

PL/2022/00064/PPFL

St Johns Way Shopping Centre proposals (Knowle Precinct) – amended proposals

Refurbishment and upgrade works to St John's Way Shopping Centre to provide 17 no. retail units at the ground floor level with some first floor storage space, 28 residential apartments at the first floor level and the creation of a second floor to provide 19 residential apartments, car parking, landscaping and all other associated works. Demolition, including of two no. existing over passes.

Introduction

Thank you for the briefing on the amended proposals for the St John's shopping centre and for the further opportunity to comment. The KDBH Neighbourhood Forum remains supportive of the scheme in principle and is pleased that the applicants have addressed some of the detailed issues we raised in our initial response.

Our original objection was based on an assessment against Neighbourhood Plan policies, particularly Policy E2 New Development on Village Centres, Policies VC1 and VC 2, D1 and D2 in respect of conservation, heritage and design and Policy T2 Contributions to Additional Parking and Road Improvements. We have considered the amendments carefully and the comments below address the extent to which the amendments have now achieved compliance with them.

The three major issues raised in our original objection related to design, car parking and viability (in relation to CIL, affordable housing and education contributions). We review each again in turn.

Design issues:

The Forum requested modifications to certain aspects of design, primarily relating to materials (the extensive use of weatherboarding) the mansard roof and the wrought iron archway.

The Forum is pleased that the applicants have introduced more brickwork into some of the ground floor elevations within the main area of the Precinct and to the High St and Tesco car park frontages. We note that:

- some, but not all, of the weatherboarding has been replaced by render but there is no brickwork at the upper levels of the Precinct elevations.
- The wrought iron archways have been retained with a less fussy design which is an improvement.
- The mansard roof remains the same.

Overall, we consider the design has been improved but would welcome further introduction of brickwork within the main Precinct area to better reflect local character. We are aware that the Knowle Society still has concerns about a number of design aspects in relation to the impacts on the Conservation Area and we defer to their detailed knowledge of heritage issues.

Car parking issues:

The applicants are not proposing any changes to the car parking arrangements. This remains a matter of real local concern.

We note that the Council's Highways officer has raised no objection to the plans citing sustainable location, reasonable bus service, no additional severe impacts having regard to the small addition in retail floorspace and low traffic flows from the new additional flats. There does not appear to be any mention of the transport policies of the KDBH Neighbourhood Plan which must be taken into account.

It seems inconceivable to conclude that no traffic or parking problems will arise from the proposed development. We question this conclusion having regard to:

- The applicant's transport assessment relies upon surveys undertaken in June 2019. The Highways' officer refers also to the Council's own Solihull Parking Study published in October 2020 which included Knowle village. That Study relied on surveys undertaken in 2017. Both surveys are out of date and do not reflect the current parking situation. The intervening time has seen various factors influencing parking behaviour, including changes in parking charges, the impact of Covid and the gradual decline of the Precinct as a shopping destination. Nevertheless, in recent months the High Street has recovered well. The efforts of traders and Visit Knowle have seen most High St shops and offices now occupied. Consequently, demand for car parking has increased and is once again nearing capacity at times throughout the week. If this is the car parking situation when footfall in the Precinct is low, then it is inevitable that a successful Precinct, coupled with demand from substantial population growth as proposed in the Solihull Local Submission Plan, will create future parking problems.
- The Highways' officer has concluded that the additional retail space is too small to cause additional traffic issues. Whilst we appreciate that, on the face of it, the new shopping centre may provide only a relatively small increase in retail floorspace, the reality is that the whole purpose of the refurbishment is to completely regenerate the centre and bring in a more modern retail shopping experience and environment, thereby increasing the appeal of the whole Precinct to a much wider area. A new and vibrant retail experience will therefore exacerbate problems in and around the car parks and St John's Close- a matter which should be addressed by reference to Policy T2 of the KDBH Neighbourhood Plan.
- There is no car parking for residents of the flats. There will of course be residents with cars and no solution to their needs has been proposed other than the possibility of car parking permits within the existing car parks. That would clearly exacerbate the shortage of car parking to serve the centre.
- There are still 72 cycle spaces which seems excessive given the lack of parking for residents.
- No information has been submitted to ease traders' concerns about the adverse effects of construction on trade. We appreciate this would usually be the subject of a condition on any planning approval but steps could be taken now to address such an important issue.

The Forum is not convinced that the Highways' officer has taken all these parking considerations into account in his response to this application. We are pleased to note that further consultation is now being undertaken.

The Forum supports the Council's request for the developers to submit a Green Travel Plan for the scheme. We do not consider the submitted Travel Assessment satisfactorily addresses these points.

The Forum reiterates the points it has previously made in respect of parking and circulation, namely that this is a matter that the developer cannot resolve alone and must be addressed primarily by the Council as Highway Authority and owner of the car parks. The Forum is keen for this development to go ahead but it should be on the basis that the Council seeks funding contributions from the developer for car parking and traffic management improvements, in accordance with Policy T2 of the NP. The Council should also commit to preparing a more comprehensive review of parking and traffic management

issues around the centre and to implementing its findings. This should be done in association with the various local bodies representing Knowle which are keen to work with the Council to deliver such improvements but cannot be expected to resolve them without Council support. To be able to do this, we ask the Council to reconsider its conclusion that there will be no unacceptable impact on car parking and traffic arising from these proposals taking account of our concerns about the Traffic Assessment findings and the requirements of Policy T2. The Council should ensure the Highways Officer is fully engaged throughout the planning application process and, if the proposed development is approved, the Officer should remain actively involved with the local community in resolving the consequent traffic and parking issues

Viability assessment

We understand that the Council is considering the applicant's viability assessment to confirm the extent to which the proposals will be able to make contributions towards affordable housing, CIL, education and to local active travel and car parking/traffic management improvements.

In the meantime, we see that the Council's officers have asked for £110k contribution towards the Knowle to Solihull cycle route. This has been queried by the applicants.

As regards the £110k contribution to the cycle way, this route has been upgraded although to a lesser specification to that originally proposed. Nevertheless, it is well established and already caters to the limited numbers who wish to travel by bike into Solihull. The Forum proposes that more effective use of such contributions would be to now prioritise safer cycling and walking routes **within** the KDBH area, for example along Station Road. The Forum would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Council and residents what local cycling priorities should be.

The Forum awaits the findings of the viability assessment in relation to understanding what other financial contributions will be made by the developers.

Assessment against the NP policies.

The Forum welcomes the amendments made to date to the design of the scheme and would support some further 'tweaks' to resolve remaining concerns. We are convinced these should be straightforward and should not cause further long delays.

As regards parking, some minor changes, such as to convert some of the cycle spaces to car park spaces would help, but we recognise this cannot be resolved by the developer alone. We do not accept the conclusions of the Highways Officer and ask that his assessment is revisited. Our view remains that the proposals do not comply with the requirements of Policy T2 on car parking and Policy E2 in respect of adequate provision for parking.

The Forum recognises that this boils down to a planning judgement on the overall balance of pros and cons of the proposal against Local Plan and Neighbourhood Plan policies. The Precinct is in a dire state and urgently requires investment which the Forum wants to see happen. As regards the valid concerns of residents and traders about the inevitable traffic and car parking implications, we, as a community, seek the support of the Council to help address and fund improvements around the centre of Knowle to help alleviate the parking and circulation problems that will arise in the event that this application is approved. Without a strategic masterplan approach, we are in serious danger of making piecemeal steps without properly addressing the wider context.