OFFICER REPORT

Case No: 24/02214/FUL Full Planning Application

Proposal: New shopfront, signage, air conditioning condenser units and extract ducts

Location: 17 - 19 Market Square St Neots PE19 2BQ

Applicant: Mrs Sara Humphries

Grid Ref: 518203 260262

DESCRIPTION OF SITE AND APPLICATION

The application site hosts 17 - 19 Market Square which is a two storey currently-vacant commercial unit within St Neots town centre where the last known use was for Lloyds Bank.

The site is within the St. Neots Conservation Area and is adjacent to a row of Grade 2 Listed Buildings (Nos. 1-15 Market Square). However, the site itself is not a Listed Building.
In planning policy terms, the site is situated within the Primary Shopping area and Primary Shopping Frontage of St Neots.

Planning permission is sought for one fascia sign and one projecting sign, both externally illuminated to the front of the building.

Over the course of the application an amendment was made to the shopfront signage, reducing the width of the 25mm deep folded aluminium back panel in grey from full (10.450 metres) width to 7.650 metres width placed centrally across the shop front.

Officers have scrutinised the plans and have familiarised themselves with the site and surrounding area.

NATIONAL GUIDANCE

The National Planning Policy Framework (12 December 2024) (NPPF 2024) sets out the three objectives - economic, social and environmental - of the planning system to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. The NPPF 2024 at paragraph 10 provides as follows: 'So that sustainable development is pursued in a positive way, at the heart of the Framework is a presumption in favour of sustainable development (paragraph 11).'

The NPPF 2024 sets out the Government's planning policies for (amongst other things):
* delivering a sufficient supply of homes;
* building a strong, competitive economy;
* achieving well-designed, beautiful and safe places;
* conserving and enhancing the natural, built and historic environment.

Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, Planning Practice Guidance and the National Design Guide 2021 are also relevant and material considerations.
For full details visit the government website: https://www.gov.uk

PLANNING POLICIES

The National Planning Policy Framework (2024)

Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036 (Adopted 15th May 2019)
LP5: Flood Risk
LP6: Waste Water Management
LP8: Key Service Centres
LP11: Design Context
LP12: Design Implementation
LP14: Residential Amenity
LP15: Surface Water
LP17: Parking and Vehicle Movement
LP22: Town Centre Vitality and Viability

St Neots Neighbourhood Plan 2014- 2029
Policy A1 - Public Realm
Policy A3 - Design
Policy RD1 - Economic Development
Policy SS1 - Town Centre Shopping

Supplementary Planning Guidance/Documents:
Huntingdonshire Design Guide Supplementary Planning Document (2017):
3.1 Place Making Principles
3.7 Building Form

Huntingdonshire Landscape and Townscape Supplementary Planning Document 2022

St Neots Conservation Area Character Assessment (October 2006)

Huntingdonshire Design Guide 2017

Local policies are viewable at https://www.huntingdonshire.gov.uk

PLANNING HISTORY

74/00203/FUL for ALTERATIONS, PERMITTED 28.05.1974

8101500FUL for ALTERATIONS TO SHOPFRONT, PERMITTED 04.11.1981

84/01009/FUL for Change of Use to Bank, PERMITTED 07.04.1986

84/01683/FUL for Extension & alterations to form banking office, PERMITTED 07.04.1986

87/00853/ADV for Non-illuminated bank and projecting sign, CONSENT GIVEN 16.10.1987

9600415FUL for Installation of satellite antenna, PERMITTED 30.05.1996

9801367ADV for Display of fascia & hanging signs, CONSENT GIVEN 18.11.1998

9900376FUL for Installation of ATM & new entrance doors, PERMITTED 12.05.1999

9900377ADV for Illuminated signage for ATM, CONSENT GIVEN 12.05.1999

0604101ADV for Display of illuminated fascia and projecting signs, REFUSED 12.02.2007

0701194ADV for Display of illuminated fascia and projecting signs, CONSENT GIVEN 16.05.2007

1300194ADV for Installation of replacement signs, CONSENT GIVEN 05.04.2013

1300583ADV for Internally lit poster box and new back lit illuminated ATM collar, CONSENT GIVEN 18.06.2013

