

 Havering LONDON BOROUGH	Strategic Planning Committee Developer Presentation 22 January 2026
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Pre-Application Reference: W0214.25

Application Reference: P1607.25

Site: Former Debenhams, 56-72 Market Place, Romford, RM1 3ER

Ward: St. Edwards

Description: Residential-led, mixed-use redevelopment of the site to provide a hotel (Class C1) with commercial space (Class E) at ground and upper floors fronting Market Place, alongside two residential buildings to the rear, connected by a communal amenity podium with commercial uses (Class E) at ground level, and a new public plaza with a freestanding commercial building (Class E), widening and landscaping works to Swan Walk.

Case Officer: Andrew Thornley

1. Site Description

1.1 The application site comprises the former Debenhams Store in Romford, fronting Market Place and with Swan Walk to the west. The building is a 3-4 storeys tall (4-5 storey equivalent due to larger floor to ceiling heights internally), and occupies almost all of the plot, with its very large footprint.

1.2 The building has a fairly neutral appearance which does little to enhance the setting of Romford Conservation Area, appearing somewhat dated in terms of its overall design quality, although it is recognised that the building has some local significance as one of the largest department stores within Romford.

1.3 The surrounding context includes a mixture of commercial, residential, and leisure uses with varying building heights. To the north and west are generally lower rise buildings with ground floor commercial or retail uses and either office space or residential uses above, at one to three storeys in height, with the occasional four or five storey building visible on the northern side of Market Place, which is fairly typical of a traditional town centre. To the south is the Liberty Centre, a large, somewhat sprawling shopping centre of low to medium

scale, which is currently being assessed for comprehensive mixed-use redevelopment under application reference P1573.25.

- 1.4 Overall, the quality of buildings in the surrounding context is mixed, with the high street to the west providing a vibrant, active and busy town centre context with a clear priority for pedestrians, whilst Mercury Gardens is very much car dominated as a result of the Romford Ring Road.

2. Planning Policy Designations

- 2.1 The site falls within the Romford Strategic Development Area (SDA) as set out by Policy 1 of the Havering Local Plan, which generally encourages new residential, commercial and social infrastructure development, whilst being mindful of general townscape and heritage considerations, all whilst improving town centre connectivity. Moreover, the Romford Town Centre Masterplan (March 2025) seeks redevelopment proposals to focus on providing a commercial-focused area that provides active ground floor commercial, retail, and employment uses with residential accommodation on upper floors. Any development should be sensitive to and supportive of the special character and setting of the conservation area, positively engaging with a rejuvenated Market Place with listed buildings, breaking up the existing large scale blocks to deliver a finer urban grain.
- 2.2 The application site falls within the Market Place Conservation Area and within the setting of the St Edward the Confessor Church (a Grade II Listed Building of very high historical value) to the northwest of the site.
- 2.3 The building itself is further designated as an opportunity site within the context of the Romford Conservation Area, where any redevelopment proposals must enhance the experience of this part of the Conservation Area.

3. Proposal

- 3.1 The proposed development seeks permission for the complete demolition of the existing building within the site, followed by comprehensive redevelopment to provide a mixed-use, residential-led scheme, with a hotel block fronting Market Place, and ground floor commercial uses (Class E) across the site.
- 3.2 The proposal would provide 155 homes within two towers positioned at the southern end of the site, which would be connected by a podium at lower levels, whilst the hotel at the northern end of the site would have 118 rooms.
- 3.3 The two residential blocks at the southern end of the site are proposed at 12 and 14 storeys, with the taller of these two buildings in the south-east corner. The hotel block facing Market Place would be of a similar height to the existing Debenhams building, at 6 storeys (noting that the existing building has very high floor-to-ceiling heights and the revised scheme incorporates more floors within the same broad envelope through reduced floor-to-ceiling heights).

4. Quality Review Panel

4.1 This application was presented to the Quality Review Panel on the 4th November 2025, and below is a summary of the key points raised and the applicant's response:

QRP Comments	Applicant Response
Height and Massing	
The general concept of the massing distribution and stacking of building heights away from Market Place is appropriate.	<p>The applicant team has carefully considered the panel's comments and has progressed the design to directly address these concerns through changes to the parapets and façade design of the higher residential blocks to the rear. The proposals have been amended and refined accordingly, with design changes embedded within the evolving scheme to ensure a high-quality, context-led response.</p> <p>The Project Team has worked closely with Liberty to deliver a height and scale that will work positively with the wider regeneration plans in the area.</p> <p>Both parties have worked collaboratively to prepare an overall strategy for placement of height and mass which will better reveal the significant of surrounding heritage assets and truly enhance the visual amenity of the area.</p>
The height of the lower building facing onto Market Place is also supported. However, the height of the building to the rear of the site feels excessive and out of context.	
Although the heights of all three blocks have been reduced since previous pre-application schemes, further townscape analysis would be welcomed. The intention should be to enhance the conservation area, not just reduce the harm to it.	
Given the complexity of the site, the panel would welcome site sections to show the relationship between the existing and proposed buildings.	
A lower L-shaped block rather than two taller blocks separated by a courtyard could be a more successful solution to reinforce Market Place and Swan Walk.	
This solution could provide a private amenity space for the residential and hotel and remove the need for the first-floor podium.	
Architecture and Façades	
Retaining and redeveloping the Debenhams building or structural frame would be a more sustainable solution for the site. Further evidence is needed to support its demolition.	<p>The applicant team has carefully considered the panel's comments and has progressed the design to directly address this point. In particular, the design of the replacement hotel fronting Market Place has changed from a more horizontal emphasis approach to a design that accentuates verticality and breaks the mass and width of the building up. This gives the new replacement building the proportions that</p>
The Debenhams building is bulky and much wider than any other building on the Market Place. If it is to be demolished, it should not be replaced by a building of similar massing and scale. A more thorough understanding of the	

conservation area should drive a more appropriate solution.	are more typical of the historic town centre, ei, terraces.
The hotel and commercial units should form part of a series of buildings, rather than a monolithic elevation. Reference to the historical context and fine grain of Romford High Street should be considered.	<p>In addition, the left side (as viewed from the front) has had its shoulder / height reduced to respect the setting of the adjacent locally listed building. This amended design approach is much more sensitive in scale and proportion. It is also lower than existing debenhams store in relation to this neighbouring locally listed building and such better reveals its significance.</p> <p>The proposals have been amended and refined accordingly, with design changes embedded within the evolving scheme to ensure a high-quality, context-led response. Further detail has now been provided with regards the façade treatment and more consideration given to the existing material palette of the location.</p>
The current proposal of vertical bays does not help to reduce the scale of the building façade. The design team is encouraged to develop the composition in a more thoughtful way to break up its scale.	
The methodology of ‘analysing’ and then replicating existing elevational propositions and arrangements is not convincing in the context of the conservation area.	
The proposed hotel entrance is too grand for this setting, and the portal is not in keeping with the context.	
The main frontages to the hotel and residential units are internalised and address the courtyard. This should be reconsidered to provide a more positive relationship with Market Square.	
The panel welcomes the number of dual aspect homes but is concerned that this has driven the form of the residential blocks rather than responding to the site. As the development will be visible from the conservation area, a more contextual approach is recommended.	
The dual aspect corner of the residential block on Swan Walk needs further consideration, to successfully address the passageway and the courtyard.	
Internal Layouts and Commercial Space	
The residential access routes through the buildings are convoluted with tight corridors and multiple blind corners. These need to be simplified and wheelchair access should also be considered.	The applicant team has carefully considered the panel’s comments and changed the access routes to the cores in response.
Resolution of this will be essential to demonstrate that the site can accommodate a high number of good quality homes.	The corridors have been widened and overall quality of residential communal areas improved.

