

The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel



Stapleford Retirement Village (PPA/22/0009)

23rd June 2022, Virtual Meeting

Confidential

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 [Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel](#) provides independent, expert advice to developers and local planning authorities against the four core principles of the Charter: connectivity, character, climate, and community.

Attendees

Panel Members:

Maggie Baddeley (Chair) - Planner and Senior Associate, Tibbalds

Georgina Bignold (Character, Architecture) – Director, Proctor & Matthews Architects

Hero Bennett (Character, Climate) - Principal Sustainability Consultant, Partner, Max Fordham

Angela Koch (Character, Community) – Founder, Imagine Places

Vanessa Ross (Character, Landscape) – Chartered Landscape Architect, Director, arc Landscape Design and Planning Ltd.

Applicant:

Will Coote – Rangeford (applicant)

Daniel Perfect – Rangeford

Anne Marie Nichols – Life 3A (Architect)

James Gardner – Ares (Landscape Architect)

Halina Timms – Ares (Landscapes Architect)

Matt Hare – Carter Jonas (Planning Consultant)

Richard Abbott – Stace (Scheme Project Manager)

Brian Farrington – Hoare Lee

LPA Officers:

Joanne Preston (JP) - Principal Urban Designer / Design Review Panel Manager

Katie Roberts (KR) – Executive Assistant / Design Review Panel Support Officer

Ammar Alasaad (AA) – Senior Urban Designer

Helen Sayers (HS) – Principal Landscape Architect

Michael Sexton (MS) – Principal Planning Officer

Scheme Description and Background

Site

The site lies outside but adjacent to the development framework boundary of Stapleford and in the Green Belt. The site comprises agricultural land.

Planning History

An outline planning application (20/02929/OUT) was made by a land promoter in July 2020 for the site, proposing 'a retirement care village in Use Class C2 comprising housing with care, communal health, wellbeing and leisure facilities, public open space, landscaping, car parking, access and associated development and public access countryside park with all matters reserved except for access'. This application was refused by South Cambridgeshire District Council in April 2021, on the grounds of harm to the Green Belt.

An appeal against the decision was lodged and subsequently allowed by the Planning Inspectorate in December 2021. The decision letter's conditions include reference (in condition 3) to a series of approved parameter plans. Condition 3 states that the development 'shall be carried out in accordance with' those approved parameter plans that are for: access and movement; landscape; and land use and building heights ('up to' ridge heights). No more than a total floor area of 17,825sqm of floor area is a limitation stated in condition 19.

The Proposal

In advance of a future reserved matters approval (RMA) application, the current applicant (RangeFord Villages) entered into a planning performance agreement in April 2022 with the local planning authority for pre-application advice for a retirement village (55 years or older) (use class C2) for circa 150 homes following the granting of the outline permission. Officers have attended three meetings with the applicant to date which have been focussed on the design and layout of the scheme. The feedback of officers has been broadly taken on board throughout the process to date.

The pre-application proposals have not been the subject of any local community engagement yet but the applicant has appointed a public engagement consultant and

has agreed to work with the Greater Cambridge Shared Planning service's Youth Engagement process. It is relevant to note that the intention is that the Magog Trust will be responsible for the future stewardship of the country park element of the scheme, as per the Section 106 accompanying the outline permission, and the applicant has advised that to date, there has been some liaison with the Trust.

Declarations of Interest

There is no declaration of interest to report.

Previous Panel Reviews

This is the first time the scheme has been reviewed by the Panel.

Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel views

Introduction

The proposal presented to the Panel by the Rangeford Villages team seeks to demonstrate how the approved access arrangements and parameter plans have been used as the starting point for progressing a masterplanning layout for a 154-dwelling retirement village, alongside advancing the proposals for the accompanying country park. It is understood from Rangeford Villages that their intention – subject to the outcomes of this review, and stakeholder and proposed local community engagement – is to submit an RMA application at the end of the summer. It is also understood that the prospective applicant is not proposing to submit any non-material or minor material amendments to e.g. revise outline permission conditions, or substitute alternative parameter plans. The Panel's comments are made within this context, therefore focusing on the overall draft masterplan and the approaches taken to date to: creating a sustainable development; providing green and blue infrastructure in an emerging detailed landscape strategy; defining and designing various character areas and individual buildings; and relating the proposed buildings to the retirement village's boundaries. Specific attention has also been paid by the Panel to: the approach being taken towards parking provision; and daylight, sunlight, shading, overheating other considerations in the various amenity spaces, and in the internal layouts of buildings and homes.

At this stage, only limited information has been provided to the Panel regarding the consideration of materiality.

Climate

The emerging sustainability strategy and the limited degree to which it has influenced the proposal as presented and to date could be much improved on. Whole life carbon considerations should be a fundamental and directive component underlying the evolving RMA submission and all aspects of the Village's detailed design. As a starting point, every opportunity should now be taken to demonstrate through full assessment how design development has minimised heat loss through proposed building envelopes, typologies and construction methods; designing out

detached bungalows and creating more courtyard buildings typologies based on the thermal qualities of farmsteads would be positive steps to take in this regard.

In terms of energy considerations and building orientation, it is seen as fundamental by the Panel that the applicant seeks to reduce fast-rising energy cost burdens - and embodied and operational carbon - through the masterplan and detailed design.

While noting that a 'Fabric First' approach is to be taken, the Panel would have preferred to have been told that certified Passivhaus and passive design principles were being fully followed. Recognising that the dual aspect apartments will help with cross-ventilation and to manage overheating, the Panel considers further integral elements of a preferred strategy would be to seek to reduce the number of single aspect apartments to a minimum, and there ought to be none that are north-facing (a recommendation reinforced by their current very deep plans). Feature glazing should be used in more limited ways, likewise to reduce potential overheating, for example by raising sill heights in bedrooms (also preferable from a privacy perspective).

Looking in detail at the scheme's roofscape and pitch orientations would increase the scope for PV provision (including on the flat-roofed pavilion), while simultaneously reviewing all potential building materials would assist in achieving a significant reduction in embodied carbon in the building structure. A development of this scale should be aiming to include PVs on every roofscape.

The Panel notes how whole-life carbon analysis has informed the selection of the SIPs panel system but care should be taken to use a supplier that sources low carbon materials. It is also suggested that minimising the use of concrete and steel, and making use of cement replacements, would be appropriate, in particular for the pavilion.

The Panel has also identified a number of landscape issues in relation to the proposed masterplan layout that raise key climate resilience-related concerns. It is clear that green and blue infrastructure are not yet fully integrated, nor are they leading the masterplanning and landscaping strategy; sustainable drainage features currently are confined to the spaces that are left over between proposed buildings and in buffer zones. One example of the consequences of this missed opportunity is that there appears to be no clear design rationale for many of the sustainable drainage system (SuDS) areas - for example, the L-shaped swale located within the southern courtyard. Instead, the Panel considers that taking a unified approach to green and blue infrastructure would lead to a successful landscape and open space

strategy, that in turn incorporates well-designed SuDS features into the landscape, in the street scene and in parking areas.

With regard to the detail of built form, the most major climate-related concern relates to the design of the pavilion. While it is noted that there is an approved parameters plan that restricts ridge height, the positive environmental contribution that the roofscape of this central amenities' building could make is considered to be particularly important. Currently designed as a flat roof, it is disappointing that it is not a green or brown roof, nor is it being proposed for PV panels. Given that the height limitation may well ultimately and in any event be exceeded by the installation of rooftop plant and machinery, the Panel recommends reconsideration of the currently proposed design and possible materials, preferably for a green or brown roof. The benefits of this approach are likely to significantly outweigh any perceived harm resulting from a slight increase in building height.

As matters of more detail, the proposed use of drought-resistant species is endorsed by the Panel; site-wide water use and its recycling should also be referenced and incorporated in the RMA submission – water butts should be provided at the outset for each bungalow, for example.

Character

The Panel's overarching suggestion for advancing current thinking on the retirement village's character is that the design team should undertake a detailed analysis of who will be living here; at present, it is not at all clear why the vast majority of accommodation will be in the form of very large two-and three-bedroom apartments and bungalows. Once this is understood, a 'day in the life' assessment should be undertaken – not only of residents but also everyone who will work here, visit or pass through on their way to and from the country park. The Panel would expect this analysis to lead to a very significant redesign of most, if not all elements of the current masterplan layout and the individual buildings within it.

The Panel's most fundamental concern relating to the current character of the proposal arises from the masterplan and the scale and location of the 154 car parking spaces shown. Many of these almost entirely undesignated spaces line either side of the 'main street' for much of its length. As a direct consequence of this domination by car parking, the layout of the retirement village is fragmented, and

open spaces are broken up unacceptably. The barrier to pedestrian movement that is created by the current parking arrangement on the main street is exacerbated by level changes on-site. The intended ease of direct walking access to reach the pavilion is particularly undermined in this regard; pedestrians potentially with limited mobility are unacceptably forced to take circuitous routes instead. Where parking is provided in car parking courts, there are other issues - either a lack of surveillance, or apartments only having car parks to look out onto.

