

Design Review:
**North-
Bicester
eco-town**



Designed by Farrells

Oxfordshire

Planning reference: 10/01780/HYBRID

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While it is unfortunate that the planning application for the exemplar phase has been submitted prior to approval of the overall masterplan, the north-west Bicester eco-town pilot project should set a precedent for development in the area over the next 20 to 30 years; therefore it is crucial that the first phase sets high standards for the future. The environmental aspirations appear appropriate for an eco-town proposal, but the local authority needs to ensure themselves that the proposed standards will be achieved and delivered on time.

Site layout

Convincing work has been undertaken to consider the flexibility of the landscape and to incorporate the existing field pattern into the site plan. We particularly welcome the proposed geometry of the site layout in the northern part of the proposal. It seems to respond well to the character of the countryside around Bicester. We also support the proposed connection for buses only between the northern and the southern part of the development. The phasing of the development will result in changes to the co-existence of different land uses, initially with fields directly adjacent to new homes, and it is positive that thought has been given to how the phases will link to one another by providing lanes that can continue into adjacent phases and not constrained dead ends. We find that the dominance of cars across the site – parked cars on both sides of the dwellings – is likely to have a detrimental impact on the quality of the development. The amount of surface given to roads, parking courts and tarmac appears excessive for an eco-town proposal.

Density

The large amount of open space will have an impact on maintenance costs, and a management strategy needs to be in place to look after those areas. Greater density would help reduce the costs for each household. We generally think that the density of the development could increase. The idea behind an eco-town development is to provide an efficient and intensive scheme layout, however this scheme does not meet these requirements generated by the imperative of efficient use of infrastructure. The team has not demonstrated why such a low density development is being proposed and we can see no reason why a higher density scheme would not be viable in this location. We are concerned that the low density will militate against the principles of the eco-town PPS principally greater resource efficiency and the reduction of car use.

Character

We welcome the fact that different architects are working on the housing designs, but we are disappointed that the proposal does not use the opportunity to create a more characterful eco-town community to set it apart from standard volume housebuilder estates. The local centre has some character but we question whether the scale and the choice of urban arcades are appropriate and viable financially. While the local centre is at the centre of the first phase of the proposal, locating it at the entry on the ring road might increase accessibility and encourage integration of the new with the existing community.

Landscape

It is important that the connections to future phases are established as part of the infrastructure of the first phase and structural planting carried out so that the trees and hedges will have grown by the time the development gets to them. While we welcome the provision of water, the watercourse and the village green could be integrated in a more meaningful way to offer a more interesting village like experience and to provide a useable and magic resource for the children.

Governance

The extensive provision of landscape raises the question of community ownership and management of the common parts, and we would recommend the establishment of a community group that also includes members of the existing adjacent community.

Sustainability

The proposed targets for the development are impressive. We urge the local authority to ensure themselves that the environmental targets will be delivered and to condition them as appropriate and to make the proposal work successfully on a larger scale, and to integrate it with the existing town of Bicester and the energy from waste facility nearby for example.

Conclusion

For this amended planning application for the exemplar site, we would expect to see a proposal that captures the essential aspirations of an eco-town: the current proposal does not make the most of this ambition.

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