



Barton Masterplan, Oxford 2nd November 2012

Panel Members

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 (Chair)

Introduction

Thank you for asking the BOB MK Design Panel to review the masterplan for Barton. The panel believe that, on the whole, the masterplan has been improved and are pleased to see that progress has been made since the BOB MK workshop on the 4th May. There are however, areas that can be strengthened further and thought about in more detail at this stage.

Below is a report summarising the comments and suggestions that the panel would like to make

The A40

The Panel was disappointed in the approach to the A40, and the limited opportunities for surface 'at grade' crossings to integrate the new development into the existing suburbs of Oxford. It is understood that this is a constraint placed upon the development by the AAP, following examination in public. However, the Panel urge all those involved in the project to remember the timescales over which this development will take place, and to take any opportunities that may arise in future years to review this relationship.

Without easy access – especially for pedestrians and cyclists – across the A40, the new development will remain isolated – just as Barton is now. It will make it harder for new residents to access facilities south of the A40, such as jobs at the John

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Radcliffe, or schools, and likewise existing residents will not easily benefit from the proposed facilities on the new development. It will also place a higher reliance on the private car and public transport, and is in every way an undesirable outcome. In balancing the competing issues of crossings vs congestion vs speed vs safety, the Panel have a strong view that much greater weight should be placed on the needs of existing and new residents to the north and south of the A40.

The masterplan should therefore be prepared on the basis that 'at some time in the future' a surface crossing will be provided at the south east corner of the sub-station, as well as in place of the existing underpass that currently provides pedestrian access to Barton. We very much hope that surface solutions can be found before substantial expenditure has been made on improving the existing or providing new underpasses, which is very much a sub-optimal solution.

Masterplan

The masterplan 'does the job'. It is – correctly in the Panel's view – a landscape based masterplan. It builds in the existing hedgerows, it makes good use of the stream along the northern boundary and locates public space there, and it integrates with the street network of Barton to the east, and across the A40 to Northway to the south west. It also builds in new tree planting. It has clearly responded to the earlier comments, and the general layout of the streets and layouts of the blocks. The one weak area is how the masterplan responds to the 'future crossing' of the A40 at the south east corner of the sub-station.

21st Century Garden Suburb and Long Term Stewardship

The Panel agree with the idea of a garden suburb but feel that there is still some way to go until it can truly be branded and considered as such. A garden suburb is so much more than a landscape based masterplan – the long term management of the estate is crucial, and needs to be planned for at this early stage.

The philosophy of a 21st Century Garden Suburb needs to be clearly defined and understood in order for Barton to become an exemplar scheme. It is understood that the aim is to create a 'cohesive neighbourhood but with variety of density and style', however it is not clear how this will be maintained throughout the years.

The long term management and ownership of the dwellings and the defining character of the green landscape have not been thought through in enough detail for the area to be considered a 'garden suburb'. Bourneville, for example, feels safe for families and has a strong sense of community due to the original forward thinking

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about management and maintenance. There is a concern that if the County Council do not take on the responsibility of maintaining the trees and greenery then it will be too expensive for the residents to uphold and will therefore not be upheld. Oxfordshire County Council do have a good record of maintaining local parks e.g. Bury Knowle Park, however it must be noted that managing a park is very different to managing hedgerows in between housing plots and green squares in residential areas.

Although long term ownership of bits of the site by Grosvenor (the commercial centre) and the City (affordable housing, possibly streets and some elements of the public realm and green space), there is no indication of how this would be translated into an overall management strategy, nor to new forms of leasehold or similar tenure, nor is it clear how the proposed energy centre (CHP) would provide heat to the development, who would be responsible, how this might impact on provision to both affordable and market housing.

Costs of on-going management also need to be considered at this stage – it is not enough to say that the on-going costs would be met through a service charge on each property, as that is unlikely to be affordable to most residents.

One way of creating a 21st century development would be to provide managed work spaces i.e. facilities for home working, installation of fibre-optic connections and meeting places for networking. People's working patterns have changed so the dwellings need to reflect this with a flexibility to cater for a live/work lifestyle. There is a concern that the volume house builders will have the ultimate control over the design of the houses and will thus simply roll out the standard housing types.

