

Design Review Report

Coleg Sir Gâr, Carmarthen

DCFW Ref: N337

Meeting of 14th May 2025



Review Status

Meeting date
Issue date
Scheme description
Scheme location

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Planning status of DCFW comment

Confidential

14th May 2025
27th May 2025
College Campus Development
Coleg Sir Gâr, Pibwrlwyd Campus,
Carmarthen, SA31 2NH
N337
Pre-application
Material Consideration

Key Points

- We urge a more fundamental consideration of how the college will be integrated with the other proposed uses within the wider masterplan, which will be critical to the success of the strategic site.
- The enlarged college campus needs to be better connected to the town and will require investment in the surrounding active travel infrastructure and public transport services to provide students with genuine travel choices and avoid reliance on travel by car.
- The material presented does not clearly explain the proposal and the design process that has been undertaken. Clearer analysis, narrative, plans and vision are needed.
- The proposal lacks a clear design response (buildings and landscape) to the site. The design ambition needs to be raised to meet the client's ambition and the significant opportunity the brief, site and landscape presents.
- Further consideration is needed about what the campus and surrounding area is going to be like and how the design can meet the needs of the college's students, staff and visitors, as well as the wider community.

Consultations to Date

This is the first engagement with the Design Commission.

There has been pre-application engagement with the Local Planning Authority who support the development in principle but have concerns about the traffic implications.

The Proposal

The proposed Coleg Sir Gâr Pibwrlwyd Campus in Carmarthen aims to provide accommodation for up to 2,385 learners (on a flexible timetable). The learners will include 14-19 year old students, apprenticeships, higher education students and adult learners.

The project seeks to create new facilities at the Pibwrlwyd Campus in Carmarthen with a range of vocational skills and creative arts for Coleg Sir Gâr. The new facilities will be opened up to offer support for community uses and local businesses.

The new development aims to facilitate a varied pedagogical approach, with a mix of face-to-face interactive sessions, practical sessions, self-directed study and blended delivery.

This expanded facilities on this site will replace Coleg Sir Gâr facilities elsewhere and result in the closure of the Jobs Wells Campus and Ammanford Campus.



Proposed Site Layout

Context

The college site forms part of a strategic site in Carmarthenshire County Council's Local Development Plan (LDP). The nature of the allocation is due to be updated in the forthcoming revised LDP and Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) is proposed to be prepared to guide development. The site as a whole is intended to accommodate a mix of retail, housing and employment uses as well as the college.

The topography of the college site has a relatively steep slope, south to north, rising up from Pibwrlwyd Lane to the wider strategic site.

There are existing college buildings on the site that are proposed to be demolished. These buildings are currently in use and are planned to be retained and used until the new development is complete.

Carmarthen town centre and train station are approximately 1.5 miles away to the north. There is a bus stop near the site on the A484. There is a pavement along the A484 that is a shared cycle route.



Site Location

Main Points

Location

The site is in the countryside just outside of Carmarthen and is quite separate from the town. The A48 and A40 create physical barriers to the town and the nearest facilities are out-of-town retail park and industrial estate type developments, such as Morrisons, McDonalds and KFC, which have been designed around travel by car.

We recognise that the college is already based in this location and that the principle of development has been established in the LDP. However, it must be recognised that the site's peripheral location will have significant implications on how people will travel to the campus (principally by car) and the implications on the design and on the students who will be studying here.

The development of the wider strategic site will change the feel of the site from being separate from the town to being on the edge of the settlement. However, based on the current illustrative masterplan for the strategic site, we have concerns about lack of integration between land uses and consideration of a variety of transport options to avoid this becoming more car-based sprawl. There also needs to be further work to better connect this area with the wider town by walking, cycling and public transport.

Further sessions focusing on the wider masterplan would provide the opportunity to explore these considerations in more detail and would helpfully inform future SPG and development management considerations for this site.

Movement

Carmarthen railway station and town centre are approximately a 30 minute walk and 10 minute cycle from the site. The route is along busy A roads and involves negotiating narrow pavements, large roundabouts, subways and industrial estates. This is not a journey many people would want to take.

There is a well located bus stop close to the site on the A484. However, we were not presented with details of the bus services and have concerns about how regular the services are to make a meaningful difference to modal share by public transport. The surrounding road network is very much designed for travel by car, with narrow and sporadic pavements and cycle paths.

With the development proposing to accommodate 2,385 students, most of whom will be teenagers, serious consideration needs to be given to how these young people are going to travel to the site. This needs to be based on the sustainable transport hierarchy in

national planning and transport policy and must give greater priority to walking, cycling and public transport ahead of private motor vehicles. We suggest significant investment is needed to improve the active travel infrastructure and public transport services to provide students with a genuine choice of travel other than by car. Engagement with the local authority and local bus services will be crucial to understand how these necessary improvements can be delivered.

The plans do not show any connections with the surrounding strategic site. The development should form part of a permeable street network where people can directly move between the college and the future development and beyond. Consideration should be given to whether the strategic site could create a more welcoming pedestrian and cycle friendly route to the town centre.

