

# The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel



**137 and 143 Histon Road, CB4 3JD (PPA 4368)**

**14<sup>th</sup> December 2023**

**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

Chris Jones (Character, Architecture) – Director at BCR Infinity Architects

David Knight (Character, Connectivity) - Director at Cake Engineering

Helen Goodwin (Character, Community) - Head of Programmes, Design South East

Paul Bourgeois (Character, Climate) - Anglia Ruskin University / The Passivhaus Trust

Vanessa Ross (Character, Landscape) – Landscape Architect, Director, arc Landscape Design and Planning Ltd

### Applicant Team:

Nathan Flax - Senior Development Consultant, Hill

Rob Preston - Associate, Planning Consultant, Carter Jonas

Asli Bilsel - Senior Design Manager, Hill

Eric Molloy - Chartered Landscape Architect, Guarda Landscaping

James Pikett - Senior Development Manager, Hill

Jeremy Thurlby - Head of Design, Hill

Paul Belton - Partner, Planning Consultant, Carter Jonas

### LPA Officers:

Joanne Preston – Principal Urban Designer / Design Review Panel Manager

Katie Roberts – Executive Assistant / Panel Support Officer

Anne-Marie de Boom - Consultant urban designer (CIP sites)

Helen Sayers - Principal Landscape Architect

## **Scheme Description and Background**

### **Brief Description of the Proposal:**

#### Site Context:

The site is located on Histon Road in the Arbury Ward, approximately 1km north of the city centre. There are residential uses adjacent to the south and west, the ATS garage adjoins the site, and the Histon Road Recreation Ground abuts the southern boundary. The site is outside of, but immediately adjacent to, the Castle and Victoria Conservation Area. The site is subject to an Area Tree Preservation Order. The site is approximately 1.18 hectares; the southern half of the application site was previously occupied by Murketts car dealership and the northern half of the site consists of an unused workshop area which is located to the rear of the ATS commercial unit.

### **Planning History:**

23/01842/PRIOR – This permits the prior approval for the demolition and removal of all buildings and structures above ground level.

### **Policy context and key policy considerations:**

The site was originally allocated under the adopted Local Plan 2006 and 2018 (site ref. R2) for 78 dwellings. However, the emerging draft Greater Cambridge Local Plan (site ref. S/C/R2) allocates the site for the development of 110 dwellings (including the ATS garage). The proposed site plan now excludes part of the ATS building along the Histon Road frontage as the business intends to continue operating from the site. The site is in Flood Zone 1 an area of very low risk of flooding.

### **Declarations of Interest**

There are no conflicts of interest.

### **Previous Panel Reviews**

This is the first time the scheme has been reviewed by the Panel.

## Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel Views

### Summary

The Panel fully understands that the review proposal is for a site acquired on the open market and that this influences the project's viability and the number of affordable homes. This does not however undermine how connectivity is fundamental to the success of the project; there should be physical connections with the Histon Road Recreation Ground provided as part of the new development. The recreation ground is being relied on heavily for visual aspects but this design component is undermined if residents here and nearby cannot access it physically. The community consultation results need to be analysed very carefully; given the summary of mixed comments provided in the review, the applicant team should be seek to demonstrate to the existing local community that they can benefit more from the recreation ground, if there is an interactive route to it through an attractive housing project.

The Panel suggests that CIP partners can help resolve how to fully embrace the recreation ground in this way, and avoid any compromise that does not include physical connections to this public open space.

The approach to affordable housing requires review; as currently designed - with all of the apartments and just three houses being affordable and being grouped on one part of the site - the project is not tenure neutral and therefore inconsistent with national design guidance (the National Design Guide, that has superseded the [withdrawn] Code for Sustainable Homes). Ultimately, whether or not the entire apartment building is finalised as being solely for affordable housing, it will need to be a landmark building from the Panel's viewpoint. The building's Histon Road elevation should be carefully considered not only in the context of the project itself but also the main street frontage's existing housing and ATS building.

The Panel understands the range of issues around value that have been discussed in the review but suggests that wider thinking is needed in relation both to the lift in value that would occur from creating physical connections to the recreation ground,

and to reconsidering how the affordable housing is provided and better integrated into the project.

### ***Detailed Comments***

#### **Connectivity**

The design team has referred to the site presenting ‘the opportunity to create sustainable development at this location... well-connected to existing communities’. The Panel endorses how the scheme aims to promote sustainable transport and is well-located in relation to the city centre and many local amenities. Yet although the site’s development is predicated on the recreation ground adjacent – that will be perceived and seen from the new homes – no physical connection is currently confirmed. Without connection, the whole scheme suffers. Canterbury Street to the south of the recreation ground terminates at a gate into the recreation ground. The Panel supports similar connectivity, creating wider permeability for residents of the review scheme and from further afield. It is agreed however that any physical connection between the site and the recreation ground should not be for cycles i.e. links should be pedestrian-only.

Although it is understood that no connections to the Histon Road Recreation Ground were first proposed in pre-app discussions, on being encouraged to open up such links, consideration was given to whether they were in the most suitable location, of an appropriate character (e.g. only visual, or via public/ private gates, and for cyclists and pedestrians, or pedestrian-only) and of the right size. The Panel acknowledges how it is not suitable to try and provide a link from the site’s northern boundary, as this would lead into Aldi’s (i.e. private) car park (there are also apparently level issues). The design team has chosen to show visual links to the recreation ground (e.g. from the pocket park), stating that discussions regarding pedestrian routes are under discussion with the City Council. In discussing connectivity to the recreation ground, the applicant team has analysed the addresses for comments made in response to the public consultation. There is a perception expressed by one existing resident that providing access to the recreation ground ‘seems like favouritism for the

new residents'. However, the applicant team has also mentioned in the review that while 60% are against, 40% would endorse new physical connections.

Given the applicant team's wider comments on the contradictory views of local residents in the recent public consultation, whereby some expressed a sense of ownership and proprietorial use, the Panel is convinced that physical access from the site into the recreation ground in terms of helping achieve social cohesion is key. The design team seems to endorse this view. If the new neighbourhood is to become part of the wider community – noting that some local residents have referred to how they like the recreation ground as it is now (and the safety provided by the enclosed children's play area arrangement) – the design team has looked more widely at how connections beyond the site could be created. Two possible locations for physical links to the recreation ground are currently being considered, as referred to in the presentation (one being via the pocket park and the other to the rear of the proposed apartment building). Regard is being had to how the recreation ground's play area currently has two distinct parts in terms of serving older children towards the east and younger children towards the centre. In the public consultation exercise, the applicant team apparently spoke of creating 'informal access' in response i.e. public, pedestrian access replicating the current access gate arrangement within the recreation ground, with a notice referring to it being a dog-free area. The Panel sees these considerations as being fundamental to the success of the project and discussions should be continued to agreement and delivery. It is accepted too by the Panel that connecting the site physically to the recreation ground may well need to be associated with improvements to it, as part of the proposals.

Turning to the proposed spine road, the intention is to create a combined access point that will be safe for the new homes' residents and for ATS tyre customers and servicing. While this intention is understood by the Panel, the design as a single straight spine will necessitate traffic being slowed down and it being made to appear less like a thoroughfare.

With reference to parking arrangements, the Panel supports the proposals for cycle parking. The Panel then notes that the site lies within a controlled parking zone therefore fewer car spaces than otherwise required are already proposed. Parking has also been reasonably well-hidden in the proposed layout, which has also been

devised to prevent on-street parking. The Panel agrees that the urban courtyard could be removed, if parking numbers reduce. At this stage, the Panel nonetheless would suggest that every consideration be given to the scope for reducing the number of car parking spaces proposed on-site now, in order to free up space.

