



Committee and date
Northern Planning Committee
8th November 2022

Development Management Report

Responsible Officer: Tracy Darke, Assistant Director of Economy & Place

Summary of Application

Application Number: 22/03891/FUL	Parish:	Shrewsbury Town Council
Proposal: Installation of 1no. new BT Street Hub, incorporating 75" LCD advert screens plus the removal of associated BT Kiosks		
Site Address: Pavement O/s 25-28 Market Street The Square Shrewsbury Shropshire		
Applicant: Mr James Browne		
Case Officer: Jane Raymond	email	: jane.raymond@shropshire.gov.uk

Grid Ref: 349182 - 312483

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Recommendation: Refuse subject to the conditions set out in Appendix 1.

Recommended Reason for refusal:

1. It is considered that the proposed hub due to its scale, design and appearance and having regard to the character of the area in which it will be located, including the immediate locality and also wider views of the site, would be detrimental to visual amenity and have an adverse visual impact on the character and appearance of the street scene, the setting of nearby listed buildings and this part of Shrewsbury Town Centre Conservation Area. The harm to the significance of these heritage assets is considered to be less than substantial and the public benefits do not outweigh the harm. The proposal is therefore considered to be contrary to local plan policies MD2, MD13, CS6 and CS17 and paragraph 199 and 202 of the NPPF and also fails to preserve or enhance the setting of nearby listed buildings or the character or appearance of the Conservation area as required by section 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

REPORT**1.0 THE PROPOSAL**

1.1 This application for planning permission is for the 'Installation of 1no. new BT Street Hub, incorporating 75" LCD advert screens plus the removal of associated BT Kiosks'. The application has been submitted concurrently with an application for advertisement consent (22/03892/ADV).

1.2 The proposed hub/kiosk measures 2.960 metres high x 1.236 metres wide and 0.350 metres deep. The hub incorporates an LED static digital display screen on both sides each measuring 1.670 metre high and 0.95 metres wide.

1.3 The proposed BT hubs in addition to displaying an LCD advert on each side (that businesses will pay BT to display advertising material and fund the hubs) will provide the following services:

- Ultrafast public and encrypted Wi-Fi
- Secure power-only USB ports for rapid device charging
- Free phone calls
- Direct 999 call button
- Display community and emergency (i.e. police) awareness messaging
- Interactive tablet that provides a series of icons with access to local council services, four national charities for support, BT's phone book, local weather information, maps and wayfinding and FAQs and instructions (it does not allow open web browsing)
- A platform for future technologies such as environmental sensors to measure air quality, noise and traffic currently being trialled
- Boost 4G and 5G with installed small cells, improving coverage and capacity

1.4 The supporting information also indicates that each hub will also provide the

following community benefits:

- 5% screen time (876 hours per unit or 438 hours per screen) of free council advertising per year
- Direct access to charities through the use of the dedicated charity icon on the fully accessible interactive tablet
- Community notice board with over 1,000 hours of content per year (the Street Hub team can work with local groups to promote events and activities)
- Discount advertising for local business groups (such as BIDs and Chambers of Commerce) and their members through BT Street Hub Partners Programme
- Business rates for each location paid when requested by the council, ensuring Street Hubs make an ongoing financial contribution to the local area.

2.0 SITE LOCATION/DESCRIPTION

- 2.1 This is one of 6 applications for BT hubs proposed to be sited at 6 locations within Shrewsbury town centre. This particular hub although addressed as outside 25-28 Market Street, is proposed to be located on the pavement outside 25-26 The Square on the High Street frontage and occupied by Starbucks.
- 2.2 The site is within the Conservation area and the BT hub is proposed to be located between two existing bus shelters on the south west side of the High Street in front of a long modern building with commercial shop fronts to the ground floor. Opposite the site is the bottom of Grope Lane and on both sides of the High Street are a long series of important listed buildings many timber framed and Grade II* listed.

3.0 REASON FOR COMMITTEE DETERMINATION OF THE APPLICATION

- 3.1 The application relates to land owned by the Council and the proposal is not in-line with statutory functions.

4.0 Community Representations

4.1 Consultee Comment

- 4.1.1 **SC Archaeology:** *We have no comments to make on this application with respect to archaeological matters.*
- 4.1.2 **SC Conservation:** *These concurrent applications follow on from PREAPP/22/00255 on which our Team provided comments where this is one proposed site of a total of six in the Shrewsbury town centre where free-standing structures with illuminated digital screens are proposed to be installed within the public realm along the pavement where the intention is to replace existing BT*

phone kiosks with these contemporary structures known as 'street hubs'.

Again with these formal submissions, a product statement prepared by BT explaining what a digital street hub is, its design and specifications and various photographic images of these structures in urban environments has been provided. Drawings, existing street scenes and photo mock-ups relevant to each proposed location in the Shrewsbury town centre and the existing phone kiosks these would replace have also been prepared along with a short heritage statement including an impact assessment relevant to each location.

Each of the six digital street hubs proposed in Shrewsbury are all within the boundaries of the Shrewsbury Conservation Area, and more particularly within the 'Town Centre Special Character Area', where additionally in most cases there are listed buildings and historic built forms in relatively close proximity or within the wider co-visible and inter-visible context of the historic street scene.

We would advise that in considering this type of proposal, due regard to the following local and national policies and guidance would be required in terms of historic environment matters: CS6 Sustainable Design and Development and CS17 Environmental Networks of the Shropshire Core Strategy, Policies MD2 and MD13 of the SAMDev component of the Local Plan, the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), as well as relevant Historic England guidance including GPA3 The Setting of Heritage Assets. As the proposed installation of these structures would be within the Conservation Area, legislatively the provisions of Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 would apply in terms of the extent to which this proposal would preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area. Additionally Section 66 of the Act would be applicable where the Act requires the need to pay special regard to the preservation of listed buildings and their settings.

As noted in our comments at the Pre-application stage, having considered these relatively large and tall structures with their predominant digital advertisement screens, and their proposed placement within the public realm and within the Conservation Area, our Team would highlight the harmful impact these structures would potentially have on the character and appearance of the street scene and on the immediate and wider setting and appearance of designated and non-designated heritage assets which make up and contribute to the town centre streetscape near these proposed installations.

We previously also referred to the BT product statement brochure where the digital street hubs are illustrated and presented within large urban centres of some scale and modern appearance characterised by contemporary built forms, with a high level of wider urban activity within which these digital structures would sit. The Shrewsbury town centre is of a much smaller scale where it is characterised by historic buildings and a much more pedestrian-scale streetscape. Due to the scale, height, siting, design and illumination of these structures they would be overtly visually obtrusive within the street scene, introducing illuminated advertising into

the public realm and adding clutter to the pavement. Within the wider context these illuminated structures have the potential to compete visually with historic buildings which contribute positively to the town centre, where these digital structures may harm their setting.

While we would likely raise no objection to the removal of existing modern phone kiosks, their relatively neutral form and appearance as street furniture within the public realm is noted. These existing kiosks particularly contrast with the tall, wide, block-like design of the modern street hubs, where their scale and height combined with the bright colourful appearance of their large digital screens would result in imposing and visually incongruous street furniture being introduced as replacement structures within the street scene.

Turning specifically to this proposed location on the High Street just outside the historic town centre Square, the proposed street hub would be placed to the front of a long modern building with commercial shop fronts to the ground floor, and positioned between two existing bus shelters. This location is directly opposite and at the bottom of the historic narrow passage known as Grope Lane, where on both sides of the High Street there are a long series of important designated heritage assets including timber framed Grade II listed buildings forming each corner of Grope Lane. Historic buildings also characterise and are prominently visible at the north-west corner of The Square where these also run along that side of the High Street and include the Grade II* listed Ireland's Mansion. Within both immediate and longer street scene views in this sensitive area, looking in both directions along the High Street, the proposed street hub would be co-visible with these varied and important historic built forms, and as a result of the street hub being a tall solid rectangular modern structure with large illuminated screens it would feature prominently in these views, being very much out of character within this historic context and setting, and comprising a visually dominant and disruptive form of street furniture within the public realm.*

It is our view that this type of development within the Conservation Area would be harmful, adding visual clutter to the street scene while undermining the setting and appearance of nearby listed buildings. While this would likely represent less than substantial harm, it would be harm none the less, where great weight needs to be given to the conservation of designated heritage assets. This type of installation would neither preserve or enhance the character or appearance of the Conservation Area, would impact on the setting of listed buildings within the Conservation Area, and would be contrary to relevant policies as outlined above which seek to protect and enhance the historic environment. .

4.1.3 SC Highways: *Whilst the proposed Street Hub would replace the existing phone kiosks, the footway width at the proposed location would be reduced as a result of the proposals, it is recommended that an alternative location is found that does not reduce the footway width to less than 2 metres.*

4.1.4 SC Drainage: *The proposal should be acceptable as the footprint of the BT Street*

Hub is only 0.42m2.

