

Report of the Woking Design Review
Panel

Goldsworth Road, Woking

26 February 2020

The design review meeting

Reference number	1352/070220
Date	7 th February 2020
Meeting location	Woking Borough Council, Civic Offices, Gloucester Square, Woking, Surrey, GU21 6YL
Panel members attending	Chris Bearman (Chair), Architecture, Housing Chris Schulte, Architecture, Public Realm Murray Smith, Architecture Public Realm Lorraine Farrelly, Architecture, Urban Design Richard Portchmouth, Architecture, Urban Design
Panel manager	Kieran Toms, Design South East
Presenting team	Nigel Bidwell, JTP Josh Cherry, JTP Sheena Bell, Gillespies Patrick Conn, Gillespies
Other attendees	David Taylor, Montagu Evans Katy Davis, Carter Jonas Charlotte Hutchison, Carter Jonas Matt Turner, EcoWorld Chris Gaylord, EcoWorld Brooke Bougnague, Woking Borough Council Tom Simpson, Woking Borough Council Tom James, Woking Borough Council
Site visit	A full site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel the scope of this review was not restricted.
Panel interests	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts of interest.
Confidentiality	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a detailed planning application. Full details of our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

The proposal

Name	Goldsworth Road Neighbourhood
Site location	Land north and south of Goldsworth Road, Woking, GU21 6LN
Site details	The 1.15-hectare site is located to the west of Woking town centre. It consists of land both to the north and south of Goldsworth Road. This land includes Woking Railway Athletic Club & York Road Project homeless shelter. It is bordered by a train line to the south and to the east is Victoria Square. It is approximately a 4 minute-walk to Woking train station to the east.
Proposal	The proposal is for 965 residential units in a cluster of towers, the re-provision of Woking Railway Athletic Club & York Road Project homeless shelter, and 30,000 square foot of commercial space, public realm improvements to Goldsworth Road and its closure to traffic.
Planning stage	Pre-application. Target date for full planning application is May 2020.
Local planning authority	Woking Borough Council.
Planning context	The site are allocated within Council's Site Allocations DPD.
Planning history	In 2016, Prime Place submitted plans to develop part of the site, with 560 flats in buildings of up to 35 storeys, on the land to the south of Goldsworth Road. Planning permission was granted in October 2016, but the development was not brought forward. A 'resolution to grant' exists for the 20-32 Goldsworth Road part of the site.
Planning authority perspective	The planning officers did not express any specific perspective.
Community engagement	The applicant informed the panel that public consultation has commenced and is ongoing, and that statutory consultation has taken place with Thamesway, Network Rail, Surrey County Council and Woking Borough Council.

Summary

The overall strategy of thinking about this site in its broader context with a ‘master plan’ approach and properly integrated green infrastructural landscape strategy is very welcome and gives a robust analytic underpinning to the overall proposal. Whilst the early stage of the scheme means that not every issue has yet been resolved, we are confident that the depth and quality of the analysis to date means that the outstanding issues can be resolved in a satisfactory manner. The proposal is particularly strong in its approach to the hierarchy of the buildings and the integration of landscape.

A considerable challenge will be the final precise identification of the nature of the podiums. Some of the detail of the open space, including the approach to the street on Goldsworth Road, and the impact of the microclimate on the private and communal open spaces, still need to be resolved.

A wider risk is the lack of an agreed town centre master plan or similar design framework. It is difficult to evaluate whether the proposal identifies the full potential of the site in the wider context of the town centre, regardless of the merits of its site planning or design. This is a major development on a prominent site and will inform Woking’s future. The applicant acknowledges the absence of guiding policy and has begun to undertake work that considers the site and Woking Town Centre on a strategic level.

Key recommendations

1. The approach to podiums should be resolved by identifying more clearly how they relate to the new landscaped street and proposed ground floor uses.
2. The public realm on Goldsworth Road should be refined, making it simpler and less cluttered.
3. A wider mix of unit sizes should be included, with more larger units, in order to bring more life and community to the development.
4. The views of the towers from afar should be considered, as should how their detailing and elevational treatment can inform their relationship both to each other and to the rest of Woking – taking into account both the town centre and the area beyond.
5. How the western side of the proposal relates to the much lower buildings to the west of the site should be taken into account more. A less abrupt end to the western side of the scheme would be particularly welcome.
6. We recommend reducing the number of flats per core. If this cannot be done, then internal corridors should be designed to a higher standard to mitigate for the large number of units served per core.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy

- 1.1. The overall approach is positive and well thought-through, and takes a very welcome proactive stance, despite the difficulties of responding to a context that is still evolving and emerging without a broader master plan. The strategy and approach make a convincing argument about where it might make sense to put a cluster of tall buildings in the centre of Woking. In this way it is conceptually a strong scheme and begins to create a coherent urban place that responds to what has already been started beyond its own red line.
- 1.2. We support the decision to rehouse the York Road Project and the Woking Railway Athletic Club which contributes to the mixed-use nature of this area and the feeling of it as a genuine centre of a community that will attract a diverse demographic and a range of uses.
- 1.3. There could be more evidence of how this place will be experienced by the circa.2,000 people that will live in the building. The location is central to Woking and the approach is effective in its response to the rest of the town centre, but it might also be useful to consider it as a self-contained place in its own right and consider how future residents will experience and understand this development in terms of character and identity.
- 1.4. We hope that the work and analysis undertaken to develop the strategy for this site is acknowledged and taken into account by the local authority, as this type of approach, if applied more broadly, could help bring high quality design to the centre of Woking. The risk is that if this sort of in-depth analysis is limited to just the approach on this site, future development around the site could potentially undermine the qualities of both this site and the town centre more widely.
- 1.5. In the absence of a tall building framework or wider public realm framework for Woking Town Centre to guide the location of tall buildings, we cannot comment on whether this is the correct location for buildings of this height or on whether these proposals are the appropriate height for this location. We can comment on the design quality of the proposed scheme and on its impact on the town and surrounding environment, but we are conscious that we are commenting on the scheme without clarity about its potential future relationship with others coming forward, despite the fact that the impact on the townscape will be collective. As tall building developments in Woking town centre progress, issues arising out of the absence of a tall building or public realm framework will become more prevalent; this is of increasing concern.

2. Landscape, amenity & play

- 2.1. The overall approach to public realm is a strong one and is very positive. It is very encouraging to see such an extensive integration of landscape issues early on in the approach, and we support the principle of making Goldsworth Road a key piece of public realm.
- 2.2. The microclimate likely to be created, needs to be further explored and the response to it justified. There is the potential for some of the private and communal open spaces to have a very limited amount of sunlight (despite the evident and positive thought that has gone into their alignment). Coupled with the likely wind effect, this may undermine the quality of the open spaces and may mean they won't be properly used. There is a need to avoid these spaces being hostile or unwelcoming.
- 2.3. The podiums are relatively high up which means they are quite separate from the street. This is not necessarily bad, but it means they need to be considered as separate spaces. The approach to these spaces should reinforce their character as elevated courtyards that primarily relate to and interact with the buildings around them, and the residents in those buildings, rather than the street. This in turn could help to develop a community within the buildings themselves.
- 2.4. We support the concept of the public realm on Goldsworth Road as a meaningful public space and well-managed street with a distinct sense of place. However, there is the risk that the approach to this space is trying to do a little bit too much. For example, there are three layers of East to West movement with a range of hard and soft spaces. This approach may lead to a fragmentary character and may cause issues between the use of the space as a movement corridor and as a space where people might like to stop and stay. A simpler approach could make larger green spaces that still allow for clear and coherent fulfilment of the key desire lines. One quality of this space is its linearity, and so a simple but effective approach could be to consider it as an ordered and calm boulevard which helps to establish legibility within the varied massing of the scheme and varied uses proposed in the podiums.
- 2.5. Maximising biodiversity on Goldsworth Road will help, in turn, to maximise the quality of the public realm.
- 2.6. The approach to the 'super lobby' and its potential to integrate the building into its surroundings is intriguing but needs to be better developed in the proposals.
- 2.7. There could be more defined areas for play in both the public and private open space. This would both benefit residents and potentially attract others from further afield to use the area.

- 2.8. The landscape strategy should be extended to include the other roofs of the development, which also represent significant green infrastructure opportunities that have not been explored yet. Given the overall nature of the development, further consideration of its potential to integrate green infrastructure could help inform its identity further, differentiating it from neighbouring developments.

3. Urban design and townscape

- 3.1. The built form of podium and a tower is a common one in new development in Woking. The impact on future development around the site should be considered, particularly to the west, where there is currently an abrupt end to the site with no relationship with what lies beyond. A more gradual stepping down may allow the development to better relate to the much lower buildings to the west. This would fit in with the analysis of the site as being the beginning of the higher town centre.
- 3.2. The overall approach to townscape creates a stronger sense of place and arrival compared to what is there now, and the concept of the building arrangement is generally strong.
- 3.3. The relationship between the podiums and the ground floor needs to be considered. They are high up and likely to have minimal genuine interaction with the street. The points at which there is interaction between the podiums and the street need to be considered, and the horizontality of the podiums and the ground floors needs to carefully fit in with the prominent and potentially dominant verticality of the towers.
- 3.4. The tallest building is likely to be much more of a landmark than the other towers, and thus warrants a more distinctive approach. Although it is generally well thought-through, it currently feels cut off at its peak and a bit bulky towards the top. It could be improved by having a more broken down or differentiated top, which would particularly improve the perception of its termination when viewed from afar. It also has an unresolved relationship to the podium beneath.
- 3.5. The approach to urban form is particularly successful in relation to the rest of Woking town centre but could be improved by considering its relationship with the rest of Woking. For example, the west facing elevation creates a bit of a wall when viewed from the south side of Woking. More consideration of the impact of the views, particularly from the south, west and north would help improve this scheme. There is some concern about the extent of mid-height mass in the scheme, mostly towards the west, and the impact this would have on both occupants and users of the development and views of it from around the site.

- 3.6. The easternmost corner of the site, where there is currently an estate agent, is a key location. Although this is not within the red line of the proposal, this area is a key coming together of routes in all directions, and it is likely to receive the most natural light and thus be a popular place in which to be outside. This space needs to be clearly defined, with a strong sense of identity and threshold.
- 3.7. We welcome the consideration of two options for the pavilion. Having the pavilion adjacent to the road will give western definition to Victoria Square and could help to 'announce' the scheme. It also gives more opportunity for high quality open space within the development site that people might like to sit in. Having the pavilion as a buffer between the road and open space could help mitigate noise more effectively than planting.
- 3.8. The approach to fronts and backs is a little confused in places. We recommend that the north tower should have its front to the north-east, i.e. towards the rest of Woking. All outward-facing elevations would benefit from further consideration and development, alongside clarifying the architectural identity of the 'interior'.

4. Access and parking

- 4.1. For the scheme to be successful, links beyond the red line are crucial. The scheme benefits from the existing proposal to create a better connection underneath the railway. The presence of circa.2,000 residents here should be a catalyst for discussions about further improvements and additions to north-south links across the railway. This is a conversation that the Council will need to lead on.
- 4.2. We support the decision to have a low ratio of car parking to units, justified by the close proximity to Woking station. Anything that could be done to further reduce the number of cars would be a positive. It is also positive that there is currently exploration of the possibility of ensuring car parking space in the development could in future be re-purposed, for example as amenity space.
- 4.3. The approach to cycle parking could go further. At the moment it is not always situated in the most convenient location for all cyclists. Cycle parking could link with a high quality and prominent cycle hub facility, to make the use of a bike in this scheme not just simple, but also an attractive part of the character and offer of the site for residents. Clarity about cycle access to the car parking cycle storage areas is needed.
- 4.4. The placing of the car parking space above the retail and commercial floors fits in with the approach to creating a positive street frontage. More could be done to improve the relationship between the car park and the rest of the building - for example by allowing natural light into this space. This could enhance the quality of residents' journeys into the development.

5. Internal arrangement

- 5.1. The split of unit sizes is weighted towards smaller units. There is the opportunity to create a community which is not transient, and which can allow people to move within the development as their needs change. Offering a townhouse type of unit and a greater proportion of larger units could help bring life and community to the development both in the short and longer term.
- 5.2. In parts of the development the number of flats per core is high, particularly in the central block. It is encouraging that there is natural light into the central corridor, but more could be done to improve the quality of these spaces, for example by introducing increased width at thresholds, maximising the amount of light that gets into them, and breaking them up where possible.

6. Materials and detailing

- 6.1. Some of the elevations are too complicated, with a collision of horizontal and vertical elements leading to confusion rather than clarity. The presence of vertical and horizontal elements is not in itself an issue, but their hierarchy should be resolved in a simple and ordered way. This would allow the definition between the different treatments to be clear from a distance.
- 6.2. Beyond this, and in part due to the stage of design development in this proposal, the approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in great detail at this review. Paragraph 130 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2018) states: *'Local planning authorities should also seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).'*
- 6.3. In order to be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note our general guidance on material quality and detail. At planning application stage, the quality of the detailing should be demonstrated through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building/landscape and should be accompanied by actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval.

7. Energy strategy

- 7.1. The approach to energy efficiency was not discussed in great detail at this review. Our guidance is that at the planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear energy strategy which details how the development will optimise thermal performance, minimise the demand for energy, supply the remaining energy requirements efficiently and optimise the use of renewables in order to align with

the Government's emerging zero carbon policy. This strategy should be informed by detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the contents of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

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