

20/01238/FUL and 20/01239/LBC, Duchess High School Bailiffgate, Alnwick

Good afternoon – I am speaking on behalf of Northumberland Estates in support of the proposed development at the former Duchess School in Alnwick.

The proposed development includes the restoration of the Grade II Listed buildings along Bailiffgate to create a set of unique hotel suites and apartments, including a new restaurant area. This will be connected to a new hotel extension to the rear, providing 33 hotel rooms. The former School Gym Block will be refurbished to provide a new gym facility to the rear of the hotel, along with an access road and car parking. This development will fill a gap in the tourism market for high quality hotel accommodation.

The proposal has undergone an extensive design process to get to this stage. This includes input from Historic England, who have provided design guidance on materials, textures, architectural detail and form to secure a design that takes inspiration from the surrounding 18th and 19th century town houses. Due to the high-quality design Historic England have no objection to the scale or massing of the new hotel building, and consider that the development has no impact on the existing Listed Buildings or Conservation Area, with it in fact making a positive contribution to the built form of this gateway into Alnwick. This is confirmed by the Planning Officer's report where it is stated that the development accords with National Design Guidance in the way that it responds positively to its surrounding context, identity and built form.

The development provides a raft of public benefits. Most clearly the development secures a sustainable future for the existing Listed Buildings along Bailiffgate. These buildings are currently heritage assets at risk, under threat from deterioration and lack of use. This threat is very real upon inspection of the buildings where substantial dry rot has infected the fabric of the building. Unless urgent action is taken the building will suffer the further loss of features of historic interest and value.

The Conservation Officer supports the re-use of the Listed Buildings but deems there to be 'less than substantial harm' overall to the heritage assets, which it should be noted is the lowest level of harm described in the NPPF. To respond to the Conservation Officer's comments:

1. As already set out, the design of the proposed hotel has undergone extensive discussion directly with Historic England, who support the design including the scale and massing. The scale of the hotel has been sympathetically designed to follow the existing site levels, being stepped down to the north along The Peth. Architectural details such as a mansard roof and stepped levels reduce any impact on The Peth street-scene. To quote Historic England's response, *'the new hotel wing is respectfully sited in relation to the rear and to The Peth, in turn this helps its relationship to the Castle wall in that it feels rooted in the town layout... the size manages not to dominate or obscure the rear elevation [of the existing buildings].'*
2. The hotel extension is necessary to provide the number of rooms required to operate commercially, and consequently allow the existing Bailiffgate Listed Buildings to be renovated and included as part of the hotel.
3. The Conservation Officer refers to the loss of the Listed wall on Walkergate. It should be noted that the section of loss has been minimised. A previous planning permission along Walkergate included the removal of a much larger and more prominent section of the Listed wall. The current proposal removes a smaller section in a less visible location. This is not only a betterment to the previously permitted loss, but the minimal loss is balanced against the overwhelming public benefits of the overall development.

As set out in the NPPF, a balanced view should be taken by the decision-maker to consider whether the public benefits outweigh any perceived level of harm. The Planning Officer's report sets out these public benefits, and concludes that they do outweigh any harm to the heritage assets. To add further detail to this package of public benefits, the following should be noted:

1. Not only does the development bring back into positive use a vacant Listed Building, but the site makes optimum use of a brownfield site, which meets with the NPPF criteria to make the most effective use of land.

2. The hotel provides high-quality new tourism development to help establish Alnwick as a year-round tourism destination, which clearly has positive benefits for the local businesses in the town and wider area.
3. The scheme provides an investment of around £8million in the local economy, including the supporting of around 110 full-time construction jobs and 130 indirect full-time jobs in the supply chain during the build period.
4. The long-term creation of at least 20 full-time permanent jobs at the hotel, along with a further 10 full-time indirect jobs in the wider supply and support chain.
5. An estimated £500,000 per annum Gross Value Added to the area in connection with the hotel's direct employment, and around £100,000 in new Business rates for the local authority
6. The hotel will complement other tourism initiatives such as the Alnwick Garden Lilidorei Play Village which is supported by the County Council and the Borderlands Fund.

The Planning Officer has concluded that the benefits of the proposal and the development complies with the planning policy of the Development Plan. It is respectfully requested that the Committee consider the benefits and opportunity that this development would bring, and agree with the Planning Officer that this application is a good outcome for the new use of the site and should be supported.

Thank you.