4.1.5 **SC Regulatory Services:** *No comments*

4.2 Public Comments

4.1.1 **Shrewsbury Town Council:** *The Town Council object to this application as the proposed BT hubs are out of character for the Shrewsbury Conservation Area. Members felt the hubs could encourage anti-social behaviour and they fully supported the comments raised by the Conservation Officer.*

4.1.2 **Civic Society:** *Shrewsbury Civic Society fully endorses the comments of the Conservation Officer.*

To our knowledge, these 'hubs' have been appearing in urban locations around the country over the last twelve months . Whilst these structures may be appropriate for a city location they are not suited to historical areas and, in our opinion, will just produce unnecessary visual 'noise'.

Shrewsbury Civic Society objects to this application.

5.0 THE MAIN ISSUES

The main issues in determining this application are:

Principle

Character and appearance and impact on heritage assets

6.0 OFFICER APPRAISAL

6.1 Principle of development

6.1.1 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) advises that communications infrastructure is essential for sustainable economic growth and that LPAs should support the expansion of telecommunications but aim to keep the number of sites to a minimum and that where possible existing structures and buildings should be utilised.

6.1.2 Part 10 of the NPPF (as amended) seeks to support advanced, high quality and reliable communications infrastructure and sees it as being essential for economic growth and social well-being. It advocates planning policies and decisions that support the expansion of electronic communications networks, including next generation mobile technology (such as 5G) and full fibre broadband connections and makes the case for the use of existing masts, buildings and structures for new electronic capability in preference to the installation of new sites.

6.1.3 This is supported by local plan policy through Core Strategy Policies CS7

(Communications and Transport) and CS8 (Facilities, Services and Infrastructure Provision) and SAMDev Policy MD8 (Infrastructure Provision), which seek to improve, maintain and promote communications infrastructure.

- 6.1.4 The proposed BT hub and the services it will provide is acceptable in principle provided that the siting, scale and design is appropriate and the character and appearance of the street scene, the conservation area and the setting of nearby listed buildings are not significantly adversely affected where the impact of the proposal needs to be balanced with the need to meet infrastructure requirements and the public benefits of the proposal.

6.2 Character and appearance and impact on heritage assets

- 6.2.1 SAMDev Policy MD2 (Sustainable Design) and Core Strategy Policy CS6 (Sustainable Design and Development Principles) requires development to protect and conserve the built environment and be appropriate in scale, density, pattern and design taking into account the local context and character and should also safeguard local amenity.
- 6.2.2 The proposed hub is to be sited within a Conservation area and with listed buildings in the vicinity. The proposal has the potential to impact on these heritage assets. The proposal therefore also has to be considered against section 16 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and Shropshire Council policies MD13 and CS17 which seek to ensure that development protects and enhances the local character of the built and historic environment.
- 6.2.3 Special regard has to be given to the desirability of preserving the setting of listed buildings and preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of the Conservation area as required by section 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.
- 6.2.4 The proposal is for an LED digital display screen over 1.5 metre high and almost 1 metre wide to be displayed on both sides of a BT hub that will be just short of 3 metres high. The submitted Heritage Statement (HS) indicates that:

'The application site is located along a well-lit stretch of pavement of the High Street which is a busy public highway for both vehicular and pedestrian traffic. The area is predominantly made up of historic buildings which is why the Street Hub is to be placed outside of large more modern buildings with retail outlets at ground level including the HSBC and Starbucks directly adjacent to the site. There is an array of established street furniture along this section of pavement including signposts, traffic signals, bus shelter and bollards.

Whilst these modern, commercial surroundings are seen as an entirely appropriate location for a BT Street Hub unit, it is noted that the site is found in proximity to several listed buildings and within Shrewsbury Town Centre

Conservation Area. Whilst the important scenic, historic and architectural features of this building and wider area are noted, it is argued that the primary setting of the application site outside HSBC is one that is dominated by modern shop frontages and illuminated advertisements with fascial signage'.

