

## **DESIGN REVIEW PANEL**

### **18 May 2006**

**PROPOSAL:** Full Planning Application for Primary Care Centre and Residential Development  
**LOCATION:** Planet Lock Wharf, Norfolk Street, Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent  
**DEVELOPER:** Prima 200 and British Waterways  
**ARCHITECTS:** Panton Sargent  
**REF NO:** 036

#### **Background**

This scheme consists of a new primary care centre, pharmacy and new housing development with associated car parking on a 0.7 ha site adjoining the Caldon Canal in Shelton, Stoke-on-Trent. The majority of the land is owned by British Waterways: this part lies between the canal and Norfolk Street and has a 180m frontage to the canal. The remainder is a public car park located on the opposite side of Norfolk Street, which is in the ownership of the local authority. The land was formerly occupied by Winton Pottery, and two buildings from this period still survive.

The Panel were informed that British Waterways' aim is not for a continuous residential frontage along the canal, as this would effectively privatise its frontage, but to create an attractive mixed use development which relates positively to the waterfront with opportunities for public access to appropriate destinations and activities. The proposed Primary Care Centre would unite four doctors' practices serving around 18,000 people in the Shelton area onto a single site, and provide a new clinic with specialist medical facilities. The residential blocks would be separated from the PCC by a staff car park and arranged in a U-shaped plan open to the canal to maximise residents' views of the water.

The Panel visited the site with the scheme architect prior to commenting on the proposals.

#### **Strategic Planning Context**

No statement of spatial planning policy was provided by the local authority. However, the site is located in the urban core of Stoke-on-Trent within City Centre South which has been designated by Renew North Staffordshire as an Area of Major Intervention (AMI) for housing market renewal. A Strategic Development Framework has been produced for the urban core on behalf of Renew, and the City Centre South AMI is identified for a range of early renewal actions including the prioritisation of the Caldon Canal frontage for waterside development.

Part of the site lies within the Caldon Canal Conservation Area, including a wharfinger's cottage at its western end, and a surviving late 19<sup>th</sup> century former pottery factory building fronting Norfolk Street. As far as is known no urban design strategy, master plan or design brief has been produced for the site or its immediate environs.

### **Contextual Analysis**

The site is on two levels: to the west a smaller lower wharf to the rear of the wharfinger's cottage which is at canal towpath level, and the remainder of the site which is over 1m higher and level with Norfolk Street. The primary care centre and pharmacy are arranged in a U-shaped plan in the western part of the site, and the residential accommodation is also in a U-shaped arrangement opening onto the canal.

No urban design analysis appeared to have been carried out by the architects to show how the proposal relates to its urban context. However, several perspective views were produced showing the relationship of the development to existing dwellings in Norfolk Street and how the whole scheme would sit within the surrounding streets.

No assessment of the historical significance of the site, or the surviving pottery and canalside buildings had been carried out; and no design statement was available to explain how the design of the scheme had been generated.

The movement network was referred to in the presentation, but the understanding of this appeared to be based on informal observation rather than a systematic analysis of pedestrian and vehicular activity.

The proposal would be a significant canalside development but no formal analysis of the views into and out of the site, or the landmark potential of the development appeared to have been carried out.

### **Urban Design**

#### Character

The historic significance of the site had not been assessed, although the plans submitted indicated that an application for consent to demolish buildings in the conservation area had been submitted.

The Panel welcomed the fact that the wharfinger's cottage would be retained and converted for a beneficial use. The details of this however will require careful attention to ensure authentic treatment of windows and other building components. The cottage currently has most of its roof surface missing and it is considered that priority should be given to the weather-proofing of the building so that it does not deteriorate beyond repair.

No indication was given of whether the possibility of converting the surviving 19<sup>th</sup> century pottery building in Norfolk Street to residential accommodation had been seriously considered.

The architect stated that the sett-paved vehicular access to the wharf required by British Waterways would be altered to provide a parallel ramped pedestrian access to the entrance to the Primary Care Centre (PCC), which would itself project into the wharf area. The Panel thought that this would result in the unnecessary destruction of the historic stone surfaces, which ought to be retained and repaired in situ.

### Continuity and enclosure

The development would provide a built-up frontage along 60% its boundary to Norfolk Street, with buildings close to the back of pavement in a similar fashion to the terraced housing in the neighbourhood. Individual buildings would be linked by brick walls with inset metal railings and gates controlling access to the car parks serving the Primary Care Centre and residential blocks. This would effectively create a gated residential community isolated from the public realm and the surrounding streets. With the exception of the five houses with front doors onto Norfolk Street and the pharmacy, the Norfolk Street frontage of the site would present an inactive, secure barrier to the public realm, which would not enhance public safety or encourage pedestrians to use the street.

Similarly the buildings facing the canal would not provide a positive presence to the water front, with the Primary Care Centre set back 10m and presenting a fortress-like frontage to the canal, and the blank ends of two residential blocks having only their balconies next to the water. The wharf would be re-worked and made available as refurbished public open space. Little detail of the treatment of the rest of the canal edge was provided, although it was stated that the PCC car park would be "secure", i.e. probably fenced, and the area between the residential units would be landscaped and banked to prevent children reaching the water.

The location of the main public entrance to the Primary Care Centre would be down the side of the development, facing the untidy backs of properties fronting Howard Place. There appeared to be no functional reason for locating the main entrance in the position proposed, a design decision which would remove a major element of active frontage from Norfolk Street.

