

Report of the Leatherhead Town Centre  
Panel

# Swan Centre and Bull Hill, Leatherhead – Session 3

7 April 2025

## The design review

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| <b>Reference number</b>               | 2168-3/200325   |
| <b>Date</b>                           | 20 <sup>th</sup> March 2025   |
| <b>Meeting location</b>               | Federation House, Highbury Drive, Leatherhead, KT22 7UY   |
| <b>Practitioner Panel members</b>     | <p>██████████ architecture and urban design</p> <p>██████████ architecture and housing</p> <p>██████████ landscape architecture and public realm</p> <p>██████████ sustainability and engineering</p> <p>██████████ economic development and community engagement</p> <p>██████████ urban design and regeneration</p> |
| <b>Community panel members</b>        | <p>██████████ Leatherhead Youth Project</p> <p>██████████ Chair of the Leatherhead &amp; District Countryside Society</p> <p>██████████ Trustee at North Leatherhead Community Centre</p> <p>██████████ Leatherhead Residents Association</p>   |
| <b>Design South East facilitators</b> | <p>██████████ Design South East</p> <p>██████████ Design South East</p> <p>██████████ Design South East</p>   |
| <b>Presenting team</b>                | <p>██████████ TP Bennett</p> <p>██████████ Corstophine and Wright</p> <p>██████████ Fatkin</p>  |
| <b>Other attendees</b>                | <p>██████████ Nexus on behalf of Mole Valley District Council</p> <p>██████████ Nexus on behalf of Mole Valley District Council</p> <p>██████████ Kier Property</p> <p>██████████ Kier Property</p> <p>██████████ TP Bennett</p> <p>██████████ Carter Jonas</p> <p>██████████ Montagu Evans</p>                       |
| <b>Site visit</b>                     | A site visit was conducted by the panel prior to the first review.  |
| <b>Scope of the review</b>            | Design South East is an independent not-for-profit organisation working across the wider southeast of England, which provides design advice to local authorities and developers and helps local communities become involved in shaping the places they care about.  |

Design reviews provide advice and scrutiny on schemes throughout design development and the planning process. Panel members deliver constructive advice and guidance that fosters dialogue and collaboration.

Design Review Panels are often made up of solely of professional practitioners but given that the applicant in this instance is a joint venture with the local authority, it was considered that key representatives of the community be invited to join the panel.

The session was conducted as a series of workshops that included site strategy, architecture and landscape. At the end of each workshop there was a discussion, and the feedback was then summarised by the chair. This work is part of a pre-application process, and so all information presented was work in progress.

**Panel interests**

Panel members did not indicate any conflicts of interest.

**Confidentiality**

The scheme is at the pre-application stage so this report (and the material shared before and at the event) is offered in confidence to the applicant team, the local authority and those who attended the review meeting only. Neither the content of the report, nor the report itself can be shared outside the participants of the meeting. Unless previously agreed, pre-application design review reports will be made publicly available if the scheme becomes the subject of a planning application or public inquiry.

## The proposal

**Site Location(s)**

Swan Centre and Bull Hill, Leatherhead

**Planning stage**

Pre-application

**Local planning authority**

Mole Valley District Council

**Previous Review**      The proposal was previously reviewed by the Leatherhead Town Centre Panel on 23 July 2024.

The panel's recommendations were:

