



Planning Department
Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council
The Campus
Welwyn Garden City
Hertfordshire
AL8 6AE

11/02/2021

For the attention of: Clare Howe

Ref: Biopark, Broadwater Road, Welwyn Garden City, AL7 3AX

Thank you for consulting me for the submitted Major Application comprising the demolition of existing buildings and construction of 289 residential units (Use Class C3) and community hub (Use Class E/F.2), with public realm and open space, landscaping, access, associated car and cycle parking, refuse and recycling storage and supporting infrastructure.

This response follows a series of pre-application meetings between the applicant team and the LPA where revised proposals were tabled and discussed as part of an iterative design process. I have undertaken a review of the submitted plans, elevations and highly detailed Design and Access Statement which is clear and helpful in reviewing such a large-scale application. A number of detailed written observations have been provided during pre-application discussions and this consultation request builds upon the last response and seeks to identify whether outstanding issues from the previous comments have been appropriately addressed.

Overview

The submitted application includes a total of 289 residential units together with a community hub located at Ground Floor of Block E. Given the accessible nature of the site in relation to local bus services on Broadwater Road, the proximity of the mainline rail station and the Town Centre, I consider this site wholly appropriate for a mid-rise, higher density scheme.

Acceptability of this principle from a design perspective has been entirely predicated on the proposals showing that they i. respond to the context and defining principles of the Garden City and ii. Respect the immediate context of the site through appropriate height and massing. It is my view that given the precedent being set by the Wheat Quarter to the immediate north which promotes a higher density urban development of up to nine storeys, that the site lies immediately adjacent to the Broadwater Road West SPD area which promotes higher density development, that (provided the development responds well to the southern and eastern residential areas) development of this nature would be appropriate.

Development of taller buildings within the Garden City can indeed only be considered acceptable if they represent a truly unique, high quality and bespoke development which pushes the boundaries of architecture through a strong, contemporary reference to the original Garden City and its distinctive architecture and design features. It is my considered view that this development achieves that high bar of expected design quality and will help to set the tone for future developments coming forward within this rapidly changing area of Welwyn Garden City, presenting a positive and truly distinctive uplift in design quality for the area.

Site Layout

Generally – as per previous observations – the site layout has continued to evolve positively since the last pre-application meeting where the minutia of the proposals was discussed. I am pleased to see that additional consideration has been given to how the loading and servicing bay area would work within the development, and that a footway has been introduced along the main access route over the former location of the loading bay, with this now being brought internal to the site. Provided that the area for loading and servicing is designed to look as unintrusive within the public realm of the development (given the short period of time that it will be occupied during the day) I believe this is a positive change from the previous iteration.

Massing and Height

Considerable time and effort was spent on assessing and agreeing an appropriate height strategy for the development throughout the pre-application process. The final arrived solution represents a positive approach to height, with the tallest element at nine storeys (akin to Wheat Quarter) being located at the northern edge of the site – furthest away from the more sensitive low density residential development to the south – with the height gradually decreasing from Block A southwards. The height has deliberately been located along the western boundary closest to the railway line to reduce its impact on the existing 3-4 storey residential blocks on the opposite side of the access road, and height has generally been stepped down from west to east to help ensure this. The most sensitive part of the site, currently shown as 2/3 storey townhouses, represents an appropriate transition to the suburban form of Welwyn Garden City to the south both in terms of height and density/typology of housing.



It is recognised that through design iteration that the maximum height of the development is now less than the existing BioPark building (including flues) by 1 metre which is welcomed. As stated in previous comments, the

proposal would alter what is currently a large, monolithic block on the skyline to one which is considerably more interesting through a series of heights with regular breaks between. The use of the mansard roofs with their angled roof forms will also help to reduce the perception of bulk and height through creating more of a slim-lined approach to the tops of the buildings.

In summary, the proposals have been significantly reduced in height from a scheme which was originally considered wholly inappropriate in height to a scheme which now sits comfortably within its context, particular in light of the Wheat Quarter to the immediate north. It is also my view that whilst being taller than the stated heights within the SPD, that the development conforms with the overarching principles of the Broadwater Road SPD and presents a gradual height reduction from north to south.

Design Quality and Materials

The elevational treatment has been through a series of redesigns through the pre-application process, and it is my view that they now represent high quality and distinctive elevations. The material palette of used for the apartment block and townhouse elevations is considered to be appropriately high quality and a positive response to the traditional materials used in Welwyn Garden City. As mentioned in earlier observations, the treatment to the contemporary reflection on mansard roofs (as a dominant architectural feature in the Garden City) are also positive and well-articulated, and it remains my view that this treatment will offer something unique and represents a high level of design aspiration and intent. Following the previous pre-application meeting, I welcome the applicant taking on board discussions held pertaining to the use of terracotta tiles with a textured/riven finish were recommended as a way of 'softening' the roofs whilst also being in-keeping with the existing mansard roof materiality.

Building on my previous comments, I welcome the inclusion of an 'entrances study' within the DAS document which shows how the entrance to each block has been defined. I am still not convinced that the fairly simplistic approach to the entrances to Blocks A, B, C and D (Block E is considered appropriate given the art deco aesthetics of the block). Whilst this is not significant enough concern to warrant a recommendation of refusal on this point, I would like to see the applicant consider how the entrances could be more prominent – as I still have concern that they are not strongly evident enough in the overall building elevations.

Whilst I welcome the mansard approach to all buildings, I would like to see a variation of Block E, potentially showing how a brick frame could be created by extending the brickwork up to approximately half the height of the mansard roof, with the roof itself sitting behind the frame. It is possible that due to its lower height, that the full height mansard on Block E may appear slightly contrived, and I therefore consider that potentially increasing the brick detail slightly higher through a box frame might help alleviate this.

I am pleased to see that a rainwater goods strategy has been provided with the application as recommended.

Amenity, Landscape and Public Realm

The approach to communal and private amenity, along with the treatment of the public realm is a very strong element of this scheme. I am pleased to see that communal amenity has now increased to 27.4 sqm per unit, which is above and beyond what would be considered reasonable when combined with each unit having private amenity in excess of 5sqm (in many cases considerably more). This is a triumph of the scheme, and particular in the conditions of working from home which is likely to be a continued theme into the future, where communal and private amenity spaces will need to work harder and be greater in their extents than previously.

The approach to private amenity is strong, with a good use of private and communal terraces, full and semi recessed balconies and projecting balconies which help to add variety and rhythm to elevations and are appropriately located to deal with the prevailing conditions depending on which orientation the elevation is facing.

I welcome the provision of sedum/green roofs of all flat roof areas which are not accessible by residents, and I am pleased to see that PV panels will be screened from views from pedestrian level as a result of enhanced height parapets to the mansard roofs. This is another triumph of the landscaping strategy of the site, that there is stated to be an over 700% biodiversity net gain beyond the existing situation. Urban ecology and enhancement to biodiversity is an essential part of all brownfield redevelopment projects, helping to ensure that developments are as sustainable as possible from the outset.

Finally, I am also pleased to see that the applicant has taken on board previous recommendations for providing a Health and Wellbeing Statement for the development. All developments of this scale should show a commitment to the ongoing health and wellbeing of its residents, and through review of his Statement by an appropriately qualified officer, I trust this will be the case for this application.

In summary, it is my view that the submitted proposals represent an exciting development which will help set the tone for high quality, contemporary development not only within Welwyn Garden City, but the wider Borough. The development is strongly based in its unique surrounding context and will create a truly bespoke development form which is recognisably Welwyn Garden City. I am comfortable with the proposed massing and height strategy which has evolved through a number of design meetings and I consider that the proposals will represent a substantial visual enhancement to the current situation and this should be given appropriate weight in decision making. I have no objections to this scheme on urban design grounds and fully support the submitted proposals.

I trust the information contained in this letter is helpful. If you have any queries regarding the information stated above, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Martin Ivatt', with a horizontal line extending to the right.

Martin Ivatt
Principal Urban Designer
UDG Recognised Practitioner

Telephone: 03330320579

Email: martin.ivatt@essex.gov.uk

Place Services provide urban design advice on behalf Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council

Please note: This letter is advisory and should only be considered as the opinion formed by specialist staff in relation to this particular matter