

**Cambridge City Council
Design & Conservation Panel**

Notes of the meeting Wednesday 14th February 2018

Attendees:

David Grech	(retired architect, formerly Historic England) Acting Chair
Zoe Skelding	RIBA
Russell Davies	RTPI (retired)
Ian Steen	retired architect, co-opted member
Robert Myers	Landscape Institute
Stacey Weiser	Cambridge Past Present & Future
Tony Nix	RICS

Officers:

Jonathan Brookes	City Council
Jonathan Hurst	City Council
Sav Patel	City Council

Observers:

Cllr Martin Smart	City Council
Ffion Jones	City Council
Hannah Walker	City Council
Lorraine King	East Cambs District Council
Rebecca Saunt	East Cambs District Council

Apologies – Di Haigh and Jon Harris

1. Presentation – Mill Road Depot, Mill Road (17/2245/FUL)

The erection of 184 dwellings (including 50% affordable housing), 72sqm of floor-space consisting of Use Class A1 (Shop), A2 (Financial and Professional Services), A3 (Food and Drinks) or D1 (Non-Residential Institutions) - in the alternative, basement car park (101 spaces), surface water pumping station, open space (including play area), alterations to the junction with Mill Road, together with associated external works including cycle parking and landscaping.

This was last seen by the Panel at pre-application stage in September 2017 when a total of 220 dwellings were proposed (a vote was not cast at that meeting). Other work since then has included sunlight and acoustic analysis as well as further assessment work on views and development of the landscaping. The site area has been reduced, with a YMCA building now proposed for the south east corner of the site, but that does not form part of the current application.

Presentation by Bob Allies and Max Kettenacker with Oliver Unwin of Allies & Morrison Architects accompanied by Andy Thompson of Beacon Planning, David Digby of Cambridge Investment Partnership and Steve McCoy of TEP (landscaping).

The Panel's comments were as follows:

The Panel noted and welcomed much of the work that had taken place to refine the project since they last saw it in September 2017. Many of the Panel's comments concerning landscaping, north-facing gardens, materials and the profiles to the blocks facing the railway had been specifically addressed in the revised site layout and elevational treatments. However, while there had also been some reduction in heights to some of the blocks alongside the railway, the Panel's previous concern over the departure from the

development density set out in the SPD remained. In response to questions on this, Bob Allies accepted that the taller elements within the scheme represented a departure from the existing character and appearance of the conservation area, but questioned whether it was right that a pre-existing character should so influence the future evolution of our cities, and prevent a brownfield site from being re-developed to its full potential.

- **The departure from the SPD.**

Much of the Panel's consideration of the project focused on this aspect since, in attempting to achieve a higher quantum of development on the site to that permitted in the SPD, the resulting scheme is almost bound to have a negative impact on the prevailing character and appearance of the Mill Road Conservation Area. The SPD sets out an overall density of 62 dwellings per hectare for this site, which is consistent with the density found in the adjacent streets of predominantly two-storey terraced housing. The density now proposed for the site is significantly higher, at approximately 82 dph. The SPD also allows for taller buildings to be placed alongside the railway, with a maximum height of 4-stories, plus one 5-storey block at the southern end. While the scheme now submitted for planning permission includes two SPD compliant 4-storey blocks alongside the railway at the northern end of the site (Buildings B06 and B07), it also includes a 6-storey block (Building B05) near the centre of the eastern boundary, plus two 5-storey blocks alongside the railway in the southern half of the site (Buildings B03 and B04), and a 6-storey block at the southern end (Building B02). The Panel concluded that these departures from the SPD would result in a degree of harm to the conservation area, but it was then necessary to consider whether that harm was justified by the wider public benefits that the scheme would deliver through the provision of 92 affordable dwellings.

- **Degree of 'harm' to the Mill Road Conservation Area.**

The Panel noted the Conservation Officer's view that this scheme would result in 'substantial harm' to the character and appearance of the Mill Road Conservation Area as described within the terms of the NPPF. The Panel further noted that the Government's Planning Practice Guidance identifies 'substantial harm' as a high test. In this instance, when considering the degree of visibility of the taller elements in relation to the overall size of the Mill Road Conservation Area, the Panel concluded that, while the level of harm may be high (e.g. in views along Ainsworth Street), the overall impact is unlikely to cross the threshold of 'substantial harm'. Two members of the Panel considered the level of harm was justified by the degree of public benefit that would be delivered, while others concluded that the level of harm was not outweighed by the public benefits. Some voiced deep concern over what they considered to be overdevelopment within a Conservation Area, and the worrying precedent that this might set. Whilst the Panel could not reach an overall consensus on this issue, there was broad agreement that the most harmful element in the scheme is Building B05, and that the harm to the Conservation Area might be significantly reduced if this block was to be reduced from 6-storeys down to 4-storeys. There was less concern over the impact of Building B02, and in particular its impact in views from Mill Road Bridge, though many in the Panel had concerns over the impact of this building on views within the site, and in particular the view looking east along Headley Street (where the building is seen to dwarf the adjacent 2 and 3-storey houses). It was again noted that the whole site lies within the Mill Road Conservation Area and the views within the site are also pertinent to the character and appearance of the Conservation Area as a whole.

