

# UTTLESFORD QUALITY REVIEW PANEL

12/12/2024

## **Uttlesford Quality Review Panel: Land North of Taylor's Farm, Takeley**

*Confidential in advance of a planning application*



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### **Land North of Taylor's Farm**

Architects: UMC Architects

Developers/Clients: Pigeon (Takeley) Ltd

#### **Panel Description**

Uttlesford Quality Review Panel (UQRP) has been set up as a sub-panel of the Essex Quality Review Panel to provide a local, independent, expert and objective review service in Uttlesford to help raise the quality of the built environment locally. It is run and managed by Place Services on behalf of the Essex Planning Officers' Association, to facilitate a quality reviewing forum for Uttlesford District Council and applicants of schemes in the context of the emerging Local Plan and the District Design Code.

The UQRP was appointed to undertake a review of the site known as 'Land North of Taylor's Farm', located to the north of Takeley Street and to the east of Thremhall Business Park. The advice sought relates to a proposed employment scheme of circa 86,000sqm (GIA) of employment floorspace including General Industrial (Class B2), Storage or Distribution (Class B8), Office (Class E(g) (i)) and Light Industrial (Class E(g)(i)), alongside associated landscaping and infrastructure for a draft strategic allocation.

The site is also north of Hatfield Forest, which is an SSSI, Ancient Woodland, historic landscape and parkland and important woodland, and a number of Grade II listed buildings along Takeley Street. Priory Wood, another Ancient Woodland is located to the west, the further side of which lies the Grade II listed Thremhall Park building. Other Grade II listed buildings are situated along Dunmow Road to the south. The Stansted Distribution Centre and 3no. other recently constructed distribution buildings are situated on the northern side of the A120, immediately to the north of the site.

The following report summarises the Panel's comments and recommendations made during the review session held on 20/11/2024.

#### **General**

The Panel would like to thank the design team for their presentation. It recognises that this is a sensitive site, particularly with regard to nearby heritage assets, its interaction with Stansted Airport, and its relationship with Takeley and Takeley Street. As an overview however, the applicant's presentation has lacked the detail necessary for a comprehensive review to be undertaken. The consensus across all of the Panel's disciplines is

that the applicant team would need to provide a significant level of additional detail in a revised proposal, in order to achieve a more positive review.

The following topics were discussed during the review session:

### **Heritage context**

The overriding theme across all of the Panel's heritage comments is that the applicant's presentation lacks sufficient detail to be able to fully understand and, therefore, assess the proposal. Despite verbal input from the heritage consultant during the review, no heritage statement has been provided, and no written assessment undertaken of significance that follows Historic England's methodology and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

The Panel finds the potential visibility of the larger proposed buildings – which rise as high as 21m – concerning, as they may potentially impact the setting of nearby listed buildings. As such, it will be important for the applicant to present a worst-case visual impact scenario. This should factor in the intended 24-hour use, with the associated issues of noise and light pollution being considered. Without this information, and a heritage impact assessment, it is not possible for the Panel to reach a definitive conclusion regarding the potential impacts of the taller buildings and the wider, 24-hour use of the site.

A lack of detail in the presentation regarding the large southern landscape buffer is highlighted by the Panel. The applicant has not specified how long this would take to be established, or what the temporary first use impacts in this area will be. This has made it difficult for the Panel to assess the time frame through which there will be limited heritage mitigation from this buffer as a result of immature planting. The trees that will be a part of this buffer may take 25 years to mature, therefore it is important that a detailed strategy which takes into account the heritage perspective is set out.

Two other notable areas of interaction between the proposal and its context are firstly, between the lower scale buildings to the west and to Takeley Street, and second, between the site's proposed buildings and Thremhall Park. For the former, the applicant is encouraged to think carefully about this relationship. The Panel firstly recommends that sections and wire frame diagrams from the perspective of Takeley Street should be produced to help in assessing prospective relationships. Whilst the heritage perspective is not solely about visibility, this is undoubtedly a key factor which requires a strong and detailed approach from the applicant. The Panel also suggests that 'stepping up' the office elements of the larger units - to create a sense of built form - may assist in mitigating harm, by breaking down their scale and massing. For the latter, the Panel specifically notes that the Heritage Impact Assessment forming part of the emerging Local Plan's evidence base refers to the site as currently making a positive contribution to the setting and therefore significance of Thremhall Park. This is due to the landscape buffer between Thremhall Park and Takeley Street that separates the historic estate from the village, which will be lost if the proposal is to be granted planning permission. Therefore, the applicant must, again, think carefully about how to reduce or minimise harm, including considering potential mitigation.

