

Home Office Design Review

Cardiff Bay Divisional Headquarters

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Home Office Panel:

John Jenkins

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Design Commission for Wales representatives:

Paul Vanner

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Background

This project has a long history. It is part of an estate rationalisation strategy which replaces, relocates and centralises police activities. The reuse of existing buildings has been considered and rejected in terms of cost and location. Planning consent had been granted on a previous scheme for the proposed site. A similar but reduced scheme has also received consent. There is an expressed aim to maintain the ability to expand the accommodation in the future to the size of the original consent.

The project is now at tender using a 'Design and Build' procurement route. The South Wales Police's view is that this design review is being held too early and should have been left until after the Design-Build tenders have been received. The authority has used a similar procurement approach successfully on a previous project with the same architects in order to meet their affordability targets.

The project has shared funding from the Police and the Home Office. The Home Office funding is not project specific and therefore no approvals will be required.

Presentation

The presentation was clear but lacked both drawings which showed the building in context, 3 dimensional representations and internal illustrations. In addition, reference was made to design and performance requirements in the tender specification but no copies were available for the panel to consider.

Summary of proposals

The proposals are shown on the attached drawings and will only be summarised here.

The site is near the Cardiff Bay and serves this new area as well as the existing local community. It is on the site of an existing Police station with new residential developments on most sides. The new building will house

divisional activities transferring from a city centre building and holding cells to replace those scattered in a range of locations. There is some mixed use development opposite and the Cardiff Bay developments are immediately adjacent. One side of the site is bounded by public open space over what used to be a canal. The site is prominent and sits on one of the major roads serving the Cardiff Bay.

The new building will contain a substantial custody suite on 2 floors, a semi basement car park for 50 cars, a small public front office and 3 floors of office accommodation for different police activities. The intention is that the roof space is also used for additional accommodation.

The building is a square form with a central atrium sitting on a corner site. The office accommodation faces both outwards and inwards on all four sides of the building. The accommodation is served by stairs and lifts in the corners of the building.

Access to the building for staff is through secure controls at the north west corner, for the public it is through a glazed entrance screen on the south west corner and access to the van docks in the custody suite is from the south east corner.

The building form introduces a rotunda on the corner which is expressed at each floor level but not in the roof form.

The roof is steeply pitched with an aluminium standing seam finish containing accommodation within, though no windows or rooflights are indicated. The eaves are expressed as a stepped box gutter section.

The ground and top floors are largely glazed with the middle two floors shown as brick/terracotta and render with punched windows.

The raised ground floor has required steps and ramps to all entrances.

Some tree planting is shown in the wide pavements around the front and side facades.

Panel comments

The views of the panel members were unanimous in all respects and are as follows:

- The design was described by the project team as aspirational in the expectation that the Design-Build process would achieve an acceptable solution. The panel felt that the scheme was far from aspirational and did not set sufficient challenges for the tenderers.
- The panel did not accept that those parts of the design not yet fully resolved should be left to the competing contractors architects. Major departures from the reference scheme are unlikely to be considered by the tenderers.
- There was concern that the project budget was not adequate to meet the authority's requirements and achieve the appropriate design quality for a major public building on a significant site in a capital city.
- The panel did not accept the architect's statement that there was 'no real context'. It was felt that the design did not reflect the urban context in terms of massing, streetscape and form.
- The panel felt that the design approach was compromised by a lack of clarity in terms of future extension. The building design does not

naturally extend even though site area is left available for this. The resultant square form with space on all four sides loses its relationship to the street as a consequence and is not appropriate in its urban setting.

- It was accepted that there were issues related to 'stand-off' distances but the building should still reinforce the street line more closely.
- The panel commended the integrated approach which incorporates the custody facilities within the body of the building.
- The inclusion of extensive underground car parking at a half level has had a negative effect on height and streetscape.
- The resultant raised ground floor will make for an unsatisfactory relationship between the pavement and the building.
- The prominent siting of the substation and oil tank to James Street should be reviewed.
- The rotunda form was felt to be an over simple approach to a corner building. It will inevitably contain faceted windows due to cost constraints which result in a crude architectural form. The lack of expression of the rotunda in the roof also limits its success.
- The bulk of the building due to the raised ground floor, high floor to ceiling heights and the steep roof is out of keeping with adjacent buildings. The bulk of a building can sometimes be alleviated by a lightness of touch in the detailing. This is not the case in these proposals. The detailing is basic and the procurement route chosen is unlikely to improve this.
- The panel felt that the choice of external materials, render and brick/terracotta, and the way in which they have been used, will result in a dull uninteresting building.
- The panel felt that the public area was too small without adequate waiting space.
- The internal circulation for staff needs to be further tested as the corner stairs and lifts make circulation on upper floors difficult. The introduction of the high level bridges over the atrium was felt to be an unsuccessful response to these circulation issues.
- The atrium open to the custody suite is a challenging approach which the panel had difficulties with. A simpler solution which uses the atrium base for staff amenity could be considered.
- No landscaping scheme was presented. This is needed to include the retention/proposals for existing mature trees together with a suitable choice of paving and hard landscape materials.
- The panel felt that the team had given insufficient consideration to long term sustainability and had not encouraged the tenderers to make serious proposals on this regard.
- The tenderers have not been asked to undertake a BREEAM assessment of their proposals. The panel's view is that this should be a basic requirement for public buildings.
- Design Quality Indicators have not been used as part of the design process and are not part of the tender evaluation process.
- It was not clear how design quality is to be evaluated as part of the tender assessment. The panel had concerns that cost was the major

issue and that design quality would have little sway in the evaluation process.

Suggested actions

The project team confirmed that the tender process would continue unchanged but that the panel would be welcome to review the drawings submitted with the tenders. With the benefit of the tender prices, the panel's comments could be considered in the context of the overall viability of the project.

The panel's recommendation is that tenderers should be made aware of this review and given more time and an amplified brief which encouraged a different approach to the site and demanded higher design quality in all its aspects. It is accepted that this would delay the process and involve a revised planning application.

The panel felt that this review should have taken place earlier in the process to avoid the delays that might now occur.