

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

6 March 2008

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| PROPOSAL: | Consideration of planning application to build 4,780m² of B1 office space in six separate blocks, forming phase one of a larger development |
| LOCATION: | Blythe Vale employment site, land East of A50 roundabout, Blythe Bridge, Staffordshire Moorlands |
| DEVELOPERS: | St Modwen Developments Limited |
| ARCHITECTURE: | Glancy Nicholls Architects |
| PLANNING: | Barton Willmore |
| REF NO: | 095 |

Background & Planning Context

The proposed development is a current valid planning application that has been to planning committee with officer recommendation for approval in February 2008 but was referred to Design Review Panel for expert comments as a result of concerns over the design. There has already been considerable consultation over the proposals both pre-submission and as a part of the statutory planning process.

The use of the site for employment is in line with the recommendation in the Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands and the Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent Structure Plan. Furthermore, the Blythe Bridge Employment Site is designated as a key employment site in Policy E2 of the Staffordshire Moorlands Local Plan 1998. The policy outlines a key restriction that no building should be greater than two storeys in height or 10 metres to the ridge and that the development should be of 'high quality'.

Site Description

The entire employment site is approximately 50 Hectares (117 acres) and is located either side of the main A50 southeast of the village of Blythe Bridge. The phase considered at this juncture comprises approximately 1.3 Hectares (3.2 acres) and is located in the northernmost part of the site closest to Blythe Bridge. The site comprises previously undeveloped green fields, these are essentially clear with a gentle fall from the highways that form the northwest and south west borders of approximately 1.5 metres. The two dual carriageways are screened by existing wooded copse which will restrict views of the proposed development considerably.

The Design Proposal

The proposal is for the first phase of development on the site and includes 6 blocks of two-storey B1 office development of between 646m² and 884m². The blocks are arranged to form a semi-circle around a 171-space central courtyard car park. The site is accessed by vehicles off the A521 Uttoxeter Road and there is a proposed extension to the 6a bus service to serve the site.

The blocks are clean and contemporary in style utilising a simple palette of materials including block work, louver profile cladding and powder-coated aluminium windows. The buildings have mono-pitched roofs as this makes compliance with the 10 metre height restriction easier. A key consideration in the design is flexibility with the 6 blocks designed to form 19 separate units with potential for tenants to let one or more of these.

Panel Comments

The Panel's discussion is summarised under the headings below:

Strategic Planning Considerations

The Panel commented upon the mix of buildings on the site and were concerned over the provision of small B1 type units in such a location when there are opportunities to integrate small office users on brown field sites in existing town centres. This type of office did not seem consistent with the 'premium employment site' concept for which regional site allocations and outline approval exist. Whilst accepting that there is a valid outline consent, the panel thought that this scheme is an example of the building out of 1990s ideology predating the current attention to town centre regeneration in North Staffs. The Panel suggested that the site was more suitable for large floor-plate operations. It was explained that the development as proposed is in response to market need, that the smaller units are to kick-start the development of the Blythe Vale employment site and that larger units should form a significant part of later phases.

The Panel regretted the rigidity of the 10 metre height restriction and suggested that though this maybe a useful guide that there should be flexibility allowing a variance in the height to create a richness and vibrancy in the development. Overall, it was felt that the future phases of development on the large site would best be carried out following the production of a masterplan that would serve to integrate future phases and provide a clear design rationale for the site.

Access

The Panel regretted the fact that the location of the site implies that most access would be via private car but were supportive of the move to extend the bus route. It was also suggested that the design could help to encourage pedestrian journeys from the nearby residential areas of Blythe Bridge and from its railway station.

Site Layout

The Panel were not wholly satisfied with the scale and location of the individual blocks. They suggested that by joining these into a faceted perimeter block a larger building with greater presence would potentially act more successfully as a kick-start development. It was further suggested that linking of the blocks would further add to the flexibility that was a stated aim of the development as this would allow for potential occupants to rent larger, linked floor-space than one block could provide alone.

Finally, the Panel suggested that the size of the refuse stores is further investigated as the provision appeared inadequate and the function and management of these areas can significantly affect the quality of the development.

Architecture and Materials

The Panel were generally supportive of the materials palette and of the clean and contemporary design of the buildings. There was however a concern over the impact of the six blocks as a result of their scale, as discussed above. The issue of individual signage was discussed and it was suggested that with a multiple-user development such as this the control should be retained by the freeholder and strictly enforced as failure to do this may result in inappropriate signage and a reduction in the perceived quality of the development.

Sustainability

Aside from the general concern over the sustainability of the development as a whole with regard to its location the Panel were broadly supportive of the sustainable initiatives put forward including the Sustainable Urban Drainage System and felt that the pond could also provide a pleasant landscape feature. There was also widespread support for the commitment to use recyclable local materials with a long lifespan, good levels of insulation and passive ventilation. The panel suggested further attention should be given to the scope for on site renewable energy..

Conclusion

The Panel considered this development to be the product of outmoded 1990s thinking that has now been superseded and that office buildings for smaller users should be located firstly on brown field sites in town centres. However, as the existing planning commitment is being implemented it needs a stronger design ethos to achieve a characteristic place. This first phase of development will be critical to set design standards for a large sub-regional employment centre and the recommended actions below are geared toward this goal.

Recommended Actions

1. The Panel recommend that the entire site is subject to a new Masterplan with a clear design overview better integrating and guiding the future phases of development.
2. The Panel recommend that the possibility of joining the individual blocks into a faceted single building be considered to add more presence to the building on the site and to allow increased flexibility of office provision.
3. The Panel recommend that the 10 metre maximum height restriction as set out in Policy E2 of the Local Plan is interpreted more flexibly and that it might be exceeded in locations where a design rationale adding character and legibility to the overall development could justify it.
4. The Panel recommend that sustainability is placed at the heart of the whole development with regard to the specification of locally sourced materials wherever possible, the further integration of public transport, consideration of renewable energy and other appropriate measures.