



Oxford Design
Review Panel

Design
South East

Report of the Oxford Design Review Panel

Ozone Leisure Park

07 January 2025

Introduction

A design review was held at Kassam Stadium, Oxford on the 12th December, preceded by presentations by the local authority and design team.

The proposal is for the redevelopment of the Ozone site as a new innovation neighbourhood for Oxford, including research and development (R&D) and leisure facilities.

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 138 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2024) 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 welcome the opportunity to engage with this exciting project at an early stage of development. The presentation of a physical model with massing/layout options was very useful for the review.

We support the move away from the typical ‘science park’ model and the intention to engage the local community in co-design activities so as to embed wider public benefits. However, we are concerned that the architectural development – although at an early stage – is too far advanced given the relative underdevelopment of the landscape, sustainability, and movement strategies and the consequent lack of a clear urban structure. It is not yet possible to assess the relative merits of each proposed massing/layout option until further analytical work – including townscape visual analysis – is undertaken.

The target date of April for submission of a planning application is highly ambitious, given the amount of information that has yet to be collected, analysed, and addressed by recently appointed consultants.

We would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again and/or participate in a co-design exercise once the panel’s recommendations have been taken into consideration and ahead of a planning submission.

Key recommendations

1. Strengthen the sustainable vision of the scheme, including setting benchmarks for carbon impact and targeting a more ambitious biodiversity net gain.
2. Undertake further topographical, landscape, townscape, character, and contextual analyses (including visual assessment) before further architecture development, and apply an integrated all-discipline urban design-led approach for future design development.
3. Develop a movement masterplan to illustrate how routes to, from, and through the site will provide connectivity to surrounding locations and knit the scheme into its urban context.
4. Define the parameters of a clear urban framework for the site and consider whether a bespoke design code should be utilised to offer flexibility in the location, use, and design of the buildings, but fixes for infrastructure elements (including green infrastructure).

5. Explore opportunities to connect into the existing green infrastructure to the north of the site, including through an improved connection across Northfield Brook to the green space beyond.
6. Engage with Orion Academy to understand its ownership, the long-term vision for the site, and any issues around privacy and overlooking to be addressed through design.
7. Identify the uses for this site through community consultation – particularly through discussion with children and young people, including the students of Orion Academy.
8. Bring the listed building back into use and define its new landscape setting in context with the redevelopment of this site.
9. Identify the location of frontage and building entrances, ensuring that these provide clear legibility and wayfinding to the scheme and contribute positively to the pedestrian experience.
10. Produce site sections to illustrate spatial relationships between existing and proposed buildings and open spaces, both within the site and beyond its red-line boundary.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Sustainable design

- 1.1. This site presents an opportunity to work with nature to create a more enjoyable and sustainable place. Parts of the proposal are capitalising on this opportunity – for example, the natural corridor creating a link between Blackbird Leys and the Oxford Science Park. However, a more ambitious biodiversity net gain (BNG) of greater than 10% should be targeted and embedded into the masterplan.
- 1.2. The design team should consider how this scheme could act as a catalyst for change in Oxford through how it facilitates active travel, the approach to car parking, and how it might benefit local residents more widely – for example, by influencing the possible delivery of a Park & Ride service.
- 1.3. Targets should be set for the carbon impact of building construction and typology.
- 1.4. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in further detail at this review.
- 1.5. 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 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.

2. Community engagement

- 2.1. We strongly support the proposed community engagement strategy – particularly the use of a co-design charette – and the intention to serve the wider public, rather than focusing only on university students and graduates.

- 2.2. Transition by Design – who are employed as the applicant team’s community engagement consultant – have been involved in consultation exercises connected to the new station trial and designs for the new Blackbird Leys community centre. Outputs from this work (especially the new station trial) will be relevant to the development of the Ozone Leisure Park project and should be referenced, where relevant, in the statement of community engagement.
- 2.3. The applicant team should not feel obliged to respond to every idea raised through the community engagement. Rather, the objective should be to understand the needs of the community and explore how to improve the proposal in this context. This should be made clear to those attending the sessions to manage expectations.
- 2.4. The NPPF (2024, Chapter 12, paragraph 137) states that “*Early discussion between applicants, the local planning authority and local community about the design and style of emerging schemes is important for clarifying expectations and reconciling local and commercial interests. Applicants should work closely with those affected by their proposals to evolve designs that take account of the views of the community. Applications that can demonstrate early, proactive and effective engagement with the community should be looked on more favourably than those that cannot.*”

3. Masterplan strategy

- 3.1. This scheme should be considered to form part of a wider masterplan comprising the surrounding emerging and future development sites. The design team must consider the long-term vision for this masterplan to ensure that the development can function independently if delivered first, whilst also creating connections to these future destinations to knit everything together.
- 3.2. Further work is required to understand whether the neighbouring Orion Academy to the north-east of the site presents any specific issues – for example, privacy and overlooking – that might require addressing through the landscape design. The design team should understand its ownership, the long-term vision for the site, and whether it might provide future opportunities for this scheme.

