



Report of the Ashford Design Review Panel

Land adjacent to Oxney Isle Barn

18th July 2022

Chair's review

Reference number	1855/080721
Date	8th July 2022
Meeting location	Online via Teams
Panel members reviewing	Liz Gibney (chair), architecture Peter Neal, landscape architecture and ecology
Panel manager	Helen Goodwin, Design South East
Presenting team	Attendance not required for a chair's review
Other attendees	Attendance not required for a chair's review
Site visit	Following two previous design review meetings during which a presentation of the site context was given virtually by the applicant team, a site visit was not required for this chair's review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted.
Panel interests	N/A
Confidentiality	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a detailed planning application. Full details of our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

The proposal

Site location	Land adjoining Oxney Isle Barn, Swan Street, Wittersham TN30 7PL
Site details	<p>The site for this proposal is a field of 1.3 hectares adjoining Oxney Isle Barn, located to the west of the village of Wittersham in Kent. The site is accessed from the private lane to the north of the site which leads to a cluster of existing dwellings, of which Oxney Isle Barn forms a part. This cluster has developed around Wittersham Manor, a Grade II listed building dating from the seventeenth century. Additional dwellings form a loosely-grouped ensemble to the west of the Manor. Blackbrook Lane, which forms the western boundary of the site, leads to Blackbrook Farm, with the lane sitting approximately 1.4 – 1.8 metres below the site and separated by a mature hedgerow. The site itself falls gently by 3m toward the southern boundary, where a post and wire fence allows extensive views south over the open countryside. To the east of the site, the mature tree line of the adjoining property forms a feature of the landscape. The entire area forms part of the Isle of Oxney, once an island but now surrounded by the Rother Levels, an area of reclaimed land around the lower course of the River Rother.</p>
Proposal	This is a proposal for a new dwelling on land adjoining the applicants' existing house, Oxney Isle Barn.
Planning stage	Pre-application
Local planning authority	Ashford Borough Council
Planning context	<p>Paragraph 80 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2021) states that 'planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside' unless the design is of 'exceptional quality'. The site falls within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). Local design policy HOU5 (part 2) is also relevant to this proposal.</p>
Planning authority perspective	<p>The recommendations of the panel are intended to support the authority in assessing the strength of the case for passing the stringent test of a Paragraph 80 dwelling.</p>

Previous reviews A proposal for a dwelling on this site was previously reviewed by the Ashford Design Review Panel, managed by Design South East, in September 2020 and again in November 2021.

The recommendations from the previous design review (10.11.21) were as follows:

1. Provide a set of section and elevation drawings that show the building in its wider setting to explain how it responds to and significantly enhances its context.
2. Reconsider the extended linear form and significantly enlarged footprint of the building to find a resolution that better reflects the characteristics of local farmsteads or clustered dwellings with outbuildings.
3. Ensure that the building is embedded within its landscape setting to reflect the character of existing buildings that nestle within a treescape.
4. Give further consideration to the transition between building, terrace, meadow and grazed field and consider additional strategic tree or hedge planting.
5. Demonstrate an exceptional response to biodiversity net gain, enhanced habitat creation to support wildlife and ecology, and sustainable water management

Paragraph 80 dwellings and design review

The recommendations of the panel are intended to support the applicant and authority team in assessing the strength of the case for passing the stringent test of a Paragraph 80 dwelling. This allows an exception to restrictions seeking to avoid development of isolated homes in the countryside in the planning system that allows the construction of a new house:

“Planning policies and decisions should avoid the development of isolated homes in the countryside unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

e) the design is of exceptional quality, in that it:

- is truly outstanding, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas; and*
- would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area.”* (NPPF 2021, para 80(e))

Demonstration of ‘exceptional quality’ is an essential prerequisite to a paragraph 80e) application. Whilst it may be challenging to define exactly what ‘exceptional quality’ of design is, it is clear that both building design and landscape design must work together in response to the specific rural setting.

A presumption in favour of sustainable development is explicit in the National Planning Policy Framework. To be ‘outstanding’, a Paragraph 80 house must be constructed to an exemplary level of energy efficiency, incorporating progressive sustainable construction features and technologies in response to climate change.

Independent design review is a tool for assessing design quality. The panel's impartial advice and recommendations are offered to support the applicant team to achieve the exceptional quality set by the NPPF and to support both the applicant and the authority to assess the design quality in order to inform the determination of the application.

Summary

The applicant team has constructively engaged with and responded to the key recommendations from the previous Ashford Design Review Panel meetings. The building and landscape now work together much more successfully in response to the specific rural setting in this Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The form and mass of the building now appear as a cluster of elements, rather than as a singular building, on account of the varied roofscape of flat and pitched roof elements. As a result, the dwelling is more comfortably integrated with the ensemble of buildings on Swan Street, having more of a farmstead character than in previous iterations. The dwelling is better integrated with its immediate landscape setting, and the planting strategy will support enhanced habitats and contribute to biodiversity net gain.

In order to meet the stringent criteria for a Paragraph 80 dwelling, demonstration of exceptional sustainability credentials in the construction, materials and detailing of the building is now needed to give weight and justification to the argument for building in this location.

Key recommendations

1. Demonstrate the modelling of an energy strategy that will meet zero carbon targets and how the materials, detailing and construction will meet those targets.
2. Demonstrate the quality of materials and detailing through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building to ensure exceptional design quality.
3. Provide actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval to ensure design of an exceptional quality.
4. Avoid incursion into the root protection area of the existing trees, if at all possible.
5. Prepare a landscape and habitat management plan to ensure quality of the landscape and ecological features in the long-term.
6. Identify the location of underground storage tanks and consider the impact on surface treatments and planting.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Energy strategy and sustainability
 - 1.1. A Paragraph 80 scheme demands an exceptional approach to sustainability through reduction of embodied and operational carbon. This requires innovation that should go beyond standard building regulations, to meet Passivhaus standards.
 - 1.2. The approach to energy efficiency is not presented in sufficient detail in the drawings. Our guidance is that at the planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear energy strategy which details how the development will optimise thermal performance, minimise the demand for energy, supply the remaining energy requirements efficiently and optimise the use of renewables in order to align with the Government's emerging zero carbon policy. This strategy should be informed by detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods.
2. Sustainability, biodiversity and ecology
 - 2.1. The proposals include additional habitat planting with a good mix of native species and a Biodiversity Metric calculation indicating a Biodiversity Net Gain of 27%. This significantly exceeds the statutory requirement for 10%+ BNG.
 - 2.2. A series of linked wildlife ponds on the western boundary provide an ecologically structured sustainable drainage system aligned with the topography of the site.
3. Setting of the building
 - 3.1. The proposal now sits more comfortably within the curtilage of the Wittersham Manor hamlet, and the building has a much improved relationship with the buildings on Swan Street, with the existing barn and the lane to the west. The proposals include a set of landscape studies supported by longitudinal and cross sections that demonstrate how the site planning and proposed building fits within its context.
 - 3.2. The arrival into a courtyard space around which the building wraps enhances the building's farmstead characteristics, and the terrace opens out successfully to take in the extensive views to the south. The building now mediates more sensitively as a threshold between settlement and open countryside.
4. Building form, plan and landscape
 - 4.1. The form of the building now blends more successfully with the enhanced landscape, wrapping around the terrace rather than projecting out into the landscape.

- 4.2. The fragmented roof form provides more variety and makes better reference to local vernacular buildings. The removal of the extensive flat roof means the form now responds more sensitively to the pitched roofs of the surrounding buildings, barns and outhouses, helping the building to integrate better with its context.
- 4.3. The footprint of the building is still more extensive than that of the existing barn and other surrounding buildings, but by breaking down the roof form, the building has a less monolithic appearance.
- 4.4. The proposal includes additional strategic tree planting beyond the site boundary to the west of the existing Oxney Isle Barn and two areas of orchard planting within the development site to the east of the proposed building. The proposed orchard planting in particular will contribute to the distinctive mature treescape of the context of the site. Once established these trees should allow the proposed building to sit more sensitively within the structure and character of the surrounding landscape. Additional tree planting is also proposed within the south-west corner of the site that should contribute to framing distant views towards the site from the south.
- 4.5. The landscape proposals provide a planned transition from the surrounding garden planted with ornamental shrub and herbaceous species to sheep grazing meadow that is to be separated by 'invisible' electric stock fencing between garden and field. In reality, the proposed stock fencing is likely to be visible, although the planned orchard planting will add to this landscape transition. The ecological structure of the western and eastern boundaries of the development site will be strengthened by the additional native planting.
- 4.6. Although it is acknowledged that there is a minimal southwards fall of circa 1.0 - 1.5m across the building footprint, the current proposals do not include a grading or proposed landform plan. From the previous DRP it is understood that cut and fill will be balanced across the site. Any requirement for retaining structures, particularly adjacent to the western elevation of the building adjacent to the native hedgerow, should be shown.
- 4.7. The small incursion into the Root Protection Area of the existing trees (T2, T3 & T4) is unfortunate and should be avoided if at all possible. It would be essential that the health of these existing trees is safeguarded throughout the design and development process and follows established good practice, including British Standard BS 5837:2012 - Trees in relation to design, demolition and construction. The Tree Protection Plan should also name the species of trees that are listed.
- 4.8. The landscape design proposals incorporate a variety of sustainable drainage features, including rainwater harvesting from the roofs and rain gardens. It is unclear whether these measures will include underground storage tanks and, if so, the

location of these should be shown and the impact on surface treatments and planting should be considered and detailed.

- 4.9. The native planting and habitat proposals are welcomed and in particular the areas of native scrub that are especially beneficial to bird species. It is recommended that a landscape and habitat management plan is prepared to demonstrate how these landscape and ecological features will be established and maintained in the long-term. This should pay particular attention to the management of sheep grazing on adjacent pasture to ensure this does not have a detrimental impact on the habitat proposals and in particular establishing areas of tall ruderal grassland species.
- 4.10. From the previous design review meeting, the additional tree planting within the south-west corner of the site was understood to assist with carbon sequestration and offsetting. If this continues to be the case, the applicant should consider calculating the amount of carbon that will be offset within the development site and include this measurement as part of the planning submission to strengthen the sustainable design qualities of the proposal.
5. Materials and detailing
 - 5.1. The quality of the bricks and tiles and the detailing of materials for the building will be critical to the success of the scheme, but limited information is provided. A contemporary approach is supported, but the reference to the Kentish rural vernacular should include the use of tiles with a characteristic variation in tone.
 - 5.2. There must be careful window/glazing specification, particularly if there is to be extensive fenestration as currently shown. More selective placement of windows and framing of views instead of the entire glazed south and east walls of the kitchen/living space could provide more hierarchy of light and space internally and more interest to the south and east elevations of the building.
 - 5.3. Paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) states: ‘Local planning authorities should seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).’
 - 5.4. In order to be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note Design South East’s general guidance on material quality and detail. At planning application stage, the quality of the detailing should be demonstrated through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building/landscape and should be accompanied by actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the contents of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions. The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

The North Kent Architecture Centre Limited
trading as Design South East
Admirals Office
The Historic Dockyard
Chatham, Kent
ME4 4TZ

T 01634 401166
E info@designsoutheast.org
designsoutheast.org

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