



Watford Place Shaping Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: 50 Clarendon Road

Tuesday 14 December 2021

Video Conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)

Thomas Bryans

Nicola Rutt

Andrew Thornhill

Alex Wraight

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
Reema Kaur	Frame Projects
Miranda Kimball	Frame Projects

Observers

Cllr Peter Jeffree	Watford Borough Council
Kate Pickard	Watford Borough Council

Apologies / report copied to

Louise Barrett	Watford Borough Council
Andrew Clarke	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

48 - 52 Clarendon Road, Watford, WD17 1TX

2. Presenting team

Rachel Korbely	Corstorphine & Wright
Tony Mead	Corstorphine & Wright
Simon Murray-Twinn	Skybridge Property
Steven Parker	Skybridge Property
Peter Jeffery	Spehere25
Mark Sleigh	Sphere25
Ali Baker	Vedose Limited

3. Planning authority briefing

The site (0.56 hectares) is located at the corner of the junction of Clarendon Road and St Johns Road and contains four to five-storey office buildings. Clarendon Road is a designated office employment area with office buildings of predominantly four to six storeys. The area includes some emerging mixed-use developments, with residential set back from the main frontage. Distinct from Clarendon Road, St Johns Road to the north is predominantly two to three-storey residential. The site backs onto the Estcourt Conservation Area to the east, characterised by two-storey Victorian terraces.

The site has planning permission to provide a mixed-use scheme including 100 residential units, circa 5,945 sqm Grade A office floorspace, and ancillary flexible use at ground floor level, with associated cycle parking, car parking and landscaping. Since the 2018 grant of planning permission, the Final Draft Watford Local Plan has been submitted for examination. This includes an emerging policy QD6.5 for building height, which states that proposals for taller buildings (over eight to ten-storeys in this area) should clearly demonstrate features including exceptional design quality, clear townscape rationale for height, positive relationships with heritage assets, appropriate residential amenity and significant public and sustainability benefits.

The scheme has now been revised since the 2018 approval. The revised scheme maintains maximum external heights but has amended the block depths, architectural approach and materiality, and now proposes 230 residential build-to-rent tenure dwellings with residential amenity areas, 4,859 sqm net lettable office floor space, revised access arrangements and layout. Watford officers sought the panel's views, in particular, on:

- success of the new façade approach in defining the height and massing;
- quality of the proposed design detailing and materiality;
- impact on townscape and conservation setting;
- quality of the residential accommodation;
- success in delivering public benefit in terms of sustainability and biodiversity.



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4. Place Shaping Panel's views

While the panel feels the architecture for the scheme is well resolved and the treatment of the elevations, differentiating between the commercial and residential accommodation, is commendable, it raises significant concerns about the quality of residential accommodation proposed in the scheme. The building's form, including height and massing, has the potential to create an externally well-designed building that sits within the parameters of the existing planning permission, and the architecture is well-developed and of a high quality. However, the panel finds the internal layout problematic. As a result of the same floor depth found in both commercial and residential accommodation, a very high proportion of units will be single aspect, and a significant proportion also north-facing. Coupled with this, the panel also finds the quantum of units off each corridor and the quality of corridor spaces, including their narrowness and lack of light, concerning. The St Johns Road streetscape, fronted by blank walls and vents from the basement car park, is unlikely to provide a pleasant pedestrian experience. While the panel welcomes the cycle storage provision, it suggests it could compromise play space and that a better ground floor experience could be delivered with access from St Johns Road. The panel feels the roofscape strategy has not been fully considered, and that this presents a key opportunity for the scheme to deliver further amenity space, biodiversity net gain, and support for the overall sustainability strategy. The presentation to the panel lacked any information on a sustainability strategy. While this work may have been developed, in the absence of information the panel is unable to provide its comments on what is a crucial aspect of the scheme. It is important that a robust response to the climate emergency is evidenced as a key part of the proposals, and an explanation provided of the way the approach to sustainability has informed the design approach. These comments are expanded below.

Building form and materiality

- The panel finds the building form, including its height and massing, to be well resolved and considers that complies with the parameters set out by the existing permission.
- While some panel members question the rationale for the introduction of concrete and to what extent it fits the character of the location, others feel the materials, especially the combination of brick and concrete, work well together as part of the mixed-use scheme and sit comfortably within the Clarendon Road streetscape, which is already home to a diverse range of materials.

Residential accommodation

- The panel is concerned by the very high percentage of single aspect residential units in the scheme. It questions the quality of accommodation that these units will provide, and in particular the north-facing single aspect units.



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- The panel encourages the design team to revisit the residential floor plans and to improve the overall quality of accommodation, reducing the number of single aspect units, and especially of north-facing single aspect apartments.
- The panel also considers the quality of residential accommodation is compromised by the large number of residential units off each corridor, by the narrowness of these corridors and by their lack of natural light. As key communal spaces, the quality of this area needs to improve to help foster a better sense of community for residents.

St Johns Road

- The panel feels that the building's frontage on St Johns Road contributes little to the quality of the streetscape. The previous iteration of the designs provided a more sensitive response that helped to create a transition from the neighbouring Estcourt Conservation Area to the Clarendon Road employment area. The treatment of this frontage as the back of the scheme creates an unfriendly pedestrian environment dominated by blank walls and vents for the basement car park. The panel asks that more is done to animate the building on St Johns Road.
- The panel suggests that the proposed terrace planting on St Johns Road provides limited benefit, and that more could be achieved with tree planting at grade on this frontage.
- The panel also suggests that the landscaped area outside the basement car park entrance has no purpose and could feel unsafe. It asks for further work to design this space so it does not become unwanted and unused.

Ground floor

- As part of the work to enhance the frontage along St Johns Road, the panel suggests that the design team explores an alternative access point to the cycle storage area. The current journey through the resident's park could compromise the use of the space as doorstep play for young families.
- The panel also feels an alternative entrance and access point for cycles, from St Johns Road would improve privacy for the ground floor units.
- The panel also encourages the design team to ensure the current character of the Clarendon Road frontage, which includes mature trees, is preserved. Sufficient space should be provided on the pavement to ensure these can be replaced with trees of an equal quality.

Roofscape

- The panel encourages the design team to give further thought and development to the scheme's roofscape strategy. The panel feels there is an opportunity to provide a further amenity space on the roof of the lower block.



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The extent of commercial office space also suggests that further plant will need to be accommodated on the roof, and this should be considered as part of the roof design.

- Opportunities should also be explored to make use of roof space as part of the scheme's wider sustainability strategy, to help deliver biodiversity net gain.

Sustainability

- Further explanation is needed to demonstrate how the scheme's design has been driven by sustainability principles. No evidence was presented to the panel of any sustainability thinking, but it is essential that the development takes an ambitious approach by setting high sustainability standards.
- While this work may have been carried out, the panel is not able to offer an opinion on the proposed strategy in the absence of information. It is therefore important that the applicant demonstrates how the scheme is responding to the climate emergency, and engages in dialogue with officers to show how it will deliver significant sustainability benefits in order to meet the requirements of Watford's emerging tall buildings policy.
- The panel considers the proposed overall reduction in CO₂ emissions of 25 per cent beyond Building Regulation requirements is not sufficient for a development of this scale.
- Through further planting, the panel would also like to see a biodiversity net gain of 10 per cent across the scheme.

Next Steps

- The panel is available to review the scheme again in the future, once the design team has had the opportunity to respond to its comments.

