

Design Review Report

Glasdir, Ruthin

DCFW Ref: N231

Meeting of 11th June 2020



Review Status

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

Public

11th June 2020
22nd June 2020
Ruthin
Residential
N231
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 declared.

Consultations to Date

Proposals for this site were reviewed as part of the IHP bidding process in July 2019.

Note on current operational context:

The Design Commission for Wales is operating during necessary public health measures due to the impact of the Coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic and this report follows the recent online review meeting.

The Proposals

The proposal is for 62 dwellings on the edge of Ruthin. This site forms part of a large (circa 200 unit) mixed use allocation for housing known as Glasdir. This has been partially developed with market housing (Taylor Wimpey) to the immediate north-east and a new school to the west. There is a focus on low-carbon, sustainable development including maximising use of natural materials in the construction of the dwellings and sourcing them from local manufacturers and suppliers, thereby keeping the associated carbon footprint as low as possible, as well as supporting local businesses.

Main Points

Our previous design review report provided in July as part of the Innovative Housing Programme 3 process raised some urgent design concerns. There is no evidence that the team has dealt with these concerns in the considered way required to address the fundamental issues. Several 'tweaks' have been made but many of the problems remain. We therefore consider that the proposals are not fulfilling the opportunities presented by the site and do not present an adequate response to design, placemaking and Manual for Streets as required by Planning Policy Wales.

Analysis

Evidence of key early stages of the design process are lacking resulting in significant weaknesses in the design. The importance of site and context analysis cannot be understated. There is no evidence of a considered site analysis undertaken at a variety of scales which would underpin future design decisions. The context of Ruthin as a town, the qualities of the edge of settlement location, the surrounding neighbourhoods, the adjacent school and residential development all need to be analysed as well as the attributes of the site including topography, orientation, views, microclimate, history, ecology, landscape, connections, desire lines, flooding etc. Whilst there are constraints, there is also a range of opportunities presented by the site that have not been positively identified. Until this work is undertaken the design cannot progress positively.

Vision

A vision for the site, informed by the brief, site and context analysis, is critical and is still missing. What will this place be like? What will it feel like? What will it be like for people to live here? What sort of lifestyle might they have? What benefits will people have living here? What will the streets and spaces feel like? All design decisions should be assessed against this vision and competing matters weighed up against what will move the proposals closer to the vision.

Without a thorough site analysis and vision, the proposed plan layout has become led by constraints which have not been sufficiently challenged or approached creatively to find positive solutions.

We were unaware that there was a masterplan and design code for the site and, as these have not been provided, we cannot comment on whether the proposals adequately respond to them.

Connectivity

Manual for Streets states that streets should, in general, be connected both to surrounding streets and internally within the site. Whilst the new access road leading to the school results in a dead end, there are a range of opportunities to connect to the adjacent residential area, but these opportunities need to be more richly embedded into the proposals. Identifying points of connection and desire lines across the site for pedestrians and cyclists (for example walking to school, to the bus stop or towards the town centre) would be a useful starting point. It is then important to consider what these routes would feel like and how the design needs to respond to this. This could be a key part of the vision for the site. Ensuring a sense of safety is paramount. Many of the footpath connections shown in the current layout are not overlooked and therefore the feeling of safety is significantly reduced.

By connecting the streets internally there is an opportunity to reduce the areas needed for vehicle turning heads. A hierarchy of streets is helpful for orientation and character but, as this is a relatively small site, it does not need to be extensive. Building-to-building distances, building thresholds, landscape approach, and surface materials should all be considered to reinforce the hierarchy. Opportunities for play should be considered and accommodated.

Placemaking

Movement and connectivity, as mentioned above, are part of placemaking in addition to the public spaces that are created, the identity of the development and the meaning that it holds for the people who live there. The site analysis and vision should inform this, but this is currently lacking. The public spaces proposed are very poor – frequently bounded by side and rear garden fences, poorly connected to each other and very little evidence of thought that has gone into how the spaces might be used.

The client will have a long-term interest in the quality of the place that is being created here for their tenants. It should be the best possible place that allows residents to build a sense of community and thrive. Possible maintenance burdens and spots that may have the potential to attract anti-social behaviour should be deigned out including alley ways, poorly overlooked spaces and parking areas, and 'left-over' spaces. The CGIs are a useful tool for the client to use to understand the nature of the spaces that are created and test whether that is what was intended or desired.

The school provides a point of activity and a potential community feature but it's relationship with the site has not been fully explored.

Design and Access Statement

All the above are needed to compile the design and access statement and tell the story of how the design has been derived and why this is the best possible solution. Large sections of this are currently missing.

Detail

The presentation included many precedent images used as examples of what is proposed but, at this stage, we would expect these aspects to be shown in drawings to demonstrate that they have been designed into the plan. Developing some areas in more detail such as street section typologies, swales, footpaths and open spaces will help to inform the layout.

Next Steps

We would welcome a future review of the proposals if steps are taken to address our concerns outlined above.

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

Attendees

Design Team:	Robert Blout, JPH
Client Team:	Arwyn Evans, Clwyd Alyn Tony Hughes, Williams Homes (Bala) Ltd
Planning Consultant:	Peter Lloyd, PLPlanning
Design Review Panel:	
Chair	Ewan Jones
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