



Watford Place Shaping Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: Wellstones Car Park

Tuesday 12 April 2022

Video conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)

Irfan Alam

Marie Burns

Nicola Rutt

Attendees

Louise Barrett	Watford Borough Council
Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Johnny Liu	Watford Borough Council
Chris Osgathorp	Watford Borough Council
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Reema Kaur	Frame Projects

Observing

Ed Bristow	Watford Borough Council
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Apologies / report copied to

Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Ben Martin	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council

Confidentiality

This is a pre-application review, and therefore confidential. As a public organisation Watford Borough Council is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI), and in the case of an FOI request may be obliged to release project information submitted for review.

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1. Project name and site address

Wellstones Car Park, Watford WD18 0LG

2. Presenting team

Steve Akeju	Telereal Trillium (applicant)
Simona Sabackova	Carey Jones Chapman Tolcher Architects
Tim Tolcher	Carey Jones Chapman Tolcher Architects
Chris Griffiths	HCUK Group
Jessica Wilson	Newsteer Real Estate Advisers
Gillian Cooper	Newsteer Real Estate Advisers

3. Planning authority briefing

The 0.25 hectare site contains a car park formerly associated with the adjacent Telephone Exchange, to the north-west of the site. To the north-east is Wellstones, a former service road with recently constructed and approved residential development on three sites for buildings of seven to eight storeys. On the opposite side of Exchange Road is the Grade I listed Holy Rood Church. Other designated and non-designated heritage assets in the wider vicinity include Grade II listed Holyrood House, former Holyrood Roman Catholic School, and former Convent of St Vincent. No 58 High Street is Grade II listed, and Nos. 44-54 and 62-70 High Street are locally listed. The application site is not in a conservation area.

The proposed scheme provides 124 homes, including affordable housing, 139 sqm of ground floor commercial space, and public realm improvements. Active frontages are provided to the north, east and west through commercial and residential uses. The site is allocated in the Final Draft Local Plan for mixed use development, with an indicative yield of 40 dwellings. The proposals would be above the base height of 5-8 storeys for the Town Centre Strategic Development Area (as set out in the emerging Local Plan) and therefore triggers Policy QD6.5 (Building Height). Amongst other things, this requires proposals to clearly demonstrate exceptional design quality; significant public benefits; significant sustainability benefits; a clear townscape rationale for the specific siting of taller buildings; and a positive relationship with relevant heritage assets and their setting.

Officers asked for the panel's views in particular on:

- whether height, massing and design are appropriate, including whether there is a townscape rationale for locating the taller element at the rear;
- whether the proposed is justified by the benefits required by Policy QD6.5;
- impact on the setting of nearby locally and nationally listed buildings;
- proposed ground floor uses, activity and legibility;
- permeability and connections to the wider area;
- quality of the public realm;
- quality of accommodation, including proportion of dual aspect units;
- impact on outlook and light for neighbouring properties.



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4. Place Shaping Panel's views

Summary

The panel considers that the proposals have the potential to deliver a high quality scheme if remaining issues relating to scale, quality of ground floor apartments and public realm are successfully addressed. The panel notes the careful analysis that has led to varied and interesting massing, and a strong architectural approach. It suggests that the stepped height of Block C should be reduced to avoid a negative impact on Wellstones, and to sit better in views from Percy Road. The setback top storey of Block A could be removed to clarify the form of the buildings, and more variation introduced to the Block D roofline. The panel supports the architectural approach, including façade articulation and materials, but asks for assurances that the quality presented will be delivered. It is concerned that the impact of traffic noise, pollution and proximity to the public realm means that single aspect ground floor flats will be of an unacceptably low quality. The development footprint should be reduced, moving blocks further from the site boundaries to enable a more generous public realm, and to create more space in front of flats. The panel suggests that duplex apartments and increased floor-to-ceiling heights could improve ground floor quality. However, removing residential uses from the ground floor altogether is likely to be the best approach. Different ground floor uses could create more activation, for example commercial or cycling-related spaces. The panel applauds the creation of the new footpath to the north of the site, but asks that a landscape architect is involved in planning tree planting, and that the path is wide enough to create an inviting route. More analysis is needed to show how the development can relate positively to Wellstones, and contribute to an improved pedestrian environment. A detailed plan should be produced for the way roofs will be used, including amenity space. A sustainability strategy should set a high level of ambition for the development. Passivhaus standards should be considered to improve energy performance and increase the liveability of flats. These comments are expanded below.

Height and massing

- The panel feels that the scheme is generally well considered, and that considerable work has been completed to explore options and identify the best approach to distributing massing across the site. However, it feels that the tallest block – Block C – should be lowered to reduce the impact of the development on Wellstones. It is concerned a building of this height will lead to Wellstones feeling even less pleasant and safe for pedestrians than it does now. It is not convinced that a strong case has been made for a building of this height and suggests that Block C should instead match Block B in height.
- The panel supports the variation in rooflines and the transition in scale between blocks, which creates interest across the site. The separation of the upper and lower elements in the lower part of Block A could be questioned, but the roof form is effective. The panel suggests extending this design language to Block D, to provide it with a more distinctive identity.



