

Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel

Report of Chair's Review: Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Design Guide

Wednesday 24 October 2018

Frame Projects, 44-48 Wharf Road, London, N1 7UX

Panel

Peter Maxwell (chair)
Roland Karthaus

Attendees

Ione Braddick	Epping Forest District Council
Sarah Pullin	Harlow and Gilston Garden Town
Louise Mansfield	Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners
Mark Leitner-Murphy	Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners
Allison De Marco	Frame Projects

Apologies / copied into

Claire Hamilton	Harlow and Gilston Garden Town
Alison Blom-Cooper	Epping Forest District Council
Claire Sime	East Hertfordshire District Council
Adam Halford	East Hertfordshire District Council
Deborah Denner	Frame Projects

Confidentiality

This is a review of a strategic guidance document in draft format, and therefore confidential. As public organisations Harlow District Council, East Hertfordshire District Council and Epping Forrest District Council are subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and Environmental Information Regulations (EIR), and in the case of an FOI/EIR request may be obliged to release project information submitted for review.

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1. Project name

Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Design Guide

2. Aims of the Quality Review Panel meeting

The Quality Review Panel provides impartial and objective advice from a diverse range of highly experienced practitioners. This report draws together the panel's advice and is not intended to be a minute of the proceedings. It is intended that the panel's advice may assist project and development management teams in making design improvements where appropriate and in addition may support decision-making, in order to secure the highest possible quality of development.

3. Background

Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners were appointed to work up Vision and Design Guide documents in June 2017. Stakeholder and developer engagement took place from June 2017 to February 2018, followed by one-to-one developer workshops and public consultation on the Vision document and design principles within the Design Guide (not site-specific information) in mid-2018 – it is anticipated that site-specific consultation will take place at masterplanning stage. Responses from the QRP reviews in May and July 2018 and public consultation, stakeholder and developer feedback have been gathered – and revisions made. The Vision and Design Guide will be reported to the Garden Town Member board with a recommendation for endorsement and agreement to take back to three district councils on 12 November – it is then proposed that the Vision and Design Guide will be endorsed as a material planning consideration by the three District Councils in December 2018.

The panel is asked to comment on the newly inserted 'Design Quality Questions' included within the Design Guide – these questions can be used by developers, Officers and the QRP to assist in reviewing masterplans and schemes.



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4. Quality Review Panel's views

Summary

The Quality Review Panel supports work undertaken in developing the Design Guide since its last review – it thinks this document responds positively to the opportunity of the brief. Whilst supporting the overarching approach, it recommends the following refinements. There is scope to more explicitly describe how the Design Guide should be used, including its design quality questions. It would be helpful to expand on how the document can be kept 'live', as development of the Garden Town progresses. As work develops across the suite of strategic Garden Town documents the panel highlights several critical areas where further work is strongly recommended to ensure delivery of the Garden Town vision – it will be particularly critical to crystallise challenging metrics early, such as on parking. It also wants to hear more on the Harlow Town Centre Area Action Plan (AAP) as soon as possible. Further details on the panel's views are provided below.

Approach and status

- The panel offers warm support to the Vision and Design Guide for Harlow and Gilston Garden Town – including how the four themes, and underlying principles, have been drawn out through the 'Key Principles for Healthy Growth'.
- The panel thinks the Guide should make an explicit statement that strategic site masterplans and future applications are required to respond to its design quality questions. It supports the idea of providing guidance and metrics within the guide, which each promoter responds through their masterplan.
- The panel understands that the document will play a crucial role as a 'check and challenge for developers' – if the focus of the guide has shifted towards a developer / applicant audience, there is scope to refine wording to make it more technical.
- It will be important that the guide does not remain static – the panel wants to know how the document will be kept 'live'- encouraging a process of revision over time.
- The panel would welcome clarity on how the guide interacts with the Gilston Charter.

Document structure

- Generally, the panel recommends reviewing the document to reduce overlap with the Vision document, avoiding duplication.
- The panel wonders why the guide contains analysis subsets such as 'typologies' and 'views' under the 'placemaking and homes' and 'landscape and green infrastructure' sections – while these are absent under 'sustainable movement' and 'economy and regeneration' themes. While it appreciates that analytical plans and maps have been included within these sections it thinks there is scope to explore relevant subsets.



