

Litherland High School
One School Pathfinder

RIBA CDA Report

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1.0 Purpose of report

This report offers a critical review of the Framework Tenderer's outline scheme, as at December 2008. The review examines the scheme's compliance with Sefton Council's requirements in respect of:

- the educational vision,
- the design brief and
- the quality of design.

2.0 Project background

2.1 Inception

As part of the Building Schools for the Future (BSF) programme, Sefton MBC was designated as a One-school Pathfinder Authority (OSP). Whilst it will be some years before Sefton is on the full BSF programme the Council been given the opportunity and funding to rebuild one secondary school on the site of Litherland High School, a successful Specialist Languages College. The new school will accommodate some 1,200 students aged 11-16 in a building of approximately 9,890 sq m. The school will also accommodate students from Bootle High School, a Specialist Technology College, which itself will close in September 2009.

Based on the DCSF's Funding Allocation Model, Sefton will be granted £23m for the new building which will meet the Authority's and the Government's transformation agenda.

2.2 The site

The site is located at Sterrix Lane, Litherland, South Sefton. It is a flat site, currently occupied by Litherland High School, a sprawling arrangement of mainly single and 2 storey accommodation, dating mainly from the 1950's, and a detached 3-storey science block. The existing school buildings cover the majority of the available open space and the main constraint is that the existing school must remain operational during the construction of the new school.

The school serves an area that suffers from severe social and economic disadvantage. However, during the last decade, the area around Litherland High

School has undergone significant regeneration to provide a focus for education and sport in this deprived part of the borough.

This regeneration has occurred incrementally as funding became available and without the benefit of a comprehensive masterplan. The result therefore has been the creation of a series of individual buildings with no predominant design style or palette of materials for the new school to emulate.

The developments comprise the new Litherland Sports Park with facilities for field and track events and a sports pavilion. This immediately abuts the school site to the south and west, and provides an opportunity to share outdoor sports facilities with the new school.

To the south east of the site lies Rowan Park School, built in 2002, offering facilities for pupils aged 3-19 with special needs. This school itself is adjacent to Litherland Moss Primary School and Children's Centre and The Bridge Adult Education Centre.

Directly across Sterrix Lane, to the north east, the new South Sefton 6th Form Centre is under construction and due to open in summer 2009.

The northern boundary of the site is demarked by a narrow pedestrian footpath and incomplete cycletrack, beyond which is a small housing development to the north and a cemetery to the north-west.

The site for the new Pathfinder school is extremely tight. To minimise significant advance demolition and the ensuing extraordinary cost of providing temporary classrooms, the proposed new development has been directed to the southern boundary of the site. (Whilst some land could have been made available to the northern boundary it would have brought the school closer to the housing development, causing issues with planning and general amenity).

2.3 Education brief

Sefton Council engaged Mouchel Limited as consultants from PfS approved list to assist with the production of an education brief, underpinning the strategic vision of "World Class in Every Class."

High level elements of the Education Brief, published in September 2007, include:

- Programmes and pathways which personalise, individualise and diversify learning.
- New approaches to managing teaching and learning.
- Redefining the leadership culture.
- Developing a fully including curriculum.

- Developing the potential of e-learning.
- Ensuring that learning is engaging, enjoyable and enquiry based.
- Ensuring that LHS is a local, national and international centre of excellence.
- Developing and enriching Community use.

ICT will be used as a tool for teaching and learning and deployed to address a wide range of educational issues.

The education brief demands that consideration must be given at the outset of the design stage to understanding and allowing for:

- Teachers and students working individually and in teams.
- Technology embedded in all aspects of the School's life.
- Physical spaces configured to allow diverse pedagogical strategies and activities and the full exploitation of the benefits for learning of the new technologies.

Whilst the overall gross target area is driven by BB98 net capacity calculations the Accommodation Schedule in the Education Brief served as a working document for discussion with stakeholders and the design team.

