

Mr Stuart Walker
Vale of White Horse District Council
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Dear Mr Walker

BOTLEY DISTRICT CENTRE, BOTLEY, OXFORD
Planning application P13/V2733/FUL

The South East Design Panel is pleased to have been asked to review the above project. Panel members visited the site before their meeting at Botley Baptist Church on 3 June 2014. We were grateful to Tony Wyatt (+Plus Urban Design) and Ian Robinson (Mountford Pigott Architects) for their presentations and it was also helpful to understand the planning context from Adrian Duffield (Vale of White Horse District Council).

SUMMARY

The local centre at Botley is faded and seemingly no longer meets the needs of the community. Redevelopment offers the prospect of a better retail offer, improved connections with the surrounding area and better community facilities, as well as a substantial amount of student housing.

The main planning moves in the layout are supported: creating a new square at the heart of the scheme, with the bulk of the supermarket tucked behind smaller units and other uses. The connections have generally been handled well, but more needs to be done to resolve the relationship of some of the fronts and backs. The full potential of West Way has yet to be met, although the breaking up of this main elevation into separate 'buildings' is one of the more successful elements of the current design.

The scheme needs to be modelled in three dimensions to see whether this essentially residential quarter can satisfactorily accommodate such a big development. We have doubts about the height and emphasis given to the north-eastern corner and we suggest it would be better if it were treated as a simple residential entrance rather than a grand statement; the tallest element in the scheme could be positioned elsewhere. We would also recommend simplifying the architectural treatment, perhaps drawing more on the

present-day character of Botley, which is quite restrained, to achieve a carefully integrated form.

We welcome the team's commitment to a low carbon, energy efficient development.

Our comments are as follows:

BACKGROUND

Botley is one of the western suburbs of Oxford and grew rapidly after the 1920s from its origins as a small hamlet. Most of the properties are detached or semi-detached houses, set back from the pavement behind front gardens. The shops at Elms Parade on West Way opened in 1937 and a local centre, the West Way Centre, was added in the 1960s. An office block and a Baptist chapel were also built around this time. The A34 road and its flyover built in 1965 has a forceful and divisive presence. The 1960s shopping centre appears outworn, with an awkward and confusing layout, and the vacant office block has proved hard to let.

Oxford City and the Vale of the White Horse are expected to grow significantly and the Botley centre, one of nine around the city, is considered in need of expansion. A scheme for comprehensive renewal for a mix of uses complies with current policy, which classifies Botley as a district centre.

A full planning application was submitted in December 2013 and an Environmental Statement has also recently been prepared.

DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

The strategy of putting the anchor foodstore in the centre of the block whilst wrapping it in other active uses is sound; however, we wonder whether the large size of the store in relation to the size of the site, together with the extent of other uses proposed is restricting flexibility in the design. We support the principle of student housing, which we understand would meet the sequential tests adopted by Oxford City Council and the above-store location should be acceptable. We welcome the generally improved circulation across the site although movements from within the site to the west are restricted. The hotel is in a good location on the site to be visible but without detracting from key public uses. We question, however, the need or desirability for the tallest element to be sited at the corner of West Way and Westminster Way; greater height in the centre of the scheme might be worth considering instead, where it could signal the new development without being overly demonstrative.

We are neutral on whether Elms Parade should be kept or replaced, but we agree that any successor should have the same active frontage of shops, seizing the opportunity to enhance the vitality of West Way, as well as being architecturally responsive to its context.

The central space or piazza is key to the success of the scheme and its presence could perhaps be signalled more strongly from West Way. Wayfinding for visitors to the centre, especially those coming by car for the first time, could be better.

More thought needs to be given to the impact of the current design proposals onto the back of the houses on Athray Road as the current scheme significantly increases the bulk of development within a very short distance from rear boundaries. The proposals need to consider creating a benign rather than negative edge to the backs of the houses on Athray Road, ensuring that there is a very significant improvement to the existing arrangements.

