

# Design Review Report

Abergele Housing,

Conwy

**DCFW Ref: 40**

20<sup>th</sup> March 2014



## Declarations of Interest

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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.

### Review Status

### Public

Desktop review	20 <sup>th</sup> March 2014
Issue date	7 <sup>th</sup> April 2014
Scheme location	Land off St George Rd, Abergele
Scheme description	92 dwellings, access and open space
Scheme reference number	40
Planning status	Full application submitted Feb 2014

## Declarations of Interest

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N/A to this desktop review. This scheme is receiving a written response to submitted material and at this stage, has not been brought to the full DCFW Panel.

## Consultations to Date

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The developer has consulted with the Local Authority's LDP Sites Project Team.

## The Proposals

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The scheme is for 92 new dwellings with associated access and open space for a Greenfield site on the south east edge of Abergele. The site is part of a strategic site allocation for 600 dwellings, employment and open space in the recently adopted Conwy Local Development Plan (LDP).

Proposals include 56 four bed, 20 three bed and 16 two bed properties in cul-de-sac arrangement, with access from St George Road to the south of the site where an existing access can be found. The road layout allows for future connection at the east of the site to a proposed road through the wider development which would form the main access from Rhuddlan Road to the north. It is proposed that existing hedgerows around the perimeter of the site and an existing ditch will be retained. An open space is planned for the south east corner of the site.

The Local Authority has prepared a draft Concise Development Brief for the wider allocated site, which has been discussed with the developers. However, there are a number of issues which the Local Authority has yet to finalise, including transport/highways impact, Welsh language mitigation and, most significantly, the comprehensive development of the whole allocated site. The Local Authority is yet to produce a Full Development Brief. The scheme has now been submitted for full planning. As this has the potential to be the first major development on an allocated LDP site, the Local Authority is concerned that it sets a high design quality standard.

## Summary

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- The Design Commission for Wales is keen to see the Local Authority move forward with the delivery of well designed homes on this allocated site. The Commission is broadly supportive of residential development on this site, and welcome the opportunity to comment on this proposal. We would like to review any further information and continue to use our expertise to support delivery on this and other allocated sites in the Conwy LDP.
- We recommend that the LPA and developers make use of the full Design Review Service wherever possible as early as possible, in line with the Welsh Government good practice guide to Pre-Application discussion.  
<http://wales.gov.uk/topics/planning/policy/guidanceandleaflets/preappguide/?lang=en>
- The Design Commission shares the Local Authority's concerns that this first major development of an LDP allocated site sets a high standard for design, and that the scheme can be successfully integrated with future development of the wider site.
- The development objectives set out by the developer are aspirational, but it is not clear from the materials provided how those aspirations will be met. Clearer strategic diagrams and cross sections are required.
- A clear movement strategy for vehicles, cycles and pedestrians must be demonstrated. This should encourage walking and cycling. This should be carried out swiftly and in partnership with the Local Authority.
- The Local Authority should address wider access and highways matters and should proceed swiftly with master-planning work for the site as a whole.
- The layout provides good natural surveillance of streets and open spaces, but better explanation of how the 'Character' referred to in the DAS will be achieved is required.
- A plan for long term maintenance of the green/public/open spaces is required.
- The Local Authority should be sure that the mix of housing proposed meets their long term housing needs.

## Main Points in Detail

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### **Delivery of Development Objectives**

The Design Commission for Wales welcomes this opportunity to comment on this potentially significant scheme, although we would have preferred to have engaged with the developers and designers at an earlier stage in the process, when greater opportunity exists to positively influence the design process and add value.

The Commission is supportive of the principle of residential development of this site in line with Conwy's LDP. As this project has the potential to be the first major development of land allocated in the LDP, we share the Local Authority's concern that it sets a high standard of design for future development. A really well-designed scheme on this site has the potential to be a catalyst for good design quality throughout Abergele and the rest of Conwy.