Key aspects of the physical design included:

- A “landmark building”
- Assure accessibility and a welcoming atmosphere.
- Guaranteeing security and safety needs.
- Being of robust construction.
- Combining ecological sustainability with a non-institutional but healthy and effective working environment.
- Facilitating oversight and monitoring of students by design.
- Addressing circulation issues in an innovative way.
- Innovative design of spaces and their inter-relationships.
- Rationalising adjacencies
- Flexible sizing of general learning bases with some inter-connection.
- Break-out areas close to general learning bases, suitable for individual and group working.
- A significant Learning Resource Centre/ Information and Communications Centre with break-out space.
- Innovative relationships between the Dining, Main Hall and Performing Arts spaces to maximise the facilities' usefulness and “wow factor.”

2.4 DQI

On 2nd May 2007, Sefton Council assembled 22 stakeholders to engage in a DQI for Schools review at the Brief Stage, led by Andy Thompson, an Accredited DQI facilitator.

The weighted FAVE scores, were helpful in reinforcing perceptions in the education brief and design brief, but produced no startling surprises.

A further DQI session, led by Broadway Malyan, took place during the early feasibility design stage to re-evaluate the previous weightings.

The next review will take place on 7th January 2009, facilitated by Philip Norris of White Young Green.

2.5 Feasibility study

In September 2007 AA Projects Ltd and Broadway Malyan were competitively selected to act as Technical Advisors and to undertake a feasibility study.

Their brief took the educational vision and developed adjacencies and further scoping through dialogue with the Headteacher and senior staff from the school.

Several options were explored and discussed by the Project Team, culminating in January 2008 with 3 options.

The preferred option comprised a concept block plan showing a rectangular layout of teaching space, clustered around a compact, open courtyard and situated at the south west corner of the site.

The layout would require demolition of the entire southerly block comprising teaching and art room space and the introduction of temporary classrooms to accommodate students from Litherland High School and Bootle High School.

Other options had been rejected as they failed to satisfy the demand for a landmark building or were rejected on the grounds of cost and a protracted programme.

2.6 Research

This was the first major new-build secondary school to be built within Sefton and the project team therefore undertook research and site visits facilitated by myself as RIBA CDA.

The research critically examined some of the initial DfES Exemplar Designs, CABE Case Studies, and visited several recently built secondary schools and Academies across the north of England.

The schemes were analysed against criteria which included: ability to deliver transformational learning and teaching, sustainability and ease of maintenance, security, ease of wayfinding, and general overall design quality.

2.7 Design Brief

A Design Brief was drafted in April 2008 and used as a source for further consultation and design development with the school, facilitated by Capita Symonds, Sefton Council's Technical Services providers.

The Design Brief was finalised in June 2008 when it became part of the Invitation to Tender documentation issued to the PfS Framework Contractors in July 2008.

Minor refinements to room areas have taken place as part of the dialogue with Kier and their Architects.

3.0 Kier / Sheppard Robson scheme design

Kier and their Architects, Sheppard Robson, have recognised in their response to the Design Brief that the new school comprises 3 main elements:

- Language, Learning, Living (L3)
- Maths, Science & Technology
- Sport and Performing Arts.

Several design iterations were presented to the Project Team and Project Board before arriving at the present layout.

This CDA commentary, which follows the criteria used by CABE's Schools Design Panel, is based upon Sheppard Robson's drawings as follows:

3813_20_201 (J) - Preliminary Ground Floor Plan
3813_20_202 (H) - Preliminary First Floor Plan
3813_20_203 (J) - Preliminary Second Floor Plan
3813_20_204 (A) - Preliminary Roof Plan
3813_20_210 - Elevations

The commentary also refers to the following drawing by Planit:

PL977.M.101 (A) - General Arrangement

3.1 Identity & context - Place – making a school the students and community can be proud of.

As mentioned in 2.2.above, regeneration in the immediate area has occurred incrementally and resulted in a series of individual buildings with no predominant design style or palette of materials for the new school to emulate. The proposed Litherland High School has therefore been designed to create its own identity and which should be clearly evident to the local community as a School of the Future.

The Education Brief requires a "landmark building" and there can be no doubt that this school fulfils that requirement in terms of its form, massing, its public face and its relationship to the highway at Sterrix Lane.

It is a large building but the use of brickwork for the main elevations and the pattern of fenestration offer a sense of human scale.

The school's visitor and student entrances are clearly visible and once inside the school the atrium, rising up through 2 storeys should provide a "wow" factor for students and for the local community who will also use the building.

