

## **SOUTH DOWNS NATIONAL PARK DESIGN REVIEW PANEL**

Date of meeting:	28/05/2020
Site:	Astley House, Spital Road, Lewes, BN7 1PW
Proposal:	Demolition of the vacant building and the construction of 28 residential units with associated landscaping and on-site car parking. (Site 2 Lewes NDP P.72)
Planning reference:	SDNP/19/05619/FUL
Panel members sitting:	Mark Penfold (Chair) Kay Brown Andy Clemas Duncan Baker-Brown
SDNPA officers in attendance:	Ben Terry (Design Officer) Nat Belderson (Link Officer) Tania Hunt (Support Services Officer)
Lewes District Council officers in attendance	Christopher Wright (Case Officer)
SDNPA Planning Committee in attendance:	None
Item presented by:	Thomas Farmer (Downen Farmer Architects) James Downen (Downen Farmer Architects) Sean Martin (Downen Farmer Architects) Andy Palmer (Applicant) George McLaughlin (Applicant) Ben Crozier (Applicant) Matthew Johnson (Planner)
Declarations of interest:	None

**The South Downs National Park Design Review Panel is an independent assessment of development proposals by a panel of multidisciplinary design professionals and built-environment experts, who aim to inform and improve design quality in new development. It is not intended to replace advice from the planning authority or statutory consultees and advisory bodies, or be a substitute for local authority design and landscape advice and community engagement.**

The Panel's response to your scheme will be placed on the Planning Authority's website where it can be viewed by the public.

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## Case Officer Update in response to revisions made since last DRP session in January:

### 1. Western Elevation:

- Lowered in height; the three elevations are now distinct due to a stepping back of the western facade to break down the massing.
- Removal of the top floor accommodation to the north side of the apartment block, resulting in a reduction in height to the northern facade.

### 2. House Elevation:

- Reduction in the number of three bed houses along De Montfort Rd with the larger three bed housing positioned at the more open junction with Leicester Rd, to create a sense of arrival.
- A larger proportion of three bed houses accommodated along Spital Road due to the wider street scape and larger adjacent buildings. Smaller units on Spital Road with pitch roof now presenting themselves to the street adjoin the existing building, making the gable feature more visible.

### 3. Highway Amendments

- Adjustments made to the highway strategy, with access into the proposed car park now from De Montfort Road and exit onto Spital Road to increase visibility splays.

Question to the Case Officer - Is there a requirement for another LVIA on this site?

The guidance seemed to suggest this was optional, but it would be useful to have a LVIA.

## Panel Questions:

1. MP -Do you have any images that show the view from the greenspace as you come off the downs with the 45-degree bank, to the town and the castle beyond?

...How the development sits within that view?

You can see the Castle and the Church and the Downs beyond from the picture shown in the presentation. There will be a slight change to this view as the proposed buildings are taller than the existing building.

The site is a gateway to Lewes.

A very small proportion of people will see the proposal from this aspect and further back, towards the residential area, they will have a wider more open view, which will not be obstructed by the development.

The development is not significantly taller than the buildings surrounding the site and it would be lower than the prison wall.

The feedback from the original pre-app and the neighbourhood plan for the designated site was to pull up the roofline and create a gateway on the western elevation.

2. AC -The presentation does not include a meaningful response to the DRP comments regarding landscape, how have these been addressed in the revised scheme?

Following on from the last DRP, the architects looked at creating flat roofs and green roofs. It was thought that this type of roof and roof style would have a strong contemporary appearance and not giving a sense of roofscape normally found in Lewes. The architects then looked at features like having communal roof gardens, rainwater capture and rainwater recycling. In terms of bigger moves like a green wall and a terrace, on the

western end of the site, we felt that this would be a radical design response and not appropriate to this site.

We agreed that it would be helpful to receive some advice from this session on the general architecture and how it can incorporate the landscape approach so that it can be built into the project from this point onwards.

The Design and Access statement was not reviewed in the meeting and there is significant dialogue in this document that shows the project from a landscape perspective. The site is on the edge of a conservation area and the suggestion from pre-applications in the area is to keep the architecture with a feel 'of Lewes'.

To have a flat roof amongst the pitch roofs would not look right in Lewes.

3. KB – In the last DRP there was a discussion regarding the introduction of a twitten at the Eastern end of the site and if that is appropriate, particularly as you have the house on Spital Road that has the tile gable end. Has this been considered?

The concerns are that it wouldn't be secure and there is an existing twitten 20-30 metres from the site. The other consideration is, by stepping back the elevations that are adjacent to the elevation on Spital Road, it would allow for that gable end not to be completely covered.

4. MP - How do you detail the abutment to the existing building? Would you have to have a gap due to the ownership, or because of the detailing to the existing building?

From a party wall perspective, the site does go right up to that building, pending party wall discussions it could abut that building or an infill could be created to give the appearance that the building is abutted to that side. There is a desire not to create a grot slot that is unmaintainable. Infilling and exposing the existing tile would be the preference. The grain of twittens in Lewes were studied and there isn't any existing twitten or access that is being blocked across that site. There has been no access across the site since the 1950s.

5. DBB – Have you considered working with existing buildings on-site to reduce waste? The waste hierarchy in the energy and sustainability statement points out prevention over reuse. How has this influenced your proposed development as your existing development appears to suggest masonry and concrete is to be disposed of?

The existing material is of very low quality. There is a good opportunity to recycle most of the existing material as hardcore that can be processed on-site and reused for footings. It was felt that the development would need to bring in new materials to keep that high quality of materials used within Lewes.

6. AC – Scale – The proposal doesn't appear to respond to the immediate streetscape, scale and character. In lieu of the contextual views, how has the immediate streetscape informed the architectural response and in particular height at the Nevill Road end of the site?

The reason that the current development had arrived at the form that the scheme is currently in was due to some interesting walks around the town with planning consultants. The architects went around Lewes and did some very detailed urban analysis in terms of how a lot of those different typologies work and it's all very unique, quirky and the different material approaches with a real celebration of craftsmanship.

There are pockets of greenery, pockets of taller building and low rise buildings, different gable-fronted buildings. This mix was a starting point for how the design for the scheme

was developed at the initial stages. The desire was to break that site up rather than have one large mass and bring in the different roof pitches and features of that general street. Nevill Road is quite interesting, as there are a lot of different types of houses with a mix of hips that jump into a gable, and brick into a brick with a flint surround; then rendered walls then onto the prison. It felt that the mix of different types of building fitted in quite well with something different again that picked up references of the high street, where you have 3 or 4 gables in a row. This was to give a sense of arrival into Lewes as there if no harm reflecting this difference.

7. KB – Was any consideration given to retaining the trees at the western end of the site?

Currently, the proposal is to lose those trees and integrate new planting. This is due to the building stepping quite far forward and from a construction point of view, it would be very difficult to keep those trees alive and healthy. The original neighbourhood plan asked for landscape improvements around the boundary of the site and in line with this, and what has been specified we aim to create a green plaza with seating that will have a connection to the park opposite.

i) KB - If you were to set the development further to the East, how far would you need to go to retain the trees?

The site narrows quite a lot at that end of the site and to make the site work and get enough housing, by pulling this site back the only option we would have is to lose a lot of the parking spaces. It would be quite challenging to pull the site back and provision of parking and loss of it would be just one of the factors.

ii) KB - Has an arboricultural study been done of the trees? The trees look to be Ornamental Pear Trees and live to 250 years, they are green in the summer and red/ orange in the autumn and I think they contribute to the landscape coming off the downs and it would be a shame to lose them

No study has been done, but the trees are perfectly healthy. The trees are relatively large and overbearing. We did explore the idea of moving them but keeping them alive would be challenging.

8. DBB - Why are your energy targets so unambitious at a predicted 19% below current Building Regulations targets, when both Lewes District Council and South Downs National Park have pledged to be Net-Zero Carbon by 2030?

Why have you decided not to apply the recent Net-Zero Carbon Decent Plans published by RIBA, UKGBC, and LETI, that provide clear data for both embodied and operation CO2 targets?

What we were very cautious of was coming up with a development that was going to be sustainable long term. We have had conversations with some of the leading environmental consultants and a lot of the input that we get, for example, are sites where gas boilers are being put into properties, as people aren't ready for those new features yet.

We are trying to minimise the gadgets and gimmicks and concentrate on the fabric of the building. For example, concentrating on reducing peoples heating bills and not having gas where possible on the site, keeping it electric and introducing solar panels where we can. Therefore, creating a development that is as sustainable as it can be, without additional systems that might break later down the line. We tried to reach a compromise; we fell

below, from a regulation point of view, but we feel people will be able to sustain living there and not using much energy.

9. DBB - Why are the roofs of the proposed dwellings not orientated to make the most of the potential for clean energy from renewables?

In addition, why are the solar PV panels you describe in your Energy & Sustainability Statement not drawn on the roof plans?

And, why were the solar thermal panels your report refers to as effective, dropped from the final proposals?

We have researched solar panels. We are trying to work out where we sit, as one hand you have vernacular architecture and the other you have sustainable features that will allow us to become carbon neutral – it is a challenge to integrate them both.

If we were going for the most energy-efficient building, we would be looking at a box without any balconies and a roof pitched at the right angle to pick up the sun. It is trying to hit that middle ground that feels appropriate for an old historic town while integrating energy and building efficiency features.

- i) DBB – there are plenty of examples of properties within a half mile radius that have fully integrated solar panels in a conservation area. The majority of roofs going up the High Street and Spital Road do have a good solar aspect as they are facing south. I have an issue with all the gable walls purely due to orientation.
- ii) MP - In the last DRP session, Luke Engleback did discuss Eco-System services and how it can aid this process. I don't think this has been brought forward. The holistic approach needs to look at the carbon targets and policy objective of the local authority, by the time the property is built it will only be 7 years to the target date – so I don't know how this is going to be achieved.

10. KB – How does the design of the rear garden space compare with the local characteristics; such as comparisons with back to back distances, the height differences between neighbouring gardens, the height of houses to garden depth, ratio footprint to plot size and sun path and shadow proposals?

The narrowest width is 12 ½ meters. The site is quite narrow and between De Montfort Road and Spital Road you have 2 rear-facing terraces, we've taken the same parameters that have been applied to previously approved developments and historic developments, where there are quite close rear to rear distances - our distances mirror the adjacent site.

Some studies have been carried out where sun path and shadows have been looked at, but no formal studies have been done.

- i) KB – In the presentation, you have the section showing a three-storey building on Spital Road and then a two-storey building on De Montfort Road. I find that odd, partly because Spital Road is on the south side of the site and therefore a taller building, this is going to create a shadow on the middle section of the site, but also it is on higher land and therefore will impact on solar collection. This is not the same characteristic as further down the road. It would be ideal if the lower houses were on the south side of the site. I appreciate that it is difficult, my thoughts are that it would be very overbearing for a three storey building looking back over a two storey building on the north side of the site? It would be ideal if the site could be rotated 180 degrees. It is difficult as there is a narrow

street to the north which feels it need lower buildings than the wider street to the south that can withstand a higher build.

11. DBB - What is your policy on sourcing local materials? For example, Lewes has some very particular local materials, like mathematical tiles?

One of the most exciting parts of the development has been exploring the richness of local materials within Lewes. There is an opportunity to use these high-quality materials. There are areas where there has been discussion on integrating mathematical tiles but in terms of brick, a specific material has not been selected yet. The idea is to source materials as locally as possible.

## Summary:

On behalf of the South Downs National Park, I would like to thank you for bringing your proposal to the Design Review Panel. The Panel would like to thank the applicant's design team for their excellent presentation and their informed responses to our questions.

The session focussed on issues that were raised at the previous DRP workshop session in January, specifically, eco-system services, landscape assessment, the scale of the development and the architectural detailing. We also discussed sustainability credentials.

Overall, we feel, quite strongly, that these important issues have not been addressed and were, therefore, reiterated throughout this session.

## **Main Issues**

- **Eco-system services**
- **Landscape assessment**
- **Scale of development**
- **Energy Target**
- **Spaces between the buildings**
- **Materials**

**Eco-system services:** There has not been enough detail that has come through in the period in between this session and the last. Unfortunately, due to a landscape architect not being available, the panel were not able to discuss this topic in great detail. However, this is still very relevant to the scheme and needs to be addressed.

**Landscape Assessment:** A discussion took place in the last DRP session regarding how you assess the landscape and how this might drive aspects of the design. Due to the development being within the South Downs National Park, all schemes should be demonstrably landscape-led and, therefore, need to illustrate how the landscape informs the design. In this case, the scale of the large block at the western end of the site and what it does in terms of the views and breaking the skyline toward the downs.

**Scale:** How the scale of development sits comfortably within its immediate surroundings? If the landscape and the trees at the end of the site are possible to be incorporated, or not? How this then relates to other landscape elements of the scheme. The scale of the whole development and how it sits between Spital Road and De Montfort Road, the two different characters of the street and the space between the buildings along each of those roads.

**Energy Target:** To make the most out of the orientation of the build to help with energy targets by minimising energy requirements.

**Materials:** To look at the opportunities for the use of local materials. The materials that are chosen are part of the inherent design process for the scheme, in that you choose how to build something because of the way the materials are used. For example; if you are using mathematical tiles you are going to build in a different way to using brick and therefore that would inform the form of the build to a certain extent.