

The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel



Pre-application re: PPA/22/0030

The Grafton Centre, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire, CB1 1PS

Thursday 13 April 2023, In-person meeting

Confidential

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 [Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel](#) provides independent, expert advice to developers and local planning authorities against the four core principles of the Charter: connectivity, character, climate, and community.

Attendees

Panel Members:

Maggie Baddeley (Chair) - Planner and Chartered Surveyor
Andrew Drummond (Character, Architecture) - Director, RH Partnership
Ben Coleman (Character, Connectivity) - Associate, PJA
Nicki Whetstone (Character, Conservation) - Associate at Donald Insall Associates
Fiona Heron (Character, Landscape) – Founder of Fiona Heron Limited
Paul Bourgeois (Character, Climate) - Industrial Lead at Anglia Ruskin University

Applicant & Design Team:

Subjit Jassy (WAPG)
Paul Turner (C&W)
Steven Frith (C&W)
Jonathan Bainbridge (Bidwells - Planning)
Amy Robinson (Bidwells - Planning)
Andrew Rawlings (Mott MacDonald)
Oliver Watts (Cundall)
Martina Sechi (Bidwells - Landscaping)
Kate Hannelly- Brown (Bidwells - Heritage)

LPA Officers:

Bonnie Kwok – Principal Urban Designer / Design Review Panel Manager
Michael Hammond – Principal Planner/Case Officer
Elizabeth Moon – Principal Urban Designer
Helen Sayers – Principal Landscape Architect
Susan Smith - Principal Conservation Officer
Tom Davies – Urban Designer/Design Review Panel Support

Observer(s):

Cuma Ahmet – Principal Planner (CPD opportunity)
Paul Hunt – Planning Officer (CPD opportunity)
Laurence Moore – Planning Officer (CPD opportunity)
Michelle Lewis – Communications Officer (CPD opportunity)

Declarations of Interest

None

Previous Panel Reviews

The scheme has been the subject of a previous Design Review Panel which took place on 22 September 2022.

Scheme Description

The key components comprising the mix of proposed uses are:

- 1) The retention and improvement of some of the existing retail spaces, with a new square, life sciences, providing employment in this location to make its spaces vibrant again (particularly at the start and end of the day, i.e. outside the hours of 10:00 and 15:00);
- 2) The reinforcement of the existing leisure quarter with new food and beverage (F&B) offers;
- 3) Improving transport connectivity in the context of the proximity of the Park & Ride and one of the major city centre car parks.

Site context

The site is made up of the Grafton Shopping Centre and land surrounding it on Fitzroy Street, Burleigh Street, Burleigh Place, Wellington Street and Fitzroy Lane.

Planning history

The site has an extensive planning history. However, of most relevance to this pre-application enquiry are the following two recent applications fronting onto East Road:

- 21/01136/FUL: Demolition of existing building (Abbeygate House) and redevelopment of the site to provide a new building containing retail and office floorspace (Use Class E) – Committee resolution to approve subject to S106.
- 19/0512/FUL: Redevelopment of existing bus turning head and redundant service area to provide new hotel and ancillary restaurant (Use Class C1), new public realm (urban park) and landscape improvements together with associated highway works to East Road providing new bus stops, pedestrian and cycle routes – Permitted.

Summary

Due to the stage of preparation of the project and the short timescale proposed for making a full application towards the end of May 2023, the Panel has sought to

direct its comments in ways that are intended to assist as much as possible in preparing the planning submission.

The Panel welcomes the extent of design work that has been undertaken in the past six months. There are nonetheless likely to be areas that require further consideration, that ought to lead to some redesign. It is not yet clear to the Panel that the depth of analysis that is said to have been undertaken has entirely come through into the scheme's design. If all of the necessary research has in fact been undertaken, the application submission needs to demonstrate fully how it has been thought about carefully, and reflected in the project. In particular, there is a need to clearly show how community engagement, sustainability assessments, the Townscape and Visual Impact Assessment (TVIA), a landscape analysis and heritage impact have all informed the design. There is a need to list out all the options considered and changes that have resulted clearly in the planning application's Design and Access Statement (DAS).

Specifically, with regard to climate and sustainability, the project is moving in the right direction. Working with Officers is recommended, to make this an exemplar project for the applicant and for future tenants. Researching, visiting and referencing Entopia in central Cambridge and West Hub in West Cambridge is highly recommended, as these are recently completed, exemplar sustainable developments. The more that business resilience is built into the proposal through every aspect of sustainability, the longer the project will remain valid and viable.

The proposals require development and refinement and could be an exemplary scheme. The Panel would be happy to review it again.

