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design down East
Danning report



Princes Parade, Hythe, Kent

Reference: 605-923

Report of Design Review Meeting

Date: 23 November 2016.

Location: Civic Centre, Castle Hill Avenue, Folkestone

Panel

Ben van Bruggen (Chair), Planner/Urban Designer
Kieran Perkins, Architect/Urban Designer
Gerard Maccreanor, Architect
Ian Turkington, Landscape Architect/Urban Designer

Presenting team

Sue Rowlands, Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design
Christie Tsiasiot, GT Architects

Other attendees

David Tittle, Design South East
Julie Payne, Design South East
Ben Geering, Shepway District Council
Robert Allan, Shepway District Council
Piran Cooper, Shepway District Council
Andy Jarrett, Shepway District Council
David Shore, Shepway District Council
Claire Perrott, Tibbalds Planning and Urban Design
Mark Gowdridge, GT Architects

Site visit

A full site visit was undertaken by the Panel prior to the review meeting

This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application

Summary

This is a sensitive and controversial site and if it is to be developed the response needs to minimise any adverse effects on the character of the site and maximise the benefits. We applaud the ambition of the housing scheme and the collaboration between urban designers and architects. However, we believe the proposal to re-route Princes Parade to the north is misconceived, introduces unnecessary costs and undermines the character of the site. We would also want to see alternative options explored for distribution of the housing to consolidate the open character of the site.

There is an urgency to proceeding with construction of the recreation centre and a system has been chosen that will facilitate that. We have suggested some moves that would help the centre function better and make the most of its position and we would urge that these are briefly explored and costed to see if they can be included.

Background

This is a proposal for a development of up to 150 homes, a recreation centre, approximately 3 hectares of public open space and commercial uses on land between the Royal Military Canal and the sea front to the east of Hythe. The recreation centre of approximately 4,000 square metres will include a 25 metre swimming pool, teaching pool, gym and sports hall.

The land, which has previously been used as a municipal tip, is bounded by Hythe golf course to the west. To the north, the Royal Military Canal is a scheduled ancient monument and around it is an area of archaeological potential and a local wildlife site. A canoe club has premises at the east end of the site.

Princes Parade follows a straight path between this land and the sea front promenade and beach. The current proposal is to realign this road to the north of the site and south of the Royal Military Canal. The intention is to submit a hybrid planning application including an outline application for the housing site with a design specification document and parameter plans and a detailed application for the recreation centre.

Principle of development

This is a very sensitive site because of the scheduled ancient monument, archaeological and wildlife sites and its general amenity value. Apart from the public rights of way the site is currently not accessible to the public but many enjoy walking alongside and through it. However, the past use of the site has left a legacy of contamination needing to be addressed.

Although it has sometimes been used insensitively in the past its open character is valuable. The views from the community around Seabrook Road to the beach and sea and back the other way are valuable as is the view down to the site from the higher parts of Seabrook. We note the local opposition to this scheme and the concerns of Historic England.

Shepway District Council must therefore weigh up the loss, or partial loss, of these assets against the benefits this development can bring. These include the contribution to the housing supply, the transformation of the public realm along the sea front, the further enhancement of the image of Hythe through a high quality housing development and commercial facilities, contributions to improvements of access and interpretation around the

Royal Military Canal and the opportunity to replace a crumbling leisure centre with a new facility.

Therefore, in proposing to go ahead with this development the above public benefits need to be maximised and the existing positive characteristics preserved and enhanced as much as possible. Our comments below are made with those objectives in mind.

Road alignment

We understand that Princes Parade needs to remain open as a highway because it provides emergency relief for the A259 Seabrook Road. One of the major design moves proposed is to realign Princes Parade so that it follows the northern boundary of this site, close to the Royal Military Canal. A wider pedestrian-only promenade would then be created incorporating the current promenade and part of the current Princes Parade. There would therefore be direct pedestrian access, without crossing a road, between the residential development and the promenade and beach.

While we can admire the ambition of this plan and see its benefits, it is a very expensive move, adding costs to the development which might be better spent elsewhere, and potentially creating as many problems as it solves. It brings an intrusive roadway close to the scheduled ancient monument, and to the series of trails and paths which run along side it, urbanising it and creating the need for it to be protected by a bund. There is currently on-street parking along Princes Parade and this would have to be moved to the north of the site with visitors then walking through the residential closes. There would be problems of parking enforcement in the residential areas as visitors would want to get closer to the beach. The character of this site is of a vibrant sea-front and a quiet canal area. The realignment proposal does not respect that character bringing a busy access and through road, which will be hard to calm, close to the canal. The strength of the straight road and the straight canal would be diluted.

