



Cambridgeshire Quality Panel

Community Building, Parcel 6, Northstowe

6 July 2023

Venue: Community Room, Northstowe Secondary College

Panel: Lynne Sullivan (chair)

Kirk Archibald

Steve Platt

David Taylor

Simon Carne

Luke Engleback

LPA: Trovine Monteiro – GCSP

Emma Lilley – GCSP

The Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth sets out the core principles for the level of quality to be expected in new development across Cambridgeshire. The [Cambridgeshire Quality Panel](#) provides independent, expert advice to developers and local planning authorities against the four core principles of the Charter: connectivity, character, climate, and community.

Development overview

The applicant proposes the erection of a community building on part of the land known as 'Parcel 6' in Phase 1 of the Northstowe major development site. Full details of the proposal are provided in the applicant's briefing note.

Once the scheme has been designed, a formal application for the approval of all reserved matters in respect of the site will be submitted to Greater Cambridge Shared Planning. The relevant outline planning permission is that for Phase 1 (Ref: S/0388/12/OL).

The requirement for a community building derives from the Phase 1 outline planning permission and its associated Section 106 agreement. The approximate location was fixed through the parameter plans and design code, which were secured by conditions of the permission.

The main reference document for the Panel is the design code, which sets out site-wide requirements for Phase 1 and design objectives for the Local Centre (or 'Mixed use centre') of which the community building will be a part.

It should be noted that the spatial extent of the proposal is limited by the parameter plans to the area shown in red below (known as 'Parcels 2 and 6').



Pre-application engagement has been sought in the past relating to the wider Local Centre and Enterprise Zone but that masterplanning exercise did not reach a conclusion. Therefore, the approved parameter plans and design code remain the key documents governing the relationship between the site and its surroundings.

Presenting team

The scheme is promoted by South Cambridgeshire District Council with the design team lead by AR Urbanism. The presenting team comprised:

- Riccardo Bobisse, project director, AR Urbanism
- Agata Podgajna, project manager, AR Urbanism
- Amanda Reynolds, AR Urbanism, peer review
- Adam West, lead architect, CZWG
- Rani Izhar, lead landscape architect, OKRA
- Rapa Surajaras, landscape architect, OKRA
- Andrew Komarnycky, sustainability lead, Expedition
- Andrew Black, planning lead, ABC
- Kirstin Donaldson, SCDC
- Sarah Lyons Sarah, SCDC
- Sharon Witton, EA, Henry Riley

Local authority's request

Key issues

The applicant and Local Planning Authority are partway through a programme of pre-application engagement. Various issues have been identified, some of which have been resolved and others remain outstanding. Some of the key issues that the Panel may wish to consider include those described below.

Siting

The design code includes an indicative location for the community building. The alternative location represented in the submitted scheme does not represent a conflict with the code due to its flexibility but the Panel may wish to consider the appropriateness of the building's position.

Layout, access and movement

As the first building within the Local Centre, the community building must be both a high-quality scheme in its own right and suitably future-proofed to take place-making opportunities when the remainder of Parcel 6 is designed. For example, as a pavilion

building with no 'rear' entrance, it should not rely on the future scheme to create a high-quality public realm on its side/edges.

Consideration also needs to be given to the provision of routes, even if temporary, across the vacant part of Parcel 6 because there will be strong 'desire lines' for those walking and cycling from the south and east.

Scale and appearance

The choice of materials is still a 'work in progress.' While a building that expresses its sustainable credentials is accepted (for example, materials with low embodied energy and low maintenance cost), focus must now turn to the detailed implications of its material choices on the physical appearance.

The main entrance needs to be integrated into the elevational design, which needs more emphasis and appears as an afterthought. It should not rely on its name on the frontage to identify its presence.

Sustainable construction

The sustainability credentials of the building are driving its built form, roofscape and architecture in terms of daylight, ventilation, mitigation against overheating etc.

Landscaping

The pergola feature and landscape provide the potential for good interface with any future public space. More gated openings could be provided to build in flexibility to accommodate wider capacity or spill over into a larger space should this be required or possible in the future. Similarly, the hall should have more openings spilling into the courtyard.

Consideration should be given to the inclusion of street trees along the Stirling Road frontage. If this is not possible due to other constraints, climbers within planting areas next to the building could help add height and softening to this frontage, which features the less active functions of the community building.

Parking

The parking strategy remains unresolved, pending further justification from the applicant. There is a shared ambition to promote sustainable transport choices,

particularly for a local facility in a town with good walking and cycling links, but the proposed car parking provision (8 dedicated spaces) is far below the indicative parking standards in SCLP Policy TI/3 (50 spaces). Suitable justification may yet be provided but the Panel may wish to contribute its thoughts on the importance of determining the right level of provision.

In terms of cycle parking, a minimum of sixty-seven spaces is required and these will need to be designed appropriately. For example, pre-application drawings have shown cycle parking consuming valuable space in the external courtyard, which the Local Planning Authority suggests should be avoided.

Community – “places where people live out of choice and not necessity, creating healthy communities with a good quality of life”

The Panel queried how the building might be used and by whom. Creating a sense of community from scratch is complex and takes time, however it needs to be encouraged if the new town is to be successful. The provision of the community building is critical to creating the sense of community. Reference was made to the lessons learnt from Cambourne where the key facilities, notably the community and health centre were not delivered early in the development. Whilst the community building is to be welcomed here it is a concern that it is so late in the development.

The community building is important as it will be the symbolic heart of this part of Northstowe and therefore the design will be key as it will set the character for the buildings that will be around it. It will set the bar for design and sustainability.

The building will be used by a wide range of people and organisations so it is important that the design addresses the needs of these diverse groups.

It was suggested that the temporary building could be retained and repurposed as a resource for Northstowe in the future.

Connectivity – “places that are well-connected enable easy access for all to jobs and services using sustainable modes”

The disconnect between Northstowe and the Park and Ride is problematic. The current link is not satisfactory and this phase of the development must facilitate and celebrate an enhanced link between the two.

Parcel 6 is a typical urban block of approximately 100m x 100m. The Panel considered that the building was dense compared to the surrounding development and this creates a tension in its relationship with the remaining parts of Parcel 6. It appears that both the block and the building are in the client's control and it would be worth expanding the brief to include the whole block. This would help resolve the constraints that are generated in the current design that will become prerequisites for future developments. These need to be defined in terms of a block code. The current design addresses its own issues, such as servicing and cycle parking within the red line but the relationship to the rest of the parcel's development needs to be further defined to ensure the success of the community centre proposition.

The Panel supports the approach to car parking by not following inflexible planning policy standards. It would be useful in terms of viability to relate the parking strategy to the wider business case for the building to ensure that it can manage the high use activities that may attract substantial vehicles from beyond Northstowe. At the same time, the parking strategy for the rest of Plot 6 could impinge on the current proposal and needs to be clarified.

Character – *“Places with distinctive neighbourhoods and where people create ‘pride of place’*

Landscape

The Panel welcomed the positive approach adopted to water management within the building.

It was noted that the building will incorporate several features such as bat and bird boxes as part of the biodiversity strategy. Whilst this is to be encouraged it needs to be based on evidence that the surrounding development and the wider area will also create the conditions for support habitats, such as foraging routes for bats.

There is a real opportunity to increase the biodiversity value of the building further. For example, the detailing of the green roof should include micro topography and different substrates which will encourage a wider range of habitats.

There is a concern that the wrap around pergola on the main elevation will require the removal of the already established trees, which is unfortunate, as well as reducing threshold space in front of the building. It was suggested that the pergola could

incorporate roof trees to create a living pergola. This would provide the enhanced biodiversity impact but will also function as brise soleil for this glazed elevation of the building. The cycle parking in the pergola along the courtyard elevation renders the layout of the courtyard subservient to cycle parking access.

