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Design Statement for 20 London Road, Neath, Neath Port Talbot.



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a. Summary Proposal

This modest proposal, is simply to retain the existing use but separate from a Town Planning perspective, use of Number 20 from that of its larger neighbour Number 19 with which it has in the past operated and assimilate small necessary modifications such as a ramp and enclosed bin store and cycle area. Numbers 19 and 20 are a pair of large interlinking late Victorian former terraced dwelling houses set just outside the immediate town-centre of Neath, converted (presumably pre-Second-World War) into commercial office use. The Statement is to be read in association with the submitted Planning Application drawings and e-mails to Mr Chris Davies Planning Senior Planner/Team Leader.

i. Background:

For decades these premises have afforded secondary grade, office accommodation at the edge of Neath centre. Number 19 and 20 were in the past, occupied by a large local solicitor practice (who subsequently relocated to 1970's built accommodation, across the road) , insurance companies and more recently, by a charity as a call centre/base. The latter 'use' is one that it is clearly not suited to, given there is a plethora of vacant and far more suitable, purpose-built, vacant accommodation, readily available within the greater Neath and Swansea area.

Most large and medium sized professional practices have typically (over the past forty plus years) moved to lease or purchase purpose-built accommodation 'out of town' This generally offered greater flexibility, holistic lease terms, good road access and plentiful car parking. NPTCBC have themselves and their spin-off housing association (ALMO) Tai Tarian, supported and followed this trend. Smaller firms have thus had the opportunity to rent more suitable in town facilities, but increasingly proprietors and workers have chosen to work from home.

The property world is currently witnessing profound changes in business practices and demand. Digital technologies and on-line team working are such that few companies large or small, can foresee a demand for large in house facilities. Those that continue to operate have had to make significant changes to occupancy levels and encompass social distancing, enhanced ventilation and where air conditioning is present should be making wholesale redesign and remodelling, if not renewal of system and their operation. Many large businesses are already grossly over supplied with office accommodation and staff are being informed they may work from home for years. Some recently advertised posts are making this a permanent condition of employment. Whilst 'co-working' facilities were becoming increasingly popular in major world centres, pre-Covid; the demand in Neath will always remain very small, even if the current pandemic was to abate in the next six months. The Covid pandemic has subsequently made shared uses almost impossible to deliver and most

have remained closed, even when lock-downs were lifted as they were founded upon collaboration, not social distancing. Global flexible work operations such as ‘Regus’ and ‘We Work’ as well as leading UK operators have seen share values and occupier demand decimated.

Within the context of London Road, such demands have resulted in these buildings proving very difficult to obtain tenants of any description. The building has now been vacant for some time. When the charity tenant vacated, it was marketed for quite some time before ultimately being disposed of by its former owners, at an auction in March 2020. This auction ironically coinciding with the very early days of the first Covid_19 lockdown. Few observers would have anticipated this lasting almost a year at present and the threat of the virus in future modes becoming a ongoing challenge that economies will need to manage.

The applicants, (run a husband and wife micro-business - fitting kitchen and bathroom’s, locally), purchased it as they are keen to support the retention of Neath as a town-centre location and with a view to developing a base facility for their business and with the potential ability to rent additional accommodation to other local business users, to supplement their income. This has failed to materialise.

Unfortunately, they grossly under-estimated the seismic change and ongoing impact that the Covid_19 global pandemic has created locally, as well as the impact across the UK and globe.

Town-centre secondary locations such as those in Neath have struggled for decades to attract inward investment and business occupiers, but the pandemic has become a real game changer. The applicants, initially attempted to refresh parts of the interior and market the building as a ‘business hub’ with shared facilities, but this has generated no interest whatsoever. The various ongoing lock-downs and the need to socially distance has made far more sophisticated facilities in world leading cities redundant and new buildings under construction are obsolete even before topping out. Neath Town centre already has a number of existing and (we gather more proposed co-working facilities and business suites) hence tenant/occupier demand will be extremely limited for many years.

A personal observation of the author of this document, discerned by his joint role as a practising local Chartered Surveyor/ RICS Registered Valuer as well as a part-time university lecturer in Property and Facilities Management, is to respectfully suggest that the outlook for UK commercial property is extremely bleak and that many current central and local government planning policies will need to change to reflect a permanently changed work order.

b. Brief and Vision

The brief has evolved a number of times over the past six months. Firstly, exploring a business hub use for 19 and 20; then as a series of live/work units before the applicants accepted that for them, the reuse of the two units 19 and 20 exceeded their available resources, as the residential/business changes would be complex under Building Regulatory requirements without wholesale remodelling and rebuilding. They subsequently sold Number 19 to a local building contractor/developer who we gather wishes to retain a business office use in Number 19 and will we understand be making a subsequent application for their premises. As a consequence, two smaller, hopefully sustainable business uses will result. This application is however, purely for Number 20.

c. Site and Context Analysis

The site is a less than four hundred metres from the town centre business area, with Victoria Gardens bus station and Neath railway station nearby.

