



Watford Place Shaping Review Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: Watford General Hospital

Tuesday 11 May 2021
Zoom Video Conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)
Irfan Alam
Marie Burns
Joanne Cave
Michael Popper

Attendees

Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Andrew Clarke	Watford Borough Council
Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Ben Martin	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council
Sharon Hayes	Watford Borough Council
Ellen Higginson	Watford Borough Council
Terri Stoilkova	Watford Borough Council
Amy Wolanski	Watford Borough Council
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Penny Nakan	Frame Projects

Apologies / report copied to

Louise Barrett	Watford Borough Council
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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

Watford General Hospital Redevelopment, Watford General Hospital, Vicarage Road, Watford, WD18 0HB

2. Presenting team

Adrian Price	BDP Architecture
Tom Rudd	BDP Architecture
Chris Stanton	BDP Architecture
Nick Pigula	BDP Sustainability
Tim Duggleby	West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust
Duane Passman	West Hertfordshire Hospitals NHS Trust
Justin Liebenberg	Royal Free London NHS Foundation Trust

3. Planning authority briefing

The development application site relates to a roughly triangular parcel of land (circa 22,500 sqm) to the south of the existing hospital, with access from the recently built Thomas Sawyer Way to the south and west. The site is allocated in the Watford Local Plan Core Strategy 2006-31 as part of the Special Policy Area 3 (SPA3) Health Campus (now known as Riverwell), for delivery of a major mixed-use regeneration to include an improved major acute hospital. The existing hospital campus, located to the north of the site, consists of hospital buildings in poor operational condition, with poor public realm quality.

The application site, to the south of the existing hospital, currently contains surface parking which will be relocated into a new multi-storey car park east of the site. The areas south and further east of the site have approved residential schemes, with planned further phases of residential, school and mixed uses. The site has significant ground level changes, with 15m difference from Vicarage Road in the north to the Colne River to the south of the site; and a significant slope on the east side of the site and adjacent to the western elevation of the multi-storey car park.

The Watford Place Shaping Panel previously reviewed proposals in February 2021. Amendments since previous review include design development of massing and elevations; of the Finger ward towers arrangement; of the green spine and other urban realm and landscape areas; of the entrance and access from the north; and coordination with neighbouring developments to create a square to the south. An outline planning application is due for submission imminently.

Watford officers asked for the panel's comments, in particular, on permeability, legibility and step-free routes; the green spine and access routes to the hospital, including the two-level bridge over green spine; activation of the space to the north of the hospital; how the parameter plans and design code will secure design quality; and whether the parameter plan red line is broad enough to secure place quality as far as Vicarage Road.



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4. Design Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel considers that the scheme has progressed well since the previous review, but issues remain to be addressed around civic function and place quality, the travel strategy, access routes to the hospital, links to Vicarage Road, southern connections for the green spine and piazza, and the northern square. The panel believes the development red line should be extended to include the entrance route from Vicarage Road, to ensure a legible entrance for those who do not arrive by car, and avoid closing down future development options. Greater clarity over entrance hierarchy is important to ensure they are easy to find for those visiting for the first time, and thought should be given to a sheltered route to the main entrance. The landscaping proposals are promising, but the panel asks the team to reinterrogate the functioning of the green spine and the experience of using it, to create a clear narrative for the way each space will be used. The north piazza does not yet have a strong enough purpose, and the southern piazza does not connect to the Colne Valley, and may not be able to in future. The panel believes that the hospital building itself is developing in a positive direction, and has previously accepted the proposed scale and massing. Work carried out to design the hospital as a healing environment is very positive, but there is still a gap between the concept and delivery on site. The panel urges the client not to lose sight of importance of the healing environment approach, and to ensure both internal and external work well for the wellbeing of patients and visitors. The move to an electric energy supply is positive, and the panel encourages further use of photovoltaics and consideration of an ambient loop. These comments are expanded below.

