

RTPI South West Awards Excellence in Planning Delivery Waking the Watergate



Photo 1: Before development - Dawn de Vries

Project's Key Features

Sedgemoor District Council is presenting The Water Gate and Wessex House (11-16 West Quay) for the RTPI SW Award for Excellence in Planning Delivery. The site is located within the Bridgwater Central & Docks Conservation Area and includes The Castle Wall, Watergate and Undercroft which are listed as Grade II* as well as 12, 13 and 14 West Quay which are listed as Grade II. The site is dual fronted with split-levels, orientated east overlooking the River Parrett, to the north is a glazed spiral staircase adjoining Chandos Street and to the west there is a pedestrian access fronting Bond Street. The building was last used as offices by Wessex Water and Age Concern but had been vacant since 2011. It comprised multiple built elements of varying ages and design, combined into one larger structure.

Because of the visual prominence of the site, its sustainable location in relation to the Town Centre and its heritage value, it was imperative to work with developers to achieve an appropriate, sympathetic and economically viable re-use to aid the regeneration of the area. The site is also within an area highlighted by 'Bridgwater Vision', a supplementary planning document adopted in December 2015, which sets out the ambitions for Bridgwater. This includes "Leisure and hospitality (food and drink) outlets on the pedestrianised section of West Quay to act as catalyst for active frontage and pedestrian priority along River corridor." (pg.92)

The first of seven Planning and Listed Building applications was submitted in February 2016, incorporating: conversion of the building to 12 flats; amended scheme for 12 flats with offices; a gym and glazed link; a Lawful Development Certificate for a restaurant (to confirm it could

be used as a café); and expansion of the gym into the Undercroft/basement area. The last application was approved in December 2017.

Planning Content and Skill

To enable the re-development of this site comprehensively there were a number of considerations and issues to overcome:

- Relationship of the proposed use and impact on the Grade II and II* Listings
- Heritage and design considerations
- Staggering and interlinking applications due to issues found during conversion works, increased ownership and requirements of investors
- Part retrospective works carried out internally due to economic pressures on the project
- Engagement of stakeholders

The Watergate is a historic gateway, which suffered with graffiti, litter, anti-social behaviours and rough sleepers. A gate securing the gateway with an access code was proposed although this raised concern from Bridgwater & District Civic Society (BDCS) and local residents regarding accessibility and legibility of the heritage asset. The Conservation Officer by assessing local newspapers and websites located a historic 1890s photo showing a large gate across the opening, justifying the closure of the gateway, increasing security to reducing opportunity for anti-social behaviour.

During the pre-application process, it was accepted that the piecemeal development of this site resulted in a complicated layout with changes in levels from the Watergate to Bond Street despite suggestions that this was once open and led to the Bridgwater Castle. Negotiations were carried out throughout the process with the agent (Restoration and Design Studio, RDS Ltd) and the applicant/developer (Energy Drop Zone, EDZ Ltd).

The original application for conversion to flats took into consideration the 1960s curved glazed staircase and a raised office area enclosed with a timber and glazed screen. The proposal also sought to rationalise the windows, which included; aluminium sliding sash; a variety of Georgian and Victorian timber sliding sash, a few crittal casement and 1930s timber casement windows. The applicant's initial proposal of PVC-u replacement windows was rejected. Negotiations led to a range of alterations to ensure consistency and interpretation of the different phases of development. Aluminium sash were replaced with standard sized timber sash with no glazing bars. The 1930s crittal casements were replaced in the same vein with tripartite sash. 1930s timber casement were replaced on a like-for-like basis incorporating double glazing and the Victorian and Georgian timber sliding sash windows were repaired on a like-for-like basis.

During conversion works original timber parquet flooring was found around the timber and glazed screens. The scheme was revised to retain the timber parquet flooring and a new layout was proposed to emphasise the timber and glazed screens, with one flat presenting a small section in the bedroom and the other using them as feature walls enclosing the living room.

Following the first consent the applicant purchased The Watergate Hotel which refocused the scheme, seeking to enhance connection between the two buildings. The gateway was re-assessed and the heritage concerns regarding the loss of an interpretational opportunity was

raised with the Agent, resulting in a more comprehensive scheme linking the ground floor of Wessex House, integrating the Watergate and the former Watergate Hotel. Further investigations during the construction phase identified a doorway that joined the Watergate with the bonded warehouse (Undercroft). The revised scheme re-used original doorways providing access between the two buildings through a glazed link, which infilled between the two, protecting the Watergate and allowing a disabled WC to the rear of the corridor.

The glazed link resulted in an inviting space for visitors to the Watergate, and Bridgwater & District Civic Society provided an information board outlining the history and connection of the site to Bridgwater Castle. The consent of the revised scheme coincided with the Lawful development certificate for the café. The link incorporated repairs and works to the Watergate itself and entrance to the café providing high level seating on one side of the corridor so visitors could sit and read the board, allowing interpretation of the historic value. This occurred as a result of the commitment of the officers involved in seeking to achieve the best solution for the site and the good will of the developer in addressing locally raised issues.

The café originally formed the restaurant area of the Watergate Hotel and a Lawful Development Certificate was submitted to reassure the Investors regarding the lawful use. This was a time pressured application due to financial pressures of the project and involved significant research due to a localised flooding event closing the hotel during the time frame evidenced by the agent. Following investigation, the lawful A3 use at ground floor was confirmed and the reuse of the upper floors of the hotel as serviced apartments/bedsits for the short-term accommodation of Hinkley Point C workers was agreed.

The bonded warehouse (Undercroft) was originally detailed as car parking for the flats but given the barrel-vaulted brick-lined design, presenting a space over 40m long and 10m wide and the later links from the gateway, an extension to the ground floor gym was proposed. This space has now been sectioned into one large open plan studio and a second smaller studio and reception with exposed walls, which are visible relative to the Watergate from the café.

Given the evolutionary nature of the development, the agent was encouraged to engage with surrounding residents and give tours of the site. Whilst this caused some initial frictions, by keeping all channels of communication open, it was possible to alleviate concerns as and when they were raised and amendments were incorporated into the scheme to satisfy all parties.

Sustainable Development

This site presents a mixed use development within walking distance of the Town Centre and a range of public transport options. The development as a whole proposed conversion to flats, gym and offices and - through the re-use of the adjoining former hotel - incorporated a shared gym/coffee shop entrance to the café with serviced apartments above.

The range of uses complies with the 'Bridgwater Vision' and Local Policies providing a mix of employment uses, social spaces and a facility to improve physical wellbeing. The café is a local independent start-up business and The Watergate Hotel provided an opportunity for the business to move to a town centre location. This business is thriving and offers a small function room facing West Quay that can be booked for events or community use and can be catered for by the café.

Both the gym and café have led to job creation and business expansion, increasing employment within the Town Centre. Bringing these two large, prominent and previously vacant buildings along West Quay back into active economic use has supported 'Bridgwater Vision' and increased the range of high quality facilities in this location.

The development through the alterations to host buildings and the Watergate historic gateway, has reduced anti-social behaviour and increased the accessibility and interpretation of the historic environment. The works carried out have also secured the long-term renovation and retention of key features within this site.

Community Engagement

The application was subject to the standard consultation in respect of site notices being erected and adjoining neighbours being notified. Throughout the development of the site, the developers were encouraged to have direct liaison with the relative stakeholders, which included retirement flats and the Bridgwater & District Civic Society (BDCS) given the objections and concerns raised. A number of the amendments made during the application followed discussions with these parties and when residents expressed fears about disturbance from the use of the gym extension, a storage area was incorporated to cushion the adjoining properties from noise.

Open days and tours of the development were carried out during the conversion works taking the residents on the journey with the developer. Through engagement with the BDCS, enhanced opportunities were agreed for the interpretation of the historic gateway. Following completion of the development and following the completion of the development there as a small opening ceremony to mark the sympathetic restoration of the complex buildings and an interpretation board was provided to highlight the 'gatehouse' and 'watergate' (www.bridgwaterpress.co.uk/blog/2018/01/15/castle-watergate-january-13-2018/).

Inclusive Planning

The café (The White Feather Coffee Company) was supported by the Economic Development Team at Sedgemoor District Council with a Small Business Grant to assist with website development and a social media campaign. The website was proposed to help further underline the company's green credentials and allow a further diversification that customers will be able to order from its delivery service. This facility also launched a new business networking group 'The Business over Breakfast Group' which provides a vibrant, business referral group focused on helping businesses achieve more through building strong relationships and trust with fellow members. (June 2018 - <http://www.bridgwaterpress.co.uk/blog/2018/06/19/business-networking-business-over-breakfast-group-officially-launched/> Accessed 20.07.18)

The fitting out of the café and the gym have been carried out sympathetically and utilises the surrounding listed structure as an asset to the business, which is confirmed through the online feedback:

'You can't go wrong at White Feather... lovely coffees, friendly staff and amazing food! A stylish venue, the perfect place to catch up with friends.'

(www.facebook.com/Whitefeathercoffee/ - accessed 12.07.18)

'The studio itself is very unique and if like myself you don't like training in a busy gym this place is perfect...with each session guided by excellent instructors'

(www.watergatestudios.co.uk/testimonials - accessed 12.07.18)

Outcomes

Development of this site was piecemeal in terms of applications, complicated and enhanced by the surrounding listed elements and needed to be more responsive at points than the system seemed to allow. This was apparent through structural issues that had to be addressed by exchange of letters as a matter of urgency. Whilst the number of applications and time sensitivities due to investment issues caused pressures, lines of communication were forged with the developer and the surrounding interested parties. This allowed for a scheme that was appropriate to the Listed Buildings and incorporated a range of planning benefits in terms of mixed uses, economic and social, and through the support of small businesses and co-ordination with the Economic Development team, the expansion of the coffee shop into this site was achieved.

The retention, renovation, reinstatement and interpretation of key historic details such as the gateway, timber and glazed screens, replacement windows and the curved walls/roof to the undercroft gym allowed sympathetic integration of the uses into the buildings. The mixed use provides for a range of facilities for future and existing residents within the locality. The flexible use of accommodation allows for the provision of residential accommodation in this town centre location and a short-term provision for Hinkley Workers in this period of need, with scope to supplement further the open market offer once the current demand reduces.

Good Practice

Public Consultation was encouraged which helped ease concerns of local residents and resulted in alterations and changes which benefited the scheme. The down side to this approach was that when the agent was discussing aspirational proposals, members of the public were not always clear how this sat within the planning process. Any disadvantage to this however was outweighed by the benefits of this level of engagement, which increased trust between all parties allowing residents to be reassured and engaged throughout the planning process.

Social Benefit

The redevelopment of this site opened the opportunity for the café as a local independent start-up business to locate to a town centre location. The small function room provided offers wider community benefit and has already been used by organisations such as mother and baby groups and the Chamber of Commerce. This flexible layout and use of space has resulted in a hub for local people and visitors and increasing footfall along the riverfront.

The gym is available for residents and members of the public and creates a modest but engaging space to exercise either in small classes through the use of gym equipment or under one to one instruction increasing opportunities to enhance health and well-being.

The serviced apartments have resulted in the re-use of a previously redundant building and, as they accommodate HPC workers, the demand on market housing by this group within the Town has reduced safeguarding town centre or close to centre opportunities for residents.

The renovation of these units also safeguards their future use with potential for re-incorporation into the general housing market, to boost housing in this sustainable location.

Conclusion

In conclusion, through positive and joint engagement between the Planning, Conservation, and Economic Development Officer and Agent, there was an understanding of the pressures of development in terms of time and finance, and all parties worked together to agree how the constraints could be viewed as opportunities. Through the purchasing of the adjoining site a re-assessment of the scheme and potential relationships between the two buildings was considered. By viewing the surrounding Listed Structures as assets and utilising the features to enhance the product the Agent was able to present the amendments to the scheme as 'planning benefits'. Through engagement and communication with interested parties additional elements were incorporated to further enhance the development and reassure residents.

The resulting mixed-use scheme has played a part in fulfilling part of the Council's wider aspirations through 'Bridgwater Vision', rejuvenating these two prominent and nationally important buildings and providing economic, social and environmental benefits. A coordinated and joint approach between Planning, Conservation and Economic Development resulted in the wider planning balance being weighed, appropriate detailed consideration of the Listed elements and support, where necessary, to aid local businesses to engage with the market.