

Design Review Report

Caerphilly Castle Regeneration,
Caerphilly

DCFW Ref: N244

Meeting of 15th April 2021



Review Status

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Scheme location
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15th April 2021
27th April 2021
Caerphilly
Visitor facilities and interpretation
N244
Pre-application

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.

Consultations to Date

The scheme was previously reviewed in November 2020. This report should be read in conjunction with the report of the previous review.

The Proposals

The proposals are for the refurbishment of the existing Great Hall, conversion of the existing visitor centre into a shop, and provision of a new café, visitor reception area, toilets, catering facilities, education space, staff accommodation, external terrace and play area, and visitor interpretation and improved accessibility across the site. The objective of improving connectivity to the town itself was also identified as aim.

Main Points

As stated in the previous report, DCFW remains supportive of the principle of the provision of facilities to improve the visitor experience, enhance interpretation and support greater inclusivity. However, the significance and ambition of the project is currently underestimated, and the current design approach does not address the quality and ambition of response that this project demands, given the status of the heritage asset.

Caerphilly Castle is one of the greatest medieval castles of Europe with a complex history of adaptation and change over a period of at least two millennia. It is both an architectural structure and setting of international significance and the centrepiece of the identity and urban structure of the town of Caerphilly. The important contribution of the castle to the understanding of the identity and culture of Wales and the nation's place in the broader narrative of European history is unparalleled.

The proposals for Caerphilly Castle to welcome increased number of visitors to explore the castle and its setting, to gain and understanding of its history and cultural significance and

to simply enjoy a deep and rewarding experience demands a curatorial and design response of exquisite sensitivity and quality. The project requires a world-class response equal to quality of the architectural, historical and cultural setting.

The masterplan, visitor plan, exhibition and interpretation plan, the design of all new interventions in the castle at every scale and on the approach to it should combine to support the communication of a coherent and profound interpretation of this precious place for all visitors.

A range of concerns were identified in the previous review that remain unresolved or unaddressed. Many of these are fundamental to resolve before the project can progress to successfully meet the ambition stated above.

Ambition and Design Concept

The previous report highlighted a lack of a clear concept for the design of the new visitor centre and this remains the case. This means that decisions about the building location, form, and materials have no link back to the special qualities of the site or the stories that are being told. The proposals were described with a focus on site constraints and compliance with the brief rather than reference to the many unique and exciting opportunities that the context gives or indeed the joy and delight that the centre itself could bring. The result is a proposal that lacks distinctiveness and a clear relationship with its setting.

The explanation of the design concept was confused and the proposed design doesn't seem to align to it. For example:

- It is to be *transparent* and yet it includes a substantial sloping green roof and timber structure.
- It is to *contrast* with the castle but also *blend in*.
- It is *curved* to have a different geometry to the castle walls, but the castle walls do have curves and the proposed curved form clashes with these and creates some awkward spaces.

None of these design concepts have been fully explored and all of them are compromised. One of them *could* be the right approach but would need to be explored in much more detail and embraced with greater boldness.

A building of this size cannot be hidden it will dominate the space and any attempt to blend it in or hide it is unlikely to be successful. Therefore, a more confident and bolder approach is appropriate. That does not mean it needs to be loud, or in any way compete with the castle itself, but it must have merit and appeal of its own that enhances the visitor experience and attraction to the site.

Site Layout and Building Form

Several questions and concerns were raised in the previous report regarding the site layout, distribution of uses and building form which have not been adequately addressed. The awkward spaces between the proposed building and castle wall remains, with some parts of the site effectively made redundant. Other outstanding questions include: Is the building in the optimum location to fulfil some of the wider objectives mentioned during the presentation? Are the toilets in the right place and should they all be in one location? Is there sufficient internal space for interpretation? These should be tested and resolved as part of the design process.

The height of the proposed building in relation to the walls was not explored in the review and it is not clear from the drawings whether the proposed building would be visible from outside the walls. There may be merit in some visibility from outside, but this needs to be carefully considered and a clear design decision made about what will be seen and what message this gives.

Considering the project initially from the macro scale –its context within the town – through to the micro scale – individual details – and using the Cadw Conservation Principles would help to give decisions about the layout and form much more rigor.

Accessibility

It is encouraging that improved physical accessibility across the whole site as well as intellectual accessibility and social inclusion are aims of the project. The early landscape proposals have started to look at negotiating level changes across the site but the impact of this needs to be worked back through the design to ensure they are fully integrated and avoid the excessive amount of railings that are currently shown on the drawings.

Landscape

Landscape architects have been appointed since the previous review which is positive. However, the input of the landscape architect is needed at a strategic site planning level which informs the location, form and relationship of external spaces to the building and addresses the whole site and its context. Currently, some of the landscape proposals, such as the proposed meadow area, seem to be poor mitigation for a problem that could be designed out.

Interpretation

The interpretation should seek to connect the history of the site with the current day and the people of Caerphilly. Community engagement opportunities should be explored. In addition to the female stories there could also be stories about language and what was happening in the rest of Wales at the time.

Caution should be taken in the amount of interpretation material proposed for any space to ensure it does not negatively impact upon the quality of the space and its architectural merit. An example of this is the proposals for the Upper Chamber which has architectural interest of its own but could become overtaken by interpretation material.

Next Steps

DCFW is firmly of the view that amending and detailing the current proposals will not sufficiently address the issues identified and outlined in this report, meet the ambition and quality the site demands or the expectations of the local authority. Time is needed for Cadw as the client to look at precedents, benchmark the scheme and be clear on the type and quality of building and experience that is desired and then clearly convey this to the design team. A creative approach is required to interpret the unique qualities of the site, address them appropriately and in a manner that will stand the test of time and develop a sound and confident design concept. The design process should have sufficient time to explore ideas and test options before determining which approach to take. This approach is not about project administration but about design processes.

DCFW would be happy to offer further support to Cadw to help realise the ambition for the project but this will require taking a step back as explained above. We encourage the

client and design team to reflect on the key points made in this report and follow up with further discussion.

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

Attendees

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