



Date of review	28 June 2020
Developer	Capital Community Developments
Scheme	Rendlesham, DC 19/1499/FUL
Planning Status	Planning Public Inquiry
Reviewer	David Birkbeck
General observations	<p>A general urban design principle is that homes face each other across streets with their back gardens enclosed. There are both historic and recent examples that deliver good outcomes in spite of breaking this principle. In April this year Marmalade Lane in Cambridge won the RTPI's supreme planning award. It has fronts facing backs. Marmalade Lane is a cohousing scheme where the nature of the community counterbalances its unorthodox layout.</p> <p>The existing scheme to the immediate south of the appeal site uses the same unorthodox arrangements proposed here. A quick search for local crime records shows it has seen much lower levels of crime than any other development in Rendlesham. The active participation in the local neighbourhood watch scheme will have helped.</p> <p>There is another reason. We avoid backs of houses facing the public realm because most house types have an internal cellular plan. Coupled to a reduction in the size of windows to the rear, backs thereby have reduced capacity to surveil the public realm. But the appeal site designs, just as at Gardenia Close/Garden Square, are raised up 0.5m increasing residents' views out. Their internal plans allow people inside to see out in multiple directions, a core principle being that interiors should connect with natural light in 5 directions, from above, then principally in equal amounts from east and west, but also from north and south. It is very unusual to find homes whose internal plan secures equal unbroken views out west and east. Some even have a third storey to increase the inside-outside links, giving them something of the function of panopticon.</p> <p>That makes it a mistake to dismiss these designs for not providing surveillance of the public realm, a criticism made repeatedly by the LPA in its BFL assessment. For example, there are 31 windows in the four buildings directly overlooking the POS feature to the west of the scheme. This is similar in surveillance extent to the village green in the district centre. The same misunderstanding of the plan forms has led the assessment to criticise the design's surveillance of the main street.</p>

	<p>The 2 'ambers' were not given to highlight negative impressions of the design but to identify the location's structural weaknesses, chiefly poor public transport and a strict northern boundary, both beyond the control of the appellant. The layout of the scheme, with its Garden City-style public realm to encourage walking, propose an appropriate response, especially if a mooted new village hub is located to the bottom Gardenia Close between Sycamore Drive and Walnut Tree Avenue.</p>		
	Greens	Ambers	Reds
Integrated neighbourhoods	2	2	0
Distinctive places	4	0	0
Streets for all	4	0	0
Totals	10	2	0

Integrated neighbourhoods

NATURAL CONNECTIONS

AMBER

Views: The treeline along the northern fringe is attractive but because the wood is inaccessible, presenting it as the end of a desire line of the scheme would have frustrated residents who would be pointed towards inaccessible amenity.

Neighbours: Some of the houses closest to the appellant site in Tidy Road are built parallel to the carriageway, giving them blank gables to the appellant site. It should be noted their plotting clearly anticipates a road to pass between them. The standard urban design device of a house ‘end stopping the street’ has not been employed, because it would stem future connectivity.

Two planned pedestrian links from either side of the peace palace into the appellant site usefully provide a direct pedestrian connection as one of the key movement corridors for people moving into the new homes. These pedestrian links would also help to encourage walking or cycling to a mooted new village commercial centre between Sycamore Drive and Walnut Tree Avenue. A bridleway north east takes the scheme into the rural hinterland.

WALKING, CYCLING AND PUBLIC TRANSPORT

AMBER

Very little in the village is too far to walk. One challenge would be that there is a falling off in the quality of the public realm as the pedestrian leaves the Garden Square/Gardenia Close environment and makes their way along Sycamore Drive towards the retail. Crudely applied highways-engineered visibility requirements have even obliged some homes to abandon their front gardens. Some have clearly been denied soft planting, such as hedge boundary treatments in case it compromises motorists’ ‘forward visibility’. One property has simply given up on the small irregular turfed strips and replaced them with Astroturf.

The limited bus service on Sycamore Road will help those who don’t have cars or driving licenses. It won’t bring any modal shift.

FACILITIES AND SERVICES

GREEN

It’s increasingly rare to be able to walk to a primary school in a few minutes. Likewise, there are other useful services, such as a local store and more in the designated district (village) centre.

The proposals for a formal public open space and a new play area are attractive additions.

