

**LONDON**  
**REVIEW PANEL**

  
BexleyCo Homes

May 2022

Dear 

**London Review Panel: Walnut Tree Road, LB Bexley**

Please find enclosed the London Review Panel report following the design review of Walnut Tree Road on the 13<sup>th</sup> May 2022. I would like to thank you for your participation in the review and offer ongoing Mayor's Design Advocate support as the scheme's design develops.

Yours sincerely,

  
Mayor's Design Advocate

cc.

All meeting attendees

Jules Pipe, Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills

Philip Graham, Executive Director of Good Growth, GLA

Louise Duggan, Head of Regeneration, GLA

# LONDON REVIEW PANEL

## Report of London Review Panel meeting for Walnut Tree Road, LB Bexley

Friday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2022

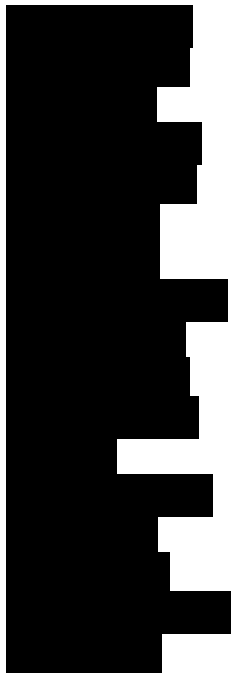
Review held remotely. A site visit took place ahead of the review.

### London Review Panel



MDA (Chair)  
MDA  
MDA  
MDA

### Attendees



BexleyCo Homes  
BexleyCo Homes  
Flanagan Lawrence  
Flanagan Lawrence  
Flanagan Lawrence  
GLA Regeneration (Panel Manager)  
GLA Regeneration  
London Borough of Bexley  
London Borough of Bexley  
London Borough of Bexley  
London Borough of Bexley  
London Borough of Bexley  
Nexus Planning  
Nexus Planning  
Nexus Planning  
Nexus Planning  
ReardonSmith Landscape

### Report copied to

Jules Pipe  
Philip Graham  
Louise Duggan

Deputy Mayor for Planning, Regeneration and Skills  
GLA Executive Director of Good Growth  
GLA Head of Regeneration

### Confidentiality and publication

Please note that while schemes not yet in the public domain, for example at a pre-application stage, will be treated as confidential, as a public organisation the GLA is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and in the case of an FOI request may be obliged to release project information submitted for review. Review reports will target publication to the London Review Panel webpage six months following the review unless otherwise agreed.

## London Review Panel's Views

### Summary

The panel commend the team on a clear and well communicated presentation that captured the good work undertaken to date. The panel recognise the viability challenges of this project and would encourage the team to develop the quality of the project in details that can be locked in at this stage and be delivered within the cost limitations. The panel agree this is an important site that is trying to deliver several objectives including civic, commercial, sense of arrival and gateway aspirations for Erith. The panel are supportive of the site layout and massing strategies however there are a few areas where these can be improved.

The panel advise the team to develop a clear sustainability strategy that includes an approach to biodiversity and drainage. The panel would encourage the team to develop the design quality of the public realm proposals, the public square, and the private and shared residential amenity. The key views between the public square and the Old Carnegie Library as well as the routes through the site need to be strengthened to encourage public access and activity. The western side of the proposal is dealing with a very hostile, noisy, and polluted environment and the design solutions for amenity and residential uses should be developed to address this. The residential layouts need to be reviewed to ensure they work for the residents living in them, considering the flat layouts, internal corridors, access to bins and bikes, number of doors required to move through and security lines.

### Site strategies, massing, and relationship to wider context

#### *Scale and massing*

- The panel agree the proposed scale is working quite well, with the massing a comfortable and appropriate arrangement for the context. This is supported in the CGI, model and birds eye views presented.

#### *Site layout*

- The panel agree the overall site layout works well and is contributing to shaping the local scale masterplan positively.
- The building footprint creates a cranked block, and this is providing good entrance spaces that blur the boundary between public and private by creating a sheltered lobby space.
- The granularity of the ground floor layout is context specific with the commercial unit being well located to support the pedestrian traffic generated by the subway to the train station.

#### *Framing the view of The Exchange at the Old Carnegie Library*

- The panel agree it is important to frame The Exchange at the Old Carnegie Library from the public square. This provides a powerful gateway view and wayfinding tool to Erith town centre from Erith Train Station. The team are advised to ensure that this view is protected in the design development to ensure it continues to function as a key part of the experience of moving through the space. The current designs are starting to obscure the view of the library from the subway entrance and the team should seek to strengthen this view where possible.

### *Car parking and traffic movement*

- The panel understand there are arguments both for minimising car parking spaces or providing spaces to help the viability and attractiveness of the sale of flats.
- The panel believe the current overlapping routes between pedestrians accessing the station subway entrance and cars accessing the parking spaces could be problematic. The team need to develop a safe spatial strategy to avoid having to rely on a compromised management strategy.

