

Report of the North Hertfordshire Design
Review Panel

Land North of Letchworth (LG1)

07 February 2024

The design workshop

Reference number	2105/240124
Date	24th January 2024
Meeting location	Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation, One Garden City, Broadway, Letchworth GC, SG6 3BF
Panel members attending	Paul Reynolds (Chair), landscape architecture and urban design Annmarie de Boom, urban design and public realm Clare San Martin, architecture and urban design Geoff Gardner, transport planning and civil engineering Janie Price, architecture and historic environment
Panel manager	Helen Quinn, Design South East
Presenting team	David Ames, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation Prachi Rampuria, Eco Responsive Environments Peter Neal, Peter Neal Consulting Martin Hubbard, Steer
Other attendees	Soham De, Eco Responsive Environments Emma Hone, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation Alex Robinson, Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation Stephen Hill, Hyas Associates Ltd (for NHDC) Edward Leigh, North Hertfordshire District Council Holly Hawkins, North Hertfordshire District Council Joe Morrizo, North Hertfordshire District Council Lewis Reynolds, North Hertfordshire District Council Naomi Reynard, North Hertfordshire District Council Nigel Smith, North Hertfordshire District Council Anthony Collier, Hertfordshire County Council
Site visit	A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the review.
Scope of the review	As an independent design review panel the scope of this review was not restricted. However, the local authority asked us to particularly concentrate on the scheme's integration with the Grange Estate and the recreation ground, connectivity, landscape, and the success in achieving a distinct development using garden city principles.
Panel interests	Peter Neal and Stephen Hill are members of the North Hertfordshire Design Review Panel and Prachi Rampuria is a

member of Design South East’s wider expert network. This was not deemed to constitute a conflict of interest.

Confidentiality This report is confidential as the scheme is not yet the subject of a detailed planning application. Full details of our confidentiality policy can be found at the end of this report.

The proposal

Name Land North of Letchworth (LG1)

Site location Land to the north of the Grange Estate, Letchworth Garden City, Hertfordshire

Site details This is an approximately 45-hectare greenfield site located beyond the current northern edge of Letchworth, the world's first garden city. It is adjacent to the Grange residential neighbourhood and the Grange recreation ground, which is a key area of strategic open space for Letchworth. Otherwise, the site is bordered by countryside.

The Letchworth Greenway crosses the site and is bordered by hedgerows on either side, which form a strong boundary. There are several other significant hedgerows on-site.

There is a gas pipeline in the northern section of the site and an electricity power cable running through the central part of the site.

Proposal Residential development of 900 new homes, including up to 900sqm of commercial and community floorspace, two-form entry primary school, and associated open space, play areas, and landscaping, with vehicular access via Western Way and Norton Road.

Planning stage Pre-application. The client team is in the process of developing a strategic masterplan for approval by the council in 2024, before submitting a hybrid application in 2025.

Local planning authority North Hertfordshire District Council

Planning context The principle of development is accepted. The site is allocated for residential-led development under Policy SP15 of the North

Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011-2031. This policy sets out a number of site-specific considerations and criteria including the requirement for a site-wide strategic masterplan.

The allocation is within the context of Policy SP2 and Policy SP8 of the Plan, which set the overall housing requirements and spatial strategy which direct the significant majority of new development to the towns in and adjoining the district, including Letchworth. Policy SP9 sets out detailed requirements for masterplanning including overarching principles.

The site has no statutory or local built heritage designations; however, there are 32 statutorily listed buildings, 3 conservation areas, and 2 scheduled monuments within a 1km radius. Initial scoping work by Letchworth Heritage Foundation identified a number of key heritage assets, including the Letchworth Conservation Area, Croft Lane (Letchworth) Conservation Area, and Norton Conservation Area; Norton Old Manor House and adjoining barn; and No. 103 Norton Road and outbuilding. Subsequent work assessed these as having negligible to limited significance on the site.

10% Biodiversity Net Gain must be accommodated.

Planning history

None.

Planning authority perspective

The local authority finds that a genuinely landscape-led approach has informed the structure of the masterplan and welcomes the work done so far to address the scheme's integration with the Grange Estate and countryside. The council considers the scheme to be sensitive to its surroundings and setting and to provide a modern interpretation of garden city principles.