3.2 Site plan – Location – making the best use of the site

3.2. 1 Location on site

As mentioned in 2.2 the available site for the new building is extremely tight, due to the sprawling layout of the existing school.

Had Sefton been able to offer a completely cleared site there is no doubt that the architect's task would have been simplified and new school located slightly differently on the site. The design teams, both during the feasibility study and at PITT stage have been challenged to ensure that:

- the current school can function as efficiently as possible during the construction works,
- the number of temporary classrooms is minimised,
- decanting of students is kept to a minimum
- the construction programme is kept to a minimum and
- the school can be built within the available budget.

The feasibility study by Broadway Malyan went some way to exploring these constraints although one of their most stimulating designs extended the contract period and would have added to costs due to the project timescale and protracted hire of temporary classrooms.

Studies concluded that the new school could be sited either in its currently proposed location at the south-east corner, close to Rowan Park School, or at the northern boundary adjacent to the housing. The latter location was rejected for reasons of planning and amenity.

3.2.2 The building form and position of entrances

Kier and their Architects, Sheppard Robson, have recognised in their response to the Design Brief that the new school should provide 3 main elements, comprising a "school within a school" having an entrance/communal facilities, an inner core, and defined/specialist spaces.

The teaching spaces are clustered into clearly defined areas:

- Language, Learning, Living (L3)
- Maths, Science & Technology
- Sport and Performing Arts.

Following a process of agreeing adjacencies, several design iterations were presented to the Project Team and Project Board before arriving at the present layout which offers a physical manifestation on site of the core curricular areas which are described more fully in 3.5 below.

The overall configuration groups the large spaces of Sport and Performing Arts, Dining Facilities and kitchens into a relatively simple linear “bar.” Meanwhile the rooms comprising two distinct teaching and learning clusters are arranged as two pods forming an organically shaped “learning ribbon”.

The design reflects some of the features of Wilkinson Eyre’s Exemplary Designs commissioned by DfES in 2004 with learning clusters and central facilities linked by a central street.

In the Litherland scheme the intersections of these 3 elements provide self-evident foci for the Students’ entrance and the Staff/Visitor entrance with clear footpath routes to direct students, staff and visitors to the building requiring minimal use of signage.

The Staff/Visitor entrance and resultant Plaza fronting Sterrix Lane between L3 and the Administration area, gives a clear identify and delineates the main entrance by means of glazing through 2 storeys. The Plaza presents an opportunity for public art, should funding be available now or in the future.

The Student entrance is located between L3 and the Maths, Science & Technology pods and also comprises a welcoming 2 storey glazed curtain wall with an in-built element of shelter.

3.2.3 Parking and access

The location of the public and staff car park and its access/egress is virtually pre-determined, as a result of planning and highway requirements. This does mean that the car park could not be located directly adjacent to the main public/staff entrance to the school, as at present. Nor is the main public entrance directly visible from the car park although it would be seen when driving long Sterrix Lane from the east.

However its location means that the school will not be seen across a vast car-park, which we witnessed on several of our reference visits. Instead the school forms part of the streetscape, reflecting the curvature of Sterrix Lane.

A clearly delineated footpath reinforced by simple signing will guide visitors from the car park, past the L3 Classrooms 1.04 -1.07.

This route, on plan, does suggest a relative pinch point at the corner adjacent to Room 1.04. However, the space is approximately 7m wide to the back of kerb and the path will be separated from the school by soft planting which means that pedestrians will not be walking directly adjacent to classrooms windows and potentially distracting students.

Some 50% of the students arrive via the pedestrian footpath to the north-west which itself will be widened and the existing cycle path extended. They will enter the site along a clearly defined avenue crossing the school grounds and leading directly to the easily identified 2-storey pupil entrance. Students arriving by public transport or on foot via Sterrix Lane will enter to the south of the car park, passing the northern leg of the L3 classrooms and also enter at the student entrance.

The design indicates that there should be no need for pedestrian/vehicular conflict, providing the students use their designated pedestrian entrances and do not enter via the car park..

Pupils arriving by cycle will also enter the site via the northern footpath or from Sterrix Lane and access cycle parking south of the car park.

