

Design Review Report

St Peter's Square, Ruthin

DCFW Ref: N340

Meeting of 16th July 2025



Review Status

Meeting date
Issue date
Scheme description
Scheme location
Scheme reference number
Planning status

Planning status of DCFW comment

PUBLIC

16th July 2025
24th July 2025
Public realm, highways, active travel.
Ruthin, Denbighshire
N340
Highways led – no planning
application.
Material consideration

Key Points

- The Design Commission is disappointed at the late stage of consultation and the limited materials available. Contextual information was not available at the time of the review.
- The Design Commission is very surprised that a placemaking approach has not been taken in preparing proposals for the square. Our comments therefore focus on what can be learned from the approach taken and applied to future projects.
- Public realm enhancements such as this are complex and require inclusive ways of working from the earliest stages, a very well-structured brief, and an integrated design team. We strongly recommend this approach is adopted by the local authority on future projects and the Commission can help with this at the earliest stages.
- A considerable investment is being made at St Peter's Square, and this may be a one in a hundred-year opportunity to significantly influence the design of the square. Drawing upon the right skills to help ensure the best possible project outcome for long term public value should be a common focus. Currently the proposal is characterised by compromise resulting from a lack of integrated design expertise and way of working, from the outset. Establishing a better structure, clear brief, and procuring the right design skills are essential.
- We do however recommend that the placemaking opportunity remains key and may still be resolved with sufficient collaborative working around the vision for Ruthin.
- Points of design and material details require revisiting with an eye to the future not only the past and a design and materials guide and palette would be very helpful to establish such principles. Similarly, the environmental implications of design and materials decisions are important and should be considered from an environmental/decarbonisation perspective, ideally with an audit.

- The SuDS approach and the SAB applications offer further opportunities to show how Denbighshire can demonstrate environmental and climate sensitivity – again reflecting long term public value.
- It is essential to ensure all drawings carry all road markings and signage, in plan and elevation, and should be informed by a 'clutter' audit that serves to inform safe and clear active travel facilities.

Consultations to Date

This is the first consultation with the Design Commission and comes at the request of Ruthin Town Council at a very late stage in project development. The Design Commission understands public consultation took place in 2024 and that the Town and County Council have been liaising to an extent. The Design Commission also understands that a start originally anticipated for July 2024 with completion in March 2026 has now been revised to a planned construction start in January 2026 with completion by March 2027.

The Proposal

The proposal is part of a 'Levelling Up' funded scope to deliver projects that will contribute to Ruthin's heritage, wellbeing and opportunities for rural communities. Key aims are to improve connectivity for walking and cycling in and around Ruthin and complement investment in activities to boost its heritage and cultural value. The interventions proposed focus on public realm enhancements, widening the scope for hosting events and revitalising historical buildings and landmarks to support local identity, promote pride of place and boost the image of the town. The proposals for St Peter's Square include removal of the roundabout to create a flexible pedestrian zone which can be used for events and/or for café seating etc; to improve the active travel offer between the Ruthin link road and the town centre by making Market Street one-way for vehicles, whilst retaining two-way active travel routes. The project for St Peter's Square comprises 5050m² with a budget of £2.5m construction, £3.5m in total is available. The project is led by Denbighshire County Council highways team with some consultancy via Mott MacDonald.

- *How has analysis of the current/potential use of the space and the microclimate informed the design?*
- *Which consents/processes are relevant and will be required for the proposals e.g. SAB, conservation area/listed building, planning – and at what stage are you with such consents?*
- *What are the specific funding requirements and how does the overall budget break down in terms of allocation of costs for the delivery of the proposals?*

These and other aspects of the proposals informed the dialogue at the meeting. Wider land ownership, use, and opportunities for wider connectivity have been explored by the Town Council however this material was not made available to the Commission prior to this review meeting.

Main Points

The materials show an approach to the opportunity for enhanced public realm, heritage assets, and active uses in a key location for Ruthin, which is dominated by highway related changes, limited approaches to active travel routes and parking. Reference to UK precedents would have been helpful in providing greater confidence to both client and design team in terms of ambition, vehicle management and materials selection.

The dialogue explored the nature of daily and seasonal/festival use, opportunities for maximising pedestrian and active use, the connection between the Placemaking Plan and the current proposals for the square, and how wider connectivity will be facilitated by the scheme. However, it remains unclear as to how successfully the space would facilitate places to dwell, meet, socialise and enjoy the square at different times of the year.

