

Design Review Report

Police Station Abergavenny &
Monmouthshire, Abergavenny

DCFW Ref: N268

Meeting of 24th March 2022



Review Status

Meeting date
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Scheme location
Scheme description
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Planning status

PUBLIC

24th of March 2022
4th April 2022
Abergavenny
Police Station
N268
Pre-planning

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.

Lee Harrison – observing only, declared that Hoare Lea had been involved at Stage 2 during the month of October 2021 only, with their services ceasing end of October 2021 and no further involvement.

Consultations to Date

None with DCFW or with the public as far as the Design Commission understands. The Design Commission encourages and promotes early consultation, ideally with the benefit of local authority presence and informed by their perspective. This was not possible for this scheme for reasons we do not fully understand. This review meeting was requested as the proposals enter RIBA Stage 4 with contractors in place – very late in the design process and with limited scope for added value.

A note on confidentiality and DCFW reports: The prospect of a new police station for this area has been the subject of public media articles and comment. As such it is in the public domain. As per our guidance, provided in advance of the review meeting, this report will also therefore have public status. DCFW Design Review reports are not meeting minutes – moreover they focus upon key design issues to be resolved in the interest of the best possible outcomes.

The Proposals

The proposal is for a new police station which will support the local policing teams in what is described as neighbourhood policing. The building is situated on a brownfield site at the edge of Abergavenny, in proximity to the A465 which was previously the location of a link road. The site is predominantly flat with a large depression forming a lagoon on the north

perimeter. The team stated that they are following the police design guidelines and have met and consulted with internal stakeholders, Designing Out Crime and Anti-Terrorism professionals.

Main Points

Location, site selection and the Town Centre First principle

The location and site selected for this proposal is some distance beyond what could be described as the town centre of Abergavenny, adjacent to the A465 Heads of the Valleys Road, edge of town food retail and housing - an environment where the highway is dominant making for a challenging and hostile pedestrian route to the site. The Design Commission was not able to understand from the design materials or presentation, the justification for the choice of this site, which runs contrary to the Town Centre First principle of planning policy in Wales. The position of the proposed building on the site works to further limit a sense of this being a civic building offering ease of access to 'neighbourhood' policing services. Approach on foot or by active modes are limited and genuine active travel options severely constrained, thereby promoting reliance on private and/or professional vehicle.

Clarification of the building use

The client and design team describe this building as a centre for 'neighbourhood' policing, a 'local hub', as a visible 'deterrent landmark' and a 'high-speed response' centre. Defining exactly what this building is intended to do and what services it will support is critical if it is to be designed well, designed to be fit for purpose and to carry the appropriate civic presence.

The nature of a local hub or neighbourhood policing activity differs from the other uses described and it is important that the client, design team and the public fully understand what the building is, what happens within it, what services it provides, as well as how they may engage with and access those services. The current proposals are not easily accessible or welcoming and therefore do not align with the idea of a local hub if that is what is desired. The client noted that there is a public-facing police facility in Abergavenny town centre, in shared premises which would serve as a community hub, and that this building is a more permanent fixture. It needs to be communicated clearly to the community that much of the day-to-day interaction with the police force in the area will not happen in this building, but in the Abergavenny town centre satellite site. This is important in the clarity of the brief and to the planning strategy and should be clearly communicated. The practical realities of how members of the public approach and will be met at the building needs much further consideration as part of this defining of the brief.

A clear definition of the brief is also fundamental for members of the community to understand what this building is and what it offers given its public funding. The Design Commission understands there is a total project budget of £2.9m available for this project. Based on the design team's materials and confirmation of the budget during discussion, this suggests some c£6,700/sqm for the facility. This is an exceptional level of public investment for which the design solution should be exemplar, and it must be absolutely clear what long term public benefits will be accrued. Where and how this budget was being allocated was not clear from the presentation or material provided.

Site layout, and interface with public realm

The materials and presentation show the building located toward the back of the site in proximity to overhead high voltage electricity pylons and with significant secure anti-climb mesh fencing which although rendered in the visuals as transparent, will in reality, be experienced as a dense boundary, especially when viewed obliquely. Currently the visual materials do not clearly convey this and a realistic impression is needed to aid understanding of what is being proposed, and the impact it will have on the surrounding environment.

