

Design Review Report

Newbridge House, Abergavenny

DCFW Ref: N137

Meeting of 10th February 2017



Declarations of Interest

Panel members, observers and other relevant parties are required to declare **in advance** any interests they may have in relation to the Design Review Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

Review Status

Meeting date

Issue date

Scheme location

Scheme description

Scheme reference number

Planning status

PUBLIC

10th February 2017

24th February 2017

Abergavenny

Residential, conversion

N137

Full application submitted 21.11.2016

Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

The applicant undertook a 28-day pre-application consultation (PAC) in Autumn 2016

The Proposals

The project proposes the conversion and extension of an existing office building to form 21 residential units. The town centre site is within the Abergavenny Conservation Area and just outside an Archaeologically Sensitive Area. A popular public park, Linda Vista Gardens, is directly opposite the site. The existing building is a three-storey office building and is set back from the street. The surrounding area is predominantly residential in nature, interspersed with a mix of commercial, retail and business uses to the east of the site.

A full planning application for the scheme was received by the local authority in November 2016 and the consultation period raised a number of issues, concerns and objections. There are other development opportunities adjacent to the site and this scheme will set an important precedent in terms of approach and quality. For these reasons, the Design Commission agreed to review the scheme, post-submission following approaches from members of the public and at the request of the local planning authority.

Main Points in Detail

The following points summarise key issues from the review, and should be considered to inform any further work on the project:

Overall Approach

The Design Commission has significant concerns with the current proposals for reuse of this building within a Conservation Area. Some of the concern may be alleviated to some extent, with better communication of the design process to justify fundamental design decisions. However, we believe that there are crucial aspects of the scheme which have not been considered or tested in enough detail to have reached an appropriate solution. This also means that opportunities to add value have been missed. Some elements of the proposal are not resolved in enough detail to give assurance that the scheme could be viably delivered.

Sustainable Building Reuse

The intention to reuse the existing building has sustainability benefits. However, we would expect to see a variety of options considered and tested before settling on the decision to reuse and extend for residential in the way proposed. Other options might include demolition and rebuild, reuse and additional building, other forms of extension or different uses. There are a variety of ways in which the building could be reused for residential, including different sized units or configurations within the block and different access/circulation arrangements. A summary of the options tested is needed to show that they have been fully considered.

An assessment of local demand, market value and viability would give confidence that that best option has been selected.

Viability, Value and Quality of Life

The Design Commission understands the need for this scheme to be commercially viable. Investing in good design at the early stage adds value to the project by using the site efficiently, reducing the risks involved in the planning process and providing better certainty over costs, therefore improving viability.

The project also provides the opportunity to add value to Abergavenny and contribute positively to the character of the Conservation Area through good, contemporary design.

The quality of life for future residents of the scheme should be a key consideration in the design process. Design will have an impact on well-being as well as the long-term value of the site. The following aspects should be considered and tested:

- Aspect – rooms on the south side of the building will enjoy good views over the park and will benefit from sunlight but the north-facing apartments would not benefit from either. Single-sided south facing apartments may suffer from overheating. Dual aspect apartments would allow all apartments to benefit and would eliminate the dark internal corridor.
- Entrance and arrival – The location of the entrance(s) and the quality of entrance spaces requires further consideration. Entrances should be logical, legible and

welcoming. Rear entrances do not add activity to the streetscape, but there might be an opportunity for front-facing entrances to the ground floor flats.

- Circulation – Circulation spaces should feel safe and comfortable and should be designed to maximise accessibility. The dark internal corridor proposed is not ideal.
- Public/private spaces – Residents and visitors will move through a sequence of spaces from public to semi-public/shared to private. These spaces should be designed so that there is a clear definition between them.
- Outdoor amenity space – the quality of the shared outdoor amenity space and lack of private space as proposed does not contribute positively to quality of life for residents.
- Public realm – The quality of the public realm and its relationship to private landscape and the building should be considered. This should be done through discussion with the local authority.
- Active Travel – walking and cycling for everyday journeys should be encouraged through the layout and safe cycle storage provision. The rear entrance places emphasis on the use of the car over walking.

Elevation Design

Although there is much more to good design than what a building looks like, the appearance of this scheme is particularly important given its location in a Conservation Area. The scheme will also be a quality benchmark for future development in the Conservation Area, so the design of the elevations needs to be fully justified.

The current proposal shows a two-dimensional application of panels to the elevation, creating a 'random' pattern. The designer did not provide a robust justification for the randomness of the applied panels, which is at odds with the horizontal emphasis of the existing building and the more ordered architectural 'language' of the Conservation Area. Proposing a quirky façade in a Conservation Area adds unnecessary risk to the planning process. A logical, ordered and modest elevation design with a strong rationale is likely to be more appropriate in this sensitive location.

If treatment of the elevation was considered three-dimensionally, there may be opportunity to improve privacy, create outside amenity space with the use of balconies and imply the division of units behind the façade. The impact of residential services (vents, flues, grilles etc.) on the façade should be considered.

Sustainability and Environmental Design

Early involvement of an environmental design or building services engineer is encouraged so that the most effective solutions can be tested and integrated from an early stage. Late consideration of environmental design is more costly and may require changes to the layout and building appearance, which could have an impact of the planning process.

A well-designed environmental strategy will maximise quality and comfort conditions for residents as well as minimise energy and resource use. It is not good practice to address sustainability and environmental design after a planning application has been submitted.

The generic list of possible sustainability features included in the Design and Access Statement is not helpful as it does not relate specifically to this project and demonstrates that sufficient consideration has not been given to this issue.

For a building reuse project, effectively improving the performance of the building fabric is a critical issue. This will have an impact on the external façade treatment and/or the internal space available, so it is very important that it is considered as part of the early design process. Any technical solutions which have been developed in concept form could be included in the D&A Statement as part of the argument to justify the elevation design. Any impact on the appearance of the building is especially important in a Conservation Area.

Landscape Strategy

Early involvement of a landscape architect is encouraged so that an integrated approach to design of spaces inside and outside of the building is taken. The landscaped space to the front of the building is one area that would benefit from greater definition in terms of its ownership and design.

A landscape strategy for the site should respond to the local authority's Green Infrastructure policy.

A management and maintenance plan for the grounds should be considered so that long term quality and value are achieved.

Communication of Design Process

There are several aspects of the scheme which need to be better communicated to demonstrate whether or not they are justified. In some cases, background work may have been done, but not communicated in the material submitted for the planning application. In other cases, thorough analysis and testing has not been undertaken, meaning that decisions cannot be justified at this stage.

The Design and Access Statement provides the opportunity for the design team to 'tell the story' of the design process so that the local planning authority and other interested parties can have assurance that the proposal is the best solution. It should outline the analysis which has been undertaken, the options considered and the testing of those options which has led to the proposal.

Better communication of the following design issues is required:

- Site analysis and how it informs decisions
- Understanding of and response to the Conservation Area (including the history of the site)
- Sustainable reuse of the existing building
- Options considered and tested (reuse or new build, massing, layout)
- Environmental design (energy and comfort)

- Response to context – showing the proposal in context in plans, sections and street elevations will help
- Justification and viability of additional top floor – demonstrate whether overshadowing of surrounding properties will be a problem. Show that the structural solution and costs have been resolved. Show impact on townscape.
- Elevation design process

A discussion with the local authority is required regarding the justification for no affordable housing being provided in the development.

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

Attendees

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