



FRAME PROJECTS

Watford Place Shaping Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: Exchange House

Tuesday 21 July 2020
via video conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)
Laurie Handcock
Bevan Jones
Nicola Rutt
Andrew Thornhill

Attendees

Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Ben Martin	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Deborah Denner	Frame Projects
Penny Nakan	Frame Projects
Adela Paparisto	Frame Projects

Observer

Cllr Peter Jeffree	Chair, Development Management Committee, Watford Borough Council
Linda Bishop	Watford Borough Council
Andrew Clarke	Watford Borough Council

Apologies / report copied to

Louise Holman	Watford Borough Council
---------------	-------------------------

1. Project name and site address

Address: 60 Exchange Road, Watford, WD18 0JJ
Planning application ref: 20/00671/FULM

2. Presenting team

Avishay Manoach	60 Exchange Road Ltd
Labeed Haque	60 Exchange Road Ltd
Viktor Rohacs	Bogle Architects
Peter Jeffery	Sphere25
Jon Turner	Sphere25
Ilianna Filianna	Cudd Bentley Consulting

3. Planning authority's views

This proposal involves the demolition of a locally listed five-storey office building on the corner of Exchange Road and Upton Road, and redevelopment of the site with a five to 18-storey residential building. The existing building was granted prior approval for conversion into 126 dwellings in February 2017, but this has not been implemented.

The proposed new building consists of a single 'U'-shaped block with stepped height. The southeast corner along Exchange Road is eight storeys, stepping down to five towards the rear southwest corner of the site. Along the western boundary the height gradually steps up to ten storeys as the block reaches Upton Road, then steps further up to its maximum height of 18 storeys on the corner of Upton and Exchange Road. The opening of the 'U' shape facing Exchange Road encloses publicly accessible green space.

The site is not within a conservation area but is close to the Civic Core Conservation Area along the High Street to the north, and St Mary's Conservation Area to the south east. The wider context also includes listed buildings: 14-16 The Parade to the east (Grade II-listed), Grade I-listed Holy Rood RC church to the south and the Grade I-listed St Mary's Parish Church.

A planning application was submitted in July 2020, and officers sought the panel's advice, in particular, on a number of key points:

- loss of the locally listed building;
- the building's density, height and design in relation to the site;
- quality of the living environment, including flat layouts and single aspect units;
- quality and usability of the landscaped area at the front of the building in relation to amenity and passive surveillance from the street and dwellings;
- impact in settings and views of heritage assets;
- relationship to lower height residential properties;
- options to deliver a sustainable development.



4. Place Review Group's views

Summary

While considerable work has been undertaken to develop architectural language and massing options, the panel does not think the proposed designs are appropriate for the site. The panel considers the building will have a detrimental impact on the setting of listed buildings, particularly the view of Holy Rood Church along Exchange Road, from the north-west. As the existing office building is locally listed, its demolition can only be justified if its replacement provides a significant architectural improvement, which the panel does not believe to be the case. The architectural language is overly complex, and the combination of colour contrast between balconies and façade, faceted façade elements and stepped massing result in a design that is unsympathetic to its surroundings. The panel asks that strategies are employed to reduce overall impact, including simplifying façade treatment and appearance, and potentially reducing the height of the eight-storey south-east corner. The panel also thinks that the chosen architectural form will compromise the quality of residential accommodation. Despite the use of faceted windows, a high proportion of units will have not cross-ventilation and will therefore not be truly dual aspect, while a significant number are also north-facing. The lack of cross-ventilation also means that a more robust energy and ventilation strategy would be required to ensure comfortable conditions, as weather becomes hotter. Further work is also needed to improve the scheme's landscape design. In particular, the scheme should contribute to making Exchange Road feel more accessible and welcoming to the public, and to improving the public realm quality of the ring road. The panel suggests the council should consider imposing conditions to ensure public access to the landscaped space. The proposed water feature should form part of a sustainable drainage system, along with the roofs. Roof space should also include accessible terraces space, and green roofs should be more biodiverse. These comments are expanded below.

