

Design Review Report

Canolfan Lleu, Penygroes

DCFW Ref: 292

Meeting of 14th September 2023



Review Status

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Issue date
Scheme description
Scheme location

Scheme reference number
Planning status

Public

14th September 2023
2nd October 2023
Mixed-use development
Water St, Penygroes, Caernarfon,
LL54 6LY
N292
Pre-application

Key Points

- The Design Commission for Wales has taken additional time to consider its feedback in this report due to the nature of its concerns about the current proposals, which are considerable.
- The Design Commission for Wales does not support the proposal in its current form. The project represents a very large investment of public funds which must be used to sound effect.
- The currently proposed layout does not work and needs to be revised.
- The currently proposed buildings are out of scale with the site's context and create a barrier to movement through the site.
- The location and design of the public square, car park and access road need to be reconsidered, including from the perspective of town centre impact.
- The design team should explore and demonstrate the testing of alternative layouts that are more responsive to the character of Penygroes.
- The development of the layout should be informed by sound urban design principles and consider green infrastructure, building orientation and environmental strategies, biodiversity and SuDs from the outset.

Consultations to Date

This scheme was previously reviewed by the Design Commission in March 2023. This report should be read in conjunction with the earlier report from that meeting.

There has been some consultation with the community and pre-application engagement with the local planning authority.

The Proposal

The proposal is for a mix of community facilities, health services, theatre facilities, nursery, offices for Grŵp Cynefin, independent living flats for older people, and a care home. Some of these facilities already exist within the village, with this project seeking to provide new facilities that better meet the users' needs and bring them closer together. The project's estimated cost is £52 million pounds, much of which will be funded through public sector investment, representing a significant investment in the area, and in Wales as a whole. It is therefore essential that the proposals work well and represent long term public value.



Context

Penygroes is a small village to the south of Caernarfon. Several smaller villages are close to Penygroes, including Talysarn and Llanllyfni, with the proposed new services intended for use by people living in the wider area. The site sits between the town centre and the local football club. The site is very large in the context of Penygroes and occupies a significant part of the southeast quarter of the village. The site faces onto two key streets within the village, Victoria Road and Water Street, with trees and a walking/cycling route to the south.

Main Points

Overall

The proposal remains unchanged since the previous Design Review in March 2023. Some additional detail has been developed, but the design remains the same.

The Design Commission raised significant concerns about the proposal in the previous review that have not been addressed. The *principle* of the proposed mix of uses is accepted, however, for that mix to work, the design and delivery must work well. Currently, there are fundamental aspects of this proposal that do not work, and which must be reconsidered if the scheme is going to be successful, particularly given the scale of public investment.

The Design Commission is therefore unable to support this scheme as it is currently proposed.

The village

The village has been characterised by having different retail and social uses distributed through the centre of the settlement but focused on the central crossroads. This pattern has been diluted by the closure of the pub and, more recently, the consent for Co-op to build a new store on the southern perimeter of the village, closing the store near the central crossroads. The new Co-op store is arguably the “busiest” public location in Penygroes (aside from schools). This has eroded the core of the village.

Given the scale of investment of public funds in Canolfan Llew, the effect of the development on the wider village needs to be fully considered, including the impact of moving existing uses, the future use of vacated sites and the cumulative impact across the village. We encourage the client team to engage with the local authority and develop a masterplan and/or placemaking plan for the future of the village as a whole.

Uses

A key part of the brief is to bring a mix of services together in one location. We recognise this is a fundamental principle of the project and there will be benefits to providing modern facilities and locating some uses close together. However, the current design drives this to a simplistic agglomeration of all uses into two large structures to facilitate informal ‘water cooler’ interaction between staff from different uses, and other small scale incidental connections. Alongside this, there appears to be no long-term strategy that recognises the

issues that may arise from different tenures, ownerships, changes in the needs and uses for individual occupiers and ultimately the design life of the buildings.

A more detailed analysis of how these uses are best brought together is needed, with more complex, subtle and sophisticated answers. The overall layout for the site should not be driven by small 'nice to have' features, like the gate between the nursery garden and the care home garden, but fully tested and designed to ensure successful, useable and attractive spaces and connections.

Layout and Scale

The proposed site layout is not appropriate and should be changed. We question whether very large buildings, as currently proposed, are appropriate. We understand that being in a single building might be easier and more convenient for each function but suggest that would be more appropriate on a different site. There is a risk at this location of over development and a legacy of unsuccessful spaces.