Community engagement

The Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation has undertaken extensive consultation and engagement throughout the masterplanning process to date. This has been designed with support from the council and feedback has informed the masterplanning evolution. Statutory consultees and key partners have been involved at relevant points throughout.

Summary

It is heartening that the winners of the design competition are continuing to develop and deliver this scheme – the quality of which is testament to the effective collaboration between the client, council, and design team. Continued collaboration between these parties sets up an exciting opportunity for the wider redevelopment of the Grange Estate and recreation ground, which would extend the benefits of this project to the established community and allow for much more successful integration between the two sites.

We do not consider that any of the presented masterplan options represent the optimum layout for this site, and are concerned that masterplanning decisions are being driven by the location of the new school, which may or may not be delivered. Urgent clarification is needed on this key issue in order to move forward successfully with the masterplanning process.

We would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again once the panel's recommendations have been taken into consideration and ahead of a planning submission.

Key recommendations

1. In discussion with the District and County Councils, establish whether the required provision for education use will be delivered through a new primary school or through the intensification of existing local school sites.
2. Work with the District Council to deliver a wider integrated plan for the redevelopment of Pelican Way and the Grange recreation ground as part of this project.
3. Explore opportunities for community funding to deliver initiatives supporting small businesses as part of the development's identity and legacy.
4. Ensure that key aspects that characterise the project vision – such as bus provision, flexible car parking, identified views, the peripheral green belt, and sustainability targets – are embedded into the masterplan to ensure their delivery.
5. Co-locate multi-functional non-residential units with attractive public space along the northern edge of the recreation ground to improve its setting and to encourage inter-community movement along the new pedestrian/cycle link.
6. Explore opportunities for additional active travel links between the Grange Estate and the new development, potentially through the purchase of private land.

7. Continue to test options for the configuration of the primary vehicular route, considering the site's topography and the intended character of this road.
8. Consider a more 'Letchworth' character to the main vehicular road and prioritise taller buildings and continuous frontage to the recreation ground.

Detailed comments and recommendations


1. Masterplan options

- 1.1. We are not convinced that any of the presented masterplan options represent the best potential arrangement for this scheme. In addition, we believe that the educational requirement of this allocation would be best met through the intensification of existing schools, rather than through the delivery of a new school on this site.
- 1.2. Given the uncertainty over whether a primary school will be delivered as part of this scheme, it seems inappropriate that major masterplanning decisions – including the structuring of key routes – are being made in reference to its potential location. For example, in the preferred option, the key desire line running diagonally from the south-west corner of the recreation ground to the northernmost corner of the site appears to have been lost as a result of the school's location.
- 1.3. Another key concern with regards to the preferred option is that the configuration of the primary street appears to limit opportunities for south-facing open space, resulting in a lack of attractive public space for social integration at the heart of the scheme.
- 1.4. In order to move forward with a preferred masterplan option, clarity is required on the need for a school, the potential for a link across the Grange recreation ground, the location of a new 'local centre', and the timing of the redevelopment of Pelican Way. In negotiating these key elements, the client and council should consider how they could be phased to deliver an integrated plan for the Grange Estate and new development to strengthen the shared community infrastructure.



2. Design strategy

- 2.1. Structuring the scheme around the site's natural green infrastructure is a very positive starting point. Given that the site's main asset is its landscape offer, which is best experienced at the edges of the site, we suggest that the design team explore layout options that create social function and activity along the site's 'inner' edges and focus the 'outer' edges on enjoyment of the surrounding landscape and views.

