



Planning Statement to accompany a full planning application for a Retrospective Change of Use from a Shop (A1) to an Escape Room (D2) on the ground floor at 181 Drury Lane, London, WC2B 5QF.

On behalf of: Artem Kramin

Prepared by: Jim Loxley

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Room 3.11, Felaw Maltings, Felaw Street, Ipswich, IP2 8SJ
Tel: 01473 407911
E: enquiries@planningdirect.co.uk
W: www.planningdirect.co.uk
Registered in England & Wales. Registered No. 7986959

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Introduction

This planning statement accompanies a full planning application for a retrospective Change of Use from a Shop (A1) to an Escape Room (D2) on the ground floor at 181 Drury Lane, London, WC2B 5QF.

Planning Direct has been instructed to produce this statement on behalf of Mr Artem Kramin, the applicant.

Location & Site Description

The site is located at 181 Drury Lane within the Central London area of Camden. 181 Drury Lane is situated at the Southern tip of Camden, just north of the boundary with the Borough of Westminster. 181 Drury Lane is situated within the Holborn & Covent Garden ward of the Borough.

The site is also identified by the Camden Local Plan as a Secondary Shopping Frontage within the Seven Dials (Covent Garden) Conservation Area. While 181 Drury Lane is not a listed building, the Conservation Area Statement describes the building as a 'noteworthy 19th Century Building' which contributes to the character and appearance of the Seven Dials. The building is not considered to be a shopfront of merit.

The Conservation Area Statement states that throughout Seven Dials' recent history, 'the area has transformed to a mixed use of retail/restaurant/residential/business with the addition of tourist related activities'. The surrounding frontage is largely made up of shops, cafes, hairdressers, pubs and theatres. The site is therefore situated within short walking distance of a range of facilities and services including A1 units.

Drury Lane has very good access to public transport and has been given the best PTAL rating of 6b. Covent Garden, Holborn and Tottenham Court Road tube stations are all located within 7 minutes walk of the site and offer Central, Piccadilly and Northern Line services. The nearest bus stop is also within a 2 minute walk of 181 Drury Lane and provides four different bus routes between Central, East and South London. The site is also within 0.6 miles of Charing Cross Station, providing both local and national rail services.

Details of the development

The development consists of a retrospective Change of Use from a Shop (Class A1) to an 'Escape Room' (Assembly and Leisure Use, D2) on the ground floor at 181 Drury Lane, London, WC2B 5QF.

Escape Rooms are a relatively modern form of entertainment venue which involve people working as a team to solve puzzles in order to escape from a locked room. The business is open between the hours of 10:00 - 23:45, Monday to Sunday.

The floorspace of the building currently measures 51.6 sqm. Development has involved some internal alterations regarding the erection of partition walls to create rooms for the entertainment purpose. Development has also included some minor exterior alterations regarding subtle changes to the building's signage.

The following plans, providing further detail, have been enclosed to accompany the application:

- Site location plan;
- Floor plans.

Planning History

Reference no.	Description	Decision	Date
2015/6923/P	Change of use of basement floor from Sauna/Massage (Class Sui Generis) to Leisure - Escape room (indoor entertainment activity) (Class Sui Generis). 141 Kentish Town Road, London, NW1 8PB	Granted	05/04/2016
2017/6079/P	Change of use at basement and ground floor levels from shop unit (Class A1) to 'Hint Hunt' escape games for entertainment (Sui Generis).	Granted	19/01/2018

The above application shows the granting of planning permissions for an Escape Room within the Kentish Town, Town Centre as well as the Holborn & Covent Garden area of Central London.

Policy Justification

National

NPPF (2018)

Paragraph 8(Achieving Sustainable Development)

Achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives:

- an economic objective – to help build a strong, responsive and competitive economy, by ensuring that sufficient land of the right type is available in the right places and at the right time to support growth, innovation and improved productivity; and by identifying and coordinating the provision of infrastructure;
- a social objective – to support strong, vibrant and healthy communities, by ensuring that a sufficient number and range of homes can be provided to meet the needs of present and future generations; and by fostering a well-designed and safe built environment, with accessible services and open spaces that reflect current and future needs and support communities' health, social and cultural well-being; and
- an environmental objective – to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.

Paragraph 9 (Achieving Sustainable Development)

Planning policies and decisions should play an active role in guiding development towards sustainable solutions, but in doing so should take local circumstances into account, to reflect the character, needs and opportunities of each area.