An entirely separate route will be created for service vehicles which will access the site from the south, via a newly created service road branching from the road to Litherland Sports Park.

The service road will provide access for biomass deliveries, stationery and other bulk deliveries to the school, catering provisions and refuse vehicles.

This alternative route will further enhance pedestrian/vehicular segregation and hence improve pupil safety.

Care will need to adequately signpost this delivery route and for the school operationally to coordinate deliveries to minimise potential vehicular congestion within the service yard.

3.3 School grounds – making assets of the outdoor spaces

The grounds have been sensitively planned to reflect the Design Brief's requirement for recreation, informal play and socialising.

This is a flat site but some low-level contouring has been proposed, using demolition arisings, to create interest without impeding lines of sight for security and supervision. The mounding and planting should also help to create some shelter from the prevailing westerly winds on this relatively exposed site.

The landscape architect's plans currently available have not provided proposed contour details but it is important that during design development that mounding does not create security difficulties.

The grounds layout introduces several "themed" areas which can be colonised by student friendship groups and a mix of hard and soft play areas.

There is no requirement within this scheme for formal grass pitches, as this requirement is met by the adjacent Sports Park, which is also used by students from Rowan Park . However, a new Multi-Use Games Area has been located in the south-west corner of the school grounds for use by Litherland High School, Rowan Park and by the community.

Provision has been made for Outdoor Classrooms linked to Faculties and educational experiences are also reinforced through the demonstration Windmill, biomass centre, and "grow your own" garden space, the latter capable of sharing with Rowan Park.

Informal space for student dining has been a high priority in the Brief with the intention of retaining students within the school grounds and at the same time offering a range of healthy eating options. The grounds have recognised this aspiration by providing informal outdoor dining immediately adjacent to the dining room and close to the student entrance on the north side of the building. The latter spaces will afford a relatively sheltered environment with views across play areas and the landscaped grounds.

Seating has been designed into the grounds close to the building and the proposals indicate an informal amphitheatre will afford provision for outdoor drama and music events.

The Council's planning requirements for tree planting are quite onerous and care must be given to the layout and particularly the management of trees and shrub species to ensure that they do not impede site supervision as they mature. Leaf clearance must also be managed in view of the school's roof parapets and concealed gutters.

The grounds will be protected by a fencing regime which has been discussed with Sefton Security Force and the Merseyside Police Architectural Liaison Officer. The fencing strategy is reviewed in 3.8 below.

3.4 Organisation – creating a clear diagram for the buildings

The internal and external organisation of the school is well planned, addressing the Council's project team requirements for clear circulation.

Clustering the three main learning zones enables offers the opportunity for easy wayfinding and signing and colour coding will reinforce the various curricular spaces.

The visitor entrance opens into a security controlled reception space and waiting area with views into the and long the internal street. The student entrance again is clear and direct, providing a sheltered arrival/meeting point.

Vertical circulation has been well considered with a central focal point staircase and lift at the heart of the building rising up to each floor level. Other staircases have been planned to accommodate pupil movement between curricular areas.

Toilets have been intentionally planned to be dispersed throughout the building in blocks at each floor within the learning ribbon. Consideration was given to a single large toilet block on each floor to simplify staff management but this would increase the travel distance for the students.

Social areas have been considered throughout the school, both internally and externally. Whilst there is a large Dining Hall located adjacent to the school kitchen there are also break-out spaces for more informal dining both inside and outside the school. The Dining Hall itself opens into a landscaped outdoor dining area and other al-fresco eating will be encouraged to take place in the informal hard play space and the landscaped spaces.

Requirements for students, staff or visitors with disabilities have been integrated into the scheme to meet building regulatory standards and the Merseyside Code of Practice. The proposals have also been submitted to Sefton Council's access advisor.

3.5 The Buildings – making form, massing and appearance work together

The external elevations reflect the characteristics of Sheppard Robson's Stockwell Park which has been applauded by CABE as one of the few BSF schemes to have received an "Excellent" rating.

The relative massing of the flowing "learning ribbon" and the rectangular "bar" structure is well handled by introducing contrasting curtain walling to link the two features and which also allows views into the internal circulation street.

