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Proposal:	New office building on 3 floors with linked housing units at 2 storeys
Location:	Land adjoining St Nicholas' Church Chapel Street The Old Town
Applicant:	A Developer PLC

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## **1. Description:**

- 1.1 This application comprises a three storey office building on a corner plot. The second floor is set back from the main elevations under a deep inset to the pitched roof.
- 1.2 The proposed housing units are 2-storey with a third storey in the roof lit by a dormer window. In total 8, 1-bed apartments are proposed. These units align in terms of front wall positioning and ridge height with the 18 century housing in Chapel Street.
- 1.3 Walls are to be brick finish and rendered elements – used in varied fashion on all elements of the complex. Housing roofs are traditionally tiled and the larger office building has a modern sheet material (grey lead like) covering.
- 1.4 Windows and doors are simply detailed predominantly grey powdered coated aluminium frames and hardwood doors.
- 1.5 Overall the development puts forward a contemporary design solution for a key site in the historic core of the town. A computer generated montage is attached.
- 1.6 The scheme does not include car parking and relies on the availability of nearby public car parks and on-street provision.

## **2. The Site:**

- 2.1 The site adjoins St Nicholas Church Yard, fronting Chapel Street and Austin Street. St Nicholas is a Grade 1 Listed Building. On the opposite side of Austin Street, south of site, is a medieval gateway. There are many medieval and 18 century buildings in the vicinity. This site and the whole medieval town centre lies in a Conservation Area. There is a major modern 1960s/70s office building to the south of the site (near to the medieval gateway). The site has been vacant for approximately 10 years.

## **3. Planning History:**

- 3.1 None directly relevant.

#### **4. Consultees:**

- 4.1 Town Council: welcome the redevelopment of this previously untidy and derelict site, but concerned at the height and bulk of the office building and the modern appearance of the alterations which, it is felt, are out of character in the street scene.
- 4.2 Civic Association: This project involves the redevelopment of an important site which has caused the Association concern for many years. However, there is a concern that this proposal could further change the character of the central area that was harmed during the 1970s. We need to be sure that archaeology is reassessed as this might prove to be the last opportunity for investigations for the foreseeable future.
- 4.3 English Heritage: views awaited
- 4.4 County Council Highways: reservations because so little on-site parking is available to serve either the offices or the dwellings.
- 4.5 County Archaeologist: this site has been damaged in the post war period but there may still be potential archaeology beneath the top levels and a watching brief is recommended.
- 4.6 8 letters received objecting to the proposal:-
- The development is too high
  - It is over-development – should be reduced in floorspace/density
  - Causes the loss of view of St Nicholas Church
  - Not enough parking which will cause conflict with current on-street parking
  - No need for offices in the town
  - The modern design of the buildings is not appropriate in the conservation area.

#### **5. Determining Issues:**

- 5.1 This cases raises a number of key issues:
- Impact on surrounding listed buildings
  - Impact on conservation areas
  - Affects on adjoining dwellings
  - Design and appearance
  - Parking