- **The gateway building (B09)**

The Panel were sympathetic to the views of residents regarding the impact of a three storey building in such close proximity to the western boundary of the site and the gardens to the existing dwellings along Kingston Street. The Panel therefore welcomed the decision by the design team to review this building and revise the proposal in order to reduce the impact on the neighbouring gardens.

- **Landscaping.**

The Panel welcomed the development of the landscaping proposals. The additional detail for the tree pits appears, in principle, convincing, although their proximity to the underground car parking will mean they are likely to require to be irrigated if they are to succeed. The opening up of Eagle Park through the re-siting of Building B08 is a significant enhancement, but it was felt that the location of the play area could have an adverse impact on this space. Whilst there was an acknowledgement that this was the most practical location, its intrusive nature would be compounded by the need to fence the play area. The design of this area might benefit from further consideration, and in particular whether the northern corner of the play area might be cut back. The use of swales and the grass bank are welcome additions that encourage play; and the footpath between the Green and Park has the potential to become an important informal social space within the development.

- **The Chisholm Trail corridor.**

The Panel noted that the Chisholm Trail corridor is included within the open space calculation of the site as a whole, whereas the roads and pavements are excluded from this calculation. The Panel therefore questioned the logic in including the Chisholm Trail, but accepted that the corridor has also been included within the open space calculations set out in the SPD. In the event that the Chisholm Trail is not routed through the site (e.g. should it be re-routed east of the railway) then the Panel would expect this corridor to remain as amenity space for the enjoyment of the residents. The Panel also noted that the Chisholm Trail is likely to be used by cyclists travelling at speed, and the treatment of the trail at the northern end of the site, where it passes the pumping station and meets the road, will need careful consideration.

- **Renewables – PV.**

As most of the roofs on the site have an East-West orientation, the Panel questioned the effectiveness of PV for much of the development. The Panel were advised that many of the roof pitches are relatively shallow and there would only be a modest reduction in efficiency of the panels on these roofs.

- **Car parking.**

The Panel noted that the overall parking ratio had been reduced in response to feedback from the pre-application consultation exercise. The Panel identified the need for strict management of the on-street visitor parking provision, as 'fly parking' would have a significant detrimental impact on the quality of the public realm. The Panel also expressed some concern over the suggestion that some of the underground parking spaces may be allocated to the YMCA development, compounding a concern that the YMCA proposal did not form part of the current application.

- **Gatehouse and YMCA building (separate application).**

The Panel were disappointed that the application was not a single, holistic proposal for the site, and that the Gatehouse and YMCA building would now form a separate application, since this made it difficult to assess both the full impact of the development and the extent of public benefits that would be delivered. The Panel also had concerns as to what might happen if the YMCA did not relocate to this site. While ongoing negotiations with the YMCA appear encouraging, it was the Panel's view that, should these not come to fruition, then this part of the site should be made available for additional social housing (mirroring the 50% ratio that is to be delivered on the rest of the site).

Conclusion.

The challenge being faced by the design team to deliver new homes on a large scale and within this sensitive location is understood. Despite the obvious public benefits of both removing a current blight on the Conservation Area and the provision of significant numbers of affordable housing, the Panel must express its reservations. How a Conservation Area evolves in order to provide new homes on a brownfield site is the fundamental issue at the heart of this scheme.

VERDICT – GREEN (2), AMBER (4) with 1 abstention.

(As Cambridge PPF have already submitted comments on this proposal Stacey Weiser did not participate in the vote.)

2. Notes of the last meeting – Wednesday 13th December 2017

Notes agreed.

3. Date of next meeting – Wednesday 14th March 2018

Reminder

CABE 'traffic light' definitions:

GREEN: a good scheme, or one that is acceptable subject to minor improvements

AMBER: in need of *significant* improvements to make it acceptable, but not a matter of starting from scratch

RED: the scheme is fundamentally flawed and a fresh start is needed.