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My ref: EXP01-APP-LTR-02-01

20 April 2020

Manchester City Planning
PO Box 352
Town Hall
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Dear Sir / Madam,

PP-08662395

Erection of modular building at 1a Brett Street, Northenden, M22 4EY

This letter accompanies the submission of a full planning application made on behalf of Express Solicitors for the erection of a modular building to the western side elevation of its offices at 1a Brett Street, Northenden. The purpose of the building is to provide additional staff welfare facilities at the premises as part of Express Solicitors on-going investment in the business which is now the largest employer within Northenden District Centre.

Express Solicitors is a successful firm of accredited solicitors, headquartered at Resolution House on Palatine Road, and has expanded into 311-313 Palatine Road and most recently to the Brett Street premises. It now employs in the region of 280 staff and is the largest private business and employer in Northenden and plays a significant role in supporting the centre through the use of shops and facilities by staff and visitors.

Expansion of the business has been supported by the City Council in the recent change of use for the Brett Street offices to maintain investment in the business, its staff and the wider local economy. This application represents a further step in redressing the welfare of staff as a responsible employer.

Express Solicitors has reviewed its requirements in light of the on-going Covid-19 pandemic. It has made the decision that the facility will still be required and intends to go forward with the proposal once conditions allow and the offices are once more operating as normal.

Application Site and Background

The application site comprises of a small area of 60m^2 to the western side of the premises 1a Brett Street, a two-storey office building in class B1 use, granted retrospective permission in September 2019, reference 123841/FO/2019. The wider site area totals 400m^2.

The site is bounded by the 2-storey wall of the office building to east, parking forecourt to front (south), a single-storey commercial unit and 2m-high wall to rear yard of commercial premises fronting Palatine Road (west) and 2m-high wall to north to alley and rear gardens beyond of homes fronting Allanson Road.

The site is located within the District Centre of Northenden, to the east of the main high street, Palatine Road. Figure 1 illustrates the location of the site in context of the centre.

Figure 1 – Site Location



Figure 2 – Extract Site Location Plan

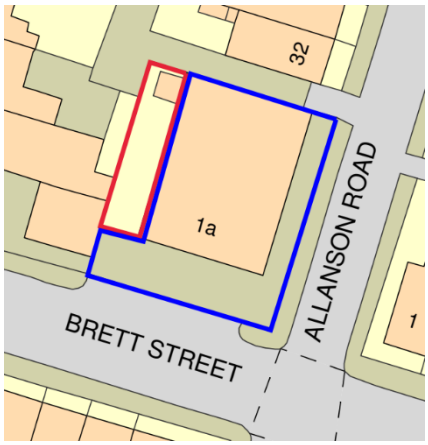


Figure 2 - OS plan base shows a small outbuilding within the red line that no longer exists.

In the wider context the site is not adjacent to any listed buildings and the Northenden Conservation Area is separated by two streets of properties to the east and is not considered of relevance to the site or proposal.

The site is designated within Flood Risk Zone 2 due to the proximity of the River Mersey to the north. Other than the flood risk no other environmental or other designations constrain the site.

Relevant Planning History

Typical of many commercial premises there is a varied history, but there is only one application considered relevant, and that is the change of use permitted in September 2019, reference 123841/FO/2019. Permission was granted retrospectively for *change of use from sui generis (comprising office, warehouse, workshop and showroom) to Use Class B1 (offices)*, as the use had started approximately a year prior. Permission was granted subject to conditions.

Discharge of condition, reference CDN/19/1025, was made in January 2020 for condition 1 to approve an Interim Travel Plan and condition 3 for a smoking shelter. It is proposed the smoking shelter will be installed to the rear of the modular building.

