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**HERTFORDSHIRE DESIGN REVIEW PANEL MEMBERS**

**Sovereign House Design Review 03/02/14:**

Peter Studdert, Peter Studdert Planning (Chair)

Jeremy Caulton, iCube Ltd

Kevin Burrell, HFBT Architects

**CONFIDENTIAL**

Dear Lyndon,

**Report of the Hertfordshire Design Review Panel:** Redevelopment of Sovereign House, Hale Road, Hertford (Planning Application Reference: 3/13/1967/FP)

The Hertfordshire Design Review Panel was convened on 3 February 2014 to review a proposal to demolish and redevelop Sovereign House, Hertford to provide a flatted development of 90 residential units.

At the time of the review a planning application for redevelopment of the site had been submitted to the planning authority following pre-application discussions in early/mid 2013. The applicant had previously secured a change of use to residential via the prior approval route.

**Site visit and presentations**

Following a tour of the site, the applicant outlined the background and rationale to their proposal. Attempts by the applicant to purchase the Elburt Wurling's public house (PH) on the South East corner of the site have been unsuccessful to date with this part of the site remaining in separate ownership. No other route to secure ownership is apparent to the applicant at this time. Sovereign House itself had previously been marketed for employment use, but without success. The applicant pointed out a number of significant constraints on the site, namely the extensive basement sub-structure of the building, and outlined how they have sought to turn these constraints to their own advantage.

The applicant's preference is to pursue the redevelopment of the site and deliver a high quality residential scheme that complements Hertford by providing good access to the town centre for occupiers, a comprehensive greening of the site, an architectural response that is sensitive to the setting, and a scheme which allows for integration with future redevelopment of the Elburt Wurlings PH, as well as any public realm improvement projects along Pegs Lane and Wesley Avenue.

The planning authority also provided the panel with a brief planning history of the site and outlined their main concerns, which in summary are:

- Relationship and integration of the proposal with the Elburt Wurlings PH and the wider Conservation Area.
- Overall provision and design of public open space and access, private outdoor amenity space, public realm and landscaping (including SuDS)
- Scale and massing of the proposals, and response to the Conservation Area
- Proposed use, and the layout and design, of internal units with regard to occupier amenity and air quality.
- Provision and integration of parking provision

Presentations were followed by an engaging and constructive Q&A session with the Panel that explored the site, the wider area and the applicant's proposal in more depth.

### **Overview of the site**

The existing site is currently occupied by Sovereign House which is a concrete office block built during the 1960's. Sovereign House is part 4, part 5 storeys in height.

There is an extensive cold war bunker which stretches across the site. The bunker was decommissioned in the 1990s with little remaining of the existing bunker. As such it now appears as a vast storage area only. There is an existing electricity sub-station, partially buried into northeast corner of the site adjacent to the main building entrance. The site currently has 60 on-site car parking spaces located at ground level.

The site falls from Hale Road north towards Gascoyne Way with an underpass linking the opposing side of Gascoyne Way along the northern and eastern boundaries. Adjoining the site to the east is the two storey Hertford Police Station. Opposite the site to the west is Pimlico Court which is a modern three storey residential development. To the south across Hale Road is the Richard Hale School which is set back from the road within its own grounds.

The site is located within the 'West Street' area of the Hertford Town Centre Conservation Area, although no mention of Sovereign House was made in the most recent Character Appraisal in 1998.

### **Overview of the proposal**

The proposal comprises the demolition of Sovereign House and replacing it with two residential blocks: 'Block A' and 'Block B'.

Block A is proposed to be constructed in an 'L' shape with the principle elevation fronting onto Gascoyne Way. Block A has been set back between 8m and 16m from Gascoyne Way making it aligned with Pimlico Court to the west. There are 61 residential units within Block A, all of which are dual-aspect. These units are served by four distinct stair and lift cores. Block B is to be constructed in a 'T' shape with the principle elevation aligned with Hale Road to the south. Block B provides 29 residential units designed around a central lift core. The majority of the units within Block B are also dual aspect.

Pedestrian access for Block A is provided via the central courtyard footpaths that can be accessed via Wesley Avenue, Pegs Lane and Hale Road. Residents of Block B can access the block directly from Hale Road, or via the central courtyard footpaths.

The proposal would have a density of 225 dwellings per hectare, provide approximately 1,350 sq.m. of open amenity space. A total of 83 residential car parking spaces are provided within the development, along with 96 cycle spaces.

