



Watford Place Shaping Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: Glyn Hopkins site

Tuesday 8 March 2022

Video conference

Panel

Peter Bishop (chair)

Joanne Cave

Jessica Reynolds

Linda Thiel

Alex Wraight

Attendees

Paul Baxter	Watford Borough Council
Andrew Clarke	Watford Borough Council
Sian Finney-MacDonald	Watford Borough Council
Chris Osgathorp	Watford Borough Council
Alice Reade	Watford Borough Council
Ben Martin	Watford Borough Council
Tom Bolton	Frame Projects
Reema Kaur	Frame Projects
Miranda Kimball	Frame Projects m

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

Glyn Hopkin site, 252-272 Lower High Street, Watford, WD17 2JJ

2. Presenting team

Edwin Dudding	Formation Architects
Marco Tomasi	Formation Architects
Alex Parrett	London Square
Richard Rossetti	London Square
Mark Cooper	MCA Landscaping
Milena Lipska	Velocity
Paul Galgey	Planning Potential
Kate Paxton	Hodkinson

3. Planning authority briefing

The site comprises the Glyn Hopkin car dealership, which includes a showroom building and a large hard-surfaced forecourt. The site measures approximately 0.49 hectares in area and is located adjacent to the junction of Dalton Way and Lower High Street. To the north-west of the site lies Local Board Road and the locally listed buildings at Numbers 1a, 1, 2, 3 and the Pump House Theatre. There is another locally listed building to the east at 253 Lower High Street. Frogmore House, a Grade II* listed building, is located nearby to the south on Lower High Street. There are large retail warehouses nearby to the south and east.

The site forms part of the Colne Valley Strategic Development Area in the Final Draft Watford Local Plan 2018-2036 (the emerging Local Plan), and has been identified as suitable for residential development with an indicative yield of 110 units. The Local Plan includes a policy which states that proposals for taller buildings (over 8 storeys in this area) should clearly demonstrate features including outstanding design quality and significant public and sustainability benefits. The proposal is for a residential development with two 7-storey longer blocks (A and C) either side of a more prominent 9-storey central block (B). There is also a smaller, separate 3-storey block (D) in the north-east corner of the site.

Watford officers asked the panel for its views in particular on the height of the development, and whether it promises to deliver outstanding design quality; the way the development sits in the townscape, and whether their townscape rationale is clear; massing, and whether there is sufficient verticality to break up bulk; the impact on surrounding heritage assets, especially the Grade II* Frogmore House; the quality of residential accommodation, including the accessibility of ground floor units; the proportion of dual aspect units; and the quality of the rear courtyard amenity space.



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4. Place Shaping Panel's views

Summary

The panel appreciates the design development carried out to date, but considers that further work is needed to ensure the development makes as positive a contribution as possible to its setting. The panel considers that the designs do not yet demonstrate the outstanding design quality required to justify the proposed heights. It asks for further consideration of the site plan, to ensure the development relates positively to anticipated developments in the area, for which it will set a benchmark. A clear typological approach should be resolved for the blocks which may lead to changes to the massing. The two frontages on Dalton Way and Lower High Street should be treated differently in response to different conditions, including potential variation in materiality. More active frontage created on Lower High Street, including commercial space if at all possible, and a stronger corner design developed for Block B. Cycle storage in the south-western corner of Block A should be replaced with a triple aspect apartment. The panel questions the quality of the courtyard amenity space, which risks being overshadowed and dominated by hard surfacing and vehicles. It asks for a varied space that offers more to residents. The vehicle entrance requires refinement, and parking spaces should be removed from outside Block D. The public realm should do more to demonstrate significant public benefit. On Dalton Way, spaces must be safe and well-maintained, while on Lower High Street trees are not appropriate, but more public space could be introduced. The development must develop a positive relationship with the adjoining Pump House Theatre, and opportunities to provide it with outdoor space and frontage should be discussed. The quality of residential units should also be outstanding, but the panel considers the proportion of single aspect units to be too high and also questions the lack of true dual aspect units. It asks for further thinking on the proximity of balconies. It asks that options other than plinth are revisited to address flood risk, including duplex flats on Dalton Way. The development must also demonstrate significant environmental benefits, and a comprehensive sustainability plan is required to make this case. These comments are expanded below.

Site context

- The panel recognises the challenges of design a residential development on a site in a hostile setting. However, as the first in the Colne Valley Strategic Development Area, the site is particularly significant and will set a benchmark for design quality. It is therefore important that a strong urban design narrative is developed to support the proposals. T
- It is not yet clear how the design team will respond to the townscape expected to develop around the site. The setting is expected to change significantly as other developments come forward, and a clearer concept is needed to show how this project will take a lead in establishing the quality and characteristics of this new, emerging place.
- The panel encourages the team to consider its proposals in a wider context, including as part of the emerging Local Plan, and to spend time anticipating



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what is likely to happen on surrounding sites. such as the Tesco's store, opposite.

Heights and massing

- The panel considers the overall approach to massing to be promising, successfully breaking down the bulk of the blocks. However, it asks that more views are provided showing the development in a wider context to understand its impact in views from distance. A stronger case is needed for the buildings of the heights proposed, including an assessment of how they contribute to the quality of anticipated future settings.
- The panel also suggests that greater clarity is needed on the form of the development. At the moment, it combines elements of mansion, courtyard and perimeter blocks and perimeter blocks. A clearer concept of the typology being created will help to identify relevant precedents. For example, there are very good European precedents for the way courtyard blocks can address corners, such as the chamfered corners of blocks in central Barcelona.
- A decision on the development typology could involve either breaking the massing down further in smaller buildings, or connecting individual buildings to form a single perimeter block. Different massing options should also be tested to assess their carbon impacts.
- It will also help to suggest solutions to the way the development relates to its surroundings. For example, the way mansion blocks meet the street at ground level can inform the relationship between flats and both Dalton Way and Lower High Street.

