

Report of the Design South East Design
Review Panel

Land West of the A10, Buntingford

9th October 2024

The design review meeting

Reference number	2224/240924
Date	24 September 2024
Meeting location	Buntingford Town Council, The Manor House, High St, Buntingford SG9 9AB
Panel members attending	Paul Reynolds (chair), masterplanning and landscape architecture Neha Tayal, architecture and urban design Magali Thomson, architecture and public realm Rachel Toms, transport planning and public realm Marcus Wilshire, town planning and urban design
Panel manager	Kieran Toms, Design South East
Presenting team	Sally Miller, Hallam Land Tom Thornewill, Hallam Land Reiss Sadler, Marrons Simon Pugh, David Lock Associates Alessandra Covino, David Lock Associates Joe Bonomo, David Lock Associates Natasha Jones, Stantec James Duffy, Jubb
Other attendees	Steve Fraser-Lim, East Herts District Council Leena Shah, East Herts District 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	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts 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

Site location	Land West of the A10, Buntingford
Site details	The 63.4 hectares site comprises agricultural fields and hedgerows, bounded by the A10 to the east, Baldock Road A507 to the South and Throcking Lane to the north. Buntingford and the town settlement boundary is situated on the opposite side of the A10 to the east.
Proposal	Development of up to 600 dwellings, elderly accommodation, mixed use Local Centre, First School, c. 4.71ha employment land informal and formal open space including new 'Buntingford Park', associated works and infrastructure including new accesses from the A507 and pedestrian bridge over the A10.
Planning stage	Outline applications have been submitted for the two parts of the site: 3/24/0966/OUT and 3/24/1255/OUT.
Local planning authority	East Hertfordshire District Council
Planning context	The site is subject to the following designations: • Site within the 'Rural Area Beyond the Greenbelt' • Historic Landfill in northeast corner of the site • Farmhouse at How Green Farm (grade II listed) situated on opposite side of the A10 to the southeast of the site • Numerous TPO designated trees situated on the opposite side of the A10 to the east. • Within the area covered by the Buntingford Community Neighbourhood Plan • The south west corner of the site is within / adjacent to land within flood zone 2/3 and identified as being at risk of surface water flooding • The site is within a Groundwater Source Protection Zone • Two public rights of way cross the site • The site is designated as grade 2 Best and Most Versatile agricultural land • Cherry Green Arable Plateau landscape character area • Site adjacent to Ecology Consultation Area

The site is not specifically allocated for any use or development within the District Plan 2018 and is outside of, but close to, the Buntingford Settlement Boundary. As such the site is within the 'rural area beyond the greenbelt'. The overall District Plan strategy (policy DPS2) seeks

sustainable housing development within settlement boundaries or on allocated sites. Policy BUNT1 of the district plan states that the strategy for the town is to focus on the delivery of existing sites with planning permission and to ensure that the impacts of development can be mitigated and managed within the overall infrastructure of the town.

Summary

The masterplan has many positive features, including proposed public realm improvements, the provision of additional facilities for Buntingford and a good response to topography. However, the design quality and sustainability of the development will be significantly undermined by it being highly car-dependent, given the inaccessible location of the site and the infrequency of buses. As such, we cannot support the proposal in this location due to its inherent lack of sustainability.

If this scheme proceeds despite this major constraint, it is vital that a robust design code is put in place to secure the key positive features, as without a design code the outline planning application provides no certainty that the illustrative elements of the proposal would be delivered.

Should the decision be made to continue with the application, we would welcome the opportunity to review the design code for this scheme, once the panel's recommendations have been taken into consideration.

Key recommendations

1. Reconsider the decision to proceed with a scheme in this location given the site's inherent lack of sustainability on account of its inaccessibility.
2. Develop a comprehensive and robust design code to secure the key positive features of the illustrative parts of the outline proposal.
3. Develop a more ambitious transport strategy to provide significantly more mitigation of the inaccessible location, through further interventions to encourage sustainable and active travel and to reduce car dominance and dependency.
4. Improve pedestrian and cycle routes into the development by ensuring that they are better lit and more overlooked, to make them safe and secure for all users including vulnerable groups.
5. Integrate Sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and play spaces into the streetscape, using section drawings to demonstrate how this will function.
6. Ensure the local centre and commercial units are appropriately sized and complement rather than compete with Buntingford's town centre.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Design strategy

- 1.1. A design code must be introduced to ensure the positive features of the illustrative plan are delivered, and should cover both residential and commercial areas of the development. The code should draw on local precedents to provide specific detail on the local centre, the relationships of buildings to the topography, and the different character areas within the development. We would welcome the opportunity to review the design code.

