



Report of the Ashford Design Review Panel

Swanton House, Elwick Road, Ashford

16th December 2019

The design review meeting

Reference number	1339/221119
Date	22 November 2019
Meeting location	Ashford Borough Council, Civic Centre, Tannery lane, Ashford TN23 1PL
Panel members attending	Liz Gibney (Chair), Architecture, Urban Design Chris Bearman, Architecture, Housing Robin Buckle, Urban Design, Planning Peter Neal, Ecology, Landscape Architecture Richard Portchmouth, Architecture, Urban Design
Panel manager	Xan Goetzee-Barral, Design South East
Presenting team	Karl Baker, On Architecture Luke Harrison, On Architecture Keith Hollidge, A Better Choice For Property Development Danielle Ingleston, DHA Planning
Other attendees	Roland Mills, Ashford Borough Council Neil Shorter, Ashford 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. However, the local authority asked us to particularly concentrate on the impact of the demolition and the proposed building on the Conservation Area, massing, appearance, relationship to Memorial Gardens and sustainability issues.
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	Swanton House
Site location	Elwick Road, Ashford TN23 1NN
Site details	0.26 ha. site in Ashford town centre. Currently there is an unused late Victorian/Edwardian building on the site with a tarmacked area to the rear. The site has a number of changes in levels and mature trees.
Proposal	Residential scheme comprising of 34 units, of 1/2/3 bedrooms, arranged in two blocks. 27 car parking spaces are located in a car park court between the blocks and there is vehicular as well as pedestrian access from Church Road to the rear.
Planning stage	It is intended that a full planning application is submitted in December 2019.
Local planning authority	Ashford Borough Council
Planning context	The site lies within Ashford Town Centre Conservation Area. The adopted planning policy in the Ashford Local Plan 2030, policy TRA3 (a), requires sites in the town centre to provide 1 space per unit on average. There are multiple exceptions to this policy such as part (d) which allows the requirement to be waived 'To ensure the successful restoration, refurbishment and re-use of listed buildings or buildings affecting the character of a conservation area'.
Planning history	Consent was granted in October 2015 for the extension of the college to the east into the site, including the demolition of the existing building. The Council concluded that the loss of Swanton House would result in harm to the character of the Conservation Area, although this harm was outweighed by the significant public benefits of securing the redevelopment of the site as part of the strategy to bring the college into the town centre.
Pre-application discussions	Pre-Application Advice has been provided by Ashford Borough Council on a draft scheme (submission in March 2019 and pre-application meeting held on 02 July 2019). A briefing of the scheme has been provided to council members in July 2019.

Summary

We are pleased that this prominent proposal for the town centre and Conservation Area has been brought to review.

The site is challenging due to the existing historic building, complex and varying edge conditions, and location within the town centre Conservation Area. These conditions require the proposed demolition and replacement building to be informed by a thorough historical analysis of the site and wider area which considers a variety of design strategies and layout options. Unfortunately, this has not been carried out and the proposal appears to be driven by its viability and car parking requirements. This is not an appropriate approach for this sensitive and unique site, and therefore the panel is unable to support the scheme.

Following the response to our recommendations and advice, we would welcome the opportunity to review the proposal further.

Key recommendations

1. A detailed historical analysis of the existing building and Conservation Area should be carried out to inform and not simply justify the proposal. The objective is to ensure the proposal protects or enhances the character of the Conservation Area.
2. The onerous parking standards should not be fully required, in accordance with exceptions to the policy. The car parking requirements for the town centre should be reviewed by the Council to ensure future developments maximise public transport, walking and cycling opportunities and are not constrained by the requirements.
3. A variety of design strategies and layout options should be considered and tested to justify the proposal as the most appropriate solution for the site and Conservation Area. This should include options whereby the existing building is retained.
4. A variety of house types should be considered to help establish the unique residential offer of the proposal.
5. A reduction in the number of units should be considered to alleviate pressure on the challenging edges and spatial qualities of the proposal, both of which currently seem constrained.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1 Design strategy and principles

