

Design Review Report

Review status

Public

Meeting date	12th September 2012
Issue date	25th September 2012
Scheme location	Harlech Castle
Scheme description	Visitor Centre
Scheme reference number	77D
Planning status	Application submitted
Declaration of interests	n/a

Summary

The Panel welcomed a second opportunity to review developments to this scheme which was last seen at Design Review in March 2012. We were surprised to learn that the planning application has been recently submitted, which is in our view a premature step. The overall vision remains unclear, and the necessary integration and coordination of the different aspects of the scheme and members of the design team, have not yet been demonstrated. We noted the local concerns expressed and, with the proposals in their current form, the desired outcomes and benefits of the project appear to be at risk. In summary:

- Spatial requirements for all internal functions, circulation, consideration of siting and a description of the desired visitor experience has not formed a recognisable brief.
- The lack of a master plan to cover movement to and from the castle, parking provision and the use of other sustainable modes of travel has not been addressed.
- Sufficiently detailed information (unavailable during the meeting) is required for an adequate assessment of the project as a whole, including the design of the bridge.
- The acceptability of the impact of these proposals on Ffordd Penllech has not been demonstrated. This is compounded by the record of refusal of permission, and dismissal at subsequent planning appeal, of a smaller scheme proposed for this site in 2008.

- The scale and massing of the new build elements, including the restaurant and the bridge, need to be refined and justified through a Visual Impact Assessment from locations agreed with the local planning authority.
- Concerns remain about transport issues given the physical difficulties in accessing the site. These should have been resolved prior to any planning application being submitted, given the effect of increasing traffic through Harlech.
- Visitor circulation from arrival, through the existing hotel to the bridge and restaurant, is not direct and is hampered by the optional diversions into separate rooms.
- Significant re-evaluation of the servicing requirements, energy source and method of provision, along with the consultation feedback, should have led to a re-evaluation of the design.

Discussion and panel response in full

The Panel was informed that the budget of £5m includes the bridge link and the gatehouse. The team anticipates a start on site in November 2012, followed by a 52 week contract.

We regretted the continuing lack of a master plan to cover all aspects of the visitor experience, as well as the more detailed planning of different functions envisaged within the proposals. This includes how the visitor centre and restaurant would operate in combination with short-let tourist accommodation in the upper storeys of the hotel building. We were advised that this would be operated through a franchise but no details of how that might be organised were forthcoming.

More detailed information should be provided on the historical and archaeological background to the proposal, along with greater evidence of a coordinated approach to developing the whole site. The Panel particularly noted the lack of integration and information on the bridge design which is a crucially important part of the project as a whole. Details of how the design detail of the bridge is co-ordinated with other elements of the public realm and the visitor centre were not clear. At present the bridge appears to have been designed in isolation, and the way in which it cuts across views to the north and Snowdonia is particularly disturbing.

Our previous stated concerns about access and transport remain. The streets of Harlech are narrow and already congested and this, together with the exceptionally steep access from the west, indicates that a fundamental strategy for resolving these issues should have been in place prior to any proposals for further development on this site, with the desired increase in anticipated visitor numbers.

The circulation and layout of the ground floor of the existing hotel is still not satisfactory and could cause confusion to visitors, particularly at busy times. We understand that the Council's conservation architect has expressed concerns that the integrity of the ground floor layout will be adversely affected through the removal of significant wall elements. Whilst the applicant expressed the view that

little of importance remained, the Panel have not had the opportunity to inspect the interior of the hotel.

The visual impact of the proposal from a number of viewpoints, along with the potential overshadowing on properties to the rear of the site on Ffordd Penllech, remains a concern. This was underlined when the local authority tabled details of a previous proposal for a pair of semi-detached houses on this site, judged to be less intrusive on Ffordd Penllech than the current proposal. Cadw had commented on these earlier proposals in a letter to the local authority of 27 February 2008, stating that any development in this area should 'respect the traditional townscape of Harlech. The massing of any structure must be modest and appropriate for the specific location, and materials should reflect the historic context'. The application was refused and a subsequent appeal was dismissed on the grounds that 'the scale and bulk of the structure on an elevated site would have an unacceptably overpowering effect on this sensitive locality... of Ffordd Penllech'.

The Panel questioned the proposed size of the restaurant and associated WC numbers. While we understood that the restaurant would serve as a community resource as well as a visitor facility, the resident population is small and would presumably make use of the space outside of visitor hours. Given this, and the late but necessary changes in M&E servicing requirements and space, we think that a holistic re-evaluation of the whole of the proposed extension would be valuable and may provide a solution to concerns about the impact on Ffordd Penllech.

Bearing in mind the planning history of the site and the concerns expressed by the local authority and by community and trade bodies (who support the principle of improving visitor facilities), the development of a new visitor centre will require a far greater depth of understanding and sensitivity to demonstrate the appropriateness and quality that this World Heritage site deserves.

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A Welsh language copy of this report is available upon request.

Appendix 1

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer

Cadw (Neal O'Leary, Kate Roberts)

Architectural/Urban Designer	EPT Partnership (John Evans)
Consultants	ND Conservation (Neil Daniels)
Third Party	n/a
Planning Authority	Snowdonia National Park Authority (Richard Thomas)
Design Review Panel	
Chair	Wendy Richards
Officer	Cindy Harris
Lead Panellist	Simon Carne
	Richard Parnaby
	Angela Williams
	Gerard Ryan