The current layout does not have buildings with clear fronts and backs. As a result, the backs of buildings and their gardens present blank facades to the public square and car park, undermining the potential for successful spaces to be achieved.

We stand by our assertion that this site needs a masterplan which should also be used to test layouts and capacity for a series of independent buildings, ideally by different architects, commissioned within clear design parameters set out in a clear brief and procurement process. A sound masterplanning exercise will also include robust business planning to secure best value from the capital investment in the long-term.

Character

The plan form and geometry of the buildings is unnecessarily complicated – and likely to be expensive to realise - with no clear reason for such complexity. Character should come initially from creating more individual buildings, appropriate to the site, not simply varying the shape of large ones.

Greater consideration of the front building lines along Victoria Road and Water Street is needed to better respond to the character of these streets. The small, planted set-backs from the back of pavement line near the crossroads are not appropriate, although much larger open space at the crossroads might have more impact. The existing frontage character of Water Street is more varied, but the proposals do not demonstrate any clear vision for establishing changes in character for this street from the crossroads to the roundabout at its southern end.

Open space and green space are dispersed across the site, often in small strips. This is not effective and leads to the scheme overall needing to cut heavily into the existing wooded area to the south – an existing green natural asset. Site planning could be more compact and pushed further north to maintain the scale of the current green zone to the south. Green infrastructure, building orientation, biodiversity and SuDS should be fundamental design considerations when developing the layout and not something added afterwards.

The design of the public square is unlikely to be successful for its intended use. It is hidden from the main public routes through the village, is too large and will not in reality be as busy or well used as currently presented in project images. The population density and number of users, even in the proposed mix, are insufficient to drive the level of activity needed to ensure success. The scheme needs proper and full consideration of who will be present and when, over twenty-four-hour periods and weekends. All new public space or routes must feel safe at all times and for a lone user late at night. This consideration of the levels of activity was not evident in the proposals.

Phasing

We recognise there are constraints with the phasing of development, but do not believe these are insurmountable. Different approaches to phasing and sequencing should allow the design team to change the layout and create a finer grain of development that is more appropriate to the context of the village.

Once replacement care home accommodation is built away from the existing location, the current care home site might best be used for uses that should be the most private – perhaps the independent living units. Our view remains that these should not be physically connected to the care home, not just for the scale and site layout reasons stated above, but because it undermines any sense of liberty and independence or any atmosphere of normality which avoids a sense of 'institution'.

Vehicles

Agreeing the quantum of parking with the local authority team is an urgent task. A proper plan for the site cannot be established without this. Further research is needed into how people travel from the surrounding area to ensure everyone will be able to access the facilities and whether improvements to public transport and connectivity are needed.

It seems likely that access by car will be the dominant form of access to this site and the village for most people, now and in the future. Arriving by private vehicle should be a high

quality and welcoming experience. Currently the car park is at the back of the buildings, with poor walking routes around the edges, and does little to enhance sense of arrival or welcome appropriate to the proposed uses. The car park access road is an inefficient use of space and segregates the natural asset of the woodland from the rest of the development.

Consideration should be given to making the car park feel more central and whether it can have a more multi-functional role to be managed and used as a public space, if and when those public uses might be required or justified. The open spaces in traditional market towns might provide an appropriate model.

Although we did not see the detail, it was suggested that there may be highway changes to the crossroads. We would have concerns about whether this is necessary and would change the character of this important part of the village.

The location and design of the theatre delivery compound should be reconsidered.

Next Steps

The Design Commission remains concerned about the fundamental issues as yet unresolved in these proposals. The Commission is willing to engage further on meaningful changes to the layout of the proposed development. As a further step we would suggest a short period of no more than three months to 'reset' the proposals and we would be willing to assist with detailed work and support for the client, during that short window.

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

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer:	Gwyndaf Williams, Grŵp Cynefin
Architect/Design Team:	Alice Stewart, Arcadis IBI Group
Landscape Architect:	Carl Horsdal, Arcadis IBI Group
Green Infrastructure Consultant:	Gary Grant, Green Infrastructure Consultancy
Planning Consultant:	Rob Davies, Asbri Planning
Local Authority:	Gwynedd Council Elfy Williams Arwel Thomas

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair:	Simon Richards
Panel:	Ewan Jones Toby Adam Max Hampton, Design Advisor, DCFW
Observer/s:	Gwen Thomas, Asbri Planning Margarita Janusevic, Arcadis IBI Group

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.

Ewan Jones declared that his practice is working for Arcadis on another project, but this was not considered to be a conflict of interest and all present were content to proceed.