- a. Reconsider the masterplan for Bull Hill, from a starting point of testing options that retain and enhance the existing landscape and make the most of the existing park's maturity and importance to the local community.
- b. Reduce the height of buildings on the Bull Hill site by reconsidering the decision to move the residential allocation here from the Swan Centre, instead developing a vision for the site that more comfortably accommodates the original Bull Hill allocation (300 homes) and seeking potential increases in this number of units only if this vision can be adhered to.
- c. Reconsider the decision to include townhouses, the hotel and the offices on Bull Hill - even though a mix of uses is generally to be encouraged - as they all increase the required density, height and servicing infrastructure on the site significantly.
- d. Rethink the approach to the transport hub, potentially by reducing its size if other functions on the site can be reduced or by absorbing parking into the footprint of other buildings, and by introducing more ground floor activity.
- e. Ensure pedestrian routes are usable and attractive by accounting for the likelihood of flooding and making sufficient agreements at an early stage with the highways authority regarding the gyratory to ensure pedestrian crossings and pavement improvements can and will be delivered.
- f. Review the uses within the Swan Centre to enable it to respond specifically to local needs, such as a medical centre and affordable offerings for young people.
- g. Create a greater distinction between the architecture of the new facades within the entrance to the Swan Centre and those wrapping around to meet the High Street.
- h. Ensure that a more detailed energy sustainability strategy for both sites underpin all design decisions from the outset

## Summary

Significant improvements have been made to the proposal for the Bull Hill site since the last meeting; it is more contextually appropriate and the increase in parkland - and its location at the heart of the development - is commended.

However, the development of Bull Hill presents a rare opportunity to improve nearby streets in the town centre and whilst the townscape approach to the east, fronting Bull Hill, is promising, other edges, and the four corners of the site, respond less well to their specific contexts. The scale of the block in the south-west corner, and the mass and position of the buildings to the north, are particularly problematic in terms of their townscape impact and more work is needed to balance sensitivity to context with economic viability. Conversely, the town houses to the south lack sufficient scale and density to contribute successfully to the townscape and engage with North Street. The architecture and landscape have neither a strong sense of place nor a locally distinctive character informed by Leatherhead's buildings and streetscapes.

The public realm of the Swan Centre proposal remains underwhelming, and the extent to which the architecture is successfully integrated into the existing streetscape is unclear from the information presented.

We are pleased to have had the opportunity to see this proposal for the third time, and we would welcome the opportunity to review this scheme again, including the design code, once the panel's recommendations have been taken into consideration ahead of a planning submission.

## Key recommendations

### Bull Hill site

1. Reconfigure the northern edge of the site, including a reconsideration of the location of the car park and the office block, to create a welcoming gateway to Leatherhead from the railway station.
2. Address the uncomfortable discrepancy in the scale of the townhouses and the blocks along Station Hill, addressing the excessive mass of the tall buildings on the south-west corner of the site.
3. Create a strong presence on the south-eastern corner to draw people into the site, integrate this edge of the development into the town centre, and terminate the view from North Street.
4. Interrogate the flooding impact, particularly of the removal of the large existing car park from the site and consider whether this can be seen as an opportunity to create a 'dry route' into the site.

5. Clearly define the entry points to buildings to ensure optimal legibility from the surrounding streets and within the site.
6. Implement improvements to the character and feel of the ring road by taking measures to tame it and reclaim it as an urban street.
7. Work with the community to strengthen local distinctiveness by introducing materials and features that draw on the architecture and landscape of Leatherhead.
8. Create clear, immutable parameters, supplemented by a design code within the outline planning application to secure high quality for the apartments and open spaces; and coding for external spaces, including streets as well as building.

#### Swan Centre site

9. Develop the relationship between external and internal spaces to generate activity and bring the public realm to life.
10. Test the integration of the architecture into its context.

## Detailed comments and recommendations on the Swan Centre

### 1. Public realm

- 1.1. The public realm in and around the Swan Centre is crucial to its success. These spaces must relate to the architecture and mediate between the shopping centre and the High Street and more needs to be done to achieve this and to activate the public realm.
- 1.2. The community have expressed some concern over the proposed loss of covered outdoor space, particularly in winter months, which could be addressed imaginatively using movable structures.

### 2. Architecture

- 2.1. Whilst the arch form is welcome, the architecture needs a more generous and informal feel. The building will work less well environmentally and socially, if it is a hermetically sealed box and we recommend that public areas are open to the outside, perhaps with sun canopies.
- 2.2. Orthogonal elevation drawings should be used illustrate how the architecture integrates with the existing streetscape and to assess how it reflects the grain and scale of their context.
- 2.3. We recommend, on placemaking grounds, that the planning application should allow the leisure space use to be flexible and not specified as a cinema.

