

Report of the North Herts Design Review  
Panel

# Land north-east of Great Ashby (GA2)

20 May 2024

## The design review meeting

<b>Reference number</b>	2171/030524
<b>Date</b>	3 <sup>rd</sup> May 2024
<b>Meeting location</b>	Holiday Inn Stevenage, St. George's Way, Stevenage, SG1 1HS
<b>Panel members attending</b>	Paul Reynolds, (Chair), landscape architecture and public realm Andrew Cameron, transport planning and urban design Annemarie de Boom, urban design and public realm Janie Price, architecture and historic environment Peter Neal, landscape architecture and ecology
<b>Panel manager</b>	Helen Quinn, Design South East
<b>Presenting team</b>	Silke Gruner, Icen Projects
<b>Other attendees</b>	Edward Keymer, Keymer Cavendish Emanuele Lo Faro, Picture Estates Ltd Diego Portales, Icen Projects Beth Wilson, CSA Environmental Carly Howes, CSA Environmental Matt Ford, Woods Hardwick Civil Engineers Nigel Smith, North Hertfordshire District Council Edward Leigh, North Hertfordshire District Council Naomi Reynard, North Hertfordshire District Council Adrian McHale, Hertfordshire County Council Xavier Preston, Hertfordshire County Council Sue Hooton, Place Services (advising NHDC)
<b>Site visit</b>	A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the review. Annemarie de Boom was unable to attend the site visit due to an ankle sprain, so carried out independent site study and a digital site visit.
<b>Scope of the review</b>	As an independent design review panel the scope of this review was not restricted.
<b>Panel interests</b>	Panel members did not indicate any conflicts of interest.
<b>Confidentiality</b>	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

<b>Name</b>	Land north-east of Great Ashby (GA2)
<b>Site location</b>	Land off Mendip Way, Stevenage
<b>Site details</b>	<p>The site comprises 49 hectares of greenfield land to the north-east of the existing area of Great Ashby, within the neighbouring parish of Weston. Great Ashby is a relatively new parish of North Hertfordshire, representing a residential area adjoining the north-east of Stevenage that has been substantially completed since the late 1990s and consisting of more than 2,000 homes. The application site will represent a new outer limit of Stevenage at its north-east and will provide an appropriately defined settlement edge against the revised Green Belt boundary.</p> <p>The site is bounded to the south-west by, and also contains, well-established tree belts and woodland blocks, including Ancient Woodland and County Wildlife Sites. There is significant tree coverage in the form of woodland blocks as well as along current field boundaries, which are a combination of trees and hedgerows. Category A and (potential future) veteran trees have been identified.</p> <p>The site has a notable change in level from north-west to south-east. In general terms, the north-west half of the site is flatter and more open while the south-east half is more undulating and divided into more discrete parcels/areas by the landscape.</p> <p>A pair of overhead powerlines run through the site on a continuation of the alignment through the adjoining Great Ashby development.</p>
<b>Proposal</b>	Residential development of approximately 600 homes plus supporting infrastructure including a 2FE primary school and neighbourhood-level facilities.
<b>Planning stage</b>	Pre-application draft masterplan framework stage. Once the strategic masterplan is approved by the council, a hybrid planning application with all matters reserved except for main access infrastructure is proposed to be submitted in Summer 2024.
<b>Local planning authority</b>	North Hertfordshire District Council

<b>Planning context</b>	<p>The principle of development is accepted: the site is allocated for residential-led development under Policy SP18 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.</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>The site has no statutory or local built heritage designations. However, there are two listed building groupings to the north-west and south-east of the site at Tile Kiln Farm and Dane End Farm. The former has a stronger connection with the site due to the more open boundaries and vistas along this edge.</p>
<b>Planning history</b>	<p>None. The site has been released from the Green Belt for development.</p>
<b>Planning authority perspective</b>	<p>North Hertfordshire District Council officers have been working collaboratively with the private landowner (Picture Estates Ltd.), the design team, and Hertfordshire County Council (including Highways and Education teams) to develop a pre-application masterplan to accord with policy requirements.</p> <p>Key issues for discussion include: the landscape and context-led design approach; integration and connectivity with Great Ashby; the boundary to the Green Belt; relationship to the heritage assets and their setting; the positive integration of the existing pylon corridor; and the appropriate level of detail required by the masterplan in order to establish the vision for subsequent design development and delivery.</p>
<b>Community engagement</b>	<p>The landowner team is progressing community engagement in parallel with stakeholder engagement and the design review process, with the intention of drawing the feedback from all three together to inform the final masterplan.</p>

## Summary

We are pleased to engage with the applicant team and council at this early stage of the design process. Given that the project is at the draft masterplan stage and will be developed in further detail following the appointment of a development partner, our comments focus on the high-level principles of the emerging proposal.

This is a challenging site, but its strong topographical, hydrological, landscape, and ecological characteristics create opportunities to shape the proposal that have not yet been fully acknowledged. Whilst we appreciate the retention of the existing woodlands and vegetation, the emerging masterplan is primarily structured by the implementation of the loop road, which internalises the scheme, limits future connectivity to the north, and fails to capitalise on the unique landscape character of the site.

This project should deliver a settlement that responds to and integrates with its local context but is distinct in its character, identity, and sustainable aspirations; however, it is not yet clear how the scheme learns from the failings of Great Ashby.

We recognise that the applicant will not ultimately deliver this scheme; however, we would welcome further engagement once the panel's recommendations have been taken into consideration, and ahead of any planning application submission.

## Key recommendations

1. Clarify the vision for the character, identity, and structure of this new place, informed by contextual analysis, public engagement, and the site's natural assets.
2. Develop a truly landscape-led scheme by reinforcing the existing green corridors and allowing the topographical, ecological, and hydrological features of the site to structure the masterplan layout.
3. Identify opportunities and constraints related to the site's heritage and landscape assets, including views, and ensure that these are embedded in the masterplan so as not to be lost in later stages of design development.
4. Remove the highways-dominated design of the loop road and prioritise the provision of direct and convenient active travel routes to destinations within and beyond the site boundary to improve the connectivity of the site and to encourage sustainable mode shift.
5. Engage with appropriate organisations, such as the wildlife trusts, to develop an active management strategy to retain and enhance the Ancient Woodland while offering appropriate access to the public.

6. Explore how a stronger sense of place could be achieved by densifying the north-western half of the site and co-locating civic elements to create a 'village heart' that is complemented by the attractive landscape at Dell's Spring.
7. Identify the privacy and function of each proposed green space to clarify the strategy for public recreation across the site, taking account of topography and realistic assessment of the size of required sustainable drainage system (SuDS) features.
8. Retain and protect Dell Spring as an unspoilt landscape area to reduce the impact on the setting of Tile Kiln Farm.

## Detailed comments and recommendations

### 1. Vision and design strategy

- 1.1. Whilst we understand the applicant team's objectives for this project, there is not yet a clear vision for the type of place that will be delivered on this site. Careful thought should be given to how the proposal – and any future expansion to the north – will relate to Great Ashby and to Stevenage, to avoid this becoming another 'ring on the onion' of amorphous suburban sprawl.
- 1.2. The value of this site is found in its rich landscape, topography, ecology, and blocks of Ancient Woodland. Rather than being seen as constraints to work against, these should be considered as opportunities that offer a unique selling point and should be promoted to articulate the vision and character of the site. The public consultation events should help the design team to understand what aspects of the site's landscape are most valued by the community, so that these elements can be prioritised in the structuring of the masterplan.
- 1.3. Whilst we appreciate the efforts to preserve the site's existing ecology and vegetation, a truly landscape-led scheme should take this a step further by reinforcing a stronger landscape structure before implementing the road infrastructure and development parcels. This would allow for stronger green corridors and routes that work with the natural topographical and hydrological functions of the landscape, as well as the opportunity to connect the fragmented blocks of woodland across the site. Conversely, taking a highways-led approach – as in the emerging masterplan – allows the loop road to act as a primary structuring device and loses the opportunity to embed the landscape character of the site into the proposal.
- 1.4. The diagrams presented by the applicant team are effective in communicating the various emerging strategies addressing blue and green infrastructure, integration, social infrastructure, land use, density, movement, recreation, and drainage. However, we would welcome an additional diagram identifying the opportunities offered by the site – including views, connections to nature, and connectivity beyond the site boundary – to ensure that these are not lost as the masterplan is developed.
- 1.5. A village character would be appropriate for this site; however, more thought should be given to how this is expressed in the character, identity, and structure of the scheme. The intention to provide rich local character areas and build a village community should be explored further and embedded in the masterplan at this stage.