1300818FUL for Existing Air Conditioning unit to be removed. Installation of new Air Conditioning system on flat roof. Installation of edge protection to flat roof., PERMITTED 24.07.2013

1400231FUL for Divide property into two self contained units, with new timber shopfronts and new staircase enclosure to rear. Demolition of existing staircase, PERMITTED 28.05.2014

24/02215/ADV for One fascia sign and one projecting sign, both externally illuminated, CURRENTLY UNDER CONSIDERATION

CONSULTEES

Detailed consultee comments can be found on the Local Planning Authority (LPA) public access website. The consultations below have been summarised where it is not stated that they are in full.
St Neots Town Council: SUPPORT. Full comments: The Town Council Supports the application with the condition that any new signage design retains the existing exposed brickwork and features relief lettering style. The proposal involves alterations to a building that contributes to the character and appearance of the conservation area.

Huntingdonshire District Council Historic Conservation Officer: No objections.

Cambridgeshire County Council Highways Officer: No objections.

Huntingdonshire District Council Environmental Health Services: No objections.

REPRESENTATIONS

One representation has been received at the time of determination. This comment relates to the impact the signage would have on the wider St. Neots Conservation Area and adjacent Listed Buildings.

Summary comments: The proposal would have a detrimental impact upon St. Neots Conservation Area, Market Square and adjacent Listed Buildings by virtue of the full width aluminium signage which has been implemented elsewhere (some unauthorised) and would erode the historic character of the area, contrary to the HDC Landscape and Townscape SPD 2022 (chapter six, pages 124 and 125) which states: 'development proposals should...enhance the streetscape by improving the quality of modern infill and through controls on shop front design'.

Objector highlights that the adjacent Ferro Lounge alterations show that the façade changes can and do play an important role and historically had a contemporary full width aluminium sign but was updated to a more subtle version when this became Ferro Lounge. Therefore, the signage needs to be handled in a more sympathetic manner, to contribute rather than harm the conservation area. The current signage should reflect the more suitable previous application (1300194ADV) and the associated conditions which served to control signage on this property.

A sketch accompanies the comment which proposes a version of the signage that does not add non existing materials, nor does it cover the existing brickwork.

SUMMARY OF ISSUES

When determining planning applications, it is necessary to establish what weight should be given to each plan's policies in order to come to a decision. The following legislation, government policy and guidance outline how this should be done.

As set out within the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 (Section 38(6)) and the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (Section 70(2)) in dealing with planning applications the Local Planning Authority shall have regard to have provisions of the development plan, so far as material to the application, and to any other material considerations. This is reiterated within paragraph 48 of the NPPF (2024). The development plan is defined in Section 38(3)(b) of the 2004 Act as "the development plan documents (taken as a whole) that have been adopted or approved in that area".

In Huntingdonshire the Development Plan consists of:
o Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036 (2019)
o Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Minerals and Waste Local Plan (2021)
o St Neots Neighbourhood Plan (2016)
o Godmanchester Neighbourhood Plan (2017)
o Houghton and Wyton Neighbourhood Plan (2018)
o Huntingdon Neighbourhood Plan (2019)
o Bury Neighbourhood Plan (2021)
o Buckden Neighbourhood Plan (2021)
o Grafham and Ellington Neighbourhood Plan (2022)
o Great Gransden Neighbourhood Plan (2023)
o The Stukeleys Neighbourhood Plan (2023)
o Sawtry Neighbourhood Plan (2023)

The statutory term 'material considerations' has been broadly construed to include any consideration relevant in the circumstances which bears on the use or development of the land: Cala Homes (South) Ltd v Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government & Anor [2011] EWHC 97 (Admin); [2011] 1 P. & C.R. 22, per Lindblom J. Whilst accepting that the NPPF does not change the statutory status of the Development Plan, paragraph 2 confirms that it is a material consideration and significant weight is given to this in determining applications.

The main matters for consideration are:

- The Principle of Development
- Design and Visual Amenity and Impact on Heritage Assets
- Impact upon Residential Amenity
- Flood Risk
- Highway Safety, Parking Provision and Access

*Principle of Development

The proposed development lies within a Spatial Planning Area Town Centre and is designated a Primary Shopping Area and Primary Shopping Frontage where Local Plan Polices LP8 and LP21 applies. However, given the proposal does not include a change of use to the building, only external alterations to the building exterior. Therefore, it is considered that the principle of development is acceptable in this instance, subject to other policy considerations discussed in the rest of this assessment.