- 2.2. We are in agreement with the client and council teams that the existing condition of houses backing onto the recreation ground does not create a positive frontage to the open space. However, we are concerned that the green buffers proposed to the remaining three edges of the recreation ground could create a similar sense of separation to the new development. In order to avoid this, the design team must carefully consider the design of these green edges to appear as an extension to the recreation ground, which could in turn allow this space to read as a village green at the heart of the two communities.
- 2.3. Given that viable retail use for a development of this size is likely to comprise only one or two units, reference to a 'local centre' could be misleading; however, this should still form an attractive and important part of the scheme. Given the uncertainty regarding the quantum and nature of the non-residential elements, it could be helpful to start with the design of an attractive public space or square which would activate the edge of the recreation ground and allow flexibility for the scheme to develop around it as more certainty about uses is given.
- 2.4. Creating an active edge to the recreation ground is a key opportunity to promote integration between the Grange Estate and the new development. An attractor is needed on the northern edge to encourage movement across the recreation ground, provide opportunity for social integration, and to improve the nature of this open space. The residential frontage proposed here is not sufficient to achieve this; rather, a new pavilion or destination – designed to enhance the setting of the recreation ground without threatening its community function – should be considered.
- 2.5. It is peculiar that the non-residential uses and the series of special moments or 'nodal points' marked on the masterplan are located along the primary vehicular link (and away from key landscape features), given the aspiration for modal shift away from car use. Considering the importance of the pedestrian/cycle route across the recreation ground to the Grange Estate, it would be logical to focus the 'neighbourhood hub' here to encourage primary movement along this link.
- 2.6. In addition to co-locating the non-residential elements of the scheme with attractive public space, the design team should seek to strengthen the 'local centre' by ensuring that buildings such as the school (if delivered) and senior living accommodation are multi-purpose in providing additional facilities to the public.
- 2.7. In designing a main vehicular route with low traffic speeds and a character that complements that of the proposal, the option of running the main vehicular route along the northern edge of the recreation ground could be re-considered. The design team should explore precedents of similar configurations and test how this could free up the northern part of the site and potentially create a more welcoming edge to the recreation ground by aiding access for the community.

- 2.8. An additional pedestrian/cycle route linking the new development with the Grange Estate would be beneficial in encouraging movement and integration between the two communities. The client team should explore options such as working with Settle to redevelop the stacked maisonettes on Western Way or purchasing privately-owned houses in order to create this new connection. 

3. Transport and movement

- 3.1. We support the client's intention for modal shift towards more sustainable transport options and welcome the work that has been done so far to explore regular bus access to the new development and flexible car parking strategies that respond to demand. We strongly encourage the client to commit to the delivery of these aspirations by embedding them into their masterplan framework. Providing residents with free membership of an on-site car club could also help as a step-change towards this modal shift.
- 3.2. We find it unlikely that the primary street will be used as a 'rat-run' to the A1; however, its intended purpose should be reinforced through its design. We recommend that the transport planner works around a street width set by the architects and urban designers, and that a separate cycle route is provided to limit the width of the vehicular road. All vehicular routes within the site - including the primary street - should be restricted to 20mph.
- 3.3. Given that Norton Road will be declassified to a 50mph speed limit, the design team should re-evaluate whether the proposed main vehicular access could join the existing road at a point slightly more to the east where there is a gap in the existing hedgerow. This could potentially allow for a reduction in the amount of ecological habitat removed to achieve adequate visibility splay. 
- 3.4. The design and alignment of the access road should be reviewed in relation to the site's existing topography. Where roads run diagonally across a slope, significant engineering work is required to achieve level road surfaces - in a 'standalone' road such as this, this may be very impactful on the landscape. Aligning a road to either follow or be at right angles to contour lines would allow for minimal engineering and landscape impact.
- 3.5. It is commendable that the scheme addresses the existing network of rural footpaths; however, the importance of the greenway and the national cycle route (NCN12) appears overstated - these appear to be primarily used for recreation, rather than as transport routes. 
- 3.6. Given the topography of the site, the provision of electric bikes can make cycling much more appropriate and accessible, as evidenced by their popularity in the hillier areas of outer Oxford.

- 3.7. The cycle route crossing Norton Road should be carefully considered and designed to ensure the safety and comfort of users.

4. Heritage and views

- 4.1. We do not believe that the proposal will impact heritage assets in the area; however, it would be interesting to express aspects of the site's history and archaeology as part of the scheme design.
- 4.2. The design team have identified some attractive views from the site and have indicated from where in the development these can be enjoyed. The design team should conduct a study of the extent, angles, and any flexibility of these views and formalise them in the masterplan to ensure their eventual delivery.
- 4.3. It would be positive if the view towards Fairfield Hospital could be drawn in further so that it could be enjoyed from within the development, rather than only from the edge of the site.

5. Facilities and community infrastructure

- 5.1. The question of whether a new school will be delivered as part of this scheme is key to the success of the project and to the integration with the Grange Estate – clarification must be provided as soon as possible. Should the existing schools have room to grow and be redeveloped in their existing locations, we believe this to be a better option than trying to fit a new school into the application site.
- 5.2. There is limited opportunity for physical links between the Grange Estate and the proposed development, so integration between the two communities should instead be achieved through shared facilities. For example, rather than providing a new school, children from the new community could attend the Grange Academy, while residents from the existing community – as well as those coming from further afield to use the recreation ground or greenway routes – could enjoy recreational facilities delivered as part of the new development. The Locally Equipped Area for Play (LEAP) proposed in the east of the site could be moved further south for better integration with the recreation ground and greater proximity to the Grange Estate, to encourage use by the established community here.

