

Cheltenham Architects Panel Meeting

Wednesday 2nd March 2022

Reviewed by:

Architects

Bastin Bloomfield, Lucia Milone, Phillip Thomas, Mark Powles, Anthony Lewis.

Application No: 21/02755/FUL
Planning Officer: Miss Michelle Payne
Location: Brecon House Charlton Hill Cheltenham
Grid references: Easting: 396704 Northing: 218157
Parish: Charlton Kings
Proposal: Construction of a paragraph 80 dwelling, estate management building, and associated landscaping, ecology enhancements, access, parking and garaging on land adjacent to Brecon House.
Applicant: Mr & Mrs Evans
Agent: Mr David Jones
Expected Decision Level: Delegated Decision

Website URL: <https://publicaccess.cheltenham.gov.uk/online-applications/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=summary&keyVal=R3YA2IEIJI0900>

Design Review History

The applicants have been in discussion with Cheltenham planning officers for some time in an attempt to obtain planning permission for a new dwelling on this site. Various schemes have been presented at Pre-app stage and design proposals have been reviewed by different design panels over the years including the Gloucestershire Design Panel (GDP), the South West Design Review Panel (SWDRP), the Design Review Panel (DRP) and the Cheltenham Architects Panel (CAP). A full planning application was submitted in 2018 but withdrawn as the proposal was not supported by GDP, CAP, and other consultees.

This application is for a different scheme designed by different architects, Hawkes Architecture, who have in turn presented several Pre-app proposals to SWDRP and DRP. The GDP have not been consulted for this scheme.

The DRP review of 12th October 2021, which is included in the appendix of the Evans Jones Planning Statement, supports the application but at the same time includes recommendations for further design refinements.

Having finally obtained support from a recognised design review panel, the applicants contacted CAP to argue that further consultation with another design panel was not required. After consultation with planning officers, and given that CAP had reviewed and had concerns about the previous planning applications for this site, it was decided that the application deserved a further review by CAP.

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In summary, CAP acknowledge that the design proposal has been carefully considered and has many qualities as acknowledged in the DRP review, but, contrary to DRP, are of the opinion that the scheme does not meet the demanding requirements of Paragraph 80(e) of the NPPF for the reasons set out below.

Design Concept

The reason why the applicants have struggled to get support for a new house on this site is because of its rural location in the Cotswold Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Establishing whether a scheme meets the high standards set out in Para 80 (e) is a subjective matter and it is not surprising that opinion may vary from one design panel to another.

CAP found the ideas behind the scheme and some of the architectural spaces proposed to be visually exciting and agreed the proposal was a unique design solution that would set it apart from other buildings in the county. Had the dwelling not been located in the AONB the panel could have warmly supported such a radical design approach. However, given the special conditions of this site, the panel questioned the whole design approach which relies entirely on the presumption that the architecture is of such high quality that its beauty trumps the natural beauty of the site.

The application documents do not provide adequate justification for the dwelling as designed. The planning statement suggests the scheme has a social benefit in that “the development will enable long-term residents to continue to live and work in the area” which cannot be the case as the applicants already live at Brecon House further up the hill. The statement also says that the applicants “appreciate more than anyone else, the beauty of the site nestled in the lower foothills of the Cotswold AONB”. So why the need for such a large and imposing new dwelling?

The design process illustrated and described in the submitted documents presumes that the buildings can be the size and scale demanded by the brief but does not question the brief itself. The resultant design is therefore for a very large house, and equally large outbuilding, that have substantial footprints and will involve significant engineering works to build. Hardly the “light touch” implied by the supporting text.

This radical design approach is acknowledged in the planning statement which claims “*the proposal clearly represents an opportunity to break from the historic palette of what may typically be considered ‘good design’ in a rural area*”. The panel believe that such a design approach may be suitable for other rural areas but not on this site in the AONB.

Regardless of the value placed on the architectural design, the panel concluded that the proposal was conceptually flawed as it cannot be said to *significantly enhance its immediate setting* because of its large scale and impact on the landscape.

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Design Detail

Notwithstanding the perceived flaws in the design brief, the panel had concerns regarding aspects of the building design and site layout. This was generally because it was felt that the scheme remained unresolved as far as the design detail is concerned. For a scheme to be exceptional and “*truly outstanding, reflecting the highest standards in architecture*” we would expect the submitted design to be fully resolved. (Note: the DRP recommendation of support also recognised that improvements could be made to the scheme design reviewed). CAP have the following concerns:

Landscape Design

The landscape design and supporting visual impact statement is thorough and well presented. There is no doubt that the landscape proposals incorporating environmental and ecological enhancements will be of benefit, but, as stated in the CPRE consultation statement, *there is no reason why these enhancements could not be carried out on their own merit as they are in no way dependent on the construction of a new residence at the site.*

Reference is made to this being a “landscape led” design which the panel believe is the correct approach for any such development in the AONB. The proposed architecture does not appear to conform to this design philosophy: why is the building located in such a dominating position in the middle of the site? Why is the building footprint so big when a more compact plan could result in less impact? Why is it necessary to have a separate estate management building and of the size shown?

The LVIA submitted does demonstrate that on the whole the site is well screened from public vantage points. However, as recommended in the DRP report, further studies are needed to establish views of the site during winter months. CAP was particularly concerned about views along the A435 Cirencester Road and the impact of the wide new site access: larger scale plans and sections are required to show the access and visibility splay requirements and site levels in more detail. The panel had concerns that the steep sloping site would make the new junction onto the A435 a prominent and urban looking intrusion into what is currently a continuous and attractive row of trees and hedges. This access and the gravel drives (which are not practical on such sloping sites) are likely to appear like a scar on the landscape and have a detrimental impact irrespective of additional tree planting proposed.

Architecture

The panel found the architectural details and layout of the house unresolved. To some extent this was due to the limitations of the CAD model images which appear schematic; the graphics, though attractive images, do not address the tricky details. For example, the way the upper floor “prospect” curved block emerges out of the landscape doesn’t really work with the south end outdoor lounge cut into the bank by 2m and the vertical timber crashing into a substantial concrete retaining wall. The

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panel also found the circular arrival pod was a weak element in the overall composition of curved forms, introduced to create a terrace at the upper level but arguably in the wrong location on plan; how it collides into the side of the “prospect” wing appears as an afterthought. Furthermore, the Access Statement included in the submission states that the terrace levels need to be modified to provide level wheelchair access at this principal floor, a further unresolved design detail.

The lower floor circulation corridors are dark and unattractive spaces and fight with the internal architecture of the vaulted ceilings, as evident from the interior model views. The wide building footprint also makes introducing a single lift (recommended by the DRP) impossible as is evident when studying Section B. The access statement suggests this might be resolved by introducing stair-lifts which one would have thought should be avoided for a house of this status.

The cantilevered “prospect” upper floor is the most prominent feature of the building but what a shame not to celebrate this feature and find a structural design solution without props. Indeed the panel was surprised the design approach did not include a structural design appraisal which might have informed the design and resulted in a clearer architectural solution.

The choice of materials and construction details are somewhat random and do not reflect or reinforce the initial design concept. The glass balustrade around the curved arrival pod clashes with the “prospect” form and arguably is more appropriate in urban settings. The metal balustrade projecting out of the curved dry-stone walling is also an odd combination.

The model views are all in black and white so an appraisal of the colour palette and selected materials is limited. The panel felt that the design was not fully resolved in this respect; the use of copper cladding, for example, is not really justified. A simpler material palette and the use of robust and durable materials would be recommended.

Where more traditional rural materials are proposed, such as the introduction of dry-stone walling, the details of openings, (eg reveals, lintels, sills and copings) are crude.

Including PV solar panels in the scheme is an integral part of the Renewable Energy Strategy and is to be encouraged but what a shame these are located on the most visible EPDM flat roof of the “prospect” block. Shouldn't this have been a “green” roof too?

Some of the model views are enticing but there is little construction detail to prove the design intent can be achieved. The “light touch approach” implied by the images, in reality will not be the case, as illustrated in the one technical drawing, Section B, where it shows significant excavation

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and concrete retaining walls are required, including piled foundations. The amount of excavated material that will need to be removed from the site and disposed of will be considerable and it is suggested this be looked at in some detail by structural/civil engineers to appraise the impact this will have on the site and highways during construction.

Estate Management Building

This is a substantial building in its own right and the most unresolved in design terms. The steep access drive down to the building will be very prominent when viewed from the A435. Again major engineering works are required to form the yard area and building enclosure. The drystone retaining walls are particularly unresolved: randomly located and isolated from one another resulting in an incongruous mix of building elements. The choice of materials and the colour palette (eg copper cladding) is again not really justified.

The panel questioned the need for the “home office” on the upper floor as it simply adds further substantial built form in a sensitive location. Could this not be accommodated in the main house?

Energy Strategy

The panel was not convinced by the energy strategy for the site. The Renewable Energy Strategy Report (RESR) states that a biomass heating system was originally proposed for the whole site with the aim of harvesting an on-site supply of biomass. After criticism from the DRP questioning the feasibility of such a scheme on the grounds that this would be a labour intensive operation and use untried and tested solar kiln technology, the heating system design was changed to Ground Source Heat Pumps. Notwithstanding this, the proposed Estate Management Building design remains part of the design proposals. The argument that the building is still justified because it provides an opportunity to test the solar kiln technology is not sufficient reason for constructing another substantial building in the AONB; there are many other remote, less sensitive sites in the county where biomass heating and kiln dried technology research can be carried out. As the heating design has been modified to exclude biomass heating, it is recommended the Estate Management Building be replaced with a much more modest rural barn, possibly earth sheltered as well.

The RESR states that *“the initial focus of any low energy project should be on the building envelope efficiency”*. Although no precise figures are provided, the building envelope in this very linear design is significant. Statements are made about the building’s energy efficiency without being backed up by construction details. Sections through the building would assist to demonstrate the integral design of service routes, extensive whole house ventilation ducts, thermal insulation and structural zones. The

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build up of components is likely to result in increased envelope thicknesses which will have an impact on the building aesthetic.

The model images, though seductive, are schematic and do not provide realistic construction details. How is the curved floor to ceiling glazing designed, for example; is the envelope completely sealed as required by the RESR whole house ventilation model, or are faceted glass doors and windows provided for natural ventilation? Triple glazing is proposed to minimise heat loss but how are these glass screens cleaned behind the permanently fixed vertical timber louvres? If the windows are openable will additional balustrades be required?

The RESR states that *“the building fabric and construction methods have been selected to be low embodied carbon, with natural materials making up the structure and insulation”*. This appears to ignore the substantial reinforced concrete retaining walls and slab construction proposed. When calculating Embodied Carbon for some reason the report states *“For all designs the emissions associated with foundations have been excluded at this stage as full details of these are unknown.”*

Recommendation

Not supported.