- 5.2 These matters are closely interrelated and the scheme can only be judged in the round. This is a sensitive setting which requires an approach to redevelopment which respects all elements of the character of the area. The building is clearly modern in character, materials and detailing but quite traditional in form.
- 5.3 The relevant policy considerations are to be found in Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 – Planning and the Historic Environment which sets out the Government’s expectations for development in settings such as this. It emphasises that it is not necessary for a new building set close to historic buildings to have to copy those buildings but a harmonious result should be sought to achieve a suitable mixture of styles as has so often happened in the earlier history of an area. In terms of the Conservation Area (CA) the advice recognises that it is not realistic to prevent any new building and that development must meet the test, does it preserve or enhance the CA which in legal terms means that the development does not need to enhance the CA but should not harm it.
- 5.4 The Tonbridge and Malling Local Plan policies set criteria for considering planning applications that affect the setting of Listed Buildings and of Conservation Areas. These policies are attached for the Committees attention.
- 5.5 The judgements surrounding these policies are complex because the considerations cannot be easily codified and inevitably require some subjectivity in the evaluation of the quality of design. The scheme does not represent the “pastiche” approach to design and is in my view much the better for that – it is sensitive and honest design not seeking to hide its modern character in its simplicity. This view is, however, not shared by many of these who have made representations on the scheme.
- 5.6 The height of the Austin Street building has caused some local concern. I have considered it in the context of the street scene of this part of the Conservation Area and the surrounding Listed Buildings. Because of the modest detailing and simple massing the height of the building has less impact than might be the case with a more complex design. The set back of the top floor likewise reduces the visual impact. In my view, notwithstanding the fact that the use of 3 storeys removes the view of St Nicholas from Austin Street, there is no overriding objection to the building on this basis. The tidying of the site and the replacement of the urban form bring a major benefit to this part of the Conservation Area. The church can be clearly seen in the area from a few metres further along Chapel Street.
- 5.7 While I recognise the concerns expressed by the County Council and local residents in respect of parking, it must be remembered that this is a town centre site very close to public car parks which will adequately service the offices. To increase on site parking would lead to a fundamental revision to the design that would not, in my view be desirable – it would erode the urban quality of the building that makes it fitting to this location.

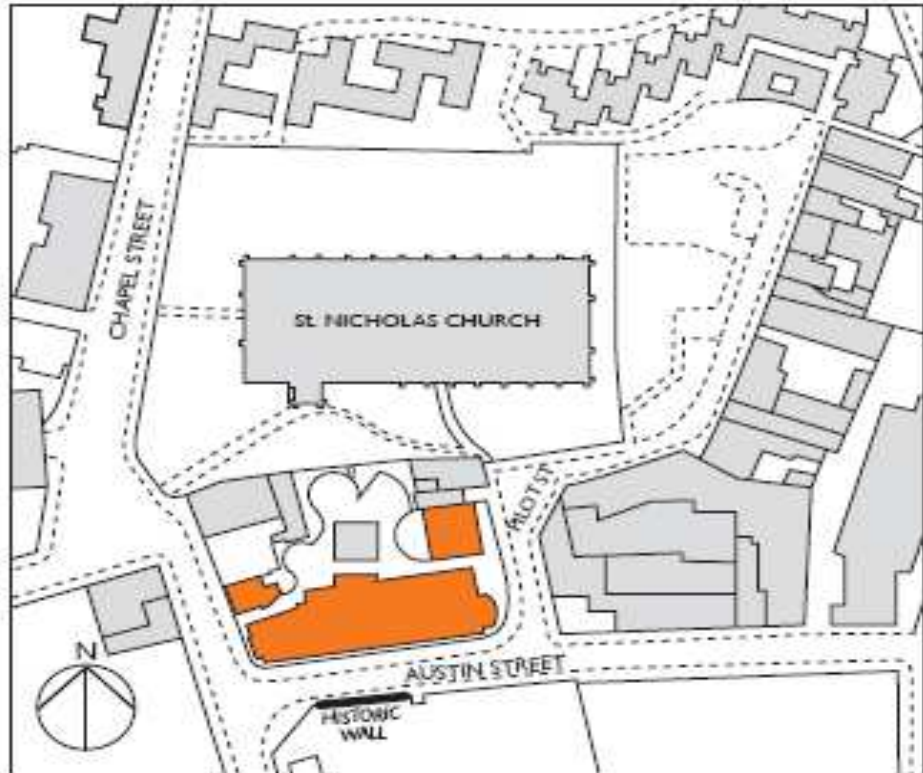
5.8 As the new dwellings adjoin existing houses in Chapel Street and offices are a B1 use, which should cause no disturbance to existing housing, I can see no objection on this aspect of the case.

5.9 The matter of archaeology can be dealt with by use of a condition.

**6. Recommendation:**

**6.1 GRANT PLANNING PERMISSION**

6.2 Subject to conditions.....



site plan



Photomontage impression of proposed building with St Nicholas Church in the background