



Somerset Quality Review Panel

Report of Formal Review Meeting: Monkton Heathfield Phase 2

Monday 26 June 2023

Somerset Council, Deane House, Belvedere Road, Taunton, TA1 1HE

Panel

Andrew Beharrell (chair)

Lise Benningen

Gabriela Costa

James Grayley

Attendees

Simon Fox Somerset Council

Sam Tearle Somerset Council

Graeme Thompson Somerset Council

Jennifer Clifford Somerset Council

Deborah Denner Frame Projects

Apologies / report copied to

Alison Blom-Cooper Somerset Council

Fiona Webb Somerset Council

Omri Ben-Chetrit Somerset Council

Confidentiality

This is a pre-application review, and therefore confidential. As a public organisation Somerset Council is subject to the Freedom of Information Act (FOI) and, in the case of an FOI request, may be obliged to release project information submitted for review.

1. Project name and site address

Monkton Heathfield Phase 2 - land east of the A38, south of Walford Cross

2. Presenting team

Joe Murphy Persimmon

Jamie Grant Persimmon

Emma Powell Redrow

Gareth Howell	Environmental Dimension Partnership (EDP)
Peter Widdrington	EDP
Jonathon Lloyd	Vectos
Gemma Nelmes	Stantec
Ian Jewson	Oneleven Property

3. Planning authority briefing

Monkton Heathfield Phase 2 is one of several separate sites forming part of the Monkton Heathfield urban extension – an area allocated under Core Strategy Policy SS1 to deliver 4,500 homes. Several sites have come forward already, including Phase 1 for circa 900 homes by the same developers Persimmon and Redrow.

Alongside extensive pre-application discussions, Persimmon and Redrow and the Council undertook masterplanning work to inform the design of Phase 2. However, in October 2021 the Council ceased work on its own masterplan and design guide for Monkton Heathfield due to conflicts with Taunton’s Garden Town status and the Council’s declarations of Climate and Ecological emergencies.

The applicant team has engaged in discussions with the Council since September 2022, when the Council agreed to defer a decision on the current Phase 2 planning application. The primary focus has been the masterplan and the key principles to be used to inform future work. Key issues include the requirement to extend an outer relief road around Phase 2 and the implications this has for placemaking and the desire to ensure there is a strong message about sustainability including, for example, a District Centre and employment opportunities that can aid self-containment.

Since the previous Quality Review Panel meeting to discuss the scheme in January 2023, the applicant has continued to engage with the highways authority about the transport assessment, assessing off site cycle linkages and testing emerging junction designs. Work has also continued to understand the planning obligation requirements and refined the ‘ask’ and ‘offer’ relating to the district centre and employment zone areas, including models of delivery.

The Council asked for the panel’s views on: transformation of the A38 into an urban street; whether the masterplan and its layout is successful in terms of place making and quality of life; parking, active travel and the park and bus / mobility hub; the integration of Passivhaus design principles and the zero-carbon toolkit; key performance indicators on sustainability; delivery of homes that reflect local vernacular; the separate northern parcel; and the preparation of a design code.



4. Quality Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel thanks the applicant team for bringing their proposals for Monkton Heathfield Phase 2 back for a second review. It welcomes the progress made, particularly on landscape strategy, green and blue infrastructure, biodiversity, housing layouts, and the character of the A38. However, several previous comments remain relevant. The panel continues to recommend that two design codes are produced: one for the public realm, landscape, and urban design including street layout and details; a second to guide the design of buildings. Translating the landscape strategy into detailed designs will be essential to the success of the scheme. The panel also asks for a more ambitious approach to environmental sustainability and low carbon design. It welcomes the emerging thinking about street hierarchy and character. In particular, it applauds the thought being given to humanising the A38. Typical plans and sections through each type of street should be illustrated in the design codes, to clarify how the street hierarchy will function and contribute to character of place. It thinks the proposals for the mobility hub require further thought. An opportunity to comment on more detailed designs for the employment area would be welcomed at the appropriate stage. The panel also looks forward to seeing how the studies of the local vernacular will inform the design of the new homes. These comments are expanded below, and points made at the previous review that remain relevant are repeated for clarity.

Design codes

- The panel recommends that the masterplan is accompanied by two design codes.
- Firstly, a design code is needed for the urban design including public realm and landscape, including variation in density and character across the site, street sections, parking and play strategies.
- Secondly, a design code should be produced on building design: housing, mixed-use and other typologies; 'parcel' or 'tissue' studies of typical urban blocks; fusion of local vernacular influences with innovative response to construction, climate change challenges and modern lifestyles and aspirations.
- Ideally these design codes would be submitted alongside the outline application for the masterplan.
- However, an alternative would be for the planning authority to require approval of design codes prior to determination of reserved matters applications. The objective and contents of the design codes could form a condition to an outline approval.



