



Cambridgeshire Quality Panel

Cambridge City Operational Hub

Monday 19th December 2022

Virtual Meeting

Panel: Robin Nicholson (chair), Steve Platt, Phil Jones, Luke Engleback and Kirk Archibald.

Local Authority: Guy Wilson (GCSP), Helen Sayers (GCSP), Tom Davies (GCSP), Tam Parry (CCC)

The Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth sets out the core principles for the level of quality to be expected in new development across Cambridgeshire. The [Cambridgeshire Quality Panel](#) provides independent, expert advice to developers and local planning authorities against the four core principles of the Charter: connectivity, character, climate, and community.

Development overview

These proposals provide for a permanent operational hub to accommodate Cambridge City Council's fleet vehicle parking. The vehicles, owned by the council, are used for street cleaning, landscaping, maintenance, and health and safety work, and include street sweepers, vans, tractors, trailers, and mowers. The proposals also include an office building for Operational Services and provide a welfare hub for staff members based on the current Cowley Road site.

Presenting team

The scheme is promoted by Cambridge City Council and supported by Lanpro Services. The presenting team is:

William Nichols (Lanpro Services), Daniel Orford (Lanpro Services), Thomas Odorico (Lanpro Services) and James Elms (Cambridge City Council)

Local authority's request

Officers have asked the Panel to focus on how the site will relate to the evolving character of the surrounding area and ensure that the site is a good neighbour both with respect to the townscape/ landscape impact of the development, and minimising potential for noise and light pollution from the site.

Cambridgeshire Quality Panel summary

The Cambridge City Operational Hub is a great location for its intended purpose, but the scheme needs a clearer ambition and to further provide evidence on how the path to net zero carbon is to be achieved. The biggest concern is the design life of the site in the wider context of the emerging North-East Cambridge development, which is a changing area, and with land values potentially rising significantly, and demand for future commercial development, this could make the City Council need to move the operational hub elsewhere.

These views are expanded upon below, and include comments made in closed session.

Connectivity – “places that are well-connected enable easy access for all to jobs and services using sustainable modes”

The Panel asked if the units Optimum Recycling Solutions and Tarmac Cambridge Asphalt are within the red line boundary, and if so, are they going to be bought out? If the two plots are combined into the one site, the existing turning head could be removed to help achieve a better balance between green and grey infrastructure, with a more coherent and efficient site providing the space needed for vehicle parking. The applicant explained that both units are included within the red line to provide resilience in the short-term transition but may not be required in the longer term. It also forms part of the construction compound whilst building on site.

The operational hub has a large amount of vehicle parking in an area that is allocated for high density development, which could cause tension with future neighbours. The Panel noted the need to plan for the long term (25 to 60 years for example) and queried if the site is going to remain in place for that long especially when the land values rise and development increases in density around it. Therefore, could it be a commercial opportunity for the City Council? If this is a possibility, there should be a testing layout of what the site would look like if the car parking infrastructure were consolidated at some point in the future with the removal of turning head to provide more flexibility and a more efficient layout. The applicant explained that there are other businesses along that stretch of road that require the turning head and so it needs to be retained. The area to the north of the existing building is considered too small by the applicant to accommodate a viable multistorey car park.

The Panel wasn't convinced about the location of the limited staff car parking provision and suggested that staff may park off site, even with a Traffic Regulation Order (TRO) in place. If there are going to be parking restrictions, these need to be enforceable. The applicant said that limited car parking for staff is in transition, but the longer-term vision is that no staff car parking will be provided, to align with the wider council's objectives.

The shared pedestrian and cycling route, on the edge of the eastern boundary appears too narrow (about 1 meter in width). With a primary school planned to the north of the site, good connections are needed, so proposals as to how to make this route wider were recommended.

The site cycle entrance should be more understated and allow for more planting.

Character – “Places with distinctive neighbourhoods and where people create ‘pride of place’

The site has many hard surfaces, which will absorb a lot of heat, and make summer conditions unpleasant for staff by radiating heat back. There is an opportunity to make significant improvements here by greening up the space to reduce this effect and provide shade. Greening up the design would also reduce the amount of water run-off. The plans shown do not provide sufficient clarity on how the site will drain to the swale area. The Panel discouraged the use of underground grey infrastructure because that would be adding to the embodied carbon.

Consideration of soil is very important. As most of the surface is sealed, it is unclear what is underneath and so soil will need to be imported. Consideration should be given to how the soil for SuDS features is going to be used and how it is going to ensure any trees and plants thrive. The tree planting areas appear to provide very small pits surrounded by hard pavement, so there were concerns about whether trees will survive in these conditions. However, as they are close to parking areas, paving could be made porous and developed in a different way such that the root systems can use larger tree cells integrated within the SuDS offer.

