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**Essex Quality Review Panel:** Land East of Highwood Quarry, Great Dunmow, Essex  
*Confidential in advance of a planning application*

Chair: Maggie Baddeley

Panel Members: Clive Burbridge, Gill Wynne-Williams, Mike Jamieson, Robin Buckle

Panel Manager: Chris King

Panel Admin: Adam Fall

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## **Land East of Highwood Quarry, Great Dunmow, Essex**

Architects/Masterplanners: Barton Willmore

Developer/Client: Landsec

### **Panel Description**

The Essex Quality Review Panel (EQRP) were appointed to undertake a review of a proposed residential-led development on land east of Highwood Quarry, Great Dunmow, Essex. The proposal includes circa 1200 new homes, as well as provision for a primary school, local centre, formal and informal open space, green infrastructure, and semi-natural areas, on a site of approximately 155ha.

The following report summarises the Panel's comments and recommendations made during the review session held on Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2021.

### **General**

The Panel would like to thank the design team for a clear presentation. They recognise this is a challenging site - particularly in relation to its planning history and policy context - and appreciate that considerable work has been undertaken to develop the presented proposals to their current stage. As an overview, the Panel's view is that there are a number of fundamental elements that require reconsideration and review, and further design development is needed for the proposal to continue to be promoted as being 'intrinsically sustainable'. These elements include the need for a clear vision and defining principles underlying the project, together with a detailed narrative of how they will create a distinctive place.

At present, the proposal is problematic, in that it is unclear and uncertain whether it would function as an urban extension to Great Dunmow or form a phase of the Easton Park garden community, should it come forward. Key to the project is also its landscape framework, and its relationship with the wider countryside. While recognising efforts made to date, wider transport connectivity issues need to be resolved, particularly to push the use of green forms of travel further; as a point of principle, without better links to the south, the deliverability of a sustainable development on this site has to be questioned. These recommendations and comments are made by the Panel to ensure this proposed application continues to proceed positively and achieves greater design quality standards.

The following topics were discussed during the review session. The Panel recognise that some topic areas have been or are to be addressed. These comments are for guidance purposes only.

### **Masterplanning & Layout**

The Panel consider that a significant amount of work is still required regarding creating the vision for this scheme and the subsequent design principles that are derived from it. Whilst there is an appreciation of the current masterplan, the Panel would have found it useful to have seen a number of different options within the presentation, in order to provide further comment on the suitability of the proposed design. There are concerns that as currently envisioned, this site could become an isolated enclave, and not the sustainable neighbourhood

that should be created here. Further consideration is required, in terms of what will make this a distinctive place. The landscape and SuDs water management features could become the heart of this development and make it very distinctive in terms of creating a place, by forming an integral part of the streets, with water filtering through the site leading down into attenuation ponds.

The Panel understand that 'edges', rather than character areas, have been identified as the preferred approach used to explore and create distinctiveness. However, there are concerns that this approach may result in a lack of differentiation across a site largely occupied by new homes. Reviews of proposed densities, changes in height, access arrangements, views into and out of the site and adjacent land uses etc. will all have significant roles to play in defining the character of this scheme, which in turn needs to come out more through the development of a revised masterplan.

The formation of housing layouts with long boulevards presents a clear ambition in terms of connecting different parts of the site together. However, there is no clear precedent for this urban form in the surrounding area. If retained, these routes would further benefit from the introduction of a sequence of spaces, marker buildings or 'moments' that would each help to address a perceived mismatch between formality and informality and help to make the boulevards more village-like. This mismatch between village characteristics and what is proposed for the site could be addressed for example by identifying more opportunities for creating spaces of intimacy and informality that are currently missing from the masterplan. Adding these spaces could help to improve the wayfinding narrative and create more moments where residents can meet, play or relax. With regard to any community buildings, such as the new primary school, further consideration should be given to the role these buildings can play within the masterplan. This may require additional investment to make the most of the architectural opportunity, but it offers the chance to generate enhanced social value and better place making. As part of this approach, character studies should be undertaken to understand the surrounding settlements and landscape, which should help inform the masterplan design - and create stronger links to its immediate context.