Blue and green infrastructure

- The panel welcomes the way that landscape design is embedded in the masterplan concept. This is appropriate for development of a precious greenfield site.
- The commitment to achieving a biodiversity net gain of 15% is welcomed, although the panel asks if this could be higher, given that 30% of the site is allocated to green and blue infrastructure.
- The panel supports the Tone Levels Wetland concept which deals with the challenges of phosphates, as well as sustainable urban drainage.
- The way in which pedestrian routes are integrated into the wetlands along with play facilities is positive.
- Overall, the panel thinks the macro approach to green infrastructure is convincing, and it will be essential this if followed through into the detail of the plot designs.
- For example, how can the landscape create defensible space for new homes, and how can green roofs, tree planting, permeable paving, and rain gardens reinforce the landscape strategy?
- A robust management plan will be needed, to ensure that the landscape continues to function well in practical terms, and contributes to the recreation, health, and wellbeing of residents.
- Community ownership and stewardship could form part of the management plan, and the panel is pleased to hear that stakeholder engagement is underway to explore this.

Sustainability and low carbon design

- Further work is needed to establish an ambitious approach to net zero carbon design, building on Somerset West and Taunton's Design Guide SPD and Carbon Neutrality Action Plan.
- The panel would encourage the design team to consider how Passivhaus design principles, and the zero-carbon toolkit can drive the design of homes on each development plot.
- The aim should be to exceed the minimum standards required by Building Regulations, for example in terms of fabric thermal performance.
- Embedding key performance indicators (KPIs) on sustainability in a design code would be helpful to set clear expectations for detailed designs.



- The low densities proposed create opportunities for low carbon construction, and this potential could be explored as part of the design codes.
- The energy strategy will be gas-free, and make use of photovoltaics and heat pumps, potentially supported by a site wide energy and/or heat network. The panel notes that the most efficient solutions may vary for different parts of the masterplan, based on density and the mix of uses. A bespoke energy strategy may be needed for each neighbourhood.
- The panel also asks how the masterplan can support reduced consumption of potable water and minimise nitrogen pollution.

Streets and parking

- The panel welcomes the emerging thinking about street hierarchy and character. In particular, it applauds the thought being given to humanising the A38.
- Transformation of the A38 is one of the most important elements of the masterplan, and the sketch ideas for this are promising. More detailed designs are needed to ensure this achieves its potential.
- Typical plans and sections through each type of street should be illustrated in the design codes, to clarify how the street hierarchy will function and contribute to character of place.
- Where possible the aim should be to minimise hard standing and maximise street trees and planting.
- The panel encourages creative thinking about a positive relationship between the new homes and landscape, for example, avoiding single-sided perimeter roads between housing parcels and landscaped areas by using small courtyards, rear mews and/or short sections of informal private lanes,
- Clarity is needed about the approach to ensuring inclusive access and safety for the street typologies proposed. For example, how are green streets designed to be accessible for all?
- As design of housing layouts progresses on parcels within the masterplan, ensuring that parking and highways are not dominant will be a key design challenge.

Mobility hub

- The provision of a mobility hub is a positive move in helping to encourage modal shift away from private car use. However, the panel continues to think further work is needed to resolve its design.



- If only 150 car parking spaces are needed, it may be possible to accommodate these with right angled parking on two sides of a single tree-lined aisle parallel to the A38 – and this might only take up around 200m.
- This parking arrangement would occupy less space, and might allow for double fronted buildings between the parking area and the central square, rather than a canopy and kiosks as currently shown.

Employment area

- The scheme currently proposes a separate business zone, with a small warehouse typology, laid out in response to the contours of the site.
- It will be a challenging to resolve the design of the employment area successfully without identified users and known servicing requirements, and the panel would welcome an opportunity to comment on this at a separate review.
- It repeats its previous suggestion that workspace with a finer grained, could be distributed throughout the scheme, to create a richer mix of uses.
- Mixed-use buildings with commercial uses at ground floor and residential above could be appropriate in the more urban parts of the site, and the panel supports the current proposal to include these in the central area.

School

- Identifying an operator for the school will be important, to allow them to take part in conversations about how its indoor and outdoor facilities are shared with the community.
- The aim should be to ensure that the school is a community asset that can fulfil a variety of functions, and this should inform the design and management of the building and landscape.

New homes

- The panel notes that detailed design of the first phase of housing is no longer to be included in this application.
- The layout of lower and medium density housing (up to 40 dwellings per hectare) looks promising, but the panel encourages further thought about the higher density areas.
- Providing a variety of homes will be important, to create a community that is inclusive of people with differing needs, and at different stages of life.
- The panel supports the Council's aspiration for high quality locally specific homes – rather than standard house types.



- Studies of the local vernacular were included in the presentation, but it is not yet clear how these will inform the design of the new homes. The design codes should clarify this.
- Around the main square, the eastern mini-centre, and along boulevards, adaptable mixed-use buildings with commercial uses at street level could be appropriate. These are likely to need a higher level of specificity in their design.
- The relationship between the house layouts and the roads to the perimeter of the site will also require careful exploration, to contribute to making them feel more like people friendly streets.

Phasing

- The panel has not yet reviewed a phasing strategy, and emphasises the importance, not only of resolving the many technical, logistical and commercial issues, but also of creating successive occupied phases which feel like complete places rather than parts of a building site.
- Each phase will require a suitable proportion of completed amenities, landscape and community facilities.

Next steps

The panel offers its continuing support to the planning authority and applicant as design work on Monkton Heathfield Phase 2 continues in more detail.