Development Proposal

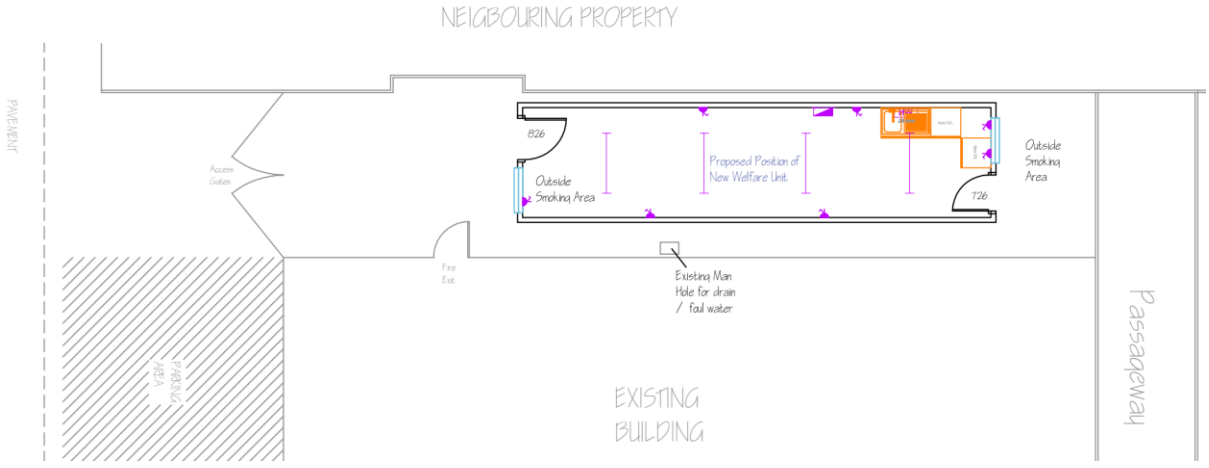
It is proposed to erect a modular building to the west of the building set behind the building line to provide new space for staff welfare facilities based at Brett Street. The facilities will include a kitchenette, seating and eating area to allow staff to move away from their desks when having lunch or extended breaks. Although facilities are available at the main offices on Palatine Road it is found the separation discourages their use by staff based at Brett Street and a dedicate facility is proposed to address their needs.

It is proposed to use a modular construction given the relatively small scale of the building, the confines of the space to construct using traditional methods and the presence of drain that would require substantial diversion works to build a permanent side extension.

The modular building will be 2.4m 9.6m, giving an approximate internal floorspace of 23.04m^2. Access will be taken from front and rear elevations with windows to front and rear too. The cabin will be located in front of the position of the proposed smoking shelter providing more privacy to staff from the street.

Materials and finishes will be per the cabin specification as set out in the accompanying plans. The colour Goose Wing Grey is selected to be least obtrusive, but it is open to condition to approve an alternative finish.

Figure 3 Extract Proposed Layout



Planning Policy

Section 38(6) of the Town & Country Planning Act requires development control decisions to be taken in accordance with the adopted development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. For the purpose of this application the adopted development plan comprises of the Core Strategy DPD (2012), Proposals Map and Saved Policies of the UDP (1995).

Emerging policy in the form of the Local Plan and GM Strategic Framework remain at early stages of preparation to have no relevance to determination of this proposed development.

In addition, national policy in the National Planning Policy Framework (2019) and Planning Practice Guidance (2014-) are material considerations that may be of significance as expression of national policy.

National Planning Policy Framework (2019)

The Framework sets out the Government's overarching planning policy objectives. Central is achieving sustainable development with the three pillars of social, economic and environmental objectives. Policy and decision-making that follows should actively guide development towards sustainable solutions.

Paragraph 10 sets out the presumption in favour of sustainable development and paragraph 11c requires decisions that accord with up-to-date development plans to be taken without delay. It is considered this proposal does accord with relevant up-to-date policy and that approval should be granted without undue delay.

Chapter 6 Building a strong, competitive economy set out at paragraph 80 that planning policies and decisions should help create the conditions in which businesses can invest, expand and adapt. Significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth and productivity, considering local business needs and wider opportunities for development. Paragraph 81d requires policies to be flexible to accommodate unanticipated needs, new working practices and allow rapid response to changing economic circumstances. This proposal represents an evolving business need and a requirement for rapid response to support continued investment.

Chapter 7 looks to ensure the vitality and viability of town centres, with a positive approach to growth of centres, management and adaptation that allows for a suitable mix of uses as defined through the Glossary. This includes support for office uses relevant to this proposal.

Core Strategy (2012)

The Core Strategy sets a 15-year vision to 2027 for development within the city. The key relevant policies identified are as follows.

- Policy EC2 Existing employment space – Supports the retention and enhancement of employment spaces and sites.
- Policy EC10 Wythenshawe – An area-based policy encompassing Northenden District Centre, to support 55ha of employment land over the plan period in the area, Policy 4 focusing economic development into the district centres. The centre is considered suitable for a mixed-use employment provision.
- Policy C2 District Centres – Will support development that provides for thriving District Centres, with distinctive local character and a good range of accessible key services.

Opportunities to supporting employment development should be taken to serve local communities, promote efficient reuse of buildings and land, positively contributing to regeneration. Development should complement and support a diverse centre without undermining the retail function.

- Policy T2 Accessible areas of opportunity and need – Encourages development to sustainable locations to reduce reliance on private car for transport, supporting more sustainable travel options.
- Policy EN14 Flood risk – Development should minimise the risk of flooding to people, property and the environment without giving rise to increased risks elsewhere. Development shall minimise surface water runoff, including as appropriate sustainable drainage systems.
- Policy EN19 Waste – All applications shall be accompanied by waste management plans to demonstrate how construction / demolition and operational waste will be minimised based on the waste hierarchy to reduce, reuse and recycle.
- Policy DM1 Development management – Sets design principles for new development to reflect and is supported by relevant supplementary planning documents, in this case 2007 Guide to Development. Appropriate siting, layout, scale, form, massing, materials and details apply to all new development, alongside considerations of impact on amenity, surroundings, accessibility and waste storage of relevance here too.

