



Design Review Report

Sixth Form Centre, Cwmbran

Torfaen

DCFW Ref: N152

Meeting of 9th November 2017

Review Status

Meeting date
Issue date
Scheme location
Scheme description
Scheme reference number
Planning status

CONFIDENTIAL

9th November 2017
16th November 2017
Cwmbran, Torfaen
Mixed Use
N152
Pre-application

Declarations of Interest

Panel members, observers and other relevant parties are required to declare **in advance** any interests they may have in relation to the Design Review Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

None.

Consultations to Date

This is the first time that DCFW has reviewed proposals for this site.

The Proposals

The proposed development is a sixth form centre as part of a wider masterplan for the site to include separate offices, A3 uses and a hotel with associated parking and public realm. The site is a brownfield site, formerly Arvin Meritor works, but has been cleared to leave a largely flat development plot. It is located close to Cwmbran Town Centre but is separated from the centre by St David's Road. The site is being brought forward in partnership between Welsh Government and Torfaen County Borough Council. The focus of this review was on the masterplan for the site rather than the detail of the Sixth Form Centre itself.

Outline planning permission for the whole of the Strategic Action Area is in place with a hybrid application proposed for this development. This will consist of a full application for the Sixth Form Centre and outline for the remainder of the proposals.

Main Points

DCFW welcomed the opportunity to review this important development at a stage when there remains scope to inform the proposals. Further value could be added by a more detailed consideration of the Sixth Form Building by DCFW at the earliest opportunity.

This site is part of a Strategic Action Area and has an important role to play in the future development of Cwmbran. It therefore requires a strong vision for what type of place it will be, how it will respond to the needs of the town and how it will serve residents in the future. Whilst ambitions regarding the connectivity of the site into the town centre, the desire for a public space and the idea of this being an extension to the town centre were articulated verbally in the review, they have not been sufficiently drawn out in the

consideration of options for the site, the design development or in establishing a clear vision.

This development will have a legacy and as landowners and promoters of the development Welsh Government and the Local Authority should be setting a benchmark for quality and making a commitment to securing public value through an exemplar scheme. Commercial considerations of potential occupiers are one aspect to be considered but the long term legacy is currently being overlooked and aspirations are not high enough. This is relevant to the mix of uses proposed as well as the physical design of the site.

Public realm

The public realm forms an important part of the proposals for this site and the express ambition is to provide a truly public, civic space that is currently lacking in the town centre. The masterplan therefore needs to define design parameters for the design of the public space and set out what happens at the edges in order for the space to be successful. Without these parameters the quality of the space will be undermined. This is evident in the initial plan for the pub which, in its current form and location will have a significant detrimental impact on the public space. The masterplan should create the conditions which enable future development, promote public interest and coordinate the use of the site, therefore sufficient detail is needed to achieve this. The idea of leaving this 'flexible' leaves the masterplan open to the piecemeal development of plots which do not contribute to the place as a whole – as demonstrated by the proposals for the pub which are generic and not in line with the masterplan.

A well designed public space considers activity first with the form responding to support and enable such activity and enliven the space. The future use of the space must be considered now, including who will use it, for what activities, what will happen at different times of the day and at the weekends and who will manage or curate the space. It is likely that the college will be the main activator of the space but more thought needs to be given to what this will consist of and how this activity can be best incorporated in order to ensure a successful space.

The implications of any requirements arising from the flood consequences assessment need to be understood so that the design of the public realm can respond appropriately.

There must be good integration between the higher access level of the site and the lower space through well designed and accessible movement options. The idea of an amphitheatre space could be one option for achieving this. The resulting space should be tested for its climatic conditions as there is a risk that it could end up very shaded and unpleasant, therefore unlikely to be well used.

Mix of uses

It is positive that a mix of uses is proposed for this site, however, the way in which the mix is to be articulated does not seem to be appropriate for a town centre location. The separation of each use into separate plot surrounded by car parking is more akin to an out-of-town development. If this is to be considered part of a growing town centre it should create an active, vibrant location of well-defined streets and squares where the ground floors are active and act as an extension of the public realm. The combination of

A3, hotel and office uses suggests the potential for vertical mixing of uses that utilises the A3 use on the ground floor. However, it is not evident that this has been explored as an option and as a result, the benefits of the mix of uses are not being maximised.

The appropriateness of a pub adjacent to a six form college is questioned. It is not clear what other options for uses have been considered for the site. For example, the town centre is predominantly national chain retailers, food outlets and leisure operators so there may be an opportunity to provide space for more independents and uses that align more closely to the college as the main occupier of the site.

Further exploration is required of the vision and the identification of key objectives for the type of place this is going to be. A long term perspective is required from the Local Authority and Welsh Government that looks beyond the initial disposal of the sites to the contribution that this site could make to the wellbeing of future generations as required by the Well-being of Future Generations Act. As a place of education and learning it should be an inspiring place that engages, stimulates, welcomes and connects people. An opportunity exists to create a wellbeing plan for the whole of the site which considers movement, energy, food, mental health, culture and ecology in a holistic way with the potential of being an exemplar development.

Connectivity

Connectivity of the site to the town centre and surrounding land uses has rightly been identified as an important aspect of the masterplan. The current plans are not explicit in showing the wider connectivity, such as the footbridge. This would be useful to demonstrate that it has been tested and incorporated into the design proposals. The requirements for active travel and enhanced opportunities to choose modes of transport, prioritising walking and cycling, need to be further considered.

Public transport connections are important and there is potentially good connectivity to these but this is not yet demonstrated in the plans. Consideration should also be given to drop off points and how this interacts with pedestrian movement.

The terracing of the site is important to accommodate the level change from the Morrisons store to site level. A creative and inclusive approach is needed to maximise accessibility for all, across the site.

Car park strategy

A large amount of parking is proposed for this site. It is disappointing that parking numbers cannot be revised given the central location of the site as it has a significant impact on the quality of the environment, air quality and the pedestrian experience. The impact of the amount of under-croft parking on the quality of the public realm needs to be reviewed and opportunities for softening the car parks with greener, soft landscaping and improving the environment for pedestrians should be taken.

Keeping the pedestrian approach to the site separate from the car parking area is positive in some ways but it means that people will be approaching the buildings from two sides. The quality of the approach to the entrance of the college from the car park is a key part of the public realm. Other desire lines between parking areas and entrances should also be accommodated.

Servicing

The masterplan layout results in a lack of clear distinction between fronts and backs of buildings presenting a problem for the location of servicing. The pub, for example, has all sides exposed to public space, road or the car park and it is not clear where and how servicing could take place that would not have a negative impact on one of these areas.

Sixth Form Centre

Whilst the design of the building wasn't examined in detail there are considerations that should be taken at the masterplanning stage that have an impact on the building design. In particular the current resulting orientation of the building needs further thought. The long south-facing elevation provides opportunities for natural daylight and solar gain but could also result in overheating and glare. An environmental strategy for the building needs to be considered now to ensure that sustainability aspirations can be met and any adjustments to orientation considered now.

Next Steps

DCFW would welcome a follow up review of the masterplan as well as the proposals for the college. This will be most beneficial when the impact of potential flooding is understood but in advance of the planning application being submitted so that there is scope for a further constructive discussion about the proposals. Contacting DCFW as soon as possible is encouraged to secure a slot for a second review.

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A Welsh language copy of this report is available upon request.

Attendees

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Architect/Planning Consultant:	Huw Lewis, Boyes Rees Architects Graham David, Boyes Rees Architects Barrie Davies, Asbri Planning
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