The panel would like the branding of the garden suburb to be considered and would like to know what aspects of the scheme will make it exemplar. There is an underlying feeling that, perhaps, the development needs to set out and reflect garden suburb principles that respond to today's lifestyles, rather than being another estate. The Council's aspiration as partner is to create an exemplar. In order to achieve this, a management strategy must be established at this stage and that the opportunity for long-term interest by developers in the suburb should be explored. The panel would like to see more information on a sustainability strategy and how the involvement of the developers and partners (Oxford City Council and Grosvenor) will be incorporated as part of the sustainability agenda.

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Benefits to Northway and Barton

The Panel was disappointed that the project seemed to be conceived as a new development, and not an opportunity to make significant improvements to Barton and Northway. There are unlikely to be any other opportunities to get inward investment into these neighbouring areas once this development has taken place.

The aim of the masterplan is understood to be to allow the new facilities to be 'owned' as much by Northway and Barton as by the new development (see two centres below). To create a truly cohesive neighbourhood there needs to be improvements in the surrounding, existing neighbourhoods of Northway and Barton in terms of landscaping, redevelopment opportunities, and the local economy as well simply interlinking the roads. If people are to drive through Barton in order to get to the new community there has to be some regenerative benefits for Barton that Oxford City Council must consider.

Given that one of the aims of the new development is to provide 40% affordable housing, there are many opportunities to re-house residents from the neighbouring areas, especially where their current housing no longer meets their needs. This then presents the possibility of redeveloping some of the existing social housing. The panel was disappointed that this was not even mentioned, whereas it should be one of the overall aims of the project. A strategy setting out phased improvements to the surrounding areas on this basis should form a core part of the project, and not be a forgotten afterthought. This also links back to the 'garden city' aspiration above - the new development risks being only a new housing estate, and not maximising the potential for change in the area as a whole.

The Panel noted that because the City Council are involved as landowner, there is scope for a more proactive approach in relation to any potential impact of the new development on existing neighbourhood centres, than that enabled only by the planning system.

Two Centres rather than One

The Panel – after robust discussion – accepted the philosophy that the new development should locate the new commercial and community facilities so that they benefit existing residents as much as those on the new development. Nonetheless there remained concerns that the two centres may disperse community activity too far. If Northway and Barton do not make use of these new facilities, the new community of 800 houses is unlikely to support both, or rather, they are unlikely both to be vibrant as the schools and shops are too far apart to naturally

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complement one another e.g. parents and school children are unlikely to go from school and straight into a coffee or local convenience shop.

However, the masterplan has ensured that those that want to make 'linked trips' will be more likely to do so, with the direct and clear connection of Middle Street between the two centres. This mid section of Middle Street should have higher ground floor heights to provide future flexibility should commercial uses wish to locate there, which will help create continuity of street activity between the two centres.

Street Order

The relationship of the new streets in the development with the A40 is difficult. In order to change driver's attitudes towards the change in speed limit from the proposed 50mph on the A40 to 20mph within a short transition space, the entrance design is crucial and the streets must have 'incidents' along them e.g. horizontal shifts in alignment, material changes and trees or other three-dimensional features which introduce 'side friction' along the carriageway to make it clear to drivers that the order of the streets has changed. While the physical width of streets needs to allow for larger vehicles, the visual width can be narrowed to help slow vehicle speeds.

There is particular concern near the supermarket, and the risk of the shop 'overtrading' by being used by those passing on the A40 as an out of town supermarket, when it is only of the size of a neighbourhood supermarket. The volume of traffic this would generate would quickly degrade the area. The Panel was concerned that role of the supermarket was slightly confused. On the one hand it was to be a neighbourhood supermarket, not promoted by signage on the A40, and its location near the A40 was as much a function of the overall masterplan design and a desire to be near to Northway rather than for functional reasons. On the other hand, this is the phase of the development that is planned to be first, and that before the new development is occupied, the supermarket will depend on trade from those passing on the A40 – risking the potential of overtrading. The Panel suggest that further thought is given to how to reduce these risks.

The massing also shows the supermarket block being higher than the block immediately on the A40 junction, drawing attention to the supermarket block itself. Perhaps this needs to be reviewed.

