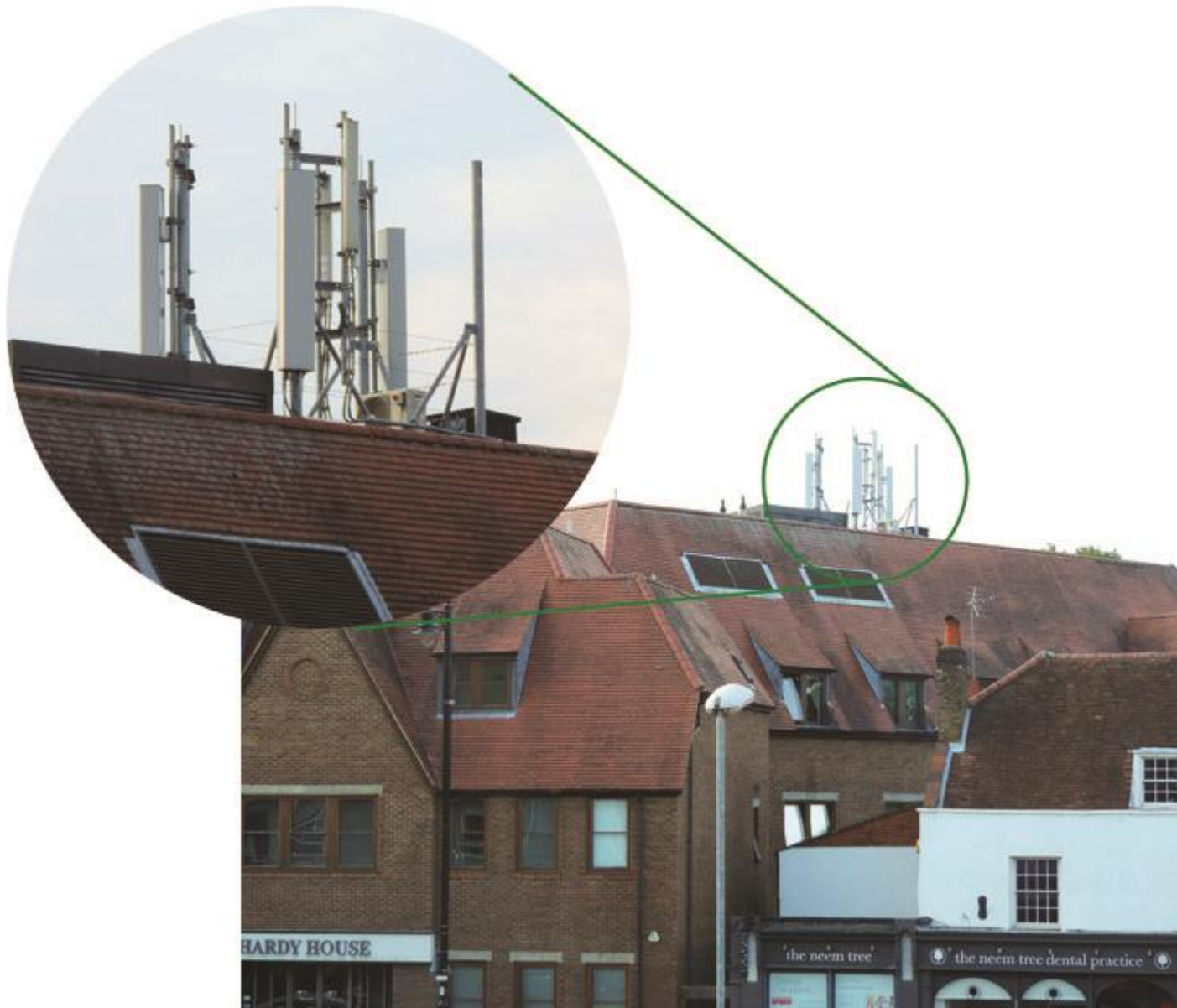


Hardy House Telecoms Mast – the end in sight?



When the crane arrived at Hardy House in December, 2011 most people assumed that it was to carry out the repair or maintenance of the heating/ air conditioning systems of the building. What they did not know was that six months before, Vodafone/O2 had sought guidance from Elmbridge Planning on the relocation of their telecoms mast from the roof of the old Post Office building in the High Street which was to be demolished, to a new site. In error, a planning official gave a verbal opinion that planning permission would not be required to site equipment on the roof of Hardy House (despite the fact that it is clearly within the Esher Conservation Area) and so the mast went up unopposed and with no prior notification.

The outcry from residents and businesses in close proximity to Hardy House and the council's realisation of their error led to the following series of events :

- The submission of a retrospective planning application by Vodafone/O2 which was refused by Elmbridge in March, 2012.
- An appeal by Vodafone/O2 to the Planning Inspectorate in Bristol which was rejected in

October, 2012.

- The issuance of an Enforcement Notice by Elmbridge in February, 2013 giving Vodafone /O2 two months to remove the mast.
- An appeal by Vodafone/O2 against the Enforcement Notice which was upheld by the Planning Inspectorate and gave them an additional 10 months until July, 2014 to find an alternative site.
- A revised planning application to modify the visual impact of the mast which was categorically rejected by Elmbridge this week.

In short, a relatively simple error in the initial planning discussion stage resulted in the above catalogue of events which has taken the time and resources of many people to resolve. Meanwhile, the owners of Hardy House – Tony Gee and Partners – have continued to benefit financially from their contract with Vodafone/O2 despite stating initially that they would cancel that contract if the retrospective planning application appeal was refused.

In her comments objecting to the latest revised planning application, the Elmbridge Conservation Officer stated: 'Hardy House is a large modern building which has been identified as a negative building in a character appraisal carried out for the area in 2007.'

The Hardy House masts are surely a case which proves we, and our planning officers, all need to be vigilant in order to ensure that the planning processes are applied and enforced for the protection of our town and the Esher Conservation Area, and that "negative buildings" are improved and not made into a worse state.