



An
Bord
Pleanála

Inspector's Report ABP-306185-19.

Development	Change of use of former social welfare office to use as school, construct extension, modifications to building and site and all associated site works.
Location	Prospect Avenue, Westport, Co. Mayo.
Planning Authority	Mayo County Council.
Planning Authority Reg. Ref.	19772.
Applicant	Educate Together.
Type of Application	Permission.
Planning Authority Decision	Refuse.
Type of Appeal	First Party
Appellant	Educate Together.
Observer	None.
Date of Site Inspection	24 th January 2020.
Inspector	Mairead Kenny.

1.0 Site Location and Description

- 1.1. The site at Prospect Avenue is in an area to the rear of the town centre commercial area and within a few minutes walking distance of the main square, the Octagon. The general character of the streets in the area is remarkable for their steep alignment up from the town centre, which is at a lower level.
- 1.2. The area in which the site is located is wholly residential and the subject street is a cul de sac with a few houses on one side and a larger period property in relatively substantial grounds at the end. A disc parking system operates between the hours of 08.30 and 18.30. The main access to the site would be from John's Row which is marked with double yellow lines and is a one-way route.
- 1.3. The subject building is the former social welfare office. The stated site area is 0.0534 hectares. The stated area of the existing building is 221m².
- 1.4. Photographs which were taken by me at the time of my inspection are attached.

2.0 Proposed Development

- 2.1. Permission is sought for:
 - Change of use of former social welfare office to primary school
 - Extension and modifications to building and site
 - All associated site works.
 - The works include elevation of the height of the roof to accommodate a classroom and offices at the first floor level.
 - The stated floor area of the development is a ground floor area of 31m² and 120m² at first floor level.

3.0 Planning Authority Decision

3.1. Decision

The planning authority decided to refuse permission for the following reasons:

- Lack of parking on site or in the immediate vicinity – would endanger public safety by reason of traffic hazard and obstruction of road users due to extra traffic generated on a busy road and at the location of the junction to Prospect Avenue.
- Lack of turning area at cul de sac road – would create a traffic hazard at the terminal point of the road and endanger public safety.

3.2. Planning Authority Reports

3.2.1. Planning Reports

The planner's report notes:

- The building has been vacant since 2014.
- The planning authority requires compliance with *Provisions of Schools and the Planning System – A Code of Practice for Planning Authorities, the Department of Education and Science and the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government July 2008.*
- No significant architectural issues given the small scale of the extension.
- The school will have 4 no. classrooms with a maximum of 100 persons including staff.
- There is no parking or turning area or set down area and the proposal to allocate a time for a bus drop off and pedestrian crossing and path results in a loss of parking on Prospect Avenue.
- The change of use is not considered acceptable given the lack of parking facilities / set down area.

3.2.2. Other Technical Reports

Road Design recommend refusal of permission for reasons relating to parking and the local cul de sac road.

Area Engineer recommends further information in relation to:

- the footpath proposed
- the surface water drainage

- the swept path available to vehicles manoeuvring at the junction.

3.3. Prescribed Bodies

No reports.

3.4. Third Party Observations

2 no. objections received. These raise issues relating to access, traffic congestion at peak times, parking overspill, safety, noise and lack of play facilities in the development.

4.0 Planning History

None relevant.

5.0 Policy Context

5.1. Development Plan

The development plan referenced in the decision of the planning authority is the Westport Town and Environs Development Plan 2010-2016.

The site is zoned Residential High Density the objective of which is 'to protect, improve and develop residential areas and to provide for facilities and amenities incidental to those residential areas, where appropriate'. Uses include education.

The development plan standard is 2 car parking spaces per classroom.

5.2. Natural Heritage Designations

No European sites in the immediate vicinity.

