

Our Ref: SJS/7472/ml

22nd July 2015

Mrs Felicity Byrne
Principal Planner
City Development
Oxford City Council
St Aldate's Chambers
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Dear Felicity

Re: Fairfield Residential Home, Banbury Road, Oxford
Application Reference: 15/01104/FUL

I refer to the above mentioned planning application and write further to the letter to you from the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) dated 14th July 2015 and our subsequent exchange of emails, which culminate in your email of today's date, and for which thank you.

I was pleased to note in your email dated 14th July that you did not think that the ODRP's latest comments would alter your recommendation to approve this application and the parallel application from University College. This helpful comment notwithstanding, we still wish to respond to the ODRP letter. That response is set out below and for ease of reference each response is preceded by the relevant paragraph in the ODRP letter.

We continue to support the aim of the applicant to work collaboratively with the adjacent site by using their collective assets and shared vision to create an excellent place for elderly people and post-graduate students to live within shared grounds. Given the immediate site context, the height and quantum of accommodation for the proposed Fairfield Residential Home is acceptable. Designing for a back land site however presents challenges which have not yet been met. We think that the current site layout and architectural response is neither ambitious nor sensitive enough for this unique site. We are therefore unable to support the scheme in its current form and recommend that substantial work, perhaps with the support of other architects, is needed to overcome weaknesses in the current proposal.

This paragraph indicates that the ODRP found the "height and quantum" i.e. the mass of the proposed building to be acceptable in "the immediate site context". As the ODRP acknowledges, the building will be located in "a back land location", the nature of which is such that it is the "immediate site context" that is important and

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that needs to be properly assessed, which is what the project team has done both in terms of the design of the building and the design of the "immediate" landscape within which the building will sit.

Every site is "unique", and this site is no different: it has a unique character shaped by its history and the changing nature of the boundaries over time, which the proposed building responds to in a positive manner.

There is no justification for what is meant by 'ambitious' or 'sensitive' in the context of the ODRP letter. We are of the view that the proposals are ambitious in terms of accommodation; the relationships between internal and external spaces and their use by residents; and that in utilising positively the existing landscape and external areas in the design with existing boundaries, the scheme is sensitive to its location.

The attempts to embrace the garden landscape in the site layout are to be commended. The herb garden offers a space for inter-generational contact and provides a rich living experience for residents, and a successful sequence of spaces, routes and uses has been established between Fairfield Residential Home and University College. Continuing to develop the walking routes across the site will help to engage the users in the open space. A lighting strategy is needed to ensure the safety of residents and visitors after dark, as well as their pleasurable use of the grounds. Whilst there has been some thought on the collective food production and shared use of the garden, developing more meaningful opportunities in the landscape design and daily use operations will allow residents to enjoy the garden to a greater extent.

The proposed access, movement and legibility of spaces and routes within the site, bringing together both the University College and Fairfield schemes, as a coherent whole, is commended by the ODRP, which we welcome.

The Landscape Strategy submitted as part of the application clearly defines the special qualities of the site and how the landscape concept and vision has responded to this, working with those special qualities to sensitively assimilate new built form within its landscape setting and create new, high quality spaces for residents and visitors.

Food production and the productivity of the landscape underpin the landscape concept as set out in the Landscape Strategy, and planting has been specifically chosen for its food and sensory qualities. The use and function of the landscape will, of course, evolve and grow as the residents take ownership of their grounds but the building blocks of opportunity have been laid – through interconnectivity of natural and built form, species selection and provision of meaningful routes – allowing residents to explore and engage with their environment.

As detailed within the Landscape Strategy, the gateway square and entrance approach would be a pedestrian priority entrance and a high quality pallet of soft planting and hard materials is proposed.

We recommend taking a far more ambitious and imaginative design approach to creating a place that is inspiring and enhances the wellbeing of people in later stages of life and staff. The footprint, organisation and massing of the building do not yet sufficiently relate to the garden landscape or surrounding buildings to create a scheme that achieves this. Given the back land nature of the site the 'Victorian arboretum' feel and the areas available for construction of the buildings, the idea of pavilions set within the landscape is compelling. The proposed site layout is beginning to respond to the site's special qualities, its boundaries and the wider leafy suburban context, in particular to the south and east. However, at present, the proposed building feels bulky and cramped between the University College student housing, the Arts and Crafts Redcliffe-Maud House and the site boundaries.

