



The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel

Pre-application ref: PPA/24/0035

Wolfson Court, Clarkson Road, Cambridge,

Thursday 22 May 2025, 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:

Simon Carne (Chair) – Architect and Urban Designer, Director at Simon Carne Architect

Fiona Heron - Founder at Fiona Heron Limited

Anna Pamphilon - Architect, Pamphilon Architects

Nicholas Anderson - Chartered Civil Engineer and retired South East development Planning Lead at Aecom

Sarah Morrison - Conservation Architect

Applicant & Design Team:

Stuart Cade, MICA (architect)

James Roach MICA (architect)

Jeremy Rye, Terra Firma (landscape architect)

Suzie Wood, St John's College (landowner)

Keir Dixon, Ridge (project manager)

Dave Jones, MICA (architect)

Jessie Turnbull, MICA (architect)

Jacob Spence, MICA (architect)

Robert Shrimplin, Shrimplin Planning & Development (planning consultant)

Mark Skelly/David Hawkins, Skelly and Couch (energy/sustainability)

LPA Officers:

Brooke Moore – DRP/Business Support Officer

Tom Davies – DRP Manager

Tom Chenery – Case Officer

Egle Packauskaite - Urban design officer

Observer(s):

Grace Cherrington – Planner, GCSP

Finn Horsefield – work experience student

Declarations of Interest

None

Previous Panel Reviews

None

Design Review methodology

The panel follows the assessment method devised by Nick Falk of Urbed for Cambridge Futures and now used by the Cambridge Quality Panel and the Cambridge Joint Panel. The method seeks a holistic response to design under the four headings of Community, Connectivity, Climate and Character. Individual members of the panel focus their response under one of these headings although inevitably there is always a high degree of overlap and focus. The order in which each is taken varies depending on the nature of the proposal.

Background

The brief seeks undergraduate student accommodation on the site of the existing Wolfson Court buildings. The site was purchased by St John's College in 2018 and the College is seeking approval for modern high-quality, sustainable and energy efficient accommodation for students. The aim is to increase the numbers of students that can be accommodated significantly. Demand for student accommodation is high and there are expressions of interest in taking the accommodation being considered.

Developing a masterplan

The design team have developed an outline site masterplan which draws on existing site conditions, site features, access and the accommodation required to be delivered.

Climate

The 1990s blocks are still in use and whilst not to the standard set in the brief, they appear in good condition. Could they be retained, reconfigured and repurposed? The embodied carbon studies apply the same intensive retrofit standard as the new build brief, which somewhat skews the comparison. A more flexible approach, for

example prioritising fabric upgrades and addressing overheating, while easing certain brief constraints might have tipped the balance in favour of retention. The design team have carried out a rigorous assessment of options but the brief limits opportunities for meaningful reuse. But the panel acknowledge that balancing the social, environmental and economic impacts is for the local planning authority to debate.

Turning to the proposals presented, the new buildings have a sensible form factor and glazing ratio, and the panel welcome that early PHPP modelling has been undertaken. To further reduce embodied carbon the scheme could benefit from stronger circularity measures. Much of the brickwork and structural and decorative timber on the existing buildings appear to be in excellent condition. Could more be done to reuse these materials on site? Will low-carbon structural options such as engineered timber be pursued? No basements are included but these should be avoided should the design evolve. Early cost planning is essential to ensure these ambitions can be delivered. Brick and tile are currently proposed as the primary external finishes both carrying high embodied carbon. Lower-carbon alternatives within bricks themselves could have a meaningful cumulative impact. Shading also needs to be considered from the outset, especially on south and west façades. If it isn't feasible to install now, ensure designs allow for future retrofit and that building services like MVHR don't obstruct later integration.

The inclusion and detailed consideration of ASHPs and PVs in the roof design has been carefully considered. The panel encourage setting stretch targets to maximise on-site renewable energy generation. Assuming the current scheme doesn't cover 100% of electricity needs, the panel wonder whether there is scope to increase PV coverage on visible roof areas.

The proposed landscaping is also encouraging, though there's a clear opportunity to introduce more large canopy trees — particularly along the southern boundary and within communal courtyards — to enhance shading, biodiversity, and long-term resilience.

The panel recommend adopting ambitious, project-specific sustainability goals alongside NZCBS 2026 aspirations, including targeting Passivhaus certification for new buildings, prioritising low-carbon and natural materials, significantly limiting concrete use through careful structural design, incorporating rainwater harvesting for all non-potable demands, and committing to a measurable biodiversity net gain that exceeds pre-development baselines.

