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## Purpose of this report

This report provides an assessment of character in relation to a proposal for the development of affordable rental housing at 2 Riverhill Avenue Forestville. This report has reviewed amended architectural and landscape plans which are dated September 2011.

This report has been requested by the *Joint Regional Planning Panel (Sydney East)*, and considers the development proposal according to clause 16A of *SEPP (Affordable Rental Housing) 2009* which requires the following consideration:

*"whether the design of the development is compatible with the character of the area".*

The SEPP does not define or explain character, the meaning of compatibility or the area which should be considered. Consequently, this report will summarise the approach which has been adopted in relation to the necessary considerations.

## Summary of conclusions

Although the amended development proposal is not entirely without merit, it does not demonstrate a satisfactory degree of compatibility with character of the surrounding area.

Unsatisfactory compatibility arises from:

- The siting and form of proposed buildings;
- Distribution of deep soil and potential for landscaping of certain critical areas;
- Design character of exterior architecture; and
- The orientation of certain dwellings.

Negative aspects of built form include the repetition of elements that are modular and rectilinear, plus exterior architecture which presents a hard-edged appearance. These aspects of the proposed development would contrast starkly with the softer pattern of the more-traditional domestic architecture which is a characteristic of the surrounding neighbourhood.

In relation to amenity which is a characteristic of the surrounding area, the proposed concentration of accommodation and activities close to the western boundary would affect the current level of amenity which is enjoyed by immediate neighbours. These aspects of the proposal would not be compatible with character of the surrounding area.

Ability of the proposed development to achieve compatibility with neighbourhood character relies heavily upon landscape screening. However, effectiveness of proposed screening would be compromised by the limited width and depth of deep soil that would be available in certain critical locations.

Reasonable compatibility with the area's character has not been demonstrated due to the extent or scale of visual and amenity contrasts that would result from the proposed development.

With regard to visual character, the majority of concerns may be remedied by simple design alternatives. In relation to amenity as an element of neighbourhood character, reasonable compatibility demands more-comprehensive design amendments.

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## Approach to this assessment

As noted, clause 16A of SEPP (ARH) provides no guidance regarding the assessment of character, the evaluation of compatibility, or extent of the area which should be considered.

The approach adopted for this assessment is consistent with the logic of character-based strategies and planning controls which the author of this report has prepared for a succession of municipal clients over more than 15 years.

Furthermore, the approach which has been adopted is consistent with *planning principles* that have been published by the *NSW Land and Environment Court* and relevant elements of the local planning controls:

- *Planning principles* which refer to elements of compatibility:
  - GPC No 5 (Wombarra) Pty Ltd v Wollongong City Council [2003] NSWLEC 268*
  - Project Venture Developments Pty Ltd v Pittwater Council [2005] NSWLEC 191*
- Elements of *Warringah LEP 2000*:
  - Clause 12 and the statement of desired future character for locality C1 – *Middle Harbour Suburbs*.

This assessment has considered “character” according to patterns which contribute to a neighbourhood’s identity: building forms, gardens, streets and streetscapes, plus the overall level of amenity.

Character typically is considered in terms of existing and desired patterns. However, this assessment recognises that local planning controls do not accommodate significant change, and therefore that existing and desired character are effectively similar or the same entity.

This assessment considers that “compatibility” is achieved where a development proposal incorporates or “reflects” patterns or qualities which contribute to identity of a neighbourhood. Note that the relevant consideration does not require consistency or “sameness”, but the demonstration of a considered design response to patterns or qualities which are evident features of a neighbourhood. It is convenient to summarise compatibility by reference to the design quality principles that are specified by *SEPP No 65*.

Because this assessment has a focus upon visual and amenity considerations, the area or neighbourhood to be considered must allow direct comparisons between existing patterns and the proposed development. Inspection of the locality surrounding the subject site confirms that the relevant area for consideration involves the street block that is bounded Warringah Road, Forestville Avenue, Riverhill Avenue and Melwood Avenue, and the opposite frontages to those streets.