## Climate

### *Sustainability*

The Panel accepts that this is a market site but the presented proposal lacks sustainability ambition, despite the design team's stated aim being 'to develop a sustainable neighbourhood'. Comparing this scheme with Hill's other sites in Cambridge and elsewhere, the Panel concludes that these new homes will not be future-proofed. In short, they will not be 'net zero-ready', and effectively will be a burden along with the existing housing stock in 10 years' time.

Although Fabric First has been mentioned in the review, there are no clear standards or metrics being committed to and worked to, other than Part L of the Building Regulations and the Hill ESG 2030 Road Map. Noting that this will be a gas-free development, in relation to performance in use, once again the design team is currently only working to Building Regulations. The Panel recommends exceeding Building Regulations by adoption of a recognised building performance standard in order to ensure low energy use in operation and mitigate any potential for residents getting into fuel poverty.

On the roof of the proposed apartment building, the intention is to provide air source heat pumps (ASHPs), while keeping the extent of plant to a minimum. A brown roof is also proposed; PV panels are currently not considered to be necessary, given the Fabric First approach being taken. The Panel does not agree. Although ASHPs are proposed throughout the scheme, their energy use can be high therefore the Panel recommends that the design team should be considering mitigation with PVs and battery storage on-site. In relation to energy use intensity, providing ASHP energy does not mean that residents' bills will be low therefore on-site electricity generation is essential.

The Panel endorses the design team proposing an EV charging point provided to serve each house, and two apartments sharing one EV charging point.



### *Water usage*

The Panel accepts that although water consumption at a rate of 99 litres per person per day as proposed is a good level, the design team needs to move in the direction of a lower consumption rate, in light of the emerging joint Greater Cambridge Local Plan that proposes 80 litres per person per day.

### *Circular economy*

On demolition of the existing commercial buildings on-site, the applicant team is not currently proposing to reuse any materials. While the Panel accepts that they cannot be re-used on-site, there are organisations operating in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire (e.g. Cambridgeshire Community Reuse & Recycling Network - CCORRN) that would be able to advise on the re-use of redundant construction materials instead.

Turning to circularity in the context of local supply chains, the Panel would expect the applicant team to use local trades and look to support local economic development. A defined radius to achieve this objective could be set, e.g. 50 miles; especially as this is one of many Hill sites, the developer could contribute significantly to growth of the local economy.

In conclusion, there are many small moves in relation to this site that could be made to enhance sustainability, and even save money.

### *Green infrastructure and landscape strategy*

The scheme includes a dense green buffer proposed on the site's northern boundary, adjacent to the three apartment blocks that front Greengate Road and that are at a lower level. As a general principle however, providing such a buffer and trying to retain trees and plant more seems to indicate to the Panel that there is a need to hide a design fault in the proposed development. Similarly, the northernmost corner does not work particularly successfully in landscape terms. The Panel is of the view that strips of planting just for screening often become leftover no-mans' land and fill with litter. In addition, tree shading and its impact on existing properties will only worsen over time (as referred to below).

Turning to the proposed 'pocket park' that as presented would only provide a view into the recreation ground and not any confirmed form of physical access, it is clear to the Panel that it is simply created as the result of a single dwelling being removed from a previous layout option. The pocket park is so small – and it is an odd concept to have a 'park' next to a 'park' – that the Panel concludes that the whole treatment of this area needs more design effort. If the space is there to facilitate an access point between the development and the recreation ground, then clear lines of sight, perhaps not including the proposed larger tree on this potential route is suggested.

On the Histon Road frontage, the Panel supports the aspiration to provide as much green infrastructure as possible. The design team will however need to check the extent etc. of proposed hedge and tree planting shown in the presentation against providing the necessary visibility splays. Once again, the Panel has a concern that how the proposed apartment block itself reads is key, and that showing extensive landscaping is not an appropriate solution for mitigating its intended scale and massing.