Connectivity

Motor vehicle access is limited to Clarkson Road and leads along the west boundary with car parking accessing the Nursery located at the north west corner of the site. Refuse vehicles use the same route to collection points along the way. Space for fire tender access is provided along the central pedestrian route, this would be clearly perceived as a 'street' that would also accommodate cyclists. The route is straight and direct. The panel wondered whether introducing changes of direction and creating a route which ran through new spaces created along its length would add to the character of the landscape design as well as discouraging cycling.

A narrow, shared cycle / pedestrian footpath runs along the west side outside the site boundary. This seemed to be well used from the experience of the site visit. It offers a route for cycles to exit the site, close to the Maddingly Road. Its width is limited with poor sight lines on exiting leading to the potential for conflict between pedestrian and cyclist.

Cycling access generally is limited to three points of entry and the design team are hopeful that advice or instruction to dismount will be successful. This may prove difficult to achieve with increasing numbers of students resident on site.

The third point of access is through the front and rear garden and parking area of 15 Maddingly Road. Whilst this is also owned by St John's College, it is not part of the project. The panel expressed some concern at the exclusion of 15 Maddingly Road as this will be a key point of access and the new footpath will run through the west side of the garden, passing close to the attractive bow window on the west elevation.

This route discharges onto the southern footway of Maddingly Road, which is not a cycleway. The nearest cycle path is on the opposite north side of Maddingly Road, and cycles will need to be wheeled to the signalised crossing to the west to access this. The site visit revealed that cyclists are already using the southern footway of Maddingly Road, coming into conflict with pedestrians. The panel believe these issues may be of concern to the highway authority.

Cycle parking is in two large, covered cycle parking buildings with double decked parking racks. The numbers and precise details were not discussed but the panel commented that combining cycle parking in just two locations would not normally be considered the best solution to cycle parking provision. Dispersing parking provision, closer to entrances would be more appropriate and make cycling a more convenient option. The cycle parking buildings are in discrete single storey buildings which did not appear to have been integrated into the master plan for the site.

Character

The panel welcomed the opportunity to walk and experience the existing buildings with their mix of different architectural approaches and spatial qualities of enclosure. Walking around the immediate area confirmed the area's green character with large houses behind hedges. Neighbouring institutional buildings are set back and generally out of sight. The front elevation of Wolfson Court on Clarkson Road is distinctive with its large tree and set back. Visible houses are of mixed character and quality. The more significant houses are away from the immediate site as described below. 15 Madingley Road is one exception.

The panel were curious to understand more of the rationale behind the master plan. It seemed to jump from a rudimentary analysis to a layout of L shaped blocks developed into floor plans of efficient space planning within two typologies. The Town House for up to 9 students located at the ends of blocks with lengths of flatted studio rooms with en suite facilities and shared common rooms and kitchens. All floors are fully accessible with lifts.

As the panel delved deeper into the design it seemed that the 'Arts and Crafts' identity which the architects have cited as a reference was not integral to the design narrative. Arts and Crafts buildings shared many principles with 'Garden cities' such as at Letchworth. Key factors being local vernacular and materials as can be found garden suburbs. If the architects are to reference Arts and Crafts it would be appropriate to look more closely at the features that distinguish these buildings. For example, M.H.Baillie-Scott, a prolific and renowned Arts and Crafts architect was hugely influential and designed several houses nearby on Storeys Way, characteristic features such as large gables, timber framing, downward sweeping eaves and open plan living areas with meticulous attention to details and gardens as extension of the house might be relevant. The garden of 48 Storey's Way, laid out in 1913 to the designs of M. H. Baillie Scott, is included on the Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest at Grade II. The design of the garden is carefully integrated with that of the house to create an open and dynamic relationship between the inside and outside space. The garden forms part of an exceptional suburban development in West Cambridge which encompasses the work of some of the most notable architects of the day. The garden has considerable group value with the house which is listed at Grade II* and is part of an important cluster of five listed Baillie Scott houses in Storey's Way. The proposals can also learn from a greater depth of study of local houses and the community aspects of the way of life, craft, work and collaboration inherent in the Arts and Crafts movement.

