Oxford Design Review Panel

Design South East

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Eastpoint Business Park, Oxford

02 November 2023

Introduction

A design workshop was held on the 19th October 2023, preceded by a site visit and presentations by the local authority and design team.

The proposal is for the redevelopment of the existing business park to create a new life sciences campus including social space, transport hub, landscaping, and ancillary development.

A summary of the Panel discussion is provided, highlighting the main items raised, followed by a set of key recommendations aimed at improving the design quality of the proposal. Detailed comments are presented under headings covering the main attributes of the scheme. The document closes with the details of the meeting (appendix A) and the scheme (appendix B).

Paragraph 133 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023) 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

We are excited by the potential community benefits of this project and by the applicant's aspiration to deliver a "best in class" scheme in terms of quality and sustainability credentials.

The emerging architectural design appears largely positive; however, the proposal fails to integrate with its wider context or adequately address issues around heritage or ecology. A return to first principles is required to ensure that the scheme is underpinned by a thorough understanding of the existing site and by a set of robust design strategies.

We would welcome a further review of this scheme once the applicant and council have had the opportunity to address the comments and recommendations set out in this report and ahead of a planning submission.

Key recommendations

The applicant should:

1. Return to first principles to develop robust preliminary strategies that address heritage, context, ecology, and connectivity of the site before further design development.
2. Consider reconfiguring the site layout to allow for outward-facing public uses and an active streetscape to Sandy Lane West and/or the north of the site.
3. Encourage the use of sustainable travel modes through greater provision and visibility of cycle facilities and exploring options for public transit and car share schemes.
4. Develop a robust landscape strategy that preserves existing trees, provides the best possible conditions for plant growth, and considers long-term maintenance.
5. Assess the impact of the building height in views from St Mary's Tower and clearly express how any harm might be mitigated or potentially outweighed by public benefit.
6. Consider architectural references that are more appropriate to the industrial history of the site context and explore how these might inform the proposal.
7. Describe the internal experience of moving through the buildings, considering how the design might foster collaboration and innovation through incidental social interaction.

The council should:

1. Require samples of the pre-cast components to be submitted and approved as a condition of any planning consent.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy

1.1. The nature of this project requires preliminary strategies with regards to the heritage, context, ecology, and connectivity of the site to be in place before informed, place-based design decisions can be made. The team must return to first principles before further work is carried out on the architectural design and ensure that all subsequent design moves are underpinned by these strategies.

1.2. Understanding and articulating the heritage significance of the site should be a first step in the design process in order to inform the landscape and architectural design. We support the council's recommendation to carry out a heritage scoping exercise, which would help the design team to understand the history, influence, and development pattern of the site. This would also identify any potential harm arising from its redevelopment – for example, the impact on the low-rise residential development in the area as well as on views from St Mary's Tower – and address this in the design. Without such assessment, it is not possible to prove that heritage harm will not be caused.

1.3. Given the nature of this proposal as a life sciences campus, it is disappointing that a strategy to understand, preserve, and enhance the ecology of the site is not in place. Failing to integrate this ahead of developing the architectural design has created poor environmental conditions for plant life on-site: largely located in shade, at height, and under constrained nutrient and water conditions. Tree and ecology surveys should be carried out as soon as possible to understand the site's existing ecosystem and the benefits it can provide around drainage, shade provision, and the impact on wellbeing; and to enable the design team to develop a robust strategy to centre nature within the proposal.

1.4. In order to create a truly successful place, it is important that the design team understands the local community and their politics. The proposal should address the specific needs of this part of Oxford and clearly articulate the potential community benefits of the scheme, such as the aspiration to develop a symbiotic relationship between the life sciences campus and Oxford Academy.

1.5. To support discussions with the school and community, we suggest that the design team develops a masterplan framework that shows the site in context with areas of significance to the local area – such as Oxford Academy, the Nuffield Industrial Estate, the Science Park, and the proposed new Cowley Branch stations – as well as the cycleway, road junctions, and school entrances. This would help to describe how the development site could play a connecting role in an exciting emerging landscape of innovation and learning and unlock joint benefits for both the development and the local area.

2. Site layout

2.1. We are unconvinced by the decision to locate the proposed public uses on the boundary with the school. Whilst this arrangement could potentially facilitate greater integration between the two sites, it creates an inward-looking development that fails to interrelate with the rest of the wider area. Activation of this central area relies on a direct connection being made across the school's secure line – if this is not possible, it is unlikely that this space will attract any public activity beyond that of the campus tenants.

2.2. By turning the proposal outward and locating the community uses on the street, a well-overlooked, more public-facing connection between the campus and school could be created along Sandy Lane West, which could also be enjoyed by the wider community. Integrating additional uses such as a bakery, café, creche, and a bike workshop would further animate the edges of the site and, if open during evenings and weekends, could further enrich the scheme with a sense of community and safety beyond the working hours of the labs.

2.3. Rather than a pavilion building, the design team should explore options for providing open space that captures social activity, features planting at ground level, and enjoys a pleasant microclimate with adequate shading – ideally provided by trees. This could be located centrally within the site as with the 'quad' of a collegiate campus, or form part of a lively streetscape – perhaps capturing the flow of pupils and teachers along Sandy Lane West or softening the sense of arrival from the underpass to the north. Re-landscaping works beyond the red line boundary could further enhance the character of this space and broaden the community benefit of the scheme.

2.4. The proposed service lane runs along the majority of the site's perimeter, creating an inward-looking site with an undesirable 'back of house' character along its boundaries. The design team should review whether the service requirements of the development could be met with a less impactful arrangement, for example through discrete spaces for turning and reversing. Alternatively, limiting this to a more controlled service yard arrangement could potentially free up the northern boundary for a pedestrian/cycle-priority street, allow for a future potential connection to the school via the western boundary, and create a more integrated proposal with outward-facing streets.

2.5. Collaboration with the school could see the release of the entry lane to the east for shared or sole use of the development. Pupils and staff arriving to Oxford Academy by active travel modes would move through the centre of the site, helping to activate the space. This would allow the existing treeline to be retained and give pupils a safer and more inspiring entrance.

3. Sustainable design

3.1. We are encouraged by the client's track record of high-quality proposals and commitment to high sustainability targets. In order to be truly 'best in class', these credentials should apply to both the building and the landscape proposals.

3.2. Demolishing existing buildings – particularly those that are of relatively recent build – is inherently unsustainable and must be more robustly justified. The applicant team must acknowledge this and its responsibility to ensure that the proposed development stands for a long time. The demand for life sciences buildings will change; therefore, careful consideration must be given to the experiential qualities – such as how collaboration is fostered through chance social interaction – that will allow people to cherish this building and enjoy inhabiting it long into the future.

3.3. We support the endeavour to re-use material from the existing buildings within the proposal. These materials should all be diligently catalogued, and their new uses identified to give confidence to this aspect of the proposal.

3.4. The replacement of lost trees does not equate to a like-for-like comparison in sustainability terms and should not be considered as such. In addition to the time taken for new trees to begin to sequester carbon, the removal of trees causes wider ecosystem disruption, including the impact on species that live in the soil and amongst tree roots.

3.5. In order to meet the proposed sustainability targets, the design team must be judicious with their use of glazing and atria in the building design to reduce the risk of overheating.

3.6. Beyond that mentioned above, the emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in detail at this review. The standing advice from Design South East is that at a subsequent design review and at planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear strategy that details how the development will minimise embodied, operational, and transport-related carbon emissions, and optimise the use of renewable energy to align with the Government's legal commitment to Net Zero Carbon by 2050. The proposal should demonstrate its compliance to a respected zero carbon pathway, for example as set out by the UKGBC Net Zero Whole Life Carbon Roadmap for the Built Environment. The sustainability strategy should be tied to measurable targets and detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods (as applicable), and also address water use, biodiversity net gain, waste reduction and circular economy principles alongside climate resilience and overheating.

4. Movement and transport

4.1. The proposed quantum of car parking may be appropriate for current demand but will not be sustainable long-term. The applicant team should develop a travel plan that discourages reliance on private car ownership by providing attractive alternatives such as a car club or a transit system running to nearby stations (existing and new) and park-and-rides. This could potentially allow for less car parking provision on-site and would reduce additional pressure to the already congested Eastern By-Pass Road.

4.2. Increasing the visibility of bicycles on-site will help encourage the use of cycling as a sustainable transport mode over private cars. Breaking up the cycle parking more broadly across the site – including 'cycle zones' attached to each building and short-stay cycle parking dotted throughout the landscape – would increase visibility and be more practical for cyclists. In addition, bringing cycle routes through the development would activate the spaces within the site and give a greater sense of safety after dark.

4.3. It is unfortunate that there is not a bus route serving the site directly. The applicant should explore whether this could potentially be accommodated by a local bus service or in discussion with Oxford Academy.

4.4. The applicant team should explore a 'monitor and manage' approach of on-site transport use to ensure that they are meeting their proposed mode share targets, and that the development's operational carbon is in line with the targeted sustainability credentials.

4.5. With private car ownership in decline, the design team should consider how the travel and energy hub might be used alternatively in the future. This flexibility should be embedded into its design so that it is not rendered obsolete.

4.6. We would welcome further detail on the function and character of the proposed routes around the site: for example, whether they are streets or lanes, or if some have pedestrian priority. The relationship between the streets and the built form – especially in relation to fronts and backs – should be explored in the next stages of design.

4.7. Simple, low-cost improvements to the off-site walking and cycling routes would be greatly beneficial to the scheme and should be factored into the proposal.

5. Biodiversity and landscape maintenance

5.1. The landscape strategy is at an early stage. Whilst there is evidently an attempt at creating an overall concept, it has not been informed by the building layout and its impact on microclimate, nor by the drive to harness maximum benefit for site users. There may be considerable issues in complying with the forthcoming biodiversity net gain legislation.

5.2. Whilst we welcome the proposed greening of the building, we are unconvinced that the high maintenance requirements of the green walls and terraces have been thought through in adequate detail at this stage. Further information on the soil, species, water management, and maintenance strategy is required to prove that this aspect of the proposal is truly deliverable. The design team should explore the opportunity for a symbiotic relationship in which plants contribute to the cooling of the building, while the building contributes to the maintenance of the landscape.

5.3. We strongly recommend retaining the mature trees to the south-eastern corner of the site. In addition to being the more sustainable choice in terms of preserving the site's existing ecology, setting the building back behind these trees would soften the relationship to the consented development at Northfield House and help to mitigate light spill.

5.4. We are unconvinced that the proposal to introduce and cultivate endangered plant species will be deliverable given the conditions on-site. It may be more realistic to collaborate with other sites to preserve these species as part of a biodiversity carbon credit strategy, which would help with achieving the required biodiversity net gain. The endangered species could inform other aspects of design within the proposal such as artwork and paving patterns.

5.5. The tiers of planting that cover the pavilion building are physically inaccessible to its users, diluting the wellbeing benefits of being in close proximity to nature. Planting directly in the ground would be better; however, planting under the cantilevers of buildings should be avoided, as the reduced exposure to sunlight and rain, combined with the removal of soil, provides poor conditions for growth.

6. Scale and visual impact

6.1. By exceeding 15m in height, the building is likely to be visible in views from St Marys Tower, as indicated in the Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note. The design team should demonstrate that they have understood the Technical Advice Note and followed its recommendations, including carrying out a visual impact assessment using simplified renders to clearly articulate the impact of the proposal and the significance of any harm caused.

6.2. The scale of the development should be considered in terms of how the building is experienced from a distance, in passing, on approach to the site, and from within the campus. Understanding the landscape and townscape impact at various scales should inform the architectural design by highlighting moments to celebrate as well as those where greater sensitivity is required.

7. Architecture, materials, and detailing

7.1. We commend the quality of the emerging architectural proposal, particularly the way in which the design team have approached the integration of ventilation flues into the façade design. However, the reference to Oxford's 'dreaming spires' is not appropriate to the site context. Given the site's links to the city's industrial history, the design team should centre their architectural narrative around chimneys rather than spires and explore other ways that industrial buildings might influence the proposal. For example, laboratories could be designed to appear more akin to workshops than offices; sawtooth roofs could suggest ways to bring in natural light; and building services could be expressed rather than hidden behind plasterboard.

7.2. It would be useful to plot the proposed ground, first, and second floor uses on the floor plans in order to understand the relationships between the internal spaces and the landscape they look out on. This could suggest where tree planting would be of greatest benefit in terms of aspect. In the next stage of design development, the design team should also explore the experience of moving through the building and how internal spaces are connected.

7.3. We support the use of pre-cast building elements, provided that a high-quality product and finish is delivered. Any planning consent should be conditioned to require samples to be shown to give the council confidence that design quality will not be lost in the evolution and delivery of the scheme.

7.4. The choice of materials should more appropriately reflect that of the locality, rather than Oxford in general. This should be investigated in discussion with the local community.

7.5. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in greater detail at this review. Paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023) states: 'Local planning authorities should seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).' In order to be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note Design South East's general guidance on material quality and detail. At planning application stage, the quality of the detailing should be demonstrated through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building/landscape and should be accompanied by actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval.

Appendix A: Meeting details

Reference number	1959/231019
Date	19th October 2023
Meeting location	Magdalen Centre, Robert Robinson Ave, Littlemore, Oxford OX4 4GA
Panel members attending	Andrew Cameron (Chair), urban design and transport planning Deborah Nagan, landscape architecture and architecture Dieter Kleiner, architecture and community engagement Kathryn Davies, historic environment and planning Zoë Berman, community engagement and architecture
Panel manager	Helen Quinn, Design South East
Presenting teams	Richard Van Lente, Railpen Ed Hayden, Scott Brownrigg Fiona Grieve, Scott Brownrigg William Naismith, Hoare Lea Sam McCartney, Caneparo Associates Bob Davis, McFarlane
Other attendees	Oliver Stebbing, Gardiner & Theobald Ian Lanchbury, Ramboll Stuart Blandford, Ridgelift Rob Linnell, Savills Rebecca Bacon, Savills Jennifer Coppock, Oxford City Council Rosa Appleby-Alis, Oxford City Council Maura Cordell, Oxford City Council
Site visit	A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel, the scope of this review was not restricted.
Panel interests	The panel did not indicate any conflicts 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

Site location

Eastpoint Business Park, Sandy Lane West, Oxford, OX4 6LB

Site details

The 14,528m^2 site is located in Littlemore, approximately 5 miles south of Oxford City Centre.

The existing site is enclosed by Oxford Academy to the west, Nuffield Industrial Estate to the south-east, Sandy Lane West to the east and the Eastern By-Pass Road (A4142) to the north. Residential dwellings lie beyond the A4142 and further south-east along Sandy Lane. The Oxfordshire Army Cadets building and the consented North Northfield House residential site (21/03328/OUTFUL) are located east of the site.

Eastpoint Business Park currently comprises five detached two- and three-storey office buildings – four of which are currently occupied by tenants – providing a total 74,805 sq. ft (NIA) of medical facilities and office accommodation. A strong tree belt delineates the south-eastern boundary, with hedgerows and trees lining the remaining site boundaries.

The site is connected to a local cycleway/public footpath to the north which leads into the residential areas to the north of the A4142 and west of the school. Oxford station is currently the main railway line, with multiple local bus routes connecting to the site; however, the site will be within a 15-minute walk of the proposed Cowley Branch, which is due to open in 2026.

Proposal

Demolition and redevelopment of the existing business park to create a new life science campus including circa 2,000sqft of floorspace across three main buildings, social space, transport hub, landscaping, and ancillary development.

Planning stage

Pre-application, with planning submission proposed for March 2024.

Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	It is considered that intensifying development on the site for business (Class E(g)) uses within the research-led employment sector, as proposed, is acceptable in principle subject to compliance with all requirements of policies E1, AOC7 and the Local Plan as a whole. Policy E1 of the Oxford Local Plan 2036 states that planning permission will be granted for the intensification, modernisation, and regeneration for employment purposes of any employment site if it can be demonstrated that the development makes the best and most efficient use of land and does not cause unacceptable environmental impacts and effects. This policy is to be amended within the new Local Plan 2040, which is being drafted and is due to be heard at Cabinet in October. The site falls within the Cowley Branch Line Area of Change where, in accordance with Local Plan policy AOC7, high-density residential and employment development that makes efficient use of land will be expected. This policy also requires that the development enhances existing tree cover and the semi-rural landscape; retains the wildlife corridor function of the brooks; safeguards land for proposed stations and access; rationalises parking and reduces surface-level parking; and improves connectivity between different parts of the area. The Oxford High Buildings Technical Advice Note suggests that development of 15m or above could be visible in views from St Mary's Tower. The impact on this and other significant views, as well as other surrounding designated and non-designated heritage assets, must therefore be considered.
Planning history	The site was redeveloped over a number of planning permissions in the mid 1980s. Subsequent change of use applications were pursued over the years.

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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