The Panel is not concerned over the views from the Parish Church of Holy Trinity, due to its distance from the site and views being largely incidental and arising from modern road infrastructure rather than being designed.

Overall, the Panel concludes that a level of harm from a heritage perspective will be unavoidable and that the issue will be decided by mitigation and assessing the planning balance. More information with regard to heritage will therefore need to be submitted, in the form of a detailed heritage statement and in conjunction with addressing landscape matters (identified below).

### **Landscape**

As the applicant refers to this being a 'landscape-led' scheme, key themes identified by the Panel include: the need for mitigation strategies; the analysis of relationships with nearby areas; and the detailing of proposed landscape elements.

The Panel notes that, although the Landscape Sensitivity Assessment completed this year by LUC for the Council has assessed this site as having a moderate sensitivity to employment development, this is for up to 3-storey units and means that it is possible that the impact could be more significant for larger scale buildings such as those currently proposed. The level of sensitivity will therefore be important for the applicant to consider. Risks to landscape character and visual amenity are of concern, particularly from the perspective of views from Takeley Street and effects on its character. In this regard, it is important to note that the site is part of a landscape buffer between Stansted Airport, Takeley and the Flich Way. The site's role in the local landscape is therefore arguably important; it is certainly more than just farmland. The Panel therefore suggests that a proposal with lower heights and reduced massing - one which makes greater effort to relate to the character of Takeley and that retains separation from land north of the A120 - may be more appropriate for the local area context.

It will also be important for the applicant team to assess the project's impact on Hatfield Forest, with regard to air pollution and landscape, including the latter's indirect effects. It is also crucial for the applicant team to consider the Landscape Institute's recent Technical Note (TGN 02-21: Assessing landscape value outside national designations), especially with regard to the site's role in relation to cultural and natural heritage. An Environmental Colour Assessment would be worthwhile, as part of creating a positive response to the issue of landscape, even if undertaken at a high level. This assessment would then allow landscape to play a role in the colour of the proposed elevations.

It is understood that the Airport has referred to particular restrictions on the use of open water as part of a sustainable drainage strategy (SuDs), and on the planting of new trees – both being intended to avoid the proliferation of birds near the airport. The approach to SuDs and blue infrastructure is noticeably poor as a result of this 'restriction', with the proposal lacking a presence of water in its approach to landscaping, which means that it is losing a tool which could be used to drive quality. The Panel recommends that the applicant team makes a greater effort to find compromises with the Airport, or push back against these restrictions, particularly as it should be possible to create swales and sustainable drainage basins that would be dry most of the time.

In terms of green infrastructure, the opportunity to drive character beyond the site's logistics/ industrial uses is currently being missed. This is a sensitive natural site, meaning that the scheme can be nature-led. The scheme's proposed green corridors are considered by the Panel to be a positive concept in principle but, in practice, they currently lack a sense of purpose. There will need to be a well-defined and coherent strategy to these spaces, as it will be difficult to integrate public space and natural settings with the proposed uses, thus necessitating a committed approach by the design team. The buffer to the west should also be wider; the perimeter dog walking route is rather tight presently, which will hinder its quality and ultimately, its use. The green north/ south corridor would benefit from being widened to create a linear park, as this would create a better-defined, more useable space.

Regarding the practical implications of establishing the buffers, the Panel has concerns around issues of stewardship and maintenance; the importance of both in securing well-maintained landscape spaces in the future cannot be emphasised enough.

In terms of process, the Panel concludes that the quality and extent of landscaping should be 'fixed' as far as possible at outline application stage, through the submission of a site-wide design code, green and blue infrastructure parameter plans and a site-wide Landscape and Ecological Management Plan, given the concerns being raised with the review proposal.

### **Urban Design**

The Panel recognises the innate challenges presented by a draft allocation for such a large warehouse and distribution scheme being located behind a small village with several heritage assets. It will not be possible to truly harmonise this proposal with its setting. Examples given to illustrate this issue include how just one of the review scheme's car parking areas would be the size of nine homes in the village; the significant presence of HGVs will be new to the area; and the proposed buildings and their uses will create significant new noise and light pollution.

The Panel is concerned that much of the applicant team's narrative has focused on the extent of landscaped space between the new buildings and existing development. This is, however, a defensive narrative that would not be enough to justify this scheme; the spaces are currently just 'left' in the Panel's view. Rather than simply promoting the green buffers as part of the site's current mitigation strategies, the design team should use spatial plans – for example, an urban form parameter plan – to begin to add spatial detail. The applicant should also be thinking more in terms of the positive benefits that could be proposed for the village. This process should start with taking a step back and investigating what the village is missing, asking the community what they might want from any new development, and deciding how this might be delivered through this proposal. From this, a 'story for the village' can be created, thinking too about the principles behind physical form, before designing physical areas in practice. The aim should be to achieve a more balanced proposal between what the applicant would like and what the village needs. There are also areas of landscaping which appear to be incidental to the layout of the 'hard' areas. This overall approach will not result in a high-quality scheme; the applicant team should aim to design the landscape layout first.

