

CUMBERLAND COUNCIL
CONSULTATION RESPONSE

Proposal: 4 no. detached town houses

Address: Hensingham House, Main Street, Hensingham

Reference: 4/23/2327/OF1

Date: 04/04/24

Description: The site is part of the garden of Hensingham House, and lies within Hensingham Conservation Area

Conclusion: Recommend design revision

Assessment:

- My apologies for providing unclear advice regarding the detailing of the buildings. My difficulty here is that the issues I have are upstream of detailing decisions and are more fundamentally to do with the design intent and aspiration first, and the detailing second.
- To unpack that a little more,
 - My issue is that the aspiration here appears to be to create something unaspirational. I mean this in the sense that this development appears closely aligned in its ethos with the broad trend of housebuilding across the country for the past six decades, about which there is an extensive body of literature drawing attention to its deficiencies and the increasingly unignorable problems it causes:
 - At a high level, creating dreary, indistinguishable sprawl without much sense of place, encouraging car reliance and associated isolation and poor health outcomes, and reflecting a general lack of craftsmanship, favouring the mass-produced over the bespoke, the generic over the particular, the impersonal over the personal;
 - At the lower level, things like simplistic and inelegant detailing, superficial adoption of “traditional” styling as a substitute for contextual design, poorly integrated bins, preponderance of hard surfacing etc.
- These houses are suburban in their style and aspiration. Is that appropriate as a principle? The division between Hensingham and Whitehaven has already disappeared into sprawl, but is it right to continue this? Are historic development patterns around Whitehaven informative when it comes to picking an approach here?
- I appreciate this may appear unhelpful because there is nothing to be done with these questions other than go back to the drawing board and explore whether a range of completely different solutions would in fact give a better result, perhaps one that more clearly distinguishes itself from the “What are we getting wrong?” section of the Housing Design Audit for England published in 2020 [Place Alliance - A Housing Design Audit for England 2020 A5 booklet.pdf \(adobe.com\)](#)
- I am aware that there is an aspiration to carry out further development in a Phase 3 adjacent to this site, and would consider Phase 2 to be an opportunity to demonstrate the level of good practice and innovation possible.

- Regarding more detailed feedback on the proposals, my reticence stems from a fear that in engaging with details I am implicitly supporting the general approach (i.e. all of the work that comes prior to detailing). I think the approach can and should be questioned.
- I've previously made some comments on detail, however mock chimneys would represent a step in the wrong direction. The issue is a lack of engagement with architectural possibilities, which is precisely what mock chimneys stand for.
- I would be very happy to discuss the ethos behind the design, the contextual study work that has informed the proposal, whether suburban typologies are desirable and if so why and which are more or less successful, and how this relates to the objectives of the National Design Guide, Housing Design Audit or similar.

Relevant Policies and Guidance:

Section 72 of the 1990 Act states that “special attention shall be paid to the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of [a conservation] area.”

Paragraph 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) asserts that “Development that is not well designed should be refused”.

NPPF para. 197 states that “In determining applications, local planning authorities should take account of the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets and putting them to viable uses consistent with their conservation...”

NPPF para. 199 states, in the case of designated heritage assets, “great weight should be given to the asset’s conservation”, irrespective of whether potential harm is substantial, less-than-substantial, or total loss. Where harm to a designated heritage asset is less-than-substantial, it should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal (para. 202).

Paragraph 203 of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states the effect on the significance of a non-designated heritage asset should be taken into account when making decisions.

Opportunities should be sought for new development within conservation areas and the settings of heritage assets that enhances or better reveals their significance. (para. 206)

Referring to assets in a conservation area, NPPF para. 207 states that loss of an element that makes a positive contribution to a conservation area should be treated as either substantial (under para. 201) or less-than-substantial harm (under paragraph 202).

The former Copeland Borough Council’s Local Plan contains a number of relevant policies:

- Local Plan Policy ST1C(ii) highlights the importance of protecting, enhancing and restoring the Borough’s cultural and heritage features and their settings.
- ST1D emphasizes the council’s commitment to creating and retaining quality places.
- ENV4A stresses the importance of protecting listed buildings, conservation areas and other features considered to be of historic, archaeological or cultural value.
- ENV4B outlines support for heritage-led regeneration, ensuring assets are put to appropriate, viable and sustainable uses.

- ENV4C aims to strengthen the distinctive character of settlements through high quality urban design and architecture that respect character and setting.
- DM10 emphasises the need for high quality design and quality places. Part B requires design to respond to local character at multiple scales, paying attention to plot size and arrangement, massing and scale, interstitial spaces, and materials. Part C requires the incorporation of existing features such as landscape and vernacular style.
- DM27A outlines support in principle for developments that “protect, conserve and where possible enhance the historic, cultural and architectural character of the borough’s historic sites and their settings”.
- DM27C outlines the restriction in principle of development within conservation areas to that which preserves or enhances the character or appearance of the area.

The Conservation Area Design Guide is a supplementary planning document adopted in 2017 that is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications within conservation areas in the legacy Copeland area. It is therefore applicable to this application.

Sammy Woodford

Conservation and Design Officer