A fundamental review of the current approach to car parking is therefore seen to be necessary by the Panel, with a suggestion that relocating the majority of car parking spaces to the entrance of the retirement village site being explored, with the added benefit of avoiding stationary vehicles otherwise dominating the landscape. Walled courts and car barn-type structures could be explored, instead of the open courts, and on-plot parking. Changing car parking arrangements in the eastern parking court could also potentially provide an associated open space benefit, that of being able to expand on and bring rather narrow structural planting on the site's boundary further into the scheme at this point. Removal of the main street spaces is suggested to then allow the buildings around the proposed 'central village green' to be re-sited nearer to the open space, reflecting how traditional village greens are surrounded more closely by built form and overlooked.

Referencing the full extent of the site boundary treatment, and while respecting the approved parameter plan for landscape and the thickness of its 'proposed new structural planting' acting as a buffer to the retirement village, it adds further to the perception of the development being inward looking and self-contained, by very considerably reducing its visual connection beyond, and the enjoyment of the surrounding landscape by residents. Accepting that the younger planting that will be used will take time to grow, opportunities should be taken now, in the detailed landscape strategy, to create visual permeability into the site (from views locally and further afield, at key viewpoints) and out from the retirement village site for residents. To select these key viewpoints into and out of the site, reference should be made to the findings and conclusions of previous landscape and visual impact assessment work, as well as sun path analysis and understanding the associated shading by mature planting.

Noting that the local context has been reviewed for character area design references, and a modern interpretation is being taken forward that draws on e.g. the

local farmstead typology, the Panel suggests that the resulting rather tight courtyard spaces in the scheme are checked with comparative studies and tested for daylight levels; as spaces for a range of social and productive activities, they should be used more widely in the masterplan and their design fully understood as connective social spaces. Likewise, the rural edges to the retirement village would merit further study, with a possible successful outcome being a more deliberate arrangement of buildings. The Panel considers that the 'sandwiched' perimeter building typologies, accommodating the considerable number of new homes, are unlikely to provide attractive accommodation for a number of reasons. It is not clear how the identified local farmstead/courtyard typologies have informed this layout and how it supports residents in enjoying and connecting with the wider landscape. The buildings shown have very deep plans, with shared circulation space that is not designed as social space. There is an opportunity to offer comfortable and incidental meeting spaces outside the private home for the community in each building. The narrow ground floor circulation spaces/ corridors should instead play a role in creating ambient spaces that residents can use on leaving their homes but not their buildings. Highlighting the importance of achieving a high quality, well-designed pavilion that meets residents', staff and visitors' needs, the Panel suggests that a redesign should be undertaken, to reconsider its length and very large footprint, and potentially relate it instead to the plan and massing of farmstead typologies devised already elsewhere in the site within the context of this rural 'edge'. This review should include adding to its single entrance in the south eastern corner, which is highly inconvenient for residents living in the northern part of the site. Creating a building with a northern as well as a southern frontage and access option has merit, likewise considering reducing the scale of the restaurant and separating out individual use elements. These and/or changes to internal uses would be with the purpose of providing communal facilities elsewhere on the site, in locations for example that would provide retirement village occupiers with a range of very walkable destinations, and that could better serve others coming to the country park and from Stapleford. As a more detailed design matter and for reconsideration alongside the wider suggested block changes, the aluminium-framed feature gables throughout the site would not generally assist with wayfinding in the Panel's view, as some face onto parking courts and elsewhere, where the pitch of a roof has been rotated 90 degrees, it does not relate to key spaces and vistas.

Connectivity

There are key concerns arising from the draft masterplan layout and its poor physical connections to Stapleford and beyond by non-car modes. As currently designed, the retirement village has all the characteristics of a car-based development and does not encourage active travel modes sufficiently, contrary to the applicant team's stated objective of achieving a high level of Fitwel certification. While there is an existing public right of way off Gog Magog Way that will become an emergency access and a 24-hour public route through the retirement village to/from the proposed country park beyond, this is currently being designed as a footpath weaving through the western site boundary's planted buffer. The Panel is of the view that in this detached location and isolated form, the path's separation from the community means that it will not be well-used by retirement village residents for personal safety reasons - and it will be a security concern to them too. A detailed review of this route would be most worthwhile.