Vehicular access to the Lower Ground Floor car park is obtained via a short ramp from Pegs Lane. Vehicular access to the Basement area car park is obtained via a second access off Pegs Lane with cars entering a double car lift which will transfer vehicles down to the basement.

## **Panel's observations and recommendations**

### Overview

The Panel supports the principle of the redevelopment of this unattractive and outdated office building, and believes that in spite of the close proximity of Gascoyne Way, residential use can be made to work here. However, the site context is extremely challenging, and although the overall scale and architectural expression of the proposed development is acceptable, the Panel is concerned that there is no overall strategic vision for this part of Hertford town centre within which the proposal can be assessed in detail.

In particular, the proposal does not show how it will accommodate the satisfactory future redevelopment of the Elburt Wurlings PH on the prominent southwest corner of the site, nor is there a vision for how the extremely poor quality public realm surrounding the development can be improved in the short or longer term. The Panel believes that further joint working to address these issues between the developer, the planning authority and the highway authority will be required before permission can be recommended. The Panel also has some detailed concerns relating to access, servicing arrangements, car parking and the provision of private open space. The Panel believes that many of these problems can be resolved by rethinking the design of Block B facing Hale Road.

### Need for a strategic approach

The Panel acknowledges the extremely challenging context presented by the Gascoyne Way dual carriageway and the separate ownership of the Elburt Wurlings PH, and understands that many of the challenges faced by the applicant are not within their direct control. However, the Panel feels there are two significant issues that need to be resolved:

- No clear strategy for accommodating the future redevelopment of the Elburt Wurlings PH on the prominent southwest corner of the site as well as potential future redevelopment of the Hertford Police Station site to the east.
- No clear public realm strategy for improving the extremely poor quality of public realm surrounding the site on Pegs Lane, Wesley Avenue and Hale Road.

As many of these issues are outside of the control of the applicant, the Panel would welcome a master planning exercise led by the planning authority, but with the involvement of the applicant and other landowners and stakeholders, to set out a vision for this part of Hertford.

A master plan for the area would help resolve how the Elburt Wurlings PH would be best integrated with the proposed scheme without being compromised by it, and help to shape development that has a stronger sense of place and legibility for occupiers, visitors and users of Sovereign House and adjoining areas. The master plan could also be used as the basis for a possible Compulsory Purchase Order on Elburt Wurlings PH if the current owner fails to co-operate in a co-ordinated redevelopment strategy.

As currently proposed the design of Block B will inhibit the future redevelopment of the Elburt Wurlings PH, and revisions should be made to the application that show how a co-ordinated redevelopment can be implemented for the whole of this street block.

### Public realm

A clear public realm strategy, informed and developed through a strategic master plan for the area, is needed to improve the quality of the public realm surrounding the site.

It was clear to the Panel that Pegs Lane is a well-used and important pedestrian route into the town centre, particularly the end of Pegs Lane where pedestrians access the underpass. A shared surface arrangement within Pegs Lane would improve the quality of the public realm and accommodate existing pedestrian desire lines through Pegs Lane toward the underpass, whilst also accommodating the main vehicular and servicing access point for the development and existing disabled parking provision. As part of this, the location and/or treatment of the proposed surface car parking and relocated substation in the northwest corner of the development site should be reconsidered as part of a wider public realm improvement strategy for Pegs Lane.

The Panel feels there is a strong need for a longer-term vision for improving Wesley Avenue as an attractive pedestrian route linking the castle and the historic town centre to Hale Road and the school by introducing at-grade pedestrian crossings and traffic calming measures to Gascoyne Way and Hale Road to replace the unpleasant and threatening pedestrian underpasses. Doing so would help to resolve the chaotic space around the southeast corner of the development site adjoining the Hertford Police Station access.

### Layout, landscaping and private amenity

The Panel welcomes the overall design and landscaping of the internal courtyard, and how this will improve the setting of Wesley Avenue, which could be further improved through a wider public realm improvement strategy for the area. The Panel has no particularly strong view about whether the existing trees along the boundary with Wesley Avenue are retained or removed, provided any replacement landscaping complements the setting and is appropriately managed during and after the construction phase.

