



**HERTFORDSHIRE DESIGN REVIEW PANEL MEMBERS
Bericot Way Design Review 08/02/13:**

Chair: Barry Shaw, Essex Design Initiative
Emmet O'Sullivan, Architecture and Urbanism Studio
Yasmin Shariff, Dennis Sharp Architects / EACT
Nicolas Tye, Nicolas Tye Architects
Francesca Weal, Weal Architects

Andrew Smith, Associate
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CONFIDENTIAL

Dear Andrew,

Hertfordshire Design Review Panel: Bericot Way residential care development

Introduction

The Hertfordshire Design Review Panel met on 08/02/13 to review proposals for a care home development, on part of a green field site owned by Hertfordshire County Council in a residential area of Welwyn Garden City. The site would house the care development as well as some further residential housing development to be dealt with as a separate application by the planning authority, Welwyn and Hatfield BC. The two developments are not financially reliant on each other and can be seen as independent developments.

At the time of the review, the application for the care development designed by Pozzoni had been refused planning permission partly on design related grounds. The development team sought the Panel's views on the submitted design to provide an independent report of its strengths and weaknesses, and to help considerations of amendments that could prove beneficial should they decide to resubmit the scheme.

Reasons for refusal on design grounds

The Welwyn and Hatfield BC planning team opted not to accept the invitation to attend the design review session - which was seen by the Panel as a matter for regret as their attendance would have provided an opportunity for the case officer to explain to the Panel the planning authority's concerns regarding the refused designs. The Panel was furnished with a summary of the Decision Notice. Design related issues cited by the refusal were broadly: overly intensive and visually dominant development to the detriment of the character of the area; a degree of visual intrusiveness and loss of privacy imposed on the proposed independent living units by the larger care home and YPD building; and insufficient parking putting pressure on surrounding roads.

Declarations of interest

One Panel member, Francesca Weal, declared that her father had once been in partnership with the founder of the Pozzoni group of architects, but as this was a long time ago and related to connections between third parties only, it was agreed that there was no potentially inappropriate interest in the scheme to be reviewed.

A representative from Hertfordshire County Council's property team was present at the review as part of the client group, but did not stay for the Panel's closed session.

Overview of the site

Extensive site surveys had been carried out particularly regarding ecology and trees but no significant risks were present and the development would have a negligible impact, as although a green field, the site is surrounded by houses and roads. It has low ecological value and only young or semi-mature trees, without TPO protection. There are no public rights of way through the site but it is used informally for access.

The site is situated in the midst of mainly later twentieth century two-storey housing. The surrounding housing tends to face on to side streets rather than the main routes past the site. Three roads serving surrounding housing run adjacent to the site so it is well served by transport routes. No flood risk is present and services are in place.

Overview of the scheme

The proposed development is intended to replace two outdated care facilities in the vicinity of Welwyn Garden City. The accommodation in submitted plans consists of:

- 75 bedroom care home
- 10 bedroom home for young physically disabled residents (YPD)
- 4 individual YPD independent living units
- An enablement suite to serve the care home
- A 20 person elderly day care centre
- Communal space, gardens, car parking and mobility scooter parking

Key drivers for the design were to ensure provision of the accommodation required in the brief, provide east/west facing bedrooms (although the Panel noted that the final design did not fully maintain this intention), include a south facing community courtyard for outside activities, and to achieve BREEAM excellent. The architects intended the design to allow views in from surrounding roads and to encourage visual and social interaction with the local community. The independent living units included were designed to be visually somewhat separate from the care home to underline the semi-independence of the residents. Some would rely more on the YPD carers than others. A linking roof was considered but was later discarded.

After initial intentions to access the site from the north, it was decided after further consultation to provide access from the east via Shackleton Way. A parking study was based on requirements at other Quantum Care homes. Landscape elements including a range of communal gardens and more private areas for residents were included in the scheme, along with a hair salon and bistro to be open to passers-by.

Bedrooms within the care home are provided in groups of 7 or 8 in accordance with the standard ratio of staff to residents common to Quantum Care operated homes. Ground floor households have access to external space, with balconies providing external access from household living areas on the first / second floors. The number of bedrooms required and dimensions of the site dictated a three story solution, but in response to massing concerns the roof was redesigned to reduce overall height.