In relation to direct visual or amenity associations, the consideration of character according to a wider reference area would provide very loose directions in relation to design quality. Consequently, consideration of a wider reference area would have no practical purpose in relation to clause 16A of the SEPP.

A final point to note is that character assessments typically assign greatest weight to visual comparisons which are available from public places such as roads. Although the proposed development would be visible from the four streets that define boundaries for this assessment, comparisons from the local streets (Forestville and Riverhill) are likely to involve higher levels of sensitivity than Warringah Road where arterial traffic tends to limit the opportunity for considered visual comparisons.

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Opportunities to make visual comparisons are influenced by existing features such as trees and buildings which are likely to screen a development proposal. In relation to the subject application, this assessment recognises that visibility would be variable:

- Forestville Avenue:
  - Direct visibility of proposed buildings E and G from the intersection with Riverhill;
  - Intermittent visibility of buildings A, C, D and E between Riverhill and Warringah.
- Riverhill Avenue:
  - Continuous visibility of buildings G;
  - Intermittent visibility of buildings E and F moving westwards from Melwood.
- Melwood Avenue:
  - Intermittent visibility of buildings B, E and F.
- Warringah Road:
  - Visibility of buildings A, B, C and D travelling east from the intersection opposite Forestville;
  - Frontal visibility of buildings A, B and C travelling west.

## **Character of the area**

This assessment considers that character of the area is influenced by the following:

- Streetscape character is influenced by a semi-regular pattern of detached dwellings:
  - Footprints demonstrate considerable variations, with overall dimensions that range from 10m to 15m wide by 10m to 30m deep;
  - Although minimum street setbacks are relatively consistent, articulation of front facades contributes to the apparent diversity of front garden dimensions;
  - Heights vary from one to two storeys.
- Architecture varies according to the age of buildings:
  - Nevertheless, traditional domestic features are evident: gently-pitched roofs with eaves, double-fronted alignments for front facades as well as front porches or verandahs are most common;
  - In general, architectural styles may be considered “unassuming” or modest.
- The “green setting” has a pronounced influence upon streetscape character:
  - Green setting of the area is influenced predominantly by deep back yards;
  - Secondly, green streetscapes are provided by front gardens which vary from deep setbacks facing Warringah Road to shallower setbacks along Melwood, Riverhill and Forestville Avenues, together with deciduous street trees that overhang street pavements (particularly along Riverhill Avenue);
  - Taller trees prove feature elements of private gardens and streetscapes, and include a visually-prominent copse at the centre of this street block and smaller clusters facing Warringah Road;
  - Clusters of shrubs and smaller trees on several properties also influence streetscapes.
- A high level of residential amenity which is typical of traditional low density neighbourhoods:
  - Amenity is most-apparent for properties that front Riverhill and Forestville Avenues, which are protected from the impacts of traffic along arterial or collector roads;

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Amenity is influenced by the density and siting of buildings, together with the location and orientation of living areas, and the broad separation between neighbours which is provided by back yards;

Amenity also is influenced by the “traditional residential addresses” which are displayed by all dwellings.

## **The proposal and character compatibility**

Some features of the amended development proposal would be compatible with the area’s character:

- Distribution of floor area into eight separate buildings:

The overall dimensions of each building are similar to those of surrounding detached dwellings, which contributes to positive effects in relation to context and scale.
- Deep soil areas that would be retained along the eastern boundary:

An communal area measuring 20m by 40m would reflect back yard areas which are characteristic of this area;

Also, a setback of 13m from Warringah Road would retain current landscape character for at least the eastern half of that road frontage;

Collectively, these measures would contribute to positive effects in relation to context, landscape, scale and density.
- Retention of visually-prominent trees:

Extensive deep soil areas next to the eastern boundary and Warringah Road would allow visually-prominent clusters of trees to be retained, and would achieve positive outcomes in relation to context and landscape.
- Distinct residential addresses are proposed for all dwellings next to street frontages:

Positive features include private courtyard entrances, building lobbies, living room windows and balconies that face street frontages, and these would provide positive outcomes in relation to context as well as safety and security (in terms of character, safety and security contribute to the neighbourhood’s amenity).

