

East of Luton Strategic Masterplan Design Review Panel Report

Date of Meeting	21 st July 2023
Meeting location	North Herts Council Offices, Gernon Road, Letchworth Garden City SG6 3JF
Panel/forum members attending	Steve Hill (chair), masterplanning and planning Paul Reynolds, landscape architecture and urban design Jonathan Spruce, urban design, transport and movement Sue Hooton, Ecology, landscape Paul Evans, urban design, character and distinction, architecture, Julian Pye, masterplanning and planning
Presenting team	Jonathan Dixon, Savills (TCE) Chris Odgers, Savills (TCE) Peter Widdrington, EDP (TCE) Brett Coles, FPCR, (Bloor Homes) Elizabeth Fry, FPCR (BH) Simon Parfitt, DTA (BH) Andrew Ward, Vectos/SLR (TCE)
Other attendees	James Bird, EDP Kerry Whitehouse, Wardell Armstrong Charlotte Cunningham, TCE Jade Barrett, Savills David Joseph, BH Derek Bromley, Bidwells Nigel Smith, NHDC Sam Dicocco, NHDC Jason Wooliscroft, BH Peter Blake, Savills Tadas Salkauskas, Barton Willmore, now Stantec
Site visit	A site visit was conducted by the panel members prior to the review.

Scope of the review	<p>The scope of this review was not restricted. However, both the site promoters and the local authority asked us to consider the following matters:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The soundness of the overall concept • The evolution of the masterplan • How to differentiate different parts of the scheme • Character areas and distinctiveness • The location of the local centre and the schools • The interface with existing settlements (Luton, Cockernhoe etc) • The interface with existing green infrastructure • The Green Infrastructure framework • How to achieve a high-quality, sustainable place • Active travel priorities/ connectivity and movement, including public transport
Panel interests	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts of interest
Confidentiality	This report should be treated as confidential as the masterplan is not yet the subject of public consultation.

The Proposal

Name	East of Luton Site Wide Masterplan
Site location	Land immediately to the east of the existing urban edge of Luton borough, south of the villages of Cockernhoe and Mangrove Green.
Site details	<p>The site is an approximately 129 hectare greenfield site, located beyond the current eastern edge of Luton. It consists of a number of fields in arable use, existing mature woodland, bisected and bordered by rights of way and contained by existing hedgerows, particularly east of Luton Road. The settlements of Cockernhoe and Mangrove Green lie to the north; Tea Green to the north east; Putteridge Bury registered gardens further to the north west.</p> <p>There are a number of heritage assets and ecological features bordering the site or in the near vicinity. The site rises broadly from the existing Luton urban edge to the north east with the highest ground affording views across Lilley Valley/Wandon End and the surrounding countryside.</p>
Proposal	Site wide masterplan for the development of up to 2100 dwellings, a local centre, 2 primary school(s) (2FE), up to 6FE secondary school, community and recreational facilities.

Planning stage	Pre-application stage ¹ (updated/refined planning applications to be confirmed)
Local planning authority	North Hertfordshire District Council
Planning context	<p>The site is allocated for residential-led development under Policy SP19 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. 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 assets within the locality, including a small number of listed buildings and Putteridge Bury Registered Garden.</p>
Planning history	As above re: previous live planning applications and other previous planning proposals.
Planning authority perspective	<p>The LPA is broadly supportive of the work undertaken to date on the site wide masterplan. However, whilst the overall structural layout and disposition of land uses has been refined to provide a more balanced location of infrastructure and facilities, the LPA would like to ensure that the most appropriate spatial layout is achieved, to ensure that an environmentally sustainable and landscape led development can be achieved in accordance with policy and the agreed site wide vision and objectives. They identified the following key issues:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Relationships and connectivity with existing/adjacent communities and the countryside (noting that the development meets the needs of Luton) and the needs to deal with Cockernhoe etc. sensitively. 2. Green Infrastructure in terms of clear on-site definition and use for off-site connections 3. Ecological connectivity/value and BNG 4. Disposition of land uses 5. Character and differentiation across the site 6. Movement and connectivity – active travel and public transport provision, together with connections to Wigmoor and Slaughter Wood <p>Further design resolution and development is required to identify clear design principles for green spaces, habitats, landscape, built form, street</p>

¹ There are two live planning applications related to the majority of the site area but not including the ‘keyhole land’. These applications date back to 2016/2017 and further discussions will be required with the LPA about the most suitable planning strategy going forward.

character, architectural character, and principles that reflect local character (e.g. Cockernhoe, Mangrove Green, Tea Green).

The masterplan work is largely underpinned by an appropriate evidence base, the majority of which has been prepared to support the previous planning applications. The LPA considers some additional detail is required on landscape and townscape analysis, ecology and Biodiversity Net Gain.

The two main promoters/developers (TCE and Bloor Homes) have been working collaboratively on the site wide masterplan. However, it is not clear how the third landowner, ATO Holdings has been included in the development/consideration of the masterplanning, although they have been represented at previous project workshops.

Site Promoter
Perspective

The site promoters provided a joint presentation of the latest masterplanning proposals. The following issues were highlighted:

1. It was emphasised that whilst there were multiple landownerships, the consultant teams are working together and viewing the site as one.
2. The strategic masterplan is a response to and intended to be in line with Policy SP9, with a focus on what is deliverable.
3. Have examined N Herts vernacular to inform the design response.
4. Highlighted that topography is challenging in places, particularly on the south eastern edge towards the Luton boundary.
5. 'Ground up' approach taken to the design process.
6. Five identity areas have been developed and significant work has gone into character and variety across the site and recognise that these could divide down further.
7. There was positive reference and concentration on interfaces and understanding how the development relates to Cockernhoe and Luton
8. It was recognised that there is a need for further work on overarching stewardship and management of green and blue infrastructure.
9. A new plan has been developed as part of the presentation to explain phasing and delivery.
10. It was confirmed that further engagement and consultation will be undertaken later this year.

Community
engagement

Public engagement on the site wide masterplan will take place following LPA Project Board consideration of the draft proposals. The current programme identifies this to be undertaken in the Autumn of 2023.

Summary

The Panel is pleased to engage with the applicants/promoters and the local authority on this project at the masterplanning stage in the design and planning process. The proposed site wide masterplan is promising, but further work is required to ensure the project vision matches the outcomes in terms of sustainability, character and distinctiveness, optimum location of key infrastructure, improved ecological and natural capital corridors and a high-quality green infrastructure network and relationship with existing settlements.

Comments on Key Topics

Vision and principles – the current vision needs to be underpinned by a set of principles to define the place – currently principles are very high level and too vague. The key structuring elements of place (GI, Movement, Character etc.) need to have their own sets of principles to define how they will be delivered – this is important to ensure that future detailed design is informed.

Integration with Cockernhoe and interfaces – the panel welcomed the emphasis on and approach to this sensitive issue, in terms of new development not turning its back on Cockernhoe. The proposal to create an additional green as an interface between proposed and existing was positive and welcomed, with frontage development creating the potential for life and activity, giving the opportunity for an asset for both new and existing communities and allowing development to face Cockernhoe in a positive way.

There has clearly been considerable thought around interfaces and avoiding ‘buffers’ from existing development, but instead creating useable features – this comment particularly related to southern boundary with Slaughter Wood and Wigmore. There is clearly an emphasis to retain existing features as much as possible and utilise them in a positive way and this is encouraged.

The panel encourage this theme and approach to be explored consistently across the site, particularly in relation to the local centre.

Social infrastructure - Further work is needed with Education to understand the timing of primary schools and how this will impact on the existing Cockernhoe school. Early years provision also needs to be clarified.

We suggest that proposed community hubs are renamed as ‘community focal points’ and these need to be better articulated to understand their potential composition, purpose and ‘relationship’ to the local centre (in terms of hierarchy of uses/complementarity). There also needs to be clarity on where the community focal point will be provided on the Bloor Land. We encourage an understanding on what options have been/are being considered for the community focal points. Accessibility to the southern school (on Bloor's land) needs further consideration, to create confidence that this is the most sustainable location for residents. Options should also be presented/considered, although it was welcomed that the school is proposed in the first phase of development.

More work is needed to understand how the local centre will be formed – what is its purpose and potential mix of uses? We would encourage that consideration is given to clearly connecting the new centre to Cockernhoe and seeing it as an extension of the existing village, which currently has very few amenities – there could be the potential to create a new village green, to the south of

Cockernhoe connecting to the new local centre. It can be seen as a positive asset to the existing community as well as the new, but needs to connect better back to Cockernhoe.

There was agreement that the broad location of the centre as proposed was logical, but options on the detailed location, orientation, key links, accessibility, how it acts as a gateway to the new community, relationship to surrounding routes and development needs to be explored further to provide a convincing solution. It is recognised that this is not the detailed design stage, but some detailed design consideration is required at this stage, to inform a set of principles for the local centre that can be fixed now. The location of the secondary school along this new north/south corridor (with the local centre to the south) provides the potential to create a strong place making feature with life and activity and we would encourage that this corridor is better understood.

Public engagement - It is considered that more engagement is needed with the local community. It was recognised that this was challenging whilst the local plan was being determined, but now that the site is officially allocated, the community should be positively engaged on the composition of the new place. The primary school locations, community focal points and location and composition of the local centre all present ideal topics/focus for engagement. Further efforts are needed to re-engage with Luton Council officers.

Green Infrastructure - More work is needed to connect local habitats and understand how the site integrates with the existing environment. The focus of natural environments being created in the proposed green infrastructure is welcomed, but not currently clear or articulated. There is substantial GI, which is well structured strategically and connected across the site (which is to be welcomed), but there lacks a hierarchy of spaces and the typologies need to be broken down to allow assessment against the Council's Fields in Trust benchmark standards, Sport England calculator, BNG requirements etc. An understanding is needed of how points of interest and variety will be created across the network. More definition of routes and spaces is required – their function, purpose, structure, key guiding principles etc. The matrix of GI was welcomed but could be presented more as a hierarchy.

There is a lack of clarity on the purpose of the central green area (on the Oliver land) – it was accepted that Brickkiln Wood requires a 'buffer' but the current proposal seems potentially excessive and no information provided on its function or how development would relate to it. This could be a potential location for the primary school and/or a central village green with development fronting onto it.

Consider coherence of GI proposals and structure against baseline info and ecology plan in particular. It would potentially make more sense from a recreation and / or BNG perspective to co-ordinate green space with the (relatively limited) areas of improved and semi-improved grassland.

More emphasis needs to be placed on the landscape features that are to be retained and how the proposed design is responding.

More articulation of SUDS infrastructure is required – the southern route is clear, but how will the overall drainage network be accommodated and (presumably) accommodated with green infrastructure?

Street Hierarchy and Movement - Whilst the proposed principal vehicular routes appear logical and comprehensive, a set of principles should be developed to articulate the distinction across the movement hierarchy – there is no real clarity on secondary routes and no understanding of how

primary, secondary and tertiary routes will differ. How will walking and cycling be encouraged over and above the private cars, through active travel routes and which green links will be multi-functional, including movement routes?

There was some discussion around the viability/achievability of any new or extended bus routes, as these would form an important part of any sustainable transport offer. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, discussions with operators had indicated a possible new express service to the site that could be provided on a wholly commercial basis given the potential demand, linking back to Luton Airport and the town centre. However, given the reduction in patronage experienced post-Covid-19, these discussions have not been revisited more recently and so there is more doubt as to whether this would still be the case. If there is to be a possible new service, it is even more important to develop key points of demand (eg local centre, schools) along a coherent route, that may be attractive to operators in the future.

It was questioned whether a roundabout the right access solution on Luton Road. It was explained there would only be three-way movements (i.e. from the south on Luton Road and east-west into the site(s)). Vehicle traffic for Cockernhoe would be re-routed east to a new spur connecting back into the village. In this context, a T-junction could be a better arrangement. This would be a more sensitive / less engineered and would allow for a continuous north-west to south-east cycleway (as indicatively shown on the northern side of the carriageway in the DRP drawings as opposed to the dotted red line on the south side in the framework plan), also linking north into Cockernhoe village on the 'old' alignment of Luton Road. This would provide ease of access between the two sides of Luton Road, particularly to key facilities and in early phases of development.

Character and Distinctiveness - The general approach to character area breakdown was acknowledged as a positive evolution of the design, but there's clearly potential to break down further and this needs more consideration. The character areas each need a set of design principles, to set out their distinction and to inform detail, ensuring variety across the site. The phasing and delivery plan was welcome, but more work is needed around an infrastructure schedule, to show how the place will build up over time – ensuring the timely delivery of key infrastructure.

There are significant distances of single-sided development proposed along key routes. How does this impact upon delivery, character and severance of development blocks from Green Infrastructure etc.? Are there opportunities to route some of these through blocks to achieve more efficient development?

