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Environment

Urban Design, Heritage and Planning

Date: 15 January 2020

To: Sarah Chester,

**Specialist Heritage and Urban Design Review for Planning Application 2017/0736/REMM for Development at 'Land off Main Street, Church Fenton'.**

Dear Sarah,

I refer to your enquiry with regards development at Church Fenton by Strata Homes. As you are aware I know this site very well and have previously assessed and advised upon the urban design aspects upon this site. My previous comments reflect the need to use a balanced judgement with regards this proposal in order to help protect the rich and nationally important heritage assets that can be found within the vicinity of this site, as well as attempting to obtain a design aesthetic that is more complimentary to the local character and distinctiveness of Church Fenton and Selby District.

You have made me aware of the most recent plans for this proposal which represent the Reserved Matters application for this site and will dictate the finished scheme. I am particularly concerned with regards the potential for the proposed dwellings to be heightened in order to help mitigate the risk of flooding to this development site and the continued use of standard, 'off the peg' housetypes and the harmful impact of highway design.

Firstly however, I would like to briefly outline the context of this site as I understand it and to provide you with a response that is unrestricted from my past role.

**Historic Context of Church Fenton**

Church Fenton has a rich history and is recorded in Domesday but likely had earlier origins. Based upon previous assessment of the village, Church Fenton would appear to represent a collection of dispersed clusters of settlement from Hall Lane and Nanny Lane in the East and Church Lane in the West surrounding possibly common land prior to enclosure. Main Street probably formed a linking route that developed due to its role as a useable route skirting the more frequently flooded areas. Other, well used, and more direct footpaths appear to have run over the application site between these two foci but never fully developed due to the frequency of flooding here. In light of this it is probable that the Church of St Mary was responsible for souls living in a wider area and may have been purposely constructed to be literally seen from dispersed settlements within this wider vicinity.

If it is therefore accepted that St Mary's was visibly and theologically connected over this landscape then the building's relationship to this wider landscape should be reassessed and the application site may become more significant, at least in terms of setting, than previously thought.

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## Policy Context

Section 66(1) of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 requires the decision maker to have ‘special regard’ when assessing proposals for development that affect listed buildings and their settings. In practice this legally requires the Local Planning Authority to give ‘Considerable Importance and Weight’ to the historic environment and the impact of development upon it. In regards to the setting of heritage assets, Historic Environment Good Practice Planning Guidance 3 reflects the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) in defining setting as *‘the surroundings in which a heritage asset is experienced’*. This guidance goes on to illustrate that the setting of a heritage asset may not simply be reliant upon any cross visibility between the heritage asset and development.

Similarly the NPPF requires that ‘Great Weight’ be given to designated heritage assets and their conservation and illustrates that where harm to the historic environment is identified, this needs to be weighted against the public benefits of any proposal with the historic environment attracting ‘considerable importance and weight’ in this balancing exercise. Harm to the heritage assets surrounding this site will likely be less than substantial but will result in serious harm and is therefore on the higher spectrum of the harm scale.

## Appraisal

Although the proposal has been through several iterations over the past years, the development proposed still intends to develop this highly sensitive site with standard housetypes that will encroach severely into the immediate setting of several high grade heritage assets. The scheme layout has been improved through efforts between the applicant and the Council, however it is still worth questioning the need to develop this site and, if it is accepted that development will occur, the next step is to obtain an extremely high quality and bespoke scheme – as this is the only way to sensitively develop such area and minimize harm as much as possible.

The following issues should be considered as main issues in this application;

- 1) The impact upon surrounding Listed Buildings.
- 2) The impact of raising floor levels due to flood risk.
- 3) The impact of using standard house types and;
- 4) The impact of highway design within such a sensitive context.

## Impact Upon the Grade I Listed Church of St Mary.

St Mary’s Church is a Grade I Listed Building and as such represents the most significant and important heritage assets in the country. The building is highly significant due to its heritage values that range from its communal to its evidential and aesthetic value. These values contribute to the building’s significance and they must be fully understood before any decision can be taken that affects these values. Also of value is the contribution of the building’s setting to this significance. As the Act stipulates, the setting of a Listed Building must also be given great weight and the setting of a building such as a church is intrinsically linked to the understanding and experience of the building and the landscape as a whole.

The applicant's Heritage statement describes the Church of St Mary as being enclosed or lacking in visibility within the area, primarily due to surrounding tree cover. However, there seems to be little appropriate weight given to the contribution that the surrounding open spaces and fields have to the church, or to other listed buildings nearby. For instance, the church and the Grade II Listed 'The Old Vicarage' have been intrinsically linked for several hundred years. The path leading directly between the two bisects part of the application site. By definition therefore an important physical and historic link between the two sites has always been experienced as a footpath through open fields. This application will fundamentally alter this perception and the Church of St Mary will be, for the first time ever, enclosed by built development. Although the heritage statement recognises this encroachment and sees minor harm occurring, there is no specific assessment of impact or identified harm other than to state that the retention of some open spaces will alleviate such harm.

The actual result will be an encroachment into the immediate setting of the church, a distortion between the church and the Old Vicarage's relationship to each other and a change in the morphology of the historic village form that will undermine the intrinsic historic relationship between the designated heritage assets and the village as a whole (which could well be considered a 'non designated heritage asset due to its age and survival of several positive buildings.)

In light of this it is entirely appropriate to reflect the points raised by Historic England who still raise concerns even in the latest iteration of these plans. This is primarily due to the impact of development within this undeveloped area and the failure of such development to preserve or enhance the setting of the surrounding listed buildings.