2. Sustainable design

- 2.1. The emerging approach to sustainable building design and renewable energy was not discussed in detail at this review. However the sustainability of the location was identified as a major concern.
- 2.2. 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.

3. Movement / Transport

- 3.1. This site's lack of sustainable transport connections are a major issue and undermine the scheme's sustainability. The long bus journey times and relatively low frequency to key destinations such as train stations make the development car-dependent. There is very limited scope for mitigation through design solutions given the inaccessible location of the development. A significantly improved bus offer, with improved speed and frequency, could help, but is unlikely to make the scheme sustainable.
- 3.2. The design code should contribute to mitigating the car-dependency of this proposal. It should prevent cars from dominating the streetscape, and allow for flexibility in the future use of car parking spaces, by using permeable surfaces and ensuring parking spaces can be integrated into gardens if homeowners do not require the use of all provided parking spaces.

- 3.3. To reduce car reliance, routine journeys should be appealing and safe to make in an active, sustainable manner. Studies covering 'a day in the life scenarios' of different demographics should be undertaken, mapping out routes to different destinations, both within this development and in the rest of Buntingford. There should be a focus on improving the quality and ease of local journeys, such as those to and from the school, the doctor's surgery and the local centre. Details should be provided about how these routes will be made attractive, safe and legible at all times of the day and night, in all weather conditions, and for different demographics and access/mobility requirements.
- 3.4. A car club should be introduced and could be used to reduce the overall number of car parking spaces. New residents will be forming new travel habits, making the presence of a car club from the outset a significant opportunity to achieve modal shift.
- 3.5. Improved bike storage for all types of bikes (including e-bikes and cargo bikes) should be introduced. Parking should be in easily accessible and secure locations, both in the homes and in other buildings / destinations around the development.
- 3.6. The route into Buntingford along the new bridge is likely to be the predominant active travel preference because of the town centre layout and school location, but it remains narrow, even where it is less constrained. This route should widen within the site, so that it is celebrated and feels prominent, and should be safer and more overlooked for all groups, particularly the most vulnerable. The inclusion of play spaces along the route would help establish it as a well-used and active destination.
- 3.7. The route along Baldock Road may be more inviting for some pedestrian journeys because, unlike the central route, the presence of cars brings some overlooking. However, the commercial units here provide no frontage onto the street. The layout and distribution of buildings should be rethought in this location to introduce more overlooking, avoiding the perception that this part of the development is a leftover back entrance. This would be especially important for residents on the east side of the A10 for whom this route would be the most direct access to the new development.

4. Landscape, Amenity and Play

- 4.1. To improve the development's landscape and blue infrastructure, sustainable drainage should be more integrated within the streetscape, rather than there being a reliance on flow down to a single SUDs location. Sections should be used to show the streets' relationship with drainage and hydrology. As part of this change, the wetland could be extended to become a green corridor.

- 4.2. Doorstep play should be introduced where children can be overseen whilst having a degree of independence.
- 4.3. We support the provision of additional amenities for the town. The design code should include details about the sports pitches to ensure their deliverability and guarantee the facility is provided.

5. Masterplan

- 5.1. The masterplan has several positive features. The local centre is well situated in relation to the location of the amenities, the main street provides good connectivity within the development, and the masterplan responds well to topography. Section drawings should be included in the design code to define how level changes relate to the homes.
- 5.2. The layout of the masterplan mostly works well, but the school is at the edge of the development, the furthest possible location from the existing settlement of Buntingford. Longer journeys will encourage car usage instead of sustainable travel. Either the location of the school should be reconsidered, or routes to and from it should be improved to encourage active travel.
- 5.3. It is unclear whether the local centre will be busy enough to sustain businesses, given its size and access issues. Conversely, if it is busy, it may undermine the existing town centre of Buntingford. More analysis should be undertaken related to how this proposal will strike the right balance and complement rather than compete with the existing Buntingford town centre offer.
- 5.4. Some of the backs and fronts of blocks are incoherent and should be rationalised to ensure that walking routes are more active, with more frontages facing out onto them.
- 5.5. A maximum size for any one floorplate should be introduced and secured using the design code to avoid undermining the existing town centre. A larger format retail store would be likely to attract significant levels of traffic from the main roads and footfall from the town centre shopping.
- 5.6. If the neighbouring allocated employment site is developed it is likely to create either a large security fence with a negative visual impact, or non-overlooked spaces which encourage anti-social behaviour. Testing of options should be undertaken to address different development scenarios for the neighbouring site.
- 5.7. The details of the impact of the edges of the commercial area on views and pedestrian experience should be more clearly defined, and unattractive fencing should be avoided.

6. Materials and detailing

- 6.1. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in great 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).'*
- 6.2. 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.

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.

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