



Harlow and Gilston Quality Review Panel

Report of Formal Review: Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Design Charter

Thursday 19 July 2018

Council Chamber, Harlow Civic Centre, The Water Gardens, Essex, CM20 1WG

Panel

Peter Maxwell (chair)
 Andrew Beharrell
 Derek Griffiths
 Frazer Osment
 Peter Studdert

Attendees

Alison Blom-Cooper	Epping Forest District Council
Ione Braddick	Epping Forest District Council
Sarah Pullin	Harlow and Gilston Garden Town
Adam Halford	East Hertfordshire District Council
Sam Kwun	Harlow District Council
Deborah Denner	Frame Projects
Allison De Marco	Frame Projects

Apologies / copied into

Claire Hamilton	Harlow and Gilston Garden Town
Claire Sime	East Hertfordshire District Council

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.

1. Project name

Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Design Charter

2. Presenting team

Louise Mansfield	Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners
Mark Leitner-Murphy	Allies and Morrison Urban Practitioners

3. 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.

4. Background

The Design Charter is intended to provide a spatial framework structured around a set of key metrics that advance on the principles and objectives of the Spatial Vision – it should be read in the context of the Spatial Vision. The key audience are intended to be developers and landowners aiming to bring forward development within the Garden Town. The Garden Town team will be undertaking consultation on the Spatial Vision and design principles before it is presented to the Garden Town Project Board in September 2018. Consultation and engagement undertaken so far has provided feedback covering: general support for the principles contained within the document; tension in accommodating the Sustainable Transport Corridors while creating sociable street; feedback has indicated a degree of scepticism about modal shift aspirations; questions on deliverability and requests for clarity on 'land value capture' aspirations; recognition of the need for regeneration within Harlow Town Centre.



5. Design Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel thinks the draft Design Charter has started to positively respond to the opportunity of the brief – establishing a cohesive and emblematic vision, for the entirety of the Garden Town, not just the new neighbourhoods. The draft document shows promise as a clear and elegant prospectus that is commendably navigating a complicated set of objectives. The panel cautions however that several important questions and challenges, including a continuing lack of clarity around the status and purpose of the document and the notable absence of explicit references to Harlow Town Centre, need to be urgently addressed. This will be critical in securing the efficacy of the Design Charter (and interrelated documents). The panel reiterates earlier comments that giving this suite of documents formal weight in the planning process will be fundamental in ensuring their successful implementation. Further work is recommended to expand on the aspirations for design quality by defining more clearly what this means locally and uniquely to Harlow and Gilson Garden Town. The panel thinks there is still work to be done to ensure a better balance between over-generalisation and over-prescription, in order to ensure the Design Charter's longevity and efficacy. There is potential for the panel to be a key audience and steward of this suite of documents – it would welcome guidance on how it should use the Spatial Vision and Design Charter to best support Officers, Committee and Board members. The panel recommends revisiting and revising metrics throughout the document – specifically ensuring that these support implementation of the 'Key Principles for Healthy Growth'. Further details on the panel's views are provided below.

Purpose and status

- The panel strongly supports the aim of the Spatial Vision and Design Charter in setting out a cohesive vision and spatial framework for Harlow and Gilston Garden Town – collating and expanding on foundations laid within each Local / District Plan.
- The panel applauds development of the Design Charter (and interrelated documents) – it however cautions that the value of these documents risks being eroded if their purpose, application and status is not clarified.
- While understanding the Garden Town team intend that the Design Charter (and other documents) should be endorsed as material considerations by planning committees in each District Council, the panel thinks a lack of clarity remains in respect of their purpose and application.
- Value will be maximised by giving the Design Charter formal weight – the panel highlights and stresses its earlier recommendation that these documents should be given formal weight in the planning process, for example as Supplementary Planning Guidance.



Ambition

- The panel questions whether the Design Charter sets its aspirations high enough – for example, terms such as ‘high-quality design’ are already imbedded in existing guidance and policies such as the recently revised NPPF, evolving Local / District Plans and TCPA’s Guidance for delivering new Garden Cities.
- Defining ‘high-quality’ in the context of the Harlow and Gilston Garden Town will provide a powerful signal of intent that clearly articulates the quality expected of new development.
- Where terms such as ‘exemplary’ are used, these should be defined in the document.

