

# Building for a Healthy Life - Uttlesford Assessment Tool

Former Friends' School, Mount Pleasant Rd, Saffron Walden CB11 3EB

Section 62A Planning Application: S62A/22/0000002

28/04/2022

28/04/2022 - First Issue

Conversion of buildings and demolition of buildings to allow redevelopment to provide 96 dwellings, swimming pool and changing facilities, associated recreation facilities, access and landscaping.

Completed by Jack Bennett (UDC Principal Urban Design Officer)

It is difficult to fully support these proposals and reasons why are detailed below. Overall, it is positive to retain and bring new life to the Friends School building (providing there is evidence that the education authority is satisfied that the school building is surplus to requirements) and avenue of mature trees, but the quality of design needs to match up to the significance of the context.

The Avenue scheme is directly adjacent to the proposal scheme, and features in numerous best practice guidance documents and most notably the Essex Design Guide, the National Model Design Code and the National Design Guide. The Avenue demonstrates a well-designed place in the same context of the proposal site. In this scenario it is not difficult to interpret the requirements of the National Design Guide (and in turn the NPPF paras 129, 130, and 134) as they are manifest in the built form of the Avenue. This, of course, does not mean that a replica of the Avenue should be provided, but the good design principles demonstrated by the Avenue need to be achieved on this site, given the proximity to the Avenue itself, and the importance of the former Friends School building. It is because of the inclusion of the Avenue in national guidance that it is referenced so heavily below.

It is understood that the applicants were encouraged to use the Essex Quality Review Panel (EQRP) and declined to do so. As the urban design officer I was involved in the pre-app process - but I compliment and do not replace the EQRP. Of all schemes that should use the EQRP, surely this is one of them, given the context of both exemplar contemporary architecture and valued historic buildings. Having said that, it is recognised that the applicant engaged with the authority and made some changes, but this is a minimum expectation on a scheme of this significance.

## Uttlesford Local Plan 2005 GEN2 Design

Development will not be permitted unless its design meets all the following criteria and has regard to adopted Supplementary Design Guidance (Building for a Healthy Life, UDC Interim Climate Change Policy, and The Essex Design Guide) and Supplementary Planning Documents'.

a) It is compatible with the scale, form, layout, appearance and materials of surrounding buildings;	a		
b) It safeguards important environmental features in its setting, enabling their retention and helping to reduce the visual impact of new buildings or structures where appropriate;	g		
c) It provides an environment, which meets the reasonable needs of all potential users;	a		
d) It helps to reduce the potential for crime;	g		
e) It helps to minimise water and energy consumption;	a		
f) It has regard to guidance on layout and design adopted as supplementary planning guidance to the development plan;	r		
g) It helps to reduce waste production and encourages recycling and reuse;	g		
h) It minimises the environmental impact on neighbouring properties by appropriate mitigating measures;	g		
i) It would not have a materially adverse effect on the reasonable occupation and enjoyment of a residential or other sensitive property, as a result of loss of privacy, loss of daylight, overbearing impact or overshadowing.	g		

Rev. - Rev. A Rev. B

## Officer Comments below (as required):

These elements are generally compatible with surrounding buildings, but the form and layout of some elements (all detailed below) have shortcomings.
Cycle parking could not be found for the apartments, although it is stated in the travel plan.
The retention and re-use of existing buildings is a positive, but no reference to built fabric or energy standards for the new build elements could be found, and no evidence to suggest they are meeting the aims set out in the Interim Climate Change Policy.
The proposals include demolition of the primary school which whilst not formally part of the Avenue scheme and understood to be surplus to county requirements (at this moment in time), is built in the same style and has murals which appear to have been made with local people/children. Demolishing these young and relatively good quality buildings for replacement with new is wasteful of materials and evidence was requested to demonstrate that existing buildings cannot be converted to dwellings, if this is purported to be the case. If existing buildings cannot be retained for viability reasons, then suggest that the wall murals are extracted and potentially incorporated as public art within public open space as these murals will likely have social significance for those involved in making them.
See commentary below

## Summary of Building for a Healthy Life scores

See each section for more details

Natural connections	a		
Walking, cycling, and public transport	a		
Facilities and services	g		

Rev. - Rev. A Rev. B

## See relevant sections for comments

The site would have benefitted greatly from a masterplan exercise exploring all options for how new development could be knitted into the context, and identifying opportunities for good placemaking, rather than the fairly crude approach of avoiding protected open space and replacing built form in the same location. It is understood why this approach has been taken, but the full range of options and the balance of merits/disbenefits of each should have been discussed at an early stage with the LPA and local people.
Connection to the existing open space to the south of the site could be improved by removing the existing timber fence along this boundary. This point also applies to the wire fence around the western boundary, presuming the security consultee foresees no security risk, removal