

Report of the North Hertfordshire Design
Review Panel

Land North of Stevenage

23 February 2023

The design review meeting

Reference number	1973/090223
Date	9th February 2023
Meeting location	North Herts Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City SG6 3JF
Panel/forum members attending	Paul Reynolds (chair), landscape architecture and urban design Andrew Cameron, urban design and transport planning Ione Braddick, urban design, architecture, and planning Janie Price, architecture and historic environment Stephen Hill, masterplanning and planning
Panel manager	Helen Quinn, Design South East
Presenting team	Barry Williams, Barton Willmore, now Stantec Paul Derry, Barton Willmore, now Stantec Tom Brickell, Nicholas Pearson Architects
Other attendees	Tadas Salkauskas, Barton Willmore, now Stantec Richard Kelly, Croudace Homes Ian Bryant, Transport Planning Associates (TPA) Helen Flage, North Hertfordshire District Council Holly Rawlins, North Hertfordshire District Council Nigel Smith, North Hertfordshire District Council Shaun Greaves, North Hertfordshire District Council Helen Goodwin, Design South East
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: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• the green corridor and transition space/gateway to the country park;• vehicular and active travel routes which cut across the green corridor;• the block structure, open space configuration and street layout along the interface between the North Herts site and Stevenage site;• the design and integration of the block structure of the school and local centre with the green space network and street layout.

Panel interests	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts 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 Stevenage
Site location	Land to the east of North Road
Site details	The site is an approximately 43-hectare greenfield site located beyond the current northern edge of Stevenage, a Mark I New Town. It consists of one large field in arable use bisected and bordered by rights of way. Graveley village (a conservation area) lies to the north. There are a number of heritage assets and ecological features bordering the site or in the near vicinity. The site rises broadly from west to east with the highest ground at the north-east affording views across Graveley and the surrounding countryside.
Proposal	Outline Planning for up to 900 dwellings, a 2FE primary school, and community facilities.
Planning stage	Pre-application. A submission for outline planning permission is targeted for summer 2023.
Local planning authority	North Hertfordshire District Council (NHDC)
Planning context	<p>The site is allocated for residential-led development under Policy SP16 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 masterplan.</p> <p>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 Stevenage. Policy SP9 sets out detailed requirements for masterplanning including overarching principles.</p> <p>There are no heritage assets within the site, but it is within the setting of a number of existing and proposed assets. The applicant stated that a</p>

	<p>heritage impact assessment is in progress but was not yet available for comment.</p>
Planning history	N/A
Planning authority perspective	<p>The LPA is broadly supportive of the work undertaken to date and largely content with the emerging structural layout and disposition of land uses, movement strategy and green infrastructure network.</p> <p>Further design resolution and development is required to identify clear design principles for green spaces, habitats, landscape, built form, street character, architectural character, and principles that reflect local character (for example, Graveley village).</p> <p>The masterplan work is largely underpinned by an appropriate evidence base, although the LPA consider some additional detail is required, in particular regarding landscape and townscape analysis, ecology and biodiversity net gain.</p> <p>The LPA has worked with the landowner to try and secure appropriate engagement with Stevenage Borough Council (SBC) and the applicant for the adjoining HO3 site. This has had some success, however, there has not been an ongoing, constructive dialogue and this may present some challenges along the interface between the two schemes and ensuring the sites are ultimately experienced as a coherent whole.</p>
Community engagement	<p>Public engagement is due to be undertaken on the draft strategic masterplan during February/March 2023. There has been informal engagement with Graveley Parish Council to explain the process, aims and timeline.</p>

Summary

We are pleased to engage with the applicant and local authority on this project at an early stage in the design process. It is unfortunate that the attempts by NHDC to foster collaborative working and develop a joint masterplan with the adjoining site in Stevenage to enable the two sites to be experienced as one place have been largely unsuccessful.

The proposed masterplan framework is promising but the project vision does not yet deliver on the aspirations regarding sustainability, character and a high-quality green infrastructure network. Further work is required to ensure the development integrates successfully into a complex setting and responds appropriately to its location adjacent to the village of Graveley, close to Stevenage town centre and the emerging development to the south, and with open countryside to the east.

We encourage the applicant and council to continue to work together to address the comments and recommendations set out in this report.

Key recommendations

1. Continue to attempt developer-to-developer talks with Miller and Bellway Homes to ascertain if any possibility remains for a joint design approach along the edge between the two sites. If further collaboration is not possible, consider the Stevenage site a fixed constraint that will require a sensitive response to edges, frontages, and connections.
2. Undertake meaningful public consultation to understand what the scheme can provide for the wider communities of Graveley and Stevenage and improve integration with existing neighbourhoods.
3. Deliver the sustainable vision described by committing to higher sustainability targets such as BREEAM Communities and LETI, alongside sustainable design principles such as optimising building orientation and the prioritisation of active travel modes.
4. Reconsider the movement framework to ensure primary streets are simplified to read as such, and the village core is better connected to the rest of the proposal. Begin to develop detailed proposals in section, defining how the character of each street type will impact green spaces and built form and carefully considering areas of transition (for example from built form to green space; streets to green space).
5. Continue to develop the green infrastructure framework of functional routes and connections. Establish a clear hierarchy and function for green spaces, together with a set of design principles that will clarify the character of these spaces and allow for an informed built response within each character area.

6. Carefully analyse the character and morphology of Graveley and the surrounding countryside to ensure the development edge responds sensitively to its surroundings, particularly in its relationship to (and separation from) the village, to better inform the character areas across the development.

Detailed comments and recommendations

1. Project vision

- 1.1. The proposed urban design framework for the site shows promise at this stage, but further contextual analysis of Graveley - including its history, morphology, and landscape setting - is required to inform the project vision and drive the development of a unique and distinctive character for the scheme. This may relate to the site's topography, key views (in and out), countryside setting, and its relationship to Graveley and Stevenage. This is all important to its character identity (urban/suburban/village) and will inform the design principles required for the next stage of design development.

2. Sustainable design

- 2.1. Given the emphasis on words such as "sustainable" and "low carbon" when describing the project vision, it is disappointing to see a 'business-as-usual' approach to the sustainability strategy, which only aspires to meet policy minimums. Due to the processes required within local government, sustainability policy documents often represent the lowest common denominator in terms of acceptability, and lag behind what is needed to adequately respond to the current climate emergency.
- 2.2. By aiming to exceed the requirements of local policy, the applicant team could deliver an exemplar precedent that may set the bar for future developments and policy-setting. Considering a higher aspiration of sustainability goals at the masterplan level also demonstrates commitment and can therefore give the council more certainty of the quality of development that will be delivered.
- 2.3. The applicant team should target higher sustainability standards such as those set by BREEAM Communities and LETI, in addition to carefully considering sustainable principles of development such as the orientation of buildings and ensuring walkable neighbourhoods.

2.4. 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.

3. Strategic context

3.1. We are concerned that a lack of communication between the stakeholders of the North Hertfordshire site and the Stevenage site will lead to the creation of two very separate places that lack any meaningful connectivity. Ideally, a masterplan including both sites would have been developed to ensure interconnectivity of routes and green infrastructure.

3.2. We appreciate that a great deal of effort has been put into attempting to foster joint conversations between the two sites, particularly between North Hertfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council. Given that a lack of integration will reduce the value of spaces on both sites, it is within the interests of both developers to further push these conversations. However, we accept that it may now be too late to resolve this issue.

3.3. If further collaboration between parties is not possible, the applicant team must now consider the Miller-Bellway site as a fixed constraint and decide how they will respond positively to it – for example, how to design the main movement route entering from the south so that it reads as one street across both sites. The back-to-back and front-to-back relationships between buildings is also important to address, and we suggest indicating primary routes and frontages from the Miller-Bellway site on the 'Urban Design Framework' diagram, to help build a clearer picture of the wider context and better understand the constraints and opportunities for response.