Efficacy and longevity

- It will be important to ensure the durability of the Design Charter – some references risk being overly general, such as the allusion to sustainability movement – potentially diminishing the importance of the Design Charter as Local / District Plans and supplementary policy documents evolve.
- Other references risk being overly prescriptive – verging into Design Coding and site-specific density guidance.
- The panel suggests re-framing guidance by placing the onus on applicants rather than presenting them with specific design solutions - asking them to demonstrate how their design has evolved, as a contextually driven response to the site.
- The panel points to the precedent set by the ‘Cambridgeshire Quality Charter for Growth’, which remains a touchstone for the local review panel and planning officers a decade after its initial publication. Lessons can be learnt from how the document distilled aspirations, using simple jargon-free language, about qualities sought in new neighbourhoods.

Stewardship and application

- The panel would welcome guidance on how the Garden Town team envisages the panel using the Spatial Vision and Design Charter to best support Officers and Committee members in their consideration of Garden Town schemes – the panel could be an important guardian for the aspirations in the documents.
- The four themes, and underlying principles, illustrated in the ‘Key Principles for Healthy Growth’ diagram are a powerful representation of the detailed indicators intended to guide growth across the Garden Town – the panel suggests using this matrix as the basis for framing assessments and comments on Garden Town schemes.



Harlow Town centre

- The panel understands an Area Action Plan is being brought forward for Harlow Town Centre.
- It reiterates earlier comments highlighting the important of Harlow Town Centre as a central fulcrum underpinning the Garden Town and questions the absence of Harlow Town Centre AAP work from panel discussion, as well as limited explicit references to the Town Centre within the Spatial Vision and Design Charter.
- The panel recommends incorporating more Harlow Town Centre references into both the Spatial Vision and Design Charter – the panel would also welcome being presented with more details on this important piece of work.

Metrics and gaps

- Incorporating tangible targets / metrics in the Design Charter could provide a baseline against which the success of the Garden Town project can be cumulatively assessed and recalibrated. This is particularly important given that the success of the overall is dependent on multiple authorities and stakeholders.
- The panel highlights gaps in the document in respect of targets on modal shift, open space and delivery timing for community facilities – embedding ambitious and explicit objectives around early delivery of community facilities will support officers in future negotiations.
- While acknowledging references to energy, water and waste within the draft Spatial Vision and draft Design Charter the panel thinks these do not go far enough – the Design Charter should include explicit and ambitious targets on sustainability metrics such as energy, waste and water use.
- The range of densities proposed for new development is currently the same. This is at odds with earlier commentary to look at higher densities beyond 50 dph.
- However, the panel feels it may be best to avoid prescriptive metrics on the density of development in the villages – at a stage when there has not been sufficient design exploration to test what will be appropriate.

Parking

- The panel thinks further creative thinking and work is required in considering critical questions around parking and modal shift – these will be key challenges to successfully delivering on the sustainable transport ambitions for the Garden Town.
- A nuanced approach will be required that applies a number of differing levers, with targets potentially phased over time – lessons can be learnt from current thinking on masterplans that incorporate car-free zones such as Dunsfold Park, Surrey.



Strategic Site Guidance

- More work is recommended on the 'Strategic Site Guidance' section of the Design Charter if the document is to be taken forward as a material consideration. The panel thinks this guidance could be valuable but that further work will be required to ensure it is sufficiently expansive to provide value – alternatively the panel suggests the first section of the document could stand alone as a strategic document.

Format

- Generally, the panel recommends reviewing illustration legibility. For example, diagrams within the 'Strategic Site Guidance' section focusing on each Strategic Site are the smallest image on the page. Movement diagrams could also make it clearer what is existing, and what is proposed.

Next steps

The panel offers its continuing advice and support in developing the Design Charter and would like to have an update on this, together with the Spatial Vision and Sustainable Transport Corridors Study, once work has evolved in response to its recommendations.

