

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

# Littlemore House and Plot 18, Oxford Science Park

1<sup>st</sup> June 2022

## Introduction

This report reflects the design workshop held on the 19th May 2022 following the presentation of the proposed scheme by the design team. The proposal is for the development of two separate plots – Littlemore House and Plot 18 of Oxford Science Park – to provide R&D and healthcare facilities.

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).

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<sup>51</sup>. 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

This is an exciting project; its siting as part of the Oxford Science Park and as part of Littlemore means that it has the potential to be influential for the city and far beyond. We are pleased the applicant team has started a meaningful process of engagement with the local authority and various stakeholders. The two sites face significant challenges, and we strongly encourage communication, especially between the applicant team and the local authority, to find the most appropriate solution in developing Plot 18, redeveloping Littlemore House and connecting the two.

The proposal is at an early stage and does not yet demonstrate a deep understanding of its context in terms of landscape character, urban grain, history, character and biodiversity. Surveys of these aspects need to be conducted before the design progresses any further, their outcomes informing and influencing the design process, with the buildings and structures meaningfully responding to the natural and built environment that makes these sites unique.

We would like to re-engage with the team once our recommendations have been worked through.

## Key recommendations

1. Develop further contextual and biodiversity studies to help understand the character of the natural and built environments of each site. Once understood, develop the design strategies that respond to these characters.
2. Explore options for connecting the two sites at ground level and interrogate the walkway further in terms of its viability and of its potential impact on the trees, the burial ground beneath it and biodiversity.
3. Clarify the different user groups, their differing needs (operationally, physically, socially) and demonstrate how the two buildings' organisation in plan and wider design concepts respond to them.
4. Clarify how the scheme embodies a care-centred approach, taking into consideration principles of universal access and intuitive wayfinding, that facilitates collaboration as well as privacy for the different users.
5. Explore a more integrated approach to the existing landscape, topography and the buildings to ensure that they conserve and utilise existing landscape assets, are easily maintained and are long-lasting.
6. Consider wider movement and connectivity – existing and future – as part of the design strategy and site layout, that will encourage low carbon travel options and suppress car dependency.

## Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy and sustainability
  - 1.1. The approach towards environmental sustainability, biodiversity, and ecology should guide the design. The proposal should consider at this early stage the energy strategy and how to achieve 10% biodiversity net gain. The inclusion of an ecologist within the design team at this early stage is applauded, yet most surveys are still ongoing and as such, their outcomes and recommendations have not yet informed the design.
  - 1.2. The challenges this development faces relate not only to the separate locations of the two plots, but also to the different characters of the two areas. One plot is located adjacent to a science park and within an almost untouched natural environment. The other plot contains an existing building and a setting of significant historic value as well as being surrounded by new development that creates problematic adjacencies.
  - 1.3. The proposal should consider all the above elements (which cannot be achieved unless more ecological surveys are undertaken) along with detailed contextual analyses of the built and natural environment and the impact that the new buildings will have on the public appreciation of Littlemore Hospital as a heritage asset and impact on its historic significance.
  - 1.4. The design strategy currently proposes a ‘patient-centred approach’, despite the low number of patients who are anticipated to visit, as well as the relatively limited number of activities planned which will be directly related to patient care (over and above research). For example, key to patient recovery and healing are the ways in which those who care for them are able to be included in patient care – a group of users who are currently omitted from the design thinking. Instead, given the laudable ambitions of the scheme, a more thorough attention on collaboration – centred on staff and researchers – might better represent the ambitions and thus refine the design approach of the scheme.
  - 1.5. We encourage the team to explore a care-centred approach more broadly, encompassing both patient and researchers’ needs, which is likely to create more opportunities for collaboration and engagement between the scheme’s diverse user groups. This might include spaces designed around a ‘conceit’ for engagement, where people are brought together, for example around food, the library, or outdoors where the natural assets could play a significant role in drawing people in.
  - 1.6. The ability for people to collaborate depends on having space to reflect privately as well as to interact. Reflection spaces can be offered outside in the courtyard or in private balconies or areas in the buildings. Whether outdoors or indoors, planting has an important role to play in securing privacy without creating isolation, through affording semi-permeable boundaries.