In particular and notwithstanding the transport perspective (see below), the Panel is unsure that the green link would be a successful addition as currently designed, questioning the practicality of this space. The area may look positive in plan view but, in practice and at a human scale, there are questions over how it will feel and whether it will see significant use. As the site can only accommodate a finite amount of green space, the design team should ensure its use as wisely as possible, to drive quality and placemaking.

The applicant is encouraged to formulate a less oppressive security strategy when considering boundary conditions. Fencing will normally be unpleasant to look at, therefore it will be important for the design team to consider alternatives where possible and, if wire mesh fencing is unavoidable, the most sensitive way of integrating this into the landscape. Regarding security, it is noted that residents and dog walkers will want to utilise the publicly available looping paths around landscaped areas but at present, these areas risk being unobserved, dark, and tight in spatial terms. The applicant should therefore review their approach and make adjustments where necessary, opening these spaces up to be more generous and considering how they can be overlooked by active frontage.

The applicant is also encouraged to think more about other urban design principles of their proposal. For example, the north/ south green link has its vista terminated unpleasantly by a substation. Such details will have an impact from a human-scale perspective on the perceived quality of the scheme. The applicant should therefore look to research and incorporate high-quality placemaking principles which will be appreciable from the human-scale perspective.

When dealing with an influx of some 1100 workers, the Panel acknowledges that it is also important to consider traffic, as well as sustainable travel by non-car modes. In acceptance of how the majority of employees will drive to and from the site, the urban design of the proposal will need to respond accordingly, and sensitively integrate car parking into the landscape scheme. A further urban design and key concern of the Panel is that no ancillary buildings for 'core' activities are being proposed. Despite the scale of the scheme and how the applicant is anticipating that 1,100 people (i.e. more than the population of the local village) will work in these buildings, there is nothing for them to do when they are not working, or for the existing community to utilise. A positive proposal would have more than two uses: the current scheme cannot, in the Panel's view, be successful with such a limited scope. If the proposal does not create social infrastructure, then the result would be a development divorced from Takeley itself and one that does not make an earnest attempt to welcome the local community. The Panel suggests referencing the [TTP development](#) on the edge of Melbourn in Cambridgeshire in this regard, where a large-scale employment use alongside a village of a similar size has been assimilated and delivered positively. The design team is encouraged to visit this development, assess its qualities and reflect its features in a revised proposal.

The Panel also stresses that whilst it is too early to think about many detailed aspects of the buildings themselves, this stage is an opportunity to define a number of principles. For example, careful thought needs to be given as to where the entrances will be located, how buildings will face and overlook streets and spaces, and the appearance of buildings as seen from key views. Thinking about such matters will allow the design team to understand what the functions and roles of each building's aspect could be. From this understanding, more detailed elements such as elevational and roof design will follow. The Panel advises that whilst creating and

submitting a site-wide design code could be a positive move, it would not be spatial and therefore could not influence layout - a key issue with the presented scheme. It will nonetheless still be important to submit a site-wide code, one that outlines urban design principles and that is focussed on generating a positive experience for the community.

## **Transport**

The Panel notes that, from a transport perspective, this site is a logical location for a commercial development. It is an accessible location that provides good proximity to a key road network. The Panel agrees that it would not be prudent for the applicant to compromise their layout in order to allow for a north eastern A120 connection into land that is proposed to be safeguarded via an emerging Local Plan allocation, when there is no certainty that this land will come forward. Instead, the Panel considers that it would be more appropriate for the applicant team to focus on ensuring good design in matters over which they have a greater level of control and certainty.

It is clear to the Panel that thought has been given to where active frontages have been located and it is noticeable that buildings have been oriented to try and screen noise from their service yards. But comments from other perspectives regarding the principles of the scheme and its design details are, however, echoed. The Panel would like to see better connectivity and clear demonstrations of proposed active travel routes. For example, the applicant team has stated a commitment to providing a cycle link along the B1256 but has not determined the extent, nor have any cycle and pedestrian links to the Flitch Way been defined. It is essential for the applicant to provide cycle connectivity; ideally, the proposed link along the B1256 should extend to the Station Road crossroads where cyclists can continue east on existing facilities. 3.5m cycle routes should be proposed, rather than 4.8m, with the latter being considered to be unnecessary when considering the anticipated level of cycle traffic and difficulty in delivery along the B1256. For walkers, it is a positive that the applicant is intending to upgrade the on-site public right of way (PRoW).