The dominance of facilitating service vehicles is disappointing and little seems to have been considered in terms of ways to manage servicing differently, in terms of access and materials, to reduce the impact of service vehicle requirements. It is understood that specific requirements from a local chemist and a local funerary function are to be met, however more general servicing would benefit from greater consideration.

We understand some of the rationale behind the materials selection informed by some preliminary work, however a robust sequential approach, informing responses to context in terms of materials selection and local supply chain opportunities, was not evident in the proposals. Four different surface materials are at present undermining visual coherence of the space particularly around the Market Hall and informal crossing points and the use of

textured paving. Whilst there is a regulatory context, a better design solution should be sought.

Traffic and parking management is, we understand, to be managed by a mix of controls and planting, with cycle and motorcycle parking spaces provided, though these were not evident on the drawings received. It is therefore unclear what is and is not to be delivered and what opportunities are available to avoid restricting future opportunities for change and improvement over the long term.

The dialogue explored further detailed aspects in terms of the need to simplify materials, reduce clutter to an absolute minimum, consider lighting design carefully and build in flexibility to anticipate change. Road markings, not evident on the drawings, will likely be used and clarity about where and how is essential. Infrastructure for EV charging as well as event power were also explored. Building in flexibility for the current and future uses are important as parking and vehicle management will change over time, as will uses.

The current proposal shows resurfacing and repaving to Castle Street which is some distance from the square, and we question if this is the best use of funds. However, we understand consultation has informed this and an additional budget has been made available.

Active travel proposals, currently showing a cycle route to Market Street, do not clearly show delineation or resolve how cyclists are directed at the top and bottom of the street, raising useability and safety concerns. Whilst specialist advice has been taken there remains an opportunity to improve design solutions beyond current proposals. The drawings provided to the Commission do not show either clarity of approach or an adequate solution. Alternatives should be sought.

Microclimate analysis is not evident in materials and the decision not to include trees at the centre of the square has a bearing on managing climate, and opportunities for shade and street cooling, as well as water management and any SuDS requirements. Whilst historical reference is important, climate and environmental changes require that opportunities for substantial greening should be further explored.

Defining a 'design speed' for the space would better inform traffic and highway design overall and contribute to more effective traffic and vehicle management and encouraging and maximising pedestrian use, safety and comfort.

Overall, there remain key opportunities for a stronger placemaking approach to what is described as a placemaking project at a key location in Ruthin. The aim should be to create a distinctive and fresh heart for the town. Greater analysis is needed alongside more in-depth engagement and testing of scenarios against likely uses and scope for adjacent uses which can help occupy the space. Design work should be informed by the use and application of the Manual for Streets.

Encouraging active use and pedestrian comfort within structured flexibility is vital to the success of the scheme.

Next Steps

The Design Commission strongly recommends a placemaking approach is taken to this project and we remain open to further dialogue and further structured reviews in relation to the scheme, mindful of the timescales.

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.

Whilst the Design Commission has in the past contributed to the Ruthin Futures project it has no direct interest. There were no conflicts of interest reported at this meeting.

Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales is the trading name of DCFW LIMITED, a Private Limited Company established under the Companies Act 1985 and 2006, Company No: 04391072 incorporated in England and Wales as a wholly owned subsidiary of the Welsh Government. Registered office: 4th Floor, Cambrian Buildings, Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff CF10 5FL T: 029 2045 1964 E connect@dcfw.org. The comment recorded in this report, arising from formal Design Review through our Design Review Service, is provided in the public interest for the consideration of local planning authorities as a material consideration, and other users of the Design Review Service. It is not and should not be considered 'advice' and no third party is bound or required to act upon it. The Design Review Service is delivered in line with DCFW's published protocols, code of conduct and complaints procedure, which should be read and considered by users of the service.

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

Attendees

Client:	Denbighshire County Council
Design Team (external):	James Finnigan, Mott Macdonald Mark Basting, Mott Macdonald
Local Authority:	Mike Jones, Denbighshire County Council (DCC) Kim Mason, DCC Eric Price, DCC Sian Lloyd Price, DCC Ben Wilcox Jones, DCC
Town Council:	Gavin Harris, Ruthin Town Council Iolo Williams, Clerk, Ruthin Town Council

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair:	Simon Richards
Panel:	Kedrick Davies, Lead Panellist Toby Adam Jen Heal, Deputy Chief Executive, DCFW Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW