

Report of the Design South East Design
Review Panel

Ozone Leisure Park, Oxford

03 July 2025

The design review meeting

Reference number	2315/290525
Date	29th May 2025
Meeting location	St Aldate's Room, Oxford Town Hall, St Aldate's, Oxford OX1 1BX
Panel members attending	Andrew Cameron (Chair), urban design and transport planning 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 team	Jonathan Bainbridge, Bidwells Chris Christophi, Perkins & Will Tanushri Bahl, LDA Design
Other attendees	Sam Walden, Bidwells Daniel Parker, Perkins & Will Nilu Kanani, Firoka Group James Rand, Paul Basham Associates James Latham, Pioneer Group Sarah Orchard, Oxford City Council David Radford, Oxford City Council Emma McLeod, Oxford City Council Peter Watkins, Oxford City Council
Site visit	A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the previous review on the 12 th December 2024.
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 detailed planning application. Full details of our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

The proposal

Name	Ozone Re-Imagined
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 are the Northfield and Littlemore Brooks, as well as the location of the 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 including 500,000 sq. ft. of R&D floorspace (Class E) with leisure facilities (including cinema and bowling).
Planning stage	Pre-application. A full (phased) planning application is proposed for submission in June 2025.
Local planning authority	Oxford City Council
Planning context	The site is located within the 'Cowley Branch Line Area of Change'. Land to the north of the site, including the Littlemore Brook, is designated as an Oxford City Wildlife Site. As existing, the site contains a disused public house, leisure facilities (including bowling, cinema, food outlets, Lazer Kombat, escape rooms and Party Man), and a hotel. Policy G5 of the Oxford Local Plan 2036 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 as part of the site's redevelopment.

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.

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.

Planning history

The Ozone Leisure Park was originally the subject of an 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 review.

Previous reviews

This scheme has previously been reviewed by the Oxford Design Review Panel (under the management of Design South East) on the 12th December 2024. Andrew Cameron, Dan Jones, Lindsey Wilkinson, and Steven Bee are returning panel members.

The proposals for the previously approved application on this site (ref: 23/01198/FUL) which will be superseded by this scheme were also reviewed by the Oxford Design Review Panel (under the management of Design South East, and including Steven Bee) on the 2nd March 2023 and the 26th April 2023.

Key recommendations from previous review (12/12/24)

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.

Summary

We welcome the applicant team's acknowledgement of their responsibility in delivering a scheme that positively benefits the local community, and their pledge to commit to continued engagement to inform how these benefits should be provided.

Whilst there is evidence of analytical work in terms of community engagement and understanding the existing townscape context and movement patterns, it is not clear how this work has been interpreted, and how this has informed the proposals. It is crucial that this missing information is presented as justification for the design decisions and as evidence of a robust design process.

We remain unconvinced that the scheme is truly 'landscape-led', and question the quality, function, and hierarchy of the open spaces on the site. We encourage the design team to take a much more nature-positive approach to support their vision of regenerative and sustainable design.

We hope that our comments provide a useful checklist for Oxford City Council to use during future negotiations with the applicant team to resolve the outstanding issues with the proposal, and we would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again once the panel's recommendations have been taken into consideration – either before or following the planning submission.

Key recommendations

1. Take a more ambitious approach to the sustainability strategy – exploring opportunities for regenerative and nature-positive design, using sustainability as a driving factor in the building design, and addressing embodied carbon and water consumption.
2. Clearly set out how topographical, landscape, townscape (including a full visual impact assessment covering short- and long-distance views), character, contextual, and movement analyses have influenced the site layout, the height and massing of the buildings, and the design of routes and open space across the site.
3. Ensure that the submitted design and access statement clarifies where project aims are supported by realistic strategies for delivery, versus those which remain as a high-level ambition at this stage.
4. Explore how the character of the brook could be brought deeper into the site to embed a nature-positive landscape and inform a true 'green heart' to the scheme.

5. Review the hierarchies of open space provision on the site. Consider the setting and role of the garden by Minchery Farmhouse and whether it could provide a more attractive and engaging space than the proposed 'green heart'.
6. Explore how the Minchery Farmhouse garden could better support community-focused activities, particularly those involving young people.
7. Consider delivering Block E in a later phase of development so that 'meanwhile' uses can better inform its design, and to ensure that space is available to accommodate the continuous presence of community uses on the site throughout all construction phases.
8. Further develop the form of the buildings to reflect a greater distinction in the architectural response to differing contexts across the site.
9. Explore how the elevational treatment and material palette of the buildings could create a sense of the unity between the public-facing uses which is distinct to that of the office/laboratory floors.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Sustainable design

- 1.1. The site's proximity to the future Cowley Branch Line station, the ecological corridor to the north, and the minimal existing biodiversity within the red-line boundary provide an ideal context to explore how this scheme could become a pioneer in demonstrating regenerative and nature-positive design – particularly given Perkins & Will's commitment to the RIBA 2030 Climate Challenge.
- 1.2. Sustainability and regenerative design do not appear to have been enough of a driving factor for the design of the proposed buildings. Notwithstanding the argument made that concrete construction is a viable answer to the performance requirements of providing laboratory spaces, the design team could instead explore the use of hybrid structures incorporating timber or recycled steel in other parts of the built fabric. An environmental assessment should be provided to justify the design decisions in relation to sustainability.
- 1.3. The sustainability strategy should address embodied carbon and water consumption as well as operational energy use.
- 1.4. The biodiversity net gain figures were not presented. This information must be provided at application stage.
- 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. Landscape and movement frameworks

- 2.1. The landscape strategy and proposals were not provided in the initial pack of information sent to the panel ahead of the design review. Whilst the landscape proposals were circulated a few hours ahead of and presented at the meeting, we have not had sufficient time to review them and are therefore unable to provide detailed commentary on this aspect of the proposal.

- 2.2. The landscape proposals illustrate some attractive ideas and appear to be designed to support movement through the site. However, it is not clear how the proposals have been informed and influenced by contextual and townscape analysis, as recommended at the previous design review. Likewise, whilst analysis of the movement patterns to and from the site has been undertaken, it is not clear how this has informed the design of routes through and spaces within the development. The design process must clearly justify the design decisions for built form, movement routes, and open spaces.
- 2.3. In the absence of a convincing landscape strategy that is clearly informed by contextual analysis and rooted in a robust green infrastructure framework, we do not consider the scheme to be 'landscape-led'. Rather, it appears that the landscape has been designed to fill the spaces between and around the proposed buildings and has been pushed to the edges of the site. We would expect a much more site/context-responsive and nature-positive landscape-driven proposal for a future innovation park.
- 2.4. We previously recommended that the green infrastructure and movement frameworks should dictate the location and character of a central green heart to the scheme; however, this does not appear to be reflected in the proposal. It is misleading to describe the mainly hard-surfaced public space in the centre of the site as the envisioned 'green heart'.
- 2.5. It is positive that the character of the brook has been acknowledged and integrated into parkland-type space along the northern boundary of the site, and we welcome the prioritisation of pedestrian movement along here, including the north-south route from the brook into the site. We strongly recommend that this is taken further, with the brook-side character bringing the diversity of 'real' nature into the scheme. Revising the footprints of Buildings C and D to increase the aperture to the north of the site could allow nature to filter deeper into the site and provide a true 'green heart' to the development.

3. Open space strategy

- 3.1. The majority of the landscape spaces will be hard surfaced, as they are likely to be heavily used by those working and enjoying leisure uses here. The design narrative for these spaces should therefore not be of a "naturalistic" landscape, but rather a high-quality and interesting hard landscape appropriate for the activities that these spaces will accommodate.

- 3.2. We support public use of the former garden area on the east side of Minchery Farmhouse; however, the formality and enclosure of the garden as proposed seems unlikely to attract and support community activities such as food-growing. Given the intended community facilities within the adjacent former farmhouse building, a more useful and durable space – perhaps incorporating some hard surfaces with planting or living pergolas to offer young people an informally supervised place to gather near the leisure facilities – would be preferable to a historically appropriate treatment that offers a primarily visual amenity. The community-related element of the space could still explore the theme of mental wellness and the connections between people and nature.
- 3.3. We are concerned that the site servicing strategy will significantly impact the experience of using the proposed ‘green heart’ space. Further analysis is required to understand this relationship – including from the perspective of the hotel operator – as well as drawings showing the southward view from within the ‘green heart’, which terminates in the back of the hotel and service yard and is unlikely to be attractive.
- 3.4. We encourage the design team to explore options to further elevate the gardens by Minchery Farmhouse to become the site’s key green space, so that the space currently identified as the ‘green heart’ could have a more functional role in the site’s servicing strategy. Re-configuring the north-west/south-east route through the site so that it passes in front of the hotel could help to unlock this.
- 3.5. The planting by the main access point does not appear to serve a strong purpose. We suggest that Blocks C and D should be placed closer to the eastern boundary – rather than canting away from it – to release more useable public space in the centre of the site.
- 3.6. We would discourage the design team from specifying ‘grasscrete’ in this scheme.

4. Community engagement and response

- 4.1. We are impressed by the community-focused ambitions for this project; however, many of these are not yet supported by a robust strategy for their delivery. The planning application should clarify which proposals are commitments, to avoid overpromising on what is actually deliverable.
- 4.2. The move from defined social infrastructure to loosely programmed spaces risks ambiguity and weakens the sense of inclusion. Flexibility must not come at the expense of clarity or local relevance.

- 4.3. The Statement of Community Involvement (SCI) largely focuses on the strategy and mechanism behind the community engagement. We would welcome more information on the applications of the work, and how its analysis and interpretation have informed the design proposals – particularly in relation to the youth consultation, which we acknowledge has been the hardest to procure but which is likely the most important group.
- 4.4. The SCI clearly expresses the community’s concerns around affordability. Providing affordable food and drink outlets on-site will be key to attracting young people and providing opportunities for them to socialise. More information on how the applicant team intends to accommodate this should be provided as supporting evidence for the community-focused aspect of the proposals.
- 4.5. It is misleading to describe the research and development buildings as being publicly-accessible if access is only provided in specific situations – for example, to access bookable workspaces.
- 4.6. 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.*”

5. Uses and phasing

- 5.1. We welcome the intention to accommodate ‘meanwhile’ uses on the site throughout the construction phase. However, careful planning is required to ensure that these ‘meanwhile’ uses can be provided continuously, rather than disappearing and re-appearing during different development phases, as this could erode trust in the community engagement process.
- 5.2. The design of speculative spaces carries risk, and whilst this is a common approach with research and development buildings, there is little precedent for the design of speculative leisure and community facilities. We are concerned that this could result in empty units on-site, which could significantly impact the success of the scheme.

- 5.3. We suggest that Block E is delivered in a later phase of development, so that the success (or otherwise) of ‘meanwhile’ uses can inform which leisure and/or community uses should be accommodated within this building, rather than being designed speculatively. These ‘meanwhile’ uses could be located on the plot of Block E, before being accommodated more permanently in the eventual building on that site, ensuring continuity of provision for the community. If the applicant team is required to deliver permanent cinema and bowling uses within the first phase of development, perhaps these could instead be located within the lower floors of Block C.
- 5.4. In addition to the policy requirement to re-provide leisure facilities on the site, the applicant team should also consider re-providing the third-sector community uses. These should be linked to specific community groups already operating at the site and could also result in additional programmes for children and young people such as gardening and food-growing.

6. Height, massing, and heritage impact

- 6.1. At the previous design review, we asked for “further topographical, landscape, townscape, character, and contextual analyses (including visual assessment) before further architectural development”. Whilst this analytical work may have been undertaken, neither the process, outputs, nor their interpretation were presented, and it is therefore unclear how this work has informed the design of the built form. We are therefore not satisfied that this recommendation has been addressed.
- 6.2. At application stage, the design and access statement (DAS) should clearly set out how the townscape landscape visual impact assessment (TVIA) has influenced design decisions around height and massing so as to arrive at the precise building heights proposed – including evidence of testing these heights in long-distance and local views, as well as in site sections.
- 6.3. Long-distance views alone were presented at the design review meeting, and these were not provided in the initial pack of information sent to the panel. Without sufficient time to analyse the proposals, we are unable to provide commentary or advice on the visual impact of the proposal. We encourage the Council to seek further engagement with the panel or other relevant experts to review the TVIA at application stage, if further advice is required.
- 6.4. The material palette for the treatment of the top floors of the blocks should be carefully considered and tested in views to ensure that its colour or reflectiveness is not obtrusive.

- 6.5. There appear to be gaps in the information relating to the assessment of heritage sensitivity and concerns around the setting of the listed building. This information should be clearly and coherently presented in the design and access statement (DAS), so as to be easy for officers to find, interrogate, and understand.

7. Architecture, materials, and detailing

- 7.1. It is unclear why the proposed building footprints are so similar in form given that the buildings should respond to different parts of the site. There is an opportunity for each building footprint to be more distinct – particularly if the site layout is reconfigured to allow for a greater aperture to the ecological corridor to the north.
- 7.2. The building façades are highly articulated through fins and setbacks; however, the buildings appear somewhat homogeneous. The design team should explore whether greater variation between the elevational treatment of the buildings might provide a more appropriate response to the masterplan, and how this might be delivered.
- 7.3. The architectural design of Block E is the most successful. Similar use of applied timber screening could be explored for at least the lower floors of the other buildings, to add a unifying feature to the buildings and to visually highlight the location of public uses. Creating a significant setback between the lower and upper floors would further differentiate between the public-facing uses and the offices/laboratories above, and would reduce the dominance of the vertical surfaces over the public spaces.
- 7.4. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in great detail at this review. 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).'*
- 7.5. 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.

8. Futureproofing the masterplan

- 8.1. Whilst we understand that this application assumes the retention of the existing hotel, the applicant team should ensure that the proposal does not compromise the future adaptation, development or replacement of the hotel building.

- 8.2. Whilst Grenoble Road sits outside the red-line boundary, we encourage the applicant team to allow for a future connection between the Ozone site and the future development to the south. Reimagining Grenoble Road as an urban boulevard could present a case for the City Council to consider improvements to the existing road layout to strengthen the north-south connectivity across the wider emerging masterplan.

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 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.

Design South East Limited
70 Cowcross Street
London
EC1M 6EJ

T 01634 401166
E info@designsoutheast.org
designsoutheast.org

