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Vicky Trietline
St Aldate's Chambers
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24 September 2020

Our reference: DC/5327

Oxford Design Review Panel: Land West of Mill Lane

Dear Vicky Trietline,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel (ODRP) with the opportunity to advise on the proposals for Land West of Mill Lane at the Design Review on 10 September 2020. We welcome the opportunity to engage with this scheme at an early stage of its development, and we thank the design team for the thorough presentation. This letter summarises the recommendations made by the panel on the day.

Background and Context

The scheme for Land West of Mill Lane, which is being promoted by Oxford City Council's Housing Department, proposes 79 new homes on a site that has been de-designated as Green Belt land and which is allocated in Oxford City Council's 2016-2036 Local Plan as appropriate for 75 new homes. The site is adjacent to Green Belt directly to the west, while the site to the north is allocated for development within the Council's new Local Plan and the site to the south-east is currently being developed. The A40 Oxford ring road runs past Marston to the north of the site although without any direct vehicular access, which comes from Old Marston via Mill Lane. The site is just outside the Old Marston Conservation Area.

Summary

This scheme, alongside other emerging proposals directly adjacent, collectively form a village extension on the edge of Oxford. At present we are not convinced that they are providing an integrated community and we think further work is required to ensure that they connect successfully and that there is a shared language and approach to the urban design and architecture. We think that a joint design workshop with all three design teams and any directly adjacent landowners or stakeholders to explore the key principles for development in this area would help to ensure better integration and a more successful village extension.

This scheme also sits on the edge of the green belt and in an important open landscape. The site should be genuinely landscape-led but currently appears to be shaped by the



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buildings. Further consideration of the strategic role of the landscape, the biodiversity, water management and visual impact assessment is required, and this should be pulled through into a more coherent strategy for the open spaces, including greater clarity over the village green or buffer open space which at present does not offer a clear purpose or function for the residents of this community.

The context of this proposal as an extension to an Oxfordshire village is crucial, and we think that further work needs to be undertaken to clarify what this village community and character means and how it can be celebrated as a central part of the proposals. This is likely to be the key attraction for people who will be the future residents of this place – to live in a community that offers a semi-rural living environment with access to landscape and green space. We think that more could be done through the urban design to capture this village feel, including the nature and variety of street widths, and the extension of the linear urban grain of Marston into the proposals. We also suggest rethinking the village green to give this clarity and purpose as a space that can sit more centrally within the development. The architecture, including setbacks from the street and front gardens, and details such as dormer windows, can pull this village character through into detail. Collectively we think this will give the scheme greater clarity and strength as a proposal.

Wider context

This scheme, alongside the emerging proposals for Hill View Farm, the scheme under construction at Cumberlege Close, and any further long-term development which may happen to the north of Marston, collectively form a village extension on the edge of Oxford. We think that some strategic work will be invaluable in ensuring that these developments come together to form a coherent neighbourhood, rather than the current disparate approach to how Marston will successfully extend. As a minimum we would recommend a joint design workshop between the various design teams to establish an agreed set of principles for this semi-rural, edge of city housing typology and neighbourhood. A joint masterplan or design code would be preferable. We suggest exploring other examples for design codes in similar contexts, such as Great Kneighton in Cambridge and The Avenue in Saffron Waldon to explore these options. This work would be crucial in setting shared approaches between design teams and could also start to inform similar strategies for other areas of growth on the edge of Oxford in existing settlements and on either side of the A40.

Without this strategic masterplan for the expansion of Marston, we note that assessing a scheme in isolation is a significant challenge and risks the creation of several disparate and disconnected communities and architectural and landscape characters.

We support the work that has been undertaken by the design team to understand the wider built context and the nature of the conservation area. At present we think there is further work to be undertaken to draw the direct link between this analysis and the design proposals. For example, some of the lessons learned around the linear north-south urban grain in Marston; the variety of street types including narrow lanes; and the



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architectural character does not seem to have been pulled through into the design of the proposals. Revisiting this analysis and the design work would help to achieve a more contextual approach.

We note that this is a relatively remote and semi-rural site. Alongside the immediate surrounding developments, it sits on the edge of Marston with the nearest bus stop 600m away and the nearest shop around 1.5km away. We support the proposals to incorporate a cycle lane along Mill Lane and think this should be pursued to ensure it links with the key origins and destinations. This should be factored into a joined-up strategy for bus services, car sharing, walking and cycling, particularly as cycling will only be able to accommodate a small part of mode share. Such a substantial growth of Marston demands the infrastructure to ensure that this becomes a sustainable settlement.

Landscape

This site sits at the edge of the Green Belt and on the edge of an existing settlement, and is both adjacent to and itself provides a considerable amount of green infrastructure. For all these reasons, a landscape-led approach to the site is crucial. At present we think the proposals have been overly driven by the buildings and would benefit from a stronger landscape approach, which draws purposeful green space more strongly into the scheme and which considers all open spaces, including parking courts, as part of the landscape.

We recommend the landscape architect produces a strategic diagram setting out the role, purpose, character and intended use of each of the key spaces, which may result in some rethinking of the urban blocks, streets and buildings, to the benefit of the scheme overall. We recognise the hierarchy of housing types in the scheme but do not think that has been replicated or followed through in the landscape. We think that a strategic diagram of the landscape could provide greater clarity to the hierarchy of spaces across the scheme.

We think that the concept of a village green is strong, but at present the proposed open space does not have a clear role within the scheme. Specifically, its role at the moment is more of a buffer zone between the built form and the adjacent Green Belt and open fields, rather than a space that is likely to be used and enjoyed by the new residents of this community. We note that the majority of the space is also given over to SuDS, which limits its usability. We recommend relocating the village green at the centre of the neighbourhood, and allowing for its greater use by the wider community across Marston, with more consideration for the ways in which people can use and enjoy this space.

Considering the location of the site adjacent to the wider Green Belt, a landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) on the proposed scheme will be critical to understand the impact that it has on the wider views across the Green Belt and of Marston. While the



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images produced by the design team are useful to test the project at this stage, robust GIS software should be used for the LVIA.

We recommend further consideration of the detailed specification and management of the landscape. Many important elements of the planting will be within the curtilage of individual dwellings and outside the control of the new Council landscape management company, which risks undermining the success of this planting. We also recommend more careful consideration of the plant species, ensuring that they are resilient to climate and disease and question whether the wildflower meadow will be compatible with the likely volume of use in this location.

Site layout

We think that parts of the site layout would benefit from further re-thinking and development to create a proposal that integrates with its surroundings, creates a landscape- and context-led approach, and creates successful spaces for residents and communities.

We think that overall the urban design and site layout has a greater sense of clarity towards the southern side of the site. Towards the north-east the site layout loses clarity, particularly where parking courts and openings break up the frontage onto Mill Lane. We recommend continuing to test this part of the site, thinking about simpler perimeter blocks as per some earlier options.

The surrounding urban grain of Marston and the existing neighbourhoods to the south have a distinctive linear, north-south characteristic. We think that this is disrupted by certain elements of this scheme, including the parking courts but also the row of six houses running east-west at the far south, which prevents the creation of positive routes to the adjacent community, and disturbs the prevailing north-south grain. We think that the earlier option 2 which was explored by the design team for the site layout presents a solution that achieves a greater sense of this grain, alongside a more successfully located village green towards the centre of the scheme, and we recommend reconsidering a scheme that may be a hybrid or contain elements of this earlier option.

We recognise the rationale for proposing parking courts to integrate the parking required but we are concerned that the impact of this will be to overwhelm the public realm and create a feeling of a vehicle-dominated development in what should be a village-feel with plenty of open, green space. We recommend exploring other opportunities to introduce the parking in a more incidental way, such as by gently widening the streets rather than marking out each bay, and introducing back lanes to some dwellings. We also note that parking controls will be necessary in some form to manage the parking across this site.

We support the notion of landmarks that the design team have proposed through the architectural treatment although we think this should be strengthened, and further thought should be given to where the key focal points are. We think that the north east corner where the site leads into the adjacent development is a key landmark to consider,



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and the landmark locations should be driven by the overall hierarchy of streets and spaces. There is scope for these to be stronger visual markers, perhaps using height as well as a contrasting material to mark transitions and landmarks.

Streets and connectivity

We support the consideration given to providing a number of entrances and routes in and out of the site. However these are not yet providing true connectivity and we recommend re-considering how these routes can create greater integration with the sites to the north and east, allowing for streets which are completed through the site layout. In our view, it would be beneficial for these streets to offer vehicular as well as cycle and pedestrian movement.

For example, on the northern boundary, the lack of an access route on the west side creates a cul-de-sac in the proposed scheme, while on the east side, there is a double road being provided on this site and also on the adjacent site which is unnecessary. On the eastern side, there is a complex arrangement required for the houses to turn the corner into the adjacent scheme and we think that an alternative location for this entrance might result in a simpler arrangement. Close collaboration with the design team for Hill View Farm on the treatment of their southern boundary will be critical at this location.

We think that involving residents from across Marston as soon as possible in the design of the scheme would help to understand where routes and access points should be, particularly learning from the insight of local residents on where desire lines are and how these spaces are currently being used by dog-walkers, cyclists and other types of user.

We think that the hierarchy of streets requires further clarification and should be accompanied by a careful use of language and description. For example, the main route running east-west from the open space to Mill Lane is likely to be quite a busy vehicular road. However we think there is an opportunity to create a variety of street widths and characters, responding to the variegated character of streets across Marston that the design team have identified as characteristic of this part of Oxfordshire. We recommend exploring more informal street typologies that are based on lanes and other rural street types rather than suburban or urban street types, as proposed currently.

The strategy for refuse storage and collection will have a significant impact on the appearance of streets and dwellings and should be carefully incorporated at this point to avoid being added later. We also recommend incorporating a car club and electrical vehicle charging points to provide alternative transport options alongside the cycling, walking and public transport infrastructure.

Housing design and architecture

The principles of the architecture appear to be developing well but we think further work is required to ensure that these provide a character that responds effectively to this semi-



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rural, village location, as well as the best possible quality of life for its future residents, with high quality finishing.

In terms of the village character, much of the housing at present is tight up against the pavement, while villages more generally including Marston tend to have homes with a small setback, front garden and stone walls, with larger back gardens. We think that some of the language of stone walls provided within the scheme at the moment could be provided more consistently to celebrate this character and the opportunity it provides to people for food growing open space, as well as socialising on the street.

In terms of the elevations, these are working fairly well overall and we think a contemporary approach with elements of the vernacular character is the right direction. At present, there are only a small number of housing types which is resulting in homogeneity in the elevations. Particularly considering the emphasis given in the Old Marston Conservation Area Appraisal on the negative contribution made by uniform styles and materials to the overall character, we recommend working hard to ensure that the scheme provides architectural interest. We recommend considering some alternative housing types to introduce greater identity, including exploring the opportunities discussed above for taller units that can be used in specific, appropriate landmark locations. We also think that providing some plan types with kitchens at the centre of the plan could allow for larger windows at the ground floor in the front elevation, which would create greater diversity in the front elevations. Regarding the roofs, we recommend careful consideration of the use of red and black roof tiles to give purpose to their application rather than this appearing as pepper-potted. We think the incorporation of dormer windows is good, which is characteristic of Marston more widely, but note that in Marston they are carefully placed in line with the front door rather than in the centre of the elevation as in the proposed plans. Finally, we recommend careful consideration of the gable ends, many of which sit in prominent places in the plan and should be carefully detailed without blank facades.

In terms of the proposed materials, the natural stone with contrasting weatherboarding is a good palette and appropriate for this context. We support the proposals for MMC and offsite construction which can provide sustainability benefit but care should be taken to ensure that a good stone is proposed of high quality, rather than a cheaper stone slip which will undermine the quality of the architecture. The weatherboarding could work well but will require regular maintenance and this maintenance strategy should be considered with the plans. There is a risk with the Design and Build procurement route that the quality could be lost through construction, so care should be taken to specify appropriate materials and protect this quality into construction.

In terms of internal layouts, we recognise the constraints brought about by the structural grid within the MMC homes. We note that in the apartment design there is a substantial leftover space resulting opposite the stair and think that this communal space could



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provide a useful shared space for residents, such as a workspace or play area for children, which are important facilities that will be increasingly important to residents across the scheme in the future, particularly those which allow people to work from home.

In the housing layouts, these seem to work well overall, although we have not seen an internal layout for the larger 4 bedroom 7 person homes. We think that homes of this scale could be a benefit and implies some intergenerational living but in this model, care should be taken that they allow sufficient flexibility for the various ways in which families may wish to live in these homes. We are also concerned about the narrowness of some of the proposed bedrooms and care should be taken to ensure that they not only provide sufficient wheelchair access but also for others with disabilities who may require more space to get in and out of bed, which all contributes to the long-term flexibility of these homes.

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 contact us.

Yours sincerely

Elli Thomas

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Review process

Following a virtual site visit, discussions with the design team and local authority, the scheme was reviewed via Microsoft Teams on 10 September 2020 by Dan Jones (chair), Jessica Bryne-Daniel, Andrew Cameron, Cora Kwiatkowski, and Clare San Martin. 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.abe@designcouncil.org.uk.

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