* Design and Visual Amenity, including impact to designated Heritage Assets

Section 72 of The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires that a Local Planning Authority, in considering whether to grant planning permission for development which affects a Conservation Area, shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving or

enhancing its intrinsic significance, setting, or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.

Section 66 of the Planning (LBCA) Act 1990 states that in considering whether to grant planning permission for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses.
This is also reflected at a local level where Policy LP34 of the Local Plan seeks to ensure that development proposals protect and conserve the district's heritage assets and where possible enhance them and their settings.

Policies LP11 and LP12 of the Local Plan and the Huntingdonshire Design Guide SPD (2017) set out key principles of good design to support proposals that respond positively to their context, integrate successfully with the surrounding built form and create well designed and sustainable developments that are functional to meet the needs of present and future occupiers. This is also reflected in the Huntingdonshire Design Guide SPD and Section 12 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2024).

Additionally, Policy A1 of the St Neots Neighbourhood Plan requires proposals in the town centre to contribute to the improvement of the Town Centre's public realm where viable and Policy A3 requires all development to be designed to a high quality that reinforced local distinctiveness. Policy RD1 require proposals for economic development throughout St. Neots to be compliant with other relevant planning policies, with regeneration and intensification of land particularly supported, while Policy SS1 supports town centre proposals, favouring particularly food and drink establishments.

The application seeks planning approval for exterior works to the building, including the introduction of a 25mm deep folded aluminium back panel spanning 7.650 metres across the middle of the top of the shopfront in grey, a new shopfront comprising repainting the left and right elements in iron grey, replacing the existing central entrance doors and installing a new externally-illuminated fascia sign and double-side projecting sign. Additionally, two air-conditioning units and two extract grilles are proposed on the rear elevation. No changes to the footprint or massing of the development are proposed.

It is noted that both the Town Council and a third-party objector raised concerns over the original full-width shop front, which would cause detrimental harm to the wider historic assets and urban character, contrary to the HDC Landscape and Townscape SPD (2022) which seeks to enhance shop front design, with indicated preference to retain the brickwork using relief lettering instead.

Officers have had regard to these comments and requested amendments from the applicant to reduce the width of the grey background fascia board which would be more in-keeping with the wider conservation area and wider streetscape, lessening the prominence the signage would have given the Greggs branding would continue onto the existing Greggs outlet to the immediate west next door and would obscure such of the brickwork and detailing.

These amendments have been received and accepted by officers, who acknowledge that should the proposal be recommended for approval, some brickwork and architectural value would remain exposed, lessening the heritage harm and dominant branding of the site should the proposal be approved while allowing the retail branding to be presented appropriately.

It is therefore considered that Officers have appropriately assessed the impact of the proposed signage on the St Neots Conservation Area, adjacent listed buildings and wider townscape character. In this case, while it is acknowledged that the proposal would cause a degree of harm to the area and wider public realm by virtue of its signage which would replace the relief lettering (now removed) used on the previous Lloyds Bank branding, it must also be acknowledged that the proposal is located within an established retail area and includes typical retail changes to the

external appearance commonly seen in the immediate area elsewhere where there is no uniform signage language. Subsequently, Officers consider that the advertisement proposed is on balance in keeping with the host building and its proposed use and would not present an obtrusive addition to the local area or have a detrimental impact on the adjacent listed building or the wider St Neots Conservation Area, nor would the proposal create undue clutter. Conditions are recommended to be applied to control the signage as approved.

It is also considered that the two air-conditioning units and two extract grilles proposed on the rear elevation are acceptable taking into account the council's Conservation Officer having reviewed the proposals raise no concerns regarding this element and that units and grilles would be sited to the rear reasonably distant from public view to prevent significant visual detriment.

