

## CONFIDENTIAL

AECOM  
Aldgate Tower  
2 Leman Street  
London  
E1 8FA

22<sup>nd</sup> December 2017

Our reference: DCC/0904

### **Oxford City Council: Wolvercote Paper Mill**

Dear Paul Comerford,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Design Review on 7 December 2017.

The site benefits from a rich history, attractive waterside setting and adjacent community hub (village green and pubs) presenting an opportunity to deliver a new development that has a strong sense of identity and distinctiveness. The current scheme is only partially successful in responding to this context, with a largely successful design and layout of the three blocks of housing to the north of the site but a less well resolved design and layout to south of the site including the entrance to the development. The approach to the entrance to the site requires more careful design to ensure that it relates better and contributes as much as possible to the existing settlement of Wolvercote. In developing the design of the scheme the adjacency to the Wolvercote Conservation Area should be treated as an asset and integrating the development with its adjoining places/ communities should be a key part of the vision.

The layout and typology of blocks to the north of the site (immediately east of the reservoir) are working well but the area to the south of the reservoir requires more work. The tall element at the entrance gives the impression of a high density tall development when most of the development is of a relatively modest, domestic scale. It also has an uncomfortable juxtaposition with the neighbouring buildings in the Wolvercote Conservation Area.

The southern part of the scheme needs to be more responsive to its surroundings in order to successfully integrate with the existing neighbourhood, and a more thorough contextual analysis is required. We would recommend some further work on the layout and height and massing at the south east corner to enhance the historic cul-de-sac and create a better relationship between the existing and new neighbourhoods. We would recommend revising the layout and distribution of height and massing within the southern part of the site to create a more open site entrance. Alternative configurations of vehicular routes and building positions should be considered as part of this process. We acknowledge that the outline consent planning condition (condition no. 7 of 13/01861/OUT) places certain restrictions on height, however there may be scope to add height in more appropriate

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locations if it improves the site layout and quality of development being delivered and this could be tested during the next stage of design development.

We think there is scope to be more adventurous with the sustainability strategy which could include green roofs, food growing and provision for electric car charging points. We encourage the design team to progress a strategy in conjunction with the overall design.

A follow up review is recommended following further design work.

### **Integration with context**

The site benefits from a unique setting being surrounded by a neighbourhood with a distinctive historic character and charm but we think the development has not yet forged a special connection between the existing and new neighbourhoods. We recommend more thought is given to the user experience at the main entrance/street to the south west of the site in particular and how the setting of the Village Green and Mill Road could be enhanced. This corner is likely to be a key focal point of townscape importance and should create a sense of arrival whilst enhancing the existing communal focal point formed by the two pubs on Godstow Road. To take advantage of this key corner, this part of the site could be more distinct by creating an attractive entry point, providing an open space, or a community use.

The site's ecology creates opportunities to establish a new neighbourhood that has a distinct character and identity. The reservoir will be a popular ecological attraction for the local community once it is made publicly accessible. Opening up this facility to members of the public and creating an amenity space by this water feature are both positive design steps but it could generate high footfall and this should be considered in its design and management. There is potential for community recreational facilities to be incorporated here which should be explored.

There is also an opportunity to establish links with existing community uses, such as the community run pub through the provision of new commercial and community facilities. We would advise working with community groups on specific facilities to ensure they are viable.

### **Heights, massing and architecture**

There is a lack of gradation in the height and massing providing an immediate step up in density/scale from the surrounding area. This is exacerbated by the awkward footprint of the block at the entrance to the site, we are not convinced by massing and configuration of the triangular apartment block typology and how this more urban looking block relates to the surrounding low rise historic houses within the adjacent conservation area. This creates a stark contrast and makes this new neighbourhood feel alienated from its context when the majority of buildings within the site are of a modest height and a more domestic typology. However, we think careful site planning and reconfiguration of the southern area of the site could create an opportunity for a taller building providing this is positioned away from the immediate site entrance. Getting the footprint and location of this building right could enable a positive taller building/ piece of architecture to emerge.