Whilst this might develop into an appropriate response, the panel wondered whether it had been sufficiently argued and was coming through in the detail. The panel also mentioned the potential for referencing arts and crafts mansion blocks as a

precedent. Given the significance of the development and its location, the design team should justify the arts and crafts proposition as part of their design rationale.

Spaces around buildings have been considered in broad terms and yet the detail for spill out spaces for communal activities, the relationship between entrance, semi-private spaces outside ground floor study rooms and the 'street' require a coherent approach. The potential for other activities at ground level within the buildings, including cycle stores, might be appropriate. There may be more opportunities to include more intimate character areas associated with active community spaces for each block and explore how the formal and informal and more natural landscape spaces interact or overlap.

The panel welcomes the aim to place meaningful buildings in a naturalistic landscape. The intention is strongly supported but the evidence is not yet clear. The approach to retaining large tree species and the inclusion of new larger specimens with appropriate space was also welcomed and encouraged. Landscape, communal activity, movement and climate mitigation are all being considered but the integration is required.

Internal site movement and disposition of access and entry points to each building is extensive but there may be an excess of options. The heart of the site and the subsidiary arrival spaces and transitional gardens appear in the analysis diagrams but are not interrogated. The spaces are insufficiently defined and not linked by features that the arts and crafts approach might include.

The proposals are well illustrated and attractive, but the panel are concerned that they may disguise what exactly is happening. The walk through was valuable and could be slowed down and stopped at times to make the point. Passing the bike store offered an unplanned reveal which needs further consideration. The main south entrance should be considered in full, it deserves more breathing space from the road. It will be the most important entrance and how it is separate from the vehicular entrance should be investigated and the hierarchy expressed. Some concerns were raised regarding the massing of the building on Clarkson Road, particularly the eastern edge.

The Madingley Road entrance is less important and more constrained for space, its relationship to the house needs further work. A close design working arrangement with that project will be necessary.

Repeating a thoroughly worked plan has obvious advantages of economy but it also needs to flex to the differing conditions on the site. The west and east boundaries are completely different in character with different demands and yet are both described as woodland edges. It was felt there were opportunities to consider the

character of the main western route more fully as a gateway to the nursery and its key links to the east was raised.

Community

The community aspirations of the project were identified in the introductory statements and brief from the client. As a high-quality property development there will be a financial imperative. It is responding to the demand for high quality student accommodation and will accommodate undergraduate students who will benefit from security, cleaning, maintenance and management. The gardens and landscaping will require maintaining to a high standard. The brief demands modern facilities with a checklist of long-term aspirations.

Aspirations are expressed in words but not a design. The panel hopes that that these will develop and enrich the proposals. St John's should ensure that the aims are delivered through an ongoing post occupancy evaluation.

The panel is strongly supportive of much of the direction taken by the proposal. The design team have worked up an exemplary presentation for the panel. The illustrations, walk through and large model were very valuable in assessing the scheme.

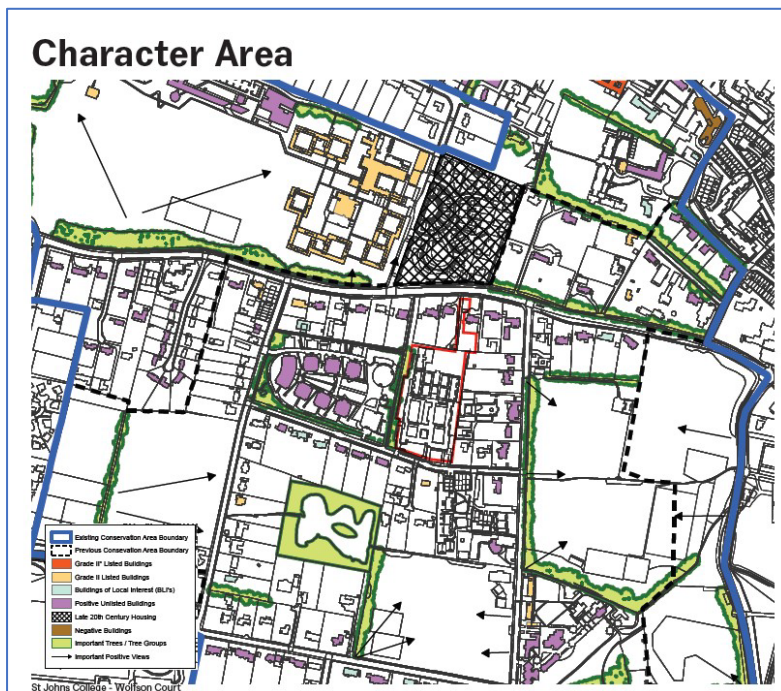
The climate and character comments are the most critical and will require fleshing out to answer concerns raised. The site offers many challenges, and the approach so far has been rigorous. There is a sense that there is far more potential and the chance to raise the design from good to exceptional.