The panel were unclear how a gateway/sense of arrival will be created on Luton Road, for what will be a key entry point to the site and the local centre.

Conclusion and recommendations

The panel were pleased to see that the site wide masterplan had evolved over recent months, as a result of a collaborative process and joint working between the landowners. Overall, the emerging structure of the masterplan is to be welcomed and we encourage the applicants/promoters and the Council team to continue to work collaboratively to address the comments below and further refine the site wide masterplan and future delivery. The main issues to be addressed are summarised as:

- Overall, greater clarity is required on the key structuring components of the site.
- Provide a set of key principles to guide each of the structuring components of place.
- Develop an engagement strategy for the site wide masterplan and beyond for the project (ie planning and delivery phases).
- Engage with all relevant communities and organisations on the proposed content of the new development.
- Develop a clear vision and offer for existing and future communities – “how will they benefit?” What are the attractors and destinations – existing and future?
- Develop a strategy for community benefits/uses and meanwhile uses/events.
- Explore and clarify the timing/delivery of key infrastructure.
- Clarify and develop a clearer street and movement hierarchy.
- Be ambitious and bold – consider future living and requirements 50 years from now and beyond.

Key recommendations

To enable progress against the above overall conclusions, the panel make the following recommendations:

1. Clearly establish placemaking principles for each defined Character area, along with any cross cutting, overarching principles for the whole site area.
2. Continue to develop the green infrastructure framework of functional routes and connections. Establish a clear hierarchy and function for all 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. Prioritise existing GI/features – must haves versus other features that might provide opportunities for enhanced proposals and cohesion.
3. Ensure meaningful green routes infiltrate development blocks and assess them at a human scale perspective.
4. Strengthen the key ecological corridors, both within and connecting the site to its surrounding environment (eg connecting existing woodland areas). Develop a clear strategy for BNG across the site.
5. Develop design thinking and 3D imagery/representation across the whole site – ensure the sketches and 3D images are accurate representations of proposed indicative plans/layouts. Plans, sketches and aerial images need to align
6. Carefully analyse the character and morphology of the adjacent villages to ensure the development edges respond sensitively to their surroundings. Also ensure that the use of the existing morphology informs spaces, buildings and relationships across the masterplan site as a whole.

7. Explore in more detail, options for the location of the local centre; in relationship with the existing village and green to the north (Cockernhoe); potential relationship with Luton Road and existing communities; along with valuable GI/hedgerow/footpaths and the north south street.
8. Develop a clear vision for the local centre as a community heart and consider a range of potential opportunities for community use and cohesion; could this include local employment space, mobility hub etc.
9. Consider renaming the central character area – consider a more positive and pro-active relationship with Cockernhoe
10. Explore further options for the potential location of the primary schools; in particular the southern school and its relationship with movement/GI/woodland etc.
11. Consider the size and use of the large area of open space shown directly east and adjacent to Brick Kiln Wood – this might also be considered as part of 6. above and the potential for the provision of open space/buffer along with built form.
12. Commit to the sustainable vision of the project by aiming for higher sustainability targets such as BREEAM Communities and LETI, alongside sustainable design principles such as building orientation and the prioritisation of active travel modes.
13. Employ meaningful public consultation to communicate and understand what the future development can provide for the wider communities of Cockernhoe, Mangrove Green, Tea Green and Wigmore. This should be more than employing a display of the proposed site wide masterplan for comment.
14. Ensure there is meaningful engagement with Luton Borough Council on the emerging proposals and potential strategies for planning, infrastructure and delivery.
15. Consider the primary movement framework, in particular the junction with Luton Road and the potential relationship with built form and topography. Does this junction need to be formed by a traffic island? Are there suitable alternative junction arrangements more suited to a more positive design solution?
16. Provide further consideration to an active travel strategy for the site as a whole. What methods could be employed to encourage future sustainable travel within and beyond the site? Re-visit the public transport strategy – it must be an express service; and develop ideas for a site wide electric future.
17. Develop an ambitious strategy for sustainability that exceeds policy minimum requirements; Considering a higher aspiration of sustainability goals at the masterplan level will demonstrates commitment and can give the council more certainty of the quality of development that will be delivered.

Provide further consideration to the location of the proposed sports pitches to the north of the masterplan area. Could some or all of this be located within the masterplan area and thus be more accessible to a greater number of future residents? Could there be potential to use sports facilities provided at the secondary school for wider community use?