The pattern of fenestration in the learning ribbon, broken up with coloured opaque infill panels, provides an irregular rhythm which at the same time provides flexibility in the positioning of internal partitions, based on the 2.5m grid. Stepping back the ends of the learning ribbon at the second floor creates 3-dimensional interest and the radiussed corners reinforce the organic feel of this part of the building.

The more solid rectangular “bar” has provided the architects with a greater elevational challenge to avoid what could have become a slab-like industrial appearance.

The Learning Resource Centre (LRC) and adjoining ICT Area is clearly a main focus for the school and community and its treatment facing Sterrix Lane continues the lightweight curtain walling theme to create light and interest when viewed from the street.

The south east elevation, facing Rowan Park School could have been seen as the more utilitarian side of the building, containing plant and services and the “big spaces,” most of which do not require windows within the walling. The elevation is appreciable and has been expressed as a simple rectangular box broken up by horizontal strips of fenestration and coloured banding.

The choice of brickwork for the majority of the school is sound. It acknowledges the use of brickwork on Rowan Park and Litherland Sports Park and offers a durable and easily maintained external treatment. The contrasting brick selection with a pale buff tone on the learning ribbon and dark blue engineering brick for the bar reinforce the concept of the differing functions of these two parts of the building.

Internally, a small palette of materials is proposed and which will be light in colour to help distribute daylighting into the heart of the building from the curtain walling and rooflights.

3.6 Interiors – creating excellent spaces for teaching and learning

Considerable discussion has taken place between Kier, their architects and the Council’s team to create an internal environment which satisfies the Design Brief and which could be accommodated into the “learning ribbon” concept.

There was always a danger that adherence to the ribbon form could have forced the internal spaces into an architectural arrangement which would be challenging to use educationally. However, the continuous dialogue has enabled flexibility in space planning, providing a good variety of “traditional” classroom spaces and others which are more imaginatively shaped.

Some of the rooms can be interconnected for large group work, using acoustic folding screens. Flexible teaching and learning is also provided by breakout spaces, resource areas and work areas on each floor in the ribbon “hubs.”

The interconnected LRC and ICT spaces are large interconnected spaces which into which natural light can flow vertically and horizontally. The two-storey void

rising from the ground floor street up to the second floor rooflight allows light and space to cascade into the heart of the building.

The Bidder has been asked to respond to the Council's requirement for daylight factors in excess of 4% for 80% of the occupied areas and this will be demonstrated in the ITT response.

The draft Mechanical and Electrical Scopes of Works available at the time of writing this review have indicated that there will be a variety of local control strategies for teaching staff as well as centrally managed Building Management Systems.

3.7 Resources – deploying convincing environmental strategies

The building is required to achieve a BREEAM “very good” rating as a minimum and the Bidder has demonstrated that this should be achievable. The assumptions will be checked in more detail as the project progresses.

Environmental sustainability has also formed part of the Council's planning requirements, including provision for staff and students travelling by cycle.

There is a concern that the Council's planning standards for staff car parking may restrict the quantity of on-site parking and lead to parking in neighbouring housing areas or the adjacent Sports Park. Dialogue on this matter will continue after preferred developer stage as part of the planning process.

The draft Mechanical and Public Health Scope of Works has indicated that a preference for natural ventilation for the majority of teaching rooms using openable windows. The larger open plan internal spaces will also be naturally ventilated, having low-level louvres and high level discharge louvres at rooflights or roof stacks. Teaching spaces will be provided with supply and extract ductwork with heat recovery inbuilt.

Mechanical cooling has to date been restricted to the main ICT Server Room, ICT Teaching Area, and the Admin Block below the ICT Area.

The room layout has avoided directly south-facing teaching spaces and sun-shading has been limited to adjustable blinds rather than a need for brise soleil. The Mechanical strategy has confirmed that environmental conditions in classrooms in summer will comply with BB87.

The proposals allow for for rainwater harvesting from all roof areas for flushing of wc's and urinals, using an underground storage tank which will service the cold water tankroom after receiving chemical treatment.

Heating will be primarily from a Biomass boiler, sized to provide a minimum of 70% of the annual heating load. The Biomass boiler will use wood pellets which will be stored on site alongside the plantroom. Gas fired high efficiency boilers will meet the shortfall in heat output.