4. Connectivity and movement

- 4.1. A movement masterplan should be developed to illustrate how the scheme will knit into the wider context. As well as drawing the wider routes to the site to illustrate how people will journey to and arrive at the development, this exercise should explore how the location and configuration of surrounding developments might inform routes through the application site and the location of the central 'heart' to create a more connected and permeable masterplan. This will enable the location of the main entrances to the buildings on the site to be established.
- 4.2. The movement strategy should layer different modes of travel and consider how they each might link into the development. Even where this lies beyond the applicant's influence – such as bus access from Grenoble Road – it is helpful to draw this speculatively in context with the proposed scheme.
- 4.3. Achieving a better connection across Northfield Brook would have a positive influence on how the scheme connects into existing green infrastructure and pedestrian networks, and could allow the open space beyond the brook to be 'borrowed' as part of the development. Whether creating this connection is feasible will impact the character of the green public route, and in turn, the design of the scheme's northern frontage.
- 4.4. Understanding the opportunities for connectivity will identify where permeability should occur on site and subsequently inform the character and design of routes and the location of on-site primary and ancillary uses. Ideally, the conclusions arising from this work should be tested using a connectivity analysis tool, for example Place Logic or Space Syntax.
- 4.5. Whilst an east-west route through the site could potentially provide an important connection to future residential development at Kassam Stadium, the principal natural desire line appears to run north-south. The design team should therefore consider whether the proposed Building A potentially interrupts this desire line, and explore how this block could be split or moved to resolve this.
- 4.6. The site will be easily accessed by car, bus, and rail (assuming delivery of the Cowley Branch Line station), and will benefit from use of the overflow car park to the north until its future redevelopment. The design team must anticipate the loss of this car park and ensure that this will not negatively impact the scheme.

5. Urban framework

- 5.1. The perimeters of the proposed development options – particularly the north and east edges – are clearly defined; however, the clarity of the urban structure disintegrates in the centre of the site, at least partly due to the uncertainty around the long-term future of the hotel. We encourage the design team to consider how the scheme might be structured without this constraint, as this may unlock different ways of thinking about the scheme.
- 5.2. A strong urban framework defined by landscape and movement analysis is required to provide a structure to the scheme rooted in its urban context. This should be helpful in terms of allowing for flexibility within the layout of the development by creating the setting for the proposed buildings, rather than having the buildings themselves as a fixed element.
- 5.3. Identifying the ‘anchors’ of the urban framework as early as possible will help to define the parameters of the proposal. The green corridor to the north of the site, the pedestrian links to local centres, and (whilst its delivery is not yet certain) the proposed Cowley Branch Line station could provide useful ‘anchors’ to which the scheme can respond. More weight should be given to these ‘anchors’ than to the allocated housing sites to the north, east, and south which have yet to come forward.
- 5.4. Once the parameters of the urban framework – including movement, permeability, green infrastructure, access, and servicing – have been identified, a design code could be used to fix these so that greater flexibility can be afforded to the exact siting, use, and design of the buildings.

6. Green space and public realm

- 6.1. The green space to the north of the site is potentially a more valuable asset than that to the south, which is bordered by a road and roundabout. Creating a new connection across the brook and opening up this space could create public access to an additional ‘outdoor room’ which could be enjoyed by users of the proposed development, Oxford Science Park, and the local community.
- 6.2. Rather than providing a central square at the heart of the scheme, green space on the site could be concentrated around the green corridor to the north to link into the existing green infrastructure network – perhaps extending deeper into the site through two or three ‘green fingers’.

- 6.3. Alternatively, if Grenoble Road is likely to be 'upgraded' in the future, an open square incorporating the local authority's green verge could be created on the southern edge of the site, creating an attractive view into the development and allowing sunlight deeper into the site. Connections off this green square could then link back to the green corridor and open space north of the site boundary.
- 6.4. Any routes created through the green corridor to the north should be informal, so as to be useable to people whilst maintaining the ecological value of this space.
- 6.5. The design team should explore how the public realm within this development could take a different approach to the current strategy for accommodating the crowds from football matches at the stadium in a way that makes this experience more comfortable to the wider public.