The Panel feels that the layout and set back of Block A from Gascoyne Way is appropriate, but has concerns over the layout of Block B. The Panel acknowledges the right of light issues which has resulted in a set back from the Elburt Wurlings PH and a 'T' shaped footprint for Block B. However, it is felt that the proposed layout intrudes too much into the internal courtyard which could be remedied by adopting a rectangular and shallower footprint similar to the earlier pre-application plan that was shown to the Panel. Any loss of units could be avoided by exploring the possibility of adding an additional floor to Block B whilst ensuring its mass and bulk is mitigated by a sensitive roof design. Another option would be to extend the footprint of Block B into the southeast corner of the site, replacing the four surface car parking spaces which are thought to be too close to the ground floor apartment and harmful to the occupier's amenity, and which leave little room for safe access and manoeuvring.

The Panel are generally relaxed about the alignment of Block B, and see merit in the two approaches suggested (to follow the proposed building line on Hale Road or reflect the alignment of Block A to give the internal courtyard a simpler geometry). However, preference would be given to the former as this would help to deliver other design and place making benefits along the Hale Road frontage.

The Panel welcomes the general orientation of the apartments, providing double aspect apartments throughout most of the development and providing multiple lifts and stairs to facilitate this. The Panel notes that the apartments with poorest amenity would be those on the lower ground floor facing north/northwest towards Gascoyne Way. The amenity of these single aspect apartments could be improved through a landscaped acoustic wall against the ramp down to the underpass to mitigate the noise impact from Gascoyne Way, which may also help to resolve the purpose of this space by creating larger defensible private gardens for occupiers of the Lower Ground Floor which would at least receive evening sun in the summer.

The remaining apartments currently have no outdoor balconies, and the Panel believes that these should be provided on south and west-facing frontages where there is no risk of overlooking.

### Access and place making

The Panel has significant concerns about the identity of the development and legibility of access for visitors and other users (e.g. post and parcel deliveries, removal vans and service providers). No principal entrance to the development seems apparent and it is unclear how a visitor would arrive at the site. It is also unclear whether Blocks A and B would be considered as one or two separate residential blocks with different addresses.

One option may be to provide a single principal entrance within the Hale Road frontage of Block B that in turn provides access to Block A via the internal courtyard. This entrance could serve for visitors to the whole development.

The Panel believes that servicing Block B from a proposed pathway onto Hale Road between Block B and the Elburt Wurlings PH presents significant design and safety concerns. The Panel believes it would be more sensible and appropriate to service the whole development from Pegs Lane so long as the detailed design and specification of materials are robust and carefully considered to mitigate any visual impacts. It may also be necessary to accommodate access to the Gascoyne Way frontage of Block A for the emergency services and for fire safety reasons.

The Panel also believes the layout of the underground car parking is extremely tight and needs careful checking to ensure that the spaces are adequate and can be accessed. Similarly, the cycle parking space is thought to be very restricted for a town centre location. Should the car parking provision fall below the standard normally required by the planning authority, enhanced and useable cycle parking will be essential.

The Pegs Lane frontage of Block A appears to be rather inactive as a result of having to locate the two vehicular access points in this area. The inclusion of private defensible amenity space as well as additional and/or larger windows to the Lower and Upper Ground Floor apartments along Pegs Lane may go some way to animating this frontage.

### Scale and mass

The Panel broadly supports the architectural response, scale and mass of the proposal and welcomes the proposed use of materials, set backs, baffles and recessed window reveals within the elevations.

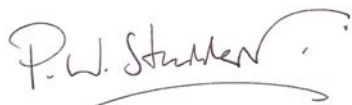
The Panel does suggest that the mass and bulk of Block A could be further broken down through the use of materials, balconies and set backs to animate and introduce greater verticality and dynamism into the elevations, particularly the elevation of Block A facing Gascoyne Way.

### Conclusion

The Panel supports the principle of the redevelopment of what is an unattractive building which offers little to residents and users of this part of Hertford.

The Panel acknowledges the challenging site context, and broadly supports the scale and architectural expression of the proposed scheme. However, the Panel has concerns which left unaddressed would undermine the scheme's integrity, in particular the lack of a public realm strategy, no clear strategy for integrating the Elbert Wurlings PH site, and issues of access and legibility, servicing arrangements, car parking and the provision of private open space.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'P. W. Studdert', with a long horizontal flourish underneath.

Peter Studdert (Chair, Hertfordshire Design Review Panel)