Detailed comments

Character

Built form

Praising the extent of design progress that has been made since the first review, the Panel remains concerned about the massing of the overall proposal, with particular regard to its scale and height. Although images derived from short and longer distance verified views were not included in the information provided to the Panel in advance of the review, the Case Officer had made reference to them therefore at the Panel's request, they were presented in the session by the applicant's design team. Acknowledging that TVIA is still being worked on – and its consequences are leading to redesign – the Panel has some issues with how the presented project would be viewed.

The Panel notes that in response to the Midsomer Common view, the roof has been remodelled to move away from the church (although plant has been added). Likewise, the height has been lowered to respond to a more distant view from the south. But the distant view from Castle Mound to the northwest that is of most concern to the Panel, despite the applicant team pointing out that there are wind turbines that already break the skyline. The view is clearly that of a single, flat and level mass that is of the whole of the northern side of the development (where one new storey is proposed), plus the new build for the former Debenhams' replacement where car parking above the store is being removed and an extra storey added. While accepting that the design team has worked hard on breaking down the profiles of the roof, this particular view still suffers and is a challenge to address. The Panel recommends looking at the Department of Chemistry building that has variety added to its distant views by the bank of chimneys that flies across its back. This may be an alternative approach to hiding rooftop plant currently.

The Panel also suggests liaising with Council Officers on options for 'pushing and pulling' the upper storeys of the proposal using VU.CITY or a physical block model, to test whether there are alternative roof forms. Otherwise, the indication is that the current increase in height from the existing ought to be cut back on the south-western corner. Recognising the obvious issue of viability, this could create an opportunity to start to address the loss of the historic grain when the Grafton Centre was built, and to begin to build at a smaller scale to respond to Burleigh Street.

The Panel agrees that the Grafton Centre when built had the effect of creating an inward-facing 'spaceship' that does not relate to the area's existing massing and the variety of buildings. It is also acknowledged how the design team has been trying to open up the site on its northern side and make it feel more part of the city, by trying to bring the historic grain back into the site. However, its massing is not yet responding to the spaces around it; for another mistake not to be made, the Panel considers that in the context of landscape and character, the design team needs to go back to the 'soul' of what they are trying to create. A clear understanding is needed of what each 'place' feels like, in terms of their individual characters and creating a cohesive identity.

The thinking behind the proposed use of the same - or different – high quality materials then needs to be combined with this greater understanding of massing, form and spaces. It should become possible to see how the single mass of the proposal when seen in more distant views could be broken up, with the different uses having different emphases, reinforced by the variety of materials used. The design team has referred to how the intention had been to use multi-tone bricks but in order to respond to the TVIA findings, brown brick had now been brought in, with the intention of balancing the TVIA with ground level views.

Where there are other opportunities to bring the development back to the scale of its surroundings, they should be taken – or at the very least, not prevented in the future. This comment is of particular relevance on the northern side of the proposal in the short term, and to considering providing easily convertible space on the western side. Although the Fitzroy Street commercial area is still operating, residential use in the longer-term future may become appropriate to bring into this historic area.

In terms of closer views, the Panel suggests further analysis would be merited, along the same lines as already undertaken from Napier Street through to the site. The interface between the development and the northern residential streets is particularly important. For example, it is unclear what the character of the space at the southern end of Wellington Street would be, as it is currently shown as a public place with some element of servicing provision - ideally, that would be removed/ relocated. If it remains, surfacing materials need to be carefully selected because of potential wear and tear; hot rolled asphalt (HRA) and coated chippings could be a suitable choice.

The applicant team's reconsideration of the approved hotel's design is welcomed by the Panel; it is generally agreed that it does not work as it should with the positive proportions of the façade treatments in the rest of the review project, nor with the surrounding existing buildings. While its design will necessarily be different to the life sciences element, it is also at odds with the historic grain. Its elevational treatment will be important, in part because it is the tallest element of the scheme and currently, the most grid-like.

Landscape

The Panel acknowledges that there is very little on-site public space within the proposal's tightly drawn boundaries. While the Panel endorses the proposed green roofs and the provision of/ planting on rooftop spaces for use by the building occupiers, they provide no public benefit. In relation to the distant views across the city, it will only be employees and their visitors who will see them.

This observation further underlines the need for the project to create an enhanced public realm. In doing so, there is scope for public realm within and outside the life sciences building to be used as elements for navigation through and around the development. In particular, the northern route requires more consideration, as at present the forms and functions of its various stretches and spaces are unclear – simply proposing to change edge treatments and use good quality materials will not be sufficient to create more than a through route with a series of undefined spaces.