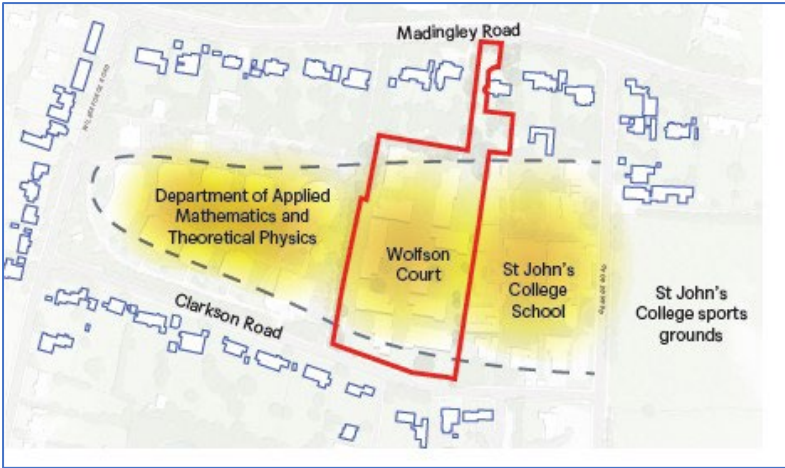


Site location plans – extracted from the applicant's DRP presentation document (May 2025)



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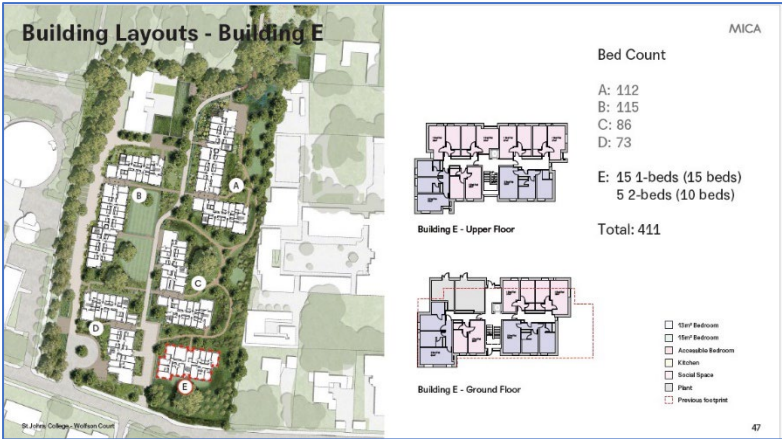
Character area assessment – extracted from the applicant's DRP presentation document (May 2025)



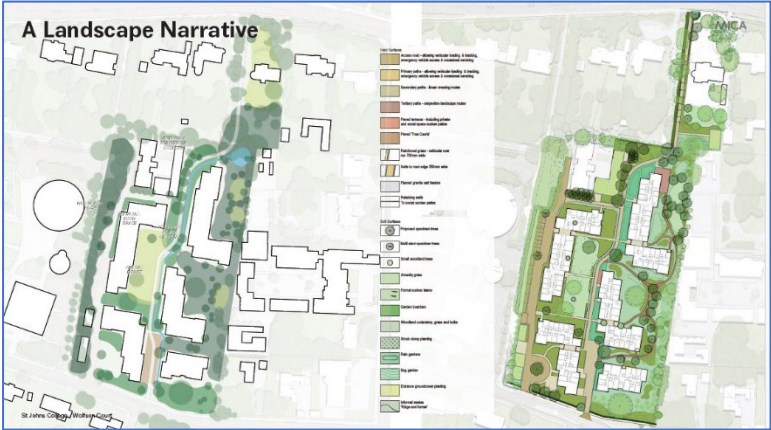
Site photos – extracted from the applicant's DRP presentation document (May 2025)



Site plan – extracted from the applicant's DRP presentation document (May 2025)



Building layout – building E – extracted from the applicant’s DRP presentation document (May 2025)



Landscape character plan – extracted from the applicant’s DRP presentation document (May 2025)



Proposed views – extracted from the applicant’s DRP presentation document (May 2025)



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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.