Proposed materials included pale brickwork to complement but not imitate the darker brickwork of surrounding residential development, as well as elements of render and non-timber boarding. Two extensive green roof areas were included in the proposals. An energy centre would be located by the bin stores (details were yet to be decided).

Panel observations and recommendations

Overview

The Panel thanked the design team and the care home operator's representative for a comprehensive presentation, which had been particularly thorough in showing how the design had developed and how design decisions had been taken throughout the process in response to the brief, the constraints of the site and brief, and discussion with care providers and end users. The Panel agreed that the site is an opportunity site.

Several positive aspects of the design were noted, including the way the design has drawn back from the edges on each side of the site, paying attention to views into the site from surrounding roads and providing a loop of landscape as a buffer to the road. The designers have done very well in terms of delivering the client's brief and optimising the needs and requirements of client on the site.

The Panel felt that the overall scale of the proposed scheme was entirely reasonable for the site's location and context, and that the site's residential surroundings do not preclude a three storey institutional development of this type.

Spatial organisation, height and massing

The Panel considered how well the building plan had been set out on the site, as well as responding to interrogation of the brief, and whether its components create quality spaces and a well-articulated building. The Panel acknowledged the needs assessment of the client was a key factor informing the density of development on the site, but identified some issues with the arrangement of the proposed buildings. The Panel agreed that larger massing was appropriate for key buildings on the site, but felt the continuous roofscape may make buildings appear more massive. On visiting the site the Panel saw no particular constraints on building heights on site.

After much discussion the Panel decided that many of the issues could be resolved and the design improved if the independent living units were integrated in a different way with the rest of the development. It is possible that this is a key element of the client's brief so removing it entirely from the site may not be practical, but the Panel wondered if more of the site could be allocated to the overall development allowing a bit more space to arrange buildings more effectively. Failing this it may be worthwhile returning to the design of the independent living units and looking for a new solution. A two storey solution may be one option worth further consideration at this point.

Interaction of internal layout with user experience and external features

The Panel identified lost opportunities at the end of the protruding fingers of the main buildings, as one block is disadvantaged by the lack of a living room to provide an aspect out of the building at the end of the block, where a staircase is situated. Also in this block residents' bedrooms face north west so any opportunity to benefit from sunlight in other rooms, by moving stairs inwards for example, should be pursued. In other parts of the design incidental spaces work well, so this seems to be a missed opportunity that could be maximised with a minimal amount of redesigning. The staircases could be much better designed and sited, and the end views could be enjoyed by communal areas or bedrooms instead of being blocked by windowless stair towers. Similarly, the generosity in other areas of the scheme is not reflected in the design of the main entrance to the care home.

The Panel was concerned that some of the bedroom dimensions appear to be small, but was told that Quantum Care's dimensions exceed national minimum standards. The Panel was pleased that window sill heights would enable residents to enjoy views out whilst seated.

Elevational treatment

The Panel was not convinced by the elevations and identified important opportunities for variety to be included in the elevational treatment. The Panel advised the design team to revisit the elevations to articulate the scheme more richly, and to provide a variety of ways to see out of the building. This would still allow a good level of care and accommodation to be provided by the plan layout as required by the brief, but would also provide visual interest, and variety in outlook for residents. Balconies, bays or oriel windows were all cited as ways variety could be included in the design.

On reflection, the Panel felt that the elevational treatment in the proposals seen at review was perhaps intended to help the building appear falsely diminutive to combat concerns about massing. The Panel decided this approach has a negative effect on the appearance and character of the overall scheme - it should be more confident.

As well as poor elevations the roofscape caused the Panel some concerns, as it seemed somewhat incoherent because it resulted from the plan form, but should be given some further design consideration. The building needs to be more confident and the architecture needs to be of a quality to give justice to that confidence. While not being apologetic about the fact that it is larger, more institutional building than surrounding housing development the design should also represent the residential nature of the development, achieving a higher level of quality than it does at present.

