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Rebecca Mitchell
Rockspring Barwood Barnstaple Limited
53 Chandos Place
London
WC2N 4HS

Dear Rebecca

**CE Housing Excellence Design Panel: Workshop
HEDP028 9 May 2018**

Land at Westacott, Barnstaple, North Devon

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Thank you for coming to the Panel and presenting this scheme with your design team. We are grateful to you for organising a site visit for the whole Panel and then for providing lunch at the Brynsworthy Environment Centre.

We were grateful to North Devon Council (NDC) and Devon County Council (DCC) for attending and contributing to the meeting. The following questions were used to support discussion at the Workshop.

1. Is the response to the technical challenges of the site appropriate?
2. Does the multifunctional green infrastructure network form a quality response to the site constraints and the existing landscape structure?
3. Are the non-residential land uses proposed in suitable locations?
4. Are the emerging design approach and our ideas for character and place-making appropriate?
5. Does the Panel agree with the proposed access and movement strategy?

NDC Planning Context

The site is the largest land parcel to the eastern edge of Barnstaple, north of the A361 between Whiddon Valley and Landkey, as allocated in the emerging North Devon and Torridge Local Plan (Policy BAR01). Barwood are the landowner responsible for the majority of the site. There is an 'in principle outline planning permission' for 149 dwellings (site promoted by Progress) that includes secondary access through a park on to Westacott Road to the western edge.

Policy BAR01 seeks a comprehensive, high quality mixed use development, well integrated with the surrounding development and open countryside as an urban extension to Barnstaple. It is composed of up to 950 dwellings, 5 ha of employment land, a neighbourhood hub incorporating a Primary School, community hall, open space and sports facilities. A Park & Change facility and cross-town pedestrian and cycle route is also a key component. North Devon asked a series of questions, summarised as follows;

- Is the masterplan creating a sustainable community?
- Is the neighbourhood hub creating a sense of place without conflict from traffic?
- Are improved cycle/pedestrian links being created with Landkey?
- Is a unique sense of place being created?
- Could an alternative secondary access route be successfully achieved in design terms through Castle Park Road to the SW of the site?

The Panel addressed these issues as part of their discussion.

NDC has made an assessment of Ecosystems Services in regard to environmental opportunities and constraints and recommends;

- Expand woodland coverage to the south to improve the visual and noise buffer with the A361.
- That Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems are employed to manage drainage issues on site.
- That culturally, the separate identities of Landkey and Barnstaple be safeguarded.

The golf course on the opposite side of the valley is currently safeguarded in the emerging local plan as a local green space.

Devon County Council

Flooding – technically DCC will require assurances on how the drainage will be located across the flood zones, the sequential movement of the water, infiltration testing and how levels have been considered – notably in major events if excess water will go down roads if needed. Maintenance and permeable paving will also need to be considered.

Highways – the aim is that design work, particularly on the Landkey roundabout will tie in with other improvements on the North Devon Link Road. The secondary access planned to the west is contentious due to the local importance of this attractive park, framed on one side by 8-10 houses and with existing children’s play equipment. The park is in the ownership of NDC. Cycle links are important and need to link with wider connections. Adoption is an important consideration, for example discussions are needed on whether permeable paving would be adopted by the County Council.

Site description

The Progress site runs north/south to the western edge of the Barwood land ownership, and includes the site access route to the west going through the NDDC owned pocket park on Westacott Road. The Barwood land ownership includes an additional smaller parcel to the North West. The Workshop was primarily focussed on the larger allocation east of the Progress site.

Overall, Barwood will deliver across their whole allocation, in the region of c 800 units (24.5ha), a Primary School and Neighbourhood Centre, Public Open Space (POS) (32ha) and a Park and Change site that will have a dual use to include employment uses.

The design team wish to deliver a contiguous masterplan across the whole site. The topography and water catchment conditions prevalent on the site, resulting in the existing up to six north-south aligned watercourses or dry ditches across the site, have led to an approach strongly influenced by blue and green infrastructure. The technical response to water attenuation and topography, will lead to wider recreational and viewpoint opportunities that the masterplan aims to maximise. The street alignment will work with the contours, east-west, aiming for a cascade effect of trees and rooflines, using existing tree and hedgerow banks, augmented by tree planting in new streets.

There is significant water attenuation across the site, using a mix of open and tanked storage in areas of POS, plus at the southern edge where the Coney Gutt stream runs parallel with the A361. Some street corridors will include back to back water features to support biodiversity corridors, will align with slope conditions and drainage features. These 'urban green spaces' will incorporate spring-fed ditches/linear ponds as permanent wet areas, as well as storm event features that will remain dry and usable for the majority of the time. These spaces will incorporate existing Public Rights of Way (PRoW) and strongly influence the overall character of the place.