The Design and Access Statement (2.1) sets out a number of Development Objectives which reflect the objectives set out by the Local Authority in its draft Concise Development Brief and the LDP. In general, the Design Commission agrees with the objectives in the Development Brief and considers it important that the Local Authority supports their delivery. However, the planning application drawings and supporting information do not provide convincing evidence that the development would meet these objectives. The developers must clearly distinguish between what are purely aspirations and what they are committing to deliver.

It is important to view this scheme in the context of the wider allocated site and the rest of the town. The Local Authority must ensure that this development does not disadvantage the development of the rest of the allocated site. A clear strategy for integrated delivery of infrastructure and travel/movement networks from the Local Authority is urgently required. They should set criteria for road, cycle/footpath and infrastructure connections, and Welsh language mitigation contributions. Any unresolved Local Authority strategy will affect site delivery and costs and may result in reduced quality in the developments delivered.

### **Clarity of Information**

Clearer diagrammatic drawings are needed to demonstrate to the LPA that this scheme meets the development objectives set out in the draft Concise Development Brief and the Design and Access Statement (DAS). The diagrams should clearly explain the hierarchy and network of road and cycle/footpath routes, parking strategies, housing mix and green and blue infrastructure; and should demonstrate the rationale behind the layout. The diagrams presented in the DAS are not large or clear enough to provide sufficient evidence that the development objectives will be met by this scheme. Cross sections through the site showing public spaces and streets of different types will help to explain the character of the place.

Clear presentation will help wider public understanding and allow a confident assessment by the Local Authority.

### **Transport and Movement**

It is important that the transport and movement strategies for this scheme are designed with regard to the wider allocated site and existing networks through and into Abergele town centre. Once the rest of the allocated site has been developed, there should be a convenient and safe network of routes which provide good connections to public transport and the facilities in the town, and which encourages walking and cycling.

The Local Authority has already prepared an 'Appraisal of Traffic Associated with Development Sites in Abergele', which sets basic principles for access to the allocated site. The study states that access to this entire allocated site should be via a new road from Rhuddlan Road to minimise pressure on St George Road and the town centre. The

site for this scheme is in the south west corner of the allocated site, and if it is approved, would be developed before the new access road is in place. This means that the sole access for this site would be off St George Road until further development takes place. The Local Authority must consider whether this arrangement would be acceptable in the short term and following future phases of development on the allocated site. The design and cost exercise currently being undertaken by Atkins, and due to be completed at end April, should help to inform decisions.

The proposals show a possible connection point for a link to a future road which might run from Rhuddlan Road at the north of the allocated site, to St George Road at the south. The Local Authority must decide whether this single link would provide sufficient connection to the rest of the development. An additional option to link to future development to the north of this scheme would improve connectivity.

In order to encourage walking and cycling, there should be a safe and convenient network of routes through the site. Again, this must be considered in relation to future development on the site. The developer/designers should think about where the most direct walking routes to local services, such as schools, shops and public transport would be. Providing the proposed footway to connect to Maes y Dre will help. It may be beneficial to allow for future cycle/footpath links at the north boundary. The walking and cycling strategy should be clearly set out in a diagrammatic plan.

A grid of routes would achieve better connectivity than the proposed 'trunk and branch' cul-de-sac arrangement, particularly for pedestrians who may be put off walking up the 'branches' to access St George Road.

A hierarchy of streets is not clearly represented in the drawings. The DAS refers to an 'Avenue', but there is little in the drawings to distinguish this from other roads. Cross sections through the streets in different locations would be useful in explaining this further.

A diagram which explains the parking strategy is required. There is clearly space for 'on-plot' driveway parking in front of each property, but it is not clear how additional on-street parking would work or how it will be managed. Parking numbers should meet Local Authority recommendations. If parking is not properly planned for there is potential for ad-hoc on street parking that obstructs roads and footways and diminishes neighbourhood quality.

The Design Commission advocates the use of Manual for Streets and its principles should be applied.

### **Layout and Character**

As discussed below, the landscape elements of the proposal, including the retained features provide and opportunity to contribute significantly to the overall character of the place, and should be used to encourage a sense of community.

