

Addroddiad Adolygu Dylunio Design Review Report

Review Status: **Confidential**

Meeting date:	20th January 2010
Issue Date:	2nd February 2010
Scheme Location:	Mill Street, Risca
Scheme Description:	Residential
Planning Status:	Pre-application

Part1: Presentation

DCFW has reviewed a previous scheme for 88 apartments on this site in August 2008. This was withdrawn in March 2009. Since then the market has changed to favour family housing and this proposal is for about 30 units which are mostly 2-bed or 3-bed houses. This is intended to be a more permeable scheme than its predecessors, with pedestrian routes through the site, designed to a more human scale and responding well to its context.

The site is brownfield, close to existing facilities and occupies a prominent site on the road into Risca from the south east. It has long been in need of redevelopment and an outline permission exists for 35 apartments. The main site constraints are a protected copper beech tree on the south west corner and a 12m wide drainage easement running north/south through the centre of the site. The root protection zone of the tree has been respected in the block layout. It is anticipated that the Local Authority owned car park on the south east corner would become part of a land transfer. The scheme is designed to achieve Code Level 4.

The Panel was also given basic information about a proposed care home of 80 units, located across Commercial Street and in the same ownership as the site under review. This was mainly to provide contextual information for the Mill Street scheme, but the team indicated that they would welcome comments from the Panel.

In the view of the Local Authority, the concept, design and density of the proposal show significant improvement from previous schemes. Active frontages were welcomed, along with a 'home zone' approach to site layout and finishes. Highways officers have concerns about the entrance to the car park, while it remains, and its proximity to the main site entrance. The proposal shows a slice taken off the car park for phase 1. Ideally the

authority would like to see the corner developed first, or the site developed as a whole without phasing. They suggested that the existing office function could be relocated to the south west corner, next to the protected tree.

Summary of key points arising from discussion, to be read in conjunction with Part 2 of this report.

The Panel welcomed the opportunity to review this scheme at a stage where design ideas were still being developed and tested. We think this has the potential to be a good scheme if the following major issues are resolved:

- We welcome the principle of development on both sites, and we appreciate the improvements that have been made to the proposals for Mill Street.
- The two sites, together with the Council's landholdings on the corner between them, should be jointly explored through a landscape focused masterplan.
- The frontage on Mill Street needs a more continuous form and the way in which the buildings turn the corner on to Commercial Street is currently not well resolved.
- We support the aspiration for a home zone treatment of the site and the improved permeability, but advised that the input of a landscape architect is needed and the inclusion of play/amenity spaces.
- We are not convinced that any form of roundabout is necessary at the entrance to the site.
- Good solar orientation should be the key to the site planning, as part of the strategy to achieve Code 4. Some re-planning of the site and internal layouts will be necessary to deliver this.
- We welcomed the possibility of a hydro scheme, but questioned the feasibility of micro CHP. Ideally the two sites would be linked to a single heating/power system.
- The phasing of the Mill Street scheme should be carefully monitored, to avoid partial development of the site becoming permanent.
- With regard to the care home, the developer should prepare a brief which encompasses all aspects of the development, and correct the impression that sustainability has been included as an afterthought.

Part 2: Discussion and Panel Response in Full

The Panel appreciated the more considered approach to the development of this site, including the attempt to repair the urban grain, and the reduced density. However, the Mill Street elevation is too fragmented and the way in which the buildings 'turn the corner' on to Commercial Street is unresolved. The likelihood is that 1.8m high fencing will be used as a boundary treatment on this corner, although the architect insisted that a low stone wall would be specified and the housing would be in bespoke units. We would have no objection to 3 storey houses on the corner, as suggested by the 3-bed specification at this point, and we think that the massing as a whole needs further consideration.

The vehicular entrance to the site from Mill Street is made wider than necessary by the parking forecourts, and this emphasises the lack of continuity in this frontage. We suggested that the houses to the north of the access road could be moved to the south

side, perhaps with the layout reversed. We questioned the necessity for a roundabout at this junction, and were informed that no detailed discussions had taken place. The design team had assumed that something like a drive-over stud would be required, but we thought that a simple cross junction would be workable.

The Panel gained the impression that the proposed phasing had driven the site layout, and this did not necessarily deliver the best solution. The client confirmed that the planning application would relate to the whole site and, pending arrangements to purchase the car park from the Local Authority and negotiations to relocate the existing accountant's office, they would wish to deliver the scheme as a whole. The intention would be to replace the existing car parking spaces on the site across Commercial Street. We suggested that any planning consent could be made conditional on resolving land ownership issues. Any possibility of phase 1 being built and the rest of the site remaining undeveloped, should be avoided.

There is little evidence that the site layout has been informed by sustainability considerations such as orientation to maximise passive solar gain and daylighting, as claimed. We noted that 11 units have north facing gardens and living spaces, and this will impact on daylight levels internally. In addition most of the roof ridges are aligned on a north/south axis which does not offer a good orientation for active solar systems. We thought that some re-planning of the site was necessary to support the passive strategy for achieving Code 4, and that sustainability considerations should be embedded in the design development from here on. The unit plans also need to be developed further, to reflect the sustainability aspirations and to ensure the "bespoke" approach that is required on several key plots.

We questioned the feasibility of micro CHP units for each household, given the low heating demand from superinsulated houses, and we welcomed the assurance that a hydro scheme on the river was a realistic possibility. This would involve linking the two sites across Commercial Street and we recommended that the developer investigate the benefits of a single CHP district heating scheme serving both sites.

The Panel thought it essential that a landscape architect should be engaged on this scheme to help develop the home zone idea, incorporate play and amenity spaces, and inform the Mill Street frontage treatment. Play areas are particularly important in a scheme of predominantly family houses. The large blank walls of the FOGs at the bottom of gardens should be reconsidered. We queried the lack of on-site affordable houses and were told that the Local Authority threshold is 35 units.

The Panel supported the proposed boundary treatment of the space around the protected tree, which locates it within the public realm rather than being fenced off. The public open space in front of the proposed care home should be developed with a quality landscape treatment and integrated with both sites.

With regard to the proposed care home on Commercial Street, we have concerns about the setback of the building from the road. While we appreciate the flood-related constraints, this gives a weak urban edge to the site at a busy junction. The south facing courtyard is a positive aspect, but single-aspect, north-facing rooms should be avoided. Escape stairs located on the south facing gables exclude the potential benefit of improved solar access, views and daylight. We questioned whether the model of single ensuite

rooms was appropriate and thought that 80 was probably too many units, although they would be grouped in clusters. The narrow corridors do not allow for informal socialising and, while we welcome daylight access via the clerestories, there may be other ways of achieving this which does not add to the height of the building. We would like to see an energy strategy developed which links the two sites and maximises financial savings and carbon reductions. In general, we think the team should step back from the proposed layout and consider a wider brief which embeds sustainability considerations such as orientation.

The Design Commission for Wales Design Review Panel and staff welcome further consultation and will be happy to provide further feedback on this report and/or where appropriate, to receive further presentations. Thank you for consulting the Commission and please keep in touch with us about the progress of your project.

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

Appendix 1: Attendees

Asiant/Client/Datblygwr: Agent/Client/Developer	Bird Group [Sonia Bird]
Pensaer/Architect:	Powell Dobson [Glyn Parker] Williamson Associates [Hugh Williamson]
Consultants:	RPS Group [Mark Roberts]
AwdurdodCynllunio/ Planning Authority	Caerphilly CBC [Paul den Brinker, Chris Boardman]
Y Panel Adlygu Dylunio: Design review panel: Alan Francis [Chair] Cindy Harris [Officer] Caole-Anne Davies [CEO] Mark Hallett	Toby Adam Lynne Sullivan Phil Roberts Maria Asenjo
Lead Panellist:	Toby Adam
Sylwedyddion/Observers:	n/a

Declaration of Interest: Mark Hallett stated that he is currently employing RPS Gregory – a division of the RPS group - and that he has in the past employed Powell Dobson.