

# Design Review Report

Vetch Field, Swansea

**DCFW Ref: 64**

Meeting of 19<sup>th</sup> February 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	19 <sup>th</sup> February 2015
Issue date	3 <sup>rd</sup> March 2015
Scheme location	Swansea
Scheme description	Sheltered residential
Scheme reference number	64
Planning status	Pre-application

### CONFIDENTIAL

## Declarations of Interest

---

Elfed Roberts attended the meeting representing Gwalia, the developer/client. Elfed is a DCFW Design Review panel member and so full declarations were made and the presenting team confirmed they were happy to proceed.

## Consultations to Date

---

Gwalia plans to undertake community consultation during April 2015.

## The Proposals

---

In 2007 Swansea City Council adopted a Master Plan for the redevelopment of the Vetch Field Site. The key components of the Master Plan included optimisation of the housing development potential, a Community Centre, the organisation of streets and spaces as safe but accessible, reinstatement of gardens and the integration of developable spaces adjoining the Vetch.

Since the Master Plan was produced there have been many changes to the site, the old football stadium buildings have been cleared (2011) and the area has been made into a temporary landscaped space. The area surrounding the Vetch consists of traditional terraced housing with minimal public open space. Some trees have been introduced to what is now a mainly grassed area, and a successful community allotment has been established on part of the site. There is a lack of natural surveillance and as a result the site needs to be secured at night to deter anti-social behaviour.

Grŵp Gwalia is proposing to develop a portion of the Vetch Field site located to the north east corner with a block of 30 sheltered housing apartments and associated communal facilities, car parking, and landscaped areas. The design and configuration of the development is focused on maintaining the street scene on William Street & Madoc Place. The apartments have been designed to face outwards towards the street and with a north and east aspect. This proposal replaces an existing Gwalia facility, in the city centre, which is due to be demolished as part of Swansea's VVP work – this brings an attached deadline.

## Main Points in Detail

---

This site is well known to DCFW's team as is the recent history of the football stadium and the Veg Vetch project. This review was carried out at a useful stage in the project development, whilst concept design is underway but not finalised. The proposed type of development seems appropriate for this site and the Design Commission for Wales supports the design quality aspirations of the team, and believes that there is potential here for excellent design to make a significant positive impact on the lives of residents.

The following points summarise key issues from the review, and should be used to inform work ahead of making a planning application:

### **Site layout**

There is an odd triangular plot, in local authority ownership, to the south of the current site which could potentially be incorporated with this facility in the future. It would be worth considering options which could utilise this space more effectively, should this become possible. It may provide opportunity for the development to better address the open space to the south west of the site. The landscaping proposed in this area is currently dominated by the car park and hard landscaping. The use of the triangular plot may provide a better balance to the landscaping strategy. It would be beneficial to test options so as to ensure that the proposal submitted for planning does not compromise future opportunities.

The accommodation has been arranged on the site to provide strong frontage to two of the existing streets, and to address adjacent potential future development. This has resulted in the majority of the flats facing north. Whilst this provides a small south facing garden, it means that the benefits of natural sunlight in living spaces will be reduced. Careful consideration should therefore be given to where residents are likely to spend most time, and to the impact of the north facing aspect on their well-being. Gwalia's extensive experience should provide useful data and knowledge which will be valuable to further consideration.

The Commission would have welcomed an exploration of more intense use of the western side of the site. Concerns about overlooking for future housing back gardens planned for the other side of this street were put forward as a key reason for rejecting this possibility. The development pattern of surrounding streets shows houses built along streets that run north to south. If this were adopted here, back gardens would be fully screened and many privacy issues would fall away. Overall, from the information presented at the meeting, we were not convinced that options to reduce the number of north facing units had been adequately explored.

### **Scale and form**

The scale, form and heights of the proposals have been planned to address surrounding buildings. Whilst the Design Commission advocates this approach, we would like to see more complete elevation and section drawings which accurately communicate the scale and massing in context. A working model at 1:200 scale would also be a useful tool, especially in communicating with lay people or those unfamiliar with architectural

drawings. Alongside these tools, perspective views, such as those presented in the review, are useful.