The Panel considered that the overall layout of the proposal should be reconsidered with a view to providing a more active frontage to Norfolk Street and a better defined relationship to the canal. The footprint of the Primary Care Centre appears to have been designed for another site, where the main entrance might face the public realm directly instead of looking onto a hotch-potch of rear extensions as it would in this case.

### Quality of the public realm

The main area of public open space would be the wharf next to Planet Lock, which would be hard landscaped with a ramped access from the wharf to the main entrance of the Primary Care Centre. This area is located at the rear of the wharfinger's cottage, which would become an office and therefore likely to be little used during the evenings or at weekends. The PCC would have a meeting room facing the wharf, but no access point and therefore no active frontage to it.

The Panel were concerned that the amenity potential of this space would not be fully realised. The lack of active uses fronting onto the wharf would create an unsafe public space which would be prone to anti-social use when the adjacent buildings were closed. The Panel considered that the possibility of introducing an A3 use (restaurant or café-bar) perhaps with an extension to the wharfinger's cottage should be actively explored. This would provide passive surveillance of the wharf into the evenings and at weekends and would allow its potential as an outdoor amenity to be fully utilised. It would also better fulfil the applicants' stated intention of providing a new destination and an attraction for canal users passing through Stoke-on-Trent. The possibility of creating a better relationship between the PCC and the wharf at ground floor level should also be investigated.

The Panel observed that the space enclosed by the residential blocks would be bordered by undercroft car parking spaces, which would result in the courtyard being surrounded by a dead ground floor frontage. The quality of this space would be improved by facing it with entrance doors and allowing some limited car parking in the central space.

#### Ease of movement

The Primary Care Centre would be accessed by vehicles and pedestrians from Norfolk Street, and also by pedestrians via the wharf. The residential blocks would be accessed from Norfolk Street, although the secure boundary to the street would not facilitate access for visitors, or encourage interaction between new and existing residents.

The Panel were concerned about the level of vehicular traffic that the proposal would generate. The existing public car park in Norfolk Street appears very well used, and the proposal would generate significantly more vehicle movements.

#### Legibility

The main entrance to the Primary Care Centre would not face the street, and instead would be reached down the side of the building. There would be no direct and unobstructed view of this important building's front from the public realm, thereby reducing its legibility and diminishing its potential contribution to the townscape.

#### Mixed use

The development would comprise a mixture of uses, and would be a positive addition to the range of facilities in the area. However, the Panel thought that the right balance of uses around the wharf had not yet been achieved, and that other uses should be introduced to animate the canalside more than a single office use could.

### **Architecture**

The Panel considered that the use of contemporary architecture was entirely appropriate. In general terms the scale and massing of the proposed development would complement the urban context, although the problems caused by the unsatisfactory layout of the scheme would require a reconfiguration of some of the building blocks.

The development would have distinctive three dimensional qualities and would use an appropriate palette of materials. These elements should be carried forward in any redesign of the layout of the scheme.

However the Panel considered that the architectural design failed to respect the public realm, by having far too much inactive frontage and by not enabling the various uses to interact directly with the public spaces around the building and with the water front. As a result the Panel thought that the proposal failed to take the opportunities available to improve the character and quality of the area.

### **Sustainability**

#### Location

The proposal involves brownfield land within walking and cycling distance of the City Centre, with good public transport routes readily accessible.

### Energy

No special provision appeared to have been made to utilise renewable energy or to reduce energy demand on the site.

### Materials

No special provision appeared to have been made to use renewable or non-polluting materials, or materials with low embodied energy.

### Supply

No indication was given regarding the use of locally manufactured materials or local labour in construction.

### Community

The development would improve the range of community facilities available in the neighbourhood and would meet a recognised community need.

### Recycling

The proposal involves the re-use of one historic building on the site, but ignores the potential of the former pottery factory in Norfolk Street.

### **Conclusion**

The Panel considered that, whilst the scheme has positive aspects, the proposal does not deliver the applicants' stated intentions in several ways. The design is not underpinned with an urban design analysis or assessment of heritage value, and no design statement has been produced. As a result the proposal does not address its urban context particularly well, fails to treat the historic environment with due sensitivity, and relates poorly to the public realm and the canal. Many of the problems with the design arise from deficiencies in the site planning, and it is this which should be revised fundamentally in order that this potentially very beneficial development can realise the opportunities provided by this special site.

The Panel were concerned that this significant proposal had been allowed to reach such an advanced stage in the design process before it was presented for design review.

### **Recommended Actions:**

- 1 An urban design analysis should be carried out to establish a better understanding of the history of the site, and its relationship with the urban context, movement network and the public realm.
- 2 A design statement should be produced explaining how the design has been generated from a thorough understanding of the site.
- 3 The site layout should be revised in order to provide more active frontages to the public realm, to improve accessibility and legibility for users and visitors, and to exploit more fully the opportunities available to use the wharf as a beneficial and safe public amenity.

- 4 Consideration should be given to the introduction of an A3 use (such as a restaurant) or other public facility within the former wharfinger's cottage, in order to encourage a more active use of the wharf.
- 5 The issue of sustainability should be positively addressed in the design of the development, through explicit attention to issues such as energy, materials, supply, and recycling.