The text within the DAS refers to context appraisal of the surrounding townscape and landscape. However, it is not clear how this analysis has usefully informed the designs. There is little value to be gained from referencing arbitrary features of surrounding housing in order to justify standard house types. There appears to be a mix of house

forms, layouts, building materials and age of development in Abergele, and therefore, it is most important that this scheme provides a residential development appropriate to a modern, edge of town setting.

In general, the proposed layout, with back-to-back gardens, achieves good natural surveillance of the streets and open spaces. However, if a new road was built along the east boundary in the future, this would be lined with garden walls/fences along the length of the site. As discussed above, minor changes to the road/path layout would provide better connectivity throughout the site.

There are a number of references to character in the DAS which are not evident in the drawings. These include the following:

- Responding to and reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development and landscape (2.1)
- Continuity of street frontage and enclosure (2.1)
- Legibility through recognisable routes, gateways and focal points (2.1)
- Diversity through range of housing typologies (2.1)
- 'Nodes' creating local distinctiveness (Fig 10)
- Green Squares (2.21) - the drawings show one place where the pavement appears to be wider and of a different colour/material
- Proposed Character Areas (2.22)
- Building scale and massing to reinforce key arrival points, junctions, streets and connections (2.22) – buildings are generally evenly distributed across the site and mostly two-storey. The placing of 2 ½ storey houses does not seem to match any organised way-finding strategy
- Clear sequence of squares and green spaces providing memorable way-markers (2.22)
- Nodes, focal points and view lines (2.24)
- Gateway buildings to frame views (2.24)
- Courtyards (Fig 15) – These are actually shared driveways or cul-de-sac ends

The use of statements within the DAS which are not evidenced in the supporting drawings makes it difficult for the Local Planning Authority to assess the true merits of the scheme.

In the Environmental Sustainability chapter, the DAS claims that 'the majority of the dwellings have their main rear elevations facing south, south-east, south-west in order to take advantage of heat provided by the sun.' In fact, the drawings show that fewer than half of the houses achieve this. All statements in the DAS should be clearly demonstrated in the drawings. This is currently not the case.

### **Landscape Design and Open Space**

The green infrastructure and landscape elements have the potential to provide benefits for residents, wildlife and the environment. It is encouraging that existing perimeter hedges, significant trees and the ditch will be retained, and that green space for recreation will be provided. In the Ecological Survey, significant badger sets were identified. It is not clear from the plan drawings where these are located and how/if they are being protected. Although retaining the ditch will encourage biodiversity, it would be

useful to see how the space around might also be used by people. A cross section would help to explain this.

A positive element here is that the open space is overlooked by houses, as this will help with security and perceptions of safety, encouraging communal use.

It will be crucial to establish who will be responsible for maintenance of the various elements of green infrastructure, as this important element of the scheme must well looked after. This responsibility may lie with the Local Authority, management companies or a joint venture, and the related character, function and management regime may affect the design principles. The retained ditch, in particular, risks becoming unpleasant if it is not properly maintained.

### **Housing Mix and Density**

The density and mix of houses provided by this scheme will be important, and may have resultant effects for development of the rest of the allocated site. The Local Authority must be sure that the scheme provides sufficient density and mix of house sizes so as not to place added pressure on future phases of development.

A variety of types of affordable housing should be spread throughout the site, fully integrated with open market housing. The size/type of affordable housing should match demand identified by the Local Authority. The scheme proposes to meet the 10% affordable housing requirement, but has most (8/9) of the affordable units clustered together and all of one house type.

Overall, the proposed development has a high proportion of 4 and 3 bedroom homes. The Local Authority should consider whether this matches local demand, and whether this mix of house types will best address the housing shortage.

### **Consultation**

The Commission urges the LPA and developers to consult early with its Design Review Panel. Annual calendars of monthly meetings are published on our website and additional flexible or half day meetings are possible, with advance planning. We recommend contacting us early so that we can identify early opportunity for added value and help all parties achieve the delivery of well designed, well located development.

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