



Design Review

**Aspire Special
School
Vellum Drive
Sittingbourne**

10 February 2018



Aspire Special School, Vellum Drive, Sittingbourne, Kent
Reference: 675.1-1038

Report of Design Review Meeting
Date: 24 January 2018
Location: Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne

Panel

Richard Portchmouth (Chair), Architecture
Luke Engleback, Landscape Architecture
Angela Koch, Planning/Urban Design
Steve Smith, Architecture/Urban Design
Magali Thomson, Architecture

Also attending

David Tittle, Design South East
Simon Algar, Swale Borough Council
Jim Wilson, Swale Borough Council
Cllr James Hunt, Swale Borough Council
Cllr Mike Henderson, Swale Borough Council
Cllr Andy Booth, Swale Borough Council
Tony Whitaker, BAM Construction Ltd
Michael Gibbs, Bond Bryan Architects
Matthew Blythin, DHA Planning
Robin Craig, Bond Bryan Architects
Caroline Gibbs, Bond Bryan Architects
Rameez Saiyed, AECOM

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

This is a tricky and challenging site and brief and, as with most schools currently, a restricted budget. Ambitious goals have been set as part of the brief which we would support. However, we do not feel that the current proposals represent a successful resolution of the brief. While some thought has gone into providing the range of internal spaces that the school will need and to issues such as how lunches will be facilitated, the main drivers of design seem to have been the site constraints and the avoidance of risks associated with the students' condition. Few of the positive aspirations articulated in the documents seem to find expression in the design. It is unfortunate that the ultimate client, the school operator, was not present at the review as they might have been able to articulate their positive aspirations which would have enabled a discussion of how the building design could facilitate them. Involving potential parents and students in the design would be a positive move.

We recommend that a number of areas of the design: the long corridors, the orientation, the internal and external arrival points, the building form and materials and the landscape design need to be re-examined. A starting point for such a re-examination might be to look at precedence of successful and inspiring schools for this student group, focussing not on how they overcome the difficulties of the user-group but on how they use their buildings positively to enhance learning and care. We were told that the school had visited 6-8 different units of different types for this user-group but it seems that the lessons learnt from those visits were all about what not to do. Our overwhelming impression was that the function of the building was containment. A more positive approach is needed which focusses on opportunities rather than constraints and brings joy to those learning, teaching and caring in and around this building.

Background

This is a proposal for a new primary school for up to 168 children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Speech Language and Communication Needs to be developed on behalf of Grove Park Community Primary School and supported by the Education and Skills Funding Agency. It will be a 3,400 sqm building with 100 car parking spaces. The school is to be built on a 1.7 hectare site to the south of Vellum Drive which is part of a wider development known as the Meads consisting of 1,200 homes and a local centre. The site was previously allocated for a general primary school but was not required by the County Council. It is currently undeveloped and used for dog walking providing a link to the new community woodland beyond. The site includes a small area of archaeological interest.

Project objectives

Five objectives have been articulated for this project and we explore below the extent to which these current proposals achieve them.

1. Provide a purpose designed landmark building designed to inspire and motivate students. We cannot see how the current low level building, set back at an angle from the Vellum Drive and Staplehurst Road could be seen as a landmark. However, while this should be seen as a civic building, not hidden from view, we question whether 'landmark' is quite the right word to use. Regarding the second part of this objective, we are not convinced that the external and internal environment of this building will inspire and motivate students.



2. Provide the local community with exceptional facilities, including a new sports facility;

Certain facilities are provided which might be used by the local community, if the school is able and willing to facilitate such arrangements. An understanding is needed about how the design might facilitate that.

3. Exploit its prominent location to promote the School and its activities within Sittingbourne.

This presumably refers to its proximity to Staplehurst Road. We can see nothing in the design which contributes to achieving this objective. The dominant element from Staplehurst Road will be the car park.

4. Enhance the sport offer on the site including new soft and hard surface areas.

The design delivers these facilities.

5. To create a high quality learning environment that contributes to its setting and the community, creating a clear identity synonymous with the delivery of high quality education.

We are far from convinced that this objective will be achieved by the internal and external environment proposed.

