

Appendix 2

13 October 2015

Nathan Craker
Vanderbilt Homes
Apollo House
Mercury Park
Wycombe Lane
Wooburn Green
Buckinghamshire
HP10 0HH

Our reference: DCC/0716

Oxford City Council: Land North of Littlemore Mental Health Centre

Your reference: 15/02269/RES

Dear Nathan Craker,

Thank you for submitting this scheme to us; we reviewed the proposal on 24 September 2015. This is our formal response to the reserved matters planning application.

Principles

The principle of a new residential development on the land north of Littlemore Mental Health Centre is sensible. It will help provide much needed housing in the city, and can add to the character of Littlemore and better define the southern boundary of Oxford. The basic design moves are sound but need to be further tested, developed, and reinforced by details. The efforts to provide pedestrian connections from the site to the adjacent Sainsbury's supermarket and in future into the centre of Littlemore via connections over the railway are highly commendable. Further thought to prioritise pedestrian routes is required. The building scale across the site is appropriate as it is in keeping with that of the surrounding area and the overall approach to building design is reasonable.

The potential of a new "village" on this undeveloped plot of land overlooking green fields is great. While the scheme has the individual ingredients of a 'place' – housing, streets and open space – a site layout that overcomes the feeling of isolation, is unique to the area and supports the daily lives of residents of all ages has not been achieved. A much more ambitious and creative design approach is required and fundamental areas of the design approach as follows need to be addressed:

1. Increase the amount of public open space and develop a landscape strategy
2. Simplify the road layout including the cul-de-sacs and parking courtyards
3. Improve pedestrian accessibility across the site

As a result of the design shortcomings stated above, we are unable to support this planning application at this stage.



Design concept

A meaningful and captivating narrative of this scheme is not evident in the current proposal. The concept of a new “village” for Littlemore could be further developed to ensure an attractive new neighbourhood in this suburban location. The special qualities of this site, specifically the subterranean remains of the iron age banjo, the view across the open fields to the west, and the Sites of Specific Scientific Interest to the north can help to underpin the design approach going forward.

Open space and landscape design

More public open space is needed to support the high capacity of future residents in this housing development. A larger central open space and streets with green verges will help to ensure the neighbourhood is more pleasant and feels homely. We recommend reducing the amount of private garden spaces across the scheme to help achieve this balance of green and built spaces. A landscape maintenance plan will give confidence to the residents and city council that this site will be adequately maintained over time.

In addition, a landscape strategy is required to ensure the open space is truly active and that users can feel safe and comfortable in these spaces throughout the day and night. This will be possible with more definition to the open spaces and public realm, particularly in terms of use such as defined play spaces for children. The edge treatment, which is crucial on a site bounded by a railway line and busy main road, appears unresolved and will benefit from further work. The concept of a central open space in the location of the historic banjo works well. While we welcome the principle of a wildlife pond, it does not appear to be meaningfully integrated into the proposal in terms of its location and proximity to Littlemore Mental Health Centre MUGA. The efforts to address water attenuation are sound, but we recommend more investigation to ensure the proposed swales are sufficient, particularly during peak rainfall seasons. More initiatives and detail on sustainable urban drainage will be greatly beneficial.

Site layout

The network of access routes should be further simplified to make better use of the land and wayfinding easier. For example, the number of cul-de-sacs that do not lead anywhere is confusing. In terms of the spine road, we recommend accentuating three key areas – the site entrance, central open space, and public realm around the possible future pedestrian bridge over the existing railway line – to create distinct parts of the site that come together in a clear narrative about the new village. We suggest specifically improving the sense of arrival in the approach to the building design and quality of spaces around the site entrance.

The building layout and design does not appear to respond to the site contours and should be driven more by sustainability in terms of the orientation. This results in a somewhat haphazard site layout. Stepped terraced housing that follow the site contours could contribute to the look and feel of an interesting scheme. We recommend the design team specifically address the areas where houses face the backs of other houses.



Car parking

The large amount of cars and car parking compromises pedestrian safety, the natural beauty of the site and quality of the open spaces, particularly the allocated car parking adjacent to the central open space. We accept the need for maximum car parking on this site. However, pedestrian access does not appear to be prioritised and the treatment and arrangement of parking courtyards, and on and off plot car parking should be more sensitively incorporated across the site. We suggest more soft landscaping and permeable hard surfaces to help reduce the impact of the tarmac and hard landscaping. Narrowing some roads could make the neighbourhood feel more homely and help define which roads should/should not accommodate on-street car parking. Green car port roofs, for example, would provide calmer views from bedrooms and hide the view of parked cars. House types that better integrate car parking so that cars are less prominent from the street are highly recommended.

Building design

The repeated house types currently give the impression of a generic, uninspiring development. We suggest, for example, designing apartment blocks that are more different to the house types. In terms of sustainable building design, further evidence of how the proposed houses and apartment blocks mitigate solar heat gain and maximise on natural light is needed. Providing flat green roofs on some of the apartment blocks or houses, for example, could help with water attenuation and drainage.

Thank you for consulting us and please keep us informed of the progress of the scheme. If there is any point that requires clarification, please telephone us.

Yours sincerely



Victoria Lee
Design Council Cabe Advisor
Email Victoria.lee@designcouncil.org.uk
Tel +44(0)20 7420 5244



cc (by email only)

Graeme Towle	TSH Architects
Rob Froud-Williams	Kemp and Kemp LLP
Steven Sensecall	Kemp and Kemp LLP
Andrew Murdoch	Oxford City Council

Review process

Following a site visit and discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed on 24 September 2015 by Fred Manson (chair), Deborah Nagan and Peter Studdert. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

As this scheme is the subject of a planning application, we will publish our views on our website, www.designcouncil.org.uk.