Architecture

- The panel is very interested to see how the designs have evolved since the last review. The requirements of the building itself are determined by clinical drivers, which the panel accepts. There is much to like about way the design of the hospital building is progressing, including the celebration of entrances and the intention to make the most of public spaces.

Entrances and access

- The panel is concerned that, while the design approach is progressive, the transport strategy is not. The development is designed predominantly for people who will arrive by car, but it is likely that many of those who drive now will not do so in future. The transport strategy should be revisited to consider how it can reach the ambitious, forward-looking standards set by the overall design approach.
- The panel considers that pedestrians are marginalised within the development, with a long walk from bus stops on Vicarage Road through an area that will not be completed for many years. The parameter plan does not provide the certainty needed on the quality of this entrance.



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- The panel would like to see the development red line extended to Vicarage Road to allow this entrance route to be addressed. A commitment should be included in the outline planning application to connect the hospital building to Vicarage Road, with timeframes for delivery.
- The panel is also concerned that the step-free entrance sequence is confusing, with a main route that turns away to the left from the main steps, and requires use of the car park lift to reach ground level. This ambiguous urban hierarchy risks confusion over the nature of competing entrances. Greater clarity should be sought over the entrance hierarchy.
- The panel suggests that the main entrance may be difficult to read if approached obliquely, and that further thought should be given to ensuring it is legible.
- The lack of a sheltered route for pedestrians to reach the main entrance could also be a problem, particularly on a north-east facing façade. There is a risk the entrance area will not provide a comfortable space.

Green spine

- It is important that the green spine contributes to the healing environment concept for the development, providing spaces that can be used by patients, visitors and staff and will improve their experience of the hospital. Public spaces also have an important civic role to play in ensuring that the hospital operates equally successfully as a place of work, and as a place to learn. Defining clear functions for these spaces is important to achieving these aims.
- While the green spine approach includes well-considered spaces, these are not addressed by the building itself, either through its footprint or internal layout. The panel suggests the arrangement of external spaces and the main building should relate more closely to one another. For example, a main plaza could be located at the main entrance if this was acknowledged in the building's footprint. This will help to
- The panel feels that the double-height entrance bridge from the car park cuts across the green spine, visually and spatially. If flows of people are split by the bridge, energy will be removed from the green spine and it may not be well used.
- The panel also suggests that there is no need for the green spine to be so wide along its full length. Width changes could be used to express the location of the main entrance more clearly, and to enhance civic spaces within the hospital.
- Stairs and level transitions do not necessarily need to be extended across the full width of the green spine. The slope could be truncated in places to create platforms offering a view of the River Colne valley beyond.



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Northern and southern edges

- The panel considers that Thomas Sawyer Way feels neglected, providing service functions only on elevations that are important to the hospital's future relationship with development to the south, on the opposite side of the road. Connections should be developed with the masterplan area to the south, ensuring that links can be made in future to the River Colne. These options should be kept open and not precluded by decisions made now.
- The panel feels that the northern edge of the new building is not sufficiently activated, and does not contribute enough to the functioning of the building. It also creates an unresolved relationship with the space between new and existing hospitals. It suggests servicing could be relocated here, freeing southern elevations to help create a more positive relationship with Thomas Sawyer Way.

Sustainability

- The panel is very pleased by the applicant's decision to move to all-electric development, and to make use of ground and air source heat pumps. It also suggests options are explored to develop an ambient loop with other nearby developments, to share energy resources and minimise use.
- However, the panel questions the extent of the glazing shown in drawings, with large picture windows that risk excessive solar gain, and the lack of apparent external shading. The extent and positioning of shading should be indicated on drawings to show how solar gain will be addressed.
- The area of proposed photovoltaics should be increased is possible, to make as significant a contribution as possible to an energy intensive building.
- The applicant is also encouraged to reduce as far as possible the amount of offsetting required for the development to achieve its carbon targets.

Next Steps

- The panel would welcome the opportunity to review the scheme again, once a massing configuration has been confirmed and design detail has progressed.