The simplicity of the block which runs along the north edge of the site could be an attractive, elegant solution if well detailed. The attention given to providing a strong corner is positive, but care should be taken to ensure the gable is not overbearing to existing property in the vicinity.

The cranked form of the east wing and the junctions between the proposed timber-clad stair block make this part of the scheme overcomplicated. The timber-clad block and glazed slot make locating the entrance from a distance confusing. The roof junctions here may be difficult to detail and construct elegantly. These elements may be simplified and refined so that they can be detailed more effectively, which should result in better value for money, allowing design attention and budget to be focussed on providing comfortable, characterful social spaces.

### **Gardens and social circulation**

Previous Gwalia schemes have demonstrated that communal gardens and shared circulation spaces can be valuable social places for residents. There is great potential for this scheme to focus on providing these kinds of places which will positively enhance the quality of life for people who will live in this development. The Design Commission for Wales would suggest that the designers work with Gwalia to develop these aspects of the scheme. The lift and stair arrangement, animation and modelling of the corridors, connections between private flats and communal areas, garden spaces and communal lounge can all contribute to this strategy. Removing the corridor from alongside the common room and reconfiguring the external spaces could provide a better relationship and visual connection to the garden, making it more useable. The qualities of these social spaces need careful consideration. Daylight, sunlight, views, acoustics and temperature and proportion are all important.

### **Materials and detail**

The use of brick as the predominant material is considered appropriate and sensible for this location. Good quality, well-detailed brickwork can provide a durable and attractive finish. As the architects showed with precedent studies, interest can be added by varying the bond and mortar details, whilst retaining a sense of homogeneity. Using only brick could provide an elegant and attractive solution, but if other cladding materials are used, such as timber or render, careful consideration should be given to maintenance and durability.

Details, such as the proposed colour window reveals, boundary treatments, windows etc. will be important to overall quality.

### **Comfort, energy and sustainability**

Thermal performance is important for both the comfort and well-being of residents and for energy use. It would be good practice to undertake thermal modelling at this stage of the project so that results can be used to inform design decisions, and to provide greater certainty that the scheme submitted for planning can provide the desired environment. Orientation, form, fenestration and shading all have an impact on the thermal environment, and modelling should therefore take place prior to a planning submission.

Other aspects of sustainability should also be considered at this stage, as recommended in the DCFW/Welsh Government *Practice Guidance: Planning for sustainable buildings*.

**Comisiwn Dylunio Cymru Design Commission for Wales is the trading name of DCFW LIMITED, a Private Limited Company established under the Companies Act 1985 and 2006, Company No: 04391072 incorporated in England and Wales as a wholly controlled subsidiary of the Welsh Government. Registered office: 4<sup>th</sup> Floor, Cambrian Buildings, Mount Stuart Square, Cardiff CF10 5FL T: 029 2045 1964 E [connect@dcfw.org](mailto:connect@dcfw.org). The comment recorded in this report, arising from formal Design Review through our Design Review Service, is provided in the public interest for the consideration of local planning authorities as a material consideration, and other users of the Design Review Service. It is not and should not be considered 'advice' and no third party is bound or required to act upon it. The Design Review Service is delivered in line with DCFW's published protocols, code of conduct and complaints procedure, which should be read and considered by users of the service.**

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

## Attendees

---

Agent/Client/Developer:	Elfed Roberts, Grŵp Gwalia
Architectural/Urban Designer:	Andrew Baker, Rio Architects David Whitter, Rio Architects
Local Authority:	Stephen Smith, City & County of Swansea Council
Design Review Panel:	
Chair	Ewan Jones
Lead Panellist	Mike Gwyther-Jones Maria Asenjo Jen Heal, Design Advisor, DCFW Amanda Spence, Design Advisor, DCFW
Observing:	Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW