

APPENDIX 2
Urban Design Assessment

Godalming Key Site Phase II Proposal (Reference: WA/2009/1674) Urban Design Assessment

1.0 Background

This report assesses the urban design and architecture of the current planning application to redevelop a part of the Godalming Key Site. It is prepared in the context of the planning history associated with this part of the site.

Refusing planning permission in October 2008 for a previous development proposal, the Secretary of State concluded that:

“In design terms.....the site could accommodate buildings of the scale, height and mass proposed. However.....the design has to be of a high quality and reinforce local distinctiveness. In this particular case.....the proposal fails to take the opportunities available to improve the character and quality of the area, and does not reinforce local distinctiveness.....the deficiencies in the design of the scheme weigh heavily against the proposal...on balance the proposal conflicts with the development plan”.

The report included more details of her specific design concerns. These are used later to measure if the current design proposal meets her concerns and is therefore acceptable or not.

The overall scale, height and massing of the current scheme is similar to that previously refused, although it does include a slight reduction in height on some elements. The ‘tower’ corner feature rises slightly higher than that previously proposed. This may still be considered excessively high, over-dominant and out of character with the surroundings, but it would clearly not be worth pursuing objection to this aspect of the design in knowledge of the specific view on scale given by the Secretary of State. Energy should now be focussed on assessing the detailed architectural treatment of the current proposal and the views of it.

In the Planning Inspector’s report on the refused scheme there is some criticism of the design process evolution and lack of a contextual appraisal. Much debate focussed on ‘Local Distinctiveness’ and ‘Local Character Assessment’. Subsequently the Appendix to this report has been prepared and includes an appraisal of these aspects of local character and sense of place, supporting the context for the assessment of the current proposed development.

It is noted that the documents accompanying the planning application also include such assessments and are broadly in agreement. A key discrepancy is in the boundary of the Character Area defined. This report suggests the character area in which the site is located is not constrained by land use but by the visual appearance of the built environment and the linkage between buildings formed by Flambards Way itself in the street scene.

2.0 Design Policy

At national, regional and local level there is clear policy guidance related to the urban design of new development. These include strong references to ensuring design excellence in new development, and respect for and reinforcing local context and character and a sense of place. Those considered most relevant to the design and architecture of the current application are as follows:

National

- Planning Policy Statement 1: 'Delivering Sustainable Development' - promotes high quality design of new developments that respond to local context and create or reinforce local distinctiveness. The companion document to PPS1 is 'By Design', prepared by The Commission for Architecture in the Built Environment (CABE).
- Planning Policy Statement 3: 'Housing' – promotes high quality design and the need to identify the distinctive features that define the character of a particular area and maintain and improve local character.
- Planning Policy Guidance 15: Planning for the Historic Environment – requires plans to encourage development that is consistent with maintaining its (the area's) overall character

Regional

The South East Plan (May 2009):

- BE1: 'Management for an Urban Renaissance'
- BE4: 'The Role of Small Rural Towns ('Market' Towns)
- BE6: 'Management of the Historic Environment'
- CC6: 'Sustainable Communities and Character of the Environment'
- H5: 'Housing Design and Density'
- The Surrey Design Guide (2002) Surrey County Council

Local

Waverley Borough Council Local Plan (2002):

- TC6: The Godalming Key Site – development supported provided it improves the townscape, being of high quality design and complementing the scale and character of the town.
- D4: Design and Layout – new development should be of high quality design integrating the site with the surroundings
- The planning and design brief for the site adopted by the Council in 2002

3.0 Design Context

In addition to the design policy context, full regard must be had to the recent Secretary of State report on the previous development proposal for this site.

The Secretary of State's design considerations on the previous proposal

When considering the previous development proposal for the site, the Secretary of State (SoS) highlighted very specific design and local character concerns which she felt the proposal failed to satisfactorily address. She "**attaches significant weight to the design aspect of the proposal**". These concerns are itemised below as direct quotations from her report, and are

used in a positive manner to test how the current application addresses them. She concluded that:

- **Given the lack of a strong visual context for the development an intensive development of the scale proposed would be appropriate to its setting and complement the character of the area.**
- **Is satisfied that the site could accommodate buildings of the scale, height and mass proposed.**
- **There would be no overbearing impact on the occupiers of nearby properties**
- **...attaches significant weight to the design aspect of the proposal.**
- **..."the site could accommodate buildings of the scale, height and mass proposed. However, for the scheme to meet the requirements of PPS1 the design has to be of a high quality and reinforce local distinctiveness. In this particular case... the proposal fails to take the opportunities available to improve the character and quality of the area, and does not reinforce local distinctiveness...the deficiencies in the design of the scheme weigh heavily against the proposal....planning permission should be refused."**

4.0 Urban design assessment

Context

In addition to assessing the proposal in terms of existing design policy at national, regional and local level, the key test is whether the current proposal satisfactorily addresses the Secretary of State's considerations above, and within these parameters whether or not planning permission could be granted.

The Appendix 2a includes papers on Local Distinctiveness and the Flambards Way Character Area which forms part of these considerations as part of the overall assessment of the design of the current proposal. This includes a local townscape and character context which design of new development should have full regard to.

Godalming is one of several small-scale historic market towns in Surrey that display built characteristics typical of such settlement pattern and growth. The South East Plan identifies certain nearby larger settlements such as Guildford and Woking as 'Sub-Regional Hubs' where development will be supported. Within the Plan Godalming falls in the 'market town' category of settlement. This market town setting for the application site must be fully recognised when addressing design of new development.

Architectural form and style

The scale and physical extent of the proposal is very large when compared to existing development in Godalming, both past and present. It comprises a perimeter block form of long, uninterrupted built frontage to Flambards Way with blocks stepping up in height from 4 to 6 storey. In context, this frontage is two and a half times the length of the Waitrose supermarket elevation to Flambards Way.

The corner of Flambards Way and Gateshall Lane is turned by an 8 storey tower 'feature'. The development extends east along Gateshall Lane, stepping down in height to 3 storey adjacent to the junction with Victoria Road. The height of development reduces to the rear, stepping down in scale. Parking is set below ground.

Essentially all the block forms are predominantly flat roofed, occasionally interspersed with smaller areas of mock pitch roof forms. There is strong vertical emphasis to the architecture, with a rhythm and articulation created by the series of bays in the design. The top floors facing Flambards Way are characterised by regularly spaced one and two storey high vertically projecting elements which align with the front facades of the building. These are interspersed with small elements of quasi-mansard roof forms, clad in metal zinc. On Gateshall Lane the top floor design creates a skyline characterised by part-splayed upstanding elements, again interspersed with small elements of mock pitched roof behind. Window openings are generally of vertical proportions, and entrances address the streets.

Internal courtyards and a communal 'garden' area are located to the rear with pedestrian access through covered passages beneath the blocks which will be gated at night.

Such scale of development and style of architecture may more normally be associated with urban city settings, with a context of surrounding high density and high rise developments, many of 'landmark' status. The consistent and repetitive style of architecture proposed for the whole development emphasise the scale and bulk and will ensure that it visually reads as a whole rather than as a series of separate but linked buildings. This reflects a more institutional character type of development associated with uses such as student accommodation, hospitals, educational establishments, civic offices and so on. In a dense city centre or edge of city location such uses are more easily accommodated without harm to local character. It is less easy to 'fit' such scale and style of architecture into a historic market town setting without causing harm.

Permeability, linkages and public realm

The layout suggests a highly 'permeable' development with several points of public access to and through the rear of the development and to the 'public' garden area. The entrances would be gated at night.

It is not clear how inviting these routes would be for the public. Entrances are beneath the building and therefore 'roofed' and enclosed, unlike the traditional yards and pedestrian routes in the town, which vary from being either open or having short sections of covered passage ways. There is no indication of who would actually wish to use these routes, many forming a 'dogs-leg' rather than a direct 'desire line'.

A potential pedestrian link over Flambards Way and across the Waitrose car park to the town centre is indicated. In theory this is a sound suggestion. In

practice it must be questioned if it could be achieved as it would involve a flight of steps and/or ramp down from street level and loss of parking spaces. It is not clear if Waitrose have been consulted.

The daylight and sunlight information submitted appears to focus on the impact on the proposed and existing residences, but there is no indication of how much sun, if any, the garden area would receive. Its purpose and use, other than acting as a physical break between the new and existing development is uncertain.

Response to the proposed design

As explained above, the final part of this report tests whether the current proposal satisfactorily addresses the Secretary of State's detailed design concerns on the refused scheme, and within these parameters whether or not planning permission should therefore be granted.

The Design and Access Statement accompanying the planning application (paragraph 5.2.2) states that...*"our design concept has paid careful attention to the Secretary of State's decision letter and the Inspector's report on the 2008 appeal scheme. We have sought to design a scheme which reinforces and respects local character. We have taken design inspiration from the historic town centre but at the same time responded to the larger scale of the buildings and plots in the vicinity of the Key Site. The result is a scheme which is visually attractive and appropriate to its context"*.

The following critique therefore considers if the current scheme has successfully responded to and fully addressed the Secretary of State's (SoS) design concerns, using direct quotations from her report.

SoS – "It would be wrong to approach the design as if it were seen in isolation".

Current scheme response

The current scheme is a large scale stand-alone design which apart from some materials proposed has little regard to local distinctiveness. Although it may be considered good contemporary architecture in its own right, the design is more in keeping with city locations and has no relationship to the existing characteristics or context of the market town of Godalming as identified in the Appendix.

The consistent design approach across the whole site results in a monolithic appearance more commonly associated with city centre developments and institutional uses. There is no architectural attempt to visually reduce the height, scale and bulk using tested treatments. These include creating the appearance of varied but linked buildings in the street scene, significantly setting back upper floors or introducing stronger horizontal elements to help visually reduce the overall vertical emphasis.

On Catteshall Lane the application refers to a 'terrace' design approach, but the sheer scale of build does not reflect the more traditional concept and scale

of the terrace as found elsewhere in the town centre, or in the adjoining Victoria Road.

Conclusion

The architecture proposed is seen in isolation and would not visually integrate or harmonise with the existing character or context of this part of the town.

SoS – “The site is in a prominent location close to the centre of Godalming and will be seen from a number of views surrounding the historic market town, albeit not from within the Conservation Area. The proposal would have an adverse visual impact when looking at it from the hills which overlook the town centre”.

Current scheme response

There remains concern that despite the opinions of the inquiry Inspector and Secretary of State, there will be glimpses and views of the higher elements of the development from the Conservation Area, at least from the lower end of the High Street. The applicant’s own Design and Access Statement notes that....”the application site is visible from the Lammas Land Site of National Conservation Interest and parts of the Town Centre Conservation Area...”

Notwithstanding the above concern, there can be no dispute over the visual impact on other long and short distance key views of the development. Views from the surrounding hills overlooking the town centre are identified in the submission. They are most significant from the Frith Hill area to the north, and more immediately from South Hill area which rises steeply above the south of the site. From Frith Hill, particularly in winter months, there are established views and vistas overlooking the town. This is part-characterised by positive landmarks such as the spire and towers of the churches which rise elegantly above the general skyline. The new development would also play a landmark role, but the proportions, forms and bulk of build would not visually compare favourably to those existing.

From the South Hill area the present views looking down to the town centre include the visually intrusive top level of the rear elevation of the Police Station, which rises to 5 storey. The most sensitive ‘receptors’ of this view are the residents. New views from this area would include the rear elevations and skyline of the complete development, taking in a much larger length of skyline than that of the Police Station and at greater height(s), including the 8 storey tower. Due to the architectural treatment proposed this will have a significantly detrimental effect on views from the South Hill area, acting as a visual barrier and a distracting influence on established and cherished aspects across the town centre and river valley to Frith Hill and beyond.

Closer views of the development would be seen particularly from the Flambards Way Character Area environs, including Victoria Road and Catteshall Lane. The corner tower forms the highest part of the proposal and is also located on the highest part of the site, compounding its height and visual impact in the locality. The height, form and scale of this element in particular is unprecedented in Godalming. It would have an extreme impact on

existing views which are characterised by lower scale buildings. Arguably this impact could be positive provided the structure introduces a new landmark of the highest possible design quality to the existing townscape. For reasons elaborated on below, this is not considered to be the case.

There is also strong concern that views would be harmed by the development at night when lights are on. This would have a 'beacon' effect and draw further unwelcome attention to it.

Conclusion

The scheme would have an adverse visual impact on views from the immediate locality and more distant surroundings, including the hillsides. It would also be prominent in the longer distance views of the town at night time when internally lit.

SoS – “There would be no material effect on the character and appearance of the Conservation Area. Godalming in general and the Conservation Area in particular is characterised by development that is two or three storeys in height”.

Current scheme response

Despite the SoS's opinion, the site immediately adjoins the Town Centre Conservation Area boundary and it is considered that any development in this location will inevitably impact on its setting. Concerns remain that views and glimpses of the development will be seen from within the Conservation Area itself which could be detrimental to its character and setting. However, as a result of the SoS's opinion this line of concern is not pursued further.

Full consideration has also been given to the potential impact on the setting of the Wey Navigation Conservation Area to the north east of the site. Due to the substantial distance between the development site and the navigation it is not felt there are any justifiable concerns regarding the setting of this Conservation Area

Conclusion

The design of the development could be considered to have a harmful impact on the character and setting of the Town Centre Conservation Area. However, the opinion of the Secretary of State on this matter is clear and subsequently it is not considered appropriate to pursue it any further. However, other local views would be affected.

SoS – “That the design of the development shares a “generic” quality of “family resemblance” to other blocks of flats elsewhere in the country. The proposal seems somewhat utilitarian and does not reinforce local distinctiveness or is attractive for such a prominent location”.

Current scheme response

Although the architectural treatment of the current scheme differs from that refused, it is considered to have the same “generic” quality referred to by the SoS. Architectural and urban design publications and journals regularly feature new developments, and the style of architecture proposed can be

identified as that applied to many schemes elsewhere in the country, and particularly in city locations. The architecture does not respond to the character of the place or therefore reinforce local distinctiveness.

The 'brutalist' 1960's style of architecture of the existing Police Station is out of character with the Godalming townscape and its demolition will be welcomed. There is the danger that what replaces it could be equally inappropriate if permitted, and will be of equal concern for future generations.

Conclusion

The design of the development has a generic resemblance to other blocks of flats elsewhere in the country and fails to reinforce local distinctiveness.

SoS – “Whilst the scale of the development (proposed) could be appropriate to its context, this is dependent on high quality architecture and sensitive detailing being achieved”.

Current scheme response

The architecture in itself may be considered as high quality, but this appears to be a case of “good architecture but wrong place”. For high quality to be achieved in this location there needs to be a much stronger recognition and interpretation of local built character and sense of place and this is missing from the design. There are ‘token’ gestures towards local character in the form of some materials, vertical emphasis and so on, but overall the design fails to satisfactorily reinterpret the local character, albeit in a contemporary manner which would comfortably fit with the place and its context. The local community would be unlikely to recognise any reflection of local distinctiveness or identity in the architecture.

At this stage it is not possible to fully assess the quality of detailing proposed. It can be assumed that this would be carefully controlled by condition, ensuring durable and high quality detailing of attractive appearance and avoiding future maintenance issues.

Conclusion

The architectural practice employed to design the development is nationally recognised for the quality of its work. Although the architecture proposed may be considered to be of high quality, it is in the wrong location and therefore fails to successfully respond to local distinctiveness, character and sense of place.

SoS – “The proposed 8 storey tower lacks inspiration and does not display the level of thinking or rigorous approach that is expected of such a significant proposal – particularly when looking at it from Flambards Way”.

Current scheme response

The tower in the current scheme is also 8 stories, and rises slightly higher than that refused. Its footprint measures 12 metres square, which together with the height

results in excessively bulky scale and proportions which are visually out of character with other built forms in the town.

Corner buildings should be treated with particular care as they are often a useful way of giving directions and helping people to find places. A building element of this scale must therefore be of the highest architectural quality if it is to contribute to local character and not detract from it. The strong geometric form of the tower creates an extremely ungainly and bulky box-like appearance which visually conflicts with its surroundings. This is exacerbated by large expanses of unrelieved brickwork rising up from street level, with limited openings or visual relief.

The design is reminiscent of large city centre institutional built forms and does not visually suggest residential uses within from its external appearance. The use is also a design constraint for a 'landmark'. With such status it must stand the test of time, as demonstrated by other local landmark buildings such as church spires or water towers. A residential block is unlikely to achieve this aspiration.

Furthermore, the flat roof of the tower appears visually incomplete and again out of character with the area. It lacks a 'top' or any detailing which would complement local distinctiveness. There appears to be some form of flue or chimney projecting above the top of roof level which in isolation would appear incongruous and not make any positive contribution to the local skyline.

There may be a case for supporting a new landmark structure in this location, but this would need to have scale, proportions and a finesse and elegance of design that positively contributes to local character. It is not considered that the current proposal displays any of these attributes and would have a 'brutal' appearance, detrimental to its setting in this part of Godalming.

Conclusion

The design of the important 'tower' element of the scheme is a strong cause for concern. It does not provide a visually distinct and sufficiently high quality architectural statement to justify such a height and scale of development.

SoS – “The flat roof together with the glazing running along the top levels does not relate well to the adjacent “Atrium”.

Current scheme response

The development has predominantly large areas of flat roof, interspersed at upper floor level by projecting flat top and splayed upstanding 'gables'. Some very small elements of mock pitch roofs, some quasi-mansard and others quasi-pitch roof forms are contained within or as part of the roof design.

The majority of the roof area is flat. The interspersed quasi-mansard and mock-pitch roof forms proposed reflect design of any place anywhere development from the 1970's when such roof forms were extensively used. Their use is not considered sympathetic to local character and context and will not make any positive contribution to the architecture and roofscape of

Godalming.

The Atrium is part characterised by a large hipped roof forms and traditional gable forms projecting towards the street scene. The proposed development has what may be described as 'gables', but with flat or splayed tops and lacking pitches, visually emphasising the 'block' form of structure. The end elevations of the blocks facing towards The Atrium and stepping up Flambards Way also emphasise the flat roof form, with splayed top corners and large expanses of unrelieved brickwork which appear ungainly and alien to the character of the local environment.

Conclusion

The excessive amount of flat roof forms proposed for the development is out of character with the area and subsequently would fail to have a positive visual relationship with The Atrium and other developments adjoining.

SoS – “The specific design fails to achieve sufficient quality in terms of its architecture and detailing. The proposal would fail to take the opportunities available to improve the character and quality of the area and would harm the character and appearance of the surrounding area”.

Current scheme response

The combination of the above responses clearly emphasises that the current proposal also fails to achieve sufficient quality in terms of its architecture and would harm the character and appearance of the area.

Conclusion

The design of the development fails to meet the quality of architecture expected of this location and would cause visual harm to the local market town character.

5.0 Response to CABE's views

CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) “wholeheartedly support this application” and considers that the corner tower “has successfully developed an appropriate verticality and distinctiveness, which successfully addresses the town centre”.

It is not intended to prepare any lengthy response to this view, other than to question how such opinion compares to CABE's own extensive range of publications which are intended to help guide and improve the quality of design in the built environment. There would appear to be many areas of conflict with its own guidance.

Furthermore, CABE's own 'Building for Life' assessment criteria can be applied to this development and there is doubt that it meets many of these design based criteria.

6.0 Conclusion

The overall look and feel of a new development should be considered in relation to neighbouring buildings and the local area more generally. It should promote or reinforce local distinctiveness with an innovative approach to design, recognise the individuality of a place and respond to and reinforce locally distinctive patterns of development. It does not have to copy the style of surrounding architecture but will benefit by responding to the scale and materials of surrounding buildings, the aspect of the site and particular views.

Character and quality of place help increase community pride, and architectural quality is about being fit for purpose, durable, well built and pleasing to the mind and eye. The local community will live with the outcome of the proposed development and it is essential that they feel comfortable with the end result.

The above assessment responds to the views of the Secretary of State concerning this site, and her detailed architectural quality expectations of development. Its conclusions clearly indicate that the current proposal fails to meet her detailed concerns and should be refused.

7.0 Recommendation

Refuse for the following reasons:

- (1) The proposed development does not meet the requirements of the wide ranging urban design policy contained in the Development Plan and the relevant government planning policy guidance and statements.
- (2) The architecture of the proposed development fails to reinforce or make a positive response to local distinctiveness and sense of place and introduces a building that would be out of character with and harmful to the appearance of the local area and townscape.
- (3) The proposed development would have an adverse visual and intrusive impact on attractive and established views in the immediate locality and in longer distance views from the hills overlooking the town centre.