

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Oxpens Bridge

15 September 2022

Introduction

This report reflects the design workshop held in Oxford on 1 September 2022, following a site visit and presentation by the design team.

The proposal is for a new pedestrian and cycle bridge over the River Thames, between Oxpens and Grandpoint.

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 principle and location of the new bridge at Oxpens has been agreed for some time. The Panel has been invited to advise on its siting, design and relationship to its surroundings.

The Panel sees the case for a bridge in this location, connecting two communities with a year-round, dry route that will encourage walking and cycling into the town centre or to the railway station. The bridge should also be seen as a destination in itself, and a place to linger and enjoy the Thames. More importantly, it will form part of a larger network for walkers and cyclists so the whole of the route into the city centre and to the station needs to be addressed. The design of the bridge should also go hand-in-hand with the emerging Oxpens masterplan, especially its landscape design.

The appearance of the bridge is striking, with its asymmetrical, wave design. To succeed, these wave elements should be structurally integral, and for visual consistency all the principal bridge elements should take on the same flowing lines where practicable.

Particular attention should be given to the handling of the underside areas of the bridge, in terms of their appearance and their function, and to the places where bridge users may want to sit and enjoy the view.

Key recommendations

- 1. Work closely with the Oxpens masterplan team, especially the landscape architects, to ensure that both projects meet their potential and serve a common purpose.**
- 2. Look at the landscape holistically, harnessing natural engineering of plants and trees to strengthen the riverbank and assist flood management. Avoid the extremes of a 'designed' landscape on one side, and a 'natural' appearance on the other.**
- 3. In refining the bridge design, consider ways of taking the flowing lines of the upstands (the waves) into the whole form, including the width of the deck, the profile of the piers and the shape of the soffit, so there is a consistent expression.**
- 4. Look for other positions for seating or resting places on the bridge, perhaps in the middle, where people will want to pause.**
- 5. Give thought to the underside of the bridge and how it might be used by different users, including children.**

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy and sustainability
 - 1.1. **The principle of a new bridge across the Thames connecting the communities at Grandpont and Oxpens has been agreed. The bend on the river and the changes in level limit the options for crossing places, but the proposed location seems logical and is supported by the analysis of desire lines. The bridge still needs to justify its existence, not just in transport and energy terms, but by making the experience of seeing and using the bridge wholly pleasurable. The site is sensitive, environmentally and visually, and the bridge should be a place to linger and enjoy nature.**
 - 1.2. **One difficulty is that the adjacent Oxpens masterplan is not fixed and big decisions, such as the future of the ice rink, have yet to be taken. At present, the back of the ice rink has an unprepossessing appearance, yet it will be prominent for the bridge and meadow users. The design of the bridge needs to allow for a range of development scenarios, but close working with the masterplan team is essential. The bridge has the potential to be an important contribution to placemaking and community development.**
 - 1.3. **The height of the bridge and the ramps to it are determined by the need to secure a dry route year-round for the communities on both sides, to encourage its regular use.**
 - 1.4. **The bridge has been designed as an efficient, lightweight construction to minimise its carbon footprint. Sustainability calculations are complex and the embodied energy in the construction can be factored against a reduction in car journeys, assuming the bridge is located in the right place. It would be instructive to calculate the saving in car journeys. We also think it would be useful to assess the whole life cost of the bridge including its lifespan and maintenance.**
 - 1.5. **We agree with the design team that the bridge should be a shared space, with no segregated cycle path. The design should accommodate gentle cycling amongst pedestrians, slowing speeds rather than obliging riders to dismount.**

2. Open spaces, landscape and biodiversity
 - 2.1. **The bridge has a most attractive setting amongst the treelined banks of the Thames, with meadow on one side and mainly woodland on the other. The bridge should respond to this context, not so much by hiding itself in the trees but by taking a cue from nature in its design. Harnessing the green assets for natural engineering, including the use of trees and vegetation to manage flooding or stabilise the river banks, should also be part of the project. In this regard we suggest that thought is given to the stability of the river at times of drought, spate or flood and the design is influenced accordingly.**
 - 2.2. **The proposal should be submitted with landscape and ecological information to allow the planning authority to assess how the combination of engineered and natural foundations and below ground structures contributes to climate resilience and improved biodiversity. More attention should be paid to the species and size of trees and shrubs specified, and their role in natural flood and drought defences.**
 - 2.3. **The spaces underneath the bridge need careful treatment. Rather than encouraging grass to grow in these shaded areas, gravel might be better, and would support a wide array of plants through self-seeding.**
 - 2.4. **It will be essential to work closely with the landscape architects for the Oxpens masterplan, to ensure a shared vision about the relationship between the planned public realm (such as the amphitheatre), the bridge and the meadow. There is no need for an abrupt contrast between designed to natural landscape, and each side of the river should have both qualities.**
 - 2.5. **The team should be clearer in their final submission about the specimens and species of tree losses. The alder proposed for removal could be older than stated, and suckering/pollarded species such as this do much to aid bank stabilisation. The alder could be propagated now so new plants of the same genetic stock are returned to site in due course;
<https://www.treesforcities.org/stories/intreeducing-the-alder-a-super-hero-tree-pioneer>**

3. Character, architecture and placemaking
 - 3.1. **The structure of the bridge with its Vierendeel trusses forming an asymmetric pair of 'waves' and a delicate middle section is an appealing concept. The design as a whole is intended to be light and elegant, with the waves as an essential part of the structure. They are not intended as decorative elements mounted on a conventional beam construction.**
 - 3.2. **The visual appeal of the bridge would be strengthened if all the main elements – the width of the deck, the profile and alignment of the piers, the balustrades – were to relate more closely to the flowing form of the waves. The team should present a design which delivers a more consistent, organic appearance, whilst maintaining a low carbon footprint.**
 - 3.3. **If the bridge is to be a destination as well as a point on a journey, particular attention should be given with the Oxpens landscape architect to the use of the spaces at both ends and underneath the bridge. This extends to the soffit treatment, lighting design, colours and materials. These spaces suggest themselves to a variety of uses, including river-based activity and children's play. Shade and shelter will also have a role. The team should pursue the multifunctional benefits of the bridge and show how they would be achieved.**
 - 3.4. **Materials, colours and surface textures are still under consideration. The location lends itself to an informality and warmer tones, perhaps natural wood finishes, in combination with the structural steelwork. Equally important is the lighting design; even if it is only to be installed later, it should not be an afterthought. Subtle, solar-powered illumination on the bridge underside could be attractive.**

Reference number	Ref: 1864/220901
Date	1 September 2022
Meeting location	St Aldates Room, Oxford Town Hall, St Aldate's, Oxford OX1 1BX
Panel members attending	Joanne Cave (chair), urban design and planning (Oxpens Panel) Andrew Cameron, urban design and transport planning (Oxpens Panel) Deborah Nagan, landscape architecture and architecture (Oxpens Panel) Dan Jones, architecture and education, arts and public buildings Paola Sassi, architecture and sustainability
Panel manager	Geoff Noble, Design South East
Presenting team	Tom Osbourne, Knight Architects Paul Comerford, Prior + Partners
Other attendees	Jenny Barker, Oxford City Council (Client) Steve Weitzel, Oxford City Council (Client) James Skilton, Stantec Sarah De La Coze, Oxford City Council Rosa Appleby-Alis, 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">• the appropriateness of the design to its context• the treatment of the underside of the bridge• landscape design• landing position of the bridge
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	No previous reviews

Appendix B: Scheme details

Name	Oxpens Bridge, Oxpens
Site location	River Thames west of the Oxford Ice rink. Oxpens
Site details	The development proposes the construction of a bridge over the River Thames linking Grandpont and Oxpens.
Proposal	The pedestrian and cycle bridge is proposed to land behind the ice rink and will link the south side of the river to the City Centre. The bridge will help connect Osney Mead which is an allocated site (yet to be developed) with the city centre. The promoters of the project are the City Council. When completed, the bridge will be adopted by the highway authority, Oxfordshire County Council.
Planning stage	Pre-application
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	The principle of a new bridge connecting Osney and Oxpens is supported in polices M1, SP1 and SP2 of the Oxford local Plan as well as the emerging West End SPD. The principle of the new bridge is considered acceptable subject to compliance with the other policies of the local plan and NPPF.
Planning history	Previously undeveloped land

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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