We strongly disagree that the building does not relate to its landscape setting. It works around its landscape setting and creates new spaces within it. Internal spaces have very direct relationships at ground floor levels with a variety of external garden and courtyard spaces allowing easy use by residents. Existing views and vistas are reinforced by new views and vistas, particularly the relationship of the Herb Garden to new Fairfield to create a variety of interconnected, interrelated spaces.

The site is not a Victorian Arboretum nor anything like one. Arboretums' were created specifically for the collection of rare species in a studied and scientific manner. The site contains a few specimen trees that date from the construction of the houses but there are many more that are much younger. The use of the term Arboretum romanticises what are essentially the remnants of rear gardens of large houses.

The comments on the bulk contradict the comments on massing in the first paragraph.

It should be emphasised that difference of bulk and a tightening down and opening up of spaces by different height buildings are key characteristics building blocks in the environment of Oxford whether in the city centre or the North Oxford Victorian Suburb. Access to many back of the land sites in this part of Oxford is traditionally tight and constrained between high hedges or houses.

The western and northern parts of the site deserve a more sophisticated response. The proposed arrangements of the three blocks for leisure, dining and kitchen facilities does not yet work with the landscape setting or as a legible sequence of spaces, and could be more sensitive in terms of the views from neighbouring sites. This could be achieved, for example, by combining the kitchen and dining room / lounge areas to create two instead of three distinctive blocks. More generous space between the blocks will allow more through views to better embrace the surrounding landscape and strengthen the pavilion concept.

In the context of this scheme, we do not understand what the ODRP means by a "sophisticated response". The spaces are clearly legible and form a sequence for

daily activities within the residential home. They provide what Fairfield aspire to and link to a variety of external spaces, new and existing, for use by the residents. The ODRP does not appear to have any understanding of the constraints affecting this site.

Creating two pavilions would if it were possible increase the travel distance for residents; it would also increase the building footprint and increase cost of the development.

The proposed car parking area to the west of the site is poor and a missed opportunity to create an inviting place. An attractive and positive entrance courtyard with car parking should prioritise pedestrians over the car, capitalise on the successful design of the manager's house and use the kitchen / dining building to frame the entrance space. Better hard and soft landscaping is required in the design of this space. We recommend that the kitchen / dining building is redesigned to respond to this opportunity and to achieve better service access from the west. The bin store and service yard to the south of the kitchen block within close proximity to the Redcliffe-Maud House is not ideal.

The ODRP fails to understand that the rear car park is not an entrance courtyard as only staff enter the building from that side. Our view is that it should be low key to provide relief and contrast from other much more important spaces on the site and has been designed as such with hard and soft landscaping. The presence of a large oak tree with and large Root Protection Area and other constraints to the north do not allow the kitchen wing to frame the space.

The landscape design of the proposed car parking area to the west of the site seeks to retain and enhance the landscape features of value that make this area distinct. The mature oak and beech trees, and beech hedge would be retained and complemented with natural planting comprising daffodils, snowdrops and ferns. Ornamental planting comprising lavender and alliums is proposed to complement the elegance of the manager's house, whilst legibility of space is provided by a sweet box hedge anchored with specimen witch hazel, which would also provide winter interest. Car parking would be screened from the residents' gardens by a clipped hornbeam hedge. The design is respectful of its context, complementary to the Fairfield and manager's house buildings and would significantly improve what is currently an uninviting area dominated by hard materials, in complement, not competition, with the gateway square to the east.

The service yard is located where it was in the previous scheme. In commenting on that scheme the ODRP did not mention the service yard. Given the extent of the Oak tree's Root Protection Zone, there is no other place in this area of the site where the service yard could be located. .

Given the proposed location of the building in a back land site, the experience of entering the home is key to its success. The new Gateway Square is welcoming and has the potential to provide a high quality entrance court. Such high quality public realm should be carried through along the access road from Banbury Road to the site. This key route into

the site should be designed as a pedestrian priority with careful hard and soft landscaping design, and effective lighting without appearing to be dominated by service vehicle movements, parking and drop-offs.

These comments are a statement of the obvious, and are consistent with the applicant's intentions. Service vehicles will not be using this access.

The main entrance to the building could be more prominent and visible when approaching it from Banbury Road. We recommend revisiting the layout of the entrance hall to allow a more generous entrance, together with the canopy design to signal the building entrance more effectively.

We are happy that the entrance reflects the arrival at a 'home' rather than an 'institution'. The current home is accessed through a house doorway which works well into a domestic hallway of human scale proportions. Our design intention is not to over-whelm residents with large spaces or dramatic architectural gestures, nor to institutionalise the building. We reject the suggestion of creating a more generous entrance hall as inappropriate to the nature of the home, and to the scale we desire for the residents.

Our preference is for a recessed entrance; we have investigated a canopy which, in our view, would look 'stuck on' and inappropriate.

Whilst we appreciate that the elevations have been greatly changed we feel that a significant redesign, driven by clear design rules and informed by the context, is needed. The proposal elevational treatment appears superficial and we question whether it is appropriate for all the building elements. The proposed frame of reconstituted stone and timber panels appears to be 'stuck-on' without a clear logic informed by its use or orientation. For example, the frame should be used in a meaningful way to support balconies or provide solar shading for the southern elevation. For the residential elements of the project, balconies would provide a softer relationship between the building and its landscape, and allow the residents direct contact with the outdoors from their rooms. Any potential health and safety concerns can be addressed through careful design. In refining the overall elevational language, the impact of the southern elevation, currently treated as of secondary importance yet visible directly from the University College courtyard and the surrounding landscape, should be addressed. By contrast, the design approach to the manager's house is to be commended as it is simple and elegant, successfully combining the architecture of the old and new.

There are clear design rules applied to the building to create depth to the elevations, shadowing and screening to reduce solar glare and to create a building that is simple and dignified as suggested by the previous review. Our 'rules' have been developed in response to comments made by the ODRP at the first review and as a response to the site and its context.

The three storey colonnades facing east and west provide shading and screening as described above with the east elevation partially terminating one edge of the

view along the access road and hinting that something else is around the corner. This approach is one that is supported by well recognised urban design principles and leads to variety in the experience of those using the site. Other colonnades to the dining/lounge pavilion provide covered and sheltered external sitting space for residents whilst that to the two storey block provides privacy both to residents and to adjoining neighbours from any overlooking.

While Fairfield does not cater for residents with dementia, there is a possibility that some residents will at some stage suffer from the almost unrecognisable early stages of the condition. Balconies present a risk of unintentional falls by people in that condition and are therefore not a feature that could be incorporated in the design without considerable enclosure in glass or railings, thereby negating the whole purpose of a balcony. Fairfield also consulted its residents who felt that the outside garden was far more important and that a balcony would not be of significant benefit to them given that most prefer to spend their time in the communal spaces rather than their rooms. The colonnades can take additional brise soleil to control solar gain, but that will depend on further detailed environmental studies at a detailed design stage.

The simplicity of the south elevation is seen as a counter to the complexity of the adjoining University College accommodation, providing a foil and contrast to that building, as suggested in the previous ODRP response.

There is a serious flaw in the ODRP's comments on the manager's house design and the main building that does not recognise that they are two separate and present different architectural problems. The manager's house extension was designed to avoid impacting on the existing garage building, which has its own distinct character. For the main building to apply the same principles that embody the random window arrangements and a flat facade would be to take a contrary direction to the advice for a "classical" approach with depth given at the first review.

We trust these comments are helpful and we would be happy to meet with you and, if necessary, the ODRP, to discuss matter further, if that would be of assistance.

Yours sincerely

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Partner
On behalf of Kemp & Kemp LLP

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