

Planning Committee

Graham Margery - Co Chairman

Planning Activity: Over the last twelve months the Dover Society Planning Committee reviewed some 195 planning applications that are potentially of interest and made formal response to the Local Authority in respect of 70 of them. In total since the last newsletter we have reviewed some 91 applications and made response in respect of 36 of them. As ever we would encourage members to look at planning applications that may be of interest to them and make comment to Dover District Council as they feel appropriate or contact our Planning Committee with their views. Applications can be found on the DDC website or the Dover Society Website under Planning.

Former Leisure Centre: I expect that members will now be aware that, following the issue of the Decision Notice to grant Planning Permission for a drive-through fast food restaurant (McDonalds) on the site of the former leisure centre at the corner of Townwall Street and Woolcomber Street, that decision has been challenged with an application for Judicial Review. The District Council received a Pre-Action Protocol Letter which is the first step towards a Judicial Review and as a result have conceded the challenge. This means that the Decision notice is revoked, and the matter will be referred back to the DDC Planning Committee to be considered again, giving greater weight to the protection of heritage assets compared to any economic benefit. However, the outcome of these deliberations is by no means certain, and the decision could still go either way. This being such a controversial scheme, whatever the outcome, one party will be delighted and the other left disappointed

and considering further action. Our last remaining hope is that, while all this is going on, another developer will approach DDC with a completely different proposal that will be more sympathetic to this historically sensitive area, but no one has come forward so far that we are aware.

Metropole Hotel: In October 2023 we were contacted by a resident of the apartments in the former Metropole Hotel in Biggin Street above the Weatherspoons public house. Scaffolding had been erected over the facade to facilitate refurbishment work during the course of which, the balconies with their ornate wrought iron railings had been removed. We looked into this and found that there was no planning application for this work which should have been submitted as it is in a Conservation Area and does not constitute permitted development.

We reported this to DDC as a potential planning breach and subsequently was informed that an enforcement case had been opened and the matter would be investigated. In following this up with DDC over many months, we were at first told that investigations were under way and later that enforcement action was being considered. The scaffolding was later removed with the refurbishment work completed but the balconies were not reinstated. We have recently learnt that DDC does not intend to pursue enforcement action, and the case would be closed. Apparently, the balconies were rusty, deemed to be unsafe, too costly to replace and the cost of legal action would be prohibitive. The fact that substantial, unauthorised work can be carried out in a Conservation Area, a clear breach of

planning regulations and there be absolutely no repercussions, is beyond belief! The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 clearly states that the Local Authority should give special attention to preserving or enhancing the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and this they have failed to do in an important part of the town centre much visited by tourists. Already we have seen the progressive degradation of the character of the area with the acceptance of modern and often garish shop fronts and now, through a combination of neglect, recklessness and apathy, we see yet further loss of our historical and architecturally significant town centre.

Building Conversions: We have over many years lamented the proliferation of Houses in Multiple Occupancy (HMOs) in Dover because an increase in concentrations of HMOs in an area alters its character, changing the population mix, impacting on the facilities and services that can be supported, as well as affecting residential amenity and social cohesion. It can give rise to noise, nuisance, more callers, a higher parking requirement and visual deterioration of buildings and gardens. This is acknowledged in the Dover District Local Plan. Nevertheless, the number of such properties in Dover continues to rise, there now being 68 properties with accommodation for 705 occupants on the latest published HMO register. There are only four such properties in the rest of the district and the total is far lower than in neighbouring districts. We therefore usually object to planning applications to convert a building into an HMO as the area they are in is often not originally designed for such intensive residential use. Furthermore, a proliferation of such properties causes house prices in the area to be depressed which discourages the development of the higher quality

accommodation which would help lift Dover out of its deprived area status.

On the other hand, where a building is being converted to self-contained flats, the occupancy is much lower, the standard of accommodation is higher, and the problems associated with HMOs are less likely to arise. We are usually keen to support this type of conversion, but we always try to ensure that minimum space standards are being met. There were two recent good examples of this. The former veterinary practice at Five Ways on Maison Dieu Road was originally a residential dwelling and has now been granted planning permission for conversion to four flats. We supported the application. Another is at 1-5 Waterloo Crescent where offices and the former Yacht club are being converted to 17 flats. This is a Grade II Listed terrace which has fallen into disrepair somewhat, so its restoration and conversion to its original residential use is something to be welcomed. Its original exterior appearance is being preserved, and the internal historic features are also preserved or reinstated where possible. This is a quality conversion of the type Dover desperately needs, and we have been pleased to support it. The application has not yet been determined.

Moving Forward: The Maison Dieu opened mid-May after a £10.5M refurbishment which we as a Society have been proud to support both financially and with volunteer work. The opening weekend was a roaring success, and we look forward to this being a major attraction bringing visitors to the town. The Roman Painted House is now opening regularly, a further reason to come and visit Dover. This will be developed further in the future. The Bench Street development is progressing rapidly and is currently ahead of schedule. Three good reasons to feel proud about our town despite all the difficulties!