



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Northfield Hostel

22nd June 2021

Introduction

This report reflects the design review held on the 10th June 2021 following the presentation of the proposed scheme by the design team. The scheme is the redevelopment of a hostel site and a sports pitch to deliver affordable housing for Oxford City Council and market housing for Oxfordshire County Council.

A summary of the discussion is provided on the following page which highlights the main items raised during the session. We then provide the key recommendations aimed at improving the design quality of the proposal. The detailed comments are presented under headings covering the main attributes of the scheme and we close with the details of the meeting (appendix A) and the scheme (appendix B).

Summary

We applaud the ambitions of the City Council to provide affordable housing, not only on this but on several other sites, and to bring forward a genuinely sustainable development. Particular attention should be paid to this development, as it will set the standard for other sites. For that reason, we believe there should be a greater focus on fostering a community, promoting active travel and designing for the specific demographics of residents.

We would welcome the opportunity to re-engage with the applicant once the following recommendations have been worked through.

Key recommendations

The applicant team should;

1. Prepare a Health Impact Assessment to inform the design strategy.
2. Incorporate the sustainability and maintenance strategy into the design, including long-term costs and who will be responsible for each.
3. Orientate the buildings and open up the public spaces to the south.
4. Create public spaces for the wider community as well as the residents of this site.
5. Inset the balconies to provide better shelter and privacy, in addition to clearer articulation of the elevations.
6. Prepare a tree planting strategy which responds to the existing character and avoid overcomplicating the planting proposals.
7. Develop a lighting strategy that includes the journey from the bus stops to the entrances.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy
 - 1.1. The proposal consists of two parts – the detailed proposal of the blocks of flats which will be developed by the City Council and the outline proposal of the houses which is managed by the County Council. The outline part was not discussed in great detail as only the massing and siting were presented, which did not raise any immediate concerns. Most of the comments below relate to the two blocks of flats which are designed in detail.
 - 1.2. The approach to energy efficiency, environmental sustainability, biodiversity and ecology should guide the design strategy. The proposal must provide further details on the energy strategy and on how the development will optimise thermal performance, minimise the demand for energy, supply the remaining energy requirements efficiently and optimise the use of renewables to align with the Government’s emerging zero carbon policy.
 - 1.3. An ambitious approach should drive every design move and decision, starting with the configuration of the buildings and open spaces. These need to be considered and analysed at this early stage in the process and be developed simultaneously as part of a coherent design strategy.
 - 1.4. The orientation of the buildings and open spaces should utilise the south aspect to create places where people want to be in – either indoors or outdoors. We question the suburban model of inward looking spaces because an outward looking development could bring the existing and future community together by creating more attractive outdoor spaces for communal activity and opportunistic meetings between neighbours.
 - 1.5. By turning the buildings and open spaces towards the south, daylight and sunlight will reach all units and amenity spaces. In the current proposal, it is unlikely that the ground floor units would receive adequate daylight and the central square may be overshadowed by the buildings themselves.
 - 1.6. Residents of affordable homes may not be able to cover excessive maintenance and heating costs. The orientation of buildings and dual aspect apartments are critically important. Homes should be designed to be as sustainable as possible, neither overheating during summer nor being too cold during winter.

- 1.7. The fronts and backs of the buildings, along with the entrances, should be clearer. The separation of the ground floor units from the street needs to ensure privacy and living rooms, rather than the bedrooms, should be facing towards the main square.
 - 1.8. In order to ensure a safe environment, the lobbies should be well lit and the lifts should be directly visible from the entrances. Affordable developments are often stigmatised by the use of excessive lights; this needs to be taken into consideration as part of the wider lighting strategy.
 - 1.9. The blocks are designed to appear like separate houses, yet the outset balconies give the impression of flat blocks. If the balconies were to be made inset, that would create a clear character for the two blocks. It would also increase their use because they would offer shelter.
2. Movement
 - 2.1. The journey from the bus stops to the entrances needs to be safe and pleasant. It should incorporate attractive landscape and good lighting that is respectful of the local wildlife.
 - 2.2. The entrances should be facing the street to feel safe and to offer opportunities for the community to come together on a daily basis.
 - 2.3. The vehicular connection between Bampton Close and Sandy Lane is not necessary. It is likely to be used as a cut-through for vehicles and make an unpleasant environment which severs some open space from the main body of the site.
3. Landscape and open spaces
 - 3.1. The landscape should develop as part of the design strategy and the positioning of the buildings. Given the restricted space, every corner should be given a purpose.
 - 3.2. Car-parking should be better integrated to allow more public spaces for the community. Picnic tables and barbeque pits could be added in the area close to Sandy Lane for the local people to enjoy.
 - 3.3. The central amenity space needs rethinking. The noise from the bypass in addition to possible overshadowing from the buildings could make the space difficult to enjoy. Given its importance as a gathering space, it should receive daylight and sunlight and be a pleasurable experience.

- 3.4. A selection of simple materials that are easy to maintain is important to make the development affordable for its residents and the council.
- 3.5. The planting proposals should add to the existing tree character and remain as simple as possible.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1561/210610
Date	10 th June 2021
Meeting location	Online via Zoom
Panel members attending	Joanne Cave (Chair), urban design and planning Alison Brooks, architecture and public realm Michael Chang, planning and urban design Eric Hallquist, landscape architecture Stina Hokby, urban design and public realm
Panel manager	Kiki Gkavogianni, Design South East
Presenting team	Simon Lea, Levitt Bernstein Associates Eleni Mente, Levitt Bernstein Associates Marc Escobar, Levitt Bernstein Associates James Morgan, WSP
Other attendees	Vicky Trietline, Oxford City Council (Housing Development) Stuart Moran, Oxford City Council (Housing Development) Alban Henderson, GL Hearn Jeremy Flawn, Bluestone Planning Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council James Newton, Oxford City Council Natalie Dobraszcyk, Oxford City Council (observer)
Site visit	This review was carried out during the Covid-19 outbreak in 2020/21. Independent site study including desktop research and a digital walk-around (in a similar fashion to that which would have been conducted on-site) was carried out prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this workshop was not restricted.
Panel interests	No interests were declared.

Confidentiality	This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a planning application. Full details on our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.
Previous reviews	This is the first review of the proposal.

Appendix B: Scheme details

Name	Northfield Hostel
Site location	Sandy Lane West, Oxford, OX4 6LD
Site details	<p>The site is characterised by mature trees to the north, east, south and west which provide a buffer between the current buildings onsite and the surrounding roads. Mature trees also form the boundary of the playing field site, however there are a number of gaps in coverage fronting Bampton Close and the Eastern by-pass.</p> <p>The Hostel site features a series of 2 storey buildings originally built as hostel accommodation used by the nearby Northfield Special School, located to the south of the site. The hostel is however currently not in use and closed. Both sites are owned by Oxfordshire County Council. The playing field site has a disused football pitch, surrounded with a metal fence with no access gate.</p> <p>Immediately adjacent to the site lies a 1970's residential estate comprising of 2 storey dwellings at Bampton Close. To the south of Sandy Lane West lies an industrial estate, largely comprising 2 storey units.</p>
Proposal	<p>The proposals seek to redevelop the site of the former Northfield Hostel House and its adjacent sports pitch site on Sandy Lane West and Bampton Close Junction. On the former Northfield Hostel site, the project seeks to provide affordable flats in two 4 storey blocks, in a varied mix of dwellings, including family and wheelchair adaptable accommodation. On the sports pitch site the scope is to provide 10no. 2, 2.5 and 3 storey houses, all of them open market in tenure.</p> <p>Private and communal amenity spaces are provided for both sites, along with bicycle and car parking spaces.</p>

The application will be hybrid, seeking detailed permission for the Northfield Hostel site and outline for the sport pitch.

Planning stage	The scheme is at pre-application stage. Two initial pre-application meetings have been held with officers. The scheme was revised following officers' comments. The height was agreed in an informal discussion as 4 storeys on the hostel site - compared to the previous 5 and 6.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	<p>The site currently features a series of 2 storey buildings originally built/used as a residential boarding facility for students in association with nearby Northfield School. The site has not been used for over 3 years. The site includes an area previously used as a sports pitch. Appropriate replacement sporting facilities for the sports pitch have been agreed and approved by the County Council, by way of the redevelopment of the Northfield School site.</p> <p>The site is allocated by Policy SP12 of the Oxford Local Plan for residential dwellings providing a minimum of 30 homes.</p>
Planning history	None.
Planning authority perspective	<p>The principle of residential development on the site is accepted in accordance with policy SP12 of the Oxford Local Plan 2036.</p> <p>Amendments are required in respect of the proposed height. The potential for overlooking and parking arrangements need to be considered further. Further arboricultural work needs to be provided to ensure the scheme is developed in compliance with relevant policies of the Oxford Local Plan 2036 and the recently published Green Spaces TAN which requires no net loss in tree canopy cover within the application site over 25 years.</p>
Community engagement	None so far.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations provided that the content of the report is treated in the strictest confidence. Neither the content of the report, nor the report itself can be shared with anyone outside the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the content of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available, and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel, forum or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

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