HOMES FOR EVERYONE

GREEN

A scheme strongpoint. Almost all types of home with bungalows, lateral apartments, maisonettes and houses of varying sizes, all typically above the Nationally Described Space Standards and with 2.7 m (rather than 2.3 or 2.4 m) floor to ceiling heights to boost lighting levels. The scheme also sets aside 33% of its 75 homes as affordable,. A key aspect of the affordable and smaller market sale homes is that they will be created by the subdivision of 2 and 3-storey buildings that present as villas rather than apartment blocks. Many of these are

horizontally subdivided units each with a discrete access. Giving people apartments in buildings that look like houses is much better than putting lower cost homes in apartment blocks, thereby making them second class dwellings. The direct street access arrangement, without any shared common parts, has always proved more popular because it reduces management costs (anything shared incurs cost). During the pandemic it has been especially popular because homes without a shared access have been less stressful to live in.

Distinctive places

MAKING THE MOST OF WHATS THERE

GREEN

The north south streets without buildings to end-stop them will allow the wood to provide a green vista to many of the streets. The no-build area created by the water treatment plant goes from a constraint to an opportunity as a large formal leisure space which will make a very welcoming impression on visitors arriving from the Garden Square access road. The land is absolutely flat and there are no views of anything else worth addressing. But the flat site obviously invites use of the dawn and sunset, both of which are offered as unhindered views. The houses are also raised up 0.5m to enhance the light penetration.

A MEMORABLE CHARACTER

GREEN

The design is bespoke using a number of house types which were influenced by working with Adam Architecture, the leading neo-classical architects of this era. They advised the appellant that proportion was crucial to any house dependent on the Georgian idiom. There is a genuine magic to Georgian symmetry and repetition, the sense of order it creates giving a unity and legibility to a new-build environment.

Some homes also pick up on a number of East Anglian craft traditions, such as pargetting, predating the Renaissance-influenced building forms. Houses don't have chimney but lanterns which add a level of interest absent on many neighbouring units built without any vertical additions to the roof ridges. Most units have full gables (rather than the much cheaper-to-build hipped rooves seen on the Persimmon national house types). The scheme's large double doors, use of timber sash windows, high quality stock facing bricks, all combine to give a very convincing update on the kind of forms that were emerging about 190 years ago. Particularly impressive is the steep-pitched pantile rooves to create a 2rd floor, and the large lights over the doors to get natural daylight into the halls.

Most people have little interest in the authenticity of building details. But it will be the landscape architecture which makes the greatest impression. The strategy of hedgerow boundary treatments coupled with softer materials for footways and carriageways, with fruiting tress such as mulberry and cherry, combine like parts of Welwyn Garden City where rich planting was designed to buoy the often-cheap building materials. Here there is rich landscaping and high-quality building finishes. This is particularly obvious in the quality of landscaping to the fronts of plots where real stone flags, real timber picket fence and parking bays in gravel rather than blacktop will deliver a very impressive presentation of the houses.

CREATING WELL DEFINED STREETS AND SPACES

GREEN

There is a general preference not to use front to backs because it can make the exposed gardens a potential route for burglars into the property. In addition, the second row faces a principal aspect of rear parking bays and close-board fences. Plans of these homes give residents views both front and back so that residents are more aware of activity in the street and in the garden. The treatments proposed (and previously delivered at Garden Square/Gardenia Close) use a multilayering of front and rear boundaries with substantial planting of native species. The access roads between the 2 parallel rows of houses are surprisingly attractive, almost like car parking within an orchard. The choice of surface materials is particularly high quality and although very unlikely to be adopted, it is understood that most highway authorities currently encourage parts of development to be unadoptable to help cap their future maintenance obligations.

Pavements are wider than in other local developments, and in some cases, there are secondary parallel pedestrian routes that serve the individual homes so that some groups of dwellings are defined as a micro-community.

Groupings of buildings often rely on strict classical mirroring with one particular building type forming bookends to a run of properties which step forward a metre or two or backward to avoid overlooking of windows in the flank walls.

A key tenet of BHL is that buildings on corners should address both of the streets that they face. Some housebuilders achieve this but then still fall down because a third elevation can also be seen from the street where the reduction in facing material and detailing looks utilitarian. Here the focus on providing active frontages to all 4 elevations means there will be none of the blank walls found on most new-builds (which dominate the impression of the adjacent schemes from Westbury and Persimmon built in the previous 20 years).

