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Design Review Report

Former Tata Steel Site, Pontardulais

DCFW Ref: 311

Meeting of 12th October 2023



Review Status

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Public

12th October 2023
26th October 2023
Residential development
Former Tata Steel Site, Pontardulais
N311
Pre-application

Key Points

- The site is well located and has considerable potential for a high-quality development.
- The proposed layout provides the basis for a permeable street network and includes good walking and cycling routes through the site.
- The Commission questions the spine street requirement and strongly recommends the local authority revisit it and take a more strategic, holistic and current approach.
- The design team must evidence its work that the LDP spine street concept on this site is undeliverable.
- The site has good permeability within it , but improvements are needed to the wider area. The local authority needs to determine how these improvements will be funded and how this scheme should contribute.
- The design team needs to develop a simpler, more distinct street hierarchy to inform the character of the different streets. A design-led approach to the street design is needed that goes beyond the current standards-based approach. This should be clearly set out and communicated with appropriate drawings and diagrams in the Design and Access Statement.
- A more compact urban form is needed to achieve a higher density of development.
- The site should accommodate a mix of uses/amenities to meet the needs of the people living there and add vitality to the neighbourhood, reflecting a place focus.
- The green spaces should create a social focus for the community. The Local Area of Play should be located centrally within the development and the large green space to the south needs further design work to create an attractive public space for the community.
- The development would benefit from a clear identity drawing in on the site's heritage.
- The design team need to establish how the development will meet the vision of creating a new neighbourhood designed for 'sustainable living'.
- The masterplan should establish a framework that shapes, guides, and controls the quality of the development. It is evident that care has been taken in the approach

to the site and it is important that this is not lost if the site is developed by third parties with other priorities.

- The developer is encouraged to take a plot-based approach to the development and enable smaller developers and local people to build the homes.

Consultations to Date

This is the first engagement with the Design Commission for this site. There has been pre-application engagement with the local planning authority. Pre-application consultation (PAC) with the wider community is due to take place shortly.

The Proposal

The proposal is for the redevelopment of a former steel works site to create a new residential extension to Pontarddulais. The proposal seeks to build up to 150 new homes and forms part of a wider extension to the northern part of town. On the linked strategic development site there is planned to be a new primary school and community facilities, as well as more new homes.

The proposed vision for the development of the site is to create a new neighbourhood designed for 'sustainable living'. The vision is based on 'discovery', 'transformation' and 'integration'.

The developers intend to obtain outline planning permission, put in key infrastructure, and sell the land for other developers to build out the houses.



Context

The site is in Pontarddulais, a town north of Swansea and Llanelli, which has a good range of facilities, including a train station, comprehensive school, leisure centre, and supermarket.

The site is a former steel works that is now vacant brownfield land and allocated in the Swansea Local Development Plan for a mixed-use development.

The site is located to the north of the town, with the high street and train station within walking distance. To the north of the site is an industrial estate, with residential to the south and east. The railway line runs along the western boundary of the site.

The site has several vacant industrial buildings, as well as an office building that is more residential in character, which are proposed to be demolished. The south of the site is at risk of flooding and has a hidden pond.

Main Points

Presentation

The design team deserve credit for the clarity of their presentation and their understanding and investigation of the design challenges and opportunities of this site and location.

Location

The site is well located, with the town centre, train station and comprehensive school within walking distance. The larger strategic development to the east will create a new primary school which, with the right connections, will be close enough for children to walk to school.

Spine Street

The site forms part of a wider Strategic Development Area in Swansea's Local Development Plan (LDP). The policy requires the delivery of a new spine street to link Glanffrwd Road and Station Road, driven by the aim of reducing environment impacts on the present route. The LDP Concept Plan for the Strategic Development Area suggests the spine street should run along the northern and western edges of the site. The design team has tested this concept and found it to be undeliverable. This testing was evident in the team's presentation.

The design team has explored alternative options for the delivery of the spine street, including running through the site and along the eastern edge of the site. The options presented would either be undeliverable or would simply move the problem elsewhere. Relying on the future redevelopment of the industrial estate to the north is unrealistic, as it appears to be successful with no indication that it requires redevelopment.

If the original route identified in the LDP is undeliverable, which needs to be evidenced, then a more strategic approach is required and this should be led by the local authority. Changing the spine street location from its existing route to an alternative one, will likely move the environmental impacts rather than reduce them overall. The spine street concept needs to be revisited and explored in greater detail in the context of all the site allocations to the north of the town, including the identified future development opportunities, as well as the recently approved extension to the Macmillan Distribution site. The local authority needs to determine whether a spine street is still necessary. If a spine street is needed,

the local authority needs to identify how best to facilitate this in the context of all the strategic housing allocations and other development between the existing town and new development.

Integration

The proposal provides a relatively strong frontage along the eastern edge of the site onto Woodville Street. Whether or not this remains as a spine street should influence whether the front building line of the new houses is brought further forward.

This part of town is characterised by streets running north from the town centre, with a lack of east to west connectivity. The proposal is based on a permeable grid network of small blocks and provides good east west connections within the site that should facilitate linkage to the new amenities to the east. There are also good walking/cycle paths along the east and west boundaries of the site.

The latest plan proposes to connect with the industrial estate to the north. Although a spine street in this location is not considered appropriate, a connection here could enable people to walk and cycle from the new houses to the industrial estate and vice versa. The design of this route needs careful consideration to make it a safe and attractive space.

Improvements outside of the red line of the site are needed to ensure people can safely and directly walk and cycle to their end destinations. Key routes will be to the town centre, supermarket, train station, bus stops, comprehensive school, and the new primary school to the east. The local authority needs to advise who is going to fund and deliver these wider improvements. The linkages from the new primary school and this site need to be incorporated in the design of the other strategic development being brought forward by Persimmon. The local authority has a key role to play in these arrangements.

Street Network

The information presented suggests there will be a street hierarchy with primary, secondary, and tertiary streets. A hierarchy of streets is important to inform the geometry of the streets, scale of buildings and character of different parts of the development. However, as proposed, there is very little difference to the characteristics of the different streets.

The proposal is based on a standard highways-led approach to street design and would benefit from a more design-led approach. The design team needs to consider the place function of each street and what characteristics would support this. Given the development is relatively small, a simpler street hierarchy would work and could remove the need for

the secondary streets. The Highways department needs to work more closely with the Planning Authority on these aspects and engage with a design-led approach with the input of the design team.

The proposal includes parking courts that have little natural surveillance. These parking courts would benefit from being reconsidered as mews streets. These mews streets could incorporate small market entry mews houses and flats. The design should incorporate EV charge points and support the future use of the car parking as public or semi-private space. Exploring precedents of mews streets would help inform the design.

We welcome the inclusion of the green link but suggest this requires a stronger frontage and sense of enclosure, with the removal of the private drive that runs alongside part of it and inclusion of more houses looking onto it. The scheme has several cul-de-sacs that would benefit from connecting with the adjoining streets.

Density

The site is allocated in the LDP Concept Plan for higher density development. Yet, the proposal is for a relatively low-density development, with the density homogeneous across the site. With good design, higher densities should be achievable for what is a relatively accessible location.

The density of development should vary across the site in response to the context, with higher densities in the more accessible parts of the development to the south, along the primary streets, focal points, and overlooking the public spaces.

A standards-led approach appears to be driving the design. Minimum distances between houses and relatively large numbers of off-street car parking are contributing to the low density of development. There is a loose urban form as a result, with cul-de-sacs and courtyard parking within blocks, large gaps between buildings and a lack of enclosure of the streets.

A more urban form of development would create a more compact neighbourhood, with higher densities and stronger street frontages. This could be achieved with enclosed blocks of walk-up flats, town houses, terraced houses, and mews houses. The site can comfortably accommodate some three storey and four storey buildings. Further consideration of scale and variation in building height and massing is encouraged. It is important to reflect this in the Design and Access Statement.

Mix of Uses

The LDP identifies the south of the site for employment and community facilities. This part of the site is at risk of flooding and the proposal is for a completely residential scheme.

Having a mix of uses is important in creating a place with activity throughout the day and for meeting people's everyday needs. Opportunities for other uses should be explored to meet the needs of the people living in the area. There is potential for ground floor units with flats above in key positions in the site, such as on the corner of High Street and Woodville Street, and for workshops and live-work units facing onto the railway line.

Public Spaces

The location of play facilities, and their relationship with the surrounding houses and streets, is important to maximising the use of these facilities and their potential to become focal points within the neighbourhood.

The latest proposal to have the Local Area of Play (LAP) on the corner of a junction of the spine street is less convincing than the earlier concept of having the LAP more centrally within the site. The original concept would connect to the proposed green link and had a stronger sense of enclosure from the surrounding buildings. This concept should be developed further to create more of a public square, which would also provide a focal point for the people living there.

The green space to the south of the site has largely been driven by constraints. However, with good design, this could provide an asset for the development and the wider area. Further consideration is needed as to what this space will be used for, the relationship with the surrounding buildings, and how the detailed design can create an attractive public space for the residents and the wider community to enjoy.

Identity

Further consideration is needed as to what the identity of this new neighbourhood will be and how the design will respond to the characteristics of the site and its surroundings. We encourage the design team to explore the site's heritage and use this to inform the design. Could the existing office building be retained and inform the design of the new houses? How can the industrial heritage be reinterpreted?

Can the site's proximity to open green space to the west and its own green spaces become a key driver for a landscape-led streetscape, with trees which will secure the identity of the key routes and public spaces.

Sustainability

Further consideration is needed as to how the development will realise the proposal's sustainability aspirations. The design should consider solar passive gain and optimisation of solar energy. A landscape-led character provides green infrastructure and ambient cooling in a warming future climate. The development should integrate car charging and consider opportunities for a car club.

Masterplan

The masterplan needs to control the quality of the development and ensure its implementation is true to the original concept and design aspirations.

The masterplan would benefit from being simplified and should seek to establish a framework that shapes and guides the development. The masterplan does not need to be prescriptive about the architecture of the buildings, the materials to be used or the elevational treatment. Instead, the masterplan needs to establish an envelope into which buildings must fit, in terms of their position, height and orientation. The masterplan would benefit from a simple design code and key diagrams. The supporting Design and Access Statement will also be important in explaining and visualising the proposals as part of the planning application to demonstrate to the local planning authority how the scheme has been developed and responded to the policy requirements.

The fact that the end developer(s) is yet to be determined is an opportunity. Rather than selling the whole site to one house builder, the site could be split into a series of plots with a set of rules for their development. The beauty of this approach is that Walters, as master developer, can set the urban form, density of development and quality of public spaces, but allow different developers freedom with the design and detailing of the buildings. This can also enable smaller and more local developers to participate, as well as provide the opportunity for local people to build their own homes and workspaces. This plot-based approach is more likely to achieve a higher quality of design and create a more varied and interesting place.

Next Steps

The Design Commission would be content to offer the opportunity for a further Design Review of the masterplan.

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A Welsh language copy of this report is available upon request.

Attendees

Client/Developer:	Meryl Lewis, Walters
Design Team:	Gill Boit, Hammond
Local Authority:	Simon Hughes, Swansea Council

DCFW Design Review Panel

Chair:	Jonathan Vernon-Smith
Panel:	Kedrick Davies Lynne Sullivan Chris Jefford Ben Sibert Carole-Anne Davies, Chief Executive, DCFW Max Hampton, Design Advisor, DCFW
Observer/s:	Carys Bate, Transport for Wales

Declarations of Interest

Panel members, observers and other relevant parties are required to declare ***in advance*** any interests they may have in relation to the Design Review and meeting Agenda items. Any such declarations are recorded here and in DCFW's central records.

There were no conflicts of interest.