4. Wider context and connections

4.1. Key destinations and attractors such as the school, community centre and mobility hub should be identified on each site in order to explore how residents of each will travel to local centres and facilities in the adjoining site, especially employment areas. A 'zoomed-out' drawing would also help to better clarify and describe vehicular and active travel routes into Graveley, Great Ashby, and Stevenage to ensure the site is well-connected and integrated into its wider context.

- 4.2. Greater understanding of the Miller-Bellway development will come as proposals are approved through the planning process, however the design team should not assume the Stevenage development will set up attractive views or provide adequate active frontage for areas of open space such as the square proposed to the south of the community hub. This might be better moved north so it can be fronted by the school and the central green space to the east, giving greater assurance to its frontage than if it is positioned overlooking the connecting edge between the two sites. Similar consideration should be given to the open space proposed in the south-west of the site, overlooking the Miller-Bellway A1 plot.
 - 4.3. The community hub proposals have not yet been developed but could be an exciting feature offering public services and facilities (for example, co-working spaces, shared facilities between school and public) to the local communities of Graveley and Stevenage. We encourage the applicant team to engage in a thorough public consultation programme including existing and future residents of both places, parish councils, and the Friends of Forster County to understand the needs and desires of the community and improve the integration of the proposal.
5. Movement strategy and street hierarchy
- 5.1. The project aspirations in terms of sustainable movement are disappointing, quoting a parking strategy of 2-3 spaces per home and a half-hourly bus service. This does not appear to match the project vision, which claims to prioritise active travel modes. Whilst we appreciate the challenging nature of an out-of-town location, we would hope for greater ambitions for reducing reliance on the car, particularly given that a mobility hub forms part of the proposal.
 - 5.2. It is positive that street hierarchy has been considered at this early stage, however further refinement is required. For example, the main route into the development (from the Stevenage site to the south) is weaving and indirect, requiring several turns before arriving at the main street. Primary roads should aim for the longest line lengths possible in order to be readable as a main route, with the number of turns limited as far as possible within the constraints of the site.
 - 5.3. The mobility hub requires further definition and could include car club spaces to encourage sharing economies above private ownership and potentially reduce the number of parking spaces required on site. Another option would be to reduce the 'default' number of car parking spaces per house and allow for rentable spaces (perhaps with the developer as freeholder) if additional cars are desired. While a car-free development is unlikely to be viable in this location, we encourage the applicant team to experiment with alternative solutions.

- 5.4. The intent for on-plot car parking to be located behind the building line is positive, as this ensures cars will not dominate the street and demotes them as a secondary choice for movement. We encourage the team to use reference images that reflect this intent. Other street and parking typologies such as mews lanes and courtyards could also be considered.
- 5.5. For local journeys (to Stevenage town centre, for example), the proposal to include a fleet of e-bikes is commendable. We also encourage the applicant team to pursue a higher-frequency bus service, which could potentially take the form of an on-demand service.
- 5.6. The drawings do not yet indicate where bikes will be stored and parked in houses and on streets – for example, porches could include specially designed slots for bike storage. These are critical details to consider in order to ensure active travel is an agenda priority. Locating cycle parking in a shed in the back garden is not an acceptable approach.
- 5.7. Given that the central green corridor must be crossed by a vehicular route, a second crossing could be introduced to split the traffic load, better connect the village core back to the centre of the scheme, and bring more life and activity to the park space. The treatment of these crossings should be carefully considered to preserve the rural character of this part of the site, and enough width should be granted between building lines at the crossing points to ensure the park maintains its sense of open greenness.
- 5.8. The use of private drives within neighbourhood blocks removes the opportunity for continuous, well-overlooked edge lanes which could prioritise active travel modes. The design team should explore how these routes may be integrated into the movement framework.
- 5.9. It is positive to see street trees proposed, but further details on species, soil volume, and utilities locations are required to ensure they are delivered as intended. Cross sections and plans indicating junctions and the space required for an adequate visibility splay (a 20 mile-per-hour limit will reduce the space needed) should be drawn up as early as possible.
- 5.10. The use of multi-functional routes needs further exploration and clarification - for example, the potential to include SuDS features and cycle ways alongside vehicular routes.

