

The Barnet Society

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Alarm bells over Spires proposals



(Below) An aerial view of the development plans and (below, left) Stapylton Road, opposite the library



Grave concern was expressed at the Barnet Society's housing debate about the scale of the damage that might be inflicted on the appearance and character of the town centre if The Spires shopping centre is redeveloped to include as many as 280 flats, writes Nick Jones.

Property developers BYM, who purchased The Spires in May 2021, began consultations with Barnet Council and local organisations last December on plans to redevelop the centre to include five blocks of flats of between five and six storeys in height.

The existing shopping mall, which is currently closed at night, would be replaced with a new pedestrian street from

Barnet High Street to Stapylton Road.

Blocks of flats would be built on either side of this new thoroughfare with shops and cafes on the ground floor, together with another new block of flats on the adjoining vacant Barnet Market site.

BYM says that it is currently reviewing its initial plans and hopes to be ready by March to discuss revised proposals.

The initial response of those who have been consulted in recent weeks is that BYM's plan for as many as 280 flats might overload the site.

A narrow pedestrian street through the centre would be overshadowed by blocks as high as five to six storeys and would not be attractive to cafes and restaurants offering outside seating.

In his first public comments on BYM's application, Ross Houston, chair of Barnet's housing and growth committee, accepted that concerns about the height of blocks and the density of the flats were of overriding importance.

"But I do think The Spires looks tired. If the issue of height and density could be addressed, and if the design is right, it could be improved as a place to shop."

Theresa Villiers, the Chipping Barnet MP, also acknowledged that some change was inevitable and that The Spires had suffered because of the shift to online shopping.

If The Spires had a residential component this could be consistent with the conservation area and the character of Chipping Barnet, but she was worried about the impact of some of the proposals which BYM had floated.

Nonetheless this was an opportunity to provide affordable homes and if there was the right retail solution, this could result in a more positive shopping experience.

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Two key requirements would be to ensure the safeguarding of the twice-weekly stalls market and provision of adequate car parking.

Simon Kaufman, one of the two local architects who contributed to the debate, thought any redevelopment of The Spires had to respect the character of an historic town centre and its “higgledy-piggledy” old streets which came together around the High Street.

“The Spires sits in the middle of two conservation areas. It fills that gap, but the proposed redevelopment does not relate to the historic roofscape and character of the surrounding streets.”

Dave McCormick of Barnet Friends of the Earth said BYM, and their planners should address the sustainability of any redevelopment of the shopping centre. “Will the new layout include a community garden? Will the new development be water neutral. This is the stage when environmental issues should be at the forefront.”

If planning permission is given for the redevelopment of The Spires,

“The proposed redevelopment does not relate to the historic roofscape and character of the surrounding streets”

BYM have said they intend to start construction in 2024 and continue work through to completion in 2030.

As regards the issue of the height of the blocks, BYM’s planning appraisal said the scale of development is “unlikely to be perceptible” from sensitive areas such as the neighbouring Monken Hadley Conservation Area and Wood Street Conservation Area.

“At a local level, the site is located in an established urban area and the provision of marginally taller buildings would not be incongruent to the character and appearance of the wider area.

“The architectural approach, including orientation and skyline profile will be important to mitigate potentially harmful impacts.”

The majority of the new buildings

A drawing of the proposed new Spires courtyard area, with on either side

are expected to comprise red brick facades in keeping with the surrounding area.

Under the plan, both the Waitrose supermarket and multistorey car park would be retained as well as space for the twice weekly Barnet Market.

Fruit and vegetable stall holders Tyler Bone and Andy Gardiner, joint proprietors of Barnet Market Ltd, have met representatives of BYM and said they were impressed by the steps that were being proposed to safeguard and enhance the market.

Mr Gardiner said he was reassured that the developers recognised the importance of the market and were ready to discuss whether the market area could be expanded.

“We walked round the site with their representatives, and they talked about the possibility of moving the bandstand, re-using the grassy knoll on the other side of the service road, and providing storage space for the stallholders.

“So yes, we were impressed. BYM does seem very keen to work with us”.