Layout

The proposal seeks to replace all the existing college buildings on the north side of Pibwrlwyd Lane with new buildings. We encourage fully testing the benefits and potential of retaining and retrofitting some of the existing buildings. However, we recognise there are funding, accessibility and infrastructure reasons that make this challenging.

It is proposed that a large proportion of the site would be taken up with car parking. There is the danger that the campus could feel dominated by this car parking. This is mainly a consequence of the site's peripheral location and lack of public transport accessibility. However, we encourage testing of whether this amount of car parking is necessary and exploring different options for how parking could be accommodated to minimise its dominance and reduce the amount of land needed to accommodate the development. Aiming to reduce the overall land take could be a useful parameter to work within.

The layout is based on the buildings facing inwards. This will help activate the public spaces between the buildings, and create the desired campus feel, but results in the college turning its back on the surrounding area. This site is part of a wider strategic site and this needs to be reflected in the design. The future development needs to be considered in the context for the plans and the design of the college must be integrated with the wider scheme. We strongly recommend integrating the different uses across the wider site to create a truly mixed-use development. This could present the opportunity for a more fundamental review of how the college could be a more central feature in this new neighbourhood, with the residential, retail and commercial uses integrated around it.

The location of the main entrance and the design of the public realm would benefit from further testing. What will the sense of arrival be like when arriving by different modes and from different directions? The main entrance currently has a relatively strong relationship

with Pibwrlwyd Lane and the existing college buildings to the south, but what will it feel like for people arriving by bus and car to the west and will it be obvious where the main entrance is or will it feel like walking a long way around the building? If the development is better connected to the rest of the strategic site to the north, this has implications for people arriving from this direction. Although not many people will be arriving from the east, consideration still needs to be given to the experience of anyone arriving from along Pibwrlwyd Lane. This all needs to be tested and the buildings and public realm designed to meet the needs of people arriving by different modes and from different locations.

Consideration and explanation of where students will be able to socialise on campus is needed. The café, atrium, central outdoor spaces and MUGA are likely focal points for activity. The design of these spaces needs developing and testing to maximise their potential and create the best possible environment for the students.

The scheme needs to be fully accessible to ensure everyone is treated equally and inclusively. An inclusive design strategy is needed.

The servicing needs to be tested to ensure this works in practice.

Vision

This project has the stated ambition to 'have the look and feel of an inspirational education building' and 'reflect the college status as a WorldSkills Centre of Excellence'. The scheme is also part of what was described in the meeting as 'the most significant strategic site in West Wales'. As a Welsh Government funded scheme, there is the expectation for the college and its buildings to be of the highest quality design. However, the scheme presented does not yet live up to these stated ambitions.

The material presented did not explain the site and context analysis, the design process and how the scheme has been developed. We did not see different options that had been explored, as requested, or how the proposal responds to the Placemaking Wales Charter and Well-being of Future Generations Act, which would be needed to demonstrate how this is the best solution for the site.

The rationale for the arrangement of the buildings and landscaping was not clear. This site and the brief offer the potential to do something special. This can be achieved with simple, high quality buildings and landscaping that responds to the unique character of the site, but this is not yet reflected in the proposals. We believe the design ambition needs to be raised to meet the client's ambition and the opportunity the site presents. This will require a much clearer vision of what these buildings will look and feel like set in the landscape both from a distance and from a user perspective.

We encourage the design team to explore the full potential of the site and how the design could be more integrated into the landscape and topography and how the architectural approach reflects the ambition of the project.

Sustainability

The need for concrete retaining walls to create the level plateaus for the buildings on this sloping site will mean the embodied carbon of the substructure will be relatively high. This will require other parts of the design to reflect best practice in embodied carbon reduction to achieve the target of 600kgCO₂/m². Consideration should be given to efficient structural form and the embodied carbon of all materials, including envelope and finishes. Glulam could be an appropriate alternative to steel for the long span roofs. Relying on electric arc furnace (EAF) steel won't help in reducing the embodied carbon results. The carbon factor used for steel in calculations should be the UK average to reflect that there isn't enough EAF for all construction (classed as a resource constrained material).

Some of the assumptions discussed in the meeting, around the embodied carbon of decentralised versus a centralised ventilation system and suggested limited benefits of greater air tightness, differ from other studies in these areas. We would encourage testing of embodied carbon via calculation and further review of parametric modelling results.

Next Steps

The Design Commission recommend the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Carmarthenshire County Council and WEPCo further engage with us on the masterplan for the strategic site and that the college scheme returns for further Design Review(s). We encourage the team to contact us early to discuss opportunities for further engagement.

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

Attendees

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Daniel McCarthy Stott, WEPCo

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Andrew Haines, Stantec
Oliver Thomas, Scott Brownrigg
Liam Hopkins, The Urbanists

Local Planning Authority: Helen Rice, Carmarthenshire County Council

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair: Jen Heal, DCFW Deputy Chief Executive

Panel: Simon Carne, Lead Panellist
Aisha Ali
Clare Wilding
Jonathan Adams
Carole-Anne Davies, DCFW Chief Executive
Max Hampton, DCFW Design Advisor

Observers: Laura Norman, Transport for Wales
Louie Vaughan, Transport for Wales

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.

Clare Wilding has worked with members of the design team on other projects but has no involvement in this project.