

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

19 April 2007

PROPOSAL: Reconsideration of full planning application for 307 residential units with open space and road infrastructure
LOCATION: Land off Scotia Road, Tunstall, Stoke-on-Trent
DEVELOPER: Barratt Homes (Chester Division) Ltd
ARCHITECTURE: John R Paley Associates
REF NO: 055

Background

On 14 December 2006 the Panel considered this proposal when its status was an unregistered full planning application. Further information and modifications to the proposal have now been made, including some design changes, and the application has now been registered. The Panel visited the site before receiving a presentation from the applicant's architects on the amended scheme.

Although the proposal is in the form of a full planning application, no detailed house designs were presented to the Panel: consequently the Panel's comments were focused on the planning and urban design aspects of the proposed development only.

Response to the Panel's recommendations

In December 2006 the Panel was aware that the principle of the development had not been established. Significant policy objections had been raised by RENEW North Staffordshire, the housing pathfinder, as to the appropriateness of this location for new residential development in present housing market circumstances, and the design of the proposal fell a long way short of justifying an exception to RENEW's spatial planning policy objections.

Set out below is an assessment of the way in which this amended proposal responds to the recommendations made by the Panel in December 2006.

Recommendation 1

The developer should appoint a design team with recognised architectural and urban design skills and a track record in the design and delivery of high quality housing developments on brownfield land.

The design team is unchanged, which places the onus upon the developer to ask his existing architects to take a fundamentally different approach to the design of this development than that previously adopted. Issues such as making the design of the development respond well to context in its architecture and its urban design, and taking the increasingly obvious need for sustainable development seriously, will have to be addressed.

Recommendation 2

The site has several characteristics which should influence the design of any development proposal, including the topography and level changes, ground conditions, and views out to local landmarks like the Sacred Heart RC Church. A thorough urban contextual analysis should be undertaken to provide a proper understanding of the built environs so that the design of any new development on the site can be fully integrated with its surroundings.

The amended Design and Access Statement makes reference to recognised principles of good urban and architectural design, including topography, views and the urban context. However, the analysis provided is seriously flawed. Topography is discussed solely in terms of gradients across the site and changes in level across boundaries, rather than the way in which the site lies in relation to the wider landscape. The urban structure of neighbouring residential areas is dismissed as being irrelevant to the layout of the proposed development, and as a result the proposed layout does not integrate with the surrounding street network. Ground conditions are clearly a major issue in developing the site, but the location of mine workings and filled or contaminated land is not mapped out. Views are referred to in terms of what the boundaries of the site look like, not the potential for vistas to local landmarks from vantage points within the site or views into the site from key positions outside. The site analysis provided with the Design and Access Statement is a land use plan that covers sites adjoining the boundary only, and does not address the wider urban context.

Consequently the design justification for the proposal is weak and unconvincing.

Recommendation 3

The site is of a significant scale and a master plan should be prepared to guide its development. This should include an open space strategy which shows how the site can provide connections between the major public open spaces in the vicinity (e.g. Tunstall Park to the north and Bycars Park to the south) and identifies a specific purpose or function for each and every piece of open space within the site.

The Design and Access Statement shows the development of a design concept based on providing a strategic link between the areas of public open space located to the north and south of the site. The Panel thought that this was the right way to organise the layout and planning of the site. However, the Panel was disappointed to see that this approach broke down when the proposed road network was introduced, with the main spine road dominating the layout. The Panel thought that the proposed north-south zone of public open space and the need for a spine road on the same alignment could be combined through the provision of a landscaped avenue defined by trees.

Open space will comprise a high proportion of the site, presumably as a result of the ground conditions. However, this valuable asset has not been utilised to its full potential. There is no strategy setting out the role of the open space or how it would be used. The acoustic bund

proposed along the western boundary of the site has been inexplicably extended along the backs of residential properties in Melstone Avenue, whereas no such treatment is proposed next to the supermarket car park. The Panel regarded the entrance to the site to be an opportunity to create a landscaped approach which signalled a high quality landscape within the site, rather than a place to site a block of flats opposite the supermarket vehicular access point. There is a need to identify opportunities for community focus in areas of open space within the site, including the potential for shared surfaces. The Panel noted that issues of post-development stewardship of the public open space had not been resolved.

The Panel was concerned to see residential properties backing onto public open space, e.g. along the southern and north eastern boundaries of the site, as this would result in a security problem.

Recommendation 4

A systematic appraisal of the way in which the proposal addresses issues of environmental sustainability should be provided as part of the Design and Access Statement.

The Design and Access Statement makes no reference to the ways in which the principles of sustainable development have been designed into the proposed development. In fact the Panel was concerned that the issue of environmental sustainability appeared to have been completely ignored: no attempt has been made to make provision for active or passive energy generation within the site, to incorporate sustainable drainage systems, to integrate with the local sustainable transport network, to address recycling needs, to deal with issues of local supply of materials and labour, or to address community needs within such a large development.

Conclusion

The Panel recognised that some efforts had been made to respond to its earlier recommendations, specifically with regard to the integration of a linear zone of public open space through the site. However, this good intention had not been properly worked through into the site planning and road layout.

The Panel thought that to justify an exception to RENEW's policy objections the development would have to be of a far higher quality than that being proposed. North Staffordshire does not need more average, or below average-quality housing. If the overall quality of the housing stock in the sub-region is to improve, then new residential development must be clearly above the average. Otherwise efforts to renew the housing market in Stoke-on-Trent will be undermined.

Recommendations

The Panel wished to make the following recommendations, should the local authority consider that the fundamental strategic planning objections can be overcome.

- 1 An contextual analysis should be carried out illustrating how the site relates to the wider urban area, particularly in respect of its connectivity to the strategic movement network and views into and out of the site.
- 2 The public open space strategy within the development should be reviewed in order to strengthen the linear route through the site and reduce pedestrian-vehicle conflict, perhaps

by creating a landscaped avenue, and by announcing the presence of the development with high quality landscaping at the gateway from Scotia Road.

- 3 The site layout and the orientation of building blocks should be revised to ensure that the proposed development integrates properly with the surrounding street network, that there are no insecure rear boundaries to dwellings, and that the buildings are aligned so as to reinforce the new street frontages.
- 4 The Design and Access Statement should provide a comprehensive statement of how the design of the proposal makes the development sustainable.