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PLANNING,
DESIGN
& ACCESS
STATEMENT

CONVERSION OF GOMERSAL CHAPEL TO
CREATE 10 NO APARTMENTS. GROVE UNITED
REFORMED CHURCH, OXFORD ROAD,
GOMERSAL, BD19 4JR.

Job 2810

PREPARED BY ACUMEN DESIGNERS & ARCHITECTS LTD
Headrow House, Old Leeds Road, Huddersfield HD1 1SG Tel: 01484 546000

acumen
designers & architects

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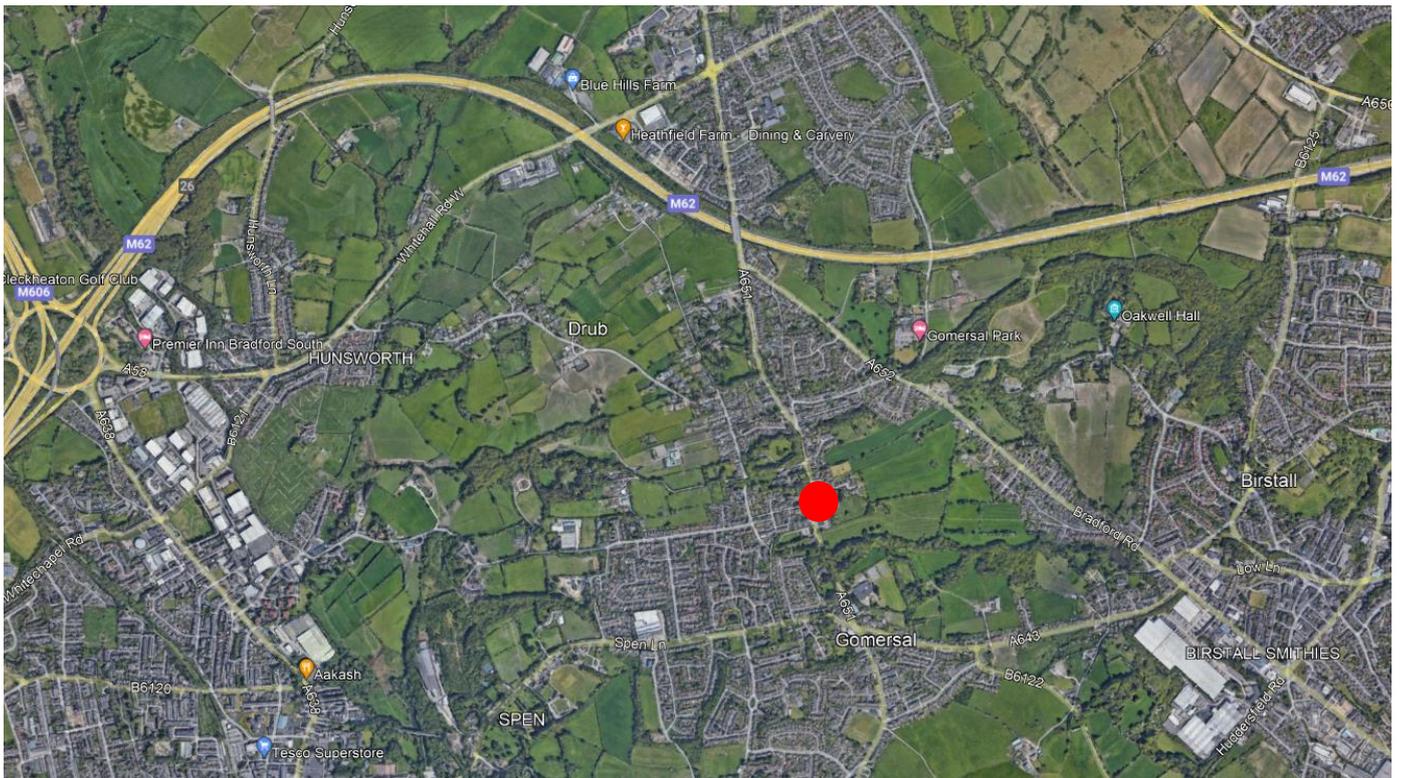
SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION

1. This statement has been prepared to support a planning application for the conversion of the Grove United Reformed Church on Oxford Road, Gomersal, to create 10no one- and two-bedroom apartments.
2. This document provides an overview of the proposed development site and considers the main planning policy issues relating to this development.
3. The Grove United Reformed Church is a Grade II Listed Building and a detailed Heritage Statement accompanies this planning application.

SECTION 2: LOCATION AND SITE DESCRIPTION

4. The site comprises the Grove United Reformed Church with adjoining Sunday School and adjoining graveyard.
5. The property is Grade II Listed and comprises a traditional chapel building with a balcony level.
6. The building comprises an entrance vestibule, hall of worship, meeting room, vestry, church hall, kitchen, and several toilets at ground floor level, with balcony level (over the hall of worship), four school rooms/offices and further toilets at first floor.
7. Externally, there is a lawned garden to the front of the buildings with tarmac pathways providing access to the buildings and a small former toilet block. Immediately to the rear of the building is a narrow-grassed yard area, beyond which is along and comparatively narrow graveyard which is understood to be closed in terms of ongoing burials.
8. The property is situated on the eastern site of the A651 Oxford Road, that is the main road that links Heckmondwike to the south and to Bradford to the north.
9. The site is approximately 450m to Gomersal local centre to the south. The larger town of Heckmondwike is less than 2 miles to the south and the city of Bradford is less than 5 miles to the north.
10. The site is well served by public transport with two bus stops for north and south bound buses being 30m walking distance from the site.
11. The site sits within a predominantly residential area, with medium and large detached and semi-detached houses sitting within spacious plots. Immediately to the south of the site is the former Gomersal First School. The school is now closed, and the site is part of a larger parcel of land that has been allocated for housing within the Kirklees Local Plan. Currently no planning application has been submitted for this site.
12. To the north of the site is a single retail unit, the Ginger Whale, which is a delicatessen and café.

Photo 1: Application Site



SECTION 3: PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

13. The proposed development comprises the internal alteration of the building to create 10 no apartments with a mix of 1- and 2-bedroom units. The accompanying drawings and heritage statement explain the proposals in more details.

14. Externally there are minor alterations to the main building comprising:

- Enlargement of existing window to create the doorway for apartment 1.
- The re-opening of two original window openings that have been blocked up to create windows for apartment 1 and for apartment 8.
- Existing doorway to the rear of the building to be partially blocked up to create a window for apartment 2.

15. There are other works included with the scheme that will have an impact on the external appearance of the building. These comprise:

- Introduction of car parking to the front of the building, and
- Widening the existing gateposts to create easier vehicular access to the site.

SECTION 4: PLANNING POLICY ASSESSMENT

16. A key policy consideration for this planning application is the fact that the building is a grade II Listed Building. Secondary to this is the site is within Gomersal Conservation Area.
17. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out in paragraph 194 that *“In determining applications, local planning authorities should require an applicant to describe the significance of any heritage assets affected, including any contribution made by their setting “*
18. Paragraph 197 then explains 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.”*
19. The NPPF then goes on to explain the importance of assessing any impact to the heritage asset and balancing this against the public benefits of the scheme.
20. Paragraph 201 then sets out that *“Where a proposed development will lead to substantial harm to (or total loss of significance of) a designated heritage asset, local planning authorities should refuse consent, unless it can be demonstrated that the substantial harm or total loss is necessary to achieve substantial public benefits that outweigh that harm or loss, or all of the following apply:*
- a) the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site; and*
 - b) no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation; and*
 - c) conservation by grant-funding or some form of not for profit, charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and*
 - d) the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use”.*
21. The Council's Local Plan reflects this approach in Policy LP35 which sets out that *“Development proposals affecting a designated heritage asset (or an archaeological site of national importance) should preserve or enhance the significance of the asset. In cases likely to result in substantial harm or loss, development will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated that the proposals would bring substantial public benefits that clearly outweigh the harm, or all of the following are met:*
- a) the nature of the heritage asset prevents all reasonable uses of the site;*
 - b) no viable use of the heritage asset itself can be found in the medium term through appropriate marketing that will enable its conservation;*
 - c) conservation by grant-funding or some form of charitable or public ownership is demonstrably not possible; and*
 - d) the harm or loss is outweighed by the benefit of bringing the site back into use.”*

22. Accompanying this planning application is a heritage statement that addresses the significance of the heritage asset and assess the harm the proposal may have on the heritage asset and weighs that against the public benefit of the scheme.
23. However, a key consideration to this planning application is whether there is a viable use for the heritage asset that would enable its conservation. This is set out in paragraph 201 (b) of the NPPF and Policy PL35 part (b) of the Local Plan.
24. The building was built in the early C19th as a purpose-built congregationalist chapel. The building has served a local congregation since it was built. Whilst there may have been internal alterations to the building, records suggest that the building has been used for no other purpose other than a church.
25. The demand for a congregationalist church, which was part of the protestant church, dwindled over time and the building transferred to the united reform church, which still has the congregationalist traditions as part of its historical roots and traditions.
26. As with many churches during the 21st century and the later part of the 20th century the congregation of the church dwindled. An ageing congregation and then the Covid 19 Pandemic, which prevented people from visiting the church, meant that by the start of 2022 the numbers visiting the church on a regular basis was not enough to keep the church open and maintained, which resulted in the building being closed and placed on the market in May 2022.
27. It was clear when the building was put on the market that the high number of churches that face a similar fate in the last 50 years, meant it was highly unlikely that any new group would come forward wanting to purchase the building to use as a place of worship. Since then, prospective purchasers have been assessing what viable alternatives there are for the use of the building.
28. There is not a need for a community hall in this area as there is the Gomersal Public Hall less than 100m to the south of this site. Furthermore, in the current economic climate no organisation would be willing to take on the maintenance liability associated with the Listed Building without being able to generate significant income from the building. Currently there are no groups that could use the building in its current format that could generate anywhere near the revenue from the building to maintain it in its current state, so alternative uses have to be explored to safeguard the medium- and long-term future of the building.
29. The recent increase in costs associated with the building trade such as vast increases in the cost of raw materials and growing labour costs further impact on the viability of future uses of the building.
30. The proposed development to convert the building to apartments is the only viable option to safeguard the future of the building. There are instances where similar buildings have successfully been converted to other uses that maintain the internal appearance and fabric of the building. One such use could be a restaurant or public house. Wetherspoons are such an operator that have successfully converted similar buildings, which is now part of their successful business model.