The Panel suggests too that any existing green spaces around the existing building, e.g. as on the south side of East Road) should be linked into the development; new soft landscaping along the northern route should likewise be 'pulled' into the newly created square and the life sciences' building.

The principal entrance to the site from Burleigh Street also requires reconsideration, in that the long blank wall, the limited landscaping, the incorporation of cycle parking and inclusion of a coffee 'shack' all serve to give the impression that this is a leftover space. A row of trees may instead be a simpler and preferable solution.

Climate

Sustainability

The applicant team advises that the development is built around sustainability principles.

Acknowledging that a climate change risk assessment has been completed (not seen), the Panel endorses how the project team is trying to assess the scheme's challenges and set measurable outcomes, with the overall aim of the project being seen as a pilot. The Panel therefore suggests that the aims and approaches referred to in the review are fixed now, in line with the targets that the Council's Sustainability Officer has already provided.

An embodied carbon 'count' will be submitted with the planning application. The aim to retain as much of the existing building as possible and create change in the facades is noted by the Panel, while certain components of the building are proposed for demolition, to increase site capacity. The foundations of the former Debenhams store are being retained and reused, for example. Nonetheless, the Panel is of the view that more consideration needs to be given to other aspects of demolition; while the proposed recycling measures are applauded, the Panel would be surprised if a more ambitious target than 10% could not be met. If materials cannot be re-used on site, there are likely to be many local users who could re-use/repurpose them instead. The Panel also comments the design team's intention to use ground granulated blast-furnace slag (GGBS) in the basement concrete but should be more actively considering it for other elements and committing to its use as a sensible choice (if structurally feasible) that would help reduce embodied carbon.

Energy

The Panel advises that rooftop solar PV arrays should be maximised in the project; while no target has been defined as yet, this is the design team's stated intention. However, it is not accepted by the Panel that solar PVs cannot be added to the multi-storey car park roof (due to Council control), nor to the cinema, or the gym's rooftop (due to inadequate loading capability.) While the intention is that panels would be added to the other existing buildings and new build, and the Panel agrees that the strategy will involve a trade-off between responding to views of the site and height, providing lift overruns and where biodiverse roofs are also being considered, there

are additional ways forward. There is a ‘future proofing’ conversation to be had with the cinema and gym operators, and the Council for solar PV installation; they could enter into Power Purchase Agreements (PPAs), whereby they become generators and can sell back electricity to the tenants and/or the grid. This approach could benefit all parties. Solar PV provision with PPAs alongside are increasingly seen on mixed use schemes with different tenures. For the gym rooftop surfaces, the scope for using Thin-Film solar cells should be investigated specifically. As labs can use large volumes of hot water, a communal solar thermal system could also be considered.

The site will be all-electric (utilising Air Source Heat Pumps), apart from the extant hotel permission that includes a gas-based system. The Panel is aware that key to the project is an understanding of the proposed spaces and their energy demands – particularly the proposed hotel, where triple glazing cannot be specified as this element will be operator-led. In contrast, life sciences are not highly heated and the Panel accepts that there needs to be a balanced provision of glazing due to the aspiration to present these spaces as interesting buildings that the public can see into. The general way of designing life sciences’ developments is to provide the write-up spaces so that they are seen from outside the building. The Panel notes however that tenants may well put film inside windows, or otherwise seek to block views in, in this city centre location.

The Panel endorses the applicant team’s explanation of how the life sciences’ element will have AHU including heat recovery, and how ventilation will have very localised, tenant-by-tenant demand control, as life sciences generally have high levels of air demand. It is also noted that although there are environmental constraints to the hotel having opening windows because of East Road traffic noise and pollution, the building is to be future-proofed and will provide opening windows.

Sustainable economic development

The Panel urges the applicant team to consider utilising local goods and services in the project, given that it will span many years. A radius can be set for product and service suppliers, for example, to demonstrate a strong commitment to the local economy.

Connectivity

In the early stages of project development, the design team had only proposed the northern east-west route. The Panel welcomes how it has now been recognised that it is important to also keep the existing east-west route through the mall public, alongside creating spaces around the building. While Space Syntax findings have endorsed this approach, they also show that closing the Centre to the public would strengthen Burleigh Street and Fitzroy Street.

The Panel agrees that the Centre currently has very service-dominated edges and endorses how a key driver is to create spaces around the edges of the building for people to dwell. The intention of trying to create space for the buildings to be able to 'breathe' by pulling back and creating these cutbacks in various places is noted and supported. Likewise, the formation of a new square and the north/ south proposed routes are very positive moves that echo existing street patterns.