It is not considered that the most efficient use is being made of the very small space in the courtyard. Is it a green oasis in the centre of an 'urban' block? There seems to be too much hard surface, and more detail needs to be explored. Is the children's play area in the right place? Could the inclusion of a water feature and productive areas for food growing such as espaliered fruit trees or vines be considered?

Architecture

Lacks all the usual functions of a community building and suggests a limited palette of opportunities for different uses. (It was clarified by SCDC that a civic hub with a wider range of services will be provided in the town centre of Northstowe).

The building is not big enough to cover the full range of community-based activities that it could host. Thought should be given to how the structure could be future proofed to allow it to be expanded as the demand for it increases over time.

Consideration should be given to creating "meanwhile" uses in the balance of Parcel 6, such as an allotment garden.

The Panel felt that the proposals for the courtyard were a missed opportunity. It was suggested that it should be kept clean and simple it would have more potential to function as a garden rather than trying to cater for too broad a range of activities. The courtyard should be decluttered and be more accessible from the gathering spaces by removing or relocating the current garden room which compromises the impact of a green space to the surrounding uses. A greater focus on structural planting in the space was recommended to provide the microclimatic benefit to the space.

It was unclear whether the courtyard was intended to be an enclosed secluded space only accessed from within the building or open and providing free access from anywhere outside the perimeter.

The Panel felt that the proposed building materials palette was appropriate and the way the building is expressed as a function of rooftop solar generation and with the

courtyard garden internally makes a lot of sense. The main hall is the big element and gives clarity compared with the other elements which are tending to clutter. The demarcation of the main entrance should be obvious from the building form and flow, not needing signage.

Climate – “Places that anticipate climate change in ways that enhance the desirability of development and minimise environmental impact”

The Panel applauded the approach adopted to allow the sustainability to drive the design.

The north facing high level windows are good and are serving a useful purpose to allow light to enter.

It would be useful to know what calculations have been done to determine what yield the Photovoltaics will generate to cover the operational use of the building.

It was encouraging to see the use of ground source heat pumps that will be used to cool in addition to heat. Could consideration be given to designing the system to service the whole of Parcel 6.

There should be something in the proposal to demonstrate how the building can be used to educate people about sustainability.

It is unclear why the cycle parking is located where it is and whether electric cycling charging will be provided. Is there any scope to locate cycle parking onto the green.

The ambitious target that has been set for embodied carbon was noted and supported. It was noted that the structure and especially the use of sawn timber will contribute to achieving a better embodied carbon rating.

Will EV charging be provided and could this be linked to the establishment of a car club for Northstowe?

Summary

The Panel thanked the design team for a thorough presentation of the proposals and welcomes the delivery of a desperately needed community centre at Northstowe.

The Panel recommended that the client takes on board the issues raised by the Panel relating to the building's redline boundary in relation to the rest of Parcel 6.

For the courtyard to work from multiple access points it needs to be safeguarded in some way from the build out from the adjacent plots. Some principles need to be established, possibly a block code, which set out the parameters for the future development of the remaining plots.

The building needs to embrace the green to the front and enable it to inform the character.

The Park and Ride is a strong desire line from the building and the enhancement and greening of the route needs to be a priority.

There needs to be more analysis of the background biodiversity in the wider area to determine what mitigations and enhancements are incorporated into the building.

There is more work to do on the courtyard and the garden room. The climate resilience could be strengthened with a more robust tree planting strategy for the courtyard.

Consideration should be given to the future expansion of the building.

The setting of ambitious embodied carbon targets is supported by the Panel.

Contact details

For any queries in relation to this report, please contact the panel secretariat.

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Appendix A – Background information list and plan

- Main presentation
- Local authority background note

Documents may be available on request, subject to restrictions/confidentiality.