However, there is no demand for such a use in this location which is a relatively low-densely populated area.

31. Notwithstanding the above, the conversion of the building to a commercial use such as a restaurant or public house would be contrary to both national and local planning policy, as set out in paragraph 87 of the NPPF *“Local planning authorities should apply a sequential test to planning applications for main town centre uses which are neither in an existing centre nor in accordance with an up-to-date plan. Main town centre uses should be located in town centres, then in edge of centre locations; and only if suitable sites are not available (or expected to become available within a reasonable period) should out of centre sites be considered”*.
32. In this situation, the development site is approximately 500m from the nearest defined centre in the Local Plan which is Gomersal local centre. The local plan also reflects this need for a sequential assessment in Policy LP13, which would also require an impact assessment.
33. Clearly these policy requirements suggest that the residential use in this location would be far more appropriate than commercial uses that should be located in town and local centres.
34. An alternative use could see the open plan nature of the building maintained for office space. However, it should be recognised that the change in working patterns resulting from the Covid 19 pandemic has reduced the need for office space, and large companies who may have the demand for such large open plan office space are in the process or have already rationalised their workspace, reducing the demand for new office space.
35. Furthermore, office space is a main town centre use and would therefore be subject to the same sequential test and impact assessment as the commercial uses referred to earlier in this report.
36. Whilst a detailed viability assessment could be provided to demonstrate that there is neither the demand for alternative uses for the building, and that such uses would not be viable, we can conclude from the assessment above that uses which could see the open internal arrangement of the building maintained would not accord with national and local planning policy. We therefore conclude that residential development is the only suitable use for the building that would safeguard its medium- and long-term future.
37. The accompanying heritage statement concludes that the less than substantial harm identified should be balanced against the public benefits of the proposal, which include heritage benefits, of bringing the building back into active use and securing necessary repairs to original fabric, including original windows.

Loss of Community Asset.

38. It could be viewed the church building is a Community Facility in which case Local Plan Policy LP48 should be applied.

39. LP48 states “Proposals which involve the loss of valued community facilities such as shops, public houses and other facilities of value to the local community will only be permitted where it can be demonstrated that:
- a) there is no longer a need for the facility and all options including the scope for alternative community uses have been considered; or
 - b) its current use is no longer viable; or
 - c) there is adequate alternative provision in the locality to serve the local community which is in an equally accessible location; or
 - d) an alternative facility of equivalent or better standard will be provided, either on-site or equally accessible; and e. any assets listed on a Community Asset Register have satisfied the requirements under the relevant legislation”
40. The policy refers to the loss of a **valued** community facilities such as shops, public houses, and other facilities of value to the community... (my emphasis). It should be noted that the church was no longer a viable operation due to its falling congregation, therefore we would question whether the facility can be considered to be a valued community facility.
41. The first part of the policy LP48 sets out that “Community facilities should be provided in accessible locations where they can minimise the need to travel or they can be made accessible by walking, cycling and public transport. This will normally be in town, district or local centres”, which as with the assessment above suggests that this is not the correct location for new community facilities, again suggesting that residential development is the only suitable use for the building in this location.

Impact on Visual Amenity

42. The proposed development will not alter the scale and mass of the building and will result in minor external alterations and therefore will have no impact upon visual amenity.

Impact on Residential Amenity

43. The proposed development makes use of existing window openings most of which are on the north, east and south facing elevations which don't overlook neighbouring properties and exceed the requirement to be at least 22.5m away from habitable windows of neighbouring properties.
44. The proposed development includes secondary windows that look towards residential properties to the west. Whilst these are secondary windows it is proposed to use obscured glazing on these windows to prevent any impact upon residential amenity.

Impact on Highway Safety

45. The proposed development includes a parking area to the front of the building providing one parking space per apartment. We consider the proposed development is a relatively sustainable location with a frequent bus service running

along the A651 Oxford Road, providing transport links with Bradford to the north and Heckmondwike to the south.

46. The proposed development sees the widening of the access to the site, to ensure a safe point of access and egress for cars parking on the site.

47. The development also includes the provision of a secure bike store.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

48. The proposed development will see sympathetic redevelopment of an important Grade II Listed Building. There is no longer a demand for the building to be used as a church and as this statement explores, there are no other suitable uses for this building in this location.

49. The proposed development will safeguard the medium to long term use for the building, with a use that is suitable for the area.

50. This statement and the supporting information demonstrate that the proposed development accords with the Kirklees Local Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework.