

Regeneration and Planning
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Scarborough Borough Council

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Mr. Adrian Perry
Chairman
Scarborough and District Civic Society
PO Box No 151
Scarborough YO12 4YJ
Your Ref
Our Ref 08/02470/LB

11 August 2010

Dear Mr Perry

Solar Panels - Crown Spa Hotel, The Esplanade, Scarborough

Thank you for your letters regarding the installation of the solar panels. I must sincerely apologise for the long delay in responding to the Civic Society on this matter.

Before dealing with the issue of the solar panels, it is perhaps helpful to take stock of the evolution of the Crown Spa Hotel during the past decade, much of which has required engagement with the planning system. The various improvements that have taken place, including substantial works to the interior, the majority of which has required the benefit of Listed Building Consent, contributing towards the Crown Spa reaching 4-Star status. This is as a result of numerous phased improvements to the hotel with the most recent works finishing in 2009. These works include the mansard roof, together with the solar panels, the refurbishment of the principal facade and the addition of the new railings to the front boundary wall. This relentless drive to bring the hotel to the top of the pile for Scarborough has brought the owners a number of prestigious awards relating to tourism, including winning the national Enjoy England Award for Sustainable Tourism in 2010.

The owners of the property have always respected the internal and external fabric of the original Grade II* listed building and the extensive modernisation work they have undertaken throughout this building is all to a high standard. On the back of this they are extremely committed as a large commercial enterprise to reducing their carbon footprint and for this they can only be commended as I am sure the Civic Society would agree.

At the time of assessing the impact of the solar panels the previously approved mansard roof was not yet in situ. My officers assessed the introduction of the panels to the roof based on the information they had in relation to the proposed mansard and had to make judgements based on 'true' elevation drawings of the overall proposal (including the yet to be constructed mansard). However, at that time we were comfortable that the solar panels would not be readily visible on the roof of the building from close quarters.

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Initially the design was shown as running parallel to the principal elevation of the building, positioned centrally within the roof area, the concept being that they would appear much like a roof lantern. At that time great attention was paid to the impact that the panels would be likely to have from longer range views of the building, and its immediate environment, as recommended by English Heritage - this included views of the roofscape from certain vantage points around the town. Again it should be borne in mind that the assessment of these were undertaken before the mansard was in place. In addition, officers also assessed the potential views from the more immediate streetscene. It was always accepted that the solar panels would be visible in long range views of the roof from certain points around the town, but it was considered that in these views the panels would not be detrimental to the existing building or the wider context.

With regard to views from close proximity, it was felt that on balance, due to the height of the building once the mansard was constructed, and the central position of the solar panel framework within the roof, that there would only be limited views of the panels.

During the major construction works that followed to create the mansard roof it became apparent to the technical engineers involved that in order to maximise the efficiency of the solar panels they needed to realign the panels at right angles to the Esplanade to achieve a southerly orientation. As you know the original proposal was to have the panels to the front section orientated east to west. The engineers brought this variation to us during the construction phase and my officers assessed it on the basis that the fixtures and fittings for the solar panels would remain central to the mansard roof and that the detailing of the units would be as originally proposed. Although this revised orientation varied from that approved, in essence changing its overall shape, it was judged, taking into account views of the roof from around the town that the alteration could be considered as an acceptable amendment to the approved scheme.

Once revealed, following completion of the roof the visual impact was not as first thought. In particular, the panels are more obvious when viewed from a stretch of the Esplanade, on approach from the south. They are more visible than initially envisaged, and in addition to this, the framework they are fixed to means that they appear fairly lightweight in construction, rather than appearing integral to the building. However, from close proximity, particularly from positions close to the main facade of the hotel, the panels are not visible, so that when the hotel is viewed in its group setting, particularly from the east and north there is no impact. In these views however, the beneficial impact of the mansard roof is obvious. The mansard roof reinstates the building as the dominant central feature of the terrace, listed as Grade II* because of its group value. This rectified the harm to the Crown Spa Hotel which had been diminished in status by unsympathetic alterations to the roofs of neighbours.

In other views we acknowledge that the panels are visible on the roof. However, from conversations with a number of different people, including some of our Members who have mentioned the panels without any prompt from us, we have received general expressions of satisfaction about the overall project. We have noted the panels in a number of medium and longer range views, but to a degree this is because we know they are there and for no other reason.

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You have enquired as to the process we followed in respect of the alterations to the scheme and why these were not reported to Committee. Firstly, as explained above the amendments to the scheme were considered against the approved scheme and in relation to the approved mansard, but also at a time when the mansard roof was not completed. In addition, discussions over the changes took place during the construction of the mansard roof and we had to consider whether to allow the panels to be erected as part of the ongoing construction works, as the work needed to be completed as one project. My Officers reacted to the unfolding circumstances and gave the matter some considerable thought at the time. They were of the opinion that the changes would not result in a much greater visual impact than the permitted scheme and took the decision to treat the matter as an amendment.

Before the government introduced a formal process for amendments, the determination of such matters was at the discretion of officers. Where no material harm was envisaged, particularly in terms of residential amenity (i.e. overlooking or loss of privacy) amendments were generally not the subject of further consultation.

With hindsight my officers and I agree that the visual impact of the panels is greater than we anticipated in views from the south along Esplanade. In longer range views of the roofscape (which are principally of the rear parts of the building), we consider the impact is similar to that of the original scheme. Whilst recognising that the Civic Society has reservations about the amendments agreed and are frustrated by our decision in this case, we did act in good faith.

Notwithstanding this, it is perhaps helpful to note the recent policy guidance from central government contained in PPS5: Planning for the Historic Environment. Policy HE10 deals with the affect of developments affecting the setting of designated heritage assets (in this case the Listed Building and the Conservation Area). The policy makes clear that a balanced approach to development affecting setting is necessary and where a negative impact on a heritage asset would arise there is a need to justify this against the wider benefits of the proposed development.

We feel that in this case, despite the greater visual impact involved, the overall scheme has many positive aspects to it in terms of the sustainability of the hotel business and the wider economy of the town and its coastal setting (the process of place shaping referred to in Policy HE10.2 of PPS5) and these need to be weighed in the balance.

Once again, I must apologise to the Civic Society for the delay in writing formally on this matter, but hope that the information provided is helpful.

Yours sincerely

Mrs J Low Planning Manager

Cc: Jim Dillon
Cllr Tom Fox Cllr Jane Mortimer Pauline Elliott