The ideas of decluttering, and of blending old and new – e.g. by the removal of a section of brick wall, while retaining an historic wall - are also endorsed on the northern side of the project. There is still more to be done however in terms of designing the northern east-west route, to ensure that there are no spaces that give the perception of being 'leftover'. No dimensions have been provided to the Panel and there is a dearth of other information on what the route will be like; for example, it appears that proposed seating may well be in the way of cyclists and pedestrians. There may also not be an adequate width to satisfy LTN1/20 dimensions and in this regard, edge treatments need to be considered further. But with further functional analysis of the scope for/ desirability of cycle/ pedestrian segregation and the necessary 2-way demarcation potentially undermining the public realm, it may have to be concluded that this is not a suitable cycle route.

A specific encouragement by the Panel relating to the northern route and north/ south connectivity is to enhance access to/ from the streets leading to Christ Church on Newmarket Road. These residential streets need to be considered as gateways to the northern route, such that they become fully integrated; the design of the spaces formed along the route needs to be clearly defined and they should not be dominated by turning heads.

Another driver for the project is introducing north/ south links that provide 'journeys' for people to enjoy. The Space Syntax technical work that had been undertaken and the associated data prove that the links proposed are workable. In particular, the Panel suggests that the proposed link from the northern route into the new square is looked at in more detail, in terms of how it will be used. The same point applies to the new square itself, where the Panel suggests a more cohesive approach to its façade treatment could be more successful - the arched facades shown could work well.

It is disappointing that the east-west route through the life sciences building will not be permanently open as a pedestrian route. Noting that the existing shopping centre mall is not a public route and that it could be closed off at any time, the Panel understands that a management plan/ strategy is being devised that would manage public access, to ensure safety and security while, for example, maintaining the existing internal access to the cinema. The route would be closed to the public – for example – when the open auditorium in the central shared space is in use for a

business or innovation event, to which, for instance, children or students may also be invited. The management strategy would be agreed via condition (in preference to being a s106 obligation, according to the applicant).

Noting that the distribution of cycle routes and parking/ storage spaces is based on a strategy to work out where cyclists are coming from, the Panel suggests that the positioning of cycle racks needs to be reconsidered. For example, the possibility of relocating racks from Burleigh Street into the entrance way to the building does not seem to be an appropriate option for the design of this 'gateway' to the project. Cycle storage within the building will include some 800 cycle spaces, with the Panel endorsing how in various locations, it will cater for cargo bikes and provide e-charging facilities and appears well-located.

Noting that Burleigh Place will be retained as a cycle route, it is currently presented as abruptly ending; instead, it should be shown to connect beyond.

The Panel suggests that clear reference should be made to public transport accessibility, particularly due to the site's proximity to the Park & Ride and bus interchange.

Upgrades on East Road are proposed; they would include tree planting and the creation of rain gardens, alongside significant s278 works in relation to bus stops and pedestrian routes. The Panel endorses the principle of these improvements and suggests that the details are formulated in relation to an identified character for the street, such as a boulevard. It is unlikely however that anyone would want to sit out on East Road; the Panel advises that this likelihood provides an opportunity to rethink this site boundary, the pavement and its road frontage.

