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Catalyst Housing Ltd
Ealing Gateway
26-30 Uxbridge Road
London
W5 2AU
6 October 2020

Appendix 2

Our reference: DCC/5330

Oxford Design Review Panel: Blackbird Leys – District Centre and Knights Road

Dear Mona Barry,

Thank you for providing the Oxford Design Review Panel with the opportunity to advise on this proposal at the Design Workshop on 24 September 2020.

Summary

The regeneration of the District Centre and Knights Road in Blackbird Leys is a significant project for the city of Oxford and represents the ambition and dedication to affordable housing delivery and high quality placemaking set out in the current local plan. Both sites have been considered for intensification for some time, and the panel welcome both sites coming forward for development through a joint venture with Catalyst Housing Group.

We strongly support the close community engagement conducted by Oxford City Council, Catalyst Housing Group and the design team which is demonstrated through a deep understanding of the needs and aspirations of local businesses, community groups and residents of Blackbird Leys. We are also mindful of the complex phasing programme of the development to ensure continual operation for local businesses and community functions throughout construction. However, we believe this understanding of local needs and aspirations has not yet translated into a clear long-term vision for Blackbird Leys and south Oxford. Nearby sites with significant number of new homes are likely to impact the role of Blackbird Leys in south Oxford, yet at present, these two sites appear as separate from their wider context. Further, it appears that this deep understanding of the needs and concerns of local residents has prevented more radical and ambitious options for the redevelopment of the district centre and ultimately led to solutions that seek to maintain the current status quo rather than providing a more future-focused vision for a new district centre in Blackbird Leys. We recommend the applicant and Oxford City Council reconsider the brief and provide a clearer and more ambitious brief for the design team to respond to.

Other comments and advice for consideration include:

- Adjust the position, orientation, and frontage to Blocks B, C, D at the district centre
- Reassess concerns on viability through ensuring quality of design and placemaking
- Provide a diverse rental offer alongside home ownership
- Refine the site layout at Knights Road to provide a clear hierarchy of streets and residential character

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- Explore further design iterations to test how the quantum and quality of open space could better support the health and wellbeing of residents
- Consider whether a village green is the most appropriate typology for the district centre
- Be realistic in the aspiration for a car-free development and provide feasible transport alternatives to car use

Strategic developments nearby Blackbird Leys

We are conscious of a number of other emerging residential-led projects nearby Blackbird Leys, such as the site at Grenoble Road and the Dog Racing Stadium. While we fully recognise that these matters are outside the influence of the design team, we believe they are pertinent to how the entire project team approaches the sites at the District Centre and Knights Road. We recommend the design team use the current available information on these other sites to consider how a significant increase in homes nearby Blackbird Leys could potentially affect the district centre and the opportunities for improved connections to other parts of the Oxford. A masterplan that can accommodate for wider strategic transformations to south Oxford could ensure Blackbird Leys is central to the enhancement of the overall area and supports the range of uses and amenities required for local residents, now and in the future.

Revised brief to design team

We are mindful of the design teams' and local authority's deep and long-running engagement with communities in Blackbird Leys and how this has informed many aspects of the current proposal – particularly in the District Centre. However, we believe the proposals are currently hesitant and lack ambition for a more profound transformation of the district centre – particularly in the range and complementary functions of social infrastructure at the district centre. We believe the brief is currently overly focussed on housing and recommend the applicant and local authority revise the brief to set out what other uses are currently missing in Blackbird Leys, and what are the strategic aspirations for social infrastructure and the nature of the public realm. To make the brief even more ambitious, we recommend considering precedents from elsewhere and proposing uses which are adaptable and sustainable for the lifetime of the community at Blackbird Leys. A more ambitious, rigorous, and robust brief could ensure that the design team's response supports a genuinely mixed-use masterplan for Blackbird Leys.

Urban design of the District Centre

We support the urban design principles developed by the design team as well as the intention to reduce the dominance of cars throughout the District Centre. We also recognise the complexity of the phasing programme and the constraints on accommodating new development on this site. However, we believe that the current masterplan does not fully live up to the principles to redefine, connect, and repair the district centre. The proposed interventions across the site do not add up to a coherent whole and the definition of frontages and typologies is currently unclear. To remedy some of these concerns we recommend the design team consider the following alterations to Blocks A, B, C, and D:

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- Examining the depth of the Block A to ensure it is only as large as necessary to accommodate the retail and community functions
- Reconsidering whether the ground floor is an appropriate location for homes on Block B
- Focusing on ensuring legible frontages to Block B on the east and west of the block
- Testing further options for the building footprint of Block C to align with the roadway and adjacent sites
- Testing alternation options for the position and orientation of Block D as well as focussing on the quality of the ground and first floor. However, we are comfortable with the current scale of Block D

Addressing these elements could ensure the District Centre better lives up to the principles set out by the design team and provides a more coherent, integrated, and complete destination for businesses, community functions and daily activities.

Landscape design for health and wellbeing

Given the volume of open space within Blackbird Leys, we believe there is a significant opportunity to connect and enhance open spaces across Blackbird Leys. While there is evidence of this aspiration, the finer detail on how it will be achieved is currently missing. Moving forward, the proposal will need to better articulate the positive impact of quality open spaces on the health and wellbeing of residents and visitors. We recommend the design team use landscape design and the ample open spaces across Blackbird Leys as tools to improve the lives of residents in what is a relatively deprived area. This can be achieved through ensuring easy and attractive walking and cycle routes through the area, access to quality communal green space and quality play for all ages.

To promote social cohesion avoid incurring greater costs in maintenance, some green spaces could be managed by different groups with supervision from a volunteer organisation. These spaces could provide functions such as gardening, rewilding or food growing and informed by the residents' needs. We recommend these ideas are included in the next round of consultation with residents. An ambitious, coherent and community-focussed vision for landscape and open space across Blackbird Leys could provide the connective tissue to bring both sites together and improve the quality of life of existing and future residents of Blackbird Leys.

Concerns over viability

We are concerned that the project's viability has limited the design process at Knights Road and impaired the overall design quality of the proposal. We believe a well-connected, characterful place with quality architecture would prove to be an attractive offer for potential residents in Oxford and therefore, we recommend the applicant focusses on a new narrative and aspiration for Blackbird Leys as a desirable location which can be achieved through better connectivity, placemaking, landscape and open space at both District Centre and Knights Road. Further, a stronger response to concerns over viability would see this challenge as an opportunity for innovation (rather than caution) in the design process.

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Diverse housing offer

We question the emphasis on home ownership over affordable and secure renting models. The current level of 33% home ownership in Blackbird Leys may be difficult to improve upon, while focussing solely on property value may not be a fair indicator of a better place. Instead, we recommend developing a more diverse and innovative offer for renters as well as prospective homeowners. This could be achieved through focussing on multigenerational homes and considering how different residential groups could offer co-benefits, such as schools and nursing homes or homes for older people.

Village green

A village green at the District Centre is thoughtful and developed through close engagement with local communities' own aspirations for Blackbird Leys. In line with other comments on greater ambition for how Blackbird Leys' regeneration, the village green typology is not yet delivering on its full potential within the masterplan for the district centre. Currently, it lacks a central space and there is not an obvious purpose for one to gravitate towards it. We recommend the design team retain the qualities that make a village green attractive – such as enclosure, green space and community facilities – while defining what a village green could be in the 21st century. Redesigning the relationship of Block B and C to one another, including their orientation, frontage and ground floor use could improve this greatly. A legible and attractive village green that supports a range of needs of the communities could be a vital civic space that knits together each element of the district centre.

Knights Road - Landscape

We agree with Oxford City Council that open space is currently underprovided at the Knights Road site believe further work is required to ensure the volume and quality of green space meets the needs of current and future residents. We recommend the design team consider how the brook and Spindleberry Nature Park can add further character and inform the type of spaces that this site could provide. Greater tree cover could also offer some additional screening from the Kassam Stadium. We also recommend testing alternative arrangements for back gardens to allow for greater permeability and free up space for a more communal area within this site. A greater amount of open, green space could ensure Knights Road integrates well within the surrounding suburban context and mitigates the loss of a well-used open space.

Knights Road – Site layout

The design development for the site at Knights Road appears at an earlier stage to the District Centre and the current diagrams suggest a capacity study rather than a completed site layout. As such, the site layout appears to be lacking a street hierarchy to define the scale of and types of routes across the site. We recommend the legibility of the stated characters for each area is improved through further design iterations. We recommend both the design team return to the principles of this site and ensure the street hierarchy and character areas are resolved and refined and they are then used to inform further design

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detail to create a safe, enjoyable public realm and the development of quality, distinctive homes.

We also recommend the design team considers how the Knights Road site supports local connectivity ensuring that the site layout can accommodate the volume of pedestrians on match days without compromising residential quality. One option for this may be to extend the route along Knights Road itself across the brook to the Stadium and nearby amenities. Ensuring good pedestrian access to the Kassam Stadium and nearby amenities could contribute greatly to the site at Knights Road stitching it into the existing suburban context and reducing residents' dependency on vehicles to access other parts of south Oxford.

Parking and transport strategy

The requirement for car-free neighbourhoods is a key part of the principle of regeneration of Blackbird Leys. We support this in principle but believe there are challenges to ensure it can be achieved successfully in practice. We would advise that controlled parking may not work in absence of a clear transport strategy for the area which strengthens public transport connections to Oxford and enhances walking and cycling routes to nearby destinations. We would also advise the applicant that the benefits of a car-free scheme must be clearly and confidently articulated to the existing residents to avoid resistance to other parts of the project. Ultimately, any reduction of car use in Blackbird Leys is likely to be a result of the quality of place at the district centre and the ease, accessibility and enjoyment of local walking and cycling routes across the area. A stronger approach to other elements of connectivity and mobility could give the applicant and local authority more confidence in the right level of parking for both sites.

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,



Theo Harrison

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Review process

Following a remote site visit, and discussions with the design team and local authority and a pre-application review, the scheme was reviewed on 24 September 2020 by Fred Manson (Chair), Deborah Nagan, Euan MacDonald, Jon Rowland. These comments supersede any views we may have expressed previously.

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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.cabe@designcouncil.org.uk.

cc (by email only)

Attendees

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Mohammed Haque	Catalyst Housing Group
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Clare Gray	Oxford City Council
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