Paragraph 10 (Achieving Sustainable Development)

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 (Presumption in favour of Sustainable Development)

Plans and decisions should apply a presumption in favour of sustainable development.

For decision-taking, this means:

- c) approving development proposals that accord with an up-to-date development plan without delay; or
- d) where there are no relevant development plan policies, or the policies which are most important for determining the application are out-of-date (7), granting permission unless:
 - I. The application of policies in this Framework that protect areas or assets of particular importance provides a clear reason for refusing the development proposed (6); or

II. Any adverse impacts of doing so would significantly and demonstrably outweigh the benefits, when assessed against the policies in this Framework taken as a whole.

(6) The policies referred to are those in this Framework relating to habitats sites and/or designated as Sites of Special Scientific Interest; land designated as Green Belt, Local Green Space, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, a National Park or defined as Heritage Coast; irreplaceable habitats; designated heritage assets; and areas at risk of flooding or coastal change.

(7) This includes, for applications involving the provision of housing, situations where the local planning authority cannot demonstrate a five-year supply of deliverable housing sites (with the appropriate buffer, as set out in paragraph 73)

Paragraph 38 (Decision-making)

Local planning authorities should approach decisions on proposed development in a positive and creative way. They should work proactively with applicants to secure developments that will improve the economic, social and environmental conditions of the area. Decision-makers at every level should seek to approve applications for sustainable development where possible.

Paragraph 124 (Achieving well-designed places)

Good design is a key aspect of sustainable development, creates better places in which to live and work and helps make development acceptable to communities. Being clear about design expectations, and how these will be tested, is essential for achieving this.

Paragraph 127 (Achieving well-designed places)

Planning decisions should ensure that developments:

- a) will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development;
- b) are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and appropriate and effective landscaping;
- c) are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change;
- d) establish or maintain a strong sense of place, using the arrangement of streets, spaces, building types and materials to create attractive, welcoming and distinctive places to live, work and visit;
- e) optimise the potential of the site to accommodate and sustain an appropriate amount and mix of development; and
- f) create places that are safe, inclusive and accessible and which promote health and well-being, with a high standard of amenity for existing and future users.

Paragraph 128 (Achieving well-designed places)

Applicants should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot.

Paragraph 130 (Achieving well-designed places)

Where the design of a development accords with clear expectations in plan policies, design should not be used by the decision-maker as a valid reason to object to development.

Paragraph 131 (Achieving well-designed places)

In determining applications, great weight should be given to outstanding or innovative designs which promote high levels of sustainability or help raise the standard of design more generally in an area, so long as they fit in with the overall form and layout of their surroundings.

Local

Policy TC3 Shops outside of centres

The Council will seek to protect shops outside centres.

The Council will only grant planning permission for loss of a shop outside designated centres provided:

- a. alternative provision is available within 5-10 minutes' walking distance;
- b. there is clear evidence that the current use is not viable; and
- c. within the Central London Area, the development positively contributes to local character, function, viability and amenity.

9.26 The Council seeks to retain local shops outside centres where possible, including those on small shopping parades. Therefore, we will resist the loss of shops (Use Class A1) unless there is alternative provision within 5-10 minutes walk (approximately 400-800 metres), depending on the scale of provision. We will also take into account the viability of the premises for the existing use, in particular any history of vacancy in a shop unit and the prospect of achieving an alternative occupier. However, we recognise that, as the number of people shopping locally has declined, it is unlikely that all shops outside centres will continue to find an occupier.

9.27 Within Camden's Central London area, there is significant competition between competing land uses. This means that additional protection is needed to prevent the widespread loss of A1 retail uses outside centres, in order to ensure that local shops are available for local residents, workers and visitors. Therefore, the Council will only grant permission for the loss of shops outside centres in Central London where it considers that the replacement use will also contribute positively to the local area. Appropriate alternative uses are considered to be housing and uses providing essential services for residents, businesses, workers and visitors such as professional and financial services, community facilities and launderettes.

