

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

20 June 2006

PROPOSAL: Outline Planning Application for Retail Development
LOCATION: Biddulph, Staffordshire
DEVELOPER: JJ Gallagher Ltd
ARCHITECTS: WCEC Architects
REF NO: 043

Background

This proposal is for 6,400m² of non-food retail development on the west side of Biddulph town centre, immediately adjacent to the A527. The scheme presented is in outline but with illustrative plans showing the proposed means of access, site layout, and civil engineering works. The site holds colliery waste, and is situated between the A527 and the line of a former railway which is now used as a footpath. The scheme would provide parking for some 329 cars, and servicing would be to the north and west off an extension to an existing access road. The Panel visited the site prior to commenting upon the proposal.

Strategic Planning Context

The site lies on the edge of Biddulph town centre with the boundary of the North Staffordshire Green Belt located immediately to the west.

The Panel were advised that the site is allocated for employment purposes in the Biddulph Local Plan 2001. Subsequently however, work done by GVA Grimley identified a shortfall of retail provision in Biddulph with some 96% of shopping taking place outside the town. Consequently the draft Biddulph Area Action Plan Preferred Options report (2005) proposed that this site be allocated for non-food retail development, an option which was generally supported by the local community.

Despite this being a strategic and highly visible site between Biddulph town centre and open countryside, no design brief has been prepared to guide the form of development.

Contextual Analysis

No urban design analysis appeared to have been carried out to show how the proposed development would integrate with its urban context, and in particular how it would connect into

the surrounding movement network. The plans presented showed a single pedestrian route linking the site with the town centre via an existing pedestrian crossing over the A527, but did not show how this relates to the wider network of pedestrian routes on the western side of the town.

A site layout plan had been prepared showing seven buildings located around the northern and western sides of the site, with car parking in the centre. However, a design statement had not been produced to explain the rationale for this and to provide the basis for future detailed design proposals.

The Panel considered that the absence of any contextual analysis for this significant development and the lack of a design statement explaining how the design of the development is being generated were serious omissions, which should be addressed before any further detailed design work is carried out.

Urban Design

The site occupies a valley containing a small watercourse which emerges from a culvert in the centre of the site and flows southwards. The northern part of the land has been filled with colliery waste and is generally level ground; the southern part is an open valley with substantial changes in level.

Whilst there appeared to be no built features on the site which might require special attention in the design process, the topography of the site is unusual for a development of this type. The Panel were concerned that the form of development indicated had been conceived for a flat site and that extensive civil engineering works would be required to the land to enable it to accommodate the scheme envisaged.

The proposed layout showed a series of rectangular retail units arranged along the northern and western sides of the site facing inwards towards an extensive area of car parking and with their rear elevations to the access road. A single 500m² freestanding unit would be prominently located on the junction of the A527 and the site access road, with its front to the car park. Thus the development would be entirely inward facing and would have blank frontages and service yards around all of its outer boundary to the north and west.

The site is presently undeveloped land formerly subject to tipping, but which has now become overgrown and appears from a distance to be part of the surrounding countryside. The Panel thought that the proposed development would have a major visual impact on this sensitive site and would over time come to be regarded as representing the town of Biddulph itself. The Panel considered that special architectural treatment will be vital in order to create a positive presence in this highly visible gateway location.

The public realm associated with the proposal is typical of a standard retail park development, i.e. mostly car parking with perimeter footpaths running along the front of the retail units and a few trees amongst the parking spaces. The existing culvert would be re-aligned north-south and would discharge in the centre of the site in a steep sided channel. The northern part of the open watercourse would be fenced for safety and a bridge link provided to connect the two parts of the car park directly. A single point of pedestrian access is proposed at the north eastern corner of the site which would provide a route to the town centre. The site is segregated from the rest of

the town by the A527 and the Panel considered that the pedestrian link with the town centre should be more direct, and that more than one option should be made available as people will inevitably take the shortest route even if this means crossing a busy road away from a designated pedestrian crossing point.

Architecture

No elevational drawings were presented to the Panel, although the sectional drawings indicated buildings of around 10m in height to eaves level. The proposed layout suggested the usual kind of out-of-town retail units, with partially active frontages to only the main inward looking elevations. The Panel considered that there is a danger that, unless a more imaginative approach is adopted now, the resulting development will consist of a series of blank-sided rectangular boxes that will not have a positive effect on the local townscape.

The Panel considered that there is a need to take a far more creative approach to the overall form of the development. The scheme will have a huge visual impact on this side of town immediately adjacent to the main road. The Panel thought that the development should be reconfigured as a single unified shape, which relates to the topography of the site in its totality. This would give the scheme a site-specific three dimensional quality and would help avoid the bland anonymous environment commonly associated with this sort of development.

The building proposed for the corner of the A527 and the site access road was considered to be particularly problematic, presenting blank elevations to the main road and to what is sure to become a busy road junction. If further analysis determines that a building is indeed appropriate in this location, then it will be vital to ensure that it is specially designed for this highly visible position as a piece of architecture in its own right with all-round active frontages.

The Panel was informed that the site presented a considerable environmental challenge in that around £2 million had been estimated for civil engineering works to create the levels necessary for the development and to deal with contamination. The Panel was concerned about the scale of these costs, which may well increase following more detailed investigations. The Panel thought that the need to invest so significantly in ground preparation would reduce the funds available to invest in the buildings, with the result that the quality of the scheme above ground would suffer.

Sustainability

The site is brownfield land located within walking distance of Biddulph town centre. Otherwise it appeared that the issue of sustainable development had not been considered in the design of the proposed development.

Extensive cut and fill is proposed to achieve a broadly level site, and the Panel thought that this might present an opportunity for setting the buildings into the landscape and providing turf roofs to promote biodiversity thereby reducing the visual impact on the countryside.

Conclusion

The Panel regarded this to be a special site which is very prominent and which, when developed, has the potential to become a highly visible symbol of the town of Biddulph itself to users of the A527. The Panel thought that it was therefore vital to ensure that the architecture is of a high

quality, and that the development is designed to suit the characteristics of the site rather than the natural contours of the site being completely reworked to accommodate a standard retail park layout which could be built anywhere. The Panel considered that before outline planning permission is granted the local authority should have certainty about the quality of the development that it is permitting by requiring an urban design analysis of the site and a design statement based upon that analysis. The Panel suggested that as part of this analysis diagrams and illustrations should be produced showing how the total building form would fit into the topography and how the development would appear from the A527. The Panel asked to be consulted again once these drawings have been produced.

Recommended Actions:

- 1 Before planning permission is granted an illustrated urban design analysis of the site and its context should be produced to show how the proposed development would integrate with its environment, and in particular how connections with the town centre could be improved.
- 2 Before detailed designs for the proposed development are prepared a design statement should be produced in accordance with DCLG Circular 01/2006 and the advice produced by CABI (*Design and Access Statements – how to write, read and use them*).
- 3 The overall form of the proposal should be reconsidered with a view to creating a unified shape to the whole development which is integrated with the topography of the site.
- 4 All building elevations which face a public highway should have active frontages with full fenestration and appropriate entrances.
- 5 The ways in which the proposal will deliver sustainable development should be systematically considered and explicitly presented when detailed designs for the scheme are produced.
- 6 Revised proposals, including diagrams showing the proposed development in its landscape setting, should be presented to the Panel prior to the submission of a detailed planning application.