

① TNS opening
(speak)

The Newbury Society: Opening Statement for appeal: Kennet Centre, Newbury, Berks ('Eagle Quarter II')

Appeal reference: APP/W0340/W/25/3359935.

Appeal re. West Berkshire Council application 23/02094/FULMAJ for the redevelopment of the Kennet Centre, Newbury RG14 5EN ("Eagle Quarter II"), with 427 flats etc.

My name is David Peacock. I speak on behalf of The Newbury Society, which is the civic society for the town of Newbury and adjacent parishes. The Society is a voluntary group, and a member of Civic Voice, which is the national association for civic societies.

The Newbury Society does not oppose the modernisation or the redevelopment of the Kennet Centre in principle. It opposes the **scale** of the current proposals, which it considers to be damaging to the **character of Newbury**, and to the town centre conservation area. We are here because we believe that if this development goes ahead, it would permanently damage Newbury's **country market town character**.

The Heritage Proof of Evidence for the developer disputes the description of Newbury as a "market town" [4.81-4.93 p. 22] and it is true that this aspect of the town's **character** is something which has been eroded over recent decades, and is currently very much under attack. But it is a quality of the present town which has attracted many people to Newbury, and it is a quality which many residents wish to retain.

The level of local opposition to this development is illustrated partly by The Newbury Society's petition against this development, which attracted over 1,300 signatures, and by more than 90 letters of objection submitted to West Berkshire Council.

It has not been easy, without legal advice and facing barristers, to put our opposition to this development into the language of the planning system, when fundamentally this is about feeling and **character**. The central issue, as we see it, comes down to this: To what extent does the inspector believe that the character of the Newbury town centre conservation area and its heritage assets would be preserved or enhanced, or harmed by the development now under consideration?

The Newbury Society strongly supports West Berkshire Council in its decision to refuse this application. We leave West Berkshire to deal with issues of wider policy, and have much in common in our opposition to this development, agreeing that it would have a harmful impact on the conservation area and on heritage assets, and that it would cause "real and serious harm."

In this hearing we will speak mainly on the first of the grounds given by the council for its refusal: the **scale, height and mass** of the proposed development, and its effect on the Conservation Area and on its Listed Buildings. We consider that the **massing, scale, and height** in the southern part of the proposed development is unacceptable in relation to

Blocks A, B, C, D, E and S (this includes blocks proposed for the street-frontage, in addition to the three highest blocks).

We do not accept the developer's arguments that the benefits of this scheme outweigh the harm.

In relation to the case set out by West Berkshire Council, we consider that the level of heritage harm is higher, including the harms to the town centre street frontage; and we consider some of the potential benefits of the development to be lower than stated by West Berkshire. Contrary to the positions set out by the council and the developers, we say that the existing Kennet Centre should not be considered as if it were one building, since it is an agglomeration of several developments produced at different dates and in different styles, and that in considering the level of harm or benefit in replacing it, some of these need to be addressed separately.

Even the heritage report submitted on behalf of the developer accepts that, in terms of **height**, the **scale** of the existing Kennet Centre is in keeping with the surrounding townscape. [reworded from 4.101 p. 24]. This development proposes to increase this **scale** substantially. The **character** of the conservation area would be harmed, along with the setting of a number of listed buildings.

We also (very briefly) support the council's position on the shortfall in amenity space, and would like to see weight given to the views of Newbury Town Council on this issue.

We will address a number of issues in our consideration of potential benefits and the weight they should receive in the planning balance. We fail to see significant public benefits to this scheme, other than the provision of housing, which could be better-met by a smaller-scale and more sensitive development.

Given the level of harm which would be caused by this development to the conservation area and to listed buildings, this is not outweighed by any potential benefits of the current scheme. Significant public benefits would be needed to justify its approval.

The Newbury Society
June 2025.