<p>The route or arcade that runs through the commercial space from Market Place to the rear of the block seems unnecessary and should be reconsidered.</p>	<p>The applicant team have produced a commercial strategy that directly responds to the need of businesses and commercial reality of this location.</p>
<p>The size and layout of the commercial units should be considered further to ensure they meet local need.</p>	<p>A mid range hotel group has already been involved in shaping the design of the hotel element of the scheme and it is expected that this will come forward with them immediately should the application be approved.</p> <p>Along Market Place, modestly larger retail stores are proposed to provide meaningful retail offerings on this main historic square.</p> <p>Along Swan Walk, smaller units have been provided. It is envisaged that smaller units, in particular, would offer a range of opportunities for retail operators and for market operators to consider scaling up into a store.</p> <p>In addition to the above, a childcare nursery operator and gym group are also in dialogue with the Applicant about securing 2 of the larger ground floor units situated in less active areas of the development.</p> <p>The standalone commercial unit in the new public plaza is to be used for a community use and intended initially to be used as sales office for the development and potentially for wider regeneration development in the area.</p>
<p>Public Realm and Amenity</p>	
<p>The panel applauds the design team's vision for the courtyard and the improved activation of Swan Walk. However, it finds the public realm lacking hierarchy and a clear sense of character.</p>	<p>The applicant team has carefully considered the panel's comments and has progressed the design to directly address these concerns. The amended proposals now has removed the previous colonnade which was a suggestion of the QRP. However, the width of Swan Walk has been maintained in order to ensure adequate access to Liberties. Reduce the impact in terms of scale, bulk and mass of the building on</p>
<p>Swan Walk should be secondary to Market Place. A narrower and more compressed space would create a better sense of place.</p>	
<p>Its current scale, in part driven by the requirements of the neighbouring Liberty</p>	

proposal, is too wide and of a street rather than lane scale. LB Havering could helpfully direct the two developers to deliver a more appropriate lane width.	Market Place in comparison with the existing building which is situated within the conservation area. As such, ensuring that Swan Walk is widened serves to better reveal the significance of this heritage asset.
The panel recommends looking at precedents such as Lower Stable Street and Bagley Walk at Kings Cross, which work more successfully.	However, landscaping improvements for Swan Walk and the public realm areas have been thoroughly reviewed to improve its appearance and give it a more inviting sense of place.
Removing the planters should be considered to declutter the space, thereby allowing retail spill-out and improving visibility to the Liberty entrance.	The applicant team has carefully considered the panel's comments and has progressed the design to improve play provision.
Alternative opportunities for greening should be maximised across the site and building to meet Urban Greening Factor targets.	On site play space for children aged 0-11 will be provided in compliance with adopted policy.
The scale and usability of the courtyard between the blocks should be considered further.	The development also incorporates a public water play feature which enhance the public realm and provide play for the public.
This area could be more successful as a private courtyard, using the pavilion as a secure line. Opportunities for play and residential amenity should be considered.	Further detail and evidence will be provided at submission to demonstrate how the panel's feedback has informed the design development.
The colonnade feels unnecessary, creating a negative undercroft space. Providing clear demarcated thresholds at the front of the units onto Swan Walk could be more successful.	The applicant team did look at this, and the proposed development has been amended partially to address these comments which has increased private amenity space for the residential elements. However, for a number of reasons, the space between the new hotel building and residential led elements has been kept partially public/accessible/permeable.
Further detail on child yield should be provided, to ensure there is sufficient allowance for children's play space given the number of homes proposed. This will be essential to demonstrate that the site can accommodate a high number of good quality homes.	Key reasons include: Operation management and servicing of the site; Fire safety;

	Future connectivity potential with Liberty and adjacent public house rear yard / potential beer garden; Construction sequencing and delivery.
Access and Servicing	
Gating the service access route to the rear of site would reduce the security risk in this area.	The applicant team has reviewed the proposals and ensured that all residential entrances are secure and feel safe. There are no issues of overlooking as compliant distances are provided between all proposed blocks and any prospective developments on adjacent land. The Project Team have been working with Liberties to ensure that neither development is prejudiced and that both are complementary to each other. Servicing has been particularly carefully considered and an operational management plan has been prepared that demonstrates that the development can function without any concerns. All elements of the development will be serviced from the rear with a central external communal lift that allows for private management for each respective element to move waste to the first floor level storage area and await collection from the rear. Further detail and evidence will be provided at submission to demonstrate how the panel's feedback has informed the design development.
The panel is not convinced that the proposed uses in this location would resolve overlooking, as gyms do not tend to have an active street frontage and a nursery would likely require some outside play space.	
The panel also notes that the Bull Tavern adjacent to the site has a lively yard space that will potentially be overlooked by future residents. The LB Havering should ensure that environmental health factors do not curtail the activities of this important part of Romford's evening economy on Market Place.	
Sustainability	
The sustainability statement is aspirational rather than evidential. Further proof of how sustainability targets will be achieved and how they have been used to inform the design would be welcomed.	The applicant team has carefully considered the panel's comments . Since this time, a comprehensive Energy Strategy, supported by an ENE04 Passive Design Statement and an ENE04 Low and Zero Carbon Feasibility Study, has been prepared in accordance with GLA Energy Planning Guidance, the London Plan and Part L 2021. The strategy follows the London Plan energy hierarchy, prioritising demand reduction,
A circular economy statement and pre-demolition audit should be provided to support the demolition of the existing building.	

