

18.10.2023

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Dear David and Wayne,

Design:Midlands Design Review Panel – Monday 9th October 2023
Design Review Land North of Leicester Road – Uppingham (Our Ref: DMDR2333)

We write following the Design Review of Land North of Leicester Road in Uppingham and would like to take this opportunity to thank you for utilising the Design:Midlands Design Review Service.

The Design:Midlands Design Review Panel members reviewing the scheme were Chris Twomey (Chair), Andrew Cameron, Fiona Heron and Phil Smith, adhering to the ten principles of Design Review. Andrew Cameron was unable to attend in person and provided written comments in advance and these were read out verbatim at the meeting.

Site Context

The site is located on the north side of Leicester Road, in Uppingham, Leicestershire. It is bounded to the north by open landscape, with the A47 and the village of Ayston beyond. A Public Right of Way (PRoW) runs alongside the allotments to the eastern site boundary, connecting the village of Ayston to Leicester Road and residential areas, to Uppingham Town Centre beyond. To the southeast corner lies a triangular parcel of unmanaged open land, which is outside the site boundary.

On the south side of Leicester Road, there is a recently completed residential development (by Bloor Homes), with family houses built around a series of small green spaces. To the west of the site, a cluster of residential properties can be found, accessed off and set back from, Leicester Road and Shepherds Way.

Key features of the site include mature trees to the northern and southern boundaries, some of which are subject to a Tree Preservation Order (TPO), established boundary hedgerows, a Saxon burial ground to the north west corner of the site and a view of the steeple of St. Mary the Virgin Church in Ayston.

Uppingham Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP)

The site is within the Uppingham Neighbourhood Development Plan area. The NDP policies for new housing development encompass design, sustainability, affordable housing, open space, parking, density, etc.; including an aspiration for new housing clusters developed around green spaces.

Design Review of Land to the north and south of Leicester Road – Uppingham

The Panel undertook a design review of the site itself and a smaller site opposite in 2018. Outline planning permission was granted in 2019 for the development of the site and access, with all other matters reserved.

The Proposed Scheme

A reserved matters application has been submitted to Rutland County Council. The scheme proposes to develop the site for 163 houses comprising 2, 3, 4 and 5 bed detached, semi detached, short terrace (3-4 units) and 1 bungalow. Of the total number of dwellings, 49 units are designated as affordable housing. Access to the site is via a new roundabout (agreed as part of the outline application) with a central north – south route through the site. Housing is arranged predominantly in perimeter blocks, with parking in front. Affordable housing is located in zones to the east and west of the site, comprising semi detached or short terraces with parking to the frontage. Open space is provided to the south of the site to the Leicester Road frontage and to the north, where an attenuation pond is located, as well as a play area (LEAP), close to the Saxon burial ground. The hedgerows to the site boundaries will be retained.

The Panel's Comments

Design Vision

The site plays an important role in the delivery of new housing in Uppingham. A strong vision which speaks of place, character and identity is crucial to achieving this. Work needs to be undertaken to develop a clear, specific vision which sets the aspirations and ambitions for the development and how the proposals meet the design principles set out in the outline masterplan. This should include connections, landscape infrastructure, character / identity, views, sustainability, etc. This would greatly assist in demonstrating how the sensitive development of the site will reflect some of the outline masterplan principles and satisfy the Uppingham NDP. The Panel suggested the Design Team seek to capture and communicate a clear and compelling 'vision' as succinctly as possible.

Uppingham

Uppingham has a special and unique character derived from its distinctive building typologies, materials, and urban grain, which the development needs to respond to, in order to strengthen its sense of identity and place.

The emphasis on what appears to be a 'highways-led' approach has resulted in a scheme which is at odds with the character of Uppingham. Opportunities should be sought to provide genuine housing typologies which reference Uppingham, specifically terraces and housing clusters which front onto and frame green spaces.

The Panel believes that careful consideration is required to ensure that street hierarchy/layout, house types and landscape design will contribute to the character and identity of the place and encouragement was given to the Design Team to pay close attention to the special character of Uppingham, including its building materials, streets, squares and open spaces.