Choice of materials

The Panel did not entirely agree with the design team's choice of materials, and felt the reasons for the choices were not presented robustly. Without boarding on the end walls for instance, an opportunity to grow climbers up south facing walls could be realised, which could integrate planting into the building scheme to mitigate the otherwise negative impact of blank end walls. The Panel had differing views about the appropriateness of the pale brick in the context of the site, and Welwyn Garden City's demands for a more traditional local (darker) brick than the paler proposed brick were noted. As the development would be a dominant building in the area, a darker brick might help soften its impact and tie it in sympathetically to surroundings buildings, but the Panel also thought that a light brick could work. It was noted that materials for a building of this size need to be of a sufficient quality and that the use of UPVC windows for instance, would be detrimental to the scheme.

Landscape design

The route to the main entrance for cars, scooters and pedestrians is creating a new street but the design of that area (in contrast to other areas of the scheme) was felt by some of the Panel to be quite hard. The arrival point could be further enhanced.

The Panel was not convinced that the landscape design elements of the scheme are strong enough to be delivered as indicated, but they had not benefitted from a presentation from the landscape architects. The Panel thought it critical that the promise of a rich landscape was fulfilled as it would be a very important aspect for quality and enjoyment of the home, and the overall impact of the scheme on its neighbourhood. Much more detail was required as to how the spaces would be maintained and what scope there might be for resident involvement.

It was also noted that the arrangement of the independent living units adjacent to the car park access road prevents the best connection between the units and wider YPD block, and disabled parking. This could cause issues in use for staff and residents.

The Panel was not convinced by the inclusion of 'added on' extensive green roofs, notwithstanding their value in achieving BREEAM credits. Efforts would be better spent on terraces or roof gardens that relate to residents' living accommodation.

Conclusions

The Panel had no concerns regarding height or massing of the proposals which were not seen as problematic during the site visit. A three story building is appropriate for the site.

The Panel commended the architects' delivery against a difficult brief but found there is not an ideal fit between the client's needs and size of the site, resulting in design challenges that have proved detrimental to in architectural terms. Some issues may only be fully resolvable if either the amount of accommodation is slightly reduced, or the portion of the site available to the care home development is increased. As the client's needs affect either option, it needs to carefully consider this advice. The Panel recognised the constraints, and the work that has been put in to ameliorate these in the scheme, but were unanimous in the view that the single storey buildings on the site were incongruous to the rest of the scheme, and do not work well at all.

The key concern is the single storey independent living units appearing under scaled and inappropriate in comparison to the main bulk of the care home development. They do not sit well on the site. This view is supported by the number of solutions tested during the design process. The Panel advises further options appraisal work to see if any of the issues in relation to the independent living units can be resolved.

The Panel would also like to see further attention given to the articulation of the care home and YPD elevations. At present both the elevational and roof treatments of the scheme appear monolithic due to uniformity; both would benefit from more variety. More could be made of the ends of each block regarding staircases and living space.

The main entrance is not well articulated and would benefit from some further work to attract people in, including softening the landscaping of the arrival route. There are clearly good intentions regarding the use and character of the spaces, but at present these are let down by the building which seems almost appealing or apologetic, yet does not disguise the fact it is a three story building. The proposal needs to be for a confident three storey building on the site, in contrast to surrounding development.

In summary, were the Panel to see the scheme again at a future review it would be looking for stronger architecture and elevations for it to be successful and accepted. The scheme needs to have a higher quality, less apologetic elevational treatment to mitigate its otherwise uniform appearance, and the independent living units should be addressed, as at present they do not work as a harmonious part of the scheme.

I hope that the conclusions of the Panel prove helpful in informing the next steps for the development proposals, and that future dialogue between the client team, design team and local planning authority will prove fruitful in finding some common ground. If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to contact the Panel via Rachael Donovan in the first instance on (01992) 556294, email rachael.donovan@hertfordshire.gov.uk.

Yours sincerely,



Barry Shaw (Chair)
Hertfordshire Design Review Panel

cc. Richard Aston, Principal Development Management Officer (North Area),
Welwyn and Hatfield Borough Council
Rachael Donovan, Design and Built Environment Manager,
Hertfordshire County Council
Russell Monck, Hertfordshire County Council
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