## **Public realm, landscape, and amenity spaces**

### *Improving biodiversity*

- The panel agree this site has an issue with biodiversity and needs to do everything it can do to improve its natural condition.
- The team are strongly encouraged to improve and contribute to biodiversity in their designs by avoiding hardscape and maximising softscape to ensure there is more planting than paving.
- The panel advise the team to avoid concrete walls and planters in the landscape and maximise opportunities for tree planting.
- The panel agree there are opportunities the team can utilise to connect to the ecological strategies at the River Thames and nearby Riverside Gardens currently being developed.

### *Sustainable drainage strategy*

- The panel agree there is a fundamental need for sustainable drainage strategies to shape the design of the space as the site is in the flood plain of the river.
- The panel encourage the team to use the opportunities offered in the public realm and shared amenity spaces at ground, podium, and roof level to develop strategies dealing with water run-off.

### *A shared public square with the London South East Colleges: Bexley*

- The panel agree a shared public square between this proposal and the college is an important public realm and placemaking element that will support the vitality of this area. It is also a key gateway to celebrate the arrival from the station into Erith town centre and this needs to be captured with an ambitious civic approach to the designs.
- The panel agree the current proposals need a stronger strategy for this public square to ensure it reads a one place, and a square in and of itself. Current proposals do not clearly set out the joined-up approach with the college needed to achieve this, with the space feeling more of a passageway than a square. While not designed primarily as a place to gather, the square should encourage activity from students and residents.

### *Closing the existing pathway adjacent to Bronze Age Way*

- The panel agree redirecting the existing pathway to move pedestrians from the station subway entrance through the new public square makes a lot of sense, although note that it does appear well used

- The panel advise the team that leaving the existing pathway as a void between two retaining walls should not be used merely for a sterile fire escape route and the space needs to work much harder.
- The panel advise the team that such a large space needs to have a purpose such as contributing to the ecology and sustainable drainage strategies. This could be in the form of a swale with gabion walls where plants can grow with a metal mesh pathway still allowing for fire escape access as needed.
- The panel would encourage the team to develop a vision for the berm, acknowledging that while this is a challenging context, it can and should contribute to the improvement of quality of this place for residents, the public and nature.

#### *External amenity space adjacent to Bronze Age Way*

- The panel commend the team on developing the proposals using sections which are helpful to understand the complex levels and structures involved along the boundary with Bronze Age Way.
- The panel agree the external amenity space at ground floor level is interesting but not large enough for a communal gathering place.
- The panel suggest this sunken amenity space also needs more of a defined programme such as a small informal playground.

#### *External amenity space wedge overlooking new public square*

- The panel suggest that this amenity space is currently not convincing as a shared amenity as it is not large enough for communal gathering.
- The panel question whether anyone would use this space as it is exposed with lots of passing pedestrian traffic.
- The panel agree that the wedge of amenity space could work in terms of access for the affordable block, but it would be a complicated route for residents in the private block to use. As such the panel suggest one option could be to give more of the space to those flats with living rooms and bedrooms facing onto it.
- The panel advise the team that to make this work as a communal amenity space it should have a specific use to make people want to use it such as a seating area.
- Alternatively, the panel suggest the space could be given over to nature, planted for visual amenity but inaccessible. Loading would need to be considered to inform the planting proposed and this may have implications on the overall quantum of amenity space proposed

#### *Shared roof top amenity*

- The panel agree that the roof top shared amenity spaces is a huge opportunity for this project to provide quality external amenity for residents.
- Rooftop amenity would maximise views towards the Thames and provide well-lit external spaces away from the noise and pollution of the busy roads and therefore improve the attractiveness for sale.
- The panel suggest rooftop amenity should provide decent parapet heights to ensure wind and noise shelter for residents.
- The panel suggest there are also opportunities for more common external spaces at each level around the cores.

### *Public Realm Vision for Walnut Tree Road*

- The panel agree this project should set out the wider ambition for what Walnut Tree Road will be and there is a real potential with this project to improve the sense of place and site quality.
- The panel suggest this could include proposals for Walnut Tree Road to become a tree lined space with a pedestrian atmosphere. It can then act as a positive entrance to this town centre area of Erith beyond the development red line.

### **Quality of residential accommodation**

#### *Site layout implications on residential quality*

- While the panel think that the site layout strategies make many positive moves, this approach comes at the expense of the quality for the residential accommodation.
- The panel appreciate the desire for the view to the old library to be captured from the subway gateway. However, this has resulted in a less generous relationship for the south and west residential elevations of the building and their proximity to the hostile context.
- The massing and ground floor layouts have been the main design driver while the residential layouts are a lot less site specific and resolved.
- The panel recommend the team focus on the resident-led experience when developing the next level of layout detail. It is important that the layouts work for those living inside this building to ensure that quality homes can be delivered in this hostile context next to the busy road.

#### *Elevations to the roundabout*

- The panel agree that the elevation of the proposed building to the south of the site and overlooking the highway roundabout is a challenging and prominent context to situate external amenity for residential accommodation. The panel could not think of a good precedent where this has been successful.
- The panel would encourage the team to develop design strategies that avoid exposed balconies facing directly onto the noisy and polluted highway roundabout.
- The panel suggest design solutions could include for more solid elements facing the roundabout such as a hit and miss brick screen, with views to either side rather than facing onto the roundabout.
- The panel agree that there is an opportunity to celebrate what will become a prominent corner. The current balcony-led elevation strategy currently dilutes this elevation which needs to architecturally hold this corner.

#### *Ground floor units*

- The panel would advise the team to develop a user led approach to design the residential accommodation on the ground floor. This is even more important where residential units face onto the busy Bronze Age Way.
- At ground floor (and the floors at closest proximity to the level of the highway) the team need to understand what it feels to look onto and live by a busy road and what design implications or solutions this would inform. These might include avoiding full height windows where they are most observed to avoid curtains/blinds being drawn constantly.

- The panel advise the team to develop a design strategy to ensure quality accommodation for those units where the berm vegetation will shelter from the road but also block their aspect.

#### *Internal residential and communal layouts*

- The panel strongly recommend the team avoid single aspect flats and long artificially lit corridors currently being proposed in the block layouts.
- The panel would encourage the team to develop the residential layouts from the perspective of residents to ensure quality, well used spaces.
- The panel are concerned that the single aspect flats and internal communal corridors could in hot summer months risk overheating. The risk of overheating is exacerbated due to no overshadowing along the south and west elevations.
- The panel encourage the team to develop their flat and internal communal layouts to avoid the risks of overheating.
- The panel noted that the affordable flat layouts seemed more resolved than the private. The top flat in the private block looked like left over space and would not provide quality living accommodation.
- The panel note there is a lot of reliance on single aspect flats and advise the layouts to be developed to allow for meaningful dual aspect units. These would allow for cross ventilation and different aspects for views and sun paths.
- The panel note that in the Housing Design Standards LPG definition for dual aspect the provision of bay windows, stepped frontage, shallow recesses, or projecting facades does not constitute dual aspect.
- Note that the Approved Document O requirements for cross ventilation to prevent overheating has an even more explicit definition for the kind of window arrangements needed for flats. The team are advised to review these documents as part of the layout development.

#### *Noise and pollution*

- The panel note that noise and pollution levels are high in this location, and it will be important for the design team to understand how comfortable it would be to live in the flats when they are designing layouts, acoustic and ventilation strategies.
- The panel suggest the team consider appropriate additional strategies to ensure acoustic comfort and air quality.

#### *Private residential amenity*

- The panel agree all new homes should have external private amenity, but this should be designed to consider the significant challenges in this location which is noisy and polluted. The panel acknowledge that external balconies onto Bronze Age Way are unlikely to be used as amenity.
- The panel suggest winter gardens could be explored for the most exposed flats to provide an in-between space for residents. Winter gardens can help with acoustics, mediating between the quiet interior and noisy exteriors whilst giving control to residents to have a space that feels like an external space when needed.

#### *Quality of life improvements that can make this scheme a success*

- The panel agree that there are opportunities for bathrooms on the external wall to have a window to allow light and purge vent. These are rarely provided in modern home construction in London and could add to the saleability of these.
- The panel advise the team to include windows in the stair cores where it meets the external walls to encourage people to use these spaces and improve the quality of the communal spaces through views and natural light.
- The panel encourage the team to explore how to maximise views to the River Thames from new homes where possible. This could include articulating the windows to frame views more clearly to the river. This would again add value to the scheme and make these homes more desirable.
- The panel suggest the team consider how ease of access to get to and use the refuse and bike storage can be improved to ensure they contribute to the liveability and quality of the resident experience living here.

### **Materiality and design detailing**

#### *Circular economy approach of building fabric*

The panel strongly encourage the team to develop the material palette with a view to circular economy principles. The team's approach to building fabric should ensure that materials are locally sourced where possible, designed to minimise waste, and have a strategy for the future of the materials beyond the current expectations of the projects use and lifespan (see London Plan figure 3.2 Circular economy hierarchy for building principles).

#### *Elevation designs*

- The panel agree that the move from a lighter buff brick to red tone brick is the right direction and the broader material palette is suitable for this context.
- The panel note the elevations are currently very controlled and caution the team against this limiting the development of quality internal layouts.
- The panel suggest the team set out more clearly their narrative to developing these elevations. This should translate how the references to context have been interpreted in the design development story.

#### *Robust detailing and moments of celebration*

- As the design develops into more detailed stages and is cost reviewed to ensure continuing viability, there is a risk that current design details are diluted.
- The panel encourage the team to design a scheme that can be built for the budget. This includes ensure the detailing is robust and locking in key details that need to be delivered to ensure the design vision is achieved.
- The panel advise the team to focus key moments in the detailing to celebrate the entrances to the buildings, locking in the quality and costs to achieve this where it makes the most impact.

### **Next Steps**

The panel would welcome the opportunity to further comment on this ambitious and challenging scheme at a future appropriate stage in the project development.