Seven Dials (Covent Garden) Conservation Area

Design and alterations to buildings

A wide variety of design has been introduced in the last twenty years. Both modern and traditional designs have been used and the combination has mostly enhanced the character and appearance of the area. Most recent development has been designed to infill, however some has been more successful than others in enhancing the Conservation Area. Where new development is thought to have harmed the character or appearance of the area it has usually been caused by one or more of the following reasons:

- a. The use of inappropriate facing materials
- b. Excessive bulk, massing and height
- c. Signs erected on upper floors
- d. Signage of inappropriate size, proportions and materials
- e. Loss of original features
- f. Introduction of prominent air handling units/ducting
- g. Loss of significant views
- h. Development that does not respect the historic context.

Commentary

Impact on local shopping

The Camden Borough Local Plan does not identify Drury Lane to be a key 'Central London Frontage', 'Town Centre' or 'Neighbourhood Centre'. Consequently, it is unlikely that Change of Use has had an impact on the sustainability of shopping in the area.

With regards to Part A of Policy TC3, it should firstly be stated that the area demonstrates a considerable provision of A1 Shops within a 5-10 minutes walking distance. Within just 800 metres of the site there are several Primary Shopping Frontages including those in the Seven Dials Conservation Area, Denmark Street Conservation Area, High Holborn Road and Covent Garden. Located within just a 5 minute walk of the site, there are also Secondary Shopping Frontages on Great Queen Street, Endell Street and Kingsway. These frontages include a mixture of independent, boutique and local convenience stores as well as more typical high-street pharmacies and supermarkets. It is therefore considered that the Change of Use does not impact on the provision of facilities in the surrounding area. In line with Policy TC3 from the Council's Local Plan, local shops remain in abundance for 'local residents, workers and visitors'.

It must also be addressed that Camden Borough Council have recently approved an application (2017/6079/P) for the Change of Use of an A1 unit to an Escape Room within the Holborn & Covent Garden ward of Camden. The Case Officer noted that 'the unit is part of a parade of commercial units of mixed and varied uses, including at least three A1 units' before stating that the loss of a retail unit would not be an issue. The Decision Notice later stated that the 'proposed sui generis use (of an Escape Room)' would be 'appropriate within its Central London Area Location' and that such a use would not 'cause harm to the amenity, character, vitality, or viability of the Town Centre or local area'. It should therefore be considered that the proposed Change of Use at 181 Drury Lane likewise has no impact on local shopping.

Benefits of the Change of Use

Responding to Part C of Policy TC3, it should firstly be noted that the Change of Use contributes positively to the ‘local character, function, viability and amenity’ of Camden. As the Borough’s Guidance for ‘community uses, leisure facilities and pubs’ states, leisure facilities ‘contribute enormously to our residents quality of life and draws people from the rest of London, the UK and throughout the world’. Furthermore, Policy C3 of the Council’s Local Plan adds that ‘the Council will seek opportunities for new cultural and leisure facilities’ and addresses that ‘Central London and town centres will, therefore, be the most appropriate locations’. As the site falls within the Central London area of the Borough and the city’s ‘Central Activities Zone’ (CAZ), it is considered that the site is an appropriate location for the Change of Use.

As paragraph 2.48 of the Council’s Local Plan explains, Central London serves a ‘unique role, character and mix of uses’ which play ‘an important part in providing vibrancy, diversity and identity that makes the borough such a popular place’. A Decision Notice for a similar application in Kentish Town (2015/6923/P) stated that Escape Rooms can provide ‘vibrancy and choice for residents, workers and visitors’. For this reason it is considered that the Change of Use is not out of character with Central London, and will continue to enhance the area’s ‘character, function’ and ‘viability’. This is likewise echoed by a recently approved planning application (2017/6079/P) for the Change of Use of an A1 unit to an Escape Room within the Holborn & Covent Area of the Borough. The decision notice stated that an Escape Room ‘would contribute to the variety of commercial offer in the area, bringing in visitors and contributing to the character and function of the commercial street frontages in the area’. It is considered that this is also the case for the application at 181 Drury Lane.

Entertainment venues such as Escape Rooms do not require a large floor space and provide exciting, small scale tourist attractions that harmonise perfectly with the inner-city urban grain. It is therefore considered the Change of Use maintains an exciting mix of uses and supports the Borough’s goal of delivering leisure facilities to both locals and visitors at both the local level in Seven Dials as well as a wider area of Central London.

