



Design Review

**Land at Bell Road
Sittingbourne**

21 June 2016



Land at Bell Road, Sittingbourne

Reference: 556-871

Report of Design Review Meeting

Date: 2 June 2016

Location: Swale Borough Council, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne

Panel

Allan Atlee (Chair), Architect/ Urban Designer

Luke Engleback, Landscape Architect

Angela Koch, Urban Designer/Planner

Alan Legg, Architect/Planner/Urban Designer

Colin Shields, Engineer/Transport Planner/Infrastructure

Presenting team

Keith Owen, OSG

Rachael Dickson, JTS

Kain Kassam, KRK

Other attendees

David Tittle, Design South East

Rizven Kassam, KRK

Jason Chandler, OSG

Pam Gregory, Swale Borough Council

Simon Algar, Swale Borough Council

James Freeman, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Sue Gent, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Paul Flemming, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Mike Henderson, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Ghlin Whelan, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Mike Baldock, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Nigel Kay, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Nicholas Hampshire, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Alan Horton, Swale Borough Council

Site visit

A full site visit was conducted by the Panel ahead of the review.

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



Summary

A higher density residential development to the rear of the High Street would be a positive addition to Sittingbourne and we commend the quality of accommodation and ambition of the developer and their design team. Our main concerns focus around the quality of the public realm and shared amenity spaces to be created and we believe that the scheme would be severely compromised if the central courtyard had to become a car park.

Our comments are as follows:

Background

This is a proposal for a development of 143 apartments and a medical centre comprising of three blocks situated off Bell Road to the rear of Sittingbourne High Street. One block will abut Bell House, a small office block and another will abut the rear of the retail buildings and snooker hall on the High Street.

Principle of development

We strongly support the principle of development on this site which is precisely the type of site that Swale Borough Council should be encouraging for development. It is not only in a sustainable location close to public transport links and amenities but also has the potential to help animate the High Street and improve its viability. It is unfortunate that a comprehensive scheme cannot be developed including the adjoining car park site.

We also applaud the ambition of the developer in providing apartments that meet London Design Guide standards which are more generous than the nationally described space standard.

Access and connectivity

It is unfortunate that a more direct connection cannot be secured from the High Street but we appreciate that the previous connection did not work well with the very small shop units difficult to operate viably and the risk of the covered walkway attracting anti-social behaviour. The loss of the Weatherspoon investment in the premises to the front makes their future uncertain and the prospect of a unit that faces two ways unlikely.

In the absence of that direct connection the route via Bell Lane and via the small square (marked 4 in the drawings) becomes significant. We were not convinced by how this is configured at the moment. The small square appears rather blank and isolated and the route through from Bell Lane across the back of the shops is not straightforward and legible. This part of the plan should be re-examined to see if more animation and clarity can be achieved. This might involve looking at the design of the medical centre and the location of the entrance of the eastern block. We were critical of the design of the entrance to the medical centre which seemed constrained. More clarity and legibility regarding the configuration of access to the blocks and inner courtyard might be achieved by providing two open courtyards along Bell Road, on both ends of the building facing the street and exploring access to the other blocks via the same routes.



Public realm and parking

A car-free scheme was originally proposed for this site but has not been accepted by Kent County Council who have instead conceded to a level of parking that is below policy requirements. This is a difficult issue. It should be possible to have zero parking in a town centre location close to the railway station and a minute's walk from a supermarket but, given the lack of other amenities within walking distance, it is important to be realistic about the behaviour of future residents. The effect of introducing parking is to lose the central square which is the residents only shared amenity space. We were not convinced that it could fulfil this function and act as a car park.

We were informed that a basement car-parking arrangement would make the scheme unviable but that this could be resolved by putting an extra floor on the western block to provide 19 more units. In principle we would support such a move subject to the consequent design implications being carefully considered and resolved. These would include the effect of the additional height and massing, the design of any ventilation grilles at ground floor level and the design and management of the car park to ensure it remained safe to use. If this strategy had the effect of raising the ground floor flats slightly as they face the car park to the west this would be a positive consequence as it would improve the residents' privacy and surveillance of the car park. We wonder whether more parking might be provided through an agreement with Sainsbury or indeed extending the footprint of the block between the Sainsbury' car park and Bell House. This would result in reduced permeability, but an increased footprint, privacy by enclosing the inner courtyard and opportunity to introduce more of a vertical rhythm.

Whether or not the courtyard can be freed of cars, its detailed design is critical. We appreciate that because of uncertainty over the car parking a landscape architect has only just been engaged. There is an opportunity to make better use of water in the scheme, incorporating water run-off into rain-garden arrangements. Sustainable drainage is a requirement for developments over 10 dwellings and it would be better if this was seen as an opportunity to improve the overall attractiveness of the place, facades and roof spaces rather than an obligation.

The thresholds to the blocks and sequence of arrival for residents should be considered. If the east-west route behind the High Street becomes more legible as well as the east-west route to the south of the development, there is the possibility of seeing this wholly or partly a private shared courtyard. While we would normally be pushing for greater connectivity, the overall size of this development is not huge and there will remain plenty of permeability across the site.

Architecture

We support the decision to go for a contemporary approach which does not attempt to pick up on the character of the High Street or neighbouring suburban housing which is eclectic and of variable quality. However, we did feel that the blocks had a very horizontal feel in the way they were articulated and that introducing more of a vertical rhythm would reflect the grain of Sittingbourne. We feel that there should be variation in the sizes of openings on different sides of the blocks with more generosity on the courtyard side where light will be more limited and the feel is more private.



We were concerned that bicycle parking should be sufficient to cope with a potential future growth of cycling. The arrangement of having two cores but only one bicycle store is questionable. If we want to make cycling a natural thing to do then the sequence of being able to pick up or drop off one's bicycle on leaving or returning is important.

This review was commissioned by KRK Ltd with the knowledge and agreement of Swale Borough 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.