Unitary Development Plan (1995) Saved policies

It is considered that there are no saved policies of relevance to the proposed development.

Planning Case

Principle of development

Express Solicitors is a very successful business, headquartered in Northenden, and employing in the region of 280 people across its split site. It is understood to now be the largest single employer in the centre and a significant contributor to the local economy by drawing in activity from staff and visitors using local shops, services and facilities.

The Framework exhorts local planning authorities to create conditions that support businesses to invest, expand and adapt rapidly. It requires significant weight to be given in decision-making to the need to support economic growth and productivity (paragraph 80). In application of its policies, an authority should be responsive and flexible in meeting business operating needs and changing practices (paragraph 81d). It is difficult to conceive in the midst of the present Covid-19 crisis of a more difficult circumstance that the all businesses and the community faces, and this is one company's positive response for its staff and business to which the City Council is urged to support as all businesses look to return to more normal operations.

Development plan Policy EC2 is straightforward in supporting the retention and enhancement of employment spaces and sites, and Policy EC10 seeks to direct economic development into district centres such as Northenden, an objective echoed in Policy C2. In this manner there is no need to flexibly interpret the policies, as policies already support granting permission that enables businesses to invest, grow and meet their changing needs. Extending the facilities at Brett Street to provide improved staff welfare facilities to improve working conditions and ability to social distance that has clear and present national and local policy support, to which significant weight must be given in the planning balance.

Policy C2 has further criteria to assess development, partly focused on protection of retail function in centres. These are not of direct relevance to the proposals, but of those that are the criteria support the proposals as follows.

Development in District Centres should:

Prioritise delivery of key 'visitor' services, including retail, public and commercial services … The Council will ensure that retail remains the principal use in Primary Shopping Areas, but also ensure provision is made … for commercial and service uses, … and other uses which make a positive contribution to vitality and viability of centres.

The offices are a commercial use, make a positive contribution to the vitality and viability of Northenden. By investing in its facilities and staff resource, Express Solicitors can ensure this positive contribution continues and secures its on-going commitment to the centre as its key employer. There, is no harm to the retail activity of the centre.

Promote the development of employment which provides opportunities for local people

Unlike the change of use of the premises into office use, this proposal does not increase employment opportunities, but it does enhance the value and condition of employment, which is a significant part of ensuring opportunities are available in the future.

Promote the efficient use of land … New development should positively contribute to the reuse and regeneration of land and premises, together with wider regeneration and investment strategies.

It is not suggested that a small-scale development such as this amounts to a regeneration strategy, but it does form part of wider investment strategy implemented by Express Solicitors to which positive benefit should be given. The company chose to retain its Northenden base when looking for premises to expand into prior to selecting Brett Street in 2018. It did so through a commitment to the local community where many members of its staff live and accepted a compromise in operating a split site. In this application for improvement to the staff facilities, Express Solicitors, is seeking the City Council's support to local businesses in making such commitments within its local communities.

Concluding on the matter of principle, there is a strong national and local policy support to the objectives of the development proposal to invest in the existing business and facilities for the betterment of its workforce. It is a matter to which significant weight should be given in the planning balance, and a matter which has full national and local planning policy support. Unless material considerations, which are turned to next, indicate other harm to matters of planning importance and that harm outweighs this significant weight, then permission should be granted. As will be set out below, there is no such harm arising and the conclusion reached remains in support.

<u>Design and amenity</u>

The site is located in a mixed commercial and residential area, set back from the main high street, typical of such locations within urban areas of most cities. It is a character that is instantly familiar because of its ubiquity but is no less important to those that live and work in the local community.

The position of the proposed modular building is to the west side of the 2-storey office building, set back from the building line and contained by two 2-metre high walls to the north and west. The western wall has razor wire to its top placed by the neighbour for security. A security fence / gate of c. 2-metres height extends between the office building and western boundary. The modular building will sit back behind this. The sense of enclosure is therefore strong, and the proposed position of the building is discrete and set back from the highway with limited visibility and even less presence in the streetscene.