	<p>efficient energy supply and on-site renewable energy generation.</p> <p>At the demand reduction stage, the scheme incorporates a high-performance building fabric, enhanced airtightness, efficient glazing and thermal detailing, alongside energy-efficient services including LED lighting and mechanical ventilation with heat recovery. These measures deliver carbon reductions of approximately 12% for residential uses and 15% for non-residential uses beyond Part L 2021 requirements, meeting the London Plan 'Be Lean' targets.</p> <p>The site is not located within an area of decentralised energy potential and there are no existing or planned district heat networks nearby. As a result, the scheme adopts all-electric, low-carbon heating solutions, avoiding on-site combustion and delivering zero on-site NOx emissions, in line with the Future Homes Standard and air quality objectives.</p> <p>At the renewable energy stage, the development incorporates air source heat pumps and a 68 kWp roof-mounted photovoltaic array, maximising available roof space and delivering further significant carbon savings. Other technologies were assessed and robustly discounted as unviable due to site constraints, limited carbon benefit or air quality considerations.</p> <p>Overall, the Energy Strategy demonstrates a site-wide regulated carbon reduction of approximately 40% beyond Part L 2021, exceeding the London Plan target of 35%. Residential uses achieve reductions of around 60%, with non-residential uses achieving approximately 35%. Any remaining shortfall will be addressed through a carbon offset contribution in accordance with London Borough of Havering policy.</p>
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	<p>In parallel, a Pre-Demolition Audit has been prepared in line with the BRE Code of Practice, London Plan Policy SI 7 and the Mayor of London's Circular Economy Guidance. The audit identifies extensive opportunities for reuse and high-value recycling, with approximately 120 tonnes of materials suitable for reuse, avoiding an estimated 195 tonnes of embodied carbon. A landfill diversion rate of at least 99% by weight is proposed, exceeding policy requirements.</p> <p>Together, the energy and circular economy assessments confirm that the scheme delivers a robust, future-proofed and environmentally responsible redevelopment, significantly reducing both operational and embodied carbon, minimising waste and environmental impact, and fully aligning with local and strategic sustainability policy objectives.</p>
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5. Key Planning Considerations

- Principle of Development

5.1 At present, the site is considered to represent an underutilised brownfield plot within a busy town centre, with an overprovision of commercial floorspace above ground floor level. As such, whilst it is important to maintain a healthy provision of commercial floorspace at ground floor level, to activate Market Place and Swan Walk, it is generally accepted that commercial floorspace at first floor levels and above are surplus to requirements in most modern town centre settings. In this respect, the proposal seeks to maintain a similar quantum of Class E floorspace at ground floor level to the existing building, albeit through the creation of multiple smaller units, but it should be recognised that the proposal would result in an overall reduction in Class E floorspace.

5.2 There is general support for the creation of new residential units within the scheme, taking advantage of Romford's excellent access to public transport and doorstep amenities.

5.3 The proposal also includes a proposed 118-bedroom hotel, positioned facing Market Place, and this is considered to be an acceptable town centre land use.

- Heritage Assets

5.4 The Romford Conservation Area extends along Market Place and down South Street towards the station, including the buildings on either sides of these

routes. Modern redevelopment from the mid-20th century onward has eroded the special historic character of the area to a degree, however, its special interest as a historic commercial centre of high local importance remains clearly legible. Ongoing development pressures mean that further development within and around the Conservation Area is very likely, and any new development will need to complement the positive features of the surrounding area to avoid any further harm to heritage assets.

5.5 The proposal is also in relatively close proximity to the Grade II* listed St Edward the Confessor Church, the Grade II listed Golden Lion Public House, and the Grade II listed Lamb Public House, all located on the north side of Market Place.

