

Thank you Mr Chairman

And the number of people in the public gallery this early on a Friday morning shows just how strongly the people of Beckenham feel about this scheme.

We have called in this proposal, because the recommendations as approved by the November Executive do not reflect the discussion at the meeting. We believe that this decision is flawed in a number of ways and ask this committee to refer it back to the Executive for reconsideration.

I will focus on two points:-

1. The complete lack of any evidence or analysis in the paper to support the decision in principle to demolish the library and replace it with housing.
2. The impact on the Elm Road Conservation Area.

The original paper does not contain the slightest justification for the decision in principle to demolish the library and indeed does not give any consideration to the implications. This morning, I would like to ask anyone in this Council Chamber, whether Member or Officer, to show me one sentence justifying it. And we must remember that this decision, with no justification whatsoever, might be seen as predetermining a future planning application.

The paper also contains no information on the results of any public consultation on moving the Library. Hardly surprising, given that there hasn't been any. And no real Member consultation either. The first time the Clock House Councillors were sent a partial draft of the paper, it was described as "a good news story" – hardly member consultation. This decision is therefore on very shaky ground legally.

Recommendation 2 commits the Council to the use of the current Library site for housing, irrespective of the outcome of the viability study referenced in Recommendation 1. The paper has tried to hide this. Its title is "Authority to proceed to Procurement". Nothing about the demolition of the Library.

As has been said several times, the Library is within the Elm Road Conservation Area. However, the paper contains nothing about the policy and legal implications of demolition and re development in a Conservation Area.

As members will recall, we approved our new Local Plan in this Council Chamber in January this year. Policy 41 covers development in Conservation Areas. It permits development, and even demolition, but it specifies tests to be passed before any building in a Conservation Area can be demolished. These tests are stringent, and defined in the National Planning Policy Framework, for buildings which make a positive contribution to the Conservation Area, and less stringent for buildings making a neutral or negative contribution.

The library is described in the Supplementary Planning Guidance for the Elm Road Conservation Area, although this description is silent on the contribution the Library makes. However, whatever the contribution, the paper should have provided the results of the tests which should have been carried out to justify the proposed demolition. That it did not, a serious omission from the paper, is one reason to refer back to the Executive.

However, there is another, much more significant reason to refer this back to the Executive. When we were considering the Call-in, I read the Supplementary Planning Guidance in full. And I found something really important in section 6, Policy Guidance.

This section covers details of how to manage changes. One of the sections, paragraph 6.13, covers demolition. I will read 6.13.2 out in full, and have copies of the relevant page for circulation:-

“ALL the principle buildings [and as the Library is individually described, it is clearly a principal building] are deemed to make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and therefore the Council will resist demolition of ANY building.”

The use of the words “all” and “any” make this completely unambiguous.

“ALL the principal buildings are deemed to make a positive contribution and the Council will resist demolition of ANY building”.

This project is based on the sale of the Library site for around £2 million for redevelopment. What sort of developer would offer £2 million for a site for which the Council’s existing policy is to resist demolition of any building? In fact, what sort of developer would even look twice at it?

Mr Chairman, this proposal goes against the previously agreed guidance for the Elm Road Conservation Area, and risks the predetermination of a future planning application. It should be referred back to the Executive for them to think again.

Supplementary Planning Guidance

6.13 Demolition

- 6.13.1 Within the Conservation Area, total or substantial demolition of a building normally requires conservation area consent. Applications for work of this kind must be made to the Council using the appropriate form. As undertaking demolition work without consent is a criminal offence, it is advisable to seek the Council's advice before demolishing any structure in a Conservation Area.
- 6.13.2 All the principle buildings are deemed to make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and therefore the Council will resist demolition of any building.

6.14 Satellite Dishes

- 6.14.1 Satellite dishes are not normally deemed acceptable within conservation areas as they cause visual clutter. They will normally be resisted on prominent elevations and should ideally be placed out of sight at the rear of the property.

7 ENHANCEMENT ACTION BY THE COUNCIL

- 7.1 Many of the buildings in the Conservation Area are private dwelling houses. As such, there is little scope for direct Council action to enhance the area. Whilst the repair and improvement of the houses will generally be a matter for individual property owners, the Council does have powers to address untidy or neglected buildings or sites and will consider their use on a case-by-case basis.
- 7.2 The Council has a diverse variety of statutory and administrative responsibilities, which can impact in a variety of ways upon the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. Street works, traffic management and placement of street furniture will attempt to reconcile Conservation Area needs with wider functional objectives.

8 ADVISORY PANEL FOR CONSERVATION AREAS

- 8.1 The Council will ensure that development control in Conservation Areas is undertaken with the aim of preserving and enhancing the character and appearance of the area. It does this by undertaking appropriate consultations and referring applications to the Advisory Panel for Conservation Areas (APCA). The Panel consists of independent representatives of relevant professions (such as architecture and town planning) and interest groups (such as the Campaign to Protect Rural England and The London Borough of Bromley Residents' Federation).
- 8.2 Each Conservation Area is entitled to a local representative, usually nominated by the local residents' association. The Panel meet monthly to comment on proposals that affect conservation areas. The panel's comments are passed on to the Planning officer for consideration as part of the normal planning process.