

Addroddiad Adolygu Dylunio Design Review Report

Review Status: Confidential

Meeting date:	3rd November 2010
Issue Date:	11th November 2010
Scheme Location:	South Sebastopol, Cwmbran
Scheme Description:	Residential
Planning Status:	Pre-application

Part1: Presentation

This is a 'refreshed' outline application for 1200 dwellings, with a new masterplan and Environmental Impact Assessment, to take account of new material considerations. The original consent was granted in 2005, and a section 106 agreement was signed earlier this year. All aspects of the proposal have been revisited, with the new masterplanners bringing a fresh pair of eyes to the project.

The site is greenfield and includes 4 farms, many trees and hedges, footpaths including a Sustrans route, and the Monmouthshire and Brecon Canal running north/south. The design aim is to embrace the challenging topography and create a walkable development with five new neighbourhoods, each with a focal space. There is an opportunity for a new road access and bus route following a loop road through the site which links the village centres. A blue/green infrastructure will be developed using the canal and existing vegetation.

The Local Authority is looking for a new settlement rather than a suburban extension. This proposal meets the requirements of their Design Brief prepared in 2003. The decision to meet the additional requirements for school provision by improving existing schools to the south of the site, has been made by the Local Authority. Many of the objections to this proposal were concerned with protecting the canal and it is now intended to designate this a Conservation Area. The applicant is about to begin public consultation on these proposals and hopes to submit an application in mid-December.

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

The Panel welcomed the opportunity to assess this proposal at an early stage of development, and decided in the circumstances to reserve judgement on its design quality. It was recognised that there is potential for a good scheme to emerge, provided the following areas are satisfactorily addressed:

- We disagreed with the Local Authority's ambition for a 'new settlement' and felt that the site would naturally become an infill, and that the greater challenge was in providing an acceptable degree of connectivity. Whilst we recognise the constraints to that connectivity, we thought that such connectivity that exists needs to be improved and celebrated and the opportunity taken to re-address existing perimeter boundary treatments.
- In figure ground terms the current scheme is too consistent and we think the designers should consider reducing the number of neighbourhood areas and introduce more variation in density. The Panel believed this would deliver a more integrated site layout and help provide a clearer structure to the provision of green spaces. The Panel also believed that each neighbourhood detailed design should be tackled by different architects to introduce variation against the backdrop of an agreed masterplan
- The input of a landscape architect would benefit the scheme and the landscape strategy should be integrated with the site layout and detailed design.
- The strategy of protecting the rural character of the canal for the majority of its length, with the small intervention of the village centre and canal basin, was welcomed.
- A full character appraisal of the existing canal should be undertaken, and not be confined to the site area. It is a predominately rural environment and care needs to be taken to ensure this is preserved or enhanced rather than neglected as has sometimes been the case in South Torfaen.
- Bridges need special consideration, not just for the site area they require to cope with spans and underpasses, but also to ensure they are slim and simple. New bridges need to be separated from existing ones, and pedestrian and cycle traffic along the canal needs to be able to pass at grade.
- The masterplan also needs to consider how the basic infrastructure for the western half of the site is delivered without impacting on the canal and any existing or new bridges. The accommodation of piped services across the canal should be carefully integrated with the detailed design of the canal corridor.
- Small community facilities should be included to give life and definition to the village core[s], and to discourage short car journeys for basic items. This would help mitigate the inevitable increase in traffic congestion on the A4042 and Cwmbran Drive.
- We would encourage the Local Authority to require, and developers to commit to achieving Code Level 4 for the initial phases. Later phases would probably reflect even higher standards. Orientation for passive solar gain should be maximized.
- We questioned how access would be gained for construction traffic for the later phases.

Part 2: Discussion and Panel Response in Full

This masterplan proposal is still at an early stage and much more detailed work remains to be done. In particular we regretted the lack of site sections, and encouraged the applicant to build a simple model to illustrate the complex terrain.

It was agreed that this was not a genuinely new settlement, but had more of the characteristics of an urban extension, and effectively fills the gap between Sebastopol to the north and Cwmbran to the south. The importance of its relationship with these two existing residential areas was emphasised, and consequently the treatment of borders and edges requires further design development.

The Panel questioned why five neighbourhood centres had been chosen, and suggested that there could be fewer centers, with higher [and varied] densities, better linkages and a clearer green space strategy possibly increasing the extent or character of that green space. The designer explained that the number and location of neighbourhoods had been driven by the topography, and existing structures and vegetation.