It should be noted that the backs of apartment buildings are very successful in addressing the public realm, through the use of balconies overlooking a richly landscaped mews close. This approach looks especially good when compared with the large surface car park which defines the public realm between the Aspen Court apartment blocks off Sycamore Road.

EASY TO FIND YOUR WAY AROUND

GREEN

There are two key tenets of BHL that the scheme delivers strongly.

First, that streets should be as straight and as direct as possible. This appears both on pages 14, 17 and again on page 52. This is about getting people to walk. They will if they can see where they are going, and feel the environment for walking feels attractive and safe.

The second is that streets should connect and use a pattern that creates a strong mental map of the place. The 'fish skeleton' layout is extremely easy to read and memorise. It is particularly helpful when roads form perpendicular junctions with strong corners and there are different types mirrored on all 4 corners, such as with the maisonettes to the centre of the site.

The direct link between Tidy Road and Garden Square means that vehicular movement is possible through the scheme so that, for example, postal deliveries can proceed in one direction and not need to go back on themselves to leave the development.

Streets for all

HEALTHY STREETS

GREEN

The planting strategy for the appellant site has a clear intention (evidenced by the soft landscape infrastructure at Garden Square) to provide 'tree-lined streets' and 'landscape layers that add sensory richness to a place'.

The need to respond to pedestrian desire lines is delivered by the pedestrian links back to either side of the peace palace.

The need for tight corner radii at junctions to give people comfort crossing the road is addressed with the perpendicular junctions to the secondary streets. It might have been better to introduce raised tables here rather than speed bumps before them.

The use of footways either side of the principal and secondary street is welcomed, helping with the impression of creating a boulevard rather than the preferred curving road promoted by DB32 in the 1990s and delivered as Sycamore Drive.

CYCLE AND CAR PARKING

GREEN

The number of bays is surprisingly high, but this is a reflection of local policy. Even additional visitor parking will be tidily accommodated in the richly landscaped private drives/mews. The formality of the arrangements is also useful for controlling behaviours. Generally, the more formal the street and parking arrangements, the more car users respect them, so that the risk of fly parking on key pedestrian routes is minimised. The quantum of bicycle storage is good.

GREEN AND BLUE ASSETS

GREEN

The cordon sanitaire around the Anglian Water treatment plant has helped to give the scheme a much larger than usual Public open Space with 5 properties overlooking it. The space to the west is less well overlooked. However, the designs of the individual units with their intention to kink their east and west aspects so someone within gets light from 5 directions also means views in many more directions than would be common to a standard cellular plan form. The homes are raised a metre or more higher than grade and the assumption is that even where they are not designed to directly overlook the western feature space, residents within the ground floor would probably have views while those on first, second and third floors of the apartments would definitely provide adequate surveillance of the space.

A key test for this new BHL questions is about net gain biodiversity regulations due to take effect from next year. By leaving a dark corridor along the north edge, ie no houses backing onto the wood, this would not discourage bat or bird nesting. The landscaping strategy of seasonal native species including many fruiting trees is the best landscape choice for supporting insects and birds.

BACK OF PAVEMENT, FRONT OF HOUSE

GREEN

All homes are raised above grade by 0.5m, partly to increase the amount of light they enjoy, and partly as a cautious response to the currently minimal potential flood risk in the future. The elevation would normally create a significant design challenge for how to create a Part M compliant ramp up to a level threshold. Happily, the depth of the front gardens allows space to plan an easy to use ramp and also for the necessary soft landscape to offset the visual impact of the ramp. It is worth noting how some of the properties in the adjacent Persimmon development do not put any landscaping in front of their ramps, allowing the passer-by to see the exposed workings of their approach. Compare this with the use of real stone flags for the ramps in Garden Square/Gardenia Close and the multi-layered vertical boundary treatments including picket fence, and beech hedges. Front gardens are generally designed not just as points of access but as features to improve the initial impression of the home and thereby the street. The quantum of space to the front and sides of houses deals with the issues associated with wheelie bins.

It should be noted that this test is principally about a co-ordinated design strategy for hiding services, in particular the gas and electricity meter boxes that blight so many elevations. The quality of the Garden Square response and thereby the expectations for the appellant site compare very favourably with the lack of care and oversight at Tidy Road.