Design Guidance

The Panel referred to current national and local guidance, in particular The National Design Guide (2020), Building for a Healthy Life (2020), Manual for Streets 2 (2010), Gear Change (2020), Uppingham Neighbourhood Development Plan (2021) and Design Guidelines for Rutland (2022) which set out the characteristics, design tools, policy context and useful precedents to create and achieve high quality places. The Design Team should utilise the above toolkits to inform and guide the proposals from the strategic to matters of detail, creating a layout designed for walking and cycling, house types which reference the local context, housing in clusters which meet the requirements of Uppingham NDP, etc. This approach will enable the provision of an integrated, connected development with a strong sense of place drawn from context. It will also assist in providing a robust rationale for the design decisions undertaken.

The wider site context

The drawings tabled were limited to the site itself, creating difficulties in appreciating the context in which the site sits, and raising questions concerning how the development will relate to its neighbours. Gaps were identified in the information provided, including an absence of a rigorous townscape analysis. The Panel suggested that the Design Team should take a step back and undertake a comprehensive analysis, including identifying pedestrian routes and desire lines, , cycle routes to and from the site, as well as sun path/orientation, key views, and the relationship of the site with adjoining sites, including newly constructed housing developments, etc.

Landscape Strategy

The site comprises a number of features including established hedgerows, mature trees, Saxon burial ground, and a long view to St. Mary the Virgin church in Ayston. How the development sits within both the immediate and wider landscape setting is important. Significant concern was expressed on the approach to landscape as something of an 'afterthought'. Landscape design and architecture are inextricably linked and in order to ensure a successful scheme, Panel members fervently believe these two elements must be considered together at the outset. The Panel strongly recommended the engagement of a landscape architect, experienced in strategic landscape design and not just planting, as an integral member of the Design Team.

The intention to create new open spaces within the development was welcomed, although the location and desirability of the spaces for residents was questioned, with the space to the north seen as somewhat peripheral for most residents and the space to the south / Leicester Road not seen as a useable / functional space. The Panel referred to the outline masterplan which comprised a series of green spaces throughout the development. Design Team members were encouraged to utilise this to inform the proposals. This includes consideration of a series of open/green spaces, each with its own identity, eg. the provision of a heart / focal space within the development to create a strong sense of place, and the inclusion of green space / mini squares, incidental spaces, etc., to add character and interest. Connections between the open spaces should also be developed to create strong, direct, green routes through the site as part of a legible and robust street hierarchy.

Reconsideration of open space provision within the development demands a comprehensive review and any proposed open / green spaces should be clearly defined in terms of their function, form and character. As proposed, the interface between the houses and the open spaces is abrupt and dominated by highways,

private drives and turning heads. Greater emphasis should be put on allowing the development to 'bleed' into its rural surroundings (as the current proposal seeks to do to some extent, at the northern boundary). This will help to blur the transition between the built and natural environments. This should also include a more sensitive approach to the Saxon burial ground, which is an important and unique feature of the site.

The approach to tree planting is sporadic with, for example the trees to the main street seemingly positioned at random? The need for a 'Tree Strategy' was highlighted to ensure a coordinated, strategic and well considered approach to tree planting. This should include a strong rationale for the siting of new trees, eg. to create focal points, aid navigation, reinforce the street hierarchy, provide shelter for pedestrians, etc., as well as details of the proposed species of trees to help reference existing trees and ensure they belong. A management policy will also need to be provided for any new trees.

The Panel considered the scheme to be missing an opportunity to respond to views from the site specifically of the church tower. Encouragement was given to physically align the primary street with this view. This approach will further assist in creating a development with a strong sense of identity, character and aid navigation.

The provision of a 'boundary strategy', with an approach for the boundaries drawn from the immediate context and character was also recommended.

Water Management

The Panel welcomed the provision of sustainable urban drainage systems (SuDS). However, a more strategic, rather than engineered approach to water management should be undertaken, with a range of measures which would be beneficial in managing water within the site but also in creating a strong sense of identity and interest within the development.

