

The Topsham Society

Reg Charity No: 265073



Planning Panel: Chair – David Burley Dip Arch RIBA. Chartered Architect.
Waterside Studio, The Retreat Drive, Topsham, Exeter, EX3 0LS
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Report from the Planning Panel

Application Number:	22/0268/FUL
Dated:	18.03.22
Location:	17 Flats at The Retreat Drive and Exeter Rd, Topsham
Conservation area:	No
Listed Building application:	No
Case Officer:	David Green

Introduction:

Topsham has a rich heritage of townscape in a uniquely scenic setting. The Society has around 300 members who pay a small annual fee. Its Planning Panel advises on planning, architecture, the preservation and improvement of features of historic interest and the quality of the Civic environment. The Committee represents a wide area of Topsham interests and keeps members and the town informed of its activities by monthly items in the Estuary magazine and newsletters. We also work in close liaison with the Topsham Community Association and the Topsham Museum Society.

Planning panel:

Panel meeting date:	Via email due to time restraints
Members present:	David Burley (Chair), Andy Graham-Cumming, Jose Northey, Charles Duthie, Trevor Coleman
Observations: (to include effect on town's landscape and the conservation area if applicable)	<p>The proposal is for a 5 storey block of flats as an extension of a recently approved block on the junction of Exeter Road and The Retreat Drive and the site of a previously approved office block.</p> <p>It is part of a myriad of incremental applications for this and adjoining land, including a 3 storey office building (16/0063/03) 4 storey/7 flats (16/1505/03) 5 storey 10 flats (17/1656/FUL), double site office building (20/0938/FUL) and 10 flats (21/1610/VOC)</p> <p>The Society warned when the Council was considering 20/0938/FUL, that there was no viability for the intended office use and that this was merely a "Trojan horse" for maximising future higher value residential uses. This warning has proved entirely accurate.</p> <p>Whilst the current proposal generally replicate the massing of office approval 20/0938/FUL, those were for business use that the applicant argued had economic/employment benefits and justified the use of the boatyard land for offices as only an exchange of commercial land uses. These arguments are now shown to have been vacuous and in any case, cannot apply to this housing application.</p> <p>The Society has previously strenuously objected to housing applications that impinge the Topsham Gap, but ECC has felt unable to resist approval</p>

because of their inability to demonstrate an adequate 5 year housing supply, as required under the NPPF. The recent refusal of application 20/0538/OUT (Spruce Close, Exeter) established that ECC can now demonstrate an allocation and/or approvals in excess of a 5 year housing supply. Therefore in policy terms, ECC are no longer obligated to approve Gap-lands application to satisfy housing supply requirements.

The applicant justifies this vast building as being proportional to the M5 embankment. This is nonsense. Not only does it exceed the height of the motorway by nearly 9m, but who would argue that a building next to a hill must be higher than that hill? In truth, this proposal, which is 6.7m higher than the highest eaves of the adjacent, already dominant Chasse development, is hideously over-scaled and wholly inappropriate to its setting in a quiet residential area.

I realise the applicant would dismiss the Society's observations as a NIMBY rant, but this would be wrong. ECC's own Placemaking Officer (the only ECC staffer that has design training) raised identical concerns to those of objectors in respect of 20/0938/FUL (page 8-9 of the officer report) noting that proposal on which the current application massing is based, *"The scale, massing and character of the building are unsympathetic to the residential character of the neighbourhood"* and *"the height together with the length of the building (65m)..... would have a fundamental impact on the character of Retreat Drive"*,

In that case, officers accepted an assessment by the Devon Design Review Panel (which, in breach of all normal protocols was not made available to ECC or the public for comment) that appeared to support the proposed mass on the basis of a modulated architectural design. Officers chose to accept this unpublished position over the concerns of its own specialist officer.

The applicant argues that because of this previous approval, ECC should accept the new application, seemingly without question. However, whereas the original design, although excessively large, had compositional design quality, the current application is repetitive, monolithic and inappropriate to the edge of a small town such as Topsham.

The proposal would expose housing at a level well above the M5 Motorway to excessive noise. In our submissions to previous applications for these sites, we have already demonstrated that Noise Surveys have been ineffectively undertaken and that even with mitigation measures, the residential environment would be adversely affected by noise.

Likewise, we have demonstrated that the impact on traffic safety and congestion will be unacceptable.

In addition, the proposal will result in the loss of locally important river frontage boatyard space, threatening viability of the remaining yard, an important part of the community. It is also in close proximity and damaging to the context of listed buildings within The Retreat estate.

Whilst not of high arboricultural value, the removal of tree enclosure of the existing boatyard will have a significant detrimental visual impact on the neighbourhood.

Recommendations:	The Topsham Society urges ECC officers and members to consider the damage this proposal will cause the neighbourhood and the town and refuse permission for the multiplicity of reasons raised above/previously.
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Submitted on behalf of the Topsham Society Planning Panel by:

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