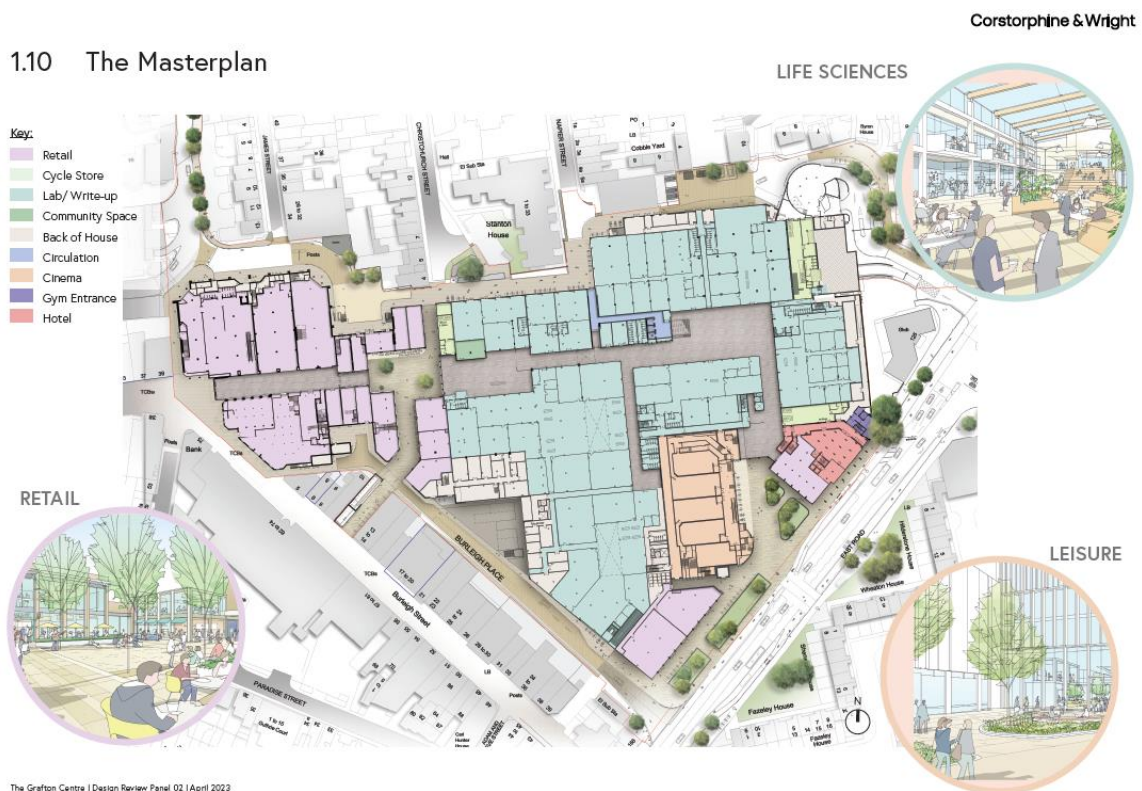
Community

The Panel recognises how retail requirements have changed and demand has been declining, accepting that the previous owner of the shopping centre tried to relet units time and time again - especially the vacated large space users. There is a clear understanding that this area is more a location for smaller occupiers and the Panel is aware that trade would be boosted by new employment in the review project. The applicant trying to keep as many retail operators as possible, including relocating two remaining larger stores, is an approach noted by the Panel.

The proposals for trying to bring the community into the development are likewise noted; they include an incubator unit that is proposed in the entrance area for companies and the aim is to attract the public into this space. Discussions are underway with the Cambridge Science Centre for space within the project, that members of the public would have access to.

With regard to the earlier, and current community engagement (including with the immediate neighbours to the north of the Centre) that is now underway, it is not clear to the Panel the extent to which the outcomes have already, or will influence design given the late stage of the project. Anti-social behaviour along the northern edge of the Centre has been a key concern of local residents in consultations so far. The perception of the area is that it is unsafe – a problem that they perceive could be addressed by improved lighting and CCTV. The applicant has advised those concerned that they intend to try and address this issue and manage the space. The Panel’s overriding comment however is that the design team also needs to have a clearer understanding of what each of the public spaces and the route will feel like, particularly at night and in terms of access and inclusivity.

1.10 The Masterplan



Proposed Masterplan – extracted from the applicant’s DRP presentation document 22388 - 8028 - 00 / April 2023

1.27 Leisure Quarter - Appearance

As discussed in the massing development a key design driver is to endeavour to align the existing mass and the extended elements with the development along East Road.

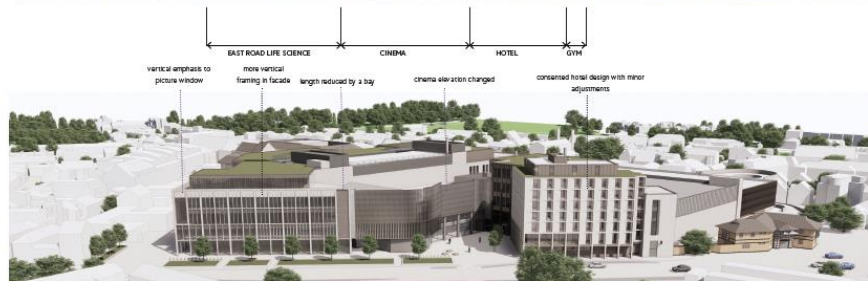
As the section below analyses the building height gradient from Parkside Place to the Cambridge Working Mens Club.

Key:

- Retail
- Life Science
- Hotel



Key Plan



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Proposed Massing Plan, Street Elevation and CGI – extracted from the applicant's DRP presentation document 22388 - 8028 - 00 | April 2023

Disclaimer

The above comments represent the views of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel and are made without prejudice to the determination of any planning application should one be submitted. Furthermore, the views expressed will not bind the decision of Elected Members, should a planning application be submitted, nor prejudice the formal decision-making process of the council.