

Planning Statement for Proposed Modification of the Existing Window Openings at No 40 The Rock and No 10 Union Street, Bury

This planning application is for the development of the former Royal Bank of Scotland building which occupies a site at No 40 The Rock and No 10 Union Street, Bury. The site falls within Bury Town Centre Conservation Area and a separate Heritage Statement has been prepared to accompany the application and which seeks to address the issues around the proposed works within the Conservation Area.

The applicant Specscart is a small, independent optician who provide Ophthalmology services to residents of Bury, including eye testing and the dispensing of spectacles and where they have a showroom to display their frames at their site in Bury Town centre. Specscart currently only occupy a small section (No 10 Union Street) of the larger (former RBS) building (No 40 The Rock), which they purchased in September 2019 and where they struggled to find a town centre site with enough floor space for them to display their spectacles on the high street, and to also manufacture their own lenses which they do in order to keep their costs down and remain competitive within their sector of the market.

The vacant RBS building (which had been empty for some 12 years prior to purchase of the building by the applicant) was one of the few buildings that had a town centre location, but at the same time had enough space (at first floor level) for them to manufacture the spectacles on their own site. Optician outlets generally do not require large shop windows as such, however, some glazing, with activities going on behind and where there is the opportunity to display their merchandise, is important, not just for the retailer themselves, but also for the shopping street and Conservation Area, which benefits from the active frontage which a vibrant shopfront provides.

The existing RBS building has a frontage (facing onto The Rock) which currently appears dead and lifeless and makes little, if any, contribution to the shopping street or to the Conservation Area. The proposed modifications to the 3 windows would open up the building frontage to The Rock and provide a much needed active frontage in this location. The existing retail / consulting / eye testing area currently does not have level / wheelchair access and the existing ramp, up to what was formerly the main entrance door to RBS, will provide level access for all users and encourage footfall to this section of The Rock.

The proposed opening up of the end elevation of the former RBS building (which is not Listed) should provide a vibrant and worthwhile frontage for the Optician and help breathe life into the immediate area - in a way that is not apparent within Bury Metro's Conservation Area Appraisal - as an important factor in the regeneration of the Town Centre shopping area. The increase in both active shop frontage, as well as the retail area created within the existing building within the town centre, can only be a positive step to ensure the continued viability of The Rock as a worthwhile place to shop and which will help to support the retail offering of this section of the shopping street. The Conservation Area can only be enhanced through the opening up and use of an existing, unused building, with the potential for increased footfall at this quiet end of The Rock.

The current proposals also involve the lowering of 2 No existing window cills (to No 10 Union Street), as the existing cills are above eye level and where the opportunity to display spectacle frames and to attract passing trade is currently limited. The lowering of the window cills (which appear to have possibly been raised when the building was used for office / banking use.

In support of the use of the former RBS building for retailing, the Bury Retail Capacity Update report (prepared by Drivers Jonas Deloitte in 2012), makes clear the need for the modernisation or reconfiguration of floorspace and / or improvements to linkages between the various parts of the town centre and where this should be supported wherever possible. There are also positive approaches to town centre regeneration encouraged within the National Planning Policy Framework, which seeks to promote the vitality and viability of town centres, including a 'town centres first' approach to retail planning policy and where it is stressed that where town centres are in decline, local planning authorities should plan positively for their future to encourage economic activity.

The applicant is extremely passionate about the establishment of an independent optician business within the town centre and where he has not only struggled to locate and purchase a suitable building which is suitable as an optician (including consulting and the dispensing of spectacles), but also a site where there is enough space for the business to manufacture the lenses and which will allow the business to remain viable within the sector.

Equilibrium Architects Ltd

10th July 2023