

Planning Committee

Graham Margery - Co Chairman

Planning Activity: Over the last twelve months the Dover Society Planning Committee reviewed some 187 planning applications that are potentially of interest and made formal response to the Local Authority in respect of 58 of them. In total since the last newsletter we have reviewed some 62 applications and made response in respect of 23 of them. This is a somewhat reduced level of activity compared to usual and reflects a nationwide trend as reported in the news recently. This does not bode well for the Government's plan to stimulate the housebuilding industry, but more of that later. As ever we would encourage members to look at planning applications that may be of interest to them and make comment to Dover District Council as they feel appropriate or contact our Planning Committee with their views. Applications can be found on the DDC website or the Dover Society Website under 'Planning'.

Border Entry/Exit System:

I mentioned in the last Newsletter delays to cross channel ferries or at the channel tunnel can rapidly lead to congestion on the major roads into the port leading to further gridlock in the town as people look for alternative routes. Thankfully, at the start of the school summer holiday, things were better controlled, and people were able to get around the town without much difficulty. However, things are likely to change dramatically when the new Border Entry/Ext System (EES) comes into operation early in November. Until now, these concerns have largely been a matter for the cross-Channel travel industry as they make preparations for the change but soon passengers will feel the impact.

The new digital border system will require non-EU nationals – which since Brexit includes those travelling on a British passport – to register biometric details, including fingerprints and a photograph, when entering a country in the Schengen area which of course includes France. This new process will replace the current system of manually stamping passports when visitors arrive in the EU, and is intended to improve border security, combat illegal migration and prevent those without the relevant visas from overstaying. On subsequent visits, once you have already been enrolled into EES, passport control officers will only verify your fingerprints and photo, which will take less time.

The new procedure is likely to delay the processing of every vehicle by a couple of minutes, the cumulative effect of which will give rise to lengthy queues leading to chaos in the town again. Dover Harbour Board is trying to streamline the process as much as possible with increased processing capacity, but options are limited with the port being squeezed between the cliffs and the sea unlike, mainland Europe.

National Planning Policy Framework:

The new Labour Government has made it very clear that they regard growing the economy as a priority and that an accelerated house building programme is the best way to achieve this. Furthermore, the Government views the current planning system as “antiquated” and stands in the way of their housebuilding objective. Changes to the regulatory regime are being considered, in particular

to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), and a consultation has recently been launched calling for views on these changes. Amongst other things the changes seek to -

- implement a new standard method and calculation for assessing housing needs to ensure local plans are ambitious enough to support the Government's manifesto commitment of 1.5 million new homes in this Parliament and to make the standard method for assessing housing needs mandatory.
- broaden the existing definition of brownfield land, set a strengthened expectation that applications on brownfield land will be approved and that plans should promote an uplift in density in urban areas and also identify grey belt land within the Green Belt, to be brought forward into the planning system through both plan and decision-making to meet development needs.
- improve the operation of 'the presumption' in favour of sustainable development, to ensure it acts an effective failsafe to support housing supply, by clarifying the circumstances in which it applies; and, introducing new safeguards, to make clear that its application cannot justify poor quality development.
- deliver affordable, well-designed homes, with new "golden rules" for land released in the Green Belt to ensure it delivers in the public interest.

The planning considerations for a large-scale infrastructure project or the creation of a new town are very different to those of a small-scale project in an urban setting, but the regulatory regime is the same for both. As a result, the proposed changes to the text of the legislation are quite technical so the Dover Society has responded to the consultation in more general terms based on our practical

experience here in Dover. In our response we made the following comments.

Housing targets need to recognise the practicalities of the local situation. An area with hills, marshland or some other challenging topography will find it much more difficult to identify suitable sites for development and the application of a nationwide formula is not practical. There could be a default position but there needs to be opportunity to deviate if properly justified. In the same way, proximity to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, Sites of Special Scientific Interest or nationally important historic monuments also affects the feasibility of development. Identification of suitable sites could best be achieved with greater community engagement when the Local Plan is being developed recognising, that this may deviate from a nationwide approach.

Where the Local Authority owns or has control of the land, mandatory housing targets makes some sense but where it does not, development depends entirely on the land owner who may be unwilling to co-operate for a variety of reasons including commercial viability. If the mandatory targets are to have any teeth, local authorities need powers to compel the land to be used possibly by compulsory purchase. Or a system of incentives and penalties to "encourage" land owners to bring forward applications for development.

We support the government's plan to designate sites as Grey Belt (a new definition) but only insofar as it relates to what are in effect brownfield sites within the Green Belt. These areas should be clearly defined at the outset and not be allowed to creep into the Green Belt proper.

As stated earlier there needs to be a degree of flexibility in decision making so that due account can be taken of any special circumstances that apply to the local area. The presumption in favour of development must not become an excuse for substandard housing.

Planning approvals should support a genuine mix of housing types so that there is not an overwhelming concentration of one particular type. This is particularly important when considering affordable housing where the lack of larger properties can be a barrier to social mobility. In Dover we have experienced examples where the provision of the smallest affordable accommodation by way of conversions to flats or HMOs has attracted people from outside the district rather than satisfying a local need. This in turn puts pressure on local social services. Developers often claim that quality affordable homes cannot be built economically and attempt to avoid the obligation through a viability analysis. In these cases, a subsidy could be considered so that an adequate supply of affordable housing is achieved.

When considering larger housing developments, adequate infrastructure provision must be included for schools, shops, pharmacies and doctor's surgeries.

When planning permission is granted for a larger development, planning conditions must ensure that the infrastructure elements are delivered hand in hand with the housing through an agreed phasing plan.

When planning applications are made and planning permission has been granted for any scheme, there is no plan for completion provided that work starts within three years. If the developer considers that the housing market has

become unfavourable, building work can slow down or stop completely and indefinitely until the market picks up again. This frustrates fulfilment of the housing targets in a way that the local authority cannot control. There needs to be a system of incentives or penalties to ensure that development proceeds to an agreed timescale.

Now that the report into the Grenfell Tower tragedy has been published, it is evident that poor quality and unsafe housing was allowed to proceed through lack of rigorous planning control as well as dishonesty because of commercial interests. In the changes to the planning system being proposed, it would be unforgivable if the simplification leads to further substandard building to satisfy commercial or political pressures.

Miscellany

Archaeological work continues on the site of the new Beacon Project in Bench Street with some medieval walls being exposed and recorded. But with excavations going not much deeper than the foundations of the new building, its unlikely that Roman or earlier deposits will be found. That's something for future generations in 100 years' time!

The application for a drive thru McDonald's on the site of the former leisure centre on Townwall Street was mentioned in the last newsletter but the matter has not yet been determined, with ongoing discussions about traffic safety and impact on nearby heritage sites.

The site of the former Co-op and Innovation Centre remains vacant. It had been hoped that this would become a hotel but those plans have come to nothing, so the site is likely to remain vacant or possibly become a car park.

Work at the former 'Good Luck', Chinese restaurant at 67-69 High Street continues to convert the building to six self-contained flats. The exterior of the building will be brought back to something like the original including removal of the old shop front extension and will match the adjacent Grade II Listed terrace. Interior period features will be retained as far as possible. This has been an untidy site for some time, so we look forward to the completion of work.

The former United Reformed Church building is also being converted to flats. Although we objected to the quantity of sixteen, preferring the nine as originally proposed, we nevertheless look forward to the completion of work also as this too has been an untidy site for some time in such a prominent position.

Roman Painted House:

This amazing historic monument was reopened to the public on 14th September as part of the Heritage Open Days event, having been closed for over a year. DDC has carried out remedial works to make safe and improve visitor access and plans to have the site open free of charge every Saturday until the end of November. DDC is now committed to a major investment program for the site including re-excavating the Roman Bath House and improved access across the Roman Lawn. This is no longer a distant dream but a genuine commitment subject to a successful funding bid. The Dover Society fully supports the scheme and looks forward to helping where we can to bring this all to fruition.

D & L Wondercrafts

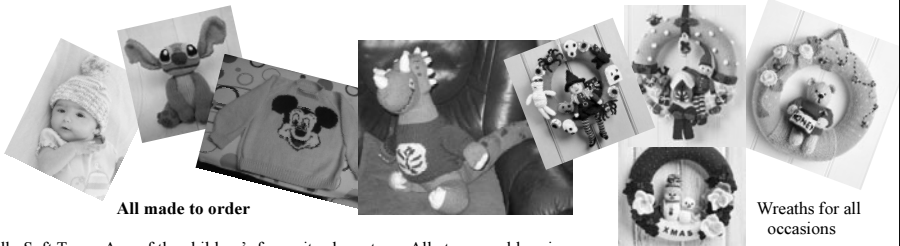
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