It is therefore considered that Officers have assessed the impact of the proposal on the St Neots Conservation Area, adjacent listed buildings and wider townscape character. In this case, while it is acknowledged that the proposal would cause a degree of harm to the area and wider public realm by virtue of its signage which would replace the relief lettering (now removed) used on the previous Lloyds Bank branding, it must be acknowledged that the proposal is located within an established retail area and includes typical retail changes to the external appearance commonly seen in the immediate area elsewhere where there is no uniform signage language. Subsequently, Officers consider that the proposal is on balance in keeping with the host building and its proposed use and would not present an obtrusive addition to the local area or have a detrimental impact on the adjacent listed building or the wider St Neots Conservation Area, nor would the proposal create undue clutter.

Overall, given the location, scale and design of the proposal, the scheme is considered to be acceptable concerning design and visual amenities and would not be detrimental to the listed building or character and appearance of St Neots Conservation Area. It, therefore, accords with Policies LP11, LP12 and LP34 of Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036, policies A1, A3, RD1 and SS1 of the St Neots Neighbourhood Plan, sections 66 and 72 of The Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the NPPF (December 2024), in this regard.

*Residential Amenity

Policy LP14 of the Local Plan to 2036 states a proposal will be supported where a high standard of amenity is provided for all users and occupiers of the proposed development and maintained for users and occupiers of neighbouring land and buildings. A site visit was carried out by the case officer during the consultation period of the application.

According to council data, the closest residential property to the site appears to be approximately 26 metres to the west. This is considered a reasonable distance given the proposed use and non-increase in floorspace and would not cause unacceptable environmental impacts, such as odour or noise, overbearing or loss of light. Furthermore, the councils Environmental Health Officer has considered the proposals and raise no objection to the proposal being approved in terms of amenity.

Overall, therefore, it is considered that an acceptable standard of amenity would be maintained for neighbours. The development is considered acceptable in terms of overshadowing, overlooking, overbearing impact, loss of privacy, loss of light and would not have a significant detrimental impact upon residential amenity. The proposal is therefore considered to be in accordance with Policy LP14 of the Local Plan to 2036 and paragraph 135(f) of the NPPF (2024).

*Flood Risk

The front and eastern side of the site are adjacent to Flood Zone 2 as per the Huntingdonshire Strategic Flood Risk Assessment 2024 and Environment Agency Flood Map for Planning. However the site itself is in Flood Zone 1.

Accordingly as minor development, neither the sequential and exceptions tests for flooding nor the submission of a flood risk assessment are considered necessary in this instance in accordance with the NPPF and NPPG.

Overall, the proposal is considered to be acceptable with regard to its impact on both flood risk and surface water and therefore accords with Policies LP5, LP6 and LP15 of Huntingdonshire's Local Plan to 2036 and Section 14 of the National Planning Policy Framework in this regard.

* Highway Safety, Parking Provision and Access

Policy LP17 of the Local Plan to 2036 seeks to ensure that new development incorporates appropriate space for vehicle movements, facilitates access for emergency vehicles and service vehicles and incorporates adequate parking for vehicles and cycles. Paragraph 116 of the NPPF (2023) states that development should only be prevented or refused on Highway Safety Grounds if there would be an unacceptable impact on highway safety, or the residual cumulative impacts on the road network would be severe.

No changes are proposed to levels of parking or vehicle access. In terms of highway safety, Cambridgeshire County Council as the Local Highways Authority have reviewed the proposals and have raised no concerns including the introduction of illuminated signage, nor has the Highways Authority recommended any conditions relating to safeguarding highway safety.

Having regard to the above, it is considered that the proposals would ensure an acceptable level of highway safety, parking provision and access and therefore the proposals are considered to meet the aims and objectives of Paragraphs 116 and 117 of NPPF (2024) and Policy LP17 of Huntingdonshire's Local Plan 2036.

There are no other material planning considerations which have a significant bearing on the determination of this application.

CONCLUSION

The proposed development is therefore considered to be compliant with the relevant national and local policy as:

* The proposal would preserve the significance of the St Neots Conservation Area and its setting.
* The proposal would preserve the significance of nearby listed buildings and their setting.
* The proposal would not have a harmful impact upon the character and appearance of the area.
* The proposal would not have a significant detrimental impact upon the amenity of neighbours.
* The proposal is acceptable with regard to flood risk.
* The proposal is acceptable with regard to highway safety.

Taking national and local planning policies into account, and having regard for all relevant material considerations, it is recommended that planning permission be granted, subject to the imposition of appropriate conditions.

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CONTACT OFFICER:
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