

Design Review Report

Talgarth Residential, Powys

DCFW Ref: N246

Meeting of 10th December 2020



Review Status

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| Meeting date | 10 th December 2020 |
| Issue date | 17 th December 2020 |
| Scheme location | Talgarth Powys |
| Scheme description | Residential |
| Scheme reference number | 246 |
| Planning status | Pre-application |

PUBLIC

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 and meeting Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

None at this meeting.

Consultations to Date

This is the first time the Design Commission has been consulted on the proposals. The scheme is a matter of public knowledge and engagement with key stakeholders is ongoing alongside preparation for further public engagement. The Design Commission was originally approached with a request for workshops to consider the longer-term strategic picture. When materials were provided it became clear that this was in fact a scheme being developed for a specific site at a stage that warranted a Design Review approach. This was discussed with the team and client and it was agreed that the review would proceed considering the specific challenges, opportunities and quality of the proposals, in the context of the broader strategic issues for housing ambition and delivery in Powys. All parties agreed to proceed on this basis as reflected in this report and Appendix 1.

The Proposals

The proposals are for residential development of unspecified tenure, at Talgarth. It is one of a series of 'pilot' schemes being addressed by the local authority within its housing strategy, some six sites of which are already on site. Two items were considered in this meeting – one was the value, efficacy and status of a 'Design Guide' and the other was a live proposal for residential development for a site known as Talgarth school. Both were considered in the context of the opportunities for the local authority relating to its housing quality ambitions and the barriers inhibiting that ambition. The 'design guide' was prepared

following challenges experienced with timescale and costs at sites already being delivered. The Commission is therefore considering the site proposals and the design guide efficacy and status.

Main points from the meeting

The 'Design Guide' – the guide was considered in detail and the Commission was given to understand that its purpose was to help control cost due to poor experiences on previously developed sites. The guide is unhelpful in its current form and has no status or weight in decision making. Its emphasis on compliance restates existing guidance and regulation that can be found elsewhere and restricts a range of possibilities for solving problems of good residential layout and dwelling design quality.

For any design guide to be effective it needs to clearly articulate:

1. The local authority vision for the kinds of places they wish to create
2. Level ambition of the local authority
3. Expected/desired tenure for residential
4. The need for proposals to be informed by analysis and response to context
5. Set clear, site-wide strategic energy and building performance targets
6. Signal helpful precedents to inform users
7. Emphasise placemaking principles and place-led approach set out in Planning Policy Wales (making reference to the Placemaking Wales Charter and the Placemaking Wales Guide) and interpreted at a local level
8. Reflect the duty placed upon the Council by the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

It was suggested that many of the elements contained within the Design Guide would be more relevant to a brief – the purpose of which is to set out the requirements for a site. However, even within this context some elements are too prescriptive and are presented in an arbitrary way with little explanation or context. A more general description of what the desired outcome is or what issue is to be avoided would allow for creative responses to the problems set out.

If a design guide is what is desired, it should be prepared with the input of a designer. Currently the document does not address these issues and has no status. For the purposes of consideration of the site in question it was therefore set aside in order that the team could focus on the live proposals.

Proposals for dwellings including bungalows and flats are being developed for the site known as Talgarth School, adjacent to a former community centre with key views of the local Church and several natural assets including mature trees to be retained within tree protection zones. Whilst indications are that a planning commission is imminent, urban design and architectural development is still in the early stages of evolution.

The site and context analysis needs to be completed and the findings applied to the design approach to better reflect the context. Local precedent shows a strong, simple, compact settlement pattern and height variation beyond two storeys. Currently the proposal is less ordered and more illogic – ill at ease with its context and creating awkward spaces. It could be stronger, simpler and more logical.

The Commission is very concerned by the large areas of hard standing/surfaces and the dominance of car parking which negatively affects the layout and arrangement of dwellings. The designing in flexibility in the number of parking spaces to respond to potential changes of use/ownership in the future should be considered.

Two access points are shown on the layouts increasing this dominance and resulting in poorly arranged and oriented units, squeezed near colliding site boundaries. This highway/private car dominated starting point fails to respond to changes in vehicle use and ownership already advancing and those anticipated within the next decade.

Analysis of the whole 'block' beyond the red line as it were, taking in the former community centre would assist an approach which addresses the essential reality that this is a 'piece of town'. Reconsidering the current layout, challenging car dominance and testing alternatives to the two access routes would be beneficial. Treatment of the junctions informed by traffic analysis could also help a more rational approach to road width.

Whilst the community centre is not to be demolished, local authority ownership of their decision to retain/possibly let or sell the property, is necessary to help inform the potential of the whole area. The potential for greening of the community centre site could help create a more positive amenity, perhaps for new community use, adding value to the residential proposals and generating positive activity at the site. The local authority should be proactive in thinking about how this site might evolve over time and the impact that will have on the relationship with the development site.

A full and detailed analysis of the landscape assets not least the mature tree species would help to better inform priorities and testing to establish the most appropriate layout and would assist better orientation of the dwellings for good daylight and energy performance,

as well as assisting a clear rationale for the distribution of public and private space. Structure is important in terms of the site layout and further consideration of the north south footpaths is essential as well as ensuring the integration of assets such as the trees and enhancement of views of the church could all have greater positive effect.

The Commission urges the team and client to revisit the analysis and test further options, based on priorities established from the findings. A challenge is necessary to avoid outdated car dominated residential layout and to enhance amenity and quality of private and public space across the site. We encourage the team to return to further dialogue with the Commission on this site as the design evolves as a result of this work.

The 'design guide' is of little constructive value, however the Commission understands that a clear set of strategic objectives is needed to aid develop of future sites coming forward at Brecon, Crickhowell and Hay. We urge the local authority as a team to contact us early in the new year, to secure a client-support workshop time so that the Commission can assist the authority with this work. We suggest this is essential to strengthen their position and articulate their requirements for future residential development.

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

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| Design & Client Team: | Arwyn George, George + Tomos, Architects Barry Davies, Asbri Planning, Planning Consultants |
| Design Review Panel: | |
| Chair | Jonathan Vernon Smith Steven Smith Lynne Sullivan Jen Heal, Design Advisor, DCFW Efa Lois, Place Advisor, DCFW Carole-Anne, Chief Executive, DCFW |

Appendix 1 - Notes provided for the client team in advance of the meeting.

Thank you for requesting a workshop with the Design Commission for Wales due to take place on 10th December. The DCFW team met yesterday to consider the materials provided. There are a couple of important points to be clear about at the outset, which we set out below. The first is the nature of the 'workshop' offered by DCFW and the second is the scheme proposal and draft design guide that have been sent to us for consideration, which relate to a residential site planning application which seems to be imminent.

1. The workshop offer.

The Commission allocates time and expertise for local authorities to discuss, consider and establish early strategic principles which apply or may influence development proposals across the authority. This is usually done with local authority objectives, policy and guidance in mind and with national place-led policy and climate response in mind. At times this may be done with land owning or influencing third parties joining the conversation. In the case of Powys, we offered this in response to the challenges highlighted with a project which came to us for review during the Innovative Housing Programme (IHP), which was actually tendered and on site and should not have been referred to us at stage. The discussion with the authority highlighted a number of strategic authority-wide items that could benefit from consideration in a workshop setting – these included recent housing need findings and the authority's need to consider how it addresses it.

2. The materials provided for 10th December

The materials submitted to us actually set out an advanced pre-application process for a specific site in Talgarth which is close to a planning application submission. Baseline information which is usually gathered via a registration document in the case of a Design Review, is not submitted. We therefore have the impression that a workshop has been requested but given the nature of the proposal it is now a Design Review scenario, and a very late one. We encourage early consultation and see from the materials, if we are understanding correctly, that meaningful work on this scheme started in May 2020 and has been influenced by a range of input to date. This conversation therefore comes very late in the process.

Having noted the above, the proposal raises the following questions which we strongly recommend the client and design team consider prior to joining us on the 10th Dec. in the context of what will now be much closer to a review:

- a) What is the design guide seeking to achieve? What stage is it at and what status does it/will it have?
- b) What is the vision for the area and site and what is it that you seek to achieve – beyond the baseline compliance suggested by the draft design guide?
- c) What objectives have been established and how do they enable sound placemaking?
- d) Whilst we appreciate that the decision to demolish the school has long been made, how sustainable is the approach given the demolition and what contribution will be made to addressing climate risks, biodiversity opportunity, community opportunities and the local authority duty towards the Well-being of Future Generations legislation?
- e) Constraints and opportunities have been identified but consideration of responses to them raise questions about the application of findings to the strategic decision making and justification for the approach being taken – not least how further analysis of the existing village form and settlement pattern inform the response?
- f) High value tree species of Oak and Birch are identified but it is unclear whether full surveys have been carried out and how they inform the response, including consideration of tree protection zones.
- g) The approach to private space, access and highway influence requires further consideration and the team should prepare for further discussion on these fronts.