- 1.1 The existing building on the site, of late Victorian/Edwardian style, is of architectural merit and as such has significant value in itself and in its role in the town centre and Conservation Area. It is an interesting and valuable element of historic townscape, prominently located on the route from the town centre to the railway station. Its distinctive front facade is clearly visible from the Beaver Road railway bridge leading into Ashford town centre from the south.
- 1.2 The proposed new building draws influence from a contemporary architectural style, using recent developments in Ashford, lying largely outside the Conservation Area, as precedent for the design. The result is a proposal which does not evoke the language and character of its most relevant architectural context.
- 1.3 In demolishing the existing building and replacing it with a contemporary design unrelated to its heritage setting, the proposal represents a loss of architectural value to Ashford town centre and an erosion to the Conservation Area. Whilst demolition and replacement may be acceptable in principle, in this case it appears to be solely justified by the scheme's viability and need to abide by the car parking requirements, which is not sufficient given the value and sensitivities of the site and existing building.
- 1.4 The panel was not made aware of alternative site design strategies, and it is important that these are explored and presented in a review to understand how the proposal has arrived at its current iteration and to ensure there is a strong rationale to support this. Nevertheless, other options which might retain the existing building should be explored, including options whereby a new building is built to the rear of the site to improve viability and support the restoration of the existing building. Also, retaining and restoring the existing building could result in a more viable scheme if the car parking requirements are not applied, taking advantage of the exceptions to the Council's car parking policy.
- 1.5 Whilst we welcome the exceptions to the Council's car parking policy, regardless of whether the existing building is demolished or not, we recommend the Council reviews this policy for the town centre. This should ensure future developments in the area maximise public transport, walking and cycling opportunities and are less constrained.
- 1.6 Given that a historic building is being replaced, a detailed historical analysis of the site and Conservation Area is imperative, and this appears to not have been carried out. Such analysis should explore the architectural and townscape language, building lines and setbacks, grain of the surrounding streets, usage of front and rear gardens and the relationship these hold to the street. Views of the proposal, from far and near, to study any impact on the existing townscape character should be agreed and established as a design tool and as presentation illustrations. Exploring these factors will help understand how development in the vicinity has evolved and the significance, relationship to and spatial function of the Memorial Gardens.
- 1.7 A detailed analysis will help inform and justify the character of the proposal, so that this responds to the architectural and townscape language of the existing building and setting. This will protect or enhance the character of the Conservation Area and provide the proposal with an opportunity to set the tone for forthcoming developments which have a similar approach. This analysis will provide the design team with valuable insights and clues to maximise the qualities of the proposal and potentially improve its viability.

- 1.8 The site, located at the south-eastern boundary of the Conservation Area, is in a challenging transition between the contemporary style of the college to the east and the Conservation Area to the north and west. Articulating the language of the existing building is particularly important if the proposal is to be a transition building between these two areas, and careful consideration should be given to the particular character of the buildings continuing westwards along Elwick Road.

2 Site proposal

- 2.1 The residential offer of the proposal needs to be established to ensure the dwellings types are appropriate for the market demand to maximise the proposal's value. This should promote the site's unique qualities and town centre location in close proximity to the railway station, as well as explore a variety of house types.
- 2.2 The proposed number of apartments appears to be driving a proposal which is unable to reconcile its scale with the capacity of the site, its complex constraints and relationships with adjoining sites. The proposed buildings are too close to the neighbouring properties to the west and likely to have an overbearing presence by impinging on natural light and privacy here. The front building has several single-aspect north-east facing apartments which is unacceptable as it results in poor levels of natural light. The rear building is overly prominent and presents a significant change in the local environment, particularly as viewed from the neighbouring properties to the west and Memorial Gardens.
- 2.3 The car park is constrained in size and presents a poor-quality space, which residents of the rear building will have to cut across regularly. The refuse store is located in the rear building with the sole entrance facing Memorial Gardens. This is not an appropriate use to be in direct view of a sensitive public space and its location will mean all residents, including those of the front building, will have a convoluted access route.
- 2.4 Reducing the number of apartments will reduce the scale of the proposed buildings and will help improve the relationship with neighbouring sites, visual impact and internal arrangement.
- 2.5 Alternative building forms and layouts should be considered. Having a single building as opposed to two would reduce the scheme's cost. Non-rectilinear footprints should be explored as this may help in achieving a denser layout. If two buildings are to be retained, the rear should be smaller and subservient to the front building. Also, a different type of rear building should be considered, such as mews or individual houses. If the existing building is retained, the new rear building could be of greater height to mitigate viability issues by cross subsidising the restoration of the existing building. In any case, all site layout options should be studied from a three-dimensional view to ensure the resulting scale and relationships to neighbouring buildings and spaces are appropriate and sensitive to the context. Access and refuse arrangements should be resolved to ensure an efficient and pleasant experience for residents.
- 2.6 The rear building will be the only one in the locality, which is so close to Memorial Gardens, presenting an opportunity to establish a relationship with the gardens. The placement and height of the rear building will need to be justified with high quality design. The relationship it holds to the Memorial Gardens should be carefully considered in the height, massing and visual impact, and similar examples where a significant building is adjacent to open space should be studied. Particular attention should be given the sensitivity of the memorial space at the south of the Memorial Gardens.

- 2.7 The removal of the existing trees, some of which are mature, is not consistent with protecting the environment and Conservation Area. The existing trees in and around the site should be assessed and their relationship to the Conservation Area and importance as a boundary treatment should be considered in the proposal.
- 2.8 The architectural quality of the proposal is acceptable. However, its contextual response requires reconsideration. The stepping down of the roofline to the west and the elevational grid structure of the proposed front building demonstrates an overly apologetic design which does not respond to the site's qualities, as the existing historic building does. The proposed massing, roofline and elevational composition should be refined, taking cues from the existing building; this will maximise the site's qualities and aid in ensuring the proposal reinforces the character of the setting.

3 Energy strategy

- 3.1 The demolition of an existing building is not a low-carbon approach to construction. If this is to take place, this should be mitigated by reusing, where possible, the same materials in the construction of the new building or public realm features.
- 3.2 The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in any 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.

4 Materials and detailing

- 4.1 The visualisations indicate that the proposal may involve expensive materials which are likely to have a high build costs. The danger is that viability concerns might require some of the successful design elements to be taken out later in the process. 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).'*
- 4.2 In order to be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note DSE's 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.

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 make 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 briefed regarding 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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