

PLANNING STATEMENT TO SUPPORT A DETAILED PLANNING APPLICATION

On Behalf of:	Awel Aman Tawe
Proposal:	Change of Use of Primary School to a Community Enterprise, Arts, Education and Energy Centre, together with related Building Works and Ground Source Heating Details
Site:	Former Ysgol Cwmgors, Heol-y-Gors, Cwmgors, SA18 1RF

Report By: Graham Carlisle
Our Ref: GSC/2020/015



Planning Statement
Change of Use – Ysgol Cwmgors

Date: May 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This statement has been prepared by Graham Carlisle of CDN Planning (Wales) Ltd to support an application seeking detailed planning permission for the conversion and re-use of a former primary school building to a Community Enterprise Arts, Education and Energy Centre. The aim for the building is to develop a thriving zero-carbon/zero waste centre that will promote and facilitate a positive vision of a carbon-free future. The centre will be a base for sustainable projects that support local people, organisations and businesses.

2. THE APPLICATION SITE



- 2.1 The building which is the subject of this application is a former primary school which occupies a prominent position in the heart of the village. The building was originally single-storey but two areas of first floor accommodation were subsequently created by using parts of the roof space. A small basement was also created at the northern end of the property. The building is set back some 5m from the main road and presents a continuous frontage to the street of 36m. It also has a width of some 12m.

- 2.2 The exterior of the building is finished in facing brick and a painted render with pitched roofs covered with red tiles. The building has a generous amount of fenestration to both the front and the rear. A 5m wide access lane, which is fully owned by the applicant company, immediately adjoins the southern boundary of the school and leads to the school yard at the rear via a gated entrance. The southern boundary between the building and the access road is formed by a brick-topped stone wall, whilst the main road frontage is enclosed by painted metal railings on a low stone wall. All neighbouring property is residential.

3. THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

- 3.1 The application primarily concerns the proposed adaptation and change of use of a school premises to a centre for Community Enterprise, Arts, Education and Energy. As shown on the submitted plans the building will become home to a wide variety of activities, and as such it will not readily fall into any single use class, thus making it 'sui-generic' in nature. Inherent in the way that the centre will be run is the need for flexibility to allow future changes as businesses and activities grow and move on and are replaced by new enterprises and activities. The application also includes a proposed rear extension across the full width of the building to provide a series of 'external' internal spaces to enhance the floor space for the units along the rear ground floor, as well as a ground source heat pumping system.
- 3.2 The applicant company is a registered charity. It was set up, following a Local Agenda 21 meeting in 1998 when a group of local volunteers took forward suggestions for a community wind farm. The charity's prime drivers are tackling climate change, job creation, retaining wealth in the Welsh economy and engaging people in renewable energy. It has a strong reputation for delivery of education, arts and engagement. AAT has set up two award-winning coops which are the largest in Wales:

i. Awel Co-op is a 4.7MW community wind farm which was commissioned in January 2017 – www.awel.coop

ii. Egni Co-op develops rooftop solar on community, business and public sector buildings. It has installed over 2.6MW on 85 sites in Wales – www.egni.coop

There are over 1,000 direct members and over 20,000 members (via local community organisations) of the two renewable energy coops. In 2019 AAT was recognised as Environmental Organisation of the year in the Social Enterprise UK Awards and Egni won Outstanding Renewable Energy Project in an award sponsored by Welsh Government. Over 60 local community organisations and schools are members of Awel and Egni Coops, owning over £100k in shares, and thereby gaining a sustainable income stream. They include a range of groups such as Merched y Wawr, food banks, sports clubs, community centres and Friends of Pontardawe Arts Centre.

3.3 . The stated mission of Awel Aman Tawe is :-

‘to combat climate change by promoting and developing community renewable energy installations and to further encourage local people to move towards low carbon lifestyles through education and the arts’.

Profits from the wind farm and their credibility from that project has enabled AAT to further develop Egni Coop which has now installed 266kW of solar panels on 16 sites in Neath Port Talbot, reducing carbon emissions by 28 tonnes/year and saving those sites over £10k in energy costs per year. The sites include Cwmgors Rugby Club, Dove Workshops, Glynneath Training Centre, Seven Sisters Community Centre, Me Myself and I, NPTCVS, Owain Glyndwr Centre, Cwmafan Community Centre, Cymer Pool, Cwmllynfell Hall, Crynant Community Hall, Cymer Library, Cadoxton Community Centre and the former Cwmgors School.

