

High Peak Borough Council

HPK/2023/0521 and HPK/2023/0522

Town Hall and Market Hall, Glossop

Construction of an external fire escape staircase and enclosure to the North West corner of the market hall.

Thank you for referring these applications to me for comments.

Significance

The Market Hall is an early development of the 1839 municipal building and was first erected in 1845. It was designed by the Duke's architects Weightman and Hadfield of Sheffield.

As a building housing a market it has an outwardly classical and simple form, with arched windows to both flank elevations, disguising the internal workings of the building and to some extent its use. This classical style is complementary to the original Town Hall municipal buildings.

The arched windows and the rusticated vermiculated doorways are striking and, for this small town, monumental elements in the townscape. The elevation which is affected is the most exposed to public view. The insertion of a fire escape staircase into one of these windows, will affect its architectural form and will disrupt the simple classical lines of the building, and there is little doubt that it will have an impact on the appearance of the building, irrespective of how the escape staircase is designed. It will cause 'less than substantial' harm. The degree of harm is moderate, not negligible.

Background and Expertise

It is unfortunate that the changing focus of the use was not discussed at the outset of the project and this kind of issue addressed, when we were considering all of the alterations holistically, as we are faced with no realistic alternative now to this alteration, other than to limit the use of the space. However, it is open to us to request an alternative, fire-engineered risk assessment, by a qualified Fire Engineer, which would (potentially) overrule the Building Inspector.

The report accompanying the application states, 'Following subsequent assessment of the fire strategy and risk profiles associated with the various spaces and levels within the market hall, a requirement for an additional fire escape stair has been identified as a necessity.'

The report whilst thorough in very other respect, doesn't say whether a fire engineer has assessed the risks or whether it is the approved building inspector. The building inspector has to assess compliance with fire regulations but my understanding is that fire risk and interpretation is not their specific area of expertise. It is a Fire Engineer who has the expertise to be able to interpret the regulations and make an expert judgement. A fire engineer would assess the means of escape and the time it takes to reach the escapes which are already embedded in the scheme, based on a judgement of all of the different factors, not on species set lengths / set distances. I cannot see anywhere in the report that it states who has assessed the regulatory compliance and there is no mention of a fire engineer.

For clarity and transparency, therefore, and to make sure that we have complied with due diligence, in view of the harm to the listed building, it is worth asking the question whether a fire engineer was engaged and / or considered and whether the applicant would be willing to obtain a second opinion.

If an accredited fire engineer agrees that this is the only option, then we would have no option other than to agree to the alteration, as fire safety would be a grave public concern which could not be ignored.

Therefore, the planning authority will need to carry out a balance exercise and weigh whether the public benefit outweighs the 'less than substantial harm' that this will cause to the significance of the listed building. That is a judgement which can only be made by the planning officer, not myself. However, I will run through the justification put forward by the applicant and assess whether the arguments are reasoned and justified (in accordance with para. 206 of the NPPF).

Impacts

My original comments to the applicant requested an 'Options Appraisal which sets out how you have arrived at this location, and what has clearly been discounted and why, rather than just the options for the design.'

This has been provided and together with the meets the requirements of paragraph 200 of the NPPF together with the statement of significance in section 2.

I have previously commented on various designs. I have repeated some of my comments here, for transparency.

My understanding is that the extended use of the accommodation in the Market Hall has changed the risk profile, necessitating an additional means of escape from the mezzanine level. The ramped access dictates this extended form of escape staircase and there is no alternative to the enclosed staircase and the high-level bridge.

I requested consideration be given to how the structure will be maintained and cleaned from pigeon droppings, litter/ rubbish being thrown into the staircase, and how a glazed balustrade be regularly cleaned?

In terms of impacts, the different designs all had similar impacts and caused a similar level of 'less than substantial' harm, but there are key differences which I raised.

The railings design was quite open (possibly the least intrusive visually) and I was concerned that it would be easy to open the final exit door by reaching inside - presumably there would be an exit bar / push rail in the event of an emergency? I considered there were a number of practical issues with this option.

These concerns have been addressed by changing the vertical railings to more slender timber fins, set at narrower spacing. Concerns about local youths using the structure for parkour have been met by adopting narrow vertical fins will, which are not conducive to climbing.

Concerns expressed about the problem of having to clean the glazed balustrade have been addressed by adopting slender metal rail and horizontal wire.

The only issue which is not fully resolved is the appearance of the door at the bottom of the steps. I suggest that full details of the door to the base of the staircase are submitted as a condition of LBC.

The louvred design is similarly vulnerable from climbing, parkour, rubbish, cleaning, etc. but also is likely to provide a perch for pigeons. The more enclosed design with the perforated screens was the most practical design but the most visually intrusive.

The application clearly sets out all of the options considered, including the 3 different designs selected for the external escape staircase and provides a very clear justification for the final solution.

The conclusions reached in the submitted report state:

‘Options 1 and 2, despite being the most economical, fall short of meeting regulatory requirements, rendering them inadequate for the primary project objective. Consequently, these options were dismissed and not deemed worthy of further consideration.

In contrast, Option 3, featuring an external fire escape with an enclosed staircase and vertical fins/louvres, stands out as the most favourable selection. It effectively addresses concerns related to heritage preservation, regulatory compliance, and security, all while presenting an aesthetically pleasing solution. Despite its higher cost compared to internal alterations, Option 3 proves to be the most cost-effective and regulatory-compliant choice, with its benefits outweighing the associated expenses. As such, it is recommended as the optimal solution for ensuring a secure and visually appealing fire escape.’

For clarification, the option selected does not preserve (i.e. not harm) the heritage.

The report floats the idea of **Compensation**.

This is not a material planning consideration when assessing impacts on heritage assets. We cannot ‘off-set’ impacts by conditioning compensatory measures, in the same way that trees can be planted elsewhere if trees are removed from a site. The heritage benefits have to be concrete and related to the scheme, not offered somewhere else as a sweetener. We cannot assess fairly a scheme which purports to offer some form of compensation which is unspecified and not part of the case for addressing heritage harm. So, I recommend we do not take into account the mention of ‘compensation’. I have already stated this on the previous application for the alterations to the Court 1 ceiling, but the idea has been re-floated again.

We need to know now whether the setts have to be removed, to install the staircase, and if so, they need to be reinstated and I recommend a condition to cover this. It cannot compensate for adverse impacts.

Conclusions

To summarise, the application justifies the approach taken and the options discounted. My only outstanding query is with regard to the expertise and whether a fire engineer would have reached the same conclusions about the need for this fire escape staircase, when assessing regulatory compliance.

In terms of details, the only missing detail is the design of the door at the bottom of the staircase. I recommend that this is provided now, rather than submitted to address a condition and to cause any further delay. The reinstatement of setts should be a condition of PP.

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19th March 2024