

Design Review Introduction Report

Glan Afon School Site,
Port Talbot

DCFW Ref: N90

Meeting of 22nd October 2015



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.

Review Status

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

CONFIDENTIAL

22nd October 2015
10th November 2015
Port Talbot town centre
Mixed Use
90
Pre-application

Declarations of Interest

None declared.

Consultations to Date

None discussed at the meeting.

The Proposals

A school currently occupies this town-centre site and will be in operation until summer 2016. One edge of the site runs along Station Road, one of the main retail streets in the town. The Victorian school building fronting, but slightly set back from Station Road, is of good quality, whereas the other existing buildings on the site are not deemed to be of significant value. Streets and back lanes of predominantly two-storey Victorian terrace housing are found to the north, east and south of the site. The site is close to main public transport interchanges.

The local authority and Coastal Housing Association have identified a demand for a wider variety of housing types in the town centre, which is informing the proposals for this site. The Local Development Plan (LDP) identifies the site for mixed-use, and it is intended that some funding will come from the Welsh Government's Vibrant and Viable Places (VVP) scheme.

This initial meeting took place at a very early stage in the design process, when strategic decisions are still being made, to introduce the scheme and context. However, the programme is tight, and it is intended that a planning application will be made in January 2016. The scheme presented at this meeting proposed retaining the building fronting Station Road to accommodate a mix of residential and retail/cafe uses. The other existing school buildings would be demolished and a new road introduced, matching the surrounding street pattern, and focusing on a new central public space, which would benefit from a new 'rear' elevation to the retail space.

Main Points in Detail

This initial meeting took place at a good, early stage in the project where there is scope for discussion to inform the design process. The following points summarise key issues from the discussion, and should be considered to inform work ahead of further review and making a planning application:

Site Approach

The presenting team had clearly undertaken a good exploration of the site conditions and context which is informing their approach.

The use of the site for housing, with a retail element along Station Road is appropriate. The ambition to retain some of the historic fabric and to strengthen and knit into the existing urban grain of the surrounding streets is welcomed, but the success of this approach, and particularly the success of the new central space, will depend largely on the size and quality of the retail offer, and the way the public realm is resolved.

An alternative approach was also discussed, whereby the central space was dispensed with and the new road continued through the scheme with terraced residential properties either side. This would allow the retail offer to be greater, as it would no longer need to rely on retail frontages both sides. No drawings for this option were tabled, so it was difficult to assess its value.

Public Realm

The design of the public realm and the interface between it and the housing and retail units in the presented scheme will be particularly important.

The idea to create a shared garden/courtyard space in the centre of the scheme is welcomed, but will only work if it can be designed to be free of parking and without the 'backs' of the retail units onto it. As the scheme progresses and there is more certainty about the nature of the retail unit(s), the alternative layouts should be tested and scrutinised to find the best solution.

Careful consideration should be given to whether, or how much of, the public realm will be adopted. Discussions with the local authority will help to determine the constraints if the highways were to be adopted. Whether they are adopted or not, the character and organisation of the streets will need to address a number of issues, including:

- Parking
- Refuse storage and collection
- Pedestrian routes
- Street lighting
- Servicing and deliveries to the retail units
- Access and entrances
- Street surfaces and kerbs
- Any shared surfaces or home zones
- Soft landscape and planting
- Maintenance considerations

The nature of the space between Station Road and the existing school building will be an important consideration, and will depend on the proposed use of the ground floor of that building and whether it is appropriate to make a public route through it. The commercial studies being undertaken by Coastal will help inform these decisions.

A route through the middle of the proposed eastern terrace of houses could be considered in order to provide better connecting routes for pedestrians through the site to and from the town centre.

Parking

Providing an appropriate solution for parking will be important for achieving overall quality.

If garages are provided, the team must consider whether residents will use them and whether this would cause a problem in surrounding streets. Under-croft parking is less likely to be used for storage and less likely that the car will remain on the street. The team will need to use their experience and knowledge to find the best solution.

House types and layout

It is positive that the mix of housing types is being informed by analysis of demand in the area. The layout of the chosen house types will impact the qualities of the streetscape, private and shared gardens, and the homes themselves. Overshadowing, overlooking, views, scale, access, orientation, management and maintenance, and relationship to existing streets and houses will all need careful consideration.

The concept layout drawing presented at the meeting was more convincing than the more detailed plan, but this is probably due to the early stage in the design process when more work is required to find the best solutions.

The need for bungalows has been identified, but they would be an odd fit on this urban town-centre site. Perhaps ground-floor garden flats might provide a better solution. Different options should be tested.

Reuse of School Building

The layout of the retained school building will depend largely on commercial testing. Once an appropriate balance of uses has been decided, the arrangement of spaces within the building can be designed and tested, and the need for extension established.

The nature, scale and division of the ground floor will have an impact on the surrounding public realm, especially at the rear of the building where it would be desirable to avoid having a 'back' service facade.

Site Sustainability Strategy

A site-wide energy and sustainability strategy should be considered at this early stage when strategic decisions about layout and orientation are being made. The Design Commission supports a passive, fabric-first approach to modelling and testing. The Welsh Government's *Practice Guidance: Planning for Sustainable Buildings*, written by the Design Commission, can be used as a prompt to this approach.

Further review

The Design Commission would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again once designs have progressed to the next stage, but with time for further work before a planning application is made.

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

Attendees

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