The design team proposes that all surface materials would be permeable, with the exception of the Histon Road/ site road junction, where access will be provided to the retained ATS tyre operation (both to the forecourt and separately, to the rear of their building). This junction may be adopted; the rest of the access spine would be maintained by a management company (including any proposed street trees and hedge planting). The Panel advises that the design team needs to consider how the hedges shown between parking bays and garages will be maintained and managed; if the scheme proposals are relying on hedge planting as an integral part of the greening of the street, then this should fall within the responsibility of the proposed management company. Despite assurances in the review, the Panel raised concern about the impact of the proposed hedges on pedestrian safety and visibility splays in respect of drivers using on-plot parking spaces/garages. The Panel is concerned that as an important aspect of the street scene, the loss of hedge planting in future design iterations will compromise the success of the scheme.

## *Trees*

With regard to the mature trees situated just inside the recreation ground's boundaries – particularly on the eastern boundary – the Panel is very aware that they may create issues with the currently proposed layout in terms of overshadowing homes and rear gardens. These trees will keep growing; the design team should factor in a presumption that complaints from future residents will arise. Endorsing the proposal that the new homes with southerly aspects backing onto the northern boundary of the recreation ground would have their living rooms on the first floor – and that this relationship with the boundary trees would work to some extent – the Panel reiterates how continued tree growth and overshadowing could still become issues.

With regard to tree ownership, the Panel very much supports all trees on-site being in shared areas and maintained by a management company. The design team needs to provide for space in the ground for their roots to grow; as currently shown, the Panel concludes that they are positioned very tightly in relation to bin and cycle stores. This kind of pressure could ultimately lead to a reduced number of trees. Instead of having to respond in this way, the Panel recommends that the design team needs to think now of them growing for the next 20 to 30 years.

Looking at the detail of the pocket park, the siting of a new large tree within it is not considered by the Panel to be the best solution; moving it closer to the new spine road, or removing it would help with surveillance.

## *Biodiversity*

The Panel supports the overall planting concept currently referred to. However, there needs to be a much stronger emphasis on biodiversity, climate resilience and drought resistance. Currently there is an emphasis on evergreen hedges however native species and a greater variety of plant species are needed, to make the development as wildlife-friendly as possible. While the applicant team has referred to the only protected species on-site being bats (a low-level licence for a roost will be needed), the adjacency of the recreation ground means that the design team needs to make sure of connectivity for wildlife, considering the proposed development

within the context of the wider network of green infrastructure. Consideration should also be given to the movement of specific species, for example hedgehogs etc. e.g. by creating boundary treatment gaps and holes in fences.

## **Character**

### *Context*

The site is adjacent to, but not within the Castle and Victoria Road Conservation Area that has a clear, grid form of streets. The design team has therefore proposed a straight, central spine road 'to give efficient layout and reflect the linear arrangement of the Conservation Area's streets'. Another key feature of the existing neighbourhood is the Histon Road Recreation Ground that lies primarily on the site's southern (and part of its western) boundary. It has an extensive, dog-free children's play area in its northern part that is enclosed by railings, again directly adjacent to the site's southern and western boundaries. The other key features in the immediate area are the three relatively recently built apartment buildings fronting Greengate Road that were developed in the context of the-then existing industrial buildings. They sit in close proximity to the proposed site's northern boundary and at a lower level than the raised, made land of this part of the review site. The Panel endorses the applicant's proposal to lower the level of the made land in this part of the site, although regard will have to be had to protecting the mature trees that stand just outside of the applicants' control. The apartments' rear elevation balconies will nonetheless all overlook the site, a factor that the Panel sees as being an important consideration in further design development. In contrast, the relatively recently built homes abutting the north western site boundary in Seaby's Yard have rear gardens, such that overshadowing and overlooking are not of direct concern to the Panel.

The site provides the opportunity to improve the existing Histon Road frontage, one that the Panel does not see as yet having been taken due to the design development that is still underway for the proposed apartment building. This building should announce the development through its distinctive form and character, sharing an identity with the rest of the development that is reflective of the site's industrial heritage and granary buildings.

