

ADVICE from Primrose Hill Conservation Area Advisory Committee
12A Manley Street, London NW1 8LT

17 April 2024

Darwin Court Gloucester Avenue NW1 7BG 2024/1039/P

1. The PHCAAC objects to the current application.
2. The PHCAAC has undertaken a series of pre-app discussions on schemes for roof extensions at Darwin Court since 2020, providing written advice dated 19 March 2020, 3 November 2021, and 1 March 2023.
3. The PHCAAC initially reviewed the current application at its meeting on 3 April 2024. Following discussion, a draft of our advice on the current scheme was then produced and circulated to PHCAAC members for review and revision at our meeting on 17 April 2024 when this advice was finalized and agreed.
4. The current application proposes to add 8 flats as a single storey at the current roof level of the 5 blocks of Darwin Court.
5. The principal issues for the Advisory Committee are the impact of the proposals on the character and appearance of the conservation area in the context of the statutory obligation to pay special attention to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the conservation area; the impact on the setting of the nearby Listed Buildings; the provision of affordable housing in our area; and meeting in full the need effectively to address the climate crisis.

Conservation area issues

6. The Committee noted that Darwin Court consists of an extended group of 5 blocks from 4 to 6 storeys high. Both heights and linear extent mean that Darwin Court consequently has considerable prominence in the conservation area. The role of Darwin Court in the character and appearance of the conservation area has been most authoritatively characterised by the Planning Inspector in his appeal decision of 29 August 1996. The Inspector (decision letter para 13 ref T/APP/X5210/A/95/260162/P5 and T/APP/X5210/A/96/265759/P5) described the existing blocks as 'dominant and overbearing', noting that the domestic architecture in the area 'is of a modest scale'.
7. The Committee reviewed this assessment in the light of the development of both the conservation area and planning policy over the period since 1996.
8. The Committee noted that the roofline and general character of the conservation area in the immediate neighbourhood of Darwin Court had changed very little in the years since designation in 1971. This included the major Listed Buildings in the immediate vicinity – Cecil Sharp House, 15-31 Gloucester Avenue, and 10 Regent's Park Road. They reflect the variety of styles in the area while also retaining a domestic-related height.
9. The Committee concluded that the Planning Inspector's assessment which was based on his expert review of the area and its buildings – the facts on the ground – was still valid.
10. Hitherto this assessment has led the Committee to conclude that further additions to the height and bulk of the building would, in the 1996 Planning Inspector's words, 'be seriously

harmful to the street scene'. They would neither preserve nor enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area. The Planning Inspector identified the addition of an additional storey as 'seriously harmful' to the heritage assets.

11. Noting however, that the Advisory Committee has supported modern buildings in our conservation area, the PHCAAC was open in our pre-app discussions to consider whether the merits of the designs proposed would alter our conclusion.

12. As our advice dated 1 March 2023 shows, at paras 9-17, we sought to assess positively the design proposals shown to us in December 2022 – drawings dated October 2022.

13. While we saw merits in these proposals, we also requested further refinements. However, the designs now submitted for planning consent have abandoned the merits of the October 2022 design, which, in our view, terminated the building cleanly and appropriately. The current application proposes elevations which extend the fenestration patterns of the lower storeys in a way which increases the recognized visual dominance of the blocks in the townscape. The terminating fins of the proposed walls gives further emphasis to the verticality of the whole building, again adding to the visual dominance of the buildings. One of our concerns with the October 2022 scheme was that the extensive glazing to the flank elevations would add to the prominence of the additional storey in longer views of the Darwin Court group along Gloucester Avenue especially when the new flats were lit. The end glazing would appear as beacons dominating the skyline. But the application scheme has retained the excessive glazing to the flank walls, while adding more glazing to the front elevations. We advise that the proposed design would exacerbate the harmfully dominant character of the existing Darwin Court buildings in the conservation area.

14. Material concerns for the PHCAAC include issues relating to the climate crisis. We note with concern the extensive use of glazing in the proposed extensions, especially on the south and west facing elevations which can be expected to be exposed to solar gain and vulnerable to overheating. The applicant's 'Sustainability and Energy Strategy' report (at pp 10-11 para 3.5 with table) under the heading 'Reducing the amount of heat entering the building in summer' states that 'External Glazing has been offset into the external structure to provide further shading.' But the offsetting to the glazing proposed on the proposed extension elevations to Gloucester Avenue, for example, is minimal (see image Design and Access statement p. 56) although these elevations are orientated south / west. We do not see this as sustainable.

15. We are also concerned that in the same table it is stated: 'Mechanical ventilation with heat recovery has been proposed to serve all office spaces.' But the application is stated to be for residential use: what office space is proposed and what are its impacts on the viability of the application?

16. We welcome the proposed installation of ASHPs and PV panels ('Sustainability and Energy Strategy' report pp. 21-24) but regret that the energy use of the existing buildings does not appear to be upgraded. This is a failure to address sustainability.

17. We commented in our pre-app review (1 March 2023 paras 15-17) on the need to avoid clutter at the level of the proposed extensions. We need to see the impact of the proposals in longer views. We also question why water storage tanks are provided.

18. The proposals would neither preserve nor enhance the character and appearance of the conservation area. Given the scale and extent of the blocks in the conservation area, and

the relation to the Listed Buildings in the vicinity, the proposals would cause significant harm – in the Planning Inspector's words 'seriously harmful' – to the conservation area and to the setting of the Listed Buildings.

Public benefit

19. We are aware that public benefit can be judged to outweigh harm to heritage assets, but we question the claimed public benefits of this application and therefore their 'value' in outweighing the formally acknowledged harm to heritage.

20. We are dismayed that the proposals are put forward on the basis that they would provide no contribution to affordable housing (Bidwell's Financial Viability Assessment paras 1.6 to 1.9). The provision of 8 high-value flats does not address the reality of the housing crisis and is not, of itself, a public benefit.

21. We note the enhancement of the accessibility to the existing blocks, which we welcome, but which cannot be considered a public benefit as they only provide access to private dwellings.

22. The proposed landscape improvements are very modest but on private land. The proposals for landscaping to the rear of the building – the area between the Darwin Court buildings and the railway line – currently provide ecological benefits and biodiversity which should be protected.

23. The minor public benefits of the proposals do not adequately outweigh the acknowledged and significant harm to heritage assets in the Primrose Hill conservation area.



Richard Simpson FSA
Chair PHCAAC.