The Panel thought that the site layout was very homogeneous with a uniform low density, and required more differentiation and hierarchy. Another stage of design iteration is needed, between the site framework and the block design. This would provide the basis for locally varied design responses. The team agreed that different densities and heights would be used to create variation in the built form. We thought that using different architects would help create a distinctive character for each neighbourhood. If a percentage of affordable housing is to be included, this should be distributed throughout the site, and not in one character area.

The Panel would like to see more mixed use and community facilities incorporated into the scheme, so as to clearly define the village centres and to prevent it becoming a dormitory development. A local shop, community hall and pub would help to create social networks, and would be unlikely to compete with existing centres.

The canal is obviously a unique asset and its sympathetic integration into the scheme will be vital. The Panel welcomed the approach taken in the masterplan, of restricting development along most of the canal's length and the creation of a landscape corridor, while opening up the area around the recently developed canal basin and the 'village core' for more small scale intensive urban uses. This is also the location of the only existing vehicular crossing point, which will be retained with the possible addition of a new bridge to the north and another to the south, forming a loop road in the development. It was confirmed that several watercourses cross the canal, some culverted, some open, and these will be incorporated into a new sustainable drainage system.

A comprehensive character appraisal of the canal, not confined to the site boundaries, would usefully highlight the inherent character to be preserved on this site, and may help make suggestions for new interventions such as pub gardens which tend to back onto the canal to offer facilities for walkers and cyclists without the intrusion of the motor car. It will also be important to ensure that residential gardens are placed a good distance away from the canal towpath to preserve its rural character, or else are opened up to avoid tall garden fences creating a visual barrier.

The Panel was concerned to ensure that any new bridges would be well designed and sympathetically integrated so that, for example, approach ramps do not blight the towpath.

We would like to see more details as they emerge, including the treatment of different levels, access and drainage infrastructure. The Panel noted that that a new road is proposed to cross the canal at the location of the existing bridge over Bevan's Lane. We had concerns that this would lead to a large and obtrusive new bridge, and suggested that the team move the new access road, leaving the existing Bevan's Lane bridge intact, with the new road bridge being located some distance away to the north.

The landscape strategy will be vital and we understood that such a strategy exists and will be integrated with the developing design. The continuity of green links and ecological corridors needs to be demonstrated.

The connections to the north and south need improving to maximise access to the existing developments, while retaining the dense vegetation on the northern boundary. Inevitably, the development will be largely accessed by car and this will exacerbate the already high level of congestion on existing roads. We were informed that improvements are proposed to the Avondale and Grove Park roundabouts, but this would not address the problems on Cwmbran Drive and the A4042. The Panel understood that this was not within the remit of this proposal but considered that this reinforced the argument in favour of on-site facilities.

Although no details are given of a sustainability strategy or Code target, the Local Authority representative stated that they would like to see a commitment to achieve Code Level 3. We thought that a development of this size and status should demonstrate a commitment to Code 4, even though there is no statutory requirement in this case, given the date of the original application. An outline of the sustainability strategy based on a CSH pre-assessment should be included in the Design & Access statement, with a more detailed approach set out in future reserved matters applications. Orientation of blocks (and/or roofscapes) to maximise passive solar gain should be a major design driver in the block layout.

The Panel was informed that most of the site was in the ownership of the Pontypool Park estate, and Welsh Assembly Government [WAG]. The developers are in the process of taking options on different areas. The first phases to be developed will be either side of the main access into the site from Cwmbran Drive. The area to the north of the access road will be developed by Barratt, and the area to the south, by Taylor Wimpey. Overall, approximately 50% of the site area will be developed.

The Panel was concerned to understand how strategic services infrastructure could satisfactorily cross the canal without causing local visual intrusions or unnecessarily leading to over-bulky bridge design. We were also interested to learn how, if the earliest phases of construction commenced closest to Cwmbran Drive, construction traffic for later stages would gain access without disturbing the new or adjoining residents.

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

Consortium of Taylor Wimpey
[Richard Cresswell],
Barratt Homes [Martin Lewis]
WAG [Paul Evans]

Pensaer/Architect:

PAD Design [Jonathan Vernon-Smith]

Consultants:

Asbri Planning [Robin Williams]
Whitehead Project Management
[Jon Whitehead]
Waterman [Andrew Wilkinson]

AwdurdodCynllunio/
Planning Authority

Torfaen CBC [Duncan Smith,
Helen Smith]

Y Panel Adlygu Dylunio:
Design Review Panel:
Alan Francis [Chair]
Cindy Harris [Officer]
Simon Carne

Roger Ayton
Toby Adam
Richard Keogh
Martin Knight

Lead Panellist:

Martin Knight

Sylwedyddion/Observers:

Julia Podedworny [student]