Architecture

- The panel notes that nearly double the number of units are proposed than indicated by the emerging local plan. This increased density and added height will require a strong justification through the delivery of buildings with outstanding design quality. While the panel appreciates the work carried out to develop the design, it does not yet consider the architecture to be outstanding.
- The panel suggests that more thought is given to the treatment of frontages, to provide a different presence on Dalton Way and Lower High Street. Options could include using different materials to give blocks their own colours.
- The materiality could also differ at ground floor level, for example, on Lower High Street, or around block entrances to help create a more specific response to settings.
- The panel also considers that treatment of Block B, on the corner, should aim to provide a marker on the journey along Lower High Street towards central Watford. A more distinctive architectural response is needed to this important



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location. Exploring a crown to the building could help to create a stronger sense of place and contribute to way-finding.

- A strong commitment to achieving outstanding design quality is needed from the applicant. The planning application should leave no doubt about the level of ambition for the development, nor the commitment to delivering design detail and overall quality.

Dalton Way and Lower High Street frontages

- The panel considers that different design responses are needed to Dalton Way and to Lower High Street. While the dual carriageway will not change in the foreseeable future, a sympathetic approach is needed to the Lower High Street frontage to enable and progress change along this route.
- This should include considering realigning Block D to locate its frontage on Lower High Street, reinforcing the importance of this route rather than Lower Board Street.
- The panel understands that commercial uses are not considered viable on the site. However, it feels to not providing any ground floor commercial space would be a missed opportunity to strengthen active frontage on Lower High Street and, potentially, to connect to future phases of development in the strategic development area.

Public realm

- The delivery of public benefit to help justify the height of the development should include the delivery of public realm around the buildings. For example, the panel suggests a pocket of public space could be provided off Lower High Street, echoing courts in previous buildings on the site.
- The panel notes the importance of designing landscaping on Dalton Way in detail, to ensure it contributes positively to a traffic-dominated setting. The indented areas of frontage must be carefully designed so they do not trap rubbish, and a maintenance plan will be needed. It is also important that these spaces feel safe, and do not provide hiding places.
- The panel also asks for more thinking on where tree planting should be focused. While large trees will make a difference to quality of apartments along Dalton Way, they are not traditionally a part of Lower High Street and may not be appropriate for this frontage.

Amenity space

- The panel is concerned that the courtyard will be dominated by parking and bicycles and could feel like a street, rather than providing a welcoming amenity space for residents. It suggests revisiting designs to explore whether cars and bicycles can be located elsewhere, freeing space for residents.



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- The panel also considers more work is needed to refine the vehicle entrance on Lower High Street, which seems unnecessarily wide and lacks character. It should be designed to contribute positively to the public realm.
- Removing the two parking spaces from the north side of Block D would help to improve the quality of the entrance, as well as allowing dual aspect units to be introduced.
- This could allow a more varied approach to be taken to courtyard landscaping. For example, swales could be included to make creative use of rainwater, and landscape design used to generate further benefit.
- The panel also asks for further assurances that the courtyard microclimate will be comfortable. If it is to provide high quality amenity space, it will require more than the suggested minimum of two hours of sunlight, and it is also important to understand the impact of wind levels below a 6-storey building.
- The development offers an important opportunity to make a connection to the Pump House Arts Centre, immediately to the rear of the site. The applicants should hold discussions with the arts centre to consider how they can create public benefit by improving its setting. The courtyard amenity space could spill over to connect with the arts centre, providing outdoor space that is currently lacking. Block D could potentially include frontage to create a presence for the arts centre on Lower High Street.

Internal layout

- The panel considers the inclusion of through cores to be a positive move, helping to activate the rear of the building as well as the front.
- The panel notes that 27 per cent of units are single aspect, which does not demonstrate the outstanding design quality required. It is also concerned that there is a lack of true dual aspect units designed to provide cross-ventilation as well as views.
- The panel also suggests that the inclusion of balconies that are orientated towards one another may need to be reconsidered, as it will create problems with both overlooking and proximity.
- The panel is concerned that raising the building on a plinth to manage flood risk will be expensive, and asks that other strategies are considered, including the introduction of duplexes.
- It is also not convinced that the plinth provides a suitable solution to privacy concerns. While bedrooms should not be at ground level next to Dalton Way, other rooms could be located on the street, as they are in many cities.



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- The panel has concerns about the quality of units facing busy roads, especially corner units in Block B overlooking the junction between Lower High Street, Dalton Way and Waterfields Way. Traffic will generate both noise and pollution, especially at ground floor level. The panel asks for further thinking to ensure a high quality living environment for all residents.
- The panel also suggests that the southernmost corner of Block A would provide a good location for a triple aspect residential unit, and that the cycle storage should be moved to allow this.

Sustainability

- The development will also need to justify its height and density by providing significant sustainability benefits. As a development on a clear site, it should aim for very high standards in relation to both embodied and operational carbon. A comprehensive sustainability strategy will be needed to demonstrate how this will be achieved, and should form a core part of the design approach.

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.