- 1.7. Providing permeable boundaries at site-wide level, addressing how the building is perceived from the public realm on all sides, and connecting interfaces that link the inside with the outside at building-specific level, should be an important element of the design strategy. Healthcare facilities and R&D spaces have direct links to wellbeing and the buildings need to afford a more immediate, close-to-hand contact with the outdoors. Allowing glimpses of the courtyard and facilities from the outside would offer a better connection between the public and the users of the buildings, as well as providing ecological corridors.
2. Movement and entrance
  - 2.1. As the new station near the science park is likely to start operating in the next 5 years, permeability, connectivity and movement to and from the station (pedestrian, cycling and vehicular) should be considered as part of the design strategy (although we appreciate that rail connectivity will not be very frequent). Connecting routes from the station to Plot 18 are likely to get busier and Plot 18 might end up being the main entrance to the facility.
  - 2.2. Vehicular, cycling and pedestrian movement need to be considered as part of a holistic strategy that includes different routes to and from the site. The train station, Oxford City Centre, nearby neighbourhoods and new adjoining developments - these will all impact how people get to the two plots and how they approach them. A wider diagram showing the potential routes and desire lines should be created before a final decision on location of paths and entrances is made. The primary carpark access road should be positioned to avoid conflicting with the primary pedestrian access to the building entrance(s).
  - 2.3. The amount of car parking is considered excessive in the context of the emerging transport strategy (new train station) and the good quality cycling routes that exist around the site. Flexibility should be embedded into the buildings to allow for future changes in the way people travel and move around. Cycle parking should be provided at all key entrances, including spaces for larger 'cargo' bikes, as well as secure cycle parking for staff and long-term visitors.
  - 2.4. Pedestrian and wheelchair movement between the two sites should be as barrier-free as possible to encourage interaction and collaboration among the users. The topography and natural environment are challenging, and as such, surveys and a deeper understanding of the conditions are necessary at this early stage.
  - 2.5. Different people will be using the two plots; patients, carers, scholars and researchers and the public will all be interacting with the facilities. It would be informative to explore what their journeys will be like and how they might differ from each other. This exercise should inform the movement strategy as well as the entrances into the sites and the buildings.

- 2.6. We are concerned about the viability of the walkway in terms of its scale, maintenance and access requirements; its location in-between mature trees and different habitats, that have not been surveyed yet; land ownership issues as it crosses at least three sites; its impact on bird flight paths; the complex topography across all sites; and the limited understanding of the canopy.
  - 2.7. Moreover, the walkway will be quite long, and (compliant) accessible fire escape routes might need to be provided, particularly if a decision to have it fully enclosed is made. This could further impact the habitats and its maintenance.
  - 2.8. Given the complexities mentioned above, making the walkway a fundamental part of the design and the only route linking the two sites and buildings poses a significant threat to the project itself. We strongly encourage the applicant team to provide a ground level route that might not be as architecturally impressive as the walkway but would address the concerns raised above.
3. Landscape character
    - 3.1. A shift from an architecturally-led approach to a placemaking-led one should start with understanding the setting, and more specifically, the historic setting. This analysis should not focus on what was there historically, but how elements of the landscape contribute to what is part of the setting of a historic building and character.
    - 3.2. For example, although comparatively recent, the lime tree avenue that leads to what is currently the main entrance of Littlemore House forms part of the history of the site and how it was perceived by the local population, in addition to focussing on the hospital's rooftop belvedere, which can be seen from some distance. This analysis and conversation around the views, and what significance the tree-lined avenue has in respect of the heritage building and its visual setting need to happen at this early stage.
    - 3.3. A Landscape and Visual Impact Analysis could assist in the process of understanding the landscape character for both sites. It should be used as a design tool to develop the built and landscape strategy for the site. Longer distance views analysis could potentially reveal the potential for a more considered roofline design strategy taking into account the heritage significance of Littlemore House at the next stages of the design process.
    - 3.4. The main courtyard will be a roof terrace and as such, could appear artificial. The irrigation and maintenance challenges of this synthetic environment should be considered early in the process. We encourage the applicant to preserve more of the natural topography.

- 3.5. Animating the main courtyard with circulation routes, useable edges and breaking it down into a hierarchy of spaces of different scales could result in a more nuanced series of garden environments where people can socialise as well as have peaceful private moments. Its design should allow for visual permeability, nature and biodiversity to come into the site.
4. Built environment character
  - 4.1. The two distinctive characters of the plots provide opportunities for placemaking that is embedded into its context. The character of Littlemore House as an imposing largely symmetrical institutional building, a sanatorium, should be analysed carefully as to whether this typology should be reflected in or contrasted by the new building.
  - 4.2. The auditorium could be better embedded into the landscape strategy and more legible and accessible within the design of the courtyard. As mentioned above, increased interaction between the inside and outside would better reflect the character of the two sites and their future use.
  - 4.3. The organisation and architectural expression of the new Quadrangle building should be reconsidered in light of the proposed entrance now situated on the south side of the quadrangle, as opposed to the previous entrance that was located on the east-west axis. Careful analysis of the institutional formality of Littlemore House and a rationale for either preserving or loosening or re-orienting the current axial relationship should be provided.
  - 4.4. This is a place that needs to have a contextual identity. We welcome the initial massing studies that start to convey the architectural qualities of the proposal. The quadrangle building is currently rendered as highly glazed. The design team is encouraged to explore materials and treatments that would reduce overheating, support a low embodied and operational carbon strategy, enrich the perimeter of the quadrangle as places to inhabit and relate to the wider Oxfordshire character.

## Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1773/220519
Date	19 <sup>th</sup> May 2022
Meeting location	Littlemore House
Panel members attending	Joanna van Heyningen (Chair), architecture, public realm Alison Brooks, architecture Camilla Ween, urban design, transport planning Lindsey Wilkinson, landscape architecture and historic environment Maayan Linglingai Ashkenazi, urban design and regeneration
Panel manager	Kiki Gkavogianni, Design South East
Presenting team	Guy Wakefield, Ridge and Partners LLP John Blythe, Foster + Partners Ross Palmer, Foster + Partners Ronald Schuurmans, Foster + Partners Nick Haddock, Foster + Partners Rosie Pope, Foster + Partners
Other attendees	Lisa Flashner, EITM (Client) Matt Abney, EITM (Client) Tom Myers, EITM (Client) Claudia Jones, Ridge and Partners LLP Elinor Huggett, Foster + Partners Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Gill Butter, Oxford City Council James Newton, Oxford City Council
Site visit	A site visit was conducted prior to the workshop. All panel members attended.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted. The local planning authority has asked us to look at the following topics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Site constraints (flooding, biodiversity and landscape) to deliver innovative design.</li><li>• Character of Littlemore House and its setting and how to inform the design.</li></ul>



Panel interests	Maayan Linglingai Ashkenazi used to work for Foster+Partners. As she is no longer employed by them, it is not considered a conflict of interest.
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.

## Appendix B: Scheme details

Name	Littlemore House and Plot 18 Oxford Science Park
Site location	SAE Institute, Littlemore Park, Armstrong Road, Oxford OX4 4FY And Plot 18, Oxford Science Park, Grenoble Road, Oxford OX4 4GB
Site details	<p>The subject site consists of two separate plots: Littlemore House and Plot 18 of the Oxford Science Park.</p> <p>Plot 18 is located immediately north of Littlemore Brook extending approximately 1.3ha. The plot is characterised by rough grassland with dense trees located to the southern and western boundaries. An existing access road runs along the eastern and north eastern boundaries. The site lies within flood zones 2 and 3.</p> <p>Littlemore House was formerly part of the wider Littlemore Hospital site and converted in the late 1980s for research purposes. It was then acquired and occupied by SAE Institute for a media college and office space. The site comprises the Littlemore House building and an expanse of grassed landscape. The site slopes to the south east by approximately 3m. The primary access to the site is from Armstrong Road and runs through the centre of the site, characterised by an avenue of 8 lime trees. The site slopes to the south east by approximately 6m. Littlemore Park, a housing development of 270 homes, wraps around the Littlemore House part of the site to the east and south.</p>
Proposal	The vision for the scheme is to bring a patient clinic, research laboratories, and wellness centre under one roof to drive innovation in cancer treatment with the University of Oxford within close proximity. Full planning permission will be sought for the erection of new buildings within Plot 18 of the Oxford Science Park and the site of Littlemore House/ SAE Institute.
Planning stage	The scheme is at pre-application stage.

Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	<p>The SAE Institute part of the site is not allocated for development under the current Local Plan, but it is prudent to note that the site was allocated in the former 2001-2016 Local Plan for research and development. The site allocation was not rolled forward as the site was not promoted for allocation by the landowner. The planning history of the site for employment space is a material consideration, as well as the surrounding employment context of the site (The Oxford Science Park).</p> <p>The Oxford Science Park (TOSP) is a category 1 employment site and as such is a key site for delivering the Council's aim of managed economic growth to 2036. The site has been allocated, under policy SP10, for employment uses that directly relate to Oxford's key sectors of research led employment at the Science Park. The policy requires that development should be designed to enhance the external appearance of the park and to optimise opportunities to enhance the park's landscape and public realm.</p>
Planning history	<p>Littlemore House: 20/02672/FUL Erection of two 2-storey buildings to provide 3,500 sqm (GIA) of flexible commercial floorspace (Use Class E) with associated car and cycle parking; hard and soft landscaping and public realm works; ancillary structures including refuse stores, substation building and vehicular access via existing entrance from Armstrong Road.</p>

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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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