



Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Plots 23-26, Oxford Science Park

21st July 2022

Introduction

This report reflects the design workshop held in Oxford on 7th July 2022, following a site visit and presentation by the design team.

The proposal is for some 41,000 sq.m of office and laboratory space, with up to 1050 parking spaces, on a greenfield site at the western end of the Oxford Science Park. The site has been allocated in the Local Plan for B1 employment uses that directly relate to Oxford's key sectors of research-led development at the Science Park.

A summary of the Panel discussion is provided below, highlighting the main items raised. We then provide the key recommendations aimed at improving the design quality of the proposal. 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).

Paragraph 133 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) states that *“local planning authorities should ensure that they have access to, and make appropriate use of, tools and processes for assessing and improving the design of development. These include workshops to engage the local community, design advice and review arrangements, and assessment frameworks such as Building for a Healthy Life 51. These are of most benefit if used as early as possible in the evolution of schemes and are particularly important for significant projects such as large scale housing and mixed use developments. In assessing applications, planning authorities should have regard to the outcome from these processes, including any recommendations made by design review panels.”*

Summary

The Oxford Science Park was established thirty years ago and has been a remarkable success. It is a major employer in the specialist areas of life sciences, complementing Oxford University's international reputation in this field. The landscape design has matured attractively and although some of the earlier buildings are showing their age, the more recent architecture is of a high standard. Sites 23-26 are at the western end of the Science Park and will be one of the last to be developed for a headquarters-scale occupier.

The workshop began with a reflection on the wider context of the development proposal; namely the future of the Science Park itself. There is scope for the Park to become denser, using car parks and the public realm efficiently, minimising car journeys and boosting the vitality and vibrancy of the area. There are some obvious legal and ownership challenges, but a long-term vision combined with an incremental approach could reap dividends.

The Panel believes that Plots 23-26 should tie into this vision. The proposed buildings are large, but generally the site seems capable of accommodating them. Of greater concern is the way they relate to the outdoor areas, and whether the gaps in between the blocks can be satisfactorily animated in the way envisaged. The architectural expression – especially the double height colonnade and the vertical fins – may be rather too forceful as a backdrop to the adjacent Schrödinger Building.

The proposal for a temporary multi-storey car park that could be converted piecemeal to office space is fraught with difficulty. Case studies where this has been achieved successfully, with concomitant analysis of the structural implications, pitfalls and feasibility, would provide a more convincing case. A more conventional approach would be easier to achieve and avoid compromising the architecture.

The 'fabric first' approach to sustainable development seems sound. It is encouraging that environmental specialists have been part of the team from the outset.

As it stands, the scheme may struggle to meet the required net biodiversity gains.

Key recommendations

1. The Science Park team should take steps to draw up a long-term vision for the whole of its area, identifying ways in which the Park could be denser and richer without diminishing its distinctive verdant character. This should anticipate the reduction in parking needs when the train station opens and be coordinated with leasing strategies. The aim should be to progress gradually from a road-based layout to one based on footpaths, biodiversity and a tighter-knit built form.
2. As part of this ambition, every opportunity should be taken to reduce car journeys and use car parking spaces as efficiently as possible. This will hasten the release of land for more beneficial purposes. The strategy for achieving this could be usefully informed by engagement with the users themselves, to derive an understanding of current barriers and opportunities, which may be different to those currently assumed, and may therefore open up unexpected solutions.
3. The car parking strategy at Plots 23-26 should be reconsidered, reducing the undercroft car parking and replacing the convertible multi-storey with a freestanding, temporary structure.
4. Adjusting the position of the blocks will produce a more serviceable public realm and perhaps a better opportunity for active frontages. Repositioning could also allow for future densification of the campus. The continuously glazed façade currently serves as a hindrance to occupying the edge with more informal, intimate, or introverted activity, such that the relaxed occupation at these thresholds – envisioned in the plots' strategy – remains unconvincing. Thought should be given to using some of the quieter external areas as outdoor rooms for staff or visitors.
5. Re-examine the need for the colonnade. Whilst it is an expressive form, it eats into ground floor space and does not respond well to the (north facing orientation elevation. A simpler form would sit more comfortably with the adjacent buildings.
6. Interrogate the landscape design further, to make more tangible biodiversity gains.
7. Reassess the flood water attenuation strategy, ensure standing water is a viable long term commitment or approach the design with an alternative strategy for the area currently designated for standing water.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy and sustainability

- 1.1. The Oxford Science Park has been a conspicuous success, to the extent that after thirty years it is running out of space. This is the moment to look at the remaining plots in the context of the Park as a whole, with a view to its consolidation and improvement. We understand the complexities of ownership and leases, but believe that in the long term a denser, vibrant but still green place can be achieved. Setting out a clear vision and the steps for achieving it should be put in place now.
- 1.2. The greenfield site of Plots 23-26 is long and thin, falling some two metres from north to south. The northernmost part is in a flood risk zone and there is a well-established belt of trees screening the site from Grenoble Road and the A4074. Given these conditions the blocks are logically positioned, but they are too deferential to the existing internal road layout and its rather profligate circle. If this arrangement can be challenged by a tighter form, we think it could make for a better scheme.
- 1.3. The proposal is still at an early stage and has yet to be tested in a landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) but subject to this work, the height, massing and scale seems generally appropriate. However, the car parking provision - at least in the short term - seems excessive and has forced some uncomfortable design decisions. If the undercroft car parking could be reduced to the minimum, it would free up space for more appropriate uses and create new design opportunities.

2. Open spaces, landscape and biodiversity

- 2.1. The blocks are sensibly orientated to allow good light penetration in the spaces in between, but we question how these will be experienced by their users. They will be heavily overlooked - not always desirable - and could be windy at times. We think other 'outdoor rooms' should be investigated, perhaps in the meadow or woodland areas, where there could be more seclusion, whilst still being safe and accessible. A similar testing exercise should be done at the front, where the areas under the colonnade could be uninviting.
- 2.2. The outdoor rooms are likely to be the primary active areas and if the development is to be a part of a wider estate movement strategy could be important tools in creating a destination forming strategy. This estate wide role is not yet accounted for and the focal points to both ends of these routes are, as yet, ill defined.

- 2.3. The fabric-first, passive design approach to sustainable design is welcome. We recognise the importance of generous floor to ceiling heights for the laboratory spaces and think this could also assist the BREEAM Excellent target. The use of vertical solar panels to conceal the plant area is an interesting initiative and could be stimulating visually.
- 2.4. Flood storage in the podium car park seems a questionable strategy and probably unnecessary, given that the highly permeable sandstone strata should allow good percolation to the aquifer. By the same token, the SUDS ponds may also be superfluous. We recognise this is work in progress.
- 2.5. We doubt whether the scheme as it stands would meet the expectation for a net biodiversity gain of 10%. This is partly because of the amount of rooftop plant required and the relatively small amount of planting that can be achieved. The external areas may yield new, richer possibilities.

3. Character, architecture and placemaking

- 3.1. The architects have sought to respect the setting of the Schrödinger Building, a recent and distinctive addition to the Science Park, however we believe that it is not necessary to be too subservient, as the Schrödinger Building is not particularly special. Heights have been kept reasonably low and we do not think that any glimpses from the main roads are likely or would be problematic. The rooftop profile could perhaps be more overtly articulated; the idea of a marker element visible from the road and to draw your through the Park is worth pursuing.
- 3.2. However, the elevations have rather too forceful a presence and the double height colonnade emphasises the big scale of the buildings. Omitting these colonnades would provide some extra space and help to simplify the facades. A more restful appearance with less contrasting materials might sit more comfortably with surrounding buildings as well as avoiding unwelcome sensory overload for certain users.
- 3.3. The multistorey car park sits uneasily alongside the principal building, and we have strong concerns about the practicality of designing it to be converted to office or lab space at some unspecified date. It presents challenges of design, procurement and viability, as well as phasing. Instead, it would be preferable to design a well-mannered, temporary and freestanding multistorey car park that could be removed in its entirety and replaced with new building with no compromises on its structure or dimensions.

- 3.4. Achieving active frontages can be challenging for developments on this scale. The notion of 'science on show' is attractive and would help to make all the entrances explicit. Having cycle storage prominently at the front would also help to promote active travel.
- 3.5. The panel questioned if the amount of active frontage (cafes, spill out areas) along the north facing elevation is realistic and suggested that it might be worth considering activation at a key point, where it can integrate well with the public realm and provide a focus point for this part of the Science Park.
- 3.6. The atria within the buildings are appealing. To derive maximum social potential from these spaces, careful consideration of the acoustics and lighting are important factors. Natural daylight serves as a clear draw, but the current choice of hard, reflective surfaces which line the space, may significantly hinder the acoustic comfort, and the ability for the atria to be sociably occupied, which in addition may be especially problematic and discouraging for neurodiverse users with particular needs.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1777/220707
Date	7th July 2022
Meeting location	Magdalen Centre, Oxford Science Park OX4 4GA
Panel members attending	Joanne Cave (chair), urban design and planning John Pegg, landscape architecture and urban design Justin Nicholls, architecture and R&D specialist Maayan Linlingai Ashkenazi, urban design and regeneration Stina Hokby, urban design and public realm
Panel manager	Geoff Noble, Design South East
Presenting team	Rory Maw, Oxford Science Park Ed Hayden, Scott Brownrigg Pierre Chin-Dickey, Macfarlane + Associates Joanne Quirin, Hoare Lea
Other attendees	Jitesh Patel, Oxford Science Park Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council
Site visit	Panel members visited the site before the meeting, accompanied by the client, design team and City Council officers
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this workshop was not restricted. The local planning authority has asked us to look at the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Height, massing and design• The treatment of the multistorey car park
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 current proposal.

Appendix B: Scheme details

Name	Plots 23-26 Oxford Science Park
Site location	The western edge of the Science Park, bounded by Grenoble Road.
Site details	Greenfield site located north east of the A4074 approximately 3.89 ha. The plots are characterised by large areas of rough grassland with a strip of hardstanding along the northern portion. A dense belt of trees line the eastern and southern boundaries of plots 23-25, screening the site from Grenoble Road and partially from the A4074. A large pond and Littlemore Brook lies to the north and west of plot 26.
Proposal	The proposed development comprises the development of three detached fully serviced and flexible laboratory and office building at Plot 23-26, providing approximately 41,081sqm (GIA) (442,192sqft) of Class E(g) floorspace. Landscape, biodiversity enhancement, access, car and cycle parking and associated works are also proposed.
Planning stage	The scheme is at pre-application stage. An application is targeted at 2 September 2022.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	<p>The main planning constraints are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flood risk. Part of plot 26 partially lies within flood zones 2 and 3 (medium to high probability of flooding). • Landscape buffer and ecology corridor • Local Plan policy requires non-residential developments over 1,000sq. m. to meet BREEAM Excellent standard as well as achieving at least a 40% reduction in carbon emissions compared with the new building regulations • Air Quality Management Area

Planning history Planning permission was granted in February 2001, for a four storey building and 189 car parking spaces (including 69 decked car park) (app ref : 00/02256/NF) for Plot 26 In March 2008 reserved matters approval was granted for a three storey building and 83 car parking spaces, including undercroft parking (app ref: 07/02830/RES). These consents were not implemented.

An outline application with all matters reserved for approx. 30,000sq. m. of R&D use on plots 23-26 and plot 18 was withdrawn in April 2022 due to the new development proposed on plot 18.

This report is a synthesis of the panel's discussion during the review and does not relate to any discussions that may have taken place outside of this design review meeting. A draft report is reviewed by all panel members and the Chair ahead of issuing the final version, to ensure key points and the Panel's overarching recommendations are accurately reported.

The report does not minute the proceedings but aims to provide a summary of the panel's recommendations and guidance.

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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