Heritage and townscape impact

- The panel believes demolition of the existing Richard Seifert building can be justified, but only if its replacement is of a higher quality. The most positive aspect of the current building is that it creates a landmark without the use of height or overly bulky massing.
- The site's ring road location does not, in itself, justify the construction of a tall building. While taller buildings are being introduced to the west, the site is separated from these and is adjacent to much lower buildings. The drop in gradient to the south and west also increases the impact of a tall building here, and risks an uncomfortable relationship with neighbouring buildings.
- The panel thinks that the complexity of the form and façade design results in a building that is too prominent for the site, and will dominate views. In the panel's view, this will have a negative impact on the setting of nearby historic buildings, including the Grade 1 listed Holy Rood Church.



- The panel also recommends that, if the Richard Seifert building is demolished, building recording is required as condition of planning permission.

Architectural approach

- The panel considers that the combination of a faceted façade and white balconies on dark brick, while architecturally interesting, is overly complex for the location, leading to a design that dominates its setting.
- It asks the design team to investigate options to simplify its appearance and create a calmer façade. The aim should be to provide a calmer backdrop to listed buildings, and reflect more of the qualities of the existing building.

Massing

- The panel understands the reasons for stepping the massing of the development, in a transitional location between higher and lower buildings. However, as mentioned above it feels this creates a form that is too prominent for the site, and will dominate views.
- It recommends simpler building massing, for example the height of the eight-storey south-eastern element could be lowered and treated as a more independent element. The height could increase towards the north of the site, in a calmer way, without the highly complex stepped massing currently proposed.

Internal layout

- The panel has concerns about the quality of the accommodation that would be created by the proposed layout. While it is good that all units have at least one balcony, the faceted windows will not provide the cross-ventilation required for flats to be truly dual aspect. Some units are also north-facing, and the panel suggests that not all the accommodation will be of the high standard expected.
- The panel also notes that the floor layouts appear to locate some kitchens on the means of escape route. It asks that compliance with Building Regulations Part B: Fire Safety is confirmed.

Energy and ventilation

- The development has a large amount of glazing, and the mitigation proposed to address solar gain on southern-facing façades may not be sufficient to avoid overheating.
- With hotter summers becoming the norm in only a few years' time, there is a risk that residents will introduce their own cooling units and undermine the building's low carbon objectives.



- The panel suggests the energy and ventilation strategy is revisited, including the potential for air source heat pumps to provide cooling in summer, as well as heating in winter.

Use of roofs

- The panel asks that thought is given to making some roof space accessible for residents as terraces, which would provide a valuable amenity.
- It also suggests that a whole-site sustainable drainage approach should be established, using the roofs and the garden water feature as active components for managing water on the site. The pond could provide storm water attenuation capacity for the roofs.
- Greater biodiversity benefits could be achieved by planting a wider range of species on the green roofs rather than relying on sedum. The panel suggests that more options are investigated.

Public space

- The panel suggests the large trees proposed for the southern boundary of the site may be problematic. There is a risk these may have to be removed when they become large enough to obstruct the sunlight of ground floor units.
- The panel enjoys the undulating, graphic approach to the topography of the landscaped area facing on to Exchange Road. However, care should be taken to avoid creating a barrier to the pedestrian area beyond that discourages people from using the public space.
- Public access is an important aspect of the development, and the landscaping should include enough openings to ensure members of the public feel welcomed into the space.
- A connection between the development and Exchange Road is also important because, over time, the ring road is likely to become a less traffic-dominated street.
- The development should make positive moves to enable future improvement to the pedestrian realm, making it a more pleasant place for walking and cycling.
- Watford Borough Council could consider imposing conditions on any planning permission to ensure public access to the landscaped area is guaranteed.
- The panel also encourages investigation of ground conditions to ensure root zones are sufficient for the trees proposed for the Exchange Road frontage.
- A wind strategy should be provided to ensure the public space is comfortable to use, and not affected by down draughts.



- The panel asks the design team to ensure the play area has sufficient protection from traffic and pollution to make it attractive for children.

Next Steps

The panel is available to comment further on the proposals at the next stage of design development, if required.