The Panel strongly recommend that every street has trees; it appears from the masterplan that some residential streets are lacking in green infrastructure. In terms of the proposed car parking strategy, it is understood that parking courts are mainly centralised towards the centre of the perimeter housing blocks; this form highlights an area of concern for the Panel, specifically in terms of increasing opportunities for anti-social behaviour. The Panel suggest exploring methods of breaking up the sections of parking to increase perceived safety, for example by allowing people to walk through these areas thereby creating transitional zones as opposed to closed-off spaces. It is believed that the more that revised parking strategies are explored and worked up, then alternative arrangements to the apparent perimeter block housing layout used throughout will be discovered. Furthermore, it is questioned whether parking space numbers could be reduced through the longer-term phasing of the development's transport strategy, to promote the modal shift from private vehicular usage to alternative modes of travel – particularly active forms.

With regard to health and wellbeing, it is important to consider combatting locally identified issues such as obesity and poor air quality - and the wider concern of loneliness - along with providing food growing opportunities for residents within the design proposals. Integrating elements such as trim trails, 'edible streets' and community hubs into the project from the outset may provide far stronger ways in which to promote and achieve healthier, more active lifestyles in this scheme. Mapping out an average 'day in the life' of a range of potential residents within different parts of the development is recommended, to better understand how neighbourhoods will evolve, while highlighting areas for social and active interactions to be created and maintained between people.

In terms of defining quality within the Design Code for the site, the Panel believe that further review is required of ways in which this could be achieved. Through good quality precedents and reference to the Essex Design Guide, the document could showcase how residential developers can create distinctive architecture through a variety of bespoke housing models and/ or utilise standard house types with distinctive facades and features that embrace tailored design in key locations. Off-site modular construction may be feasible in such circumstances, as currently being promoted by Homes England. Research into more innovative construction methods could also help to identify further opportunities to enhance the built form. Overall, there are concerns that if architectural distinctiveness and landscape character are not clearly defined within the project and its Design Code from the outset, then this site will become a continuation of the series of incremental residential developments that have extended Great Dunmow, including on land immediately to the south.

## **Landscape & Open Spaces**

On review of the presentation, it is clear that a lot of work has been put into creating the setting for the proposed housing. The landscape framework setting, and its delivery and phasing, are key to this project; how the framework addresses connections to the wider countryside, such as the ancient woodland and broader landscape to the west, is fundamental too. The ecological strategy is bound in too, into how the landscape and SuDs are treated and whether the character and thinking given to the periphery of the site can be 'pulled in', into green corridors through the proposed development. For example, the area leading to the central park could include more of the countryside character. This could be derived within the green corridor linking this space to other sub-character areas such as Hoglands Wood and Ravens Farm. This approach will ensure that the route does not simply become a footpath with a generic planting scheme, but instead creates a series of landscape features that together inform the overall character of the green infrastructure strategies for the site.

Going forward, it will be important to ensure that the level of landscape character desired is captured within the Design Code for this scheme, along with the protection of development phases and long-term management of green spaces. It was unclear to the Panel during the presentation what the exact amount of land within the red line boundary that would be designated for public access would be in the future. For instance, there remain questions regarding if the adjacent farm will continue to be a discreet area that is commercially managed with limited footpaths, or whether more public access will be provided for residents to this space. As a result, it is recommended a clear public access strategy for this scheme is produced, which demonstrates further connections to the wider open areas and beyond.

Due to the extent of open space proposed within the development, it is believed that the site presents an ideal opportunity for biodiversity net gain (BNG). If the mosaic of habitats can be developed in the Design Code, along with the approach and management for different spaces and green infrastructure across the scheme, then the Panel consider there to be a serious opportunity for achieving BNG on this site. It is recommended that the extent of the proposed gain should be explored to the site's full potential capability, while also being considered in relation to the requirements that are emerging within the Environment Bill. Points have been raised within this report regarding how the setting for the development will evolve with the potential emergence of a garden community immediately to the west. In landscape terms, the current proposals portray a discretely designed development. However, if the new garden community were to proceed, there are questions regarding how that extension will 'fit' with this scheme - in particular, the way in which linkages are established between the two sites. Furthermore, a review of the provision of amenity, sports and leisure space will be required to ensure they can support the wider community, as well as those living on this particular site.

### **Access & Connectivity**

The Panel welcome the efforts made to embrace ways to provide for sustainable transport measures to and within the site. However, concerns remain regarding the proposed single site access arrangements for vehicles, which in effect create a cul-de-sac. Whilst this may not necessarily be an issue for car accessibility and deliveries, there are apprehensions of how this layout will work for public buses. Due to the 4km diversion between the single-entry and exit point of the site, there are not only concerns that this will impact on the extent to which new residents will use any bus service, but also the potential negative impact on the existing patronage of buses and associated costs on running a service.