To better promote sustainable travel modes, the Panel advises that the applicant should commit to upgrading bus stops and undertake a genuine exploration of the buses looping around the two access points into the site, given there is no housing south of the Takeley Road frontage in this location. The potential catchment of such a route would be substantially increased within the development, thus providing a significant boost to the sustainable transport offer. The Panel also questions whether the easternmost access point should allow private vehicles for employees into the site, as is currently planned. If traffic is a local concern, then it stands to reason that the applicant should not encourage car travel as a means for local residents to use their cars to access the proposal's buildings or its landscape (or any ancillary buildings/ uses which may come forward in future revisions). Instead, the applicant should focus on pedestrian and cycle routes locally, to encourage active travel.

While the concept of the north/ south green link is viewed from a transport perspective to be positive in terms of its width and potential for landscaping, the urban design considerations referred to above are considered valid too. The Panel's view of the ongoing east/ west route against the site boundary is less positive, however. The large buildings will feel imposing on the PRoW, particularly given the limited width of landscaped space and the inconsistency of built form along this route.

Although it is not possible for the Panel to comment with certainty at this stage, the quantum of car parking appears to be appropriate, relative to the size of the development and the proposed uses of buildings. Although it would be ideal for the tenants occupying the warehouses to share car parks to reduce the overall number of spaces, the Panel understands that there must be a level of realism over this issue and that it may not be feasible to do so. This position must, however, be justified by the applicant and there should not be an expectation for the Panel - or the local planning authority - to accept the matter at face value. It has also been noted from the applicant's sketches by the Panel that cycle stands would be incorporated; as a design detail, they should have green/ brown roofs, bughouses on their sides as measures that will add to biodiversity net gain.

## **Planning**

Once again focussing on the lack of detail in the applicant's presentation, the Panel considers that, from a planning perspective, more baseline information is required, together with an explanation of how background

research has influenced the review proposal and its illustrative layout. Without baseline assessments, it is difficult to comment with the necessary detail and certainty, and it is difficult to have faith that the applicant team has designed the proposal in a manner which has taken account of the necessary contextual information.

The design team should also produce a number of new diagrams, to facilitate assessment of the proposal in its context in greater depth and with more certainty. For example, the Panel finds it surprising - and disappointing - that no wire frame diagrams have been presented, when it seems that the information which they might provide could exert influence on what a contextually responsive layout would look like.

The Panel therefore recommends that the applicant team takes several steps back; the baseline assessments should then influence a new, revised layout and related parameter plans providing thresholds etc. should be evolved for an extensive range of spatial elements. The Panel would also expect the applicant to submit a site-wide design code with the proposed hybrid application. The Panel's recommendation is that planning conditions specifying these items as 'approved' - and requiring the development to be delivered in accordance with them - should be attached to any grant of permission in this scenario.

### **Summary**

The overarching theme of all of the Panel's comments is that a lack of detail in the applicant team's presentation has prevented comprehensive comments. The Panel has no clear idea of how baseline information and assessment has been reflected in the emerging proposal. In particular, it has not been possible to accurately assess the heritage impact of the proposal, nor formulate an understanding of the timeframes associated with proposed buffer planting; both are elements which will be crucial to the success or failure of this project. For a more successful revision to the proposal to be achieved, it should have a significant uplift in levels of detail, including a number of submitted parameter plans being submitted on application that can be specifically cited in planning conditions requiring the development to be delivered in accordance with them.

A key theme of the Panel's comments is that, whilst the applicant has stated that this is a landscape-led scheme, the Panel cannot agree. In the Panel's view, 'hard' infrastructure (such as car parking and the buildings themselves) have dictated the layout of green infrastructure, when this should not be the case. The Panel has also called for the applicant to think more deeply about placemaking principles. Whilst some of the applicant's proposed ideas, such as the north/south green link, are seen as favourable in principle, there are design concerns over whether the green spaces/ routes would feel high-quality, pleasant, and safe in practice.

There is also a clear view that the provided plans do not take into account the serious challenge of providing such a large-scale scheme adjacent to such a small village. Sensitive integration with Takeley, and designing with its community's needs in mind, local connectivity, and the provision of ancillary uses are all principles that have not yet come through, despite creating a more positive proposal for Takeley, and giving more consideration to the impacts of a proposal which will bring 1,100 workers into the area, being critical to the success of the proposal.

While the Panel sees the approach to date to transport as being generally positive, more detail should be provided on active travel connectivity, and measures promoting bus travel.

Overall, a successful revised proposal will be rich with detail, genuinely landscape-led, expressive of positive placemaking principles, and well-integrated into the village of Takeley.

