

4 Norfolk Place, Littlehampton, West Sussex, BN17 5PD

Planning Department
Arun District Council
Civic Centre
Maltravers Road
LITTLEHAMPTON
Sussex
BN17 5LF

Dear Sirs,

LU/117/17/PL

2 - 13 Duke Street Littlehampton BN17 6EU

This application proposes demolishing a complete row of former cottages and replacing it with an unremarkable block of flats which offers nothing of value to the streetscape or locality.

I am a member of the Littlehampton Heritage Group, and also of the Littlehampton Community Charter Group in which capacity I participated in the development of the Littlehampton Neighbourhood Plan. These Groups have already made a Representation, my reason for adding this is my personal knowledge of the site, as I assisted Ockendens with a number of their premises as they rationalised and readjusted to the changing retail business world from the late 1970s onwards, including some of the initial changes to this row of cottages to convert it into a retail Garden Department. This was achieved without any significant or intrusive alteration to the external scale of appearance of the street frontage, even though most of the internal walls and floors were removed and the roof was entirely restructured.

I felt, then as now, that Ockendens' decision to preserve the Duke Street streetscape intact was very commendable, and continues to this day to be one of the factors that underpins efforts to make the High Street a vibrant and attractive shopping centre. The scheme as carried out also indirectly improved the experience of moving between the (then new) car park and the High Street through St Martins Lane.

Ockendens had used the entire row for storage from around 1960; prior to that about three of the cottages had been occupied by employees or was tenanted, the remainder of the cottages had been empty for maybe twenty five years since being declared unfit for habitation due to lack facilities. The progression from Residential to Storage to Retail was to some extent expedient, but it showed that it is possible to use buildings (at a time when people were moving from town centre housing out to the suburbs) flexibly with minimal disruption or impact. And the current trend and policy of converting un-needed office and business space into dwellings shows that this can be a reversible process.

Duke Street and St Martin's Lane are the only two breaks in the north side of the High Street, and are the vital accessible pedestrian routes both to the car parks and to the parts of the town to the north. Apart from the rear additions to Sainsbury's on the West side of St Martin's Lane, north of the Crown Inn, which is basic and bland, all the other buildings in these two pedestrian feeders have considerable merit as elements of the streetscape, they are varied, of a scale that bridges very happily between the larger buildings in the high street and town to the north, are full of character, and generally add to the sense of place. The Application site has survived as a complete terrace, and is the only remaining complete section of what was once quite an extensive residential zone of the town. And crucially, it is an outstanding example of locally-fired brickwork and coursed cobble wall construction.

Consultations and meetings around the Neighbourhood Plan proposals revealed a huge public affection for the cobble walls that were once everywhere around the town, and which the Pevsner Guide to Sussex (currently under revision) specifically named as being typically local (although 'pebble' is used instead of our local 'cobble'). This interest and wish to conserve cobbled walling as an iconic local feature is one of the best-supported aspects of the Plan.

In terms of building use, the claim that this is a redundant failed public house is completely spurious. It is in fact a structure that has shown itself versatile enough to accommodate several uses, and the latest use as a Bar was short lived simply because it commenced that use only recently, and was discontinued when the entire company, comprising also two other busy licensed premises nearby, ceased trading due to the illness of a key manager, and not because of gradual commercial failure. Under other circumstances time may have shown the business model of the Tap and Barrel to have been absolutely right for this location; and it certainly would not have been possible to show the case was hopeless if the CAMRA test for failing pubs had been applied - something that many LPAs will ask for in evidence.

There will be objections to this scheme on the grounds of loss of retail floorspace, but to be realistic, there are overwhelming pressures against the success of businesses which rely on 'footfall' and passing trade in this type of location. The continuing more or less unfettered growth of out-of-town by-pass retail developments and the widespread use of on-line retailers clearly means the ongoing viability of small retail units in town centres is increasingly questionable. On the other hand town centres are being reinvigorated by the return of town-centre living as offices and shops close down. The existence of town-centre car parks does provide for both day-time shoppers and overnight residential parking. Residential use in this kind of location is demonstrably sustainable, even though town centre dwellers too will drive out to the by-pass to shop.

It is my view that the town will eventually take the knock of loss of shops irrespective of whether new shops are included in town centre developments; and that the town will gradually revert to being more of a place to live in. These are inescapable long-term trends. A much more important issue at this time is the Townscape and Heritage, particularly as these former cottages are capable (as shown by Ockendens) of being both Residential and Commercial premises, and are a most important and authentic example of a form of construction which is highly valued locally.

I submit there is no justification for demolishing the existing buildings - or at least, no justification for, or benefit to the townscape from, demolishing the Duke Street Frontage or changing its scale or appearance. This row is too important to be sacrificed, particularly as it is capable of providing an appropriate amount of accommodation while keeping the streetscape intact.

Yours truly

18/05/2012