The aim is to ensure that an accessible, walkable neighbourhood emerges. The main arterial boulevard/street will include a shared footway / cycleway and incorporate frequent bus stops at approximately 350m intervals (as being on a hill on the approach to Barnstaple to the west). An improved crossing facility into Landkey is being proposed across the A361 at the south east corner. A new roundabout is proposed as the main access point into the site at the Landkey roundabout, which will access on arrival the Park & Change facility associated with existing bus services on a 20/30 minute frequency, as well as employment space on 1.3ha.

The overall placemaking strategy aims to incorporate the blue, green infrastructure and neighbourhood facility opportunities in a series of nodal points with key buildings and prominent views. The scheme is at too early a stage to determine detailed housing typologies but the masterplan indicates a strong emphasis on using the perimeter square template that supports on-plot parking.

Panel feedback

The Panel discussed the scheme following a presentation from the design team and contributions from North Devon and Devon County Council. In respect of the Workshop questions, the following recommendations were given.

Is the response to the technical challenges of the site appropriate?

In drainage terms, the Panel consider the attenuation appropriate and that all measures have been taken to ensure a complementary approach with the emerging townscape. The Flooding Team at DCC are recommended to reflect on the opportunity to provide some on-line storage along the Coney Gutt corridor, outside of the development area, to provide increased levels of protection to downstream areas. This is separate to the attenuation required to mitigate for the increased runoff generated by the development.

The use of multiple SuDS features should mitigate for any impacts on water quality on the Coney Gutt and will also control and mitigate for any impact of additional flows downstream. Additional tree planting is welcomed that would slow water down, but it is important that this is balanced so as not to overplant, as the corridor has an important biodiversity function also. Going forward it would be valuable to describe a water system or network that includes existing streams and wetlands.

Barnstaple and the SSSI downstream will be protected from the impacts of increased rainfall due to climate change across the land area of the development if the scheme is implemented, for events up to the 1 in 100 year return period. Given the topography of the site it is logical to avoid infiltration at higher elevations as this could lead to water seepage at the lower parts of the site. The use of permeable paving can still be considered to provide some attenuation and slow the release of runoff, but it will need to be located outside of adoptable roadway areas, as DCC confirmed they would not accept permeable paving as a construction method within their road network.

Does the multifunctional green infrastructure network form a quality response to the site constraints and the existing landscape structure?

The design team perceive the character of the new neighbourhood as being structured against the SuDS corridor concept of 'riverside walks'. The Panel in principle see this as sensible, however the layering of spaces needs further investigation alongside the place making concepts. There is a current disconnect between the spaces, their character and the design proposals, how they link with the open space elements and their treatment variation from more formal rain gardens to naturalistic ditches. There is a current disconnect, notably with the hilltop park that is not directly linked with the School/Neighbourhood Centre (local centre) or by the central North/South Green corridor. The riverside and hilltop need to be better linked. Likewise, the allotments currently placed at the North East corner are too remote to be part of a communal place connected within the rest of the community.

The Green Infrastructure network appears to work well with the prominent viewpoints, but destination creation is important. To achieve this the Panel recommend an understanding of how the place would work, particularly when considering school trip movements and before/after school activity as well as the attractiveness of places for older children walking/cycling from school further afield. The play opportunities presented by both the hilltop and the river corridor are not apparent from the proposed masterplan. There is an important interplay with the local centre that will depend on excellent connections with east-west and north-south movements.

The Panel welcomed the emergence of a strategy on frontages and green interfaces and how these connect with the primary spine street, this will be useful when securing the housing typologies at later stages. To enhance the open space elements, they need to be overlooked to feel secure.

The Panel felt that sections are essential to identify how the woodland strips and hedgerows (as green fingers) would work in reality. From a plan, some of the woodland appears as a barrier, but as observed on site, these strips are permeable though their ecological value may require restrictions or control of access. The established trees (a fragment of a former woodland) and their spacing are unusual and offer an important element to inform the development of the character of the site. A fine grained and specific evaluation of this and other unique landscape features and their ecosystem role could inform the landscape strategy and create distinctive setting for this new community.

The trees can be used to establish a vocabulary of the place – of being naturalistic with visual benefits. If this is then linked to the movement and street hierarchy a more shared-space concept will emerge. Allotments could be located in smaller parcels across the site to better serve the community too.

Are the non-residential land uses proposed in suitable locations?