CONNECTIONS AND MOVEMENT

The severance of Botley from Oxford by the A34 Western Distributor road, with its fast flowing traffic over the flyover, is regrettable and has left Westminster Way with a poor aspect. There is no obvious remedy to this situation but we note that in other respects Botley is well connected to the city, with good bus services and an easy, level cycle route. Opportunities to extend the dedicated cycle way into the city should be investigated as the new student population would be expected to make extensive use of this route.

We consider that the connections and routes through the new scheme are well considered and logical. The exceptions are the connections from the central square to the parts of the new development in the west which appear to be a separate adjunct to the main proposals. The servicing strategy is sound, and generally a notable improvement on the current situation, but refinement is needed in parts where there are some awkward impacts on neighbours and some poorly considered ground floor frontages.

LANDSCAPE AND PUBLIC REALM

Redevelopment of the district centre offers a considerable opportunity to improve the public realm, not only within the confines of the site but also at its edges, especially West Way. West Way is unusually wide, but its buildings are varied and it does not necessarily need to be treated like a formal boulevard. It does however need greater cohesion. We would like to see the team develop a vision that would unite both sides of the thoroughfare, even if it were to be implemented by the Highway Authority or others.

There is a gradient across the site rising to 3m on the Athray Road and accommodation of a large car park makes it important that it is handled effectively. Steps and ramps could be used more imaginatively to connect the different levels and also ensure that buildings are used to mark the spaces. The steps need to be part of an inviting approach to the piazza, rather than a barrier to it.

The liveliness of the central piazza will depend greatly on the calibre of the buildings around it and the activity they sustain so this should be carefully scrutinised. There is a particular opportunity to enhance the setting of the church of St Peter and St Paul, not simply by enlarging the memorial garden but by giving it a suitable aspect. We are not convinced by the relationship with the car park, as currently shown.

The upper level gardens for the student accommodation could be extremely attractive communal spaces and certainly should not be omitted from the detailed scheme. On the

other hand, we are not persuaded of the usefulness of the public space scooped out at the concave entrance, where West Way meets Westminster Way.

We think there is too much reliance on an as yet unproven green buffer between the new development and the back gardens of Arthray Road and that there should be more breathing space between the buildings. We are not convinced that the root protection zones of existing trees along this edge have been taken into account.

OTHER ARCHITECTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The overall architectural quality is not yet good enough for this prominent location and needs to be reassessed, both at close hand and from a distance. We believe that three-dimensional modelling as well as more sections would help to test the massing and composition. If Elms Parade is to be demolished we believe its successor should be at least of equal architectural merit and particular attention should be given to the sequence of buildings on the frontage. The backs of these buildings should also be given attention, as they will be highly visible. Because of the large size of this urban block, particularly in relation to its context, there may be a case for breaking the development into smaller, quite simple discrete blocks. These must also avoid creating a wallpapering of different facades that are unrelated to the interiors or the structure.

Botley has a fairly low key, undemonstrative character with few landmark buildings and a fairly simple palette of brick and render walls with dark tile roofs. The same tonal effect might be carried through here and the unpretentious quality of well-detailed brickwork has much to commend it.

The south-eastern corner with Westminster Way is unsatisfactory, with a series of blank facades and service entrances around the hotel. We suggest that this part of the development needs to be resolved further, making it a better experience for pedestrians.

There will be an expectation amongst students for high quality living accommodation. Long corridors and north-facing, single aspect rooms are unappealing and should be avoided. We do however support the proposal to put the shared facilities in the centre of the blocks, giving it a focal point.

We welcome the commitment to sustainable design and construction and the promise of a CHP system across the site, waste water strategies and a minimum BREEAM rating of 'Very Good'.

The Panel has not been asked to review the proposals for the new Baptist Church or the associated housing as the plans are still at an early stage.

We hope that you and the applicants find these comments helpful. Please keep the Panel in touch with the project and do contact me if anything in this letter is unclear.

Yours sincerely

ROBERT OFFORD
Panel Manager

This review was commissioned by Vale of White Horse District Council.

DECLARATION OF INTEREST

Chris Bearman, Panel Member, is a Partner of Allies and Morrison Architects who are working with Mace Real Estate, (joint venture partners at Botley with the developers Doric) on an unrelated project. It was agreed at the meeting that this interest was not prejudicial and that Mr Bearman should remain to take part in the discussion.