A Building Management System and sub-metering will be introduced to allow monitoring of gas, water and electricity supplies.

3.8 Feeling safe – creating a secure and welcoming place

Security is a paramount concern for the school, both for protection of the students and also the building and its grounds and formed an important aspect of the Design Brief.

The Bidder has addressed the needs of the school, without creating a fortress, through dialogue with the client's project team, the Police Liaison Officer and Sefton Security.

Fencing and access have been considered sensitively, with clearly separate entrances for students and staff/visitors. Control points have been built into the public entrance, managed from reception, to restrict unauthorised access and at the same time safeguard school staff.

Clear lines of visibility have been incorporated into the design, for both the grounds and the school's internal environment. This configuration will minimise hiding places and allow good supervision by staff and by CCTV.

As mentioned in 3.3 the school will need to introduce a careful horticultural management regime to ensure that the generous tree and shrub planting does not become over-grown and create areas where intruders could hide.

Security has also been designed internally to lock-down parts of the school whilst allowing controlled access during out-of school hours for extended community use.

The proposed widening and straightening of the footpath to the north of the school will greatly benefit a sense of security for students approaching the school and in turn benefit the local resident community.

3.9 Long life, loose fit – creating a school that can adapt and evolve in the future

The Council has no intentions within the foreseeable future to extend the school beyond the current 1,200 pupil places. However, in the unlikely event of other

facilities being required on site these could be accommodated by extending the Science wing or the Sports Hall or by constructing a free-standing entity within the school grounds.

The available budget means that the plant and building services have not been designed for an expanded building and any new building would probably require to be independently serviced.

Internally however the configuration of teaching and learning spaces offers remarkable flexibility both physically and in their ability to facilitate innovative education.

Whilst recognising the guidelines of BB98, teaching spaces have been arranged with a variety of room sizes with some acoustic folding screens to enlarge or reduce spaces.

The use of steel framed stud partitioning and flexible fenestration pattern will further allow spaces to be modified as needs change over time.

The Bidder's proposals for furniture layouts have further demonstrated how the general teaching spaces and other rooms can be adapted to suit various educational requirements.

The proposals meet the needs of community use allowing access to key areas including the Hair & Beauty facility, Main Hall and Dining, Conference facilities, LRC and toilet facilities.

The proposals for the school grounds indicate areas where the external environment can augment classroom teaching.

3.10 Successful synthesis – making a design that works in the round

Given the site constraints and having to build alongside the existing functioning school, this proposal demonstrates imaginative use of the site and offers the landmark building required in the education brief.

The building has the potential to set high design standards on the South Sefton campus, complementing but not competing with the neighbouring Sixth Form Centre.

This building and its landscape setting responds well to the site and offers the potential to lift the spirits of the community by means of its overall design both externally but especially internally.

It is clear that there is no single design response to the BSF programme and the number of solutions across the various waves is legion. Designs must respond to unique site conditions, community needs and behaviours, and above all to the approach to educational transformation. This proposal has sought to address all of these requirements in responding to Sefton Council's design brief.

Educational transformation is an illusive concept but this building and its environment move away from the traditional "classroom and corridor" approach seen in several of the new secondary schools we visited. Instead the building lends itself to a variety of spaces wherein teaching and learning can take place, whether in formal but flexible classrooms, breakout spaces, workbases, or the magnificent LRC/ICT zone. Opportunities are presented for collective teaching in rooms which can accommodate groups of varying size, through to self-learning. The delivery of education will be supported through an ICT-rich infrastructure, which is currently being developed.

The public consultation indicated a positive response from attendees:

- *The building looks wonderful – really modern and inspiring.*
- *The layout looks fantastic – very impressed with the sports facilities.*
- *Very bold design, really uplifting for pupils and the community – matches Sixth Form Centre well.*
- *I felt it was an imaginative, educationally very viable design.*

Such comments are particularly welcome and reinforce the expectation that this landmark building will offer a stimulating learning environment for its students, an exciting working environment for its staff and the potential to further raise educational standards.

I believe that this proposal for Litherland High School offers a benchmark against which Sefton's and other future BSF proposals can be measured.