- 1.6. Whilst we appreciate the logic for the lack of retail facilities and the uncertainty over the secondary school, the creation of a strong village 'heart' to this scheme would be desirable. We question whether the existing neighbourhood centre at Great Ashby will be sustainable long-term and encourage the applicant and council teams to discuss whether the delivery of a new neighbourhood centre on this site to serve all of Great Ashby – and freeing up the existing one to be redeveloped for housing – could be a better scenario. In the long-term, there could be an opportunity for Tile Kiln Farm to become a community hub – perhaps with a farm shop and/or café – that is complemented by this village 'heart' or local centre.
- 1.7. We appreciate that the various constraints of the site limit development space; however, it is concerning that this proposal would see land released from the Green Belt to provide a built density of only thirty dwellings per hectare. Providing greater density to the north-western half of the site would provide critical mass for a stronger sense of place and arrival and would ease development in the south-eastern half of the site, with its more challenging topography and drainage opportunities. These two halves could differ in typology and could be delivered by two different housebuilders.
- 1.8. The self-build plots would be better located in areas where it would be more challenging for commercial housebuilders to deliver their standard product – for example, in the narrow gap between Nine Acre Spring and the woodland block separating the site from Cleveland Way.

## **2. Sustainable design**

- 2.1. The emerging approach to sustainable design and renewable energy was not discussed in detail at this review.
- 2.2. 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. Heritage response**

- 3.1. It is acknowledged that there will be inevitable harm to the setting of the listed buildings and so this must be mitigated as far as possible. Strategic constraints and opportunities related to Tile Kiln Farm, Dale End Farm, and the areas around them (as defined on the plan) should be identified and embedded in the masterplan at this stage so as not to be lost when the project is handed over to the housebuilder who will deliver this scheme. In addition to reinforcing the site boundaries, the design team should consider sun paths, vistas, and how views to and from the site could be enjoyed. The impact on views from existing windows should be analysed and mitigation of this harm should be embedded in the masterplan.
- 3.2. Dell Spring is a historic feature of the site, and we support the intention to enhance the landscape there by retaining it free from development. However, the emergency access route that passes by the dell from Back Lane will have a significant negative impact on its setting – even if limited to 3.7m wide and treated with sensitive materials. If access is required to this part of the site, it should be moved to the east of the dell to limit its impact on this sensitive landscape feature.

### **4. Connectivity, movement, and transport**

- 4.1. The site's location at the edge of Great Ashby and Stevenage poses a challenge in terms of delivering a sustainable place due to the car-oriented nature of its neighbouring development. This is evident from the emerging proposal, which does not yet sufficiently depart from such convention to act as a catalyst for modal shift in this location. Negotiating a more frequent (more than twice an hour) bus service; creating strong connections to the countryside, Great Ashby, and Stevenage; and providing attractive active travel routes to the proposed on-site primary school and neighbourhood amenities are all critical moves to making this scheme as good as possible in terms of sustainable movement and connectivity.
- 4.2. It would be useful to understand how future residents could use sustainable travel modes to get to existing facilities such as the local secondary school, to Stevenage town centre, or even to the train station to commute further afield. Understanding and describing these trips will help to ensure that these opportunities are embedded in the masterplan.

- 4.3. The proposed pedestrian/cycle routes appear to hug the vehicular roads at all times. Whilst this is efficient in terms of land use, it does not prioritise pedestrians or cyclists and therefore does not encourage active travel modes over private car use. We suggest that the active travel structure is designed first, ensuring direct routes and easy crossing at junctions. The design team could then decide if the vehicular roads should follow the pedestrian/cycle routes, or whether they should sit separately and allow landscape to permeate between them as a more sensitive response to the existing landscape structure.
- 4.4. The access road acts as an umbilical cord connecting the new development back to Great Ashby. The proposed carriageway width, 20mph speed limit, and use of T-junctions (rather than roundabouts) are all supported; however, greater consideration should be given to prioritising this route for walking and cycling so that it can act as an attractive and convenient active travel connection that knits together the new and existing communities. Making this route straighter and more direct whilst also implementing traffic calming measures should be considered. Alternatively, a well-located, physically independent active travel route could allow for direct links between road crossing points and could remove the need for footways on both sides of the access road, given that there is no direct frontage access here.
- 4.5. Ensuring the continuation of a strong active travel route beyond the access road to the existing local centre is key to integrating the development with Great Ashby. The applicant should explore whether off-site contributions could be made to improve walking and cycling infrastructure along Mendip Way – particularly in terms of how the existing roundabout by the community centre is safely navigated.
- 4.6. An additional connection from the south-east of the site to Cleveland Way would provide greater permeability to Great Ashby and another strong link to the existing local centre, as well as creating a more efficient bus route and potentially negating the need for the loop road and the emergency access by Dell Spring. Whilst we appreciate that implementing this route may not be possible due to third-party landowners and to the topography in this part of this site, it should be explored as a potential option.
- 4.7. We are concerned that the layout of the loop road could risk internalising the site and failing to future-proof it from any future development to the north. A better approach may be for the access road to split into two or more streets leading into the countryside, alongside a network of streets that connect them. The bus ‘loop’ would still be provided within the street network, but this would not read as a primary structuring element of the masterplan.