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- The panel also considers that the taller element of Block A should be reduced in height. It feels that the setback top floor element reduces the clarity of the separate blocks in views from the south and the west, and is too tall in views from Percy Road, alongside the Grade 1 listed Holy Rood Church. It suggests removing the top storey so that this part of the block has a height of ground plus five storeys.

Architecture

- The panel considers the architecture of the scheme to be well considered, and to have the potential to deliver a visually engaging, well detailed building. It supports the overall architectural language, the choice of precedents, the articulation of façades, and the proposed materials.
- The designs are at a relatively early stage, and their eventual success will depend on development of detail. It is therefore important that the quality of the completed building meets the standards identified in precedent developments. The materials used must therefore be of a high standard, and value engineering prevented from undermining the final built quality.

Ground floor

- The panel is concerned that living conditions in the ground floor flats will be unacceptably poor. While flats on upper floors are dual aspect, those on the ground floor are single aspect. Ground floor flats on Exchange Road will face onto a busy road, and will be close enough to experience pollution as well as noise despite the defensible space buffer. The two ground floor flats on the northern elevation of Block C will be in shadow, and there is not enough space separating them from the public route.
- The panel feels that this problem is exacerbated by building too close to the site boundary, leaving insufficient room around the development to provide space and light for residents. It asks the applicants to pull the footprint of the buildings back on three sides – away from Exchange Road, Wellstones and the new footpath to the north. Doing so will create more public realm, and greater protection for the development from traffic and public routes.
- Moving the development back from the site boundary would also set a new, more sympathetic building line for future developments on Exchange Road to help mitigate their proximity to the busy road.
- Consideration could be given to introducing duplexes to avoid accommodation that is solely located on the ground floor. Ground floor flats could also be made more attractive by increasing floor-to-ceiling heights to produce more exciting, industrial-scale living spaces.
- The panel is also concerned that locating residential units on the ground floor will create inactive frontage around the development. It suggests that the best option could be to avoid residential use at ground floor level, and to look



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instead at uses that can generate more activity. Office space could be considered to activate the ground floor, or cycling-related activities – cycle stores, potentially with a cycle café space on the corner of Block B.

New pedestrian footpath

- The panel supports the creation of a new pedestrian through route between Exchange Road and Wellstones, along the northern boundary of the site. This represents a significant opportunity to create an active, well-used route, and to introduce valuable permeability through to the High Street.
- The panel also feels that the width of the pedestrian route is inadequate to create the quality of space required. More space is likely to be needed to incorporate a buffer zone in front of the building and trees, as well as the pedestrian route. The panel also notes that trees will create shade, and the right balance between planting and space will be needed to ensure a pleasant, legible pedestrian environment. A landscape architect should advise on the design of this route.

Wellstones

- The panel is concerned that the new footpath connection will lead pedestrians onto Wellstones, which has no pavements and is unsafe for walking. Further thought is needed about how the character of Wellstones can be improved to create a more pedestrian-friendly environment.
- It suggests that a separate design exercise is required, involving a landscape architect, to consider how the buildings can meet Wellstones at ground floor level in a positive way. They should contribute to a future vision for the street as a pedestrian space, serving the various forthcoming residential developments, rather than as a service road.
- While the panel does not support the principle of gated development it suggests that, if the podium were to be removed from the site, a ground-level amenity space on Wellstones could work with a simpler type of enclosure.

Roofs

- The panel notes the need for further design development for the roofs on each of the buildings. More detail is needed to show how space will be allocated between the various proposed uses, including sedum, plant, photovoltaics, and accessible roof terraces. The size and height of the plant areas, and the way that are screened by parapets should also be carefully assessed. The panel supports the intention of providing accessible roof space for residents.

Amenity space

- The panel is pleased to see that every flat above ground floor will have a balcony, providing private amenity space.



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- It will also be important to ensure enough amenity space, and particularly play space, is provided for the number of units proposed. More work is needed to demonstrate that the designs can deliver sufficient amenity space to meet policy requirements, and to contribute a good quality of life for residents.

Sustainability

- The panel asks the design team to develop a sustainability strategy for the development as soon as possible. It is important that the client sets high sustainability aspirations for the scheme, and that these are incorporated into thinking from the start to shape all aspects of the design. The aspiration should go beyond policy requirements by meeting higher standards, such as standards set out in the London Energy Transformation Initiative Climate Emergency Design Guide.
- The panel also suggests that the team should consider Passivhaus standards for the development. As this requires sealed units, it can help to deal with hostile conditions for residential accommodation, keeping out noise and pollution in a setting where opening windows is likely to prove difficult. It would also contribute significantly to sustainability by reducing energy demand.

Next steps

The panel is available to review the scheme again, if required, when the design team has been able to respond to its comments.