Building location and orientation

The proposed location and orientation of the building are said to be driven by the need to avoid building over the area of archaeological sensitive area and to avoid early morning solar glare entering the classrooms. However, we were not shown any options that had been tested regarding the orientation and its effects on light. The result of the proposed orientation is that the building sits at a diagonal on the site. At variance with the grain of the surrounding neighbourhood and therefore delivering a message of being separate. This undermines the objective of giving the building a civic presence within the neighbourhood. It also means that the external areas where students can spill out from the class rooms are awkwardly shaped left-over spaces.

This has been deliberately designed as a 'finger' building to maximise edges and allow light into the classrooms. There will be times of year and times of day when west, south and east facing classrooms experience direct sunlight. Only an extensive study of options can demonstrate that there is a particular orientation which significantly reduces glare. There is a need to provide sheltered external space in many places around the school and this might also play a role in providing shading to the classrooms.

Building form and internal layout

The most disappointing aspect of the proposed design is the long and relatively narrow internal corridors, totally lacking in daylight, which are the only circulation areas. Children need visual references for wayfinding and daylight for wellbeing. We cannot believe that there is not a viable and workable solution that could introduce more natural light into these corridors, such as by the use of clerestories, nor that corridor widths could not be varied to provide more social spaces and aid wayfinding. We understand that special schools are advised to have a greater proportion of space dedicated to circulation. Changes in colour, texture and proportion could also help with orientation.

While we appreciate that a lot of the teaching and support activities that will take place within this school need to take place in secure spaces with minimal distraction, and that very



few of these are required to have no external light, we find it hard to believe that everything must happen behind closed doors. The result of this design is to create something which has a strongly institutional feel and will lack legibility, and while we are sure that the school will take measures to make the space as bright and inviting as possible they will be fighting against the internal environment.

We understand that unlike a mainstream school, there will be staggered arrival times for students, however as some arrive by minibus and some are early or late, there will inevitably be bunching of arrivals. The external and internal arrival space seems inadequate to cope with a process which will often require direct handover from parents or carers to teachers or teaching assistants. More generosity in these spaces would both be more functional and more welcoming.

We question whether there could not be a greater variation in building height and a consequent reduction in building footprint, perhaps by putting some staff areas on an upper floor. We were told that this is not viable, but we would like to see that tested.

Materials

We question whether the extensive use of brick is the best economic decision for this building given the extent to which the budget seems to be restricting ambition in other areas. The large area of metal roof has an industrial feel which we feel might not create an inviting environment.

Landscape, car parking and boundaries

The landscape design seems to be underdeveloped. For example, there seems to be no SUDS strategy. A series of separate external break-out areas are conceived for different year groups but there is a lack of detail as to how the landscape will support the learning activity of each of these groups.

On a wider level we were told that the school are attracted to the idea of a 'forest school' but there was nothing in the plans that showed how they might access the community woodland or how elements of woodland might be brought within the school boundary. There does not seem to have been any attempt to explore and exploit the educational or therapeutic benefits of the landscape through topographical seating or sensory elements or to make more functional aspects, such as rainwater run-off, into interesting features. At the review meeting we heard from a local councillor about how rainwater harvesting and attenuation are deployed in a nearby school as interesting and educational features.

We appreciate that what appears to be a high level of parking will be needed to cope with the high staffing levels and the need for secure vehicle drop-off for many of the students. The proposed car park layout seems rational, but it would have been helpful to see other options explored as to its position. As stated above, more generosity in the drop off area would be helpful and some greening of this area, and the car park in general, would make it more welcoming. SUDS features could be used to add interest and support biodiversity.

There is a clear need for a secure boundary to the school because of the potential behavioural difficulties that the students might experience from time-to-time. A strategy to soften and bring character to this boundary and reduce its institutional feel is needed. This might be



achieved through a combination of mesh fencing and hedging. The large oak tree which we understood is to be retained is not shown clearly on all plans so it is not possible to verify that its root zone has been protected.

This review was commissioned by BAM Construction Ltd with the knowledge 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.

APPENDIX 1

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