



Cambridgeshire Quality Panel

Cambridge North Residential Quarter

Monday 24th November 2025

Panel: Meredith Bowles (chair), Oliver Smith, Joel Gustaffson, Elanor Warwick, David Taylor and Lindsey Wilkinson

Local Authority: Cuma Ahmet (GCSP), Jonathan Brookes (GCSP), Annemarie de Boom

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

The proposed scheme will deliver a total of 425 units. The mix will comprise Build to Rent (BtR) residential dwellings, as approved at the Outline planning stage, with a proportion designated as 'affordable market rent'. In addition, the scheme will provide the Affordable homes secured through the Outline permission. There will be no open market homes within the Reserved Matters Application, and all units will be managed by Grainger.

Presenting team

The scheme is promoted by Blockwork and Platform 4 (Network Rail) and supported by Franklin Ellis Architects, Bidwells, Urban Edge, Applied Energy and Grainger. The presenting team is:

Mike Derbyshire (Bidwells), Richard Thomas (Blockwork), John Wood (Grainger)
Matthew Branton (Franklin Ellis Architecture) Joe Taylor (Franklin Ellis Architecture)
Andrew Cottage (Urban Edge), Toby King (Applied Energy)

Local authority's request

The Greater Cambridge Shared Planning Service have asked the Panel to focus on matters relating to scale and massing and courtyard articulation; social cohesion due to the reduced number of cores; apartment layouts, private amenity space and access to on-site amenities; cycle storage; overheating; and allotments as right model for Built to Rent (BTR).

Cambridgeshire Quality Panel summary

The Panel welcomed the ambition of the scheme and Grainger's management expertise on the BTR model, but raised concerns about missing floor plans, the detailed design of courtyard spaces, and the need for clearer strategies around amenity provision, circulation, and community cohesion. They emphasised that much of the scheme's success will depend on how residents use and live in the spaces between buildings and highlighted the importance of robust management for both private and public spaces.

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

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

The Panel queried the mix of affordable housing, specifically what proportion will be affordable rent and what will be Built to Rent (BTR). It would also be important to clarify whether the provision includes 2-bed 3-person or 2-bed 4-person units, as this detail is critical in determining the overall housing mix.

The presentation referenced the types of households expected to live here; however, a clearer understanding of the proportion of children yielded by the development will be essential. The Panel asked whether this analysis is being undertaken and how the location of units—for example, whether they will be on the ground floor with gardens—will be determined.

The Panel further suggested that greater clarity is needed on tenancy churn. Affordable rent households typically have an average tenure of around 11 years, whereas standard BTR schemes tend to see churn every 2 to 3 years. Understanding who the key resident groups will be is therefore vital in assessing the long-term sustainability and community impact of the scheme.

The Panel raised significant concerns regarding the single aspect flats, particularly in relation to ventilation. It was noted that 6% of the units have no private communal space, and a large proportion are provided with only Juliet balconies. The Panel also sought clarification on what proportion of units are dual aspect (35%) or have an external balcony (34%) as opposed to a Juliet balcony (64%).

This raises practical questions about where residents will be able to dry their clothes. Although the applicant explained that washer–driers would be provided, the Panel highlighted that these may not be suitable for residents in affordable units, as they can be costly to operate. This could make a real difference to the day-to-day living experience and affordability for those households.

The Panel emphasised the need for careful consideration in the allocation of lettings to ensure that single-aspect units or internal corner units are not disproportionately allocated to affordable rent households or to young professionals who may not have sufficient income to manage the associated challenges.

The Panel noted that having more than ten flats per floor within a single core raises concerns about the ability to foster neighbourly connections. In addition, there appears to be a missed opportunity in the current design, as the cores are buried so deeply that the stairs and corridors receive no natural daylight. If the cores were positioned to overlook the courtyard, residents would be more likely to use the stairs, and this could foster social interaction and lead to be community cohesion.

Full-storey walk-ups can provide significant health benefits and have been shown to work successfully in schemes such as the Kings Crescent Estate in Hackney. The amenity spaces being provided are delightful, but they need clear activation—especially if there are not yet firm plans for who will be living there. Think carefully about who will use each space and how, with defined responsibilities for programming, maintenance, and management. Ongoing organisation effective management will be essential to ensure these spaces function as intended.

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

Since the original Outline application, the area has continued to evolve, and one of the recurring challenges observed elsewhere relates to security issues associated with fencing along the busway route. While the diagram presented looks positive, the reality for a resident living in one of these flats and walking to amenities such the pharmacy is likely to be more complex than the diagram suggests.

Given the strength of cycling culture in Cambridge, it would be appropriate to consider Cambridge City parking standards, as reliance on bicycles here will be far greater than indicated in the South Cambridge Local Plan. Thinking from the perspective of the end user, it is important to push for robust cycling standards and not hold back, particularly as this is intended to be a car-free development.

For residents of affordable homes, aspects of the car-free development may raise concerns. There may be an opportunity to review the offer to future tenants to ensure that their needs are appropriately addressed.

The Panel queried the vibrancy of the proposed public spaces and raised questions about surveillance and supervision of the public realm during the day—would it feel sterile, or would it integrate as part of the town? The applicant explained that

Brookgate will deliver the commercial elements on adjacent plots, including offices and laboratories with ground-floor retail, which the Panel welcomed. However, further queries were raised as to whether the Residential Quarter adequately addresses the public realm along Milton Avenue.

The Panel encouraged continued dialogue with the Crown Estate at Cambridge Business Park and the Science Park to develop a coordinated public realm strategy that strengthens the link between Cambridge North Station and the Science Park along Cowley Road.

The isochrone diagrams presented are misleading. A simple walking diagram showing the actual routes residents would take would present a very different picture of what is genuinely accessible within a 5 or 10-minute walk.

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

The Panel noted that the landscape has received detailed approval as part of the Outline planning application. However, they understand there remains scope to vary the courtyard design. While the applicant is content with the current proposals, the Panel considers that there is still significant potential for improvement.

Questions were raised about the character and function of the internal, overlooked courtyard space: who its primary users are and how it relates to broader user groups, alongside the residents. The current approach feels inward-looking, and the space must work hard to deliver residential amenity and foster a sense of community within the building.

A deeper interrogation is therefore needed to understand the courtyard’s role—examining who uses it, when and how it is used, and the extent of Grainger’s control over its management for residents.

The masterplan requires further interrogation in relation to landscape design, particularly how the new buildings interact with the surrounding environment and, most importantly, with the courtyard. Clear external foyers should be provided so that the landscape responds directly to the entry points of the buildings. This approach could be aligned with the concept of open staircases referenced in the Community section.

Consideration should be given to garden privacy, security, and safety. The location of play areas should be carefully considered, as they may generate noise, while quieter spaces need to be provided in anticipation of high levels of footfall.

Concerns were raised about whether the trees are shown at the correct scale. It is essential to understand how vertical planting will interact with the buildings, and to ensure that spaces for both sunlight and shade are incorporated.

With limited private amenity space in many of the units, residents will need opportunities to step outside and find their own niche or corner within the shared landscape.

While the landscape design itself is not the greatest challenge, the long-term management and maintenance of these spaces is critical. The operational model must be clear: where will outdoor activities such as yoga take place, how will residents sign up for classes, and to what extent are these spaces overlooked? Understanding the management framework — including how external spaces are supervised and controlled — is fundamental. A clear balance between private and public space is essential to creating a genuine sense of community.

Ensuring good access to the Wild Park is fundamental, but it must be balanced with a robust management model to safeguard the habitat. This is especially important given that the site is not well overlooked. The challenge lies in reconciling accessibility with the need to protect and manage the natural environment, ensuring that the qualities of the Wild Park are not diminished over time. It should be clarified whether the illustrated water body will be permanently wet or will in likely be a muddy puddle for large parts of the year. Alternative approaches to the use and reuse of rainwater generated by the development could allow for an alternative approach to this area to create a more usable open space.

The Panel questioned whether the architecture was attempting to do too much, and whether this was incurring unnecessary cost. Must the height, building line, and materials all be articulated simultaneously, or is there merit in adopting a calmer approach? Where articulation is required, it may be more effective to focus on the courtyards — for example, by projecting the cores into these spaces, or by introducing articulation around private gardens to create a variety of spaces.

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

Clarification was sought regarding the location of the heat pumps. The applicant explained that they will be positioned above the tanks and will serve domestic hot water only.

The social aspects and provision of communal space are clear strengths of the scheme; however, the environmental and sustainability elements do not appear to meet the same standard and could be strengthened.

Concerns were raised about the modelling of overheating, particularly the G-value of the glazing. This is a critical factor, as the choice of glass directly affects the balance between admitting natural light and controlling solar heat gain.

The scheme proposed the use of full height glazing which can cause challenges with overheating. The lower sections of these glazed areas do little to improve daylighting but can result in significant heat gains. The Panel therefore discouraged the use of these low-level glazing areas, which they were surprised to see as such a prominent feature given the significant risks of overheating. With increasingly frequent periods of high temperatures, residents may otherwise resort to installing air conditioning or taking other desperate measures if overheating is not properly addressed. The modelling should ensure that the most accurate and up-to-date Cambridge weather data is used.

Additional consideration should also be given to the nearby sewage plant, which during periods of high pressure can produce odours. This may leave residents with the choice of keeping windows closed or tolerating unpleasant smells.

It was therefore recommended to explore the establishment of a collective management infrastructure — in whatever form that may take — while integrating measures such as external shading, already widely adopted across Europe, together with energy solutions like ambient heat loops or ducted air source heat pumps. If these steps are not taken now, cooling down systems will inevitably need to be retrofitted with the consequence of regret and expense.

Regarding water, the Panel noted that all rainfall is currently directed through two pipes into the rain garden. It was suggested that this approach could be adapted into

a viable rainwater harvesting scheme, which would help to reduce the water burden on Cambridge's infrastructure.

Specific recommendations

- Rethink the articulation of the scheme—particularly how cores project into the layout—and improving the relationship between entrances, circulation areas, and external private amenity spaces. Consider elevational treatment in relation to solar control.
- Further interrogation of the landscape is needed and re-examine courtyard design to clarify its role, how it works for different users, and its management.
- Adopt Cambridge City cycling standards to reflect strong cycling culture in Cambridge and the car-free nature of the development.
- Consider reducing the proportion of units without external amenity space and increase the number of dual-aspect dwellings to improve quality of living.
- Avoid full-height glazing, which contributes little to daylight and increases overheating risk. Optimise window design and incorporate external shading to minimise reliance on retrofits or the use portable cooling units in the future.
- If fewer elements of articulation are pursued, ensure they are replaced with a stronger and well-considered design. Any substitutions must be carefully thought through to provide genuine value and enhance the overall quality of the scheme.

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
- Applicants background note
- Presentation

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

Proposed Site Plan

