

South East Regional **Design Panel**

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16 March 2015

Dear Mr Wood

FORMER POST OFFICE, ASHDOWN ROAD, KINGSTON
Planning Application 14/13247/FUL

Thank you for asking the Design South + East Design Panel to review the proposed development at Kingston Old Post Office. Panel members visited the site and its wider surroundings before their meeting on 2 March and we were grateful to Viv Hill and Dominic Chapman of John Thompson and Partners for their presentation. We were pleased to be able to view the model of the scheme and its context as well as looking at a further iteration of the taller tower. It was also helpful to hear the planning aspirations from Viv Evans and Toby Feltham at Kingston Council.

SUMMARY

This central site has long been in need of redevelopment. The design principles are generally sound, the mix of uses is appropriate for the location, and the re-use of the two listed buildings is welcomed. The site is suitable for intensive development, with buildings of varying heights, and we support the case for creating a more pronounced edge to the town centre.

We are concerned however that too much is being asked of the site and consequently is being overdeveloped; not so much because of the height of the tallest buildings, but by the arrangement of the blocks, the quality of accommodation they will provide and the way the development as a whole will fit in with its surroundings. We sense that the scheme could give more public benefit in return for the floorspace being created and do much more to drive further changes outside the red line of the planning application. The Wheatfield Way frontage is not yet convincing and we believe it should anticipate, or even stimulate, the prospect of a much calmer thoroughfare than the present relief road.

790-490 Former Post Office, Ashdown Road, Kingston

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We note English Heritage's concern about the possible impact of the tallest building on the setting of heritage assets. The most sensitive views are to be tested further.

Our Panel's disquiet is that the architectural quality of the tallest tower is not yet sufficient to justify its very considerable prominence in the local and wider townscape. The lower but still bulky tower to the north also has an uncomfortable relationship, fighting with the listed buildings to its sides and not offering enough to Ashdown Road.

Our comments are as follows:

BACKGROUND

The Post Office site is in the southern part of the town centre, close to Kingston College and contained on its southern and eastern sides by Wheatfield Way, which was built as the town centre relief road. There are two listed buildings, both long vacant, but the remainder of the site is taken up with buildings of low merit and a surface car park. There are two conservation areas nearby and the large open space of Fairfield Recreation Ground, which we visited.

There is widespread recognition of the need to regenerate the site and the Council has recently adopted a development brief for the wider area, the Eden Quarter. This Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) usefully sets out the Council's aspirations for the development. A tall buildings strategy is being prepared but in the meantime the SPD identifies three possible locations for tall buildings (over nine storeys), one of which is the southern corner of the Post Office site. However, the SPD stops short of suggesting what form or height buildings should be. For such an important aspect it is disappointing that the SPD contains very little information to guide the three-dimensional aspects of development. A model, physical or virtual would be an extremely useful tool here.

The current scheme is well advanced; it has been to public consultation and a full planning application has been submitted, but this is the first time it has come to external design review.

DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

The principle of a high density, mixed-use development on this site is appropriate. We welcome the retention and conversion of the listed buildings, which should adapt well to their intended uses. The retail and leisure offer will help to bolster the appeal of the town centre and it is a good site for new housing. The general circulation arrangements and the configuration of public and private space seems sound.

Two scenarios have been presented, with and without the retention of residential Frances House, on Wheatfield Way. Either approach could be made to work, but replacing the existing building would result in a better scheme.

We support the argument for a taller building that could herald the town centre in the approach from the south, positioned where it could form part of an emerging cluster with Kingston College.

We should like to see the scheme go further in anticipating or even leading change elsewhere in the Eden Quarter – the future of the area north of Ashdown Road and the long-term character of Wheatfield Way would benefit from a more integrated approach.

We understand that the amount of affordable housing is still being negotiated with the planning authority, which has a target of 50% affordable in such locations. The integration and management of different tenures may have design implications for the project.

PUBLIC REALM AND CIRCULATION

Considerable thought has been given to the quality of open space, both public and private, within the development area. We believe the same attention should be given to the periphery, especially Ashdown Road and Wheatfield Way, to ensure that these become attractive, enjoyable streets. Humanising Wheatfield Way will be a particular challenge, but we do not think the scheme should treat it as a permanently hostile edge.

Improvements should be made as part of the Council's movement strategy, as well as the Mayor's "mini-Holland" cycling fund for Wheatfield Way. Bringing the implementation of the public areas forward early in the development would be a clear declaration of intent about the intended quality of the scheme as a whole.

We are not wholly convinced by the amenity value of the eastern square outside the former telephone exchange and think its purpose could be made clearer.

The new Post Office Square will be an important new public space. The Eden Street brief calls for it to be a space modelled on the scale of the Apple Market, and surrounded by buildings of quality and variety; changes may be needed to the height and composition of the new buildings if that intimacy is to be achieved. However, we are not convinced that this example is appropriate here and the design team should look more closely at the character of the existing building, the orientation of the space and the effect of sunlight and overshadowing from the taller buildings to the south.

FORM, MASSING AND OTHER ARCHITECTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Panel was invited to give particular attention to the southern residential tower. This will be the tallest building in Kingston, surpassing historic landmarks such as the Parish Church.

The tower is intended to serve as a marker for the town in distant views. Other tall buildings may follow. Regardless of this it must set a benchmark for architectural quality. We would not wish to be prescriptive about the number of storeys and we appreciate the proportional relationship between girth and height. We also think that the revised, lower version has merit, particular in some views. The building is relatively slender in the northward view from Penrhyn Road, but noticeably thicker and slab-like when seen from

east or west, where it is dominant in the townscape. The design is being reconsidered, including the profiles and materiality, and we would counsel for simplicity; at the moment the composition risks being overworked and is not of such exceptional quality to justify its prominence. Brick seems preferable to a mainly glazed exterior and we would question the appropriateness of open, projecting balconies at the higher levels.

Panel members were provided with the townscape assessment prior to the meeting. We note English Heritage's concern about the impact of the tower on the setting of heritage assets and understand that further visual studies are being prepared to test this further. English Heritage has raised particular concerns about the taller element intruding in distant views from historic parks and gardens, including Hampton Court, Home Park and Richmond Park. It was not possible to visit these locations, but we experienced key local views including those from Kingston Bridge and the Market Place. Of these, the view from the Market Place seems especially sensitive.

Taking the scheme as a whole, we are not convinced by the attempt to model down the scale of development in discrete components. The corridor spine of the apartments reveals the true scale and dimensions of what is effectively one very large structure. This has resulted in single aspect flats facing Wheatfield Road, and deep north-facing units elsewhere, with consequent problems of aspect or daylight. These difficulties are, we feel, symptoms of too much development on the site. There was little differentiation in the layout, size, balcony space or terrace of the units regardless of whether they faced in or out, north or south. Some units appear to straddle the discrete building components, giving the sense that the building's exterior is simply wrapped around an efficient layout, rather than responding genuinely to its context.

It was not clear where the main street entrances to many of the apartments would be, particularly for those units deep in the centre of the plan or facing Wheatfield Street, which appear to be entered from an internal corridor rather than from the street. It was also not clear how a visitor might find their way from the car park, to a particular apartment without the use of extensive signage. Residents should be able to give clear and simple directions to their visitors. The depth of the plan means that internal corridors will have little or no daylight.

Residents may not find the communal podium garden convenient or pleasant to use. The amenity value of that space is questionable, in our view, only being of use to those facing onto it in the lower blocks. We suggest that developing a narrative of users would help to bring identity and clarity to the layout.

We are not persuaded by the 13 storey block interposed between former post office and the telephone exchange, which will be a bulky and ungainly intrusion on Ashdown Road. It fails to meet the requirement of the SPD to be sensitive to the scale and material palette of the listed buildings.

We should have liked to have seen the project much earlier in its gestation, but we hope that you and your team find these comments helpful in taking the design to the next stage. 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

cc Viv Evans, RB Kingston
Chloë Clay, RB Kingston
Toby Feltham, RB Kingston
Jamie Fox, RB Kingston
Jonathan Webb, RB Kingston
Eric Owens, RB Kingston
Viv Hill, John Thompson and Partners
Dominic Chapman, John Thompson and Partners
Judith Salomon, St George West London Ltd
Georgina Horne, St George West London Ltd
Quentin Webster, St George West London Ltd
Peter Stewart, Peter Stewart Consultancy
Harriet Whitehorn, English Heritage
Stephen Senior, English Heritage

Panel members present: Ben van Bruggen (Chair), Jane Briginshaw, Tina Frost,
Justin Nicholls, Ian Turkington

Geoff Noble, Design South East

This review was commissioned by the Royal Borough of Kingston Council with the knowledge and agreement of St George West London Ltd.