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Oxford North (Northern Gateway), Oxford City Council Design Workshop

Notes from 8 June 2017

Thank you for attending the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) Design Workshop on 8 June 2017. Having advised on the masterplan in October and December 2014, and again in April 2016, we welcome the opportunity to comment on the proposal as it progresses towards a planning application. This report is our formal advice following the Design Workshop of 8 June 2017.

Introduction

The intention to develop Oxford North, formerly known as Oxford Northern Gateway, as an innovation district at the forefront of international practice, supports Oxford's and the UK's role as a global leader for innovation and research. Expanding Oxford's offer by creating a new, concentrated and highly appealing district for the activities and people involved in the knowledge economy appears to be an entirely appropriate and exciting proposition for this part of the city. We continue to support the high aspirations of the developer, Thomas White Oxford (TWO), which match the project's importance as the city's largest proposed development.

We recognise and welcome the significant amount of work that has gone into developing both the masterplan and the proposals for Phase 1A since the last Design Workshop, and the very helpful presentation at this Design Workshop. We support the approach of submitting a hybrid planning application. However, some of the major opportunities presented by the site, as referred to in our last advice letter, have not been taken advantage of in the current proposal. Overall, we think that the 10 overarching design principles for Oxford North are not yet successfully addressed and delivered in the current proposal. Principally, we see a paradox between the ambition of a thriving, urban innovation district of international status and appeal, and the character shown in the drawn proposals. The masterplan appears to be missing development at the important level of urban design, which is essential to bridge the gap between the strategic masterplan approach and the design of individual buildings.

In our view, more time and work are needed to develop the masterplan and Phase 1A. We make the comments and suggestions below on this basis, to assist the local authority, developer and design team achieve the purpose and ambitions of the project.

Masterplan

As the proposals for Oxford North develop and a new piece of city emerges, the demands of creating an appealing, resilient district come into sharper focus. This gives all parties the opportunity to shape Phase 1A in light of the developed masterplan scheme and vice versa. In this context, we make the following points about the key moves that will underpin the success of the development.



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Sustainability

- The scheme appears to be missing a world-class ambition for sustainability. The proposed energy sharing loop system for heating, cooling and the provision of hot water is very positive but we would expect the scheme to take an even bolder strategic approach to the management of carbon, energy and water. We encourage TWO to establish a sustainability strategy with the aim of enabling the district to function independently – to be as ‘off-grid’ as possible – in relation to resources. The elements of the strategy should be developed and incorporated into the drawings to make sure that sustainability helps drive decision-making on the physical form of the development.
- We suggest devising a range of environmental indicators, benchmarking current performance, setting targets for the future and reporting on those indicators at regular intervals over time.

Spatial identity

The historic environment of central Oxford generates many questions about the characteristics of the new innovation district, and the way in which those characteristics are informed by, and how they are distinct from, existing ‘Oxfordness’. Taking on board TWO’s vision for the development and the City Council’s position on ‘Oxfordness’, we make the following points about identity, as a fundamental aspect of the new innovation district.

- The masterplan and the Phase 1A proposals currently appear to mix urban, suburban, campus and business park characteristics and thus lack a clear spatial identity. The applicant team have set out to create an integrated urban environment and the City Council is seeking an ‘Oxfordness’ based on streets and spaces but the drawings do not show a clear typology of built form and external spaces.
- The blurred spatial identity means that the streets, plots and blocks are not yet working together well enough to create a coherent place. The blurring is also causing many issues in Phase 1A, as set out ahead.
- It is essential to define the identity of the innovation district – in terms of routes, density, layout and character – and apply it from the vision through to the drawings. We think that either an urban or a campus-like environment could work well; useful reference points may be found in edge-of-town university campuses such as that at Lancaster University.
- In our view, the ‘Oxfordness’ of the new district could be a new embodiment of existing characteristics of the city. We recommend not making literal references to Oxford’s historic environment in the new architecture.
- To realise the intended spatial identity, a stronger urban design proposal is needed. This should be informed by daylight and sunlight studies, which will help ensure that the buildings shape external spaces that provide suitable comfort, warmth, shade, shelter and appeal.
- We recommend exploring greater diversity in building heights and density across the masterplan area, potentially with some taller buildings and a finer urban grain, to enhance the district’s character and sense of place. At present, the built form appears rather homogenous and bland in terms of height and grain. The development could create a more impressive first impression of Oxford as drivers approach the city from the A34 with some taller buildings and a more interesting profile of roofs.

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- We welcome the efforts to respond to the surrounding context but think the scheme could build on and respond to the character of the adjacent areas to a greater extent. Given the scale and significance of the development, we recommend exploring what could be achieved to transform this part of Oxford in partnership with neighbouring landowners and in relation to Oxford Parkway rail station. At present, the proposals show signs of having been developed too strictly within the boundary of the outline planning application and to a rapid timetable, limiting the development's ability to respond to future opportunities on the land around the site.

Infrastructure

- We suggest reviewing some ways in which infrastructure is being invested in. We strongly support 'humanising' the A40 and A44 by reducing vehicular speeds and improving the character of these roads. We wonder whether sustainability mechanisms and the 'humanity' of the new Thomas White Street should also be prioritised as part of the investment in infrastructure.
- The innovation district will evolve over time, both during its planning and design, and as a dynamic place once built. With the growth of the district and the anticipated shift away from car-based travel, we recommend planning for future densification – for example by re-purposing proposed car parking areas – which could help make the district feel more like existing parts of Oxford.

Landscape

- We recommend establishing a stronger vision for the landscape across the masterplan area. This should identify landscape-related outcomes as part of the sustainability strategy and provide the foundations for character areas, a rich urban ecology, seasonal change and landscape management – these are not yet evident in the drawings.
- The maintenance and management of the landscape will be crucial to the long-term appeal of the district; careful planning in relation to S106 contributions, ownership, access and responsibilities will be needed. For areas of external space that are managed by the landowner, we would advocate providing public access as far as possible.
- Landscape could be part of design codes and indicators that ensure that each delivery phase plays its part in creating an appealing and environmentally harmonious environment.
- We suggest exploring ways in which the open spaces and landscape could feel 'wilder', to connect the new district with its natural surroundings.

Meanwhile uses, arts and play

- Given the project's long-term timeframe, we strongly suggest deploying temporary ('meanwhile') uses across the masterplan area, as the phases of development evolve and are implemented. Meanwhile interventions and activities would bring life to parts of the site not yet being developed in a permanent way, and enable a range of uses and physical forms to be tested for success. Installing long-term vegetation and nursery planting for future use across the district will also make effective use of the site.

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- We strongly recommend establishing an arts strategy for the innovation district, through which residents and workers can enjoy a range of artworks and activities.
- Given the number of homes in the scheme and the anticipated blurring of home and work life, we also recommend developing a play strategy.

Committing to the above approaches would, in our view, both enable TWO's ambitions to be realised and be important in selling the innovation district to its international audience of investors, researchers and innovators.

Phase 1A

In principle, the part of the site indicated for Phase 1A appears to be suitable to develop first. Humanising the A40, installing the new link road (Thomas White Street) and providing the red hall, a flexible workspace building, a residential building and new outdoor spaces make for a sound set of components to be delivered as Phase 1A. We would question the viability of retail provision in the first phase, unless greater vitality and footfall can be achieved through other modifications to the proposals.

Movement, streets, spaces and parking

- The humanisation of the A40 appears not to go far enough and we suggest reviewing the highways proposals and the workspace building to create a route that feels and operates more like a 30mph street.
- To achieve a strong and intuitive sense of place, we recommend creating a stronger hierarchy of routes and spaces within Phase 1A and providing more visual material to illustrate each street, square, courtyard or garden.
- We welcome the aim to support modal shift to active and sustainable travel through this project and the intention to minimise the effects of cars on the public realm. We suggest exploring ways to further reduce reliance on cars in the detailed proposals for Phase 1A.
- Accommodating necessary cars at basement level is positive; to help ensure that the public realm is sufficiently activated we recommend establishing outdoor pedestrian routes to the car park rather than internal circulation routes in buildings.
- The proposals for the Thomas White Street do not yet fully contribute to the ambitions of the project. We question the principle of building out only the south-east side of this street at this stage, as this dilutes the physical form, character and vitality of the new district's principal route and destination.
- We also recommend reviewing the way that Thomas White Street is contained and activated by building frontages along it, its width and accessibility for vehicles. Becoming pedestrian-only during working hours could support the goals of the innovation district.
- The temporary car park on the north-west side of the street makes a statement that is not in line with the intended environmental aspirations or shift away from car-based travel. We suggest that there should be greater emphasis on creating a more complete street by activating both sides of the street in Phase 1A to establish this important part of the new district's identity from the outset.



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- The other open spaces in Phase 1A have the potential to be enjoyable although there is a risk that they detract from the primary routes, which are key to the district's character and vitality. While we welcome the location of the proposed public square, its location adjacent to the residential buildings is unlikely to be successful without more spatial containment, at least by a building on its east side.
- The courtyards proposed on the north-east side of the workspace building could be charming but we worry that their orientation, shaded by the building, will limit their appeal.

Landscape

- Across Phase 1A, the landscape proposals could go further to create a more ecological environment and a more distinctive, dramatic sense of place.
- More information on the proposed landscape is needed – for example to show that this quantum of tree canopies will create spaces below that work for plants and/or people throughout the year. We would remind the team that planting trees over a basement car park will require a minimum a tree pit depth of 1.5 metres.
- We strongly recommend expanding what is delivered in Phase 1A to include structure planting, including the proposed buffer to the A34.

Buildings

- In principle, a series of carefully designed buildings with a humane industrial feel appears appropriate for Oxford North.
- The concept of the red hall, as a hub for business and social activity with a distinctive form and appearance, is positive. The building's proposed colour is enlivening although we worry about the building's north-east elevation, where the lack of activity and articulation at ground floor level do not support the building's purpose.
- The workspace building is set to provide good accommodation for emerging knowledge-based businesses but its contribution to the wider urban form is more limited. This building does not yet play its part in the efforts to transform the A40 into a more humane street; one or more entrances, activity and a more 'open' architecture on its south-west side would make the A40 more inhabited and less hostile. We also recommend creating greater clarity on what is the 'front' and the 'back' of this building, and strengthening the building's corner at the junction of the A40 and Thomas White Street.
- In terms of the proposed envelope materials for these buildings, departing from traditional materials may well be successful here. However, both metal and glass are problematic because they lend themselves poorly to human-scale articulation at ground floor level or to adaptation – essential for the activities in the buildings to remain relevant and successful over time. We welcome the clay bricks proposed for the workspace building but are concerned that elevations that are primarily glass promote division, between 'inside' and 'outside', and potentially between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'.
- We would welcome the opportunity to comment further on the residential buildings and to see floor plans for the new homes. Given the project's ambitions, the residential buildings' contribution to the spaces around them and the quality of the internal and external spaces for residents ought to be of the highest standard.



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Next steps

In addition to the points above, we offer the following advice to take the project forward and to de-risk the planning process.

- Creating a successful new district will be dependent on open dialogue and collaboration between TWO and the City Council. This will need to tackle the apparent tensions between some of the aspirations of the developer and the local authority, recognise that Area Action Plan was prepared before this scheme was developed, and address the issues that we have identified in this report. Drawing ideas and options that are not constrained by planning application requirements may aid the process of dialogue.
- We recommend establishing robust governing principles, for example by strengthening the parameter plans and/or through design codes. These principles should define and commit to the nature of routes, other external spaces and built form across the masterplan. They should provide clarity on what is required of new buildings and spaces, and on what can flex as the district is designed, built and adapted over time.
- We would like to see the scheme again before a hybrid planning application is submitted, to see how the issues identified have been addressed and to review the proposals for the residential buildings in more detail.

We have confidence that the applicant team and the local authority can tackle the issues we have raised and deliver a world-class innovation district at Oxford North.

Attendees

Design Workshop Panel

Keith Bradley – Chair
Jo van Heyningen
Alan Berman
Noel Farrer
Tom Holbrook

Scheme presenters

Julian Barwick	Thomas White Oxford
Keith Priest	Fletcher Priest Architects
Joe Sweeney	Fletcher Priest Architects
Jonathan Kendall	Fletcher Priest Architects
Stina Hokby	Fletcher Priest Architects
Robert Townshend	Townshend Landscape Architects
Gary Alden	Townshend Landscape Architects
Jerry Hargreaves	Peter Brett Associates

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Tony Russell	Peter Brett Associates
Rob Linnell	Savills
Olivia Lane-Nott	Spacecraft Consulting

Local Authority

Andrew Murdoch	Oxford City Council
Nadia Robinson	Oxford City Council
Adrian Arnold	Oxford City Council
Maura Cordell	Oxford City Council

Design Council Cabe staff

Rachel Toms
Victoria Lee

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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 cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

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