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Northwood Road Academy, Hillingdon

GLA Response 1

Revision: P01

Site layout
38. The footprint of the proposed building is similar to that of the existing building marked for demolition. An existing car park is located to the south of the existing and proposed building and is included within the red line boundary.

39. The new school building is proposed to be located in the same area as the existing building marked for demolition. While this approach is understood from a perspective of minimising impact on Green Belt openness, it misses the opportunity to deliver improved access and legibility of the site. The main entrance is hidden from the proposed car park and drop off area, and key outdoor areas, including the courtyard, appear to receive significant overshadowing. The proposed building does not appear to respond to the adjacent school building. Whilst the rationale for siting the building in this location is understood, the applicant should explore all opportunities to optimise access and legibility, daylight and sunlight performance, and responsiveness to existing educational buildings on site.

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The developed building arrangement closely follows the existing building footprint and the unbuild approved extension with adaptations that support the diverse needs of its students and foster a positive and inclusive educational experience for a Special Educational Needs and Disabilities School. The proposed building is set back from the previous approved scheme and extension. Having a secure site and outdoor play spaces is one of the main drivers when starting the design process for a SEND school. The transition arrival journey was carefully considered as the pupils arrive to the school by minibus and after they enter the drop-off area they are welcomed in a safe and calming area away from the staff car park which is located to the north of the site. The drop-off area is positioned directly in front of the main entrance and pupil's entrance and is an air-lock safe space where pupils will disembark. During the school hours the secured drop-off area Plaza will be used as a play area. As part of the landscape design the main access into the school is easily identifiable with the use of trees framing the entrance. The fenestration curtain wall of the pupil's entrance is easily identifiable and features a double height space that brings daylight into the area.

One of the key elements for the school was to prioritize the safety and security features, including clear wayfinding, privacy screening from the road and the adjacent Harefield Academy. It was established early on the design process by the school that the parents of the attending pupils have concerns regarding the interactions between the two schools and the possible anti-social behaviours. Addressing those concerns the drop-off area is away from the view of the Mainstream Secondary Academy and careful considerations were given to planting and screening from the car park and MUGA play area. The two schools will operate independently and do not intent to have any sharing spaces in the future that will compromise the well-being and mental health of the pupils.

40. Several utility structures, such as bin storage, water tanks and heat pumps, are proposed in standalone structures scattered across the site, in particular along the southern site boundary. This could create a cluttered appearance of the open space around the building, and in particular when viewed from outside the red line boundary. The applicant should seek to minimise the amount of standalone utilitarian structures by consolidating them within one single purpose-designed structure and provide adequate visual shielding where necessary through appropriate design and landscaping measures.

Due to the available infrastructure on the site and existing services points the utilitarian structures are placed in different locations to accommodate the needs of the new building. The positioning of the structures was meticulously thought out to minimize the impact that will have on the outdoor space available for the pupils. The school preference was to keep away the ancillary structures from the main play area and to limit the potential distractions during services time that may cause behavioural issues. These structures are usually timber fenced but in this instance the sprinkler tank is proposed as a brick enclosure that gives the opportunity to be used for school signage. The use of the architectural language to create a cohesive approach across the site.

Due to the site constraints, it was considered that the Air source heat pump and Sprinkler tank enclosure is best to be positioned on the southern elevation towards the car park having access to the plant rooms adjacent. These standalone structures help with creating a more defined boundary between the existing car park and the new building.
The electrical switch room has been located on the East corner of the building to allow easy access for servicing and being adjacent to the sprinkler tank enclosure.
The bin store enclosure is positioned outside of the secure line with easy access from Northwood Road.

Architecture and Materials
41. The proposed school building consists of a central spine containing the main entrance, a social space and library, flanked by two 2-storey wings. The east elevations of each of the three blocks are set back from each other. While this creates a more engaging frontage, it hides the main entrance's visibility from the car park and the drop off zone. The prominence of the entrance is also undermined to some extent by its location under an undercroft. The applicant should explore options to create a more intuitive and welcoming entrance, visible and legible from key access routes.

Pupils approach from school entrance

Pupils approach from Drop-off area and Staff car park approach.

The drop-off area is positioned directly in front of the main entrance and pupil's entrance and is an air-lock safe space where pupils will disembark. The proposed north car park is to be used by staff and visitors only.

Natural brown cladding has been used to articulate the elevation around the main entrance to create a sense of arrival and distinguish the main route into the school. The sensory journey of the pupils as they approach the drop off area is achieved by the proposal of sensory planting and trees to calm them before entering the school. This elevation has been further enhanced through the introduction of a heavy-framed window, to visually draw visitors into the building. A double height curtain-walling detail has been used to highlight the pupil entrance, positioned adjacent to the main entrance. The large window encourages swathes of natural light into the double height space, merging the barrier between inside and outside.

The undercroft area serves as a sheltered entrance, meeting the necessary requirement for Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Schools. The decision to have this protected area integrated under a projection of the building is considered more robust than opting for a standalone canopy, which would be the default solution. This feature also plays an important role in accommodating the visitors and parents while they wait to be given access into the reception area, seamlessly integrated into the overall architectural form. The covered entryway has the purpose of protecting the visitors from the weather and create a sense of shelter. The reception area features a full curtain walling system that gives the sense of openness that immediately communicates a positive atmosphere to visitors.

It is important that main entrance makes a positive and striking first impression to welcome pupils in, and so, the feature brown colour is mostly used for this area.

42. The dominant material is a combination of light and dark brick. The library façade looking out over the courtyard to the west has a distinctive wood curtain glazing façade. The entrance to the east features a contrasting cladding material. While the overall material palette raises no strategic issues, it does not successfully express the building's civic function. In particular the main entrance lacks legibility. A more open and transparent approach for the entrance, potentially similar to the library façade, should be explored.

The design scheme is centred on four primary materials: light buff brick, dark buff brick, timber, and natural brown cladding. The warm tones of the feature cladding and brick type chosen for the exterior of the new school will help to maintain the same architectural language in the area Additionally, the use of timber serves to connect with the adjacent Harefield Academy while adding visual interest to the courtyard elevation.

The chosen materials for the new building are in harmony with those used at the existing Satellite Meadow School. The existing Meadow school main entrance undercroft features a distinctive blue glazed brick. The school's preference is to maintain a similar design approach for the proposed building, prioritizing materials that are both durable and visually appealing.
Implementing a warm brown colour scheme for the exterior facade, particularly utilizing earth tones, not only enhances the overall design coherence but also establishes a distinct identity that complements the school's unique character.