

DESIGN REVIEW PANEL

24 January 2008

PROPOSAL:	Consideration of planning application to develop an 850 work station call centre office with associated recreation and training facilities for Vodafone
LOCATION:	Land at Forge Lane, Festival Park, Stoke-on-Trent
DEVELOPERS:	Stoke-on-Trent Regeneration Ltd
ARCHITECTURE & PLANNING:	RPS Planning and Development
REF NO:	087

Background & Planning Context

The decision to develop a large state of the art call centre facility in Stoke-on-Trent was taken in April 2007 to consolidate a number of facilities that they currently operate in North Staffordshire. Etruria Valley was selected as the ideal location for the substantial development as a result of its existing connections and infrastructure.

The proposed development is in line with national policy, regional policy (specifically the Regional Spatial Strategy for the West Midlands) and local policy. The proposed development is of a contaminated brownfield site that has historical employment use and current allocation for a continuation of this. The site is sustainable in that it is located close to the existing facilities at Festival Park and transport links including regular bus services into the city centre and a cycle and footpath network.

At the time of the design review a detailed planning application had already been submitted with a decision expected in March 2008. As a result of commercial sensitivity the proposals for this development have remained confidential until the submission of the planning application and this prevented a pre-application presentation to the design review panel.

Site Description

The application relates to a section of the Etruria Valley of approximately 4.69 Ha that lies to the south west of the Trent and Mersey Canal. Approximately half of this (2.26 Ha) is for the Vodafone development discussed here, this is located 1.6 Km from Stoke-on-Trent city centre. The site rectangular along a north-south axis and is essentially flat.

The site formerly housed the large Corus Steelworks and to the immediate eastern boundary is a triangular landfill area associated with the former industrial use of the site. The western boundary is formed by currently vacant land that is allocated for commercial development with the railway line and main A500 dual carriageway beyond this.

Design Proposal

The proposed building is a bespoke call centre facility within a 147m x 45m envelope covered by an asymmetrical curved metal roof. The building contains two storeys of cellular accommodation along the taller western edge and is bisected by the main entrance with central facilities including a 300-cover cafeteria. To each side of the central service area there are two large single storey open plan spaces, the north hall housing 450 desk spaces and the south hall a further 400.

The south and west elevations are the principle facades and are characterised by the large overhangs to the roof supported by V-shaped struts the main entrance is situated along the western edge and the south elevation also contains a staff entrance fronting on to a landscaped area containing a 14 metre high, 5- kW wind turbine. The north and east elevations are more solid the long east elevation is lower as a result of the asymmetrical curved roof and is punctuated by full-height vertical slots of glazing. Car parking for 435 vehicles surrounds the building on three sides but is predominantly located to the north and east.

Natural day lighting and views out are provided by high-level windows to the south and west elevations with solar protection offered by the overhanging roof. There are also the aforementioned vertical windows and various smaller windows located at a lower level. The building is to be constructed from built-up metal cladding as opposed to composite panels so as to allow for future recycling and is predominantly white, red and silver in colour reflecting the corporate branding of Vodafone.

Panel Comments

The panel were pleased with the detailed information and analysis contained in the Design and Access statement and further clarified by the presentation and were generally supportive of the proposals put forward. There were however a number of areas that were discussed and these are summarised below:

Strategic Urban Design

The Panel highlighted that this development is an example of the 'building –out' of the retail and office park concept from the 1980's and 90's and whilst not suggesting that this should affect the development it should be recognised that the area as a whole should be flexible to accommodate more houses closer to places of work and better public transport, pedestrian and cycle access. In response to this comment it was put forward that vehicular and non-vehicular access is good and that future sites located in Etruria Valley would be likely to include a variety of mixed-use developments.

Site Layout

An initial question was raised about the extent of the site and there was a conflict in some of the plans provided, some showing the inclusion of the triangular former landfill area and others not. It was explained that the area was not within the site boundary but that the development of the Vodafone building provided an opportunity to enhance the green space. The Panel applauded this and highlighted the potential use of the land as a leisure facility for the staff of this building and neighbouring ones. It was suggested that this might be achieved by using a bridge link to the higher green space but it was accepted that this had been rejected on both cost and technical grounds.

There was a brief discussion about the orientation of the building with a suggestion that it could better address the adjacent Trent and Mersey Canal. The Panel accepted that other options had been investigated at an earlier stage and the decision was now fixed but regretted that the confidentiality of the proposal had made earlier consideration at design review impossible.

Sustainability

The Panel welcomed the sustainability initiatives indicated including rainwater harvesting but pointed out that a 5-kW wind turbine would provide only a fraction of the energy requirement for such a development and that its inclusion was little more than a gesture. This was fully accepted but it was pointed out that larger turbines would be inappropriate in this location and would be likely to meet with opposition from the overlooking residents in Wolstanton. The panel did not however think that this was reason to dispense with the smaller turbine as shown as any contribution should be encouraged and the windmill would provide an interesting feature.

The Panel raised the issue of accessibility via public transport, cycle ways and footpaths and were reassured to hear about the proximity and frequency of the bus service and the emerging cycle network across Festival Park. The Panel were pleased that extensive shower and change facilities were provided by the entrance but suggested that cycle storage be located closer to the main building.

The Panel suggested that a sedum roof might be appropriate for a building of this type but it was explained that this had been rejected on economic grounds and because of concerns over water-tightness with the high volume of electronic equipment to be contained within. The Panel understood the reasons given but regretted this decision.

Architectural Form and Materials

In general the Panel were satisfied with the architectural form and materials and were especially pleased with the decision to use built-up metal cladding as opposed to composite panels. There was widespread support for the decision to provide external views for employees and there was a clear view that these should be maximised. Likewise, the Panel supported the decision to optimise the amount of natural day lighting from the long roof light strips that traverse the building.

There was some discussion over the views of the building from the elevated A500 and the opportunity to provide a sedum roof was raised at this juncture. It was suggested that the building would be inhabited 24 hours a day and therefore the appearance at night would also be of importance, thus showing the need for well considered external lighting. The potentially pleasing visual effects of strips of light emanating from the internally lit roof-lights at night was also discussed.

Landscape

The Panel were supportive of the attempts to create a feature including the wind turbine at the southern end of the building as this would be likely to be the main entrance for pedestrians and cyclists. There was however some concern over the car park landscaping proposals as indicated and a suggestion that more trees, well-positioned and of carefully selected varieties, be incorporated. It was suggested that the general aim should be to create a 'park with cars in it' as opposed to a car park.

Conclusion

In summary the Panel were supportive of the decision to provide a high quality bespoke development in this location and were also generally supportive of the proposal presented. There were however a number of suggested actions and these are detailed below:

Recommended Actions

1. The Panel recommend that opportunities to link the site to the Trent and Mersey Canal towpath to the north of the site and to the green space to the east be fully exploited.
2. The Panel recommended that car park is landscaped sympathetically incorporating an appropriate selection of well-located trees of a suitably large scale.
3. The Panel recommend that the buildings colour palette be revisited and the potential use of harmonic opposites to counter the dominance of the red be considered.