We understand that this decision was based on advice from property consultants that homes with direct access to the beach would command much higher values than homes with a road between them and the beach. We would question the brief that was given to these consultants. Princes Parade is currently a fast, straight road. A home with that type of highway between it and the beach would clearly be less valuable than one without. However, there is an alternative approach which calms Princes Parade through a series of public squares, tables, broad pedestrian crossings, build-outs, parallel or perpendicular parking areas, etc. There are plenty of sea-front roads around England, which are not particularly radical in their street design, but which achieve slow traffic speeds because they provide access to perpendicular parking spaces and are generally busy with people accessing the beach. Aside from these sea-front examples there is also plenty of experience of achieving calmed streets through the introduction of the measures listed above. We do not believe that such a transformed Princes Parade would reduce the value of homes located behind it. Indeed, it might be seen as more attractive than the widened promenade proposed, which at certain times of the year could feel very desolate.

This alternative configuration could have wider benefits such as being closed on weekends or holidays to allow special events helping to create the sense of place. It might be possible, using a barrier or rising bollards, to close Princes Parade to through traffic while retaining the possibility of opening it when it was needed to provide relief to the A259.

The decision to realign Princes Parade seems to have been made early in the design process and the more detailed design of the residential development predicated on it. We would recommend that the same level of design thinking is devoted to developing an alternative option. If necessary, an experienced street-design practice should be engaged to draw up designs for a calmed Princes Parade. Once an alternative design is available the property consultants should be asked to reconsider the question of values.

Housing development

Designs for the housing development area at an early stage and much will depend on attracting the right developer. There is clearly an ambition to create something with a distinctive character that draws upon certain coastal themes and builds upon the success of recent contemporary schemes in Hythe. There has been good collaboration between landscape and urban design. There is a need for any design specification document to capture the essential elements of this proposal. However, we were not sure whether this was primarily seen as a landscape-led scheme, which it perhaps needs to be, or a more urban one.

The current proposal distributes the housing into five (or four and a half) 'clusters' each with an access road from the realigned Princes Parade. The idea behind this is to provide five open spaces each affording views from the settlement to the north to the sea and back. It also maximises views across the small areas of open space to the sea. This will also allow a number of properties to be promoted as having 'sea views' although many of these would be quite limited. The danger is that this proposal is just seen as filling the site with development and that these relatively small spaces, with car parks intruding into them, do not provide sufficient openness. We would question whether these clusters are large enough to have a sense of community and also how they will be distinguished from each other.

We were not shown options that may have been considered for alternative distribution of housing. It would have been useful to evaluate the impact of alternatives on the open character of the site. For example, one might have chosen to consolidate the housing and hotel at one end of the site which would leave a larger open area of the site respecting its current open character. If development was consolidated at the eastern end the open space would be contiguous with the golf course which would leave a substantial area of openness and maintain a sea-front gap between Hythe and Sandgate. Consolidating the housing and other commercial uses with the leisure centre may also help support their viability and make for a walkable neighbourhood on days when the sea front is less hospitable. A second alternative might be to consolidate the housing to the west providing for a larger public open space to the east of the pedestrian bridge and public right of way. This might create a green recreation area linking with the areas around the canal and the recreation centre. It would allow the recreation centre to be placed in a more landscape context.

At this stage we are being offered an approach and not a design. Given the sensitive nature of the site it is difficult to see how this might be developed without some certainty over the future of the architecture. The parameter plans are to be accompanied by a design code. It is crucial that any design codes set out clearly a quality threshold that any developer bidding for the site will be expected to meet. The temptation will be to provide a flexible and loose code and a more detailed master plan. However, it may be better to provide a detailed design code with specifics of design quality of the buildings and landscape and a design framework instead of a master plan. An outline accompanied by the first phase reserved matters

application for the buildings would be another way of securing the design detailing. In any event the design code should be seen as tool for the landowner in the promotion of the site and not merely a way of controlling detailed aspects of the design at development control stage after the developer is appointed.

X The site has extraordinary development costs. Understanding these will be crucial to the final quality of the design. X

Recreation Centre

Clearly this is a much needed facility in view of the poor state of the existing facility and this is a suitable place for it with the opportunity for synergies with the canoe club and beach based activities. We understand that five locations were evaluated. Clearly there are constraints on the budget and Shepway District Council have chosen the Affordable Recreation Centre (ARC) system which was explained to us as a 'kit of parts' which could be configured in a number of different ways and given different external architectural treatments. The system is tied to a particular contractor so that there is certainty about costs. We do not know how much flexibility there is within the ARC system without additional costs. A new centre of this sort is a once in a generation decision for the Council and it would be a shame if the opportunity was not taken to maximise the centre's capacity to make the most of its setting in favour of standardisation.

We question whether the quantity of parking is really necessary and would urge this to be carefully analysed with a view to minimising rather than maximising it. It consumes a lot of valuable land at this end of the site and distances the recreation centre from the canoe club. Having said that we would not want to see the generosity of public space outside the centre diminished.

X We are not convinced by the external architectural treatment of the centre and the narrative that it was based on a Martello tower. It seems to place a heavier structure above a lighter one which is an uncomfortable relationship and the entrance seems constrained and not very legible.

