

The Newbury Society 2: Kennet Centre (“Eagle Quarter II”)

Second set of comments from The Newbury Society in response to the Kennet Centre (“Eagle Quarter II”) plans 23/02094/FULMAJ, for 426 flats in blocks up to eight-storeys high. This follows on from our detailed submission of October 13, which remains our main response.

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1. **Local public opinion.** The Newbury Society’s petition against the previous Lochailort plans for the Kennet Centre gathered 2,354 signatures from those opposed; this petition was rendered redundant by the developers’ withdrawal of their planning appeal.

The Newbury Society launched a new petition specifically against the revised plans (23/02094/FULMAJ) on October 15, 2023, via change.org, and within three weeks it had gathered over 900 signatures. It currently (Nov. 27) has 1,071 signatures, and over 100 signatures have been collected to a supplementary paper petition (final totals to follow).

We also note the number of letters of objection which appear on the WBC planning website opposing this application, currently 53. In our assessment, local public opinion is strongly against this application, because of the harm it would inflict on the character of Newbury.

2. **Affordable housing.** West Berkshire Council’s current policy is for 30% affordable housing for large-scale new developments on brownfield sites (WBC’s Core Strategy, policy CS6). We re-state that this policy requirement requires 128 affordable flats from this development. Lochailort’s application offers only 19 flats, “subject to viability” (having previously submitted reports stating that it is not viable to provide any affordable housing).

This remains a serious and substantial under-provision of affordable housing. Given the many negative aspects of this development proposal, we consider that it should not be approved unless, as a minimum, it fully meets West Berkshire Council’s own standards for affordable housing, and that these can be guaranteed (even if this requires a legal agreement).

3. **Sustainability.** The previous applications were put forward with much publicity about their green/ sustainable credentials. The developers’ Planning Statement, submitted with this application, states “The proposals will incorporate Ground Source Heat Pumps providing efficient and renewable heating and cooling throughout the development” (Eagle

Quarter II Planning Statement dated September 2023, section 20.5 p. 64). We do not see detailed plans of these among the documents and we note the references in the consultation response from Environmental Health to Air Source Heat Pumps. We would like guarantees that the Ground Source Heat Pumps are an integral part of these development proposals, and that they would be constructed at an early phase in the development. Without them, the application would not accurately reflect the development, and the developers' claims for "sustainability" would be significantly damaged.

4. **Parking.** Of the five reasons given by the developers in their attempt to justify the large-scale shortfall in parking spaces (see our previous submission), two are bluntly contradicted by the Highways consultation. This site should not be treated as "exceptional" in planning terms and the developers were informed of this prior to the submission of their application; and the Grainger's/ Weavers Yard development provides no precedent for a shortfall in parking on this site.

The WBC Highways consultation identifies both an increase in the number of flats since the previous application (21/00379/FULMAJ), and a reduction in the number of parking spaces from what was potentially accepted earlier in the year "on balance," by planning officers (see Highways submission, section 27), increasing the problem. Even with the dual-use of all the spaces in the Kennet Centre multi-storey car park, this plan has a significant shortfall in its parking provision.

On the dual-use issue, councillors need to decide whether they see it as acceptable that some or any of the public spaces in the Kennet Centre multi-storey should be considered as part of the parking allocation for to this development, while retaining the public parking charges and without being dedicated spaces. The foreseeable knock-on consequence of this, with parking fees as they are, is that tenants with cars are likely to seek free parking elsewhere in Newbury. If dedicated spaces are required to resolve this (for example, on the top floor or two floors of the car park), this may partly resolve the problem but the numbers available will not meet the totals required by WBC parking policy.

The most favourable presentation of the proposal, even with the inclusion of the whole of the multi-storey car park as dual-use spaces, admits that it represents a significant shortfall. The developers state that, after taking into account parking required for the commercial spaces etc, the plans include a total of 297 residential spaces, representing 0.7 spaces per flat [Applicant to Highways, further information dated 17 Nov., 2023, point 5]. This is a shortfall of 174 spaces from the admitted policy requirement of 471, or a shortfall of 37%. Considered without the multi-storey spaces, the developers are offering 83 dedicated spaces instead of 471, or a shortfall of 82%.

Given the widespread concern about climate change, and moves towards carbon-reduction and a greener Newbury, it may be tempting to relax the parking requirements for this site to discourage car use. While changes to council parking policy are worthy of debate, one-off changes or exemptions would be inequitable: they should not unfairly financially benefit a development such as this: this development is not, as Highways have made clear, to be treated as "exceptional." What is needed is a reduction in the number of flats.

5. **Bus Stop lay-bys.** In line with the Highways comments (Nov. 1, item 11), the plans (including landscaping plans) should not include alterations to the bus stop laybys now present on the south side of Market Street.

6. **Access.** Has a detailed assessment been carried out on how the remaining shops and other commercial uses in the Kennet Centre will be serviced, particularly with regard to the planned access in Cheap Street? And has any Highways assessment been carried out on the impact of using the Cheap St access (opposite Walkabout) for rubbish collection etc on Newbury's traffic flow and circulation, following the changes which have been made to the traffic flows in Bear Lane?

7. **Economic case.** The economic case for this development is weak. The long-term case is largely based on a consequent increase in the number of people living in Newbury town centre. This logic does not address what is suitable or appropriate for Newbury, and on its own would support a development many times this size, which (like the current development) would not be appropriate.

The Newbury Society has consistently said that it should be possible to redevelop the Kennet Centre sympathetically with somewhere in the order of 250 flats, and (if they were broadly a similar size to those currently proposed) this would allow for an appropriate development while inflicting less harm on the character of Newbury. The outcome would still be an increase in the number of people living in Newbury town centre, and a consequent increase in the numbers using local shops etc.

A prosperous long-term economic future for Newbury is heavily tied-in with its attractiveness, and considerable weight should be given to this when considering the economic impact of such a large-scale development. Developments which compromise the settings of Newbury's listed buildings, other heritage assets and the conservation area as a whole will cause economic harm; those which complement the heritage will be a long-term benefit.

In the short-term, any construction will generate employment, much of it from outside the area. Any positives here should not outweigh the long-term considerations.

On a separate point, the developers have consistently argued that the scale for this development is essential to make it viable; that it is economically necessary to have over 400 flats. Our view is that a successful redevelopment should be possible on this site when linked to the revenue generated from the construction of around 250 flats.

8. **Archaeology.** We fully support the recommendations from the West Berkshire Heritage Service about the archaeological importance of this site and a staged approach of investigation, which we would expect to involve extensive trenches.

9. **Conservation Area.** Given that this is a Conservation Area, and given Historic England's assessment of the harm caused to the conservation area and its recommendation for refusal, the normal presumption in favour of planning approval is removed. In this case,

planning permission should only be granted if councillors are convinced that the harm to Newbury represented by this application is outweighed by “meaningful public benefits” [Historic England, Oct. 27, 2023, par. 3 under “Historic England’s position on the proposals”]. The Newbury Society has demonstrated that, with this planning application, these simply do not exist.

The Newbury Society (2),
Nov. 27, 2023