- 5.3. We generally support the proposal for a pedestrian/cycle route directly linking the new development with the Grange Estate. However, whilst cutting directly through the middle of the recreation ground is an obvious access route, it could be challenging to design the path to accommodate intensive use without significant disruption to the pitches. A wider strategy that seeks to upgrade and rethink the function and layout of the recreation ground – for example by re-providing pitches within the new development if required – should be explored by the design team in discussion with the council.
- 5.4. The development should establish the Grange recreation ground as the geographical and functional heart of the two communities. This fundamental shift in purpose should be supported by a design that makes the recreation ground a welcoming space for all throughout the week. Re-designing the recreation ground in collaboration with the council could allow for more varied use of the existing open space beyond dog-walking and football; offer an opportunity to address persistent flooding issues by restoring the old drainage patterns for this part of the site; and create a much more biodiverse landscape, perhaps incorporating woodland play. Exploring the site’s history and archaeology could reveal a past identity to the recreation ground that could be restored as part of its redevelopment.
- 5.5. The aspiration for the final scheme should be for each block or group of homes to offer something special that collectively contributes to a modern interpretation of the garden city. Whilst this is a residential-led development, this could be achieved by including aspects of community infrastructure such as shared gardens, spaces for co-working for working from home, or the ability for houses to be converted to retail use in response to demand. More detailed testing of the development blocks is required to ensure that such aspirations are deliverable, and to identify where greater flexibility may be needed in terms of configuring building fronts and backs.
- 5.6. The Heritage Fund’s position as landowner and their vision to expand the legacy of the garden city sets out an exciting opportunity wherein community funding could be used in creative ways to provide benefits rarely seen in developments of this size. For example, the ‘local centre’ could include spaces for artists, creators, or entrepreneurs to use for free or at reduced cost as an initiative to support small local businesses. These could be located above retail units occupied by established local companies to further strengthen community integration and to increase the impact and vibrancy of the ‘local centre’.



6. Character and identity

- 6.1. Generally, the proposed character zones appear promising; however, in order to refine these further, the design team should consider how the residents of each house will experience the site and whether they would identify as living in an urban, suburban, or countryside part of the development. More consideration is also needed for how aesthetic character will vary within these broader areas – for example, how dwellings along the northern edge of the site should differ from those along the western edge, despite both having height, density, and typology consistent with the ‘countryside living’ character area.
- 6.2. A distinct identity is required for the setting of the recreation ground. The design team should develop a strong vision for the relationship between the open space and the new built form, including a new name for the recreation ground. The nature of this relationship should be tested, refined, and expressed through a drawing of the view across the recreation ground, as with those shown of the neighbourhood hub, residential streets, linear park, and countryside buffer.
- 6.3. The drawing of the ‘local centre’ does not evoke the sense of somewhere in Letchworth, where main streets are defined more by their green verges and trees than by the height and continuity of their frontage. Locating the taller buildings onto the recreation ground would create a more locally appropriate character along the main street and would allow building heights to step up with the natural topography, ameliorating views into the site.
- 6.4. The character of the main vehicular road will contribute significantly to that of the development, so its material treatment and associated landscaping should be carefully considered. Ideally, kerb height would be minimised to create a sense of the road gently edging out into the landscape. In order to minimise the need for significant engineering in its implementation and ensure a softer impact, the route should be configured to work as much as possible with the existing topography of the site, and provision for pedestrians should be provided separately.
- 6.5. The site sections show an abrupt change between the tall blocks lining the main street and the low-scale blocks toward the edge of the site, suggesting an attempt to achieve too much differentiation of built form in such a small area.

7. Sustainable design

- 7.1. We support the landscape-led soft edge to the development, which provides biodiversity enhancement and flood defence as well as being an attractive setting for the homes that overlook it. We encourage the design team to ensure that this edge is not eroded through further development and delivery of the scheme.