It is therefore my conclusion that serious harm will still occur to the historic environment through this proposal and that individually substantial harm will occur to certain important attributes of setting such as the near complete destruction of the historic and fundamental linkage between church and its historic vicarage.

### **Impact of Using Standard Housetypes.**

Church Fenton evolved through millennia gradually utilising unique and distinctive buildings that reflected the land use, social relationships and technological improvements of the time. Within the village there are still encased timber frame buildings dating from the medieval period. Later buildings used early brick more extensively whether it be in small, low rows of vernacular cottages, farms or more polite structures that reflected evolving styles on the Continent at the time. This tradition was continued into the Victorian era where railway cottages and the odd large house built upon, and helped to further define, the character of the village. Each building was largely unique and the spaces between dwellings were also defining characteristics of the area. It is not therefore appropriate to cite new housing estates as forming a positive part of the local context.

If development is to occur on this site the very highest standards of design will be required. Standard housetypes can sometimes be used, but in this case there still seems to be an over reliance upon a single 'double fronted' type which only reflects one attribute of the local distinctive character. There has been some effort to develop more cottage type houses, but these still fall short of reflecting the unique

characteristics that form the historic core of the village. Instead the proposed terrace form is far more urban and again this is directly a result of trying to make a standard housetype fit a unique hole.

It is not just the housetypes themselves either that can cause harm. Details such as the use of inappropriate UPVC windows, the proportion of windows and doors and chimneys as well as boundary treatments and landscaping, all contribute to the overall success or failure of such a scheme. Although the layout and siting of some properties has improved, this scheme really needs to take the best from other such developments within similarly rich heritage sites and currently it fails to do this.

### **Impact of Highway Design**

The highway layout will be required to meet the adoption standards of North Yorkshire CC Highways Department. Unfortunately many of these standards are in direct conflict with the sensitivity of the historic environment. The approach road, visibility splays, the curved layout of the highway, footways on either side of a carriageway etc are all attributes that favour the movement of the private car rather than help to create sustainable and distinctive places. This is largely in part due to the reluctance of the Highways Authority to adopt modern standards such as the Government's 'Manual for Streets' that stipulates clearly that highway design needs very much to be responsive to context and to put pedestrians first. Instead it appears that dated guidance from the 1990's is still being used to assess such schemes and this is wholly inappropriate for any site, let alone such a sensitive one as this.

In this particular case, the highway layout will dictate the layout of the development and this in turn will cause greater harm to the historic environment and further homogenise this unique site. The access road will likely be accompanied with wide visibility splays, white lining and perhaps even double yellow lines. This will not only destroy the rural character of this site but will further, urbanise its sensitive and discreet historic context. The result will be a large access road on approach to the village accompanied with all the paraphernalia to control cars. This will cause greater harm to the entrance to Church Fenton from the south and will further directly impact upon a major approach to the church of St Mary. Further into the site also, the curving roads and footways will further suburbanise this site where concrete kerbs and tarmac are the dominant material. There is no information on lighting columns or service boxes etc and these would generally form part of a planning condition and as such a typically engineered approach would likely be undertaken for such detail.

To introduce such materials and forms into the immediate vicinity of Grade I and II Listed buildings will therefore cause further harm and as such the fundamentals of this scheme must be correct at this stage prior to approval of reserved matters.

### **Impact of Raising of Floor Levels to Accommodate Flood Threat**

This site has apparently recently been re-graded due to its flood risk from Flood Zone 1 to Flood zone 2. It is our understanding that this change will result in a raising of floor levels of the proposed buildings in order to alleviate such flood risk. Put simply, if this development was a precarious balance previously, by making the dwellings larger or higher, the impact upon the historic environment will be greater. The new housing will therefore not only still appear as 'could be anywhere' due to the elevations and standard housetypes, but will also potentially increase the height of several buildings. This will likely mean that the site can be

seen from a greater distance away and will cause greater harm to the setting of the above mentioned listed buildings.

## Summary and Conclusion

In summary this site should never have been approved for housing due to its impact upon high grade listed buildings and its location within a largely unsustainable location, where services are lacking and where car travel will be the default option. It fails to meet any sustainability criteria and in an age of Climate Crisis such developments should arguably be resisted.

One important aspect of Sustainability is to create liveable places that enhance distinctiveness and well being. The historic environment is a core indicator in the creation of such places and as such is included within the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Failure therefore to create such places runs in direct conflict with such global aspirations that are essential to sustaining our way of life for future generations.

However, it is a matter of fact that this site has approval for housing development. Despite this, harm to the historic environment and conflict with the Paragraphs 190, 193, 194 and 196 of the NPPF will still occur. Despite some public benefits, such as the potential for affordable housing, Selby still maintains an adequate five year supply of housing and there would seem to be few other public benefits that would outweigh such serious harm to the historic environment.

There are however a plethora of examples of housing development throughout the country where distinctive houses have been based upon their local context, where the impact of highway engineering has been minimised, and where the historic environment has dictated the form and appearance of such development, and not the other way around. If, therefore this development is to go ahead, then it simply must recognise that the present house types and highway design - and their impact upon the historic environment - are not appropriate in this highly sensitive location and therefore must be revised.

**Team Expertise:** This report was written by TheUrbanGlow Design & Heritage Ltd by request of the local community representatives of Church Fenton. TheUrbanGlow is an IHBC HESPR Recognised Practice for the Historic Environment.

Director TheUrbanGlow Design & Heritage Ltd