The water / drainage strategy should form part of the overall landscape ('green' & 'blue' infrastructure) for the development, with a strong emphasis on 'place-making', maximising opportunities for bio diversity, creating spaces with amenity value as well as dealing with surface water attenuation.

The Design Team was encouraged to explore opportunities for a more imaginative approach to attenuation, rather than focusing on water storage which should integrate with and enhance, the existing landscape and topography. For example, integrating the SuDS within the street patterns, eg. within the central verge, creating a visual and physical connection between housing clusters and ensuring the SuDS features are much more than drainage - SuDS which are accessible, safe and considered for their recreational as well as water management / ecological features (no barriers). Provision of water management features within the development will also reduce the extent of the attenuation pond to the northern edge of the site.

Connections, Streets and Parking

The proposals have a role to play in connecting the new community with the existing community to ensure the development is properly integrated into Uppingham. The provision of a well-connected, permeable, legible development with strong linkages is key. Concerns were expressed regarding the potential of the development to be dominated by cars and the Panel stressed the need for a development which reduces reliance on the private car and creates a place that is genuinely attractive for walking and cycling.

The proposed road layout seems to be heavily influenced by the requirements of a refuse lorry (that comes once a week) comprising numerous hammerheads and uniform / standard street widths. The layout does not reflect current design guidance, eg. Building for a Healthy Life and Manual for Streets 2. As proposed, there is real concern that all the streets will appear to be car dominated as parking is located to the front of dwellings. This will make the car 'the first choice for movement' rather than walking and cycling.

The Panel identified a range of opportunities to develop and refine the proposals. The streets are tools for 'place-making' and an identifiable street hierarchy, with clear street typologies informed by the landscape are vital to achieving this. There is a need to reconsider the design approach to the streets and how the scheme sits, contributes to, and enhances the existing movement network. This should include redesigning the north – south street which as proposed will be dominated by parked cars / hard surfaces, with little relief. Suggestions include tree planting and integrating swales into the street, along with parking such that cars do not detract from the street scene. For the smaller, side streets which are lightly trafficked, a 'shared' lane typology is encouraged. This will require less material, less cost (to build and maintain) and result in less carbon. Consideration should also be given to the provision of connected routes in the form of an 'edge lane' street typology rather than disconnected private drives - this is more in character with the countryside setting of the site.

Encouragement was also given to explore a range of parking solutions to contribute to the character of the development, for example parked cars placed to the sides or rear of properties. Mews streets or courts that are well designed i.e., have at least two access points and at least two dwellings in them to ensure there is a good degree of natural surveillance. Courts and mews do not need to be the 'last resort', they simply need to be well designed. The need to design-in features to support proven and emerging technologies, specifically car charging points, should also be considered at the design development stage.

Cycling and walking are important modes of transport, they are also sociable and healthy activity for all ages. Information is needed on the location of existing cycling and pedestrian routes; proposed cycle routes within the development; cycle parking and storage etc. The importance of designing the scheme to meet current guidance for pedestrians and cyclists is important, including mapping existing walking and cycling routes, connecting to existing infrastructure, designing the streets to accommodate cyclists and pedestrians. Suggestions include continuous pedestrian footways and junction radii which are of a human / walkable scale and not 6m radii as proposed, as these do not respond to pedestrian desire lines and will encourage speeding cars. Ensuring all homes have safe and accessible cycle storage which ideally should be at the front of dwellings (not in sheds in back gardens) to make cycling a better / easier option than the car.

Undertaking a place-based approach to the streets must include careful consideration of the number of turning heads / hammerheads. Reducing the radii or having none at all (by using tracking) will enable hard landscape squares / courtyards to be created. The spaces can be designed to accommodate car movements / parking, but also to provide attractive hard landscape spaces when empty.

While it was understood the roundabout formed part of the outline planning consent and has been agreed as part of the Uppingham NDP, the Panel questioned the appropriateness of a roundabout for the site

entrance and drew attention to the fact that Uppingham is not a place which is characterised by roundabouts.

Affordable Housing

The Panel emphasised the importance of integrating the affordable housing provision throughout the development and ensuring the design of the affordable homes is of high quality also tenure blind.

Sustainability

Attention was drawn to the importance of designing for sustainability from the outset to ensure it is an integral part of the design development process. From the information provided, it was unclear how the scheme has been designed to embrace and promote sustainability. The Panel urged the Design Team to explore all means of reducing carbon and harnessing renewable energy, including careful consideration of orientation / aspect to inform the layout.

Summary

The Panel thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposals for land north of Leicester Road. Rutland County Council officers, Uppingham Neighbourhood Planning Group members and Uppingham Town Council Councillors were also thanked for positively engaging and participating with the design review.

The outline planning permission sets an indicative framework for the new development and the Panel believes the current proposal represents a diluted version of the masterplan, with too strong an emphasis on highways and not enough consideration given to place-making and the aspirations contained within the Uppingham NDP and current design guidance / best practice. The Design Team was strongly encouraged to take a step back and undertake the following:

- Utilise the outline planning permission specifically the masterplan and design principles to inform the scheme
- Produce a succinct Vision which sets the ambitions and aspirations for the development and how the proposals will be in keeping with the character of Uppingham
- Utilise existing design tools to inform the design process specifically Building for a Healthy Life, Manual for Streets and Rutland County Council Design Guide
- Engage a landscape architect as an integral member of the design team to ensure architecture and landscape are designed collaboratively
- Produce an overarching Landscape Strategy which includes the provision of a range of open / green spaces within the development, with strong and attractive connections between them
- Consider the provision of a 'heart' / focal space within the development
- Ensure a place-making approach to the site layout, including an identifiable street hierarchy
- Strengthen the proposals for the north – south route including aligning with the view of the church spire, integrating green and blue infrastructure including tree planting and SuDS, ensuring parking does not dominate the street scene
- Ensure a sensitive and respectful approach to the Saxon burial ground

- Design for walking and cycling including connected private drives to create an 'edge lane' street type. Make provision for cycle parking to the front of dwellings
- Develop house types which reference the characteristics of Uppingham, whilst avoiding pastiche design
- Distribute affordable housing throughout the development and ensure all housing is tenure blind, and
- Design for sustainability / low carbon from the outset.

We trust that the feedback provided within this letter will prove to be of benefit to you in seeking a successful resolution and outcome for this scheme and provide an opportunity for further discussions with the determining authorities. We would be happy to provide further design advice on the project which would need to involve the Design Team and we will seek to ensure that the composition of the Panel remains the same throughout any ongoing review process.

Yours sincerely,

Dharmista Patel
Design Midlands Design Review Panel Manager

Design:Midlands Design Review adheres to the ten principles for design review as follows:

1. Independent: It is conducted by people who are separate from the scheme promoter and decision-maker, and it protects against conflicts of interest.
2. Accountable: It records and explains its advice and is transparent about potential conflicts of interest.
3. Expert: It is conducted by suitably trained people who are experienced in design and know how to criticise constructively. Review is usually most respected where it is carried out by professional peers of the project designers, as their standing and expertise will be acknowledged.
4. Advisory: It does not make decisions. It acts as a source of impartial advice for decision-makers.
5. Accessible: Its findings are clearly expressed in terms that decision-makers can understand and use.
6. Proportionate: It is used on projects whose significance warrants the public investment of providing design review at national, regional and local level, as appropriate. Other methods of appraising design quality should be used for less significant projects.
7. Timely: It takes place as early as possible in the life of a design because this saves the most time and costs less to make changes. If a planning application has already been made, it happens within the timeframe for considering it. And it is repeated when a further opinion is required.
8. Objective: It appraises schemes in the round according to reasoned, objective criteria rather than the stylistic tastes of individual panel members.
9. Focused on outcomes for people: It asks how this building or place can better meet the needs of the people using it, and of the public at large who are affected by it.
10. Focused on improving quality: It constructively seeks to improve the quality of architecture, urban design, landscape, highway design and town planning.