- Layout, Scale and Massing

5.6 In planning policy terms, there is scope for some taller buildings to be introduced in this location, to allow any redevelopment to properly optimise this town centre, brownfield site, however it is important that taller elements respond appropriately to the historically lower rise context of Romford Town Centre, whilst also being cognisant of the emerging proposals within the adjacent Liberty Centre.

5.7 The proposal would introduce a fairly substantial change in both the massing and the quantum of development across this part of Romford, with the introduction of a 12 and 14 storey building at the southern end of the plot. Whilst significantly taller than most of the existing buildings in the area, there are some examples of taller buildings nearby (e.g. Mercury House), with various other consented schemes within the wider town centre of a similar scale and height.

5.8 Improvements to Swan Walk are proposed, in tandem with the adjacent application for the Liberty Site, and there is a general intention to make this route wider and improve its overall appearance. It is considered that Swan Walk could provide a key route through the town centre if activated well with supporting high-street commercial frontages along its length.

- Detailed Design

5.9 The proposed development would largely be finished in red brick, utilising a mix of tones to articulate the various sections of the buildings, with paler tones proposed for the tallest proposed building, in the south-east corner. The ground floor is designed to provide a solid base to the buildings, utilising different materials and design techniques to the upper floors, to emphasise the different land uses within the scheme (commercial uses at ground floor level with residential and hotel uses above).

5.10 The proposed fenestration gives the buildings a clear vertical emphasis, and the proposed buildings have a well defined base and middle, with some articulation and differentiation of the tallest elements through the use of vertical

soldier courses and decorative motifs, although these elements are somewhat modest in the context of tall buildings.

- Transport, Parking and Servicing

5.11 The application site has a Public Transport Accessibility Level (PTAL) of 6a, on a score from 0 (worst) to 6b (best), indicative of excellent access to public transport. As such, the proposal is proposed to be car-free, in line with London Plan policies for well-connected areas.

5.12 The proposal includes five disabled parking bays, which would be accessed via the existing servicing access road to the east of the site which connects with Mercury Gardens.

5.13 Servicing would also take place from Mercury Gardens, utilising the previous servicing area positioned on the access road which sweeps round the Liberty Centre at roof level, however the Transport Assessment further notes that there is also the potential to provide a small level of servicing from Market Place (outside of Market days and within current timing restrictions).

- Landscaping and Ecology

5.14 The proposed scheme would have an Urban Greening Factor (UGF) of 0.4, which is the target for residential-led developments, and is set out as being exempt from the Biodiversity Net Gain requirements as less than 25 sqm of habitat currently exists on-site.

- Unit Mix

5.15 The residential component of the proposal would comprise of 155 units within Blocks 2 and 3, in the south of the site, with 62 units within Block 2 and 93 within Block 3. Of these 155 units, 59 would be 1-bedroom units (38%), 50 would be 2-bedroom units (32%), and 46 would be three-bedroom units (30%), representing a fairly even split of unit sizes.

5.16 All of the new dwellings would have private external amenity space in excess of the London Plan standards. There will also be shared podium external amenity space that would provide outdoor play for toddlers and young children, although not all play space demands can be met on site (for ages 12+).

- Affordable Housing

5.17 Whilst a Financial Viability Assessment has not been submitted with the application, the Planning Statement sets out that the scheme will not meet the policy target of 35% of affordable housing (by habitable room). However, the Planning Statement further explains that the proposal would seek to provide affordable housing provision equal to 20%, equivalent to 91 habitable rooms, and the applicant has suggested these could be provided as 17 x 3-bedroom

units, 7 x 2-bedroom units, and 1 x 1-bedroom unit, which is significantly weighted in favour of family-sized accommodation.

6. Conclusions

- 6.1 The proposal to redevelop the former Debenhams building within Romford as a residential-led scheme, with ground floor commercial uses and a hotel block facing towards Market Place, is considered to be broadly acceptable in principle, making effective use of a brownfield site in a very accessible location, with doorstep amenities available for future occupiers. However, any redevelopment proposal needs to be conscious of the site's historic setting, and the balancing of these two material considerations will be key to the assessment of this application's overall acceptability.
- 6.2 Please note that this application has been submitted and is currently under assessment by the local planning authority. Members comments and considerations on the current proposals would be welcomed in order to inform further negotiations on the scheme.