## Detailed comments and recommendations on Bull Hill

### 3. Site Strategy, Scale and Massing

- 3.1. Significant improvements to the scheme have been made. The location of the park in the centre of the scheme is welcome and the open spaces have improved. Our main concern relates to the corners; the north-eastern corner is the most successful, others need further development.
- 3.2. The south-western corner is dominated by the mass of the two tall buildings, the impact of which is exacerbated by their pairing. We recommend exploring one tall building or an approach whereby the second block moves towards the park and is made lower. The footprint of these buildings also suggest that they will need to be single aspect flats, which is a concern given that some will have a very poor aspect and little sunlight.
- 3.3. The location of the Multi Storey Car Park (MSCP) on the north-eastern corner creates several problems; including closing off the view from the station approach. Given that the flood zone runs across the width of the northern edge of the site, the suggestion in the presentation that the location of the MSCP is dictated by the flooding is not convincing and we recommend its location is reconsidered. Further exploration should also be undertaken into the provision of active uses on the north side of the MSCP and directing pedestrian movement through the park towards the town, as opposed to along the western edge of the site.
- 3.4. The access to the MSCP is at one of the widest points of road which will encourage speeding vehicles. Further work needs to be done to increase the activation of the frontages on the northern edge of the site and to create a 'home zone' feel. Given that floor plates of the other buildings are lifted by 1.2m from grade, the buildings should be designed to prevent inert frontage meeting the public realm.
- 3.5. Whilst there were mixed views regarding the principle of an office on this site, we welcome the opportunity it provides of creating a mix of uses, if further consideration is given to its scale, form and location.
- 3.6. The edge to Station Road lacks coherence and more needs to be done to create a strong, distinctive character and presence, appropriate for an important town centre street. The south-eastern corner should be seen as part of, or a conclusion to, North Street, but the townhouses are not of sufficient scale to enable this. We recommend exploring the use of stacked maisonettes to achieve greater scale and density, however we also challenge this location for town houses given its exposure to the road.



- 3.7. Excessive permeability in parts of the site is compromising its ability to generate activity. We recommend that activity is concentrated along key routes to create life and that the area to the rear of the health centre is not public.
- 3.8. Sections should be produced through the site - extending into the site's context - to assess how the proposal works beyond its boundaries and to inform the design of the spaces around the ring road and the town centre.
- 3.9. The location and quantum of affordable housing within the scheme is welcome, but it is essential its location is fixed within the detailed planning application.
- 3.10. The hybrid planning approach presents some challenges in design quality terms and it is essential that parameters are set for key aspects that are outside of the detailed application. These parameters should fix height, footprint and architectural character through design codes, with an emphasis on coding for the quality of the external spaces and streets.

#### **4. Architecture**

- 4.1. The edge to Bull Hill is one of the most successful aspects of the proposal and the linking elements between the pavilion buildings on Bull Hill successfully resolve the level changes and provide supporting spaces for bins, cycle storage and plant. However, the architecture throughout the site is lacking a locally distinctive character. We recommend that the design team consider features such as flint knapping and other traditional crafts and industries. More fundamentally, the design team should draw on the wealth of local expertise of the community panel members to inform further design development.
- 4.2. Notwithstanding these comments, it may be appropriate in some areas of the site, adjacent to the railway for example, to offer a less contextual sensitive approach. The MSCP offers a similar opportunity, and despite our reservations about its scale and location, we see an opportunity for the MSCP to inject a new, exciting form and architecture into the town centre, but doing so will require a more authentic architectural connection to Leatherhead.
- 4.3. The entrance to the MSCP should be integrated into its form, not designed as a projection.
- 4.4. We are concerned about the quality of some of the apartments and that the footprints defined in an outline planning application might embed problems in the development; for example, south or west facing units are likely to need cooling. Further development is needed of the apartment typologies to address this, and deck access should be explored as a way of accessing the apartments on Bull Hill and enabling natural ventilation.