We are concerned about the configuration of the entrance area which at present is dominated by café seating. There are often queues to buy tickets at a recreation centre, or people simply milling about waiting for their friends and family and there needs to be sufficient space for this away from the café area.

We do not know whether the ARC kit of parts includes a more visible staircase. If it does not, we strongly suggest that the promoters of ARC design one. This is a building concerned with health and activity and local authorities have a duty to promote public health. Public buildings of all sorts, but particularly recreation centres, should be promoting the option of taking the stairs to reach the first floor by locating an open and inviting set of stairs in a prominent position. The current proposal places the lift to one side with rather mean stairs as a secondary route wrapping around the back of it.

We feel that a huge opportunity may be missed if there is no facility for visitors, and those attending the gym to appreciate the views along the seafront from the first floor. Similarly we are concerned to see that the swimming pool had been placed at the rear of the building and the opportunity to swim while viewing the sea has been lost. We were told this was to

provide privacy for swimmers but we felt that some manipulation of levels might provide an alternative solution to this problem.

We would question the use of Cor Ten as the cladding material here. While it can be a striking material it is often difficult to get right on large buildings. It has a very industrial feel, evoking ship building, rather than a beach aesthetic. The detailing and finessing of the plates and joints will be critical to the look and feel of the building. We would like to have seen how this is to be handled and how imaginatively it could be used, for example by having panels of different width, being etched onto or perforated over glass to provide screening.

We advise the client to visit and familiarise themselves with buildings such as the Feilden Clegg Bradley Leeds Metropolitan Univeristy and the Faulkner Brown Hebburn Community Centre in South Tyneside.

Building for Life 12 review

We were asked to provide a focussed review using the Building for Life 12 assessment system. Our current assessment is set out below. The housing proposals are at a very early stage so some questions may be raised from 'amber' to 'green' (or even 'red' to 'amber' or 'green') once more information is available.

Building for Life 12		Provisional assessment	Comment
Integrating into the neighbourhood			
1	Connections Does the scheme integrate into its surroundings by reinforcing existing connections and creating new ones; whilst also respecting existing buildings and land uses along the boundaries of the development site?	AMBER	Connections are restricted by the nature of the site but are not further restricted by this development. Internal pedestrian connections are good. Realignment of road is not a logical internal connection and so prevents this gaining Green
2	Facilities and services Does the development provide (or is it close to) community facilities, such as shops, schools, workplaces, parks, play areas, pubs or cafes?	GREEN	Good range of local facilities in walking distance. Others (e.g. secondary school) are further afield but accessible via public transport.
3	Public transport Does the scheme have good access to public transport to help reduce car dependency?	GREEN	Buses on Seabrook Road accessible via footbridges.
4	Meeting local housing requirements Does the development have a mix of housing types and tenures that suit local requirements?	GREEN	Housing mix still under discussion but assume that local authority will negotiate suitable mix.

Building for Life 12		Provisional assessment	Comment
Creating a place			
5	Character Does the scheme create a place with a locally inspired or otherwise distinctive character?	AMBER	There is clearly an ambition to create a distinctive character and so this is likely to achieve 'green' but at the moment insufficient detail on landscape, urban design or architecture.
6	Working with the site in its context Does the scheme take advantage of existing topography, landscape features (including water courses), trees and plants, wildlife habitats, existing buildings, site orientation and microclimate?	RED	The road alignment decision is a poor response to context and the decision to spread development across the site needs to be re-examined.
7	Creating well defined streets and spaces Are buildings designed and positioned with landscaping to define and enhance streets and spaces and are buildings designed to turn street corners well?	RED	Appears to be no development fronting the realigned Princes Parade. Rest of layout too sketchy to assess but danger of front & back confusion in the housing areas.
8	Easy to find your way around Is the development designed to make it easy to find your way around?	AMBER	The nature of the site and the response to it is likely to make this pretty legible. There may be a danger that each section of development is indistinguishable from the others.
Street and home			
9	Streets for all Are streets designed in a way that encourage low vehicle speeds and allow them to function as social spaces?	AMBER	Realigned Princes Parade will not be a slow street other streets have the potential to be social spaces.
10	Car parking Is resident and visitor parking sufficient and well integrated so that it does not dominate the street?	AMBER	Detail of residential parking unclear at the moment. Parking for beach users furthest from the beach will create conflict.

Building for Life 12		Provisional assessment	Comment
11	Public and private spaces Will public and private spaces be clearly defined and designed to have appropriate access and be able to be well managed and safe in use?	AMBER	Insufficient detail at this stage.
12	External storage and amenity space Is there adequate external storage space for bins and recycling, as well as vehicles and cycles?	AMBER	Insufficient detail at this stage.

This review was commissioned by Shepway District Council.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Since the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the Panel, this report is offered in confidence to the addressee and those listed as being sent copies. There is no objection to the report being shared within respective practices/organisations. DSE reserves the right to make the guidance known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed to remain confidential, this report will be publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application and to any public inquiry concerning the scheme. DSE also reserves the right to make guidance available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please let us know.