

Watford Place Shaping Panel

Report of Chair's Review Meeting: 50 Clarendon Road

Tuesday 1 March 2022

Video conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)

Nicola Rutt

Attendees

Chris Osgathorp	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council
Colleen Scales	Watford Borough Council
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Reema Kaur	Frame Projects
Miranda Kimball	Frame Projects

Observers

Cllr Peter Jeffree	Watford Borough Council
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Apologies / report copied to

Louise Barrett	Watford Borough Council
Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Stephen Johnson	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

48 - 52 Clarendon Road, Watford, Hertfordshire WD17 1TX

2. Presenting team

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

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 currently contains four to five-storey office buildings. The area includes some emerging mixed-use developments, with residential set back from the main frontage. 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. 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.

An alternative scheme to that approved is now proposed, which seeks to include 230 build-to-rent dwellings and 4,859sqm net lettable office space. These proposals were reviewed by the panel on 14 December 2021, and revisions have been made in response to their comments. The revised submission includes some amendments to the internal layouts and St. Johns Road frontage. Watford officers asked for the panel's views on the success of these revisions: in particular, whether the extra height is justified, and whether its benefits can be demonstrated; on the quality of the proposed units, including north-facing, single aspect apartments; on the approach to the public realm; and on the arrangement of rooftop uses.



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4. Place Shaping Panel's views

Summary

The panel notes improvements made to the proposed development since the last design review, but remains concerned that the quality of accommodation will be poor, exacerbated by a lack of amenity space for residents. While the panel does not oppose the height of the development in principle, it does not feel the outstanding architectural qualities or public benefit that are required to justify it have been demonstrated. The building's massing could be improved by reducing the height of the shoulder element by three storeys, in response to the additional height on the tallest element. The high proportion of north-facing, single aspect units is of concern, and will result in poor quality accommodation. Internal corridors are narrow, and the eastern ground floor corridor long, dark and overloaded. Front doors should be considered for these units. The panel considers the lack of private amenity space for residents to be a problem, and asks that the strategy of avoiding balcony and roof terrace space is revisited. It also questions the quality of external communal and private space, and asks that more evidence is presented to demonstrate how it will be used and that it will not be significantly overshadowed. The panel feels that the courtyard space is insufficient for the number of residents who will use it. No proposals have yet been made to provide affordable housing, which will form a significant element of any public benefit the development can provide to help justify its height. The sustainability ambitions set out are welcome, but more information is needed on how these will be delivered. These comments are expanded below.

Architecture, height and massing

- The panel does not consider that the addition of three floors to the building is unacceptable in principle. However, Watford's emerging Tall Buildings Policy will require the building's height to be justified both by outstanding design quality and by outstanding public benefit.
- The panel considers the architectural resolution of the building to be of a good quality, with the potential to create an elegant building that works well within its setting. However, it does not yet feel that the proposed design quality is outstanding, and therefore can justify the building's height.
- It is also concerned that the proposed height is driven by cost rather than design considerations. The massing of the development could be improved if the height of the shoulder element were reduced by three storeys in response to the increased height of the tallest element, also reducing the number of units in the building.
- No proposals have been made for the provision of affordable housing as part of the development. This will form a significant element in any public benefit the scheme can offer to help justify the proposed height.



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Internal layout

- The introduction of duplex apartments, and the reduction in long internal corridors are both welcome improvements to the scheme. The panel also considers the improved access to the cycle stores to be a beneficial addition.
- However, it continues to have significant concerns about the quality of accommodation the scheme will provide, and does not feel that the level of public benefit provided is outstanding, or that it justifies its height.
- While the proportion of north-facing, single aspect units has been reduced since the previous review, it remains very high, accounting for more than half of the total. This is likely to result in a significant number of poor quality apartments which will not be provide pleasant places to live.
- The panel also notes that the ground floor corridor on the east side of the building remains long, lacks daylight and serves multiple units. It suggests that these apartments would benefit from external front doors, to alleviate the pressure on this corridor and provide more pleasant access.
- The panel also considers the corridors throughout the building to be too narrow. It asks that their width is increased to 1.5m as an absolute minimum to provide higher quality internal spaces.

Amenity space

- The panel is not convinced that the proposed courtyard amenity space is large enough to serve the residents of the building's 230 apartments. More detailed drawings of the space are needed, and a functional analysis should be produced is needed to provide details of the way the space will be used, and who it is designed to cater for.
- The panel also lacks the information it needs to judge whether the external amenity space will be of a sufficient quality to be beneficial to residents. It is essential that sunlight and daylight analysis is presented to demonstrate the effects of overshadowing on the courtyard. Both winter and summer equinoxes should be analysed, to provide information on the quality of the space all year round.
- The limited private amenity space that is provided, for ground floor units only, is narrow and will also potentially be overshadowed. The panel questions whether this space will be of an appropriate quality.
- The panel is unconvinced by the arguments presented to justify the overall lack of private amenity space in the development. It considers that these are driven by cost concerns, rather by consideration of benefit to residents. It would like to see balconies and roof terraces included to provide private amenity space beyond the ground floor. This would significantly improve the quality of accommodation provided, particularly in north-facing units.



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Sustainability

- The panel is pleased to see the progress made in developing a sustainability strategy since the previous review, and welcomes the ambitious targets that have been set. However, more information is needed to provide assurances that these ambitions will be delivered. Detail of the sustainability approach should be developed further in conversation with Watford officers.

Next steps

The panel is available to review the scheme again, if required, when the design team has been able to respond to its comments.