7. Wayfinding, frontage, and servicing

- 7.1. There are too many options in play in terms of where frontage will be located on the site. This must be clearly defined in order to progress design development.
- 7.2. The location of building entrances is not yet clear, including where these may face the perimeter of the site. An entrance in the north-west corner setting up a direct relationship to the future Cowley Branch Line station is obvious; but access to the leisure facilities from the eastern boundary should also be considered in response to the stadium and future housing here.
- 7.3. The pedestrian experience of the site should be explored throughout the stages of design development to ensure clear legibility of the site, so that future users will not have to rely on signage to navigate the development.
- 7.4. The servicing strategy for the buildings must be considered at an early stage as this will impact the site layout.

8. Uses

- 8.1. It is likely that the uses on this site will change over time according to cultural shifts. The leisure uses should be informed by the community engagement – particularly with children and young people, who underpin the out-of-hours and night-time economies and can offer vital insights into how leisure use has changed - for example, the use of cinemas for live-streamed theatre or sports events rather than only for films on general release.

- 8.2. We support the intent to include education and training as part of the offer of this proposal – this must be explored further and designed in early so that it is truly embedded within the scheme. In order to develop the brief for this element, the applicant team should engage with local school groups – including Orion Academy – to understand the types of facility that would be of benefit.
- 8.3. Different uses could be tested on the site by offering ‘meanwhile’ accommodation for businesses to trial before committing to permanent premises. This framework could also be used for seasonal uses such as outdoor cinema viewings.
- 8.4. Locating the leisure uses on the eastern side of the site creates a logical relationship with the stadium; however, the quantum of this must be defined.
- 8.5. It may be beneficial to allow for some retail space on the southern edge of this site, in anticipation of the future residential development south of Grenoble Road.

9. Listed building

- 9.1. The listed building contributes visually and culturally to the character of the wider area and, as heritage at risk, should be restored and brought back into use before it decays further. Its setting must be handled sensitively as part of this development; however, there is little merit in trying to protect or replicate its original rural setting, which has been substantially eroded. The future setting for the listed building must be defined by its future context within this redevelopment – including its curtilage, which may not necessarily be the historic curtilage. Identifying and evaluating the heritage values of the surviving building will determine how these may be protected or enhanced.
- 9.2. We consider that the listed building would sit best within an enclosed landscape defined by the development around it. Allowing the southern frontage of Block F to come forward of the listed building to help define the space around it could be successful.
- 9.3. A community use may be appropriate for restoration of the listed building – particularly in the long-term as the surrounding residential sites come forward. This should be explored through the community consultation.

10. Height, massing, and orientation

- 10.1. The very recent appointment of a landscape architect is welcomed, but is notable by the lack of material presented regarding topography, townscape, and visual analysis of the skyline and massing. This critical aspect of the design proposals is underdeveloped even at this early stage. Further analysis of the topography, townscape, character, context, and skyline – including visuals – must be in place before further architectural development is pursued.
- 10.2. In addition to visual impact assessments, decisions around height should consider the relationships of neighbourhood scale. For example, the disconnect between the height of the building in the north-east corner and the adjacent school would require significant justification. Whilst a taller building in this corner could help to provide orientation for this part of Oxford, which is characterised by a suburban layout and lacks legibility, we suggest that more realistic height propositions are tested.
- 10.3. The emerging development at Oxford Business Park forms part of the application site's existing context. The massing of these buildings should be clearly drawn to help in understanding the spatial relationship to the proposed scheme and aid in design development.
- 10.4. The way in which the scale of buildings is graded across the site is critical to the success of this scheme, and is made challenging by the decision to work with fixed modules. The large footprints of the proposed buildings combined with an increase in height from the existing gives the scheme a problematic massing. Reducing the footprint of the upper floors – perhaps achieved by stacking non-laboratory uses above the main R&D floorspace – could help to give variety and interest to the development's silhouette.
- 10.5. The orientation of the proposed blocks relates well to the listed building, strengthening its significance; however, the block in the north-west corner is less successful. This building must help to create a welcoming entrance to the site while relating well to other built development within and beyond the site boundary and creating a sense of defined space – this has not yet been resolved.

- 10.6. Given the importance of the public route leading eastwards from the Cowley Branch Line station, the north of the site could be considered the main elevation of the scheme. It is challenging to imagine the relationship between the buildings here and the green route along the brook, and whether this will be a pleasant space, given that it will be overshadowed. Drawings – including sections through the site here – are required to clarify the character of this route and the spatial relationship to the scheme, and to inform the design of this frontage.