### *Site layout and masterplanning*

The Panel obviously understands that this is an urban site, where future residential development at the Council's accepted density will necessarily feel 'crowded'. But there are difficulties created because of this being a long, narrow site, where the presented response is to somehow fit a double row of housing along a central spine. According to the design team, alternative layouts have been considered but the presented scheme with a new road through the centre of the site's length is apparently the most efficient; any other would lead to the loss of a number of proposed dwellings. An apartment-based scheme has been considered but concluded to be too bulky in terms of massing, and would be car parking-dominated.

The Panel perceives clear opportunities for the proposal to respond better to the opportunities created by the site's levels and the presence of mature trees that are largely beyond its boundaries. While the design team refer to having identified where the project could relate visually 'and actually' with the recreation ground – and in spite of stating total support for physical access to the recreation ground – no confirmed access has been presented to the Panel. In the Panel's view, the scheme becomes almost unacceptable without that physical access, in line with the two indicative points currently shown. Routes to those access points also need to be very clear and legible.

Accepting how the design team has referred to these other opportunities for a different layout having been explored, and how consideration has been given as well to the most suitable position for the 'pocket park' and the 'urban courtyard', the Panel considers that they are all aspects of the layout that remain unresolved. The urban courtyard is such in name only; it may just in reality be a parking area, and refuse lorry and vehicle turning head. The design team's description of the space now and in the future if car ownership decreases. Although being 'a place for children to play' now is not a realistic prospect in the Panel's view, as that does not match the actuality of how that space would be used, if car ownership were to decline and this were to become a car-free area, then it could provide an informal area for play.

Specifically for the pocket park, there are various detailed design issues that have been identified by the Panel - and during the review, the design team agreed with the

Panel that the fenestration treatment on the flank walls/ side elevations of homes abutting the pocket park will be important.

Further consideration needs to be given to the proposed vista building marking the end of the spine road. Its garage as currently shown will be very prominent; the Panel recommends that a different form of building should be considered.

In the longer term, the design team's suggestion is that should the ATS tyre shop site fronting Histon Road become available in the future, it could be appropriate for a redevelopment that would 'mirror' the current project's form on the southern side of the site access road i.e. potentially providing another apartment building of matching scale and massing. The design team and Panel both acknowledge that it is therefore essential for the current scheme's 'corner' apartment building to be high quality.

#### *Boundary treatment*

The Panel's views on each of the site's boundaries have focused on ensuring that landscape treatments and layout are closely inter-related in terms of the orientation and proximity of new homes. The proposal to provide extensive 1.8m high close-boarded fencing around plots as boundary treatment is not supported by the Panel – a very unattractive prospect. Instead, it is suggested that the railings reaching the same height would be entirely preferable, noting how lower railings already mark the site's boundary with the recreation ground, and the dog-free play area within the recreation ground itself.

A pitched roof for the apartment building has been explored by the design team but not progressed due to 'looking oppressive'.

#### *Massing, roofscape and elevations*

The presentation has shown that proposed elevations for the new houses are not particularly well-developed at this stage. There is a concern that in effect, only a generic 'list' of house types has been shown to the Panel and little sense can be gained of what this proposed new neighbourhood would look like. The design team has helpfully looked into the history of the site and found that it was previously used as granaries (producing chicken feed, according to the Panel); reflecting this past

use, the Panel would support the intended saw-toothed roofs and brick detailing etc. and the reference to granaries in terms of potentially asymmetrical roof ridges that would be very distinctive. Referencing the existing chimneys on-site is also suggested by the Panel. The design team now exploring cutting out the corners of some houses to enhance passive surveillance is also seen as a positive move.

The Panel does not agree with a suggestion that the example of the residential building at the southern end of Histon Road is a suitable reference and relevant to this proposal's apartment building, for which no elevations are yet available.