However, the amended proposal also contains a number of features which would be distinctly incompatible with the area’s character:

- Unsatisfactory design responses to the scale of developments upon neighbouring properties and to the amenity of those properties:

These outcomes would be most evident along the western boundary, where the consistency of three storey modular forms and setbacks demonstrates no consideration of context, scale, built form, landscape or amenity of the neighbouring properties.
- Insufficient variation and articulation of the proposed building forms:

In general, the repetition of near-identical three storey building forms which display a modular and rectilinear character would not reflect the degree of diversity which is characteristic of the surrounding area;

Use of identical setbacks and the repetition of near-identical building forms would be inappropriate for the frontage to Riverhill Avenue;

Repetition of similar dimensions for western facades and courtyards would accentuate scale and visual density of the proposed development.

Overall, these outcomes would not be appropriate in terms of context, scale and built form.

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- Inappropriate application of a “hard-edged” exterior architecture:

Rectilinear forms, frequently with limited shadow articulation of prominent facades, would be visible from street frontages as well as from Forestville Avenue;

Western elevations comprise sheer three storey planes with horizontal banding, and would present a prominent backdrop to neighbouring properties as well as to vantage points along Forestville Avenue;

Facing Riverhill Avenue, facades are composed of “frame-with-infill”, and are capped by steep, “sharp” skillion roof forms that would appear inconsistent with the street’s established architectural character;

Overall, the stark contrast presented by the proposed exterior architecture would be incompatible with the area’s character, and would be unsatisfactory in terms of context, scale, built form and aesthetics.
  - Green character of street setbacks would be compromised by driveways without adequate landscaped verges:

Siting of driveways hard against buildings with only one narrow verge would prevent canopy landscaping that might have disguised the effect of paved intrusions into front garden areas;

Streetscape of Riverhill Avenue in particular would be compromised by a visually-intrusive ramp that is exposed over a length of nearly 30m, and impacts of the ramp would not be mitigated by the one-way width or by the proposed 2m deep soil verge next to the western boundary;

Facing Forestville Road, the wider two-way ramp has a shorter length, but would provide a vista into the site that would be terminated by the sheer side elevation of Building C, and impacts would not be mitigated by proposed landscaping in a planter bed over the driveway, or by proposed landscaped verges that are only 1m wide;

In summary, the location and design of proposed driveways, combined with the absence of effective deep soil landscaping along both sides of the proposed driveways, would be unsatisfactory in terms of context and landscape, and would have indirect impacts in relation to scale, built form and the visible aspect of density.
  - Amenity of neighbours and the surrounding area would be compromised by the concentration of activities along the western boundary:

Immediately next to the western boundary, proposed buildings C, D, E and G2 contain a total of twelve dwellings with balconies that would expose six neighbouring properties to overlooking and increased levels of noise from general occupancy (setting aside any impact of possible “nuisance” events);

The exit ramp to Riverhill Avenue incorporates a long steep gradient which is likely to contribute to excessive noise impacts for neighbours;

These impacts are undesirable in terms of context and amenity.
  - Use of landscaping to screen visual and amenity impacts is not appropriate:

In order to manage potential impacts over the short to medium term, likely impacts should be anticipated and addressed by the appropriate siting and design of buildings;

Notwithstanding the principle that impacts should not rely upon landscape screening, effectiveness of screen plantings that are proposed along the western boundary would be compromised by narrow deep soil setbacks which are only 2m or less;

Overall, proposed landscaping would not eliminate undesirable outcomes in relation to context, scale, built form, the visible aspect of density, amenity and aesthetics.

On balance, the extent and degree of undesirable outcomes indicate that design of the amended development proposal would not be “compatible with the character of the area”.