

Derbyshire Landscape and Placemaking

Independent Landscape and Urban Design Advisors

email: contact@derbyshirelandandplace.com

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Development of 75 new dwellings, new access, provision of green infrastructure and all associated works

Land at, Ash Bank Road, Werrington, Staffordshire

Urban Design Comments based on the Illustrative masterplan SKM-189-PL-01 Layout Rev V.
Amended 02.11.21. Site Visit 13.01.22.

The main layout is well conceived and relates well to the existing settlement and the topography of the site. The housing set back and retention of a green area at the front keeps the sense of a gap in the built development and openness, albeit with a loss of views to the wider countryside from the main road passing through Werrington. The neighbouring site is a Young Offenders Institute, and it is difficult to relate to these institutional buildings and harsh boundary treatments. However, there has been an attempt to align buildings and screen and improve views from the main road. The layout of the houses screen views of the Young Offenders Institute car park and buildings from the main road which gives townscape improvements to Werrington.

The proposed housing is split into two areas of site. One large site including two fields to the west of the frontage buildings of the Young Offenders Institute and one comprising a smaller green area to the east in front of the main buildings and small frontage buildings in front of the Institute.

The larger site proposal for 71 houses is irregular shaped and extends over 2 fields to the south of the A52 Ash Bank Road with an upper and lower field. The site slopes from north to south by approx. 14m with a mature hedgerow in between. The upper field is bordered by the Young Offenders Institute to the east with an existing field gate off the access road to the main buildings. A line of houses facing the A52 lie immediately to the west of the upper field. The lower field is also bordered by the Young Offenders Institute, but also wraps between the housing along the A52 to the north and between houses at Salters Close to the East and south. The main southern boundary is bounded by fields to the south. There are mature hedgerows in between the two fields and along part of the wester boundary of the upper field. Mature hedgerows along the southern boundary between the site and open countryside, and a good mature screen of hedgerows and hedgerow trees to the eastern boundary in the lower field. The trees around the entrance area and in front of the Young Offenders Institute provide a distinct group of mature trees. However, the main boundary to the upper field comprises a line of mature Cupressus which does not match the landscape character but gives a strong screen. At the rear of the housing areas next to the fields are a variety of fencings styles and planting. There is one mature oak tree that lies in a raised section of the south-eastern corner of the upper field. This has the appearance of a focal tree and appears old and cracked with a significant break in the trunk, it still has presence as a notable tree.

The proposed housing layout responds to the boundaries and topography with a long primary estate road leading from the northeastern corner to the southwestern corner, with a secondary road extending westwards between the two existing housing areas, and a smaller secondary road leading off to the east from the main road towards the lower part of the first field. All the roads end in a hammerhead arrangement. There are shared driveways off the small secondary road and from the hammerhead at the most southerly part of the site. Beyond this last hammerhead lies an area for SUDS drainage.

The public open space within the site is provided at the front along the A52 and along the dividing hedgerow between the two fields. A 30m strip is left for the Suds pond area at the bottom of the site beyond the housing. At the western corner of the site, a pedestrian/cycleway link enters the site from the A52 and a small rectangle of land is proposed at this point. On balance the green areas are well distributed throughout the layout.

Whilst I think the plan is responsive to the site, there are a few issues that may need further review. The access road is shared with the access to the Young Offenders Institute. As such I saw on site that there are three mature trees that may be lost that do not appear to be shown on the layout plan as existing trees. The landscape and visual assessment in Paragraph 5.16 acknowledges that 'the proposed access point into the western parcel will result in the loss of a small group of trees, however, this will be offset by a net gain in tree planting within the proposed landscape buffer alongside the A52 highway, which will mature to establish an enhanced verdant setting along Ash Bank Road, as well as providing an accessible green space'. I understand that this is a potential solution to the tree loss, but the assessment needs to outline the value of these trees in terms of their value to the wider group around the institute buildings. There does seem to be a communal value to this mature group and townscape presence. Apart from the loss of trees, I have no objection to the access, although from an urban design viewpoint it needs to be more legible as an entrance to a housing estate.

The area of the first secondary road in the eastern corner of the first field appears slightly tucked away and tight, especially plots number 14, 15 and 16, although I recognise these will have extensive views from the rear from their elevated position. These houses otherwise have a poor relationship to the pattern of development. Apartments 17-22 have a better relationship to the public space and the other housing. Beyond this area of housing, the secondary road changes to a shared surface road sweeping around the large Oak tree which appears to be an awkward transition on plan. The sudden change of direction and curve into the corner of the hammerhead potentially leads to poor details on site. This area may need further exploration as to levels and retaining around the tree. The platform for 21-22 and its side footpath comes close to the rootzone and is elevated. This may spoil views of the tree if the intention is to make it a focal tree.

Next to Plot 56 the driveway is close to the rear garden boundary of the existing houses. It may be possible to turn one of the houses to align with No 55 and leave one house with a dual frontage on the end facing open countryside. The BCP along the private driveways also looks standalone and be less so if found closer to the hammerhead, depending on standards for truck collections.

Looking at recent amendments I can see that the two groups of three houses at Plots 38 -43 have been switched to a more semi-detached typology. The variation to terraces of three would have been preferred at this point to give more variety in the scheme and more townscape quality when seen from the main road. I would also suggest that where the backs of these houses are visible from the main road, they should be of a quality to reflect the frontages so that they add to the streetscape even though they are set back. This can be done by more detail in the brickwork and reduction in pipework.

The two breaks for roads in the hedgerow between the upper field and the lower field will reduce the presence of this hedgerow. Although it still in part shown on the layout plan, the landscape masterplan shows only three clumps to be kept. This is presently a main feature of the site and will be significantly reduced.

Generally, I think the layout works well. Regarding the house types I have the following comments:

House types:

The Hollingwood. Shallow arched and casement windows are cottage style windows with lower and mid string courses. The windows are deeper than the Bourne, so the lower windows are larger than the upper windows. This reduction in window size works well. The deep porches also enhance the elevations.

The Blackthorne Apartments. The frontage appears unbalanced with a slightly offset symmetry to the principal windows that looks accidental between the two symmetrical front doors. I would suggest that the door to the upper flat has a porch over it which would reduce the blank space above and give a little more legibility and articulation to the elevation.

The Bourne (Sigma). The porch on this frontage cuts across the string line and is close to the corner of the upper window. I prefer a flat canopy on this. Rendering only the upper half seems top heavy due to the relatively tall gable frontage and in this case I would retain all brick frontages on this housestyle.

The Bourne appears to have larger windows at the upper part than the lower, appearing slightly unbalanced. Similarly, I think the flat canopy rather than a pitched canopy works with this elevation. These elevations will work with full brick or half render.

The Southwick is relatively proportional and a more substantial detached house. Plots 56 and 57 show two together with a hipped roof with the floor plans. This is not shown in the detail sheet and may not work with the floor plans. The layouts show that these are 4-bedroom houses with 2 car spaces and this may not meet standards. Plot 32 seems to have a large side verge and it is not clear if this is within the private or public domain as it seems to extend into the public open space. It appears there is more hedgerow removal here also due to the water easement.

In general, the variety of house types is satisfactory for this scheme. I do think there is an opportunity to have more distinctive character areas which can be reflected in the use of terraces along Plots 38 to 43, with more detailing of brickwork on the back elevations to reflect the quality of frontages as these elevations are seen from the main road. Another area where a stronger character can be achieved is at the countryside edge where it may be possible to have more of The Bourne (Sigma) in place of the Arun at Plots 74 and 75.

Looking at the material plan, the choice of bricks Fonterra Clumber Red and Clumber Red Mix are acceptable, and also the choice of Russell Lothian grey slate and Cottage red roof tiles. The location of the houses to be render do not appear to be shown on the plan. I would limit the use of render within the scheme to occasional buildings and away from the open countryside edge.

The materials for all the roads are tarmac/bitumen finishes and in this respect I am not sure the hierarchy will be distinguishable with the width of the primary road and secondary road carriageways appearing similar. A change of surface to the private drives would soften the appearance of the scheme.

The area to the east of the frontage buildings where 4 houses are proposed does have a backdrop of the main buildings of the Young Offenders Institute which is not very attractive. However, the line of houses will be screening views from the main road of these buildings and therefore reinforce the streetscape along the main road. I do think the gap in the houses for the easement and the proposed car park are an uncomfortable arrangement. The car park on the opposite side of the tree and boundary planting is not very legible as an arrangement. I do not consider this is the best place for the car park as it spoils the current frontage. The block paving will soften the appearance but there is little room for any meaningful landscape between the carpark and boundary wall. The barnlike red brick frontage buildings adjacent have a simple form and the greenery around it enhances the setting to the Institute. Turning this area into parking will be clearly visible from the main road and will spoil the setting of this building. Whilst I appreciate it is difficult to have parking for these houses in front of the houses, I am wary that the resulting layout will be a poor quality of design. There is ready a fragmented appearance to the main road at this point.

I am also aware that the ecological zone is very disconnected from the wider countryside and also part of the setting of the main institute, I welcome this being turned into an ecological zone but wonder how this will work in practise in terms of use as it is not easy to find the access.

My only suggestion is to open up a pedestrian gateway in the wall leading to the houses from the main road at the point of the gap between the houses, this would add a more legible and purposeful entrance, with a footpath in between the houses to the ecological area. Although this is for ecological balance only it provides a more connected and responsive layout and access can still be controlled.

Conclusion:

I see the layout on balance provides townscape improvements to Werrington. There are areas for improvement in the design that will strengthen the quality of the scheme. These mainly relate to retention of existing landscape character of mature hedgerows and trees where possible, changes to housing typologies, and refinement of some of the house types. More thought needs to be given to the area around the mature Oak focal tree to ensure the transition to private drive is more legible.