

Design Review Report

Coed Darcy, New Masterplan

DCFW Ref: 253

Meeting of 14th October 2021



Review Status

Meeting date	PUBLIC 14 th October 2021
Issue date	21 st October 2021
Scheme location	Neath Port Talbot
Scheme description	Residential led mixed use
Scheme reference number	N253
Planning status	Pre-application (extant permission in place for previous masterplan)

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 and meeting Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

Consultations to Date

Proposals for Area 1 within the original masterplan were reviewed in 2005. A previous review of this new masterplan for a smaller portion of the site was held in May 2021.

The Proposals

The scheme proposes a new masterplan for Coed Darcy comprising residential development with a new primary school and local centre / commercial hub. Coed Darcy is a brownfield site located west of Junction 43 of the M4, south of Skewen and to the north of Jersey Marine. Following the removal of the BP refinery infrastructure, St Modwen has invested in the remediation and preparation of the site for development. A new masterplan identifies a developable area of circa 45ha which will be the focus of the masterplanning exercise.

Coed Darcy is a longstanding, significant regeneration project, owned and promoted by St Modwen Developments. Planning permission was originally granted in 2008 with the first phase of 300 new homes delivered by Persimmon. The client considers the 2008 consent no longer viable for delivery. A revised masterplan is evolving for a new scheme to enable continued delivery of development at this strategically important site. Up to 2,000 new homes, a primary school, commercial uses within a local centre and care home / sheltered accommodation are currently proposed.

Main Points

The review in May 2021 was an early discussion focused on high level considerations such as the vision for the development and strategic landscape and movement opportunities. After several postponements, this second review came just one month before an outline planning application is due to be submitted. It is very disappointing that much time and opportunity has been lost when the interesting and fruitful discussions from the first review could have been continued. This review now comes at a time when the opportunity for meaningful input into the outline application is significantly reduced. At this stage we have significant concerns that the vision for the scheme lacks clarity, and the proposed

character areas and design principles are poorly conceived giving insufficient weight and certainty to the outline application.

Vision

The wording of the vision has developed since the previous review but still lacks clarity and specificity. The vision states an ambition to be a “15-minute neighbourhood” but there is no explanation of what this means or how this has influenced the plan and indeed how the masterplan created meets that vision. We would expect this to influence determination of the amount and location of services and facilities within the development, the network of pedestrian and cycle routes, the density of development to support the necessary facilities and public transport connections. Some ‘day in the life’ scenarios would be a helpful way to consider how the place would function as a 15-minute neighbourhood.

The existing landscape and proposed green infrastructure have emerged as strong themes in the analysis and wording of the vision. The retention of 46% of the site for green infrastructure suggests that this is a significant influence but there is nothing specific within the masterplan that would create clear identity unique to this development. The edges of the developed area will benefit from proximity to retained surrounding landscape, but the green infrastructure theme does not embed itself throughout the proposals. Instead of penetrating the developable areas, the green landscape remains peripheral, and the streets do not overtly reflect any landscape vision.

One of the aims stated by the design team in the review is to continue the ‘Coed Darcy identity’ as this is seen as important by existing residents. This feedback seems to have been accepted without any critical and informative review of what has and hasn’t been achieved in phase one, and a distillation of the essential elements of character for future phases. This might be driven more by the townscape than the design and materials of the buildings but there has been no exploration of this. A review of relevant precedents would also be helpful to inform this process. At this point, the idea of a ‘Coed Darcy identity’ is not developed or presented clearly to help guide the proposed development.

A clear, coherent vision should be the guiding light which drives all design decisions. Some key diagrams and sketches would be helpful to define a vision and convey it to local people, the planning authority and future development partners.

Character Areas

The approach to character areas seems to be underdeveloped and based on street types and hierarchies instead of defined and potentially distinct geographical zones. Much more work needs to be done to understand how character areas should be defined and how they fit within an overall vision for the place.

A consideration of how the place might grow seems essential to inform the character of the place and the phasing of its delivery. This would suggest that character areas would radiate out from the centre rather than follow the linear form of streets.

If the landscape is to be a key part of the vision this would suggest that different character areas would also respond to varying landscape conditions across the site.

Care should be taken in applying density, scale, dwelling size, tenure and street hierarchies to the character areas. For example, the character of the landscape edge may be different

to the interior of the site but that doesn't mean different dwelling sizes and tenures can't be accommodated.

Further investigation of the Village Centre character is needed to inform its design parameters. What will this space be like? What will people do here? What spaces are needed to accommodate this activity? Is it rural or urban? Enclosed or open? Busy or quiet? Where does it start and finish?

Movement and Access

The potential railway station would be a significant asset for the development but is unlikely to be operational within the timescales of the masterplan development. Habits will be formed as people choose to move into the development and, with the proximity to the motorway junction, there is likely to be an assumption of car travel. Some information is provided about active travel routes but a full exploration of options and innovation around alternatives to private car use is lacking. If the 15-minute neighbourhood can be achieved this may help to reduce the need for travel by meeting some day-to-day needs but this is not proven within the documentation.

The main access road into the development passes through the village centre. This will have a significant impact on the nature of that space. Opportunities to filter traffic through different routes should be explored to reduce the impact on this important space.

Access across the railway to the northern part of the site now seems to be pedestrian and cycle only. It is not clear what the nature of the separate access point to this area will be. The land north of the railway line is effectively a separate development, which suggests it should have its own distinctive character.

The potential for future development should be considered in relation to potential vehicle and pedestrian connection points. Although the remainder of the wider site is not planned for development at this stage, could it ever be developed in the future? If so there will need to be adequate future connection points.

Planning Approach

The proposals are currently in the pre-application consultation phase with an application planned for submission in November. It is proposed that the Design and Access Statement will be in two parts with the first part setting out the strategic picture and the second part providing more of the detail on character areas. The planning approach outlined would see the first part of the DAS submitted with the application, but the second part will follow during the determination period.

This unusual approach is a significant concern and we do not support it. Firstly, the content of the second part of the DAS will not have been included within the PAC process so the local community won't have had the opportunity to review, consider and feed into it. Secondly, the second part of the DAS will be critical to ensure the delivery of quality and character as well as key infrastructure and it is essential that it is considered comprehensively as part of the application. Given that the second part of the DAS still requires significant work, we consider November to be premature for the submission of the application. The application should not be submitted until both parts of the DAS have been through public consultation and completed. This would also provide time for the other comments raised in this report to be addressed.

Phasing and Delivery

We have not seen a phasing plan setting out how the site will be developed and what infrastructure will be put in when. It is not clear who will deliver elements such as the community facilities, shops, village square etc and what the management will be of these spaces. It is important to tie these into the phasing to ensure they are delivered early and are available for residents.

A mechanism needs to be established with the local authority regarding the process for determining reserved matters applications as each phase comes forward.

Next Steps

This is a significant development in its scale and in its opportunity to be an exemplar place that addresses the goals of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the principles of the Placemaking Charter. However, the current proposals and the material that has been presented has not convinced DCFW that this opportunity will be realised. More time and work are needed to address all the matters raised in this report and to work collaboratively with the local authority to establish a way forward to realise the stated aims of the development. DCFW can help to facilitate further exploration of how this significant development that will be developed over the next decade can be taken through the planning process to help ensure design quality is delivered.

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

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer:	Elise Coalter, St Modwen Mark Thorne, St Modwen
Architect/Design Team:	Alistair Fraser, Powell Dobson
Landscape Architect:	Simon Brewster, Soltys Brewster
Planning Consultant:	Nick Matthews, Savills
Local Authority:	Chris Davies, Neath Port Talbot CBC

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair: Ewan Jones
Lead Panellist: Toby Adam
Panel: Chris Jefford
Jen Heal, DCFW, Design Advisor
Efa Lois, DCFW, Place Advisor
Observers: Craig Sheach
Gareth Howell