In addition, no direct pedestrian access is provided to the closest bus stops on Gog Magog Way from the south eastern corner of the retirement village site. While there will be minibus transport made available for retirement village residents, it is not clear how this service will operate. The Panel's view is that convenient and sufficiently close connections to the established and relatively extensive social infrastructure of Stapleford must be more clearly demonstrated.

The outcomes of the recommended 'day in the life' study should directly assist in being able to boost all aspects of the site's connectivity by active travel modes, once the needs and abilities of the residents, visitors, staff and neighbours are better understood.

The almost complete absence of reference to cycles, e-cargo bikes, mobility scooters and e-scooter use and storage should be addressed fully in the next iteration of the masterplan.

Community

It has only been possible for the Panel to gain a limited understanding of the people that the retirement village will cater for; the average age has been given and information provided on e.g. on how Rangeford Villages caters for ageing residents in terms of paid options for domiciliary care services. The Panel would have found it

helpful to have been able to explore how residents will live here, how they will be able to enjoy their own homes and their connection to landscape and nature, as well as understand with more clarity how they will use the on-site landscape and amenities. Gaining this detailed level of understanding is particularly pertinent, when the applicant advises that many people will choose to stay on-site all of the time, as their 'safe place'; it therefore remains unclear to the Panel at this stage how such resident-specific considerations have influenced the presented design. It is understood that the site is not a gated community and will allow full 24h access for the public; over-55 local residents will be able to use pavilion facilities. Not intended as an exhaustive list, the Panel suggests that consideration needs to be given to extensive scheme changes as a direct result of understanding residents' and community needs better, such as: defining shared and private outdoor spaces better; exploring semi-recessed balconies to encourage sitting out under shelter in poorer weather; providing wayfaring to suit varying levels of mobility, with seating that is fully integrated and sited to appreciate the landscape in different locations; adding cycling routes around the retirement village; and including an outdoor gym, as well as the proposed visiting children's informal play.

While the Panel clearly understands the topography-related reasoning underlying the siting of the proposed pavilion, and the intention that it is a central village amenity for retirement village residents, its current, relatively 'hidden' location, might not serve the local community well, despite over-55s from the surrounding area being encouraged to become members of some of its facilities, and there being public events held there at times. The lack of direct view of the pavilion from the footpath from Stapleford also undermines the potential to serve the local community well. In terms of landscape elements proposed between buildings, there are tokenistic gestures that if reconsidered, could create another new opportunity for promoting community health and wellbeing. The idea of raised growing beds for residents, with encouragement for them to take ownership of that part of the outdoor space, should be evolved further, not only to create growing areas dedicated to providing 'healthy living' produce for supplying the proposed restaurant but also one that would cater for people from the wider local community.

Summary

Overall, on analysis of the plans provided and somewhat contrary to the review presentation's stance, the proposed masterplan and emerging detailed designs do not yet constitute sustainable development.

The Panel's overarching suggestion for advancing current thinking on the retirement village's character is that the design team should undertake a detailed 'day in the life' assessment of everyone who will live in the retirement village, work there, visit or pass through it.

With reference to climate resilience, the landscape proposals for the retirement village must be formulated from a fully integrated green and blue infrastructure strategy that in turn influences the juxtaposition of buildings, streets and parking areas.

Developing a comprehensive sustainability and energy strategy is seen as a vital next step in ensuring that the retirement village is a well-connected, well-designed and low energy development that promotes a healthy and active way of life – one that creates a new community, closely connected to Stapleford. Prioritising walking and cycling and other forms of e-mobility other than the car is clearly necessary throughout the development, to help achieve all of these objectives, and to promote free-flowing and safe non-car movement by residents and visitors alike.

Overall, the findings from the recommended new 'day in the life' research should feed into implementing the Panel's recommendations for a fundamental reconsideration of the current masterplan, incorporating; an integrated green and blue infrastructure strategy; reviewed siting, orientation and internal layouts of individual buildings and their elements; a reduced, relocated number of car parking spaces; and clear, direct, fully accessible connections within and beyond the site boundaries.

The above comments represent the views of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel and are made without prejudice to the determination of any planning application should one be submitted. Furthermore, the views expressed will not bind the decision of Elected Members, should a planning application be submitted, nor prejudice the formal decision making process of the council.

Contact Details

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