The Panel wondered if the local centre might be better located closer to Barnstaple. It is important to secure life and vitality through to this development from Barnstaple, the local centre will bring economic viability. Further justification of the local centre's location needs to be provided, and the overlay of spaces and movement will help in that. Sections are needed to show how the proposed and existing topography is used, and if the places of interaction are in the right places. For example, will the playing fields work on the sloping ground near the proposed school site? How would fencing the site work in relation to the tree plantation for example – and how would people walk and cycle to school?

The employment land offer is significantly less in quantum to that suggested by NDC in the emerging local plan. Aside from the type of employment being offered, the Panel recommend that a clear strategy for employment land is developed in dialogue with NDC. The Panel felt the employment offer located where it is at the gateway to the development was unfortunate. It was pointed out that this relates to a noise contour on that corner of the development making it unsuitable for housing. This is a constraint that needs to be mapped and explained.

The Panel wondered if the better location for the employment land would be to the south western corner nearer to where other employment uses are already established. But aside from this, is zoning of employment now an out of date concept? Integration of employment into the local centre should be considered. A finer grained approach where small flexible start up employment space is provided as part of the retail and housing mix in this location and around the higher density spine route would be preferred. On site, there was certainly cause to reflect on whether some of the existing employment uses were suitable for housing to be located near to them due to noise and smells. Integration of employment provision should be researched further and a short paper prepared to set out the employment opportunities and needs of small

entrepreneurial businesses and how they might be accommodated within the masterplan. A more sensitive response on this aspect is needed.

The Park & Change was considered in the right place. To share the Park & Change car park with the employment premises, the Panel thought, could pose operational issues. The aim is to reduce commuter traffic into Barnstaple, and there needs to be car park capacity to support this. Further discussion is likely needed with Devon CC to ensure that existing bus services and frequency will support a Park & Change and ensure longer term viability.

However, overriding these practical considerations was the feeling that there was a missed opportunity on this corner site. This location has the potential to become a landmark feature on approaching Barnstaple – there is an opportunity to add to that sense of arrival and create a destination. It was suggested that the employment uses might relate to energy generation. If this is the case, then this needs developing further to perhaps lend some significance to the overall theme of the new community. The Panel felt following discussion that an Enterprise Centre for start-up businesses would be an enhancement of the local centre – somewhere that would encourage networking and community activity. With 950 homes, there would certainly be enough scope to support such an enterprise if brought forward early.

Phasing was discussed, and the Panel was made aware that the new roundabout has to be delivered by 2021. There would likely be two housebuilders to bring forward the reserved matter applications at any one time, with delivery at c 100 units per annum. The Panel, as did the LPA, felt that the local centre should be brought forward as soon as possible to start establishing a community.

Are the emerging design approach and our ideas for character and place-making appropriate?

It is important that the character of the place is not wholly based on accommodating car ownership but the Panel accept the need for balance in how that is planned. The Panel are aware that it is too early to define the detail of parking completely until reserved matter stages, but the outline application could ensure an approach that will influence the overall character of the final development. There was a debate on future-proofing the site, and the Panel wanted to test whether the sole use of on-plot parking is realistic or an efficient use of land (based on the perimeter square layout), when other potential approaches (predicated on a probable reduction in car ownership in future years) could be used.

The overall feel was considered quite suburban – whereas the aim should be to add distinctiveness, and work with the rural setting, keep areas of the site open by making development more compact. The Panel felt that not enough is being made of some of the site's natural assets and that more could be made to celebrate them and to use them as a generator of character. The advantage of this site lies in its interplay with trees and water, its views across to the other side of the valley and the amount of open space available. It runs the risk of becoming too linear by working exclusively with the contours. The Panel recommend looking to adjoining established Devon villages where there is density, continuity, variety and character from on-street frontages. Providing variety through changes to street treatments – being flexible

in the design code for example in changing patterns of car ownership could allow for adaptable places to emerge. Parking needs will change and on-plots are not readily adaptable.

Does the Panel agree with the proposed access and movement strategy?

The mix of land uses is good, but the Panel questioned whether the proposed zoning across the site is the right approach, and this affects the movement strategy as well. Currently, with the western access route not being fully secured, there is the risk that a single-access/cul de sac development could result, which would fail to achieve a connected development in accordance with guidance. The Panel felt, the primary point of access and roundabout are in the right position. The challenge is the access to the west onto Westacott Road. If that were undeliverable, then another access point needs to be obtained. On undertaking a site visit, the Panel felt the alternative route through the Westacott Road Industrial Estate, Castle Park Road to the south west of the site was not feasible due to its illegibility, its proximity to established businesses and its narrow access. Another route through to the North Western parcel is not direct, would be reliant on a technically challenging road bridge, and would be too indirect to be attractive.

The Panel conclude that the best option is the access point through part of the Council owned area of open space. There is likely to be a lot of local opposition to the use of this land, so it is important to demonstrate how the impact could be mitigated by extending the Park to the east and improving local access to amenity within the new development. So the LPA, with support from Devon CC are recommended to secure a sensitive scheme working with the developers across both parts of the site, perhaps using a less-engineered approach that encourages slower traffic and retains where possible areas of open space. The western access is essential to deliver the integrated approach required to ensure the new community does not become dependent on private cars and has a legible link to the town. Although walking and cycling can provide levels of accessibility, the benefit of the bus corridor with dedicated Park & Change through to Westacott Road is essential to integrate this significant extension with the rest of Barnstaple. The Panel recommend reference to Manual for Streets to justify this position. There may be concern that this route could become a 'rat-run' but the Panel consider that there are measures that can be used to design out this perception and demonstrate overall benefits to the existing neighborhood of Westacott.

In terms of place-making, within the scheme, the east-west spinal/primary street is supported. The shared cycleway on the spinal street needs careful planning to allow for children to cycle in safety, but wider than that – cycle connections beyond the site and Barnstaple should be considered to ensure strategic leisure routes. The Panel recommend that the new DfT LCWIP Guidance is used to study the whole cycle corridor, which may also allow further funding to be achieved via DCC.

Phasing is crucial, and as permissions are given at the RM stages, thoughts as to the connection to the streets and movement should be secured to ensure sustainable travel patterns are encouraged early in the community's growth, before bad travel habits set in. A wider transport and movement strategy is required and a strategy adopted to secure phasing between Outline and RM phases.

Conclusion

The Panel welcome the early sight of this scheme. The scheme is at early stages, and so there is a lot of potential to secure the right format for delivery. But this place needs an identity, the DNA of it needs to be secured. The Panel worry that this could become an average suburb, so suggest investing time at this stage to generate a thorough characterisation assessment drawing on the key elements of a sustainable community as well as a Devon village typology, to set out some clear ambitious design parameters for delivery at Reserved Matter stages.

The Panel support the landscape approach, and recommend building on that – developing a layered approach for the SuDS corridors, residential areas and the mix of activities in the public realm across the development. These could be exciting and greatly add to the variety of the place on the ground. The integration of water features in urban areas creating places has been showcased from Upton, Northamptonshire in early 2000s onwards with the spaces often being dry and used for recreation. Many good examples are covered in the latest SuDS Manual.

The site visit emphasised the importance of longer views, people will identify with the hilltop park, the green corridors and the river. Some elegant building landmarks could be identified to contribute to the town's skyline. Finally, the zoning needs pulling apart to secure a sustainable movement strategy that includes quality cycling infrastructure and resistance given to any possible cul-de-sac outcomes. Car parking has yet to be resolved but the Panel accept that any changes in parking quantum is by incremental stages.

The Panel would be pleased to continue this journey with you and hope it can return in the future to support the outcome of this exciting scheme.

Yours sincerely

Julie Tanner

Panel Secretary, CE Housing Excellence Design Review Panel

cc North Devon Council, Devon County Council

Panel Members for this review:

<i>Juliet Bidgood</i>	<i>(Chair, Architect)</i>
<i>Simon Carne</i>	<i>(Architect, Urban Designer)</i>
<i>Alan Corner</i>	<i>(Hydrology)</i>
<i>Justine Leach</i>	<i>(Landscape)</i>
<i>Jon Tricker</i>	<i>(Transport)</i>

Note of interest:

James deHavilland of Barton Willmore is a member of CE SWDRP, but he took part in this review solely as a member of the design team and had no role in the formulation of the Panel's guidance.

Confidential

**Confidentiality*

Since the scheme was not the subject of a planning application when it came to the Panel, this letter is in confidence to the addressee and those listed as being sent copies. There is no objection to the letter being shared within the respective practices/organisations.

SWDRP reserves the right to make the guidance known should the views contained in this letter be made public by others in whole or in part.

The letter would be made available to meet a Freedom of Information request or to any public inquiry concerning the scheme.

The letter would also be made available to a subsequent SWDRP session for the same site (or, if relevant, an adjacent site) or to another design review panel should a scheme go before them.

The letter could be made public when the scheme goes forward as a planning application if the applicants or the Local Planning Authority so wish. The letter should be made public in these circumstances and there will often be pressure from third parties to release the letter. Applicants often include a commentary on design review in Design and Access Statements showing both the Panel's comments and how the design developed in response. Design review can also occur at application stage in which case the resulting letter would supersede the first.

If you do not require this letter to be kept confidential, please let us know.

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HEDP, c/o RIBA South West, Unit 4.8, Paintworks, Bath Road, Bristol BS4 3EH www.creatingexcellence.net

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