



FRAME PROJECTS

Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Quality Review Panel Meeting

Report of Formal Review: Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Spatial Vision

Thursday 24 May 2018

Epping Forest District Council, Civic Offices, 323 High Street, Epping CM16 4BZ

Panel

Peter Maxwell (chair)
Frazer Osment
Jan Kattein
Richard Smith
Chris Snow

Attendees

Claire Hamilton	Garden Town Project Director
Ione Braddick	Epping Forest District Council
David Coleman	Epping Forest District Council
Sarah Pullin	Harlow and Gilston Garden Town
Claire Sime	East Hertfordshire District Council
Adam Halford	East Hertfordshire District Council
Graeme Bloomer	Harlow District Council
Deborah Denner	Frame Projects
Allison De Marco	Frame Projects
Farzana Yasmin	Frame Projects

Apologies / report copied to

Alison Blom-Cooper	Epping Forest District Council
Dianne Cooper	Harlow District Council

1. Project name

Harlow and Gilston Garden Town Spatial Vision

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

Claire Hamilton, Garden Town Project Director, introduced the Spatial Vision explaining that the related Design Charter and Sustainable Transport Corridors Study will be presented at a later meeting. The Spatial Vision is intended to succinctly set out the context for the Garden Town, the drivers for change, the vision and aims, and key principles to guide future development. The vision is a shared one, with the Councils working in partnership with other stakeholders and site promoters to bring forward transformational growth at Harlow.

5. Design Review Panel's views

Summary

The panel finds the draft Spatial Vision a good basis for further development and commends the depth of thinking underpinning the document. Aspirations have been set high and the panel supports the positive tone established – but giving it formal weight in the planning process will be fundamental to ensure successful implementation. The document begins to effectively communicate 'what' the Garden Town is intended to be, but further work is needed relating it back to Harlow and defining the 'how' and 'when' as part of a convincing delivery plan. As part of this process, clear priorities should be set across each theme, to manage expectations as funding will not stretch to do everything. Therefore, the spatial vision should be clear about public vs private sector commitments and responsibilities. Further work is recommended to celebrate what is already special about this place. The document would also benefit from greater emphasis around the core message of the Garden Town as a landscape-led network of integrated villages. Other aspects of the Spatial Vision that could be further refined include: the character and quality of the centres, including Harlow Town Centre; village centre hierarchy, self-sufficiency and identity; employment clusters and innovation; fostering change through early small-scale interventions; and sustainable transport, including connections between Gilston and Harlow Town Centre. These comments are expanded below.



Status and interrelationship

- The panel understands the Spatial Vision has been coordinated with Local Plan work undertaken by Harlow District Council, East Hertfordshire District Council and Epping Forrester District Council ('the Councils') as well as the policies of the two County Councils.
- The panel recommends giving the Spatial Vision formal weight in the planning process – to ensure implementation of the document's positive aspirations.
- It would also be helpful to clarify the relationship between the Spatial Vision and the Design Charter, Sustainable Transport Corridors Study, Harlow Town Centre Area Action Plan (AAP) and delivery plan – coordination across workstreams, studies and plans will be important.

Structure and priorities

- The panel supports the proposed approach of taking four key themes, then developing key principles and indicators to sit beneath these.
- As a next step, the panel recommends defining the hierarchy of priorities within each strand – to give the vision greater clarity. Particularly as in most areas these will be subject to negotiation and agreement with third party developers.
- The panel cautions that it will be important to manage expectations, particularly if the Spatial Vision is a public facing document intended for use with local communities – funding will not stretch to do everything, and it should be clear that what is promoted is deliverable.
- Clearly articulating public-sector commitments and, responsibilities that are expected to rest with the private sector and third sector, would be valuable.

Existing character and identity

- The panel thinks the document could go further in celebrating existing unique features of Harlow and Gilston – to articulate what is special about this place.
- A compelling narrative describing the Garden Town's unique existing features would assist here – for example its heritage assets, sculptures and Stort Valley setting could inform future development of the Garden Town.

Vision and messaging

- The panel recommends looking back to the original Gibberd vision and reinterpreting this for the new Garden Town – re-writing Gibberd's description, which speaks with clarity about the structure of the place. This could be an inspiring message that acts as a powerful tool, focusing and sustaining interest in the Garden Town project from a broad range of stakeholders.



- Focusing the document around the core message of the Garden Town as a landscape-led network of integrated villages will help the document's legibility and efficacy – aiding communication with delivery partners and central government.

Phasing and delivery

- While the panel understands that a delivery plan will sit alongside this document, the Spatial Vision itself lacks detail about 'when' and 'how' development, including social infrastructure, will occur – it should be clear how both documents relate.
- A delivery plan should include details of: land value capture; delivery responsibilities; maintenance and stewardship and land disposal options – to maintain quality from concept through to delivery.

Harlow Town centre and new village centres

- The panel wants to hear more about the character and quality of the centres and encourages more work articulating the vision for each, including Harlow Town Centre.
- In working to ensure the vibrancy and vitality of the centres the panel recommends looking at examples, research and precedents of how high streets are evolving and their potential future functions. Lessons can already be learnt from the current shift away from retail towards entertainment uses – which have potential to generate similar spend levels.
- There is scope to produce guidance to encourage developers to embrace a broader range of non-residential possibilities, particularly in existing centres, than they may have been inclined to traditionally deliver. The panel thinks there are opportunities to provide additional activity and uses in these centres.

Self-sufficiency

- The panel admires the aspiration to provide a range of centres: hatches; local centres; and Harlow Town Centre – but questions if it will be possible to make these centres self-sufficient in the current economic climate?
- There is a risk that the number of centres envisaged may undermine each other.
- To avoid this risk further scrutiny and evidence will be required to consider whether each centre is desirable, economically sustainable and viable – each would also benefit from being instilled with a uniqueness that considers the function of each, within a hierarchy of local centres.



Employment clusters and innovation

- Innovation will happen in locations that encourage a flexible and diverse ecosystem of commercial and other non-residential uses. Relying on conventional industrial districts to create innovation, is unlikely to achieve this – innovation tends to start in informal, or low-cost workspaces.
- The panel recommends avoiding single-use zones and supports the concept of co-locating uses as a means of fostering vibrancy – but thinks that further work should be done to encourage the economic aspirations described.
- In developing an employment strategy, greater breadth and granularity are encouraged. This should go beyond spatial thinking and develop an approach to issues such as: rent levels; governance; and the type of businesses who will occupy these spaces.
- The panel wonders whether there is scope to encourage a flexible approach to how planning rules are applied at these specific locations – this could encourage adaptability and maximise opportunities for enterprise and innovation.

Fostering change

- Community engagement activities initiated in mid-2017 raised awareness of the Garden Town concept and were a positive start. The panel encourages building on this momentum to help foster change and avoid the risk of community frustration while they wait on delivery.
- The panel thinks early small-scale incremental intervention will give the community an opportunity to experience the real benefits of the Spatial Vision – this will feed community motivation to support delivery of the Garden Town.
- Early interim uses could be low cost but play a significant role in demonstrating the benefits of change. For example, pop-up shops could be promoted in vacant premises in Harlow Town Centre and other existing centres.

Sustainable transport

- The panel commends the team for embedding sustainable transport within the Spatial Vision – within a challenging context of relatively dispersed development, the vision for encouraging a significant model shift is ambitious.
- The panel cautions that delivery of the spatial vision will hinge heavily on the sustainable transport concepts promoted, including new bridge connections. Significant energy should be focused early on to clearly establish how they will deliver this strand of the vision.



- To this aim, early delivery of the Bus Rapid Transport (BRT) will be essential to support sustainable travel – avoiding reliance on car use becoming habitual.
- The panel is not yet convinced by proposals to connect Gilston back into Harlow Town Centre – more detailed exploration of bridge crossings and the BRT route will be needed.
- The panel is concerned with the proposed BRT route around the proposed Gilston Villages as currently shown, as a complete circuit. It wonders if a C shaped route may be more efficient and deliverable. The panel look forward to seeing further development and analysis here.

Language

- The panel recommends the Garden Town team and Councils refine the language used in the document to enable this to be used as a planning document. The panel suggest a careful review of how the terms 'will', 'shall', and 'should' are used in relation to the spatial vision themes and priorities.

Next steps

The panel offers its continuing advice and support to help with the development of the Spatial Vision and would like to have an update on this once work has evolved in response to its recommendations.