Impact on Local Amenity

With the exception of subtle alterations to signage, it should be pointed out that the Change of Use has not resulted in any major alterations to the external building (see appendix 1). In adherence with the Conservation Area Statement, it is therefore considered that the development has not altered the character of Seven Dials. The front of the building maintains a typical shopfront style in line with the area's local building tradition and distinct historic qualities (see appendix 1). Consequently, development has not resulted in the 'loss of original features' or the 'loss of important views'. With regard to Policy D1 in the Council's Local Plan, it can therefore be stated that development 'respects local context and character', preserving the 'historic environment and heritage assets' of Seven Dials.

Impact on Residential Amenities

This development recognises that the Seven Dials Conservation Area benefits from a 'mix of residential and commercial activities'. Nevertheless, as the Conservation Area Statement addresses, 'this combination of activities can also create problems' with regards to 'increased noise and smells' often caused by the Borough's pubs, restaurants and general evening economy. Having regard to the following, it is considered that the development does not impact on existing residential amenities and, further, would provide a high standard of amenity to future occupants of the scheme itself.

Noise

Firstly, It is not considered that the development has resulted in an increase in noise to what is an active, secondary shopping frontage in a busy area of Central London. The Change of Use to an internal leisure facility has not included the provision of external seating. For this reason development has not lead to the congregating of customers on the pavement or a noticeable increase in noise associated with footfall or voices outside the building.

Regarding vehicle movements, it is not considered that the Change of Use has produced an increase in noise levels. With the site located in a Central London area with a PTAL rating of 6b (best), customers rarely access the building via private vehicle. In addition, with a Change of Use to leisure purposes, the building receives less deliveries than its previous retail use. Consequently, the Change of Use from A1 to D2 is not judged to have generated an unacceptable increase in noise levels outside the building.

The leisure use involves customers taking part in 'Escape Room' activities. As this activity does not involve the consumption of alcohol, the Change of Use has not generated unreasonable or disorderly levels of noise. Furthermore, it is also noted that games are limited to a maximum of just 6 people per game room. Given that the site only has two 'escape rooms', it is clear that these small groups of customers do not generate an unacceptable level of noise.

A Decision Notice for a similar application in Kentish Town (2015/6923/P) stated that because Escape Rooms involve 'indoor entertainment activity that requires mental agility', the Change of Use would 'not cause negative harm to occupiers of neighbouring buildings'. It should also be addressed that because the building has been converted into a leisure use, and not for the purpose of live or music entertainment, there has not been issues with amplified or unamplified music creating noise disturbance. Consequently, it is believed that the Change of Use does not generate unsuitable internal noise levels.

Opening hours

The opening times are as follows:

Monday to Sunday - 10:00 - 23:45

It is considered that the opening times of the leisure facility do not have a detrimental impact on the surrounding area. The unit is located within a secondary shopping frontage on Drury Lane in the lively Covent Garden area of the borough. This street therefore has several pubs and restaurants open to later hours than the Escape Room. Consequently, the presence of people on Drury Lane during later hours should not be judged as uncharacteristic of the area. It should therefore be considered that the closure of the leisure facility at 23:45 is normal with regards to neighbouring businesses operating in the area.

Parking and Access

The Change of Use acknowledges the Conservation Area Statement which highlights pressures arising from an increase in local traffic generated in the area. As the statement warns, generating more traffic will result in a 'loss of amenity through congestion and pollution'. As the site is located in an area with excellent public transport services, visitors prefer to access the site on foot and thus development does not cause a detrimental impact to the existing transport and road network. 181 Drury Lane records a very high PTAL rating of 6b with access to Covent Garden, Holborn and Tottenham Court Road tube stations which are all located within a 0.3 miles (7 minutes walk) of the site. These stations offer services on the Central, Northern and Piccadilly Lines throughout North, East, Central and West London. Local bus services on High Holborn Road also provide routes to Central, East and South London. Consequently, the site has not required new access to be formed and therefore development respects the local character and amenity of the Seven Dials Conservation Area as addressed in Policy TC3 of the Camden Local Plan.

Conclusion

It is the professional opinion of Planning Direct that this application be approved as it satisfies both national and local planning policies.

The Change of Use has not impacted on the local amenity, vitality and viability of Drury Lane and the Seven Dials (Covent Garden) Conservation Area. In line with leisure objectives for the borough, the application supports and promotes Camden as an attractive part of London for both local residents and visitors.

In accordance with the NPPF the applicant expects any issues identified during the planning process and potential solutions to be brought to his attention at the earliest opportunity.

Appendix 1. Entrance to 181 Drury Lane including minor alterations to signage.