Whilst the proposals illustrate aspirations for external communal seating and staff amenity areas, including the use of an attenuation pond as a feature in the landscape, a comprehensive landscape strategy needs to be developed. This needs to clearly address what is secure or public and what kind of environment it offers. The quality of the environment close to the road and pylon both for occupants of the site and members of the public walking past, is questionable and needs further consideration.

Further reflection on the proposed position of the building on the site and the boundaries could offer more generous opportunities for cycle and footways offering a positive contribution to active travel options. Similarly, the balancing pond could be considered outside the boundary offering a much more generous public realm. The nature of the outdoor space and the proximity of the pylon and its negative impact on the acoustic quality of the spaces could result in amenity which is not desirable. It is important that any further landscape development work considers staff wellbeing, and how the external spaces are likely to be used and make a positive contribution.

Architectural approach

The absence of the clarity needed to define the building's purpose, how public or how private/secure it may need to be directly influences the architectural response.

Currently the architectural language is overly dominant in its setting and is somewhat aggressive and assertive in nature. The elevation design accentuates its verticality and treatment of fenestration serve to deter views in and out – expressing a deterrent building without natural surveillance from the inside or ease of comprehension from the outside. It is questionable that architecture should ever be designed to be intimidating and the rationale for this is currently unclear. This also contradicts the concept of a civic building and 'local hub' with which members of the public can interact and signals a very different type of building. Given the difference in levels between the site and the A465, it is unlikely that that the building would be particularly prominent and perform any specific deterrent function. The design team clarified that alternative roof pitches had been explored, but due to the perceived domestic nature of alternative pitches, the current design had been seen as the favoured option.

The overall architectural articulation was more akin to retail park than civic building, with the risk of agricultural detailing further exacerbating this. The Design Commission suggested that the applicant focus keenly on junction and interface details, such as panel joints, material changes, eaves, soffits etc, using secret fix, hidden rainwater goods and refined detailing elements. The design team stated that this was their aspiration for the next stage of the design.

The Commission was not provided with any information as to the interior requirements, layout and circulation, meaning it was not possible to make full assessment of the quality of the interior environment or its relation to the external expression and treatment.

Sustainability

Given the budget available and the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act Wales, which is integrated with national planning policy, it is vital that this is an exemplar/optimum design solution.

A comprehensive, site-wide and building-specific energy and sustainability strategy is required. We note the provision of EV charging points and consideration of capacity to deal with the future needs of a vehicle fleet. However, the lack of choices of active modes for staff promotes car reliance over alternatives.

Consideration should be given to battery storage on site, its suitability for this facility, and whether it would be a sustainable option for future use. The design team and client should further explore increased PV provision on site, as well as alternative passive principles for the design approach and materials choices for the building.

The considerable budget for the project should allow for innovative materials and sustainability solutions that future proof the project and anticipate forthcoming regulatory changes, extending the design life and anticipating end of use and re-use/recycling.

The Design Commission questioned the ventilation strategy and whether the orientation of the building, the materials suggested and the over-reliance on mechanical over natural ventilation was appropriate, especially given the incoming Part L. The design team stated that, due to the location of the building on site, natural ventilation was not an option. The Commission is concerned about the risk of overheating in this building and would urge the design team to consider the use of acoustic side vents to give the building users access to natural fresh air within their control.

Learning and future consultations

Public services in health, education and policing, among others, occupy a range of assets and built environment facilities and the Design Commission encourages an earlier, more strategic assessment and approach to the future requirements of the estate. This would help avoid a piecemeal, scheme by scheme approach where consultation is sought at such a late stage in the development of proposals. We would welcome a closer working relationship with the agencies and authorities involved to achieve a more strategic approach, much earlier in estate considerations when value can be added and with view to enhance long term public benefit.

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

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer:	Alex Haddow, Gwent Police Thomas Bean, Pick Everard Stuart Cummings, Wilmott Dixon Lucy Stevens, Wilmott Dixon Jason Davies, Wilmott Dixon
Architect/Design Team:	Faye Morrison, Stride Treglown Llinos Hallett, Asbri Planning
Chair:	Simon Richards
Lead Panellist:	Michael Gwyther-Jones
Design Review Panel:	Craig Sheach Barry Evans Stephen Smith Jamie Brewster Jen Heal, Design Advisor, DCFW Efa Lois, Place Advisor, DCFW
Observing:	Lee Harrison, Hoare Lea Elfed Roberts, DCFW Panel Member Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW