

Derbyshire Landscape and Placemaking

Independent Landscape and Urban Design Advisors

email:

Reserve Matters App: SMD210210536

'Reserved matters application for approval of appearance, landscaping, layout, and scale to provide: 157 residential dwellings (Class C3) providing a mix of two, three and four bedroom houses, and two bedroom apartments; 6 x live / work units (Sui Generis); 1 x public house / restaurant / café (Sui Generis / Class E(b)); a marina / basin and associated boating facilities with 13 berths; associated works including internal road network, associated highway works, drainage infrastructure, landscaping, open space, play area, pedestrian, and cyclist links; land reserved for future railway station with associated heritage / railway activities building/s and car parking; and land reserved for future link road including associated landscaping. The application is submitted pursuant to outline planning permission SMD/2014/0750A site location plan identifying the area which the reserved matters application relates to is provided at Appendix I and a list of the application drawings is provided at Appendix II.'

Land at Barnfield Industrial Estate, Sunnyhills Road, Leek, Staffordshire, ST13 5RJ

Urban Design Comments based on the Illustrative masterplan.

A primary concern is the concept of the layout. The scheme differs significantly from the outline application in that the housing is much more inward looking. The frontages to Sunnyhills Road are dominated by stretches of brick and stone walls facing the highway, apart from a group of houses around the main junction and on either side of Barnfield Road between the east and western area of housing. From one point of view this provides the most privacy and protection for the gardens of the houses from the road which is dominated by industrial traffic and will be used more frequently once the link road is implemented and widened with more traffic from other areas. However, the character of this road previously envisioned was of a widened boulevard with a strip of green between the main carriageway and frontage estate road. With a separate frontage road, the building frontages are set back further from the road and the gardens at the rear would be more shielded from the noise. The present landscape verge is dense, however, there is opportunity to create visual gaps which means more housing frontage would give a much more meaningful public image to a new housing area. The architecture of the factory opposite and its landscaped boundaries are of a high quality and would not dominate any new housing.

Another benefit to having a secondary frontage service road would be to have an enhanced walkability and cycle route along the frontage, with the character of a 'parkway' along this stretch of road.

Another key factor in the initial outline plan was the connectivity of Sunnyhills Road with Newcastle Road which is the nearest residential area and a key route to school. The main entrance was to be located closer to Sunnyhills Road and this would help encourage residential traffic in this direction. It also leads to the nearest bus stops into town. The access road to Ladderedge Country Park and car park at the western edge of the site is bordered by industry on one side and part of the site on the other with a WST station on the corner. The current masterplan shows the back fences of housing facing this road. I agree overlooking the sewerage treatment station with hard flat concrete standing is an unattractive outlook for houses, however, the boundary of a 2m high acoustic fence and a hard wall at the back of houses is a poor sense of arrival when approaching the development. I think a softer landscape boundary would be preferable and a more distinctive building as an introduction to the site when approaching from the west along Sunnyhills Road. The small green space seems left

over on the southwestern corner due to the easement servicing the treatment plant and existing vegetation, it appears disconnected from anywhere else in the masterplan and there is no attempt to create a walkway across the green space along the south side of Plot 38 through to internal streets which would improve connectivity.

I agree that the orientation of houses 39 to 43 will improve the character of the entrance to Ladderedge Country Park and the interface between the site and the Country Park. The houses here will also improve overlooking and security of people moving into and out of the park. However, I do think again an opportunity has been lost to integrate the pond area into the housing area by providing of a walkway or enhanced nature scheme. The provision of straight 2m footpath to the carriageway does help with connectivity with the housing areas, the pond and the country park but the edge is hard and straight and could be softer.

The orientation of Plots 44 -57 all look inward and turn their backs on the country park. The landscape edge here is quite dense so it would seem that houses would not benefit from views into the countryside. However, frontages in this direction would give a softer countryside edge and reduce the risk of garden paraphernalia and unsightly rear fences being the introduction to Leek. The opportunity to create a new built-up countryside edge is a lost opportunity especially in terms of visitor attraction. There is some significant level changes and banking at the rear of these properties and there may be an opportunity to make steps down to the public footpath into the country park linking to the existing footpaths before they meet the aqueduct and new marina basin.

I suggest exploring mirroring the scheme so that the main access road runs parallel to Sunnyhills road with streets running perpendicular to it towards the countryside edge. This would allow for views to run along the streets to the county park and hillside beyond with more residents getting the benefit of views, and more opportunity for accessibility. Presently the longest access road runs past the marina and the amount of traffic passing by will dominate the space even though it is designated as a home zone. I also think the parking spaces and road are a poor transition from the marina to the residences beyond and would not encourage pedestrian priority or create a characterful public realm. I understand that this could be dealt with by surface treatments however, the amount of space left for public realm fronting the marina is poor when there is a much greater opportunity for the building edges to characterise the space. The transition and walkways from the marina to the country park is unclear. I can see the space requirements for the marina has been provided, but wonder is this is tight and needs exploring more to see if it is fit for future purpose. I consider the use of a high security fence is unwelcoming and perhaps against the idea of public realm and opening up to the country park. This needs to be thought out differently and I suggest references to other parts of the canal can hint at the creation of character at this terminus.

The linear park and link between the marina and station seems contemporary but at odds to the layout. There has been no attempt to integrate the very straight existing public footpath into the housing scheme on the planning layout and this could be blended with the public space to be more attractive. The presence of the scrapyard is unfortunate, and an acoustic green wall alongside the scrap yard could be an attractive feature. The fronting of houses onto this space is welcome.

The plot for the restaurant and café is very unimaginative with little attempt to give outside characterful spaces. Only a designated rectangular plot on the illustrative site layout. The road and parking areas in front of the cafe and to the rear of Plots 148 – 154 seem to have a poor delineation and no attempt to create a verge. Just a wall to separate the two which will create poor vistas and poor circulation with the last two car parks potentially being blocked in. The rear of 148 -154 will be a particularly unattractive with parking area surrounded by walls and close boarded fencing and little opportunity for surveillance.

On the eastern side, I agree that Barnfield Road is characterised by housing frontages and I like the row of terraced housing facing the station. It would be good to see a potential concept plan for the station area to see how this could fit with the housing development. There is a great opportunity to see the round turning head to Barnfield Road as a focal axis of the public realm connecting the

scheme. If there is a way to secure improvements to this as part of the future plan for the area then I would recommend a schematic design could be perhaps illustrated into the current layout.

The scrap yard is unfortunate as it was very loud as I was walking along the public footpath. The use of water to disguise the noise may be used additionally to tree planting and green acoustic walls. Other areas of land between the housing scheme and the River Churnet should be treated as part of the project and enhanced biodiversity wise. The natural landscape treatment should run into other areas of the scheme and around parts of the canal basin. Presently the layout presents few opportunities internally for a truly connected green infrastructure that connects habitats and provides quality amenity space. These needs improving with more information on the use of Suds (Sustainable Urban Drainage) throughout the scheme. The use of bioswales and rain capture should be considered as a way of dealing with runoff.

Other sustainable credentials need to be considered such as solar roofs, electric charging points, green roofs, and bicycle parking areas. The café presents a terrific opportunity for a cyclist hub and breakaway café to the countryside. There is little reference to feasible renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies within the scheme. The scheme needs to make provision for sustainable management of the ecological landscape and use of surface water.

I am unsure about the live/work units' location and think these houses should be purely residential along Barnfield road with the live work units located nearer to the station and the café to add more focus and intensity to the space creating a hub of activity. Overall, there could also be more live/work Units in light of the recent changes in the workplace since the pandemic and these could be more scattered throughout the scheme and maybe a few concentrated around the green space and the industry towards the eastern end of the scheme to form a transition.

Overall, I do not read that there are different character areas to the housing throughout the scheme with the layout and the housing typologies looking much the same and regular. More perimeter blocks or small walkway connections would give opportunity to create greater variety and distinction between house types. The reliance of turnround houses at corners does not provide the focal points required. More distinction is required between different areas of the scheme.

The house types and buildings all present as relatively bland and suburban to me and could be located anywhere. The site is capable of accommodating both contemporary and traditional forms of development that are high quality and functional. Larger windows and more use of balconies, setbacks and referencing is required. The outline suggested referencing to the Moorland area of Leek where high quality housing exists in treelined street. This certainly could be referenced in part of the scheme. However, I would also look at the character of buildings along the Caldon Canal and see if this old industrial architecture could lead to more contemporary interpretations to present a new reinvented sense of arrival of the canal into Leek.

As Cornhill is located in the northern part of the Churnet Valley, it occupies an important site on the edge of Leek at the head of the Caldon Canal and Leek - Stoke railway line. It has potential to act as a significant gateway into the Churnet Valley. Significant gateway buildings are required.

Lastly, I would say that the scheme needs considerable rethinking throughout rather than a few changes to the present layout. The plan fundamentally is internalised, and the housing is laid out to increase sizes of houses whilst reducing the mix. Whilst I appreciate the economics of this it does not give the wider public benefits and expectations that this scheme is required to deliver. I would suggest revisiting the concept.

The canal basin is key to the character of the scheme, and I would suggest the influence in style of the marine architecture extends beyond the houses fronting onto it. This is the point at which the gateway and arrival is enhanced and a new edge to Leek provides benefits to the whole town. In the event of the basin not being deliverable, I would favour the development of a low key landscaped public space. This could be interesting in itself if well designed. It should however open up access

and views to the country park and could include the use of water as a shallow pool to develop an interesting POS in place of canal.

A few minor details:

The parking area between plots 30 and 31 is a poor termination to the vista of the road.

The driveway at Plot 28 is an awkward angle over the corner of the hammerhead.

The tandem parking parallel to the footpath on Plot 44 will be unattractive and confusing.

The car park between Plots 17, 18 and 19,20 is a poor ending to the road. This pattern of parking lots at the end of the streets facing Sunnyhills Road is repeated along the main frontage of the scheme. This is a consequence of the increased floorspace throughout the residential areas that results in more parking and less green space. The two rectangular pieces of greens space at the far west and the far east both appear as left-over spaces and not very well integrated with little obvious use.

The change in mix leans towards more expensive larger properties with an increase in number of 4 bedroom properties, and I see no reference to affordable housing within the scheme. From an urban design perspective inclusiveness and a good mix of properties leads to more interesting and diverse places. The increase in residential floor space from 148,818ft² to 176,220ft² equates to 27,402ft² (2545m²) which is a substantial increase in residential floorspace, and indicates a higher density development with less public open space.

There is a need for a mixed use diverse scheme, quality office space and housing for young people in particular. This has all the potential for a community hub which offers a different quality and character of space from other areas of the town yet builds upon the unique setting to the countryside edge, the River Churnet, Caldon Canal and country park. The opportunity to enhance tourist and visitor attraction to Leek is in a truly comprehensively mixed scheme. Presently, I do not think the benchmark of design quality has been met.

The Listed Grade II Wall Grange Farmhouse with stone farm house and barns dominates views on the hillside to the south of the site. The farm has a dominant backdrop to views of the housing. It may well be worth considering the farms relationship to the site as a listed building and how the development will have an impact on its setting. Whilst this is not a great concern as the industry would have a greater impact it maybe that a traditional reference might be relevant. The bridge to Wall Grange farm further along the canal is listed and I wonder if there is any historical connection between the farm and the canal.

The Listed Grade II, Caldon Canal Barnfields Canal Aqueduct 1801 by John Rennie is an arched structure curved which formerly carried the Caldon canal over the River Churnet into the Leek canal basin. Presumably, any heritage considerations will need to be sensitively dealt with regarding the aqueduct and any works will need listed building consent.

I find the relationship of the River Churnet, Leek branch of Caldon Canal, the canal feeder and Nature Reserve, and the tow path along east side of canal, a facinating area that with sensitive treatment would have significant benefits to Leek in terms of access to the countryside and tourism potential. This with the terminus of the Churnet Valley railway demands a comprehensive masterplan that shows more detail of public realm.

I see the delivery of the canal basin as essential to the scheme as there is little justification to have housing in this area without the wider public benefits of the new station and canal basin which bring more life into the area. There is a danger of delivering a housing area where residents feel isolated and surrounded by industry otherwise.