

Design Review Report

DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

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

CONFIDENTIAL

Meeting date	Tuesday 16 July 2013
Issue date	Tuesday 30 July 2013
Scheme location	Hillside School Site Blaenavon
Scheme description	Residential
Scheme reference number	83B
Planning status	Pre-application Full application submission expected Autumn 2013
Declaration of interests	None recorded

Details of consultations to date

Public consultation with local residents has taken place regarding the principle of redevelopment on this site, however, the detail of the design and layout of the development coming to the Commission for this review is not in the public domain. The review has therefore been afforded confidential status until such time the development is in the public domain and/or the planning system.

The Proposals

The development is on the site of the former Hillside School, which closed in 2011. The main school building is well liked in the local community although the building itself is not remarkable and is not listed. An application for demolition of the school buildings is imminent.

The Panel welcomed an early consultation at this stage in the development of the project. This is a challenging site in terms of the character of the town and the existing buildings given that the whole forms part of the Blaenavon World Heritage Site. The site is close to a designated conservation area (and SSSI, which may host European protected species), characterised by stepped, narrow terraces finished in stone or render with a slate roof.

Summary

The Panel made the following observations:

- This is a historic environment with the challenges of linking old and new build, whilst accommodating the elements necessary for modern living. It will require a sophisticated design response in order to deliver a high quality outcome.
- The semi-detached properties, if provided, will need to reflect the local architectural character, being simple and of good quality, using quality materials. The Panel thought that this would be assisted by a consistent palette of materials throughout the site.
- The Panel was concerned about the proposed green space at the rear, edged by a high fence, making the public footpath beyond it less secure. They questioned whether the fence could be reduced or removed or the orientation of the buildings changed, so that the green space is overlooked and more naturally surveilled.
- The provision of parking was discussed at length. Melin Homes require provision of two parking spaces per house and it was proposed, for the majority, to be placed in landscaped courts, behind the rear garden of the properties. The Panel questioned whether this area would be adequately supervised or overlooked and suggested that some might be re-planned to provide such supervision.
- It was suggested that most people would use the 'rear' door to gain access to their property, which might remove the necessity to have a canopy over the door leading to the street.
- The Panel was not wholly convinced by the proposal to use slot windows, when larger, simpler windows echoing those of the existing terrace vernacular, would allow more natural light into the rooms.
- Whilst it was accepted that a pocket of open green space cannot be built on for wayleave reasons, the space would be surrounded on three sides with a tall fence and be sloped, making use of the space very difficult. The Panel urged the design team to consider alternative design approaches for this part of the scheme.

Discussion and Panel response in full

The surrounding buildings are of simple, unspoilt, domestic architecture that is a key characteristic of the town of Blaenavon. As you move away from the town centre the character is diluted by a newer mix of building styles. The King Street conservation area is to the western end of the site and characterises the subtle quality of the traditional domestic architectural language that should be used to inform any contemporary development.

The design team provided two plans of the development, one having designated pedestrian connections through the site, one without. Both include the provision of semi-detached properties which the Panel thought acceptable, provided they were well-resolved.

The basic principle of two vehicular/pedestrian entrances to the site with pedestrian-only links to the north west was considered practical and sensible. An option containing a prominent additional pedestrian link, turning through the site, was considered ambitious and well intentioned, but without corresponding linkages outside the site and with limited overlooking within, it might be susceptible to anti-social behaviour. It was argued that it would provide a link between the parking courts and front door, but the Panel believed that everyone arriving by car would use the door off the rear garden.

The location of parking bays was a key issue. The Panel felt that parking arrangements were generous and was advised that they adhered to the South Wales Parking Standards. The Panel felt that better sustainability standards could be applied to reduce the number of parking spaces required on the site. The team responded with assurance that the level of parking bays was necessary, not least as there is insufficient public transport provision in the area.

The Panel questioned whether the parking bays, currently separated from the rear of the houses by a boundary wall, might be brought into the property boundary. This would enable the spaces to be used more flexibly and would help the security of the vehicles parked there, whilst recognising that larger rear parking courts have more options for landscaping. The parking bay areas combined with the treatment of the refuse bin use and storage are critical to the planning of the external spaces, and the successful resolution of this will be critical to the scheme's success. The provision of lower boundary treatment to rear parking was discussed, so as to provide a view of the parking area from the rear of the house, but it was recognised that security might be compromised in this.

The decision to set all the properties back from the street needs increased sensitivity towards the existing architectural language, and it was questioned whether an access was required at grade to both access doors, or simply to the main entrance.

The green area on the south west side of the site could provide a focal point for the community if natural supervision and surveillance of the area was increased and the green space better integrated into the scheme.

The Panel thought there would also be merit in changing the orientation of some of the houses at the corners of the streets to overlook the parking courts improving the security of these areas and limiting the likelihood of anti-social behaviour.

The Panel felt that the vertical window aesthetic was overdone and some of the associated details, superfluous. Likewise the dark cladding material proposed for the buildings at the rear of the site was considered gratuitous and a simpler approach, avoiding pastiche, would be preferable.

The apartments at the rear of the development, intended to provide housing for persons with learning difficulties, were contentious due to the need to enclose the rear of these apartments for security. This has a negative effect on the security of the green spaces and footpath behind them, and the Panel felt that some re-planning may allow the buildings to provide the necessary enclosure.

The Panel would welcome the scheme returning to the Commission as the project progresses, providing the timetable for development allows.

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

Appendix 1

Attendees

Agent/Client/Developer – Melin Homes	Richard Evans Lisa Hopkins
Architect – Rio Architects	Shirley Hamill Andrew Baker
Consultants – Asbri Planning	Robin Williams Lowri Hughson-Smith
Planning Authority – Torfaen CBC	Stephen Thomas Rebecca McAndrew
Design Review Panel Chair Lead Panellist	Alan Francis Christopher Jones Lynne Sullivan Richard Parnaby Lynne Sullivan
Observing Recording	Carole-Anne Davies, DCFW Sue Jones, DCFW