Although only indicative massing has been presented to the Panel for the proposed apartment building, it does appear to be somewhat bulky. Instead of a flat roof, the Panel suggests that consideration is given to using a saw tooth ~~form~~ or asymmetrical pitched roof form. 'Considered fun' could be had in any building that turns the corner of Histon Road, using e.g. signage, fenestration, materiality, and a typology with very strong characteristics that could also link to the recreation ground. With the cycle storage at ground floor of the currently proposed apartment building on the street corner – if it remains in this position – there is a need for it to be very carefully designed. This corner at ground floor level should not be 'blind' and unattractive; the Panel suggests that glazing could be used to create an enjoyable, active frontage. Otherwise on the ground floor, the apartments will each have their own, private external amenity space, and their own front doors – a suitable approach in the Panel's view. Without seeing elevations, the Panel notes that the apartment building is currently proposed to have either winter gardens or inset balconies on its Histon Road/ access road frontages, and balconies to the rear. No single aspect, north-facing apartments are shown, a design principle that the Panel endorses.

The Panel accepts that throughout the development, elevations and roof forms are still being worked on and endorses how there is an intention in the design team to reference industrial forms and materials, as outlined in the presentation. The palette of materials will also be fundamental.

## Community

The Panel emphasises how physical connections to the recreation ground from the development are considered fundamental from a community perspective. More

generally, the community aspects of this design review thread through all aspects of the proposal. But it is not yet clear at all who will live here – whether it would be primarily older people, or young families (for example). The Panel considers that the scheme should feel like a mews-type street (e.g. as at Marmalade Lane, Cambridge and Goldsmith Street, Norwich), where people of all ages can gather and spend time, with informal seating to encourage encounters between neighbours.

Thinking this aspect of the proposal through would be beneficial in terms of giving an idea of the identity of the place – and then showing how it would be different to anywhere else locally. The Panel suggests that an example of how to make the character of this unique place come through would be to use the clue of the historic use of the site as granaries; in other words, ground the new neighbourhood in its history.

The proposed pocket park could be a growing space, in light of the Panel seeing it as odd to propose a park next to a park; there could be seating here, and a place created for all ages that is somewhere to stop, meet and chat i.e. a place that would help to start to bond the new community.

The urban courtyard should likewise be reconsidered – it should feel like a place to inhabit and use.

Although the proposed affordable housing mix has been derived from discussions with City Council housing officers and with reference to the housing waiting list – and conversations are understood to be ongoing – the Panel is disappointed to see that all of the proposed apartments are to provide affordable housing, despite officers not specifying this form of provision as a preference. Because all of the apartments are affordable, the development is not tenure neutral. Although some market research has been conducted by the applicant team, it remains unclear to the Panel why smaller market homes (as apartments) and larger, non-flatted affordable dwellings are not being proposed. At present, only three houses are affordable, positioned adjacent to the apartment building therefore another source of disappointment for the Panel is how the affordable housing is all grouped together in just one corner. Contrary to the National Design Guide, the project will not be tenure neutral with the affordable housing integrated throughout, despite this being a relatively compact site.





Figure 1: Proposed Roof Plan (NTS)

*For information: in determining an application for planning permission, the decision must be taken in accordance with the development plan unless there are material considerations that indicate otherwise (see [section 70\(2\) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990](#) and [section 38\(6\) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004](#) – these provisions also apply to appeals). A material planning consideration is one which is relevant to making the planning decision in question (eg whether to grant or refuse an application for planning permission). It is for the decision maker to decide what weight is to be given to the material considerations in each case. This design review panel report will be a material consideration in the determination of a future planning application for the project presented, or a similar scheme, with the Council as decision maker deciding the weight to be attached to the report.*

## **Contact Details**

Please note the following contacts for information about the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel:

Joanne Preston (Joint Panel Manager)

[joanne.preston@greatercambridgeplanning.org](mailto:joanne.preston@greatercambridgeplanning.org)

+44 7514 923122

Bonnie Kwok (Joint Panel Manager)

[bonnie.kwok@greatercambridgeplanning.org](mailto:bonnie.kwok@greatercambridgeplanning.org)

+44 7949 431548

Katie Roberts (Panel Administrator)

[Katie.roberts@greatercambridgeplanning.org](mailto:Katie.roberts@greatercambridgeplanning.org)

+44 7871 111354