Number 20, affords ample existing vehicle parking provision and is readily accessible for pedestrians and cyclists. It is however, challenged in that there are better located commercial office premises within Neath. The town centre, already contains large numbers of empty or part vacant commercial space e.g. Queen's Street, Windsor Road, Victoria Gardens, Alfred Street, and The Parade. In recent years, rents in these locations have fallen by more than 50%, as demand for such space has collapsed and obtaining long term sustainable tenants scarce. The lack of business relief for businesses of the size of the combined 19 and 20 was the

d. Interpretation

There are no truly significant changes proposed by this scheme. Number 20 already has a clearly distinct façade that intimates it is a separate unit to Number 19. The design simply reflects the current requirement for a smaller unit.

The Proposal

This proposal is to retain Number 20 (as at present) as an office business unit. The Pedrick's, were faced with very large rate demands to meet (and no opportunity of a rate reduction) throughout the pandemic, and foresee little hope of a return to the 'traditional normal' mode of business. They were placed in a position where they needed to raise revenue and have been explored in a range of options that were discussed in e-mails with the Senior Officers of the Planning Department. As indicated they have since been forced to sell Number 19 to a separate developer.

The proposed ongoing/retained use fits with the NPTCBC Local Development Plan currently adopted and effectively continues the existing use, hopefully, with in a more manageably sized business unit.

Were the council starting with a new business model we respectfully suggest it is highly unlikely that this part of London Road would be designated for business use, but this is what has co-existed in this location for many decades. In the longer term, return to residential applications is we suggest more viable, but the applicants are keen to once again persevere with a business use, if this can be attained and made viable.

i. Character

The proposal retains the character and detail of the existing facades, largely as existing, simply by repairing fabric and redecorating.. The only significant change is to broadly mirror the detailing of the ramp to Number 19, at the front of Number 20 to afford wheel-chair accessible access to the ground floor of Number 20, thereby meeting the requirements of Building Regulations and the Equality Act. The proposal sustains the existing local character and retains a legible development.

Internally, the agreed layout will be finalised following further discussions with LABC building control, but will remain broadly as existing, with only minor changes to block off the currently inter-connecting doorways in the Party Wall of 19/20, add fire-doors and enhance accessible toilet provision and make small enhancements to aid inclusivity following Approved Document M of the building Regulations where necessary, or at the least, not making the situation worse. These matters to be developed further as part of the Building Regulation submission. They will not impact on the external appearance or use of the building from a Town and Country planning perspective.

ii. Access

It is proposed that the existing access ways into the building and car-parking will be retained to the front and rear. There will be no physical separation on the boundary line of the tarmac surfacing, such that both premises may have readily accessible turning provision, as currently exists, allowing entry and exit in a forward gear. A ramped approach at the front will facilitate inclusive access to the ground floor.

iii. Movement

As existing, there is no change. Walking, cycling and the use of public transport remains eminently available and sustainable. Good connectivity and access to these facilities exists. The Business user(s) will be encouraged to promote the use of walking and cycling. Located

within a secure private timber close-boarded storage compound within the rear car park, there will be ample provision for storing cycles as well as the wheelie-bins the facility will use. An appropriate mix of parking provision has been integrated which is well overlooked by these and surrounding properties. Meeting with TAN 18. Principles set out in Manual for Streets. Disabled car parking will be delineated.

iv. Environmental Sustainability

Thermal insulation or enhancements will be made whenever the applicants are upgrading thermal elements or controlled services and fittings. The building is currently heated via a modern, thermally efficient gas boiler and radiators. LED and other energy efficient lighting will also be incorporated. When the need arises to upgrade in future years, the possibility of heat pumps will be evaluated. Water use within the facility will be minimal. There is no increase in surface water systems. Foul drainage will be lower given a reduced occupancy. Waste Management processes will be contained within the compound with any light commercial and domestic refuse stored in wheeled bins concealed by the enclosed timber fenced and gated compound.

v. Community Safety

There is already natural surveillance from both London Road and Rectory Road. This will not change. The existing chain-link fence and gates will remain all as existing. The premises are fitted with security fencing, gates and this will remain transparent. Secure car parking is retained at the rear.

Secured by Design principles have been considered. Existing street lighting and background lights will remain. Ongoing use of the premises will retain activity at different times of the day.

vi. Response to planning policy

This application retains business use in London Road and although modest in nature follows the broad principles of the adopted NPTCBC Local Development Plan. Please see details within the bibliography below.

It also follows the general expectations of Planning Policy Wales and TAN 12 and attempts to meet these as an established existing premises in the current economic climate. It is politely requested that the Council support this application.



Bibliography

Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Local Development Plan (2011-2026) Proposals Map Adopted January 2016.

Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Local Development Plan (2011-2026) Adopted January 2016.

5.2.17 Policy EC2 Existing Employment Areas 61

5.2.20 Policy EC3 Employment Area Uses 61 5.2.23

Policy EC4 Protection of Existing Employment Uses.

5.2.30 Policy EC6 Live-work Units.

5.2.38 Policy R1 Retail Allocations Policy R 1 Retail Allocations Neath Town Centre Regeneration Scheme

Planning Policy Wales <http://gov.wales/docs/desh/publications/150924planning-policy-wales-edition-10-en.pdf> –

TAN 12: Design <http://gov.wales/docs/desh/publications/140731technical-advice-note-12-en.p>

The Town and Country Planning (Use Classes) Order 1987 (the Use Classes Order) (SI 1987 No 764).