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RESPONSE TO REPORT PREPARED BY COUNCILLOR CLAIRE STRETTON – VERSION 3

PROPOSED FLOOR PLAN LAYOUTS

The report indicates proposed layouts for the building with usage as a Registry office. The plans have been assessed within the context of the listed building in terms of building fabric and likely acceptability of the proposed interventions.

GROUND FLOOR

The proposed usage of the building puts it within the public realm and as such it will then need to be fully accessible. It is proposed that the main ceremonial room and all public access is, quite rightly, via the existing main entrance. This is two steps up from the external drive level to height of 280mm. In order to be fully DDA compliant a ramp length of 3.36m would need to be installed to allow for wheelchair access (assuming a 1 in 12 ramp gradient). This would then obstruct the driveway and result in the loss of parking bays to the front of the building – increasing the pressure for on-street parking and / or a parking area in the rear gardens.

The proposal seeks to block up the existing entrance lobby arch with a glazed screen and to create a new door opening through the existing original panelling of the lobby. This is unlikely to be acceptable in conservation terms as it fundamentally severs the relationship of the main, ornately decorated entrance hall with the lobby and access into the building. It would also involve the loss of some of the entrance lobby panelling which would also not be acceptable in this important part of the building.

Two new openings are indicated in the wall of the room to the left of the main hall – labelled as waiting area and reception. This wall is not so significant in terms of not having any panelling or ornate detailing, in which case this may be seen as being acceptable in conservation terms.

However, the introduction of a lift and also the internal lobby to the 'strong room' is likely to be looked at unfavourably. This is due to both the loss of fabric (due to the floors having to be removed to accommodate a lift), and also by the loss of the proportion and sense of the original room, which features a fireplace within a purpose designed 'nook' with lowered ceiling. This is an 'Arts and Crafts' interpretation of a traditional inglenook fireplace.

The main hall itself is quite fine in its detailing and scale and it is unlikely to be able to be extended into the external verandah area as it will change the proportion of the room. If wedding ceremonies are proposed then they will need to be arranged within the confines of the existing space available. Shown at face value, this looks as quite tight in terms of access and chair proximity. A mock layout has been set up in-situ to establish exactly how many chair spaces can realistically be accommodated in the space – please see attached photos. This indicates that the main hall can only facilitate a maximum of 32 people. This is significantly lower than the required 50 that has been advised by the current Registrar.

WC's are indicated in the location of the current WC and services and in various locations around the building across both ground and first floors. Whilst the numbers proposed would comply with the required standards the receptionist can only access the WCs by passing through the main ceremony room. Similarly, from the drinks / reception room guests can only access the WCs by entering the ceremony room or through the kitchen.

A new opening is shown between the Drinks Reception / meeting room and the rear staircase lobby. There is some panelling in this location defined by timber moulding above and below the dado rail. It may be possible to adapt this to accommodate a new door opening but the Conservation department would need to advise if this loss is deemed acceptable. This room would also need to be acoustically separated from the main ceremony room as it would appear that the intention would be to have two events happening at any one time ie. A ceremony taking place whilst another group is in the drinks / reception room.

FIRST FLOOR

The first floor layout largely indicates the room arrangements as existing. The main exception to this is the introduction of the lift which, as noted previously, is unlikely to be acceptable due to the loss of floor structure and of disruption to the scale and proportion of the room. In a similar vein to the ground floor, there is a fireplace arrangement set out as an Arts and Crafts interpretation of an inglenook. The fireplace itself is an inappropriate 1960's replacement which could be changed to something more in-keeping. However, the introduction of the lift would disrupt the sense of the original room.

SECOND FLOOR

The second floor indicates a single flat to accommodate a caretaker. The layout of the flat and opening up of the walls will need to be agreed with the Conservation officer but in principle, would like be considered acceptable. However the Council will need to assess if it is required to have an on-site caretaker and whether this commercially viable in terms of providing this level of on-site presence for the proposed building usage.

EXTERNAL AREAS - PARKING

As proposed in previous versions of the Councillor's report, it is intended to create a new parking area within the rear garden. As stated previously, a traffic survey will need to be carried out and visibility splays will need to be checked in terms of proximity to Underhill Close opposite and Woodcote, adjacent. This will also involve the loss of important tree screening along Lower Boyndon Road and also further trees within the garden itself.

In order to achieve this parking area it will be necessary to either excavate the land due to the change in levels from the road up into the garden or to have a steep ramp up into the site. The requirement for either a hammer head or turning circle will lead to large areas of the garden being taken up with hard surfaces.

The introduction of parking in this location is not likely to be viewed favourably by the Conservation department as it impacts heavily on the setting of the listed building. The original gardens have historically been significantly reduced due to the sale of the land and construction of housing. A parking area will further negatively impact the building within its landscape context. It will also require the loss of part of the brick garden wall which falls within the listed curtilage. This will further erode the significance of the original dwelling and its walled garden setting.

Further to this it will mean that the intention for receptions to take place in the garden would be compromised by the lack of external space and the negative view of a car park.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, we still consider the proposed interventions to facilitate a registry office within the listed building would not be acceptable in terms of Conservation policies. The building was originally designed as a dwelling and as such the rooms are, whilst larger than average for a house, domestic in their scale and not suitable for use as a public building. The Registry office requires a large ceremony room which the Brocket is unable to provide. Alternative public uses will have the same issues of having to adapt the building to be fully accessible, with the intervention of ramp / lift etc. The issue of additional parking requirements will also apply leading to further on-street parking or the destruction of the rear garden, loss of part of the listed garden wall and removal of important tree screening. All of which would no doubt be of concern to the local residents and also be detrimental to the fabric and setting of the building.

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