



Oxford Design  
Review Panel



Design  
South East

Appendix 2b

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

# Littlemore House and Plot 18, Oxford Science Park

5 September 2022

## Introduction

This report reflects the design workshop held in Oxford on 18 August 2022, following a site visit and presentation 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 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. 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 Ellison Institute for Transformative Medicine (EITM) has an ambitious development programme for its two Oxford sites. It offers the prospect of creating a world-class facility for cancer research in partnership with other organisations in the city and deserves buildings and complementary public/ private realm of the highest order. The aim is for Institute's spirit of innovation and collaborative working to be carried into the built form, site design and connections.

The Panel first reviewed the design proposal in May. Since then, further studies have been undertaken to help understand the character of the two sites, including their historical, ecological and landscape context.

The Panel is disappointed that these background studies, worthwhile in themselves, are not being used to inform and influence more ambitious changes to the original concept. In particular, we are not persuaded by the way the Littlemore development is configured as an enclosed, inward-looking block, or by the relationship between the Plot 18 building with its surrounding landscape. We remain unconvinced by the practicality of the high-level walkway and the risk of significant impacts.

Much effort has gone into making the new buildings energy efficient. We are concerned, however, by the very considerable embodied energy in the proposed development, with its reliance on underground car parking and heavy concrete construction.

The Institute has assembled a very strong professional team. We invite them to reconsider some of the assumptions underlying the design and to take the scheme to a new level, with sustainability at its heart.

## Key recommendations

1. Revisit the approach to sustainability, so that it is embedded in the design concept from the start and with the specific aim of reducing the embodied energy in the construction.
2. Using a robust transport strategy, reduce the car parking to the minimum and consider omitting the basement car park at the Littlemore site by making alternative provision.
3. Look again at alternatives to the high level canopy walkway, in particular the scope for a simple ground level path between the two sites.

4. Use the studies and surveys that have been undertaken to review the appropriateness of the built form on each site to loosen their architectural rigidity. Consider ways of creating a family relationship between the buildings, as a way of expressing their common purpose.
5. Be clear about the purpose of the open space at the Littlemore site and examine other options to a tightly enclosed, inward-looking quad.

## Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy and sustainability
  - 1.1. The brief from the Ellison Institute calls for a flexible internal layout, with clinics, meeting spaces and wet and dry laboratories arranged to support collaborative working. This is a stimulating requirement and one that could be extended to the way the buildings sit in the landscape and connect to each other.
  - 1.2. The former mental hospital has an interesting history, and it makes sense to repurpose the better buildings on the site. We commend the proposed changes, including the removal of inserted floors and the replacement of later accretions with glazed construction. However, some of the later hospital buildings are of modest quality and the architects could perhaps be bolder in their treatment; equally, the new buildings do not need to be subservient to the old. .
  - 1.3. The sustainability strategy is heavily weighted towards the operational aspects of the buildings, with a commitment to efficient fabric, natural ventilation and low energy consumption. This is commendable. However, the strategy is not matched in the construction phase, with a large, carbon-intensive concrete basement for parking, the auditorium and plant, representing a large amount of embodied energy.
  - 1.4. The Panel would urge a lighter touch, reducing parking to a minimum and allowing for its gradual decommissioning as car use diminishes, through improvements to public transport, park and ride, car sharing and the promotion of walking and cycling. Essential car parking could be accommodated at ground level or cut and cover, or in a freestanding temporary or adaptable structure. Plant might be better located on the roof. The undercroft at Plot 18 could offer some scope for parking. There is a need for a robust transport strategy that factors long-term expectations into the first stage design process.
  - 1.5. The connection between the two sites is important, operationally and visually. We remain doubtful about the benefits and practicality of the raised walkway, with its serpentine route and limited entry and access points. Its height also makes it a questionable proposition, with the tree canopies difficult to negotiate and pier foundations hard to accommodate without damaging burial remains or tree roots. An alternative simple ground level path would be cheaper, more versatile and less likely to cause tree or ground disturbance.

- 1.6. The Littlemore development turns inwards to face the garden. We think this arrangement should be relaxed, making a better relationship with the Catalyst housing to the southeast, and allowing intervisibility between the site and its surroundings. More variation in the architectural treatment of this frontage will help.
- 1.7. A robust views analysis will help direct key design decisions about layout and massing, including the relationship with heritage assets and their setting issues. It might indicate that the buildings could be a little higher in places, allowing a more varied roofline.
2. Open spaces, landscape and biodiversity
  - 2.1. Since the last review some useful studies have been undertaken, including a detailed ecological analysis. It would be helpful to define landscape character, not just the ecological profile, paying particular heed to the edges. For example, at the part of Plot 18 where the woodland meets grassland, softening the boundary condition would assist integration with the adjacent sites.
  - 2.2. It would also be useful to move from an effort to minimise the development's impact on its surroundings, to using the qualities of the landscape positively to shape the design. Greater interplay between indoor and outdoor spaces might assist in this regard.
  - 2.3. The purpose and character of enclosed space within the Littlemore development needs further thought. Is it a quad - a relatively formal arrangement, in the Oxbridge tradition - or is it to be more of a walled garden, relaxed and informal? Whilst there will be security and operational considerations, it is worth pursuing the option of public access to the open spaces. Oblique views or glimpses into the gardens could be rewarding.
  - 2.4. At Plot 18, the most ecologically diverse area is likely to be the margins of the brook and particular attention should be given to the way it meets the building.
  - 2.5. The avenue of limes at Littlemore is a pleasant feature but we do not think it should be retained at all costs, especially if it compromises the layout.
  - 2.6. We understand that the team is still aiming to meet a minimum of 10% net biodiversity gain across the two sites.

3. Character, architecture and placemaking
  - 3.1. The two sites are very different in their character and settings, and the way they are to share a single institution is an interesting challenge. This is not simply a matter of ease of movement between the two, but about their architectural language. We think more of a visual overlap, whether in form, materiality or detailing, would assist in meeting the Institute's aim for free and flexible interchange between the two locations.
  - 3.2. At the moment, the Littlemore quad arrangement is quite a formal response to the old hospital building, which are serviceable but architecturally unimpressive. The new build could be more demonstrative, and less subservient to its immediate context. The long south-east elevation might benefit from a more fluid, dynamic form, reflecting the diverse functions within the building. At present, the main clinical area in the south-east corner seems to unbalance the composition, and we also question the need to sink the auditorium below ground, depriving it of views out. It is worth investigating whether a raised auditorium, effectively splitting the quad in two, would create more versatile spaces. We would like to see the architects pursuing other design options, whilst making the case for their preferred approach.
  - 3.3. At Plot 18, the raised pavilion form is an abrupt contrast with the Littlemore quad. This is driven by the different conditions of the two sites, not least the need to respond to flood risk. The footprint of the building is tight for the site and has an uncomfortable relationship to wooded area to the west. The orientation of the rectangular form seems awkward and the result of trying to place the rectangle with minimum damage to the trees. It would be better to provide more breathing space between the building and the trees. We see the need to raise the building off the ground, but the undercroft and entrance could be rather gloomy; a more generous soffit height might relieve this difficulty.
  - 3.4. The architectural treatment of the northwest side of Littlemore House and the open space between it and the St George's Manor site needs careful consideration so that the two sites relate more comfortably to each other.

4. Transport and movement
  - 4.1 The overall design and integration of the site with the surrounding community should be such that it promotes low carbon sustainable travel and suppresses car dependency. Fundamental to such a strategy is the integration of walking and cycling infrastructure, connectivity to local facilities and public transport nodes and low car parking provision (which should be reduced over time, as further public transport options are introduced). There should be convenient covered cycle parking.
  - 4.2 The design team should demonstrate how their design promotes or supports good connectivity to the local context and community, as part of their commitment to lasting and sustainable development.

## Appendix A: The design review panel meeting

Reference number	Ref: 1863/220818
Date	18 August 2022
Meeting location	Littlemore Park, Armstrong Road, Oxford OX4 4FY
Panel members attending	Lindsey Wilkinson (Chair), landscape architecture and historic environment Camilla Ween, urban design and transport planning Alice Brown, architecture and historic environment Catherine Burd, architecture and historic environment Martin Stockley, civil engineering and transport planning
Panel manager	Geoff Noble, Design South East
Presenting team	Lisa Flashner, EITM (Client) Guy Wakefield, Ridge and Partners LLP Claudia Jones, Ridge and Partners LLP Will Hines, Ridge and Partners LLP Oliver Bannister, Ridge and Partners LLP Georgie Murray Threipland, Ridge and Partners LLP John Blythe, Foster + Partners Ross Palmer, Foster + Partners Ronald Schuurmans, Foster + Partners Nick Haddock, Foster + Partners Elinor Huggett, Foster + Partners Robbie Mackenzie, Ecology Solutions Nick Wright, Donald Insall Associates
Other attendees	Tom Myers, EITM Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Gill Butter, Oxford City Council James Newton, 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"> <li>• Treatment of the eastern facade of the Littlemore development</li> <li>• Visual permeability and the relationship with the Catalyst housing</li> <li>• The appropriateness of an enclosed quad</li> </ul>
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	The proposal was first reviewed at a design workshop on 19 May 2022.

## 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</p>

expanse of grassed landscape. The primary access to the site is from Armstrong Road and runs through the centre of the site, characterised by an avenue of 12 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.

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	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.

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#### 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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