11. Materials and detailing

- 11.1. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed at this review.
- 11.2. Paragraph 140 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2024) 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	2219/121224
Date	12 th December 2024
Meeting location	Kassam Stadium, Grenoble Road, Littlemore, Oxford, OX4 4XP
Panel members attending	Andrew Cameron (Chair), urban design and transport planning Alice Brown, architecture and sustainability Dan Jones, architecture and community engagement Lindsey Wilkinson, landscape architecture and historic environment Steven Bee, historic environment and urban design
Panel manager	Helen Quinn, Design South East
Presenting teams	Daniel Parker, Perkins & Will Christopher Christophi, Perkins & Will
Other attendees	Katherine Harrison, Bidwells Heritage Jonathan Bainbridge, Bidwells Planning Martha Woodley, Bidwells Planning Richard Todd, Bidwells Planning Firoz Kassam, Firoka Nilu Kanani, Firoka James Latham, The Pioneer Group Sammy-Jo Hagan, Transition by Design Dafydd Warburton, LDA Design Sarah Orchard, Oxford City Council David Radford, Oxford City Council Emma McLeod, Oxford City Council Natalie Dobraszczyk, Oxford City Council Rosa Appleby-Alis, 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	Dan Jones previously worked for Penoyre & Prasad until 2002, prior to their merge with Perkins & Will. Lindsey Wilkinson previously worked for LDA Design until 2005. This was not deemed to constitute 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

Site location	Ozone Leisure Park, Grenoble Road, Oxford, OX4 4XP
Site details	The site contains the existing Ozone Leisure Park, a hotel, and a Grade II* Listed Building (Minchery Farmhouse). The site sits to the west of the Kassam Stadium in the Littlemore area of Oxford. The Oxford Science Park lies to the west beyond Minchery Lane (a public right of way). To the north of the site is the Northfield and Littlemore Brooks, which is also the location of proposed Cowley Branch Line with Littlemore Station. Grenoble Road sits to the south of the site. Beyond this, a large-scale development is proposed on South Oxfordshire land to meet unmet housing need in Oxford. The Ozone Leisure Park and the adjoining Kassam Stadium is served by extensive car parking areas to the north and east.
Proposal	Demolition of existing (Class E) buildings to enable the delivery of an innovation neighbourhood for Oxford. This would be a mixed-use development of including 500,000 sq. ft. of R&D floorspace (Class E) with leisure facilities (yet to be determined).
Planning stage	Pre-application. A planning application is proposed for submission in April 2025.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	The site is located within the ‘Cowley Branch Line Area of Change’ (Policy AOC7). The site is unallocated; however, it is included in the

draft Local Plan 2040 together with the Kassam Stadium site for redevelopment. The draft allocation identified the potential for “redevelopment of the Ozone Leisure Complex within Use Class E”. There is no objection to a mixed-use development incorporating R&D. Whilst the site is not allocated for this use, there is no policy which would prevent a more efficient use of the site with this additional use added.

Policy G5 protects indoor and outdoor sport and recreation facilities. Policy V7 relates to cultural, and community uses. It is therefore considered that replacement leisure facilities should be provided even if it is a multi-functional, more intensively used space.

The site contains a Grade II* Listed Building (Minchery Farmhouse) which dates from the 15th century and was built as a dormitory range of Littlemore Priory. It is on the Heritage at Risk Register.

There is significant archaeology on the site associated with the former priory. The extent of this is not entirely known but extends under the hotel, to the west of the application site and likely to the east of the listed building. Although not scheduled, Littlemore Priory can be considered of equivalent significance.

The application site does not lie within a conservation area, but development of taller buildings on the site could impact the landscape setting of the Central (City & University) Conservation Area, which is fundamental to its significance and can be appreciated from both viewpoints outside the city looking in (i.e. the Viewcones) and from elevated viewpoints within the city looking out.

Land to the north of the site, including the Littlemore Brook, is designated as an Oxford City Wildlife Site.

Planning history

The Ozone Leisure Park was originally the subject of the outline planning permission (ref: 94/1754/NOY), which included the adjoining Kassam Stadium development. A variation was secured (ref: 03/01533/VAR) on 19 September 2003 to both permissions to secure mixed D2 (leisure) and A3 (food and drink).

Following revisions to the Use Class Order in September 2020, the site is now predominantly (76%) in (or available for) a Class E use. The exception to this is the Vue Cinema which provides 43,348 sqm and is in a Sui Generis use.

On the 19th March 2024, the OCC Planning Committee resolved to grant planning permission (ref: 23/01198/FUL) for “Demolition of existing Bingo Unit (Sui Generis, Classes E (b), (d), (e), (f), and (g) (i, ii or iii)); development of a new part-four/part-five storey (plus roof plant) building comprising laboratory and office space (Use Class E(g)) and a ground floor level commercial unit (Use Class E(a) or E(b)), with associated access road, public realm, hard and soft landscaping, cycle parking, EV charging, service yard, site infrastructure and associated works”. This application will be superseded by the proposals reviewed at this design workshop.

Previous reviews

The proposals for the recently approved application on this site (ref: 23/01198/FUL) which will be superseded by this scheme were reviewed by the Oxford Design Review Panel on the 2nd March 2023 and the 26th April 2023. Steven Bee is a returning panel member.

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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