The Panel highlighted the importance of tree management, and the key is to have sufficient, healthy soil for the trees to grow. The choice of tree species is critical to the success of this element of the planting strategy.

The areas for fleet parking could be covered by a green or brown roof that would supplement the biodiversity offer. Green roofs would slowly sequester carbon, whilst the paving for the parking can be of crushed concrete type that can also sequester carbon.

The swales planting should be treated as a wet woodland to encourage more biodiversity and insect life which would help feed birds and bats, provide shelter for insectivorous birds such as swifts and swallows. Sparrow terraces and/or other bird and bat boxes are recommended. These interventions can change and improve the quality and the character of the place.

Trees will need to be managed and consideration should be given to how they, and in particular their canopy, may impact on PVs.

In relation to the new and the existing buildings, it was highlighted that the plans do not identify any reception area for the office, raising questions about what access control mechanisms will be in place.

The Panel recommend the provision of a “dirty entrance” to the new building, with changing rooms and showers for workers with muddy boots etc., to avoid having to dirty the main office area.

It is important that images shown to the Panel properly relate to the proposed design. For example, the slide showing attractive timber elevations was not developed to show how this works for this building. More detailed sections and elevations would have been helpful.

Elevation plans suggest that windows sills are low on the upstairs floor, which will impact on heat gain adversely with no daylight benefit and should be reviewed.

It would be helpful to show examples of best practice from elsewhere in Britain or Europe. For example, there is a municipal facility in Copenhagen where the garage and workshop roofs are a public demonstration of sedum roof design.

Climate – “Places that anticipate climate change in ways that enhance the desirability of development and minimise environmental impact”

The Panel asked what the embodied carbon of the existing buildings was and whether it was significant. Embodied carbon calculations for the whole development should be presented as part of the planning application.

A comparison of operational energy between the existing and new buildings over time should be made. An analysis of the benefits of keeping old buildings against providing new ones would be beneficial. For example, how much operational energy is required to run the depot and how will this change over time? How much water is required? A case for how the path to achieve net zero carbon needs to be presented.

The Panel recommended maximising the number of photovoltaic panels (PVs), for example, garages and canopies could be covered with additional PVs. It was

suggested to combine PVs with on-site battery storage, particularly if the whole fleet is to be electrified. How many vehicles will be charged overnight in the long term? How much could the PVs and storage combination contribute in order to achieve net zero carbon?

Community – *“places where people live out of choice and not necessity, creating healthy communities with a good quality of life”*

The hub has an important function for the city, and benefits from an excellent location, especially for staff but the big issue is its intended design life. The Panel were concerned about the impacts of the rest of North-East Cambridge when it is developed in the future and re-iterated whether this facility may well move elsewhere as land value rises and there could be pressure from the City Council, which is already distributing functions to other parts of the city, such as Cherry Hinton Hall and Queen Anne Terrace, to release this land.

In the future there will be new primary schools and a district centre close to the hub, so the question is how long this facility will be tolerated here?

Specific recommendations

- Review the balance between grey and green infrastructure on site to maximise the amount of landscape.
- If design were to be started again, would the same layout be chosen? What is the role of the turning head?
- Useful to do a testing layout for a more intensive, denser design, and what this would look like?
- Provide clarity on staff parking restrictions and ensure these are enforceable.
- Consider how to improve the eastern boundary treatment for the cycling and walking route to make it wider and downgrade the design of the cycling entrance.
- Use permeable and porous surfaces to sequester carbon and allow trees to grow and avoid unnecessary grey infrastructure for drainage into the swales.
- Importance choices for trees in terms of soil needed and impact of tree canopies on PVs; trees need a management plan.

- Review the amount of space that could be utilised for green and brown roofs.
- Explore if swales could be wet woodland as raingardens would be great to encourage more biodiversity.
- Review layout for a “dirty entrance”, the role of timber cladding and height of first floor windows sills.
- Develop the timber elevation image into a detail design
- Embodied carbon calculations for the operation lifetime of the hub should be presented as part of the planning application.
- Maximise the number of PVs and consider their use over canopies, how much power can be generated and stored?
- Make a case for how many vehicles are needed.
- How can the site be a good neighbour for the future North-East development and in particular to the proposed primary schools and district centre?

The opportunity for ongoing engagement with the developer and design team would be welcomed as the scheme develops.

Contact details

For any queries in relation to this report, please contact the panel secretariat via growthdevelopment@cambridgeshire.gov.uk

Author: Judit Carballo

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Appendix A – Background information list and plan

- Local authority background note
- Applicant's background note
- Proposed Site Plan
- Proposed Ground Floor Plan
- Proposed First Floor Plan
- Proposed Elevations and Sections
- Main Presentation

Documents may be available on request, subject to restrictions/confidentiality.

Site Plan