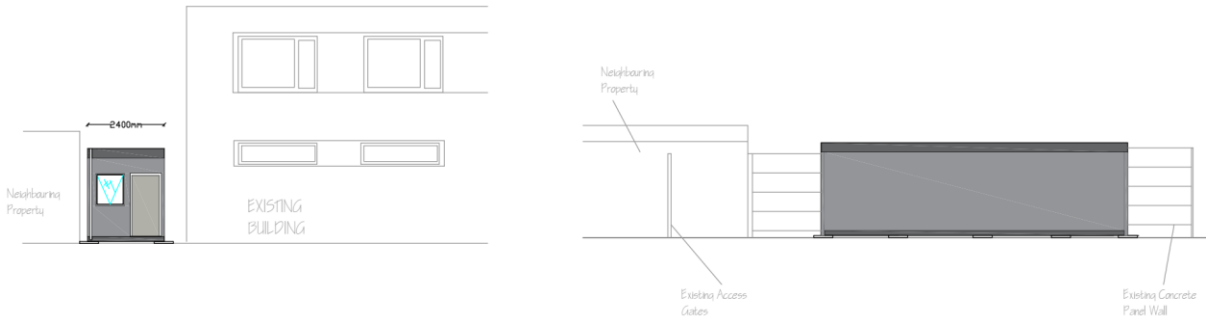
A modular building approach has been taken because an extension of the office building would require drain diversion, an increased cost and disruption to business. The confined space also lends itself to a modular solution as a simpler, shorter and altogether less disruptive installation process than a tradition build approach to neighbouring homes and businesses.

Siting of the cabin set back from the frontage is considered to barely register in the already limited influence the space has on the property frontage and streetscene when approached from either direction. Existing views, such that they are, are already influenced by the existing fence / gate and forecourt parking, and the substantial cement walls and unsightly razor wire that bound the space. The new building will improve this view.

It is considered that the siting, layout, scale and form is suitable for the discrete site and will not give rise to any harm to visual amenity.

The finish materials used will be as specified in the submitted details. A grey finish is proposed as least obtrusive, but alterative colour could be specified through condition. It is not a brick finish like the office building, but given the scale, position and discrete nature of the development it is considered a matching material is of little design importance, particularly given the existing variety of materials in the vicinity which is away from the conservation area. At the rear (north) and side (west) the existing concrete walls nearly match the building height (400mm difference), which will be imperceptible from private views in rear yard / garden.

Figure 4 Extract proposed elevations



The cabin access is from the front and rear elevation with windows to front and rear too. The cabin will be sited to place the planned smoking shelter to the rear out of view, providing more privacy to staff.

Overall, the proposal does not give rise to harm to amenity of neighbouring properties or uses, nor harms the appearance of the streetscene and visual amenity. It is supported by Policy DM1 and associated SPD Guide for Design.

Highway

The development will add circa 23m^2 floorspace to the premises, but it will not lead to additional staff at the workplace as it is an ancillary facility. Planning permission 123841/FO/2019 condition 1 requires Express Solicitors to seek approval for an Interim Travel Plan, which will be followed up 3 months following its approval with a full Travel Plan. This requirement will codify the existing practice of seeking to encourage staff to avoid using private car to and from work, and where this is not possible or desirable for some staff, to consider car sharing. Express Solicitors is acutely aware of the pressures on parking in local residential streets and regularly monitors its staff and their cars to discourage such behaviour.

Because the Travel Plan is already being put into place as a live document, it is considered this proposal does not give rise to any additional pressures, and any concerns that may arise locally. As such there is no harm to the objectives in Policy T2 from the proposal.

Flood risk

The application is accompanied by a Flood Risk Assessment prepared by Integra. The Assessment concludes that the proposal will not give rise to any increase in flood risk elsewhere from the positioning of the modular building on the site. Therefore, the proposal is found to be compliant with Policy EN14 and wider national planning policy objectives regarding flood risk and sustainable drainage.

Waste management

The staff facilities will include a small kitchenette and will generate limited amount of waste associated with the preparation of food. All other waste streams are unchanged from those considered in approval of the change of use in 2019. The siting of the modular building enables the two 1100L bins to continue to be kept in the locked area overnight. The proposal is made in accordance with the objectives of Policy EN19 and the Waste Management Strategy submitted to with permission 123841/FO/2019 which is enclosed again with this application for information.

Conclusion

At its heart this is an application for a small modular building to extend an existing office premises to improve staff welfare and facilities. It represents an on-going commitment by Express Solicitors to invest in its staff and in its continued presence as the main employer in Northenden.

As a physical development the modular building is a small, discrete change to the site and the streetscene. Its appearance will not lead to any material or harmful impact on publicly available or private views.

The proposal will positively support the well-being of staff, supporting productivity and success of the company, rewarding its continued investment at a difficult time.

The proposal clearly benefits from the presumption in favour of development set out paragraph 11c of the Framework as a policy compliant proposal, and planning permission should be granted without undue delay.

Yours faithfully



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