

Notes of the Design Surgery at Gravesham Borough Council on 22nd June 2022

Gravesham Borough Council attendees: Peter Price
Design South East: Richard Portchmouth, Ross O'Ceallaigh, Bridie Lebdiri (observer)

Site: Former Police Station, 133 Windmill Street, Gravesend DA12 1DB
Officer present: Peter Price
Planning application ref: 20220432

Background:

The application site is the site of the former police station, which has been vacant since 2016. The application involves the demolition of existing structures on site and the erection of 75 Retirement Living apartments for older people (comprising 48 no. 1-bed and 27 no. 2-beds) including communal facilities, access, car parking and landscaping. Proposals for the site have come to Design Surgery on two previous occasions.

The local authority is seeking advice on the design, built form, massing, layout and external material proposed for the site.

Comments:

- There is concern over the suitability of this island site for a retirement living development, considering the busy location and high levels of traffic around the site. This results in an aggressive disconnected environment and potential safety concerns for vulnerable residents. If this use is delivered on site, then exposure to traffic, air and noise pollution will need to be effectively mitigated together with connectivity to the adjoining streets. However, there are benefits of town centre living for this demographic.
- The urban design approach of the proposal is confused. The surrounding urban block structure is ignored, and the urban grain fragmented in the proposed development. The façade design attempts to respond to the surrounding historic context with the aesthetics of a Georgian terrace. However, the plan form of the building is not street-based as a terrace would be, instead acting as a T-shaped 'building in space' without a clear front and back. The T-shape plan form fails to provide definition to the street, particularly on the north-west and south-west corners. The proposal therefore contrasts uncomfortably with the surrounding historic street pattern.
- The plan form results in a high number of flats accessed via a single bank of lifts and long corridors, with minimal daylight. The majority of flats are single aspect, and on each floor, there are two flats that are single aspect and north-facing. This will result in dark and poorly ventilated spaces. It also creates a risk of overheating in single aspect south and west-facing flats.

- A perimeter block layout would allow for a more sheltered central communal area, which is protected from the busyness of surrounding streets. Another option to explore could be a H-shaped layout which defines internal courtyards and gardens and fronts onto Wrotham Street and Windmill Street. This approach could provide a more sheltered and defined communal open space to the south, which would be accessible from the central communal lounge (a sketch has been provided illustrating this approach). Both a perimeter block and a H-shaped block could allow for a greater number of dual aspect units, improving the quality of life for residents.
- The massing and height of the development is generally acceptable.
- The sustainability strategy for the proposal was not discussed at this surgery. However, it is expected that the applicant considers how the development will minimise energy use and ventilate flats in a sustainable manner.
- Some flats have balconies, which is welcomed. However, many flats do not have any private outdoor amenity space, which will reduce the quality of life for residents.
- The arrival experience to the building is poor for pedestrians, who will have to walk through the car park, and past the undercroft and refuse storage to get to the entrance. Furthermore, the entrance is lacking prominence and feels more like a service entrance.
- There are concerns that the communal spaces are not reaching their potential of providing high quality spaces for residents. The communal lounge addresses the car park, which is not the optimal outlook. Ideally the lounge would address the communal garden. However, the garden is located more remotely at the rear of the building, away from the main entrance. Due to its peripheral location and lack of visibility, it is at risk of being underused.
- There needs to be a clear strategy for the landscape spaces, which considers what activities take place in the spaces and how residents will make use of them in their daily lives. It is unclear what uses, if any, are expected to take place in the landscape space along Windmill Street.
- The proposed materials and façade design clearly echo the historic buildings in the context. However, the lack of nuance and detailing in the design approach results in a pastiche aesthetic. For example, the window proportions lack legibility & hierarchy and are of PVC material. The façade design and materiality should be carefully considered alongside the plan & section form to ensure a consistent and coherent design approach.