

Downing Court, Grenville Street, London, WC1N 1LX

Suggested Text for Consultation Document

- 1 This note addresses the revised proposals for the extension of Downing Court, Grenville Street, London, WC1N 1LX. These are the second iteration of proposals for the site, and follow a pre-application meeting with and subsequent comment from the London Borough of Camden.

Site Location and Context

- 2 Downing Court was constructed in the inter-war period as a residential mansion block. The building rises to six storeys above a basement and is built in brick with a rendered ground floor. The building is architecturally robust and comparatively typical of the period with little embellishment save for a string course between the fourth and fifth floors and a simply detailed parapet. The elevations are given relief and articulation through the use of symmetrically placed projecting bays and a regular fenestration pattern.
- 3 Downing Court is situated at the south-west corner of Brunswick Square on the junction with Bernard Street, Grenville Street and the square itself. Its context is mixed with a retained Georgian townscape to the south and west and large-scale post-war development to the north and east. This includes the grade II listed Brunswick Centre, immediately to the north-west. The building forms an element of the Bloomsbury Conservation Area and is considered to make a positive contribution to the character and appearance of the area (Bloomsbury Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Strategy, April 2011).
- 4 The Bloomsbury Conservation Area covers a large area of mixed character but one that essentially encapsulates the late 18th and early 19th century development of the area. The conservation area also includes large scale institutions such as University College London and University College Hospital.
- 5 In order to manage the large area, the conservation area is subdivided into 14 sub-areas. Downing Court is located in sub-area 12. The Bloomsbury Conservation Area states that the sub-area *'is dominated by large-scale, green open spaces of historic significance in and around Coram's Fields. The spaces act as a green lung, providing a sense of openness which contrasts with surrounding areas. There is a predominance of institutional use (hospital, university, education), recreational and community uses with secondary residential and office uses'*.

- 6 It also states that *'The remaining fragments of the townhouses developed on the Foundling and surrounding estates in the late 18th and early 19th centuries are mostly protected by listing. These contrast with the much larger scale footprints of the 20th century redevelopments, such as the Brunswick Centre, which contrasts with the much finer grain of earlier residential development. Whilst the Brunswick Centre occupies several street blocks, elsewhere the street layout and distribution of open space remains as originally developed. Regardless of architectural style or period, there are similarities in the strong parapet lines, use of banding to articulate storey heights, long, continuous frontages of development, a relatively consistent and close relationship to the street and generally rectilinear form of blocks. The prevailing height of development is four storeys, with taller elements up to seven storeys.'*

Historic Development

- 7 Downing Court developed out of the amalgamation of several smaller plots that were originally the site of late 18th century townhouses. Grenville Street was first laid out as part of the overall estate planning of the Coram Estate by Thomas Cockerell. Cockerell was also surveyor to the New River Company and laid out much of their Islington estates and others across London. By 1799, terraced properties had been constructed on the site of Downing Court and the remainder of the Coram Estate was being laid out (figure 1).

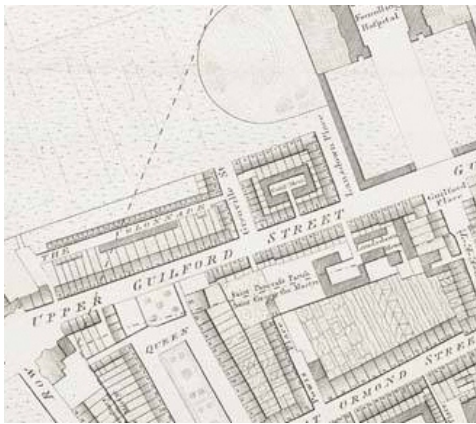


Figure 1: Extract from Richard Horwood's map of London (1799)

- 8 Historic mapping shows that the arrangement as shown in Horwood's map continued into the 19th century with the extension of Grenville Street into Brunswick Square and a context dominated by terraced properties (figures 2 and 3).



Figures 2 and 3: Ordnance Survey map extract, 1875-6 (left) and Ordnance Survey map extract 1896 (right).

- 9 By 1916, the plots of the terraced properties north of Colonnade had been amalgamated to create a building with a larger footprint (figure 4). Ultimately, those plots at the eastern end of Bernard Street were incorporated into the site to allow for the construction of Downing Court in the inter-war period (figure 5). At the time of its construction and into the 1950s, its immediate context continued to be characterised by finer grain, Georgian development. This context has since been transformed considerably with post-war development dominating the area around Brunswick Square (figure 6).



Figures 4 and 5: Ordnance Survey map extract, 1916 (left) and 1956 (right).



Figure 6: Aerial image showing the immediate context of Downing Court and mix of finer grain and larger-scale development.

The Proposed Scheme

- 10 The scheme currently proposed involves the careful and considered extension of the existing building by a single storey. The design of the proposed extension takes into account the composition and symmetry of the existing building of Downing Court and its elements are aligned to correspond with the location of the projecting bays on the floors below. The design seeks to provide a harmonious addition to the building while relating to its principal features.
- 11 The materials used in the proposed design include a metal cladding, its tone and colour selected to complement the strong brick character and aesthetics of Downing Court. Areas of glazing will be screened with a treated hardwood timber scheme which will also tone into the colour of the proposed cladding and the brick of Downing Court. While the palette of materials is contemporary, the intention is to ensure that they relate well to the existing building and the surrounding context and character in tone and texture.
- 12 The proposed extension is largely set back from the parapet of the existing building and projects from the building line only where it relates to the composition of the window bays on the floors below. This approach serves to reduce the visibility of the proposed roof extension and ensures that while being legible against the existing building as a complementary addition, it is not a dominant or overbearing feature either on the existing architecturally robust building or on the surrounding context.
- 13 Downing Court is located at the south-west corner of Brunswick Square, a large area of open space within the conservation area. The position of the building in this

relatively open and leafy area ensures that the additional height to Downing Court does not create a sense of enclosure on the surrounding area. This is also aided by the position of the proposed extension on the existing roof which reduces the visibility of the additional floor.

- 14 In terms of the wider conservation area, Downing Court is read in what is essentially a 20th century townscape in the main where post-war development now dominates the building's context to the east and north. The height and scale of the proposals in this location are not exceptional where height within the sub-area already rises to seven storeys. The architectural approach in this instance means that the proposed extension would not read as a dominant addition. Rather, the well-considered footprint planning and elevational treatment creates a subservient addition to an existing building already strong in character and appearance. The proposed extension would be a high-quality addition to a good building in the Bloomsbury Conservation Area that is respectful of both Downing Court and the character and appearance of the surrounding area.

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