6. Green infrastructure

- 6.1. More information is required around where and how biodiversity will be conserved, improved, and enhanced to achieve a 10% biodiversity net gain. This may be more readily achieved by expanding the green infrastructure network to include green 'fingers' that protrude into the centre of the development – some of which may provide green travel routes to access central parcels or may be protected as habitat for wildlife. Weaving a greater variety of green routes and corridors throughout the scheme may begin to inform the different characters areas within the site.
- 6.2. It is positive to see so much green space allocated on the masterplan, but the character and function of these spaces is unclear at this stage. The strategic green infrastructure has the potential to be a fantastic asset for existing and future residents alike and careful consideration is required of how it can function and accommodate a range of active and interesting uses, including enhancing biodiversity. The team must also demonstrate that consideration has been given to how these large areas are effectively managed and maintained as a community asset.
- 6.3. The green 'corridors' that make up the green infrastructure strategy may not work as effectively in reality as they do on plan. For example, the north-south route towards Graveley Cricket Club is interrupted by a ditch, fence, and private garden. There also appears to be no clear destination for many of the routes running along the edges of the site – these could provide an opportunity for better active movement connections to the surroundings, together with new active leisure circuits.
- 6.4. While the central route running east-west along the Hertfordshire Way leads to an existing footpath and has a clear logic, more attention must be paid to where this route meets the proposed country park to the south (within the Miller-Bellway development). This is a potential gateway to the development as well as a critical transitioning point, and it is currently unclear how such a large space will function. Opportunities such as key views to the south, potential for structural landscaping to frame views, integration of movement routes, and accommodation for play are all worthy of consideration to give this space function and prominence within the scheme.
- 6.5. The design team must demonstrate how green routes will positively connect with development blocks and assess these routes from a human scale perspective to ensure they make sense in terms of legibility and wayfinding. To ensure better integration with the site's setting, discussions with neighbours should take place to establish how the development will connect into destinations such as the cricket grounds and the country park.

6.6. The natural topography of the site is somewhat challenging but creates interest and pleasant long views out of the site. The proposal should work with the site's contours and embrace the natural setting, rather than using retaining walls. Both natural topography and made ground from cut and fill can add character to areas of public realm, outdoor play, and active travel routes, weaving additional interest through the site.

7. Character areas and built form

7.1. An underlying set of principles based on the green infrastructure framework and movement strategy must be developed in order to inform the character of each area and the design response required. For example, the external green buffers and boundary treatments will be crucial in defining the character of the 'countryside edge' and allowing it to appropriately respond in a way that maximises views, integrates with the rural land beyond the site, and encourages nature enhancement. Likewise, only when the character and function of the central park is understood and developed can the 'park edge' of the urban and village core begin to respond to this space. This could help to develop a sense of community for each character area.

7.2. The differentiation between the village core and urban core seems logical given the noise from the A1 and views towards Stevenage in the west of the site, versus the more rural, quiet east of the site. The change in character as experienced along the spine road will likely be in terms of density, building heights, and materiality. The spine road itself – including whether it will primarily be used by private cars, public transport, or active travel modes – will also impact the relative character of each core area.

7.3. We question the need for the North Road gateway to be differentiated from the rest of the urban core; overall, the number of proposed character areas could be rationalised and reduced as they currently appear overly complicated.

7.4. Given that the character on either side of North Road is predominantly rural, declaring the development's presence on North Road will create a significant impact on the setting of Graveley. We therefore urge the design team to further analyse the character and morphology of the village before deciding how to respond appropriately along this edge of the site. If a 'gateway' is intended, this should be made clear in the project vision, but alternative options should be considered.

7.5. When choosing precedent images that describe the intended built form, the applicant team should ensure they accurately reflect details such as the proposed boundary treatments and car parking strategy, to effectively evoke the desired character outcome.

8. Materials and detailing

- 8.1. The approach to materials and detailing was not discussed in great detail at this review. Paragraph 135 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2021) 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).'*
- 8.2. 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, forum 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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