



FRAME PROJECTS

## **Watford Place Shaping Panel**

### **Report of Chair's Review Meeting: Exchange House**

Monday 14 September 2020  
via video conference

#### **Panel**

Peter Bishop (chair)  
Laurie Handcock

#### **Attendees**

Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Ben Martin	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council
Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Helen Harris	Watford Borough Council
Amy Wolanski	Watford Borough Council
Simon Mabey	Digital Urban
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Penny Nakan	Frame Projects

#### **Apologies / report copied to**

Louise Holman	Watford Borough Council
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## 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
Ian Bogle	Bogle Architects
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 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.

The application was reviewed by the Watford Place Shaping Panel on 21 July 2020. The architects revised the scheme in response with the following key amendments:

- Massing:
  - Reduction to the south wing height down from seven to five storeys.
  - Reduction of shoulder to west of the tower.
  - Addition to the tower height from 18 to 21 storeys.
  - Some 'steps' in the middle section removed to reduce complexity.
- Architectural approach / façade:
  - Mix of brick and white concrete balconies has been replaced with a simpler palate of grey brick and metal balcony railings.

Additional details were also provided on amendments to massing and façade, public realm and energy and ventilation.

Officers asked for the panel's comments on the suitability of these amendments in responding to their previous concerns, and on issues including the loss of locally listed building and its justification through design quality; the effect of stepped height on massing; the lack of true dual aspect flats; energy and overheating issues, and provision of public realm.



#### 4. Place Review Group's views

##### *Summary*

The panel is pleased to see that a significant amount of work has been done since the previous review meeting to respond to its comments, resulting in positive changes to the scheme, but asks that materials and detailing are conditioned if possible. Without renders showing the materials to be used, it is not possible for the panel to judge whether the impact of the development in key views of the Holy Rood Church Mass is reduced, a judgement that must be made by Watford officers. However, it feels that a simplified façade design and material changes have resulted in a more appropriate, higher quality building that can justify the demolition of the existing, locally listed building. It suggests minor material amendments to help avoid the building appearing dominant. Materials and detailing should be conditioned to ensure the building is delivered as designed. It considers that the taller tower has resulted in a more elegant design, but Watford officers should be satisfied that this location is appropriate for a tall building within the wider development context. Landscape designs require further development and detailing. The main public space must be welcoming, to draw people in, and more ground floor commercial uses should be considered to create a truly public space. Landscaped space at the south-west corner should be given an active role. The internal layout of flats should be assessed by the council to ensure it provides a living space of sufficient quality. These comments are expanded below.

##### *Height and massing*

- The panel considers that the addition of three storeys to the tower has created a design of greater elegance. However, Watford officers will need to make a judgement on whether the proposed height is appropriate within the wider townscape, and whether this location is right for a tall building within an emerging context of height in the town centre.
- Changes since the last review have also improved the scheme in terms of massing and form, helping it to respond better to the domestic scale of the urban fabric to the south and the west of the site.

##### *Architectural approach*

- The panel considers that changes to façade designs have succeeded in creating a calmer and more elegant building. While the alterations are a clear step in right direction, the panel has not seen the proposed materials and cannot therefore provide a view on whether the harm caused in views of the Grade I-listed Holy Rood RC Church. This question is therefore for Watford officers to answer when materials are confirmed.
- Nevertheless, the panel suggests that the colour of brick could be lightened a little to provide a greyer, less dominant presence in views past Holy Rood Church, from the south.



- A comparative exercise could be carried out to assess the impact of different materials in this important view. Watford Borough Council should request before and after images to allow it to compare and contrast different material options in this view.
- It is essential that the building, when constructed, is delivered as designed to avoid damaging impact in views. Materials and detailing should therefore be conditioned to ensure they are delivered.

#### *Internal layout*

- The design of units as single aspect with faceted windows creates architectural complexity, but the panel considers that it results in better quality residential accommodation than would be the case with truly single aspect units. However, it encourages Watford officers to assess whether the quality of living space provided by each unit is sufficient. If there are doubts, the option of increasing floor-to-ceiling heights could be considered.

#### *Commercial uses*

- The panel suggests that more commercial uses at ground floor level would provide greater public benefit. For example, uses such as a café and a local shop would encourage people into the scheme, and establish its function as a public and accessible place. Options for introducing more uses such as these should be discussed with Watford officers. Reducing the amount of residential accommodation to include more ground floor commercial space would benefit the development overall.

#### *Landscape and amenity space*

- Landscape designs for the scheme are at an early stage, and should be developed further to reach the level of detail required for a final design.
- The panel supports the designation of the courtyard opening onto Exchange Road as public space, but emphasises the need to ensure it feels public and welcoming to passers-by. Care should be taken to avoid creating any apparent barriers on Exchange Road, or the appearance that gardens may be private. Secure lines should be drawn as close to building as is reasonable, allowing the landscape to invite people in.
- The panel is concerned the triangular open space at the south-west corner of the site does not have function, and will not provide any wider benefit. It suggests the building is extended into this space to open it up, and that it is designed for active use.
- It is important that the development's frontage on Upton Road balances the need for privacy for ground floor units with passive surveillance. Residential units should not be over-screened and should retain a relationship with the street outside.



- While the development should provide a high level of environmental performance, the panel suggests that some of the proposed photo-voltaic cells could be removed from the roof, to provide communal roof space which would have significant value as amenity for residents.

### *Next Steps*

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