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- When using photos, the panel suggests including captions explaining why images have been included – there is a risk of misinterpreting images without a narrative.
- It repeats its earlier point recommending revisiting the scale of the diagrams within the 'Strategic Site Guidance' section.

Overall density considerations

- It will be critical that the guide gives unambiguous guidance on principles that are fundamental for delivering the vision. For example, the panel points to the critical relationship between density and public transport.
- It thinks wording on density is contradictory and recommends ensuring it is robust and clear.
- It highlights the risk of setting density caps informed by 'nearby existing development' – these may not be enough to support the social infrastructure, public transport and local facilities required to achieve sustainable development.
- It thinks there are risks in pursuing an approach that sets approximate densities or ranges – such as those within the strategic site guidance section – without further detailed density analysis, as these are likely to be too low. It may be preferable to focus on desired outcomes and design quality questions demonstrating how these will be achieved.

Design quality questions

Overall approach

- While the panel supports using a thematic approach for sections covering analysis – in refining the series of design quality questions, the panel suggests moving beyond a thematic approach.
- It recommends developing questions that challenge developers to demonstrate how proposals reflect a considered level of analysis about its location and how this contributes towards a holistic vision for the place– applying a cross-cutting approach to interrogate proposals.
- The panel thinks this approach will help robustly test the logic and approach underpinning schemes – and reduce the risk that design quality questions are used as a 'tick-box' exercise.
- Generally, it thinks questions could be more specific – and suggests reviewing language to ensure it is sufficiently robust.



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Placemaking and homes

- The panel recommends posing questions that challenge developers / applicants to describe their vision – it will be critical that the vision of each place is unique.
- It wonders if wording could be sharpened to pose questions on high quality architecture, typologies or streetscape qualities.
- In pursuing a cross-cutting approach – it will be critical to ensure strategic site densities are sufficient to support Public Transport, including Bus Rapid Transport (BRT). For example, questions could be posed asking that applicants ‘demonstrate the density necessary to deliver the services and sustainable transport needed’ – this will then generate a feedback loop that challenges developers/applicants to test their schemes against desired outcomes.

Landscape and green infrastructure

- It reiterates earlier questions on the scope of sustainability measures considered and states these do not go far enough – there is scope to pose questions on water, waste and other critical outcomes.

Sustainable movement

- Whilst avoiding over-specificity, the panel suggests refinements that test both ‘carrot’ and ‘stick’ measures for achieving sustainable transport goals. For example, asking questions about what measures will be put in place to make walking and cycling easier; and questioning what measures are proposed to discourage private car use.
- At question four, it suggests asking how people will use public transport.

Economy and regeneration

- It will be important to interrogate developers / applicants on their understanding about the role of their local centre within the hierarchy of the wider garden town and beyond.
- There is scope to expand on questions asking how proposals support the health and vibrancy of the town centre – to ask how the function of the new centres compliment, augment or contrast with existing offers in the surroundings.

Stewardship and management

- The panel supports questions that explore future management parameters – including stewardship and management regimes, and how and who will manage the public realm.



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Next steps

- The panel strongly supports ongoing work across the suite of strategic Garden Town documents, including: Infrastructure Delivery Plan; and Town Centre AAP.
- It recommends further exploration on several fundamentals that require further scrutiny – critical to ensuring delivery of the Garden Town vision. It will be critical to crystallise challenging metrics early, such as parking and sustainability. These will influence behaviours and outcomes – their impact on built form means it will be important to understand them early.
- The panel continues to strongly urge further work on parking and modal shift – these are fundamental challenges to successfully delivering on the sustainable transport ambitions for the Garden Town. It will be important to understand how levers and metrics will be set, with targets potentially phased over time.
- The panel strongly recommends further exploration of the approach to intensification – encouraging discussion on an approach to incremental densification across the Garden Town. It wants to hear more about a holistic approach across the Garden Town, that considers: the four strategic sites; existing Harlow communities; and Harlow Town Centre.
- It cautions about the risk if a coordinated approach is not pursued – with outer strategic sites developing higher densities than those of Harlow Town Centre.
- The panel would welcome being presented with the critical Harlow Town Centre Area Action Plan (AAP) work, including preferred option work, as soon as possible – during winter 2018/19.

