- *In this instance, I accept that the site is within a walkable neighbourhood, with convenient access to a park and many of the properties in the locality have very limited private outdoor space. In this context, I consider that there are reasonable grounds to depart*

from the recommended standards and I consider that the area shown on plan PL 110 A is likely to be sufficient for a single dwelling.

14. This would not, however, provide even “very limited” private open space during office hours. There would be no private amenity space. The quality of the proposed amenity space does not, therefore, meet the criteria for TNP ESDQ28 (provide good quality private outdoor space) or LP 2035 Policy DES5 which requires that:

- private outdoor sitting space should not be overlooked by adjacent habitable rooms (the office windows would be occupied for long hours and overlook the space)
- the space should not be compromised by parking areas or garages.

15. Councillors may wish to consider maintaining the Town Council’s objection on this ground.

Recommendation

16. For the reasons given above, it is recommended that Thame Town Council continues to object to this application.