## 5. Landscape and movement

- 5.1. Despite the welcome variety of uses and increased parkland area at the centre of the development, given the importance of the open spaces to the success of the scheme, their detailed design should be fixed within the detailed planning application.
- 5.2. Responsibility for, and funding of, ongoing maintenance and management of the open spaces is critical to the future success of this development. Responsibility for each space must be defined within the planning application and a clear distinction made between public spaces (adopted by the local authority) and communal spaces paid for by residents and tenants through their service charge.
- 5.3. Whilst we understand that a hydrological assessment had been carried out, it is unclear whether flooding has been modelled and how this has informed the landscape proposal. The removal of the expansive area of hard surface car parking - and its replacement with permeable materials - is likely to positively impact on flood risk and we recommend a more thorough exploration of the implications of this.
- 5.4. The levels relative to the station are important but it is not clear how a dry route might be created in the event of flooding. This is a lost opportunity to provide a wider benefit and encourage movement through the site.
- 5.5. An understanding of levels across the site are key to the success of the proposal and particularly important to its relationship with the town centre. The levels must be interrogated further (and any issues around accessibility addressed), to enable a gradual progression.
- 5.6. The cycle route is unsatisfactory and dominated by the road and this, together with the looming mass of the car park, result in a space of little quality. The cycle route should feel primary and the car route secondary.
- 5.7. Consideration should also be given to applying a parkland treatment to the space along the railway embankment. More fundamentally, we are also concerned about the location of the route, tucked as it to the west, along the railway line. It is somewhat hidden and may encourage antisocial behaviour.
- 5.8. The 'green ring' around the site creates some successful open spaces, but in general it exacerbates the problems caused by the ring road rather than addresses them. We recommend that the treatment of the edges should tame the ring road and give it the feel of a 'street' rather than a 'road'. Greenery could also spread across the road to improve the transition with the town centre and to help address car dominance.

- 5.9. Flint walls should be considered at low level within the landscape to reference Leatherhead. Involving the community in the design of seating areas, benches and the play area would also benefit future stewardship.
- 5.10. There was little information presented on the treatment of rooftops. Consideration should be given to how these can be used to create further amenity space and improve biodiversity.

## **6. Sustainability**

- 6.1. Whilst there appears to be a commitment to sustainability, there is no evidence of what is to be delivered and what key performance indicators have been defined.
- 6.2. There appears to be no strategy for energy, embodied carbon, flooding, blue roofs, overheating and materials. Defining these could be challenging within a hybrid planning application and further thought needs to be given at this stage to ensure a sustainable development is delivered on this site. Consideration should also be given to a site wide energy system.
- 6.3. The standing advice from Design South East is that at a subsequent design review and at planning application stage the proposal must produce a clear strategy that details how the development will minimise embodied, operational, and transport-related carbon emissions, and optimise the use of renewable energy to align with the Government's legal commitment to Net Zero Carbon by 2050. The proposal should demonstrate its compliance to a respected zero carbon pathway, for example the UKGBC Net Zero Whole Life Carbon Roadmap for the Built Environment. The sustainability strategy should be tied to measurable targets and detailed modelling work informed by respected calculation methods (as applicable), and also address water use, biodiversity net gain, waste reduction and circular economy principles.

This report is a synthesis of the panel's discussion during the review and does not relate to any discussions that may have taken place outside of this design review meeting.

The report does not minute the proceedings but aims to provide a summary of the panel's recommendations and guidance.

### **Confidentiality**

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**Role of design review**

This is the report of a design review panel or workshop. The role of design review is to provide independent expert advice to both the applicant and the local planning authority.

Design review is endorsed by the National Planning Policy Framework and the opinions and recommendations of properly conducted, independent design review panels should be given weight in planning decisions including appeals. The panel does not take planning decisions. Its role is advisory. The panel's advice is only one of several considerations that local planning authorities have to take into account in making their decisions.

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