- 6.2.5 It is accepted that the proposed hub will replace an existing BT call box but it will be almost a metre higher than the phone box it will replace and the adjacent bus shelters. The advertising material on the existing phone box to be removed is not illuminated and the majority of shop fronts in this location and within the town centre generally are also non-illuminated. It is considered that the scale of the proposed hub will be totally out of proportion to its setting and out of keeping with the character of the area.
- 6.2.6 It is agreed with the Conservation officer that the proposed tall modern structure with illuminated screens on both sides would be a visually dominant and prominent feature in the immediate and wider street scape and also in longer views of the site and would be very much out of character within the context of the site and would negatively impact on the setting of nearby listed buildings and the character and appearance of the conservation area. It would be the first structure of this type within Shrewsbury town centre and would appear out of place and prominent and would not assimilate into the street scene or make a positive contribution to the street scene.
- 6.2.7 Paragraph 199 of the NPPF requires that '*When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance*'.
- 6.2.8 Paragraph 202 states that '*Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use*'.
- 6.2.9 Although the proposal will provide public benefits outlined in paragraphs 1.3 and 1.4 of this report it is not considered that these benefits outweigh the harm identified. It has also not been demonstrated why the benefits offered could not be delivered by a hub of smaller proportions more appropriate to a historic town setting such as Shrewsbury.
- 6.2.10 Whilst the BT hubs of the scale proposed might be appropriate in the context of a larger urban centre characterised by contemporary built forms of much larger scale and modern appearance and within wider spaces they are not appropriate in a small historic town such as Shrewsbury. The town centre is of a much smaller scale where it is characterised by historic buildings and a much more pedestrian-

scale streetscape and the applicant has been asked to explore alternative sites and/or a smaller version of the BT hub that would be more appropriate for installation in smaller historic towns such as Shrewsbury. Unfortunately BT do not at this time have a smaller version available than the hub proposed.

7.0 CONCLUSION

7.1 It is considered that the proposed hub due to its scale, design and appearance and having regard to the character of the area in which it will be located, including the immediate locality and also wider views of the site, would be detrimental to visual amenity and have an adverse visual impact on the character and appearance of the street scene, the setting of nearby listed buildings and this part of Shrewsbury Town Centre Conservation Area. The harm to the significance of these heritage assets is considered to be less than substantial and the public benefits do not outweigh the harm. The proposal is therefore considered to be contrary to local plan policies MD2, MD13, CS6 and CS17 and paragraph 199 and 202 of the NPPF and also fails to preserve or enhance the setting of nearby listed buildings or the character or appearance of the Conservation area as required by section 66 and 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990.

8.0 Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

8.1 Risk Management

There are two principal risks associated with this recommendation as follows:

- As with any planning decision the applicant has a right of appeal if they disagree with the decision and/or the imposition of conditions. Costs can be awarded irrespective of the mechanism for hearing the appeal, i.e. written representations, hearing or inquiry.
- The decision may be challenged by way of a Judicial Review by a third party. The courts become involved when there is a misinterpretation or misapplication of policy or some breach of the rules of procedure or the principles of natural justice. However their role is to review the way the authorities reach decisions, rather than to make a decision on the planning issues themselves, although they will interfere where the decision is so unreasonable as to be irrational or perverse. Therefore they are concerned with the legality of the decision, not its planning merits. A challenge by way of Judicial Review must be made a) promptly and b) in any event not later than six weeks after the grounds to make the claim first arose.

Both of these risks need to be balanced against the risk of not proceeding to determine the application. In this scenario there is also a right of appeal against non-determination for application for which costs can also be awarded.

8.2 Human Rights

Article 8 gives the right to respect for private and family life and First Protocol Article 1 allows for the peaceful enjoyment of possessions. These have to be balanced against the rights and freedoms of others and the orderly development of the County in the interests of the Community.

First Protocol Article 1 requires that the desires of landowners must be balanced against the impact on residents.

This legislation has been taken into account in arriving at the above recommendation.

8.3 Equalities

The concern of planning law is to regulate the use of land in the interests of the public at large, rather than those of any particular group. Equality will be one of a number of 'relevant considerations' that need to be weighed in Planning Committee members' minds under section 70(2) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

9.0 Financial Implications

There are likely financial implications if the decision and / or imposition of conditions is challenged by a planning appeal or judicial review. The costs of defending any decision will be met by the authority and will vary dependent on the scale and nature of the proposal. Local financial considerations are capable of being taken into account when determining this planning application – insofar as they are material to the application. The weight given to this issue is a matter for the decision maker.

10. Background

Relevant Planning Policies

Central Government Guidance: NPPF

Core Strategy and Saved Policies: MD2, MD13, CS6 and CS17

11. Additional Information

View details online: <http://pa.shropshire.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=summary&keyVal=RH4SPYTDIGQ00>

List of Background Papers: File 22/03891/FUL
Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder): Councillor Richard Marshall
Local Member: Councillor Nat Green