The Panel's view is that to achieve the fundamental success of this site in terms of access and connectivity, a southern connection through to adjacent residential schemes and the existing town centre is essential, allowing buses to follow a circular route through the site and providing better pedestrian and cycle connectivity. It is clear from the way Great Dunmow is developing, the emphasis of new development is shifting to the south and east (where the existing high street is located). It is understood that new leisure, retail, and educational land uses are proposed towards the south, therefore it is essential for this scheme to show better connections and linkages in response, and to fully justify the proposed site's location in terms of suitability and long-term sustainability.

The site's current lack of connectivity adds to it having the character of another urban extension to Great Dunmow, and it is considered that creating a clearer differentiation will be important if this scheme is to proceed. Unless the new garden community comes forward to the west, there are concerns over the sustainability of this development as a single entity; its access arrangements and current size mean that while it is not considered to be large enough to support a self-contained development, it would in effect be an isolated enclave. Links to the south towards adjacent residential developments and the existing town centre may mitigate these issues; strong outward connections would make this a much more anchored scheme, providing it with a greater sense of purpose within the existing settlement of Great Dunmow. Whilst the provision of pedestrian and cycling routes is welcomed, further consideration of connections for public transport and the filtering of cars through the development would significantly contribute to the success of the masterplan. The Panel suggest considering ways in which car usage and movement can be frustrated within the site, to move

away from a 'car-first' strategy. As seen within other successful modern developments, a reduction in road and highways infrastructure not only helps save on construction costs, but also provides more space and opportunities to enhance cycle and pedestrian routes. As the detail of the masterplan evolves, the Panel would like to see more of this approach adopted.

It is felt that in order to elevate the sustainable links within this site, there is an opportunity to create an exciting sustainable transport hub within the development, which would encourage residents to cycle or walk as opposed to drive, as well as providing a centralised zone for local bus services which will be key in connecting residents to the wider urban context. Whilst it is understood that there may be concerns with regard to viability, it is suggested that opportunities are fully explored for increasing the frequency of the route to Stansted to give a better offer of connections for new and existing residents in the area. Additionally, it is considered that the crossings located along Woodside Way need to be of high-quality, and the Panel would also like to see an upgrade to the treatment of Flich Way to an all-weather surface to improve the sustainable connections towards Stansted.

## Summary

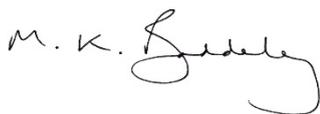
Overall, the Panel has a series of questions relating to the fundamental objective of this project: there is a lack of clarity on whether this scheme will be a freestanding development on the edge of Great Dunmow, or the first phase of an emerging garden community. Consequently, this deficiency and the lack of an obvious evidence base supporting the proposal – whichever form and character of the two it is to take - needs to be made clear through a future planning application. The site's role, context, and character also all need to feed a lot more into the design objectives for this scheme.

Another serious issue to be resolved is in regard to the vision; information was presented on some worrying statistics in Uttlesford, such as high vehicle emissions, low active travel, and high obesity rates in young children. Along with the changes in national policy and guidance over the last two to three years surrounding emissions, health and wellbeing and promoting alternative and active modes of transport, there is scope for this development to raise the bar by being highly sustainable; this will be absolutely essential for it to be considered a success. Whilst references have been made to a Design Code and parameter plans that would be conditioned, it is difficult for the Panel to see what distinguishes this development as a special place. The Panel believe that a clear design vision and defined principles would help to understand more about what this scheme is seeking to achieve, and how it will do so.

From the current proposals, it appears that detailed landscape elements are more resolved than transport connectivity. The idea of a single point of access for all vehicular traffic is considered to be counter-intuitive, particularly in relation to promoting bus use. The lack of integration of the site particularly with development to the south of the site also needs further review - analysing a day in the life of new residents will be critical research, as the awkwardness of some journeys to the local centre, key public amenities and other transport links means it is very difficult to justify this development in sustainability terms, as it is currently proposed. Once again, this leads back to the overall vision for this scheme, where it is felt that a clearer understanding and narrative given to sustainable aspects of design would help to improve on what is currently considered to be an inward-looking enclave of residential-led development.

The Essex Quality Review Panel would be happy to engage with the proposed application further should the above comments and observations be developed.

Yours Faithfully



Maggie Baddeley  
Panel Vice-Chair