On the current plans all of the streets are measured at 6.1 metres wide, which seems wide except for Middle Street, which is the main 'spine' of the development, likely to carry the most traffic, and also, importantly, the bus route. Street width

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needs to be varied between the main and side roads so that the order is clearly indicated.

In Neighbourhood 2, north of Middle Street, the Panel questioned if it was desirable to have new hedgerows between the blocks, resulting in the need for two 'single sided' roads for each block. This arrangement also broke the enclosure on the north side of Middle Street. Instead, the blocks could be made slightly wider, with scope for large planting in the back gardens. This would also remove the issue of who would maintain the hedges in the longer term.

Plots

A number of the plots are arranged awkwardly on the current plan and it has been noted that the blocks are almost certainly too small, particularly in the area between the sub-station and the allotments. The layout creates a particular challenge on the corners to accommodate a quality street enclosure, parking, bins etc. The proposed planting may be too large for the rear gardens. This is particularly the case in the housing to the east of the transformer station.

The Panel feel that a more detailed plan/model, perhaps at a scale of 1:50, of an individual plot as well as some of the critical areas i.e. Commercial Areas, Middle Street etc. would help to bring the scheme to life. It is currently difficult to understand how the gardens, parking and bins etc. will be arranged.

Parking

The proposed parking ratio of 1:1 spaces per dwelling is too low as it is likely that in order for residents to afford a mortgage most of the properties will be shared by a couple with up to two cars. The proposed parking spaces in front of the houses will dominate the front gardens, precluding their use for anything else, and will undermine interaction with the streets by creating a physical barrier between the dwellings and the roads which is not the desired outcome. If the car is to be positioned in front of the dwellings then the buildings would need to be set-back at least 5 metres from the street.

Avoidance of large rear parking courts is welcome but imaginative arrangements of parking, including suggested parking squares, are needed to avoid car dominated streets, especially where there is concentration of higher density housing.

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House Design and Tenures

There is a concern that there may be an over-reliance on the volume house builder. This in turn may mean that quality may become subservient to cost, regardless of whether the dwellings are to be tenure blind. Given the location of the development, with no dominant strong character from which to draw its cues, there is the opportunity to be more adventurous, with, for example, self-build playing a greater role. There could also be a place for co-ownership.

The location of affordable housing was described as clusters. The Panel felt that this needed to be clarified, in order to avoid large lumps (mini estates) that detract from the objective of tenure-blind development

The question of space standards was raised in relation to different tenures, and there was concern about the size of market housing.

'Lifetime Homes', co-housing other forms of tenure could be incorporated into the housing mix.

Allotments

A suggestion has been made that the allotments should be integrated within the community rather than fenced off as is currently proposed. In order to achieve this, it is important to ensure there are active frontages overlooking the allotments, in order to maximise natural surveillance. Opportunities to improve the allotments – appearance, number of plots, services, management – to enable them to cope with additional demand and visibility should also be explored. If a fence of some sort is felt to be necessary, it could be aesthetically much more pleasing than the current structure.

Design Codes

The emerging design codes are generally good but the mechanisms to ensure they are put into practise need to be secured. For example, each dwelling boundary and amenity space need to be knitted together in order to maximise the utility of the area. This could be achieved by the Council placing covenants to protect front gardens by ensuring that they are not used for parking as this would create a physical barrier between the dwelling and the pavements. The management of this needs to be considered, and a mechanism for the management, policing, updating and control of the design code should be clearly set out. Developers were advised to look at

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performance codes and a Regulatory Plan similar to the German Plan to keep things simple.

It will be important to have a clear brief / design code for each street type in the form of a street design guide to ensure that this most important piece of public realm meets the design aspirations of the Garden Suburb. The issue of parcellation needs to be resolved. Developers should be responsible for development on both sides of a street. The emphasis in the codes should be on performance (rather than form) with the priority being design quality of the public realm should be prioritised. The panel welcome the inclusion of feature houses throughout which will need to be indicated in codes/regulatory plan.

Conclusion

The scheme is generally promising and the physical aspects of the plan are becoming clearer, many of the management and quality aspects have yet to be addressed. These would need to be included in any application to make sense of the masterplan. Although time may not allow, we would suggest it might be appropriate to review the scheme once more before the planning application is submitted in February 2013.

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