- 7.2. The opportunity to grow food locally should be embedded in the scheme – both in reference to the heritage of the garden city movement, and as a way to contribute to the scheme’s sustainable legacy.
- 7.3. The configuration of the development blocks and streets in the west of the site could be reconsidered in order to achieve more homes with a southerly orientation to benefit from passive solar gain.
- 7.4. The detailed design of the built form must ensure that sustainable technologies such as solar panels and heat pumps can be accommodated in a sensitive manner that will not negatively impact the streetscape.
- 7.5. The sustainability targets for water, energy, and carbon should aim higher than those required by government policy, which are insufficient to address the climate crisis. These targets must be embedded in the brief so that a future development partner is required to meet them.
- 7.6. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in further detail at this review. The standing advice from Design South East is that at a subsequent design review and at planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear strategy that details how the development will minimise embodied, operational, and transport-related carbon emissions, and optimise the use of renewable energy to align with the Government’s legal commitment to Net Zero Carbon by 2050. The proposal should demonstrate its compliance to a respected zero carbon pathway, for example the UKGBC Net Zero Whole Life Carbon Roadmap for the Built Environment. The sustainability strategy should be tied to measurable targets and detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods (as applicable), and also address water use, biodiversity net gain, waste reduction and circular economy principles.

8. Testing, phasing, and delivery

- 8.1. Despite the early stage of the project, we recommend that the design team begin to test the proposed road widths and block depths found in each character area to ensure that they are deep enough to accommodate the proposed building typologies and parking solutions whilst also ensuring sufficient room for landscape, including any verges or tree planting. Likewise, whilst we support the undulating form of the development edge, the block depths of the resulting ‘pinch points’ should be tested to ensure that frontage can be achieved to both the peripheral green belt and to the main street.

- 8.2. In order to achieve the proposed housing quantum and a hedge-fronted 'garden city' character, it is likely that shallow housing typologies will be required in order to accommodate on-plot parking. Whilst these parameters will require a degree of flexibility, the design team should be proactive in testing prospective housebuilder's standard typologies to ensure that the design vision can be delivered.
- 8.3. If the outline application is submitted in partnership with a master developer, with reserved matters schemes subsequently delivered by housebuilders, there is the potential for issues to arise in terms of the flexibility of the outline proposal. The Heritage Foundation should ensure that they are able to maintain sufficient control over the project to avoid such conflicts in the future, should this path be taken. The potential use of a robust design code may be worth exploring to ensure that the overall vision is delivered, along with looking at locations that have successfully delivered using similar models, such as Newhall in Harlow.

9. Materials and detailing

- 9.1. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in detail at this review. Paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2023) states: *'Local planning authorities should seek to ensure that the quality of approved development is not materially diminished between permission and completion, as a result of changes being made to the permitted scheme (for example through changes to approved details such as the materials used).'*
- 9.2. In order to be consistent with this national policy, the applicant team and local authority should note Design South East's general guidance on material quality and detail. At planning application stage, the quality of the detailing should be demonstrated through large scale drawings at 1:20 and 1:5 of key elements of the building/landscape and should be accompanied by actual material samples which should be secured by condition as part of any planning approval.

This report is a synthesis of the panel's discussion during the review and does not relate to any discussions that may have taken place outside of this design review meeting. A draft report is reviewed by all panel members and the chair ahead of issuing the final version, to ensure key points and the panel's overarching recommendations are accurately reported.

The report does not minute the proceedings but aims to provide a summary of the panel's recommendations and guidance.

Confidentiality

If the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the panel, this report is offered in confidence to those who attended the review meeting. There is no objection to the report being shared within the recipients' organisations provided that the content of the report is treated in the strictest confidence. Neither the content of the report, nor the report itself can be shared with anyone outside the recipients' organisations. Design South East reserves the right to make the content of this report known should the views contained in this report be made public in whole or in part (either accurately or inaccurately). Unless previously agreed, pre-application reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject

of a planning application or public inquiry. Design South East also reserves the right to make this report available to another design review panel should the scheme go before them. If you do not require this report to be kept confidential, please inform us.

If the scheme is the subject of a planning application the report will be made publicly available, and we expect the local authority to include it in the case documents.

Role of design review

This is the report of a design review panel or workshop. Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of a number of considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority. We will try to make sure that the panel are informed about the views of local residents and businesses to inform their understanding of the context of the proposal. However, design review is a separate process to community engagement and consultation.

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