

Planning Committee

Friday, 26th October, 2018

SPECIAL MEETING OF PLANNING COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor Garrett (Chairperson);
Councillors Carson, Dorrian, Hutchinson,
Johnston, Magee, McAteer, Mullan and Nicholl.

In attendance: Mr. J. Walsh, City Solicitor;
Mr. A. Thatcher, Director of Planning and Building
Control;
Ms. N. Largey, Divisional Solicitor;
Mr. E. Baker, Development Engagement Manager; and
Ms. E. McGoldrick, Democratic Services Officer.

Apologies

Apologies were reported from Alderman McGimpsey and Councillors Hussey and McDonough-Brown.

Declaration of Interest

No declarations of interest were reported.

Planning Applications

THE COMMITTEE DEALT WITH THE FOLLOWING ITEMS IN PURSUANCE OF THE POWERS DELEGATED TO IT BY THE COUNCIL UNDER STANDING ORDER 37(e)

LA04/2018/2393/LBC - Conservation led works to Bank Buildings involving the taking down, recording and assessment for restoration purposes of the building above the fourth floor cornice line to the Bank Street, Castle Street and Castle Place elevations of the building for off-site storage.

The Committee was informed that the site related to Bank Buildings, a Category B1 Listed Building and, was located within the city centre on the corner of the junction of Royal Avenue and Castle Street, within the City Centre Conservation Area.

The Committee was reminded that the building had been severely damaged by a fire that started on 28th August and continued for 3 days. A significant proportion of the internal structure had burnt away, had collapsed or had been severely damaged with the external facades subject to further damage. In its present condition, the building's physical fabric remained very vulnerable and posed a threat to public health and safety.

The Development Engagement Manager advised that the application sought Listed Building Consent for conservation led works involving the taking down, recording and assessment of the building above the fourth-floor cornice line to Bank Street, Castle Street and Royal Avenue, including the 6 chimneys.

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He informed the Committee that, after the agenda had been published, the following representations of support had been received:

Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA)

- The proposal struck the appropriate balance between the conservation of the building, public safety and wider considerations around economic, social and cultural life in the city centre;
- Supported the orderly removal of stonework to facilitate assessment and an authentic reconstruction;
- Sets out the importance of conserving the city's built heritage;
- Welcomed the engagement by Primark, Belfast City Council and Historic Environment Division and suggested that the combined expertise would lead to a positive outcome for the city;
- If permission was granted works should start the next day in order to reduce the safety cordon;
- The impact of the fire on city centre life had been severe. It was equally important that steps were taken by the Council and government departments to attract people back to the city centre; and
- RSUA had encouraged the public to share their views and were running an ideas competition for early career architects on the same theme.

Ulster Architectural Heritage (UAH)

- Agreed with the updated Outline Conservation Statement and reiterated its support for the proposal;
- Supports the final substantive reply from the Department for Communities Historic Environment Division, including the recommended conditions, particularly in relation to the methodology for the works;
- The methodology should refer to "dismantling" rather than "demolition";
- Commented on the potential use of shipping containers as a basis for both the protection of pedestrian corridors and to form a base for shoring structures. UAH had previously suggested prefabricated steel pedestrian corridor sections could be craned into place and linked safely under their own cover as a quick and safe alternative solution;
- Regarding the comments from the Council's Economic Development team, the proposal had the potential to satisfy both traders and those who wish to see the building retained. This was arguably the fastest route to reopening the footfall corridors;
- Suggested that the Economic Development team did not consider the potential impact and focused on the current situation on the ground. This was of no apparent relevance to the application per se;

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- The comments confirm that most UK cities were suffering considerable loss of footfall due to the rise of online retail and 'homogenisation'. This countered, to an extent, those who simply choose to 'blame' Bank Buildings for much wider ingrained problems;
- Suggested that there had been no acknowledgement of the economic value of heritage and the fact that the two were not exclusive; and
- Agreed that the longer the cordon remained in place, the greater the likelihood that user habits within the city centre fundamentally change. They suggested that the best way to facilitate both the early reduction of the cordon and the preservation of the integrity of the city's valuable built heritage was to firmly support this application.

Belfast Chamber of Trade and Commerce (BCTC)

- BCTC, who represented over 400 local businesses, recognised the urgent need for action and was supportive of this application for survival of the city;
- Supported the proposed reduction in the cordon to allow pedestrian access between Royal Avenue and Donegall Place safely;
- Suggested that the situation was urgent, severing the city's retail core, deterring many shoppers and was having a devastating effect on trade and business. The city and businesses lose hundreds of thousands of pounds of lost revenue each day; and
- Suggested that the work was completed with the utmost urgency, including 7 days per week operations and night working. Logistical movements should also be scheduled at night times, to avoid unnecessary disruption during retail trade business hours.

Northern Ireland Environment Link

- Bank Buildings was one of the most prominent heritage buildings in Belfast City Centre;
- The case for protecting and restoring our relatively small stock of heritage buildings was further supported by the economic value that is derived from built heritage;
- It was recognised that the longer the safety cordon remained in place, the greater the potential impact on user habits with the city centre; and
- The best way to facilitate both the early reduction of the cordon and preservation of the city's valuable built heritage was to support this application.

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Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in Ireland (SPAB)

- Commented on the rich heritage and history of Bank Buildings and suggested that the protection and retention of the structure was appropriate to the significance of the site and building;
- Welcomed the applicant's approach to record precarious structural elements at high level and to take down and store for future analysis and possible reinstatement. This would minimise the risk of progressive collapse, which would also result in reducing the safety cordon on surrounding buildings;
- The SPAB Briefing Document on 'Disaster and Recovery' recommended that protective works should be carried out to the damaged building to stabilize its condition and prevent further deterioration. The current proposal was in keeping with this strategy; and
- SPAB advocated sensitive new design over reconstruction or restoration and recommended the next phase of works to the surviving structure followed this approach. Future proposals should be sympathetic to the surviving historic fabric while clearly of our time.

Four individual representations

- It was critical that Bank Buildings were retained and restored, not demolished;
- The building was extremely important and utterly irreplaceable. Its loss would be devastating for the city centre;
- Given the building's significance, it represented an important landmark at this junction;
- There had been too many buildings damaged and demolished through 'modernisation' or neglect – There were too few and each lost cumulatively impacted on the history and character of the city; and
- The heritage led approach was supported.

The Development Engagement Manager outlined the response of the Planning Department to the aforementioned issues raised, as set out in the Late Items Report Pack.

The Committee received a representation from Councillor Craig, in support of the application. He suggested that the Building meant a lot to the people of Belfast and that the public should continue to shop on Castle Street to support the traders which had been affected by the safety cordon. He suggested that the conservation led approach, outlined in the application, was appropriate and the Council had a legal duty to protect the building. He suggested further that the programme of work, previously agreed by the Council to animate the City, would also help to support the traders.

The Committee received a representation from Mr. J. O'Connor, Mr. P. Stinson, and Mr. S. Douglas, representing the applicant.

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Mr. O'Connor explained that Primark had been trading in the location since 1980 and that they realised the historic significance and cultural importance of the Building to the City. He suggested that the situation to recover the building was very complex and they had explored multiple possibilities to restore the Building as fast as they could. He suggested that this application was the important first step to start the recovery of the Listed Building as a future Primark Store.

Mr. Stinson thanked the Council for their engagement and fast processing of the Planning Application. He outlined a range of support for the case officer's recommendation for approval and suggested that the report reflected the competing public interest between the relevant planning policy and associated impacts on the City Centre. He suggested that the method of works outlined in the application had the support of the Historic Environment Division and the proposed works were required to facilitate further investigation on the structural integrity of the facades of the building.

Mr. Douglas explained that he was the Conservation Architect, working with a wider team on the application. He suggested that most of the interior of the building had been destroyed, however, it was hoped that much of the three external walls could be restored. He highlighted that the application only referred to the 'taking down' of the unstable elements of the building that would enable the restoration to begin.

He explained that complex issues, such as the façade retention and the reduction of the safety cordon, would proceed in parallel with the application works and they would be working with the Council's Building Control Service to take these issues forward.

He suggested that they would be following best practice and international standards of conservation and that the application was the first in a series of planning applications to complete the project.

During points of clarification, the representatives explained further their approach for health and safety, schedule of works and their anticipated timeline for completion of works. They suggested that they intended to work on site 7 days a week, however, as the project was complex and unpredictable, they would keep the Council updated on their progress. Mr. O'Connor explained that they had construction teams on standby to start building works next week, subject to the Committee's approval of the application.

During discussion, the Director highlighted that although the first condition outlined in the case officer's report stated that "*The works granted must commence within 1 year from the date of this Consent*" the informative attached to this, advised the applicant that the works should commence as soon as practically possible.

After discussion, the Committee granted approval to the application, subject to the imposing of the conditions set out within the case officer's report and delegated power to the Director of Planning and Building Control for the final wording of the conditions.

Chairperson