- 3.4 Also submitted in support of this application is a detailed business plan which seeks to explain the aims and intentions of the redevelopment of the school premises. It describes the various uses and activities that will be facilitated in the building, which follows from extensive local market research over a number of years. It also sets out a timetable of works and activities spreading over the three years that it is anticipated will be needed to complete the project. The job architect has also produced a schedule of work required which helps to explain the various internal changes that are proposed.

4. PLANNING POLICY

- 4.1 National planning policy is provided by ‘Planning Policy Wales – Edition 10’ which was published in 2018. One of the key planning principles set out in the document is entitled ‘Making best use of resources’ and seems particularly relevant to this proposal. It states, in part, as follows :-

“The efficient use of resources, including land, underpins sustainable development. The planning system has a vital role to play in making development resilient to climate change, decarbonising society and developing a circular economy for the benefit of both the built and natural environments and to contribute to the achievement of the well-being goals”.

- 4.2 In relation to community facilities, PPW states, in part, at paragraph 4.4.1 as follows :-

“Community facilities perform various functions which cover a broad range of activities and services that can be delivered by the public, private and third sectors. Community facilities contribute to a sense of place which is important to the health, well-being and amenity of local communities and their existence is often a key element in creating viable and sustainable places”.

- 4.3 Relevant Local Planning Policy is provided by the Neath Port Talbot Local Development Plan (LDP) which was adopted in 2016. The school building lies

within the defined settlement limits for Gwaun-cae-Gurwen, which is recognised in the plan as a major settlement which provides a sustainable location for most types of development. Policy SC1 of the plan concerns settlement limits and explains at paragraph 3.0.13 that settlement limits define the areas within which development, which accords with the role and function of the settlement will be acceptable in principle. Such development would require to comply with all other relevant policies and should be proportionate in scale and form to the role and function of the settlement. It is considered that the proposed development in this case is fully compliant with this policy.

4.4 Policy SC2 of the LDP endeavours to protect all existing community facilities. Where, as in this case, the facility has been found by the Education Authority to be surplus to requirements, the policy makes it clear that any change to a non-community use will be resisted unless it can be shown that the facility is no longer viable or needed by the community, and that there is no potential that the building can be used for an alternative or shared community use. Quite clearly the changes proposed for Ysgol Cwmgors are fully in keeping with the aims and intentions of this policy.

4.5 Policy SP6 of the LDP encourages development in the 'Valleys Strategy Area in order to reinvigorate those areas, which include Cwmgors/Gwaun-cae-Gurwen. The policy explanation goes on to say :-

“The strategy is centred on improving economic resilience with the encouragement of tourism, small scale employment and other economic developments, the diversification away from traditional industries and the identification of growth areas where development will be concentrated with the aim of spreading the regeneration effects over a wider area”.

It is suggested that the combination of educational, cultural and business activity proposed in this case will certainly contribute to the policy strategy of reinvigoration in this part of the Valleys Strategy Area.

- 4.6 Policy TR2 of the LDP requires that all development shall be provided with appropriate levels of car parking and cycling facilities, and that access arrangements are safe. In this case the building is served by a private 5m wide access road leading to a school yard that will readily convert to a car park, and where a cycle rack can also be provided. The development fully complies, therefore, with this policy.

5. CONCLUSION

- 5.2 Whilst it is always unfortunate to see a village school close, as has been the case with Ysgol Cwmgors, it does, however, present an organisation such as Awel Aman Tawe an opportunity to provide a new and exciting community facility that will present local people with an intriguing mix of educational, cultural, social and economic facilities that will contribute greatly to the future vibrancy of the area. With only a limited number of changes the building can be transformed so as to provide a wide range of activity spaces whilst still retaining the existing character of the street frontage. What is proposed is fully in keeping with current planning policy and it is requested, therefore, that planning permission be granted for this development.

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