- 4.8. We appreciate that the masterplan layout is somewhat dictated by the site topography; however, the need for compliant routes should be viewed in balance with the opportunity for better placemaking. Short distances at gradients of 1:15 or even 1:12 should be considered if this would allow for a scheme that is less car-oriented and provides easier walking and cycling routes to the countryside.
- 4.9. The route under the pylons is developing well, and we support the use of water attenuation features in this part of the site; however, this should be addressed as one character area rather than dividing it into 'road' and 'parkland'. A stronger pedestrian/cycle route through this corridor – perhaps with a more direct relationship to the swales and drainage basins if the topography allows – would help to enhance the experience of this part of the site. More should also be made of the views out to the countryside when reaching the north-eastern site boundary.
- 4.10. If the bus service is to be funded through a Section 106 agreement, there is some uncertainty as to the long-term stewardship of the site once this budget has been exhausted. We encourage the applicant to explore methods to secure transport funding in perpetuity – perhaps through rental costs of some of the proposed residential properties.
- 4.11. Providing car parking to the front of houses makes private car use an easy first choice for travel. Whilst we appreciate that this level of detail is beyond the scope of the current design stage, the project team should consider how the emerging urban character might allow for a future design code that allocates more car parking to the side of houses or in courtyards, and locates cycle storage at the front door to encourage better uptake of sustainable transport modes.

## **5. Ecology, drainage, and recreation**

- 5.1. The provision of green corridors across the site should be carefully considered to enhance the scheme's ecological connectivity. Pulling back the corner of some development parcels would allow for wider green corridors to accommodate this, as well as allowing the landscape structure of the site to be more visibly dominant. Reinforcing the green connection along the southern boundary could offer a nature recovery network component to this edge. Along with an Ancient Woodland management strategy, this may allow the required biodiversity net gain to be achieved on site, rather than relying on offsetting, which should not be necessary for a site of this scale.

- 5.2. We are concerned that the blocks of Ancient Woodland will become somewhat leftover spaces, rather than an integral and celebrated part of the masterplan. We appreciate the planning policy requirement to ensure that there is no resulting “loss or deterioration” of the Ancient Woodland (Nation Planning Policy Framework, paragraph 186c); however, active management of the Ancient Woodland is vital to its longevity and could offer opportunities for engagement. The design team should analyse precedents of developments that integrate or abut Ancient Woodland and reach out to wildlife trusts to develop an active management strategy to retain and enhance the quality of these woodlands while offering appropriate public access – perhaps within extended woodland buffers.
- 5.3. Whilst there is a significant amount of green space shown on the site plan, it is not clear how these spaces will meet local planning standards and how they will be used by the public. The masterplan should clearly identify areas of private, semi-public, public, and community use and where active and passive recreation activities can take place, to give greater clarity on the residential experience.
- 5.4. The new Neighbourhood Equipped Area of Play (NEAP) near the end of the access road is intended to replace the existing play area; however, it is poorly located in the most traffic-heavy part of the site. Play areas provide social overlap for parents, carers, and children and should be strategically located alongside civic facilities – such as the school – to help create a heart to the development.
- 5.5. Cross-sections should be prepared through the open space, drainage basins, and the edges of adjoining development parcels to provide a better understanding of the impact of topography on the design of these spaces, and of the views along and across them. If the drainage basins are to form part of the proposed recreation and play strategy, the design team should take care to ensure that they remain accessible and are not sunk deeper as a result of topography and land parcel constraints in the further development of the masterplan.
- 5.6. Drainage basins work best in the low parts of a site, where water naturally flows; however, some within the proposal appear to be located uphill. The drainage strategy should be overlaid with the site contour lines to better understand how this will work, and the extent of engineering required. The design team should also test whether the volume of the proposed swales could be increased.
- 5.7. Whilst street trees are welcomed in general, the consistent pattern shown along the primary and secondary streets creates the impression of an avenue that emphasises the dominance of these streets. The use of street trees should be broken up more, and a greater variety of sizes and species used to better reflect the character of the existing woodland.

5.8. The allotments are located in a steep and isolated part of the site, which would be difficult to access carrying heavy loads of tools or soils, or by cargo bike. We find this to be an inappropriate location; rather, the allotments should be visually prominent and located at the heart of the community so that they are easily accessible for all residents to help support a healthy lifestyle.

## 6. Materials and detailing

6.1. Due to the early stage of design development, 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).'*

6.2. 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.

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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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