

Design Review

Land at Wises Lane and Cryalls Lane Sittingbourne

9 May 2018

Land at Wises Lane and Cryalls Lane, Sittingbourne

Reference: 557.3-1069

Report of Design Review Meeting

Date: 23 April 2018

Location: Swale Borough Council, Swale House, East Street, Sittingbourne

Panel

Allan Atlee (Chair), Architect/ Urban Designer

Luke Engleback, Landscape Architect

Alan Legg, Architect/Urban Designer/Planner

Also attending

David Tittle, Design South East

Mick Drury, Mulberry Estates

Julian Wilkinson, BDW

Brian Sutherland, BDB Architects

Hamish Buttle, Quinn Estates

John Wilde, C&A Consulting

Cllr John Wright, Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council

Cllr Nicholas Hampshire, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Ghlin Whelan, Swale Borough Council

Cllr James Hunt, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Roger Truelove, Swale Borough Council

Cllr Mike Baldock, Swale Borough Council

Simon Algar, Swale Borough Council

Andrew Byrne, Swale Borough Council

Alun Millard, KCC Highways

Site visit

As this was a follow-up review a smaller panel was used and a site visit was not undertaken. A full site visit was undertaken by the panel prior to the first review meeting in June 2016.

Summary

Since we last reviewed this scheme the masterplan has moved in a positive direction on a number of fronts but there are still aspects of the proposal that give cause for concern. It is disappointing that we have not yet seen the design brief which is a requirement of this site allocation. The design brief should have established design principles for the masterplan before it was developed.

The general tendency with this scheme to privilege traffic flow over place-making and pedestrian convenience is likely to lead to higher vehicle speeds and a less safe and attractive neighbourhood. Although the main road through this development has a linking and relieving function it should be seen primarily as a suburban street.

Regarding the phase 1 detailed design, we can see that discussions with the local planning authority have led to a positive evolution of the layout in some aspects but in others it still needs work. Clear design principles would have helped.

Background

This is a proposal for a residential-led mixed-use development of up to 675 homes, community, retail, sporting and medical facilities on an area of 47 hectares to the south west of Sittingbourne. The proposal also includes a primary school, formal and informal public space and a link road between Borden Lane and Chestnut Street.

Two thirds of the site is allocated for residential development under policy MU3 (Land at South West Sittingbourne) of the adopted local plan. A hybrid planning application has been submitted to Swale Borough Council with full planning permission sought for 80 homes on an area closest to the northern access to the site from Wises Lane.

This scheme has been reviewed on two previous occasions by the Swale design review panel. The last review on 18th July 2017 concluded that some strategic changes had been made which significantly improved the proposal; the panel supported the relocation of the school to be closer to the local centre, the inclusion of the rugby club and link road making a more direct connection to the A249. The proposal for north-south greenways through the site was commended. However, we felt there was a lack of vision in the proposals and that although reports such as an environment assessment and heritage reports had been commissioned we could not see how they had influenced design. We felt that more detail was needed at the outline stage to give the local authority confidence that a masterplan potentially delivered by a number of parties could achieve the necessary quality.

We sought greater clarity regarding the nature of the link road and how it would change as it moved through different areas of the development and particularly how it would respond to the greenways. We were strongly concerned about the large roundabouts at each end of the link road and how pedestrians and cyclists would access the development at these points. There was no diagram showing wider pedestrian connectivity into and beyond the development.

Masterplan development: response to previous reviews

While some specific points made in previous reviews have been responded to positively in other areas, the illustrative masterplan has not evolved significantly. In the absence of a design brief articulating clear design principles for the site this is likely to continue to happen.

Junction and link road design

At the last review we called for greater clarity about the character of the 'link road'. We are pleased to see that this has evolved somewhat and that calming/crossing arrangements are illustrated where the road passes through the greenways (although it is not clear exactly what these will be and the the central one nearest the school is absent). Sections drawings across the link road have not been produced and it is still hard to discern how its character changes.

At the first review we said that there was no reason why homes should not have direct access to the link road but on the southern side this seems to have been totally ruled out. This decision might be justified if the southern edge of the road provided a high-quality green verge with swales incorporated as part of an overall SUDs strategy, but this is not the case. The illustrated layout is wasteful of land as the area of carriageway is effectively doubled by the use of a separate service road to the houses. Furthermore, these service roads are often illustrated as being accessed by a convoluted drive around the block, rather than a simple in-out arrangement which has been typical of such service roads in the past.

In previous reviews we have criticised the layout for not following simple urban design principles and employing a loose but fully connected grid. There continue to be illustrations of cul-de-sacs embedded in blocks and obvious vehicle connections not made.

The two over specified roundabouts at each end of the link road are still shown. The applicants have not demonstrated how pedestrians and cyclists will safely and conveniently use these junctions. Nor has our previous request for an illustration of wider pedestrian connectivity been provided.

School and neighbourhood centre

At the last review we commended the decision to relocate the school and locate the shop and medical centre close to it but criticised the illustration of the school as set behind a car park. The school is still shown addressing a combined car park and drop off space with no 'civic space' in front of it for parents to wait and meet. The adjacency to the shop and medical centre could be improved still further and focussed on a shared public space which would become the heart of the neighbourhood.

Density

We are pleased to see a more varied pattern of density and building heights and would urge that this was explored further during the development of phases.

Cryalls Farm and southern edge

At the last review there had been no response to the heritage report. We are pleased to see that there is now a suitable response to the listed buildings. The buffer to the southern edge also seems appropriate.

Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems

It is unfortunate that SUDS discussions are on-going at such a late stage in the evolution of the masterplan. They could have driven the design much more. The principle that run-off should be dealt with as near as possible to where the rain drops fall should be one of the design principles for this development. At present we can only see a couple of attenuation ponds in the centre of the site. This does not constitute a SUDS. There are a huge number of benefits in terms of biodiversity, air quality and cooling that wide verges with swales and trees could provide to this development which would greatly increase its attractiveness and marketability.

Phase 1

It is good to see detailed proposals coming forward for a first phase of this development which enable the design issues to be engaged with in a practical way. The detailed designs for Phase 1 underline the importance of the design brief which should have been in place before any full application was submitted.

Layout

We are pleased with the way the layout for the northern part of phase one has developed as a result of discussions with the local planning authority. In particular our recommendation for a back-garden-to-back-garden arrangement where the scheme adjoins Dental Close has been adopted. This has been facilitated by the adoption of a simple loop through this block.

The layout of the southern part of phase 1 does not seem so rational with extended cul-de-sacs creating awkward relationships and possibly using land less efficiently than might be possible. It is not helped by not being able to use the land alongside Wises Lane near the Maylam Gardens and Brier Road junctions but north and south of this strip connections to Wises Lane could be created.

Junctions

The junction between the old and new Wises Lane seems over-specified with splays apparently based on the sweep path of large refuse vehicles. This creates a junction which is not friendly to pedestrians in order to facilitate a movement which will only happen once a week. We were told that a more compact layout was proposed but this was changed following a safety audit. We would suggest that there is something wrong with the safety audit methodology if that is the case.

There is a further problem with the proposal for this junction with the existing houses that currently front Wises Lane having access to drives across the triangular verge created by the new junction. This means that this area will simply be a series of drives and any benefit the green verge provides will be lost.

We can understand what is driving the decision to realign the road to create a more perpendicular junction but it could be that a much more subtle realignment of the old Wises Lane might be sufficient to give the signal to motorists that the new Wises Lane is now the through-route (something they will learn soon enough anyway).

At the junction between the new Wises Lane and the link road a dedicated right hand turning lane is proposed. Again, this is prioritising traffic flow over placemaking and is likely to result in increased speeds along the link road.

House designs

We are pleased with the way the house designs for Phase 1 seem to have evolved into a more contemporary approach in line with our recommendation from the previous review. It is unlikely that even the best volume housebuilder could replicate the quality of Bordon's older houses and so it is much better to create something that is simple and of its time. However, the architectural proportions and boundary treatments of these houses might have something to teach us. The larger windows now proposed should allow for greater daylight within homes than a historicist approach would have achieved, although where homes are south facing this needs to be examined carefully so there is not overheating. It would be much better if the spur for contemporary design was modern ways of living and working, in the way that, for example some of the better homes in Newhall, Harlow allow for small strategically-placed office-study areas and well-lit inside-outside rooms for socialising or play.