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The emerging architecture for housing is of a high standard and should create high quality homes. We have some concerns that the car parking in the front gardens may result in these areas being overly dominated by hardstanding, creating a bland environment. The car port dwellings run the risk of detracting from the quality of the public realm and architecture and we encourage the design team to pay particular attention to this element of the design. Technological innovations might result in patterns of car ownership declining or changing in the future, leading to the fewer cars being needed and this could be planned into the design, by designing car ports to be adaptable and providing opportunities for car sharing. To encourage the adoption of electric car ownership we recommend providing a communal source for fast car charging.

### Site layout

The current approach to site planning prioritises vehicle users and fails to integrate the site fully with the neighbouring settlement and conservation area. Reducing the speed of vehicle movements should be a clear design driver within the development. The location and design of routes through the development needs more work and should prioritise non-car based movement. We recommend avoiding formal one way systems which might encourage higher speeds, particularly along the long route to the east of the site. This could be discouraged by punctuating routes with traffic calming measures to prompt drivers to slow down and be more cognisant of the presence and needs of pedestrians. Shared spaces could work within this environment but we think it would be beneficial to provide separate entrances for pedestrians to the site where possible. Social interaction between residents could be encouraged by including seating, landscape and play opportunities along the street and at the central junctions.

### Landscape

The site benefits from a special setting with the reservoir providing a unique ecological habitat and point of interest. The biodiversity, landscape and setting are valuable assets that this scheme could enhance and capitalise on. However, there is a lack of detail for the landscape and the proposals could be more ambitious in this respect. We would advise giving thought to how a sense of character could be created in the landscape design. The scheme would benefit from an analysis of the condition of the existing trees to inform a site-wide tree strategy. The historic hedgerow in the middle of the site is a clear constraint that compromises the best use of site, its removal could be justified if it creates a more coherent layout and the scheme provides overall landscape enhancements. Some of the other trees may be in poor health and could potentially be replaced with specimens that would better complement the site and have a longer life span. As an example, there could be phased removal and replacement of the plane trees that are in poor health to the east of the site once any newly planted vegetation becomes established. Thought should be given to the long term resilience of any replacement planting to disease and climate change.

This is a beautiful site but there is the unfortunate presence of existing road noise which could detract from the tranquillity of the homes and outdoor amenity spaces. On site mitigation should be explored but we recommend this should be addressed at source via the provision of attenuation measures or a barrier close to the road.

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The maintenance, security, supervision and upkeep of the strip of land for maintenance to the east will require careful planning as it will be an unmonitored, with an ongoing maintenance requirement. It could feel like a leftover piece of space and quite isolated and exposed, particularly at night time. It might be worth investigating if this space and the trees at the site boundary could be given to the new homes that abut this piece of land.

New planting on the site could make reference to the site's past use as a paper mill by incorporating plants for making paper such as birch trees. Providing allotments for the local community would create a place for interaction and a valuable ergonomic resource.

Allowing public access to the reservoir is a significant benefit of this project but also creates safety issues and we recommend giving thought to how safety features could be carefully integrated within the landscape.

We hope you have found the review process and the content of this letter useful. Should you have any other queries please do hesitate to contact us.

Yours sincerely

A. Osborne

**Annabel Osborne**

Design Council Cabe Advisor

Email: [annabel.osborne@designcouncil.org.uk](mailto:annabel.osborne@designcouncil.org.uk)

Tel: +44(0)20 7420 5207

### **Review process**

Following a site visit, (and) discussions with the design team and local authority and a pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 7 December 2017 by Mike Hayes (Chair), Ben Hamilton-Baillie, Dan Jones, Jessica Byrne Daniel and Kathryn Davies. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

### **Confidentiality**

Since the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application, the advice contained in this letter is offered in confidence, on condition that we are kept informed of the progress of the project, including when it becomes the subject of a planning application. We reserve the right to make our views known should the views contained in this letter be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). If you do not require our views to be kept confidential, please write to [dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk](mailto:dc.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk).