



Watford Place Shaping Review Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: 19-21 Clarendon Road

Tuesday 16 February 2021
Zoom Video Conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)
Anna Bardos
Thomas Bryans
Marie Burns
Joanne Cave

Attendees

Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council
Helen Harris	Watford Borough Council
Vicky Hughes	Watford Borough Council
Amy Wolanski	Watford Borough Council
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Miranda Kimball	Frame Projects
Penny Nakan	Frame Projects

Apologies / report copied to

Andrew Clarke	Watford Borough Council
Louise Holman	Watford Borough Council
Ben Martin	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

19 – 21 Clarendon Road, Watford, WD17 1JR

2. Presenting team

Andrew Gale	Iceni Projects
Mairead Flower	Iceni Projects
George Baines	Iceni Projects
Richard Harvey	PRP
Eline Putne	PRP
Nick Collins	KM Heritage
Simon Mabey	Digital Urban

3. Planning authority briefing

The site is located on the corner of the junction of Clarendon Road with Beechen Grove, which forms the multi-lane ring road to the town centre. The site of 0.08 hectares contains a vacant three-storey building circa 1980, which was formally occupied by RBS bank. The site is not within a conservation area, and the building is not listed or locally listed. The Clarendon Road frontage of the site is within a secondary retail frontage as identified in the Watford District Plan 2000. The site is within the Special Policy Area for the town centre, seeking balanced provision of facilities and infrastructure. Taller buildings are subject to 'Skyline - Watford's Approach to Taller Buildings SPD 2016'.

As a town centre location, the immediate context of the site is mixed with a range of uses, listed buildings, permission for neighbouring tall buildings and sites with redevelopment potential. Notably, the adjacent junction with Beechen Grove has corners featuring Jurys Inn hotel (nine-storeys), Beechen Grove Baptist Church (Grade II-listed) and Arliss Court, a five-storey former office building converted to flats. Opposite on Clarendon Road is the Grade II Listed Watford Palace Theatre.

The scheme was previously presented to the Watford Place Shaping Panel at a Formal Review (21 July 2020) as a proposal for a hotel and apartment on the same site. The proposed development now requires demolition of the existing building and the erection of a 21-storey residential tower containing 117 Build to Rent units, which would be one of the first such schemes in Watford town centre, with associated amenity space and café use at ground floor.

Officers view the proposed use as acceptable in principle, and consider the site has potential for some height. They asked for the panel's comments in particular on:

- scale, height, design approach, and elevational treatment;
- visual impact/potential dominance within the setting of nearby listed buildings;
- creation of a positive public realm along the Clarendon Road and Clarendon Road and Beechen Grove frontages;
- achieving sustainable design within a tall building.



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4. Design Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel considers that a building of the proposed height can be justified at this location if it offers an exceptional level of design quality, but that the present proposals fall significantly short of this. A new design strategy is required that simplifies the form and profile of the building. Where contextual references are used, as in the case of the Beechen Grove Baptist Church, these should be subtle and not literal transpositions. The development has the potential to provide Watford with a new form of town centre living, and the panel made suggestions about façade design and materiality intended to help refine the design approach, including considering different balcony arrangements and quality of the indoor and outdoor amenity spaces, including the ground floor public realm. The panel asks the design team to ensure that the overall mix of unit sizes will create a socially sustainable community and consider more two-bed units and the inclusion of a high percentage of affordable units. Internal configurations should enable residents to both live and work in one-bedroom units. Sufficient parking should be provided for both access and deliveries. The panel also feels a tower of exceptional design quality requires an ambitious sustainability strategy that reduces both embedded and operational carbon as far as possible, and asks the team to explore a passivhaus approach. These comments are expanded below.

Height

- The panel considers that the site has the potential to accommodate a tall building, if the design achieves the exceptional quality required to justify the proposed height.
- As part of an emerging cluster around the junction of Beechen Grove and Exchange Road, the proposed tower has the potential to provide a landmark for Watford and to support wayfinding through the town.

Architectural approach

- The panel feels that the proposed design does not yet reach the exceptional level of quality required for a building of this height. To achieve this, the design should embrace its verticality in a bolder, simpler way. A new design strategy is required to achieve this.
- The panel also suggests that both stepped back elements and horizontal banding at terrace levels appear awkward, because they interrupt the verticality of the tower.
- The panel expressed a range of views on potential design approaches for the tower. Some panel members welcomed the inclusion of local design references, in particular to the listed Beechen Grove Baptist Church, and felt the choice of brick offered vital depth and texture for the façade. However, contextual references should be subtle rather than literal additions.



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- Regardless of design approach, the quality of the materials used will be essential to delivering the richness and variation in the façades required to achieve the exceptional design required. The panel therefore asks Watford officers to ensure materials are tested and specified as part of any planning permission.
- As design progresses, the panel suggests views should be produced to show how a pedestrian or cyclist will experience the building, to complement existing views from a vehicle perspective.
- The panel also asks that sunlight, daylight and wind testing is conducted for the ground floor and all communal outdoor spaces to ensure they are comfortable to use.
- It is also important that the design approach is considered as part of the emerging cluster of tall buildings. The panel therefore asks Watford officers to examine how this proposal and others nearby will relate to one another in design terms.

Residential mix

- The panel suggests the proposed mix of units should be adjusted to improve the social balance of the development and ensure that the optimum mix is delivered for the needs of the town. This should include the addition of more two bedroom units, and sufficient affordable and accessible units to meet local requirements.
- The panel considers that the size and internal layouts, in particular of the one bedroom units, feel small for the needs of residents post-pandemic. It is important that units comfortably support home working – especially for a couple occupying a one-bed flat. The panel encourages the separation of the bedroom from the living room to achieve this.

Shared and amenity spaces

- The panel welcomes the provision of multiple outdoor amenity spaces for residents. However, it asks whether indoor spaces could also be included for communal uses, for example a shared workspace, by creating a double height space at the ground floor. This type of use could help to animate the lower levels of the building and transform one of the more challenging spaces in the tower.
- The panel asks the design team to assess the wider provision of amenities and facilities for residents beyond the development, to provide reassurance about their overall quality of life.



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- The panel suggests that the layout of the three bedroom flats with north facing balconies should be reconsidered, to improve the quality of their amenity space.
- The panel also suggests that consideration should be given to staggering rather than stacking balconies, to maximise opportunities for social interaction.

Public realm

- The potential of the quieter, sunnier, south facing side of the building on Clarendon Road to create ground floor activity needs to be maximised. This includes enabling people to spill out from the café onto the pavement space.
- The panel considers the treatment of this frontage to be critical to the scheme's success and suggests that as much animation should be provided as possible. It encourages the design team to engage with Watford highways officers to discuss how the opportunity can be taken to improve and animate the public realm beyond the development's boundaries, including through the use of high quality materials.
- The panel encourages the design team to use the area's existing and emerging streetscape manuals to consider how the building and its surrounding public realm can form part of the wider public realm strategy.
- The panel suggests that parking arrangements should be revisited to ensure there is enough space for deliveries, and that the disabled parking bays are not regularly occupied by delivery vans.

Sustainable design

- The panel appreciates work to reduce the carbon impact of the building, but considers that the design team should take further measures to ensure the development meets exceptional sustainability standards, and makes a sufficient contribution to the UK's net zero carbon commitment.
- The team should measure the whole life carbon impact of the building and produce a circular economy statement, to explore further how the development can achieve net zero carbon, both in terms of embodied and operational carbon.
- The panel asks the design team to explore the application of a passivhaus design approach. It suggests The House at Cornell Tech, New York, as a precedent for designing tall buildings to this standard.

Next Steps

- The panel is available to review the scheme again once the design has progressed and the team has been able to respond to its comments.