6.0 The Appeal

6.1. Grounds of Appeal

The first party appeal includes the following points:

- There is a total of 24 parking spaces on the cul de sac, 10 of which are public spare parking spaces. The building would have an established parking provision of 9 no. spaces, which is more than required for the existing building under the development plan standards.
- There is no increase in car parking requirements.
- These spaces would be managed by staff and not used for drop-off or pick up.
- Car movements on Prospect Avenue would be limited to a few trips by staff.
- Car movements by staff at Prospect Avenue will be the same as existing car movements and there will not be a traffic hazard.
- There is a precedent case in Castlebar which is operating very well based on a temporary permission granted by the Board and under management of staff. A temporary 5 year permission would be acceptable.
- There are no other viable sites.
- In view of the town centre location, zoning, established use, established parking and Park and Stride policy and the precedent, a grant of permission is appropriate.
- Enclosed letters outlines how the school traffic will be managed and describes the amenities in the vicinity of the site.

6.2. **Planning Authority Response**

No substantive response.

6.3. **Observations**

None.

7.0 Assessment

7.1. Parking and traffic management.

The submission lodged with the appeal identify the manner of operation of the school under a 'park and stride policy' which is stated to be similar to one already in use in a primary school in Westport where it is operating well. There is reference also to a case in Castlebar which was considered by the Board.

Appendix D of the appeal submission includes a 'mobility plan' which outlines the possible access routes along John's Row by way of a multiple of access roads. The site is described as being ideally located as it is not on the other school routes.

There is a reference in the mobility plan to the use of public spaces for pick up and drop off. In this regard a number of public car parks are identified on a map. This management arrangement is suggested as an alternative to the use of Prospect Avenue and John's Row.

The proximity to the Greenway is noted by the appellant in addition.

My comments in relation to traffic and parking aspects of this development are as follows.

- It is relevant to note that John's Row which would be the main access route to the site is a one way system and is narrow. I consider that it is likely that congestion on this street would result from the development which could result in congestion on Peter Street, which is steeply aligned.
- The existing road markings at John's Row have not been adequately taken into account and there is no spare area which could reasonably serve as a school drop-off. The fact that the street is a one way might be advantageous in terms of serving the school but the fact remains that there is no space for cars or buses.
- The use of Prospect Avenue for drop-off would be entirely inappropriate as there is no turning bay.
- It is difficult to assess the relevance of the topography which I consider is a very significant characteristics of this part of Westport. It may be more likely to

discourage access to the school by pedestrians and certainly may not be appealing to cyclists. In this context I am dubious about the option of using public car parks notwithstanding the proximity of the site to the town centre.

- The particular congestion which would arise from this type development has not in my opinion been factored in to the application and given sufficient consideration. The documentation presented with the appeal is lacking detail, commitments and is generally unconvincing in my opinion.
- I consider that the comments made in relation to the established parking associated with the former social welfare office and traffic which would have resulted from this use are of limited value. The latter premises would have attracted adults over the working day and would have given rise to a completely different use pattern.

To conclude, I consider that the suitability of this site as a location for a primary school is seriously undermined by the nature of the adjacent roads and the traffic congestion and traffic hazard which would result in the absence of a proven and implementable strategy to address drop-off and pick-ups in particular. I remain unconvinced that having regard to the nature of the area that such solutions can be found and I therefore do not recommend that the Board consider a request for further information.

I consider that the decision of the planning authority is appropriate in this case.

7.2. Principle and design including open space provision.

I note the third party reference to possible intrusion on his property. Any such intrusion, would be a private legal matter.

In principle and in terms of the detailed design I consider that the re-use of this building would be welcomed and the architectural treatment is sensitive. The main alterations to the building involving a slight increase in roof height and a small extension would not be detrimental to the character of the building or the Architectural Conservation Area.

In relation to the provision of playground space and amenity areas to serve the four classroom school I would not be unduly concerned about the limited provision.

I have no objections in principle to the use of the building as a school.

8.0 Recommendation

8.1. I recommend that permission be refused for the reasons and considerations below.

9.0 Reasons and Considerations

Having regard to the nature of the proposed use, the character of the surrounding residential streets, the topography of the area and the absence of detailed and convincing proposals for drop-off and pick-up arrangements, the Board considered that the proposed development would give rise to traffic congestion and would endanger public safety by reason of traffic hazard.

Mairead Kenny
Senior Planning Inspector

31st January 2020