GPM2 ARCHITECTURE DESIGN
ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN ● CHARTERED BUILDING SURVEYORS ●
PROJECT MANAGEMENT ● PLANNING & DEVELOPMENT ●
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Berkeley House, Lynsted

Up to the end of October 2021, Berkeley House was a residential care home providing accommodation and personal care for up to 19 people with learning disabilities or autistic spectrum disorder. The service was spread between four separate houses, The Windmill, The Granary, The Bakery and Pippin House. Following a Care Commission inspection the site was closed after the care service unable to make urgent improvements.

As one of the UKs leading care providers providing high-quality support to over 2,300 people in almost 420 care homes across the country, Achieve Together specialised in caring for people with learning difficulties, autism and associated complex needs. In 2021 they had an 89% CQC rating of good or outstanding. As to whether the cost of running the site itself had some bearing on the nature and quality of the care that was being provided prior to its closure, this statement explores the real possibility that in the longer term it would have an impact on the ability of the care provider to provide a high-quality service. By its own admission Achieve Together were actively trying to achieve carbon neutral status in the running of their sites, stating in their literature that they were procuring 100% of their electrical energy needs from renewable energy sources. To quote from their Impact Report for 2021, 'Every month, we track, monitor and report energy consumption across our operations. Regular and detailed reporting allows us to keep on top of our energy usage and identify areas for improvement. We continually look to improve our energy performance and have investigated the feasibility of installing air source heat pumps at several sites. If successful we intend rolling this out across the estate'.[1]

The buildings on this site are old and so without radical overhaul will become more and more expensive to heat. As listed heritage assets there is little that can be done to make them more energy efficient, not only for the practical difficulties in adapting the fabric and improving the airtightness but the costs involved in moving away from gas boilers to more sustainable heat pump solutions. Not only are older buildings less well insulated but they are also draughtier and in some cases their orientation means that they suffer from a lack of passive solar gain in the winter months, making them even more expensive to heat.

The Approved Code of Practice on the Workplace (Health, Safety and Welfare) Regulations suggests the minimum temperature for working indoors should normally be at least 16°C. Care homes are more often kept at a higher constant temperature of around 20 degrees in communal and resident areas[2], to ensure thermal comfort for the resident. In comparison residential dwelling houses do not have to be heated to a constant minimum internal temperature and the occupant can decide to what level to heat their home, if at all.

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[1] https://www.achievetogether.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Impact-Report-2021-English-Version.pdf
[2] https://ukcareguide.co.uk/rise-in-care-home-costs/

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With three of the four buildings on the site being so old, to bring the existing building fabric up to a standard that keeps running costs low would in any event require a significant investment. As heritage assets, whilst any new works need to comply with the required energy efficiency standards, Building Regulations dictate they should not unacceptably alter the building's character or appearance and can only be to the extent that they would not cause long-term deterioration of the building's fabric or fittings. To this end it would not be possible to bring the buildings up to the required standards without affecting the period features of the buildings.

With the government looking to phase out gas boilers, alternative low-cost heating and hot water solutions would at some point need to be provided as the buildings become more expensive to run. For air and ground source heat pumps to be effective, buildings need to already be well insulated and airtight. Running costs for such facilities have increased substantially in recent times and it is no longer a viable proposition for a third-party care provider to cover the energy costs associated with heating them. In the case of Berkeley House, The Mill and The Windmill, none of these can currently be described as well insulated or airtight to the degree that would be required. With the three main buildings on the site heritage assets, any changes that unacceptably alter the character or appearance of these buildings would not be acceptable.

The existing buildings, by their very orientation, are also prone to overheating in the summer months and with the changing climate and the introduction of Part O to the Building Regulations, there is now more emphasis being put on solar shading and building orientation to ensure that building occupants are not adversely affected by extreme temperatures. With the existing buildings their orientation is set and so there is a built-in limitation on how far energy efficient measures would be effective in reducing heating demand.

Whilst use of internal spaces could be arranged so that living accommodation is on the south side of the building to maximise passive solar gain, this isn't always practical or possible. Other options would be to either install shading devices externally over openings, or to have internal shutters or blinds. This too is problematic where any addition to a heritage asset could be deemed to unacceptably alter the character or appearance. Similarly with internal devices, these are further limited due to the fact that heat is allowed to enter the building and heat the air internally. In this instance improved internal ventilation becomes more important for the thermal comfort of the occupant, which ironically becomes more difficult for the occupant accessing the opening with the blind or shutter pulled across the opening.

Berkeley House and Mill House both have a frontage facing South, with Living accommodation towards the rear so do not lend themselves well to passive solar design principles. Both also have limitations when it comes to providing external shading devices, as the frontages are a significant part of the heritage asset in each case. From a health and safety perspective window blinds are also not a sensible option in a care home environment as the mechanisms present their own hazards.

The only building on the site that comes close to being able to function as a care facility is Pippin House, which was constructed in 2018. As such the building is relatively up to date with current Building Regulations in terms of it being highly insulated and airtight, however these are currently

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heated with gas boilers. To improve the energy performance of this building, in line with the notional building model associated with the 50% uplift of standards, there would have to be some consideration of heating the building via a communal heating source such as a ground source heat pump with the possible introduction of solar PVs on the roof and or solar water heating. In this instance a heat pump solution would be more affordable and appropriate, given that the building is not Listed.

There are other issues on the site with respect to fire safety and the way the existing buildings are laid out. In Berkeley House, the third-floor accommodation is served by a single fire escape staircase with no alternative means of escape from the top floor. It is not known if there is a sprinkler system installed to mitigate the risk to occupants, however this is considered unlikely given the heritage status of the building. Mill House also has a third level with sleeping accommodation that is served by a single staircase, however it would appear that the stairwell is not a fire protected compartment given that the existing walls that form the stairwell are original. These issues could only be addressed by some internal reconfiguration that are unlikely to be acceptable given the heritage status of the buildings. Nonetheless these are fundamental issues that would affect the safety of the building occupants especially where the building is in use as a care facility.

In terms of accessibility, only one of the existing buildings is designed anywhere close to standards set out under M4(3) of the Building Regulations, for full wheelchair accessibility. Accessibility has only been partially achieved through adaptations that have been limited by the fact that the buildings are Grade II Listed.

Where adaptations have been made to make the buildings more accessible, the works carried out have been to the detriment of the historic fabric of the buildings. In the case of Mill House there is no easy access for a wheelchair user into the building other than via some coarse looking concrete steps that have been purposely installed at the rear. None of the two storey buildings have lifts or stair lifts, so wheelchair users are in every case limited to use of the ground floor rooms. Whilst this is not the case with Pippin Cottages, which is single storey and has been specifically designed for wheelchair access, as the buildings make up a group facility, the fact that only one of four buildings on the site is accessible is evidence that the facility is not suitable for inclusive care home use.

Summary

The existing site is made up of four buildings, three of which are heritage assets and to improve the energy performance of these to the standard required so that heat pumps can be used effectively to heat them would be both impractical and costly. To this end running costs of the site would continue to rise to the extent that they may impact on the ability of the service provider to offer a quality service. Similarly three of the four buildings are not fully accessible for wheelchair users with the adaptations that have already been made damaging to their historic fabric. Finally with the flawed layout on Berkely House itself, the current fire escape arrangements from the third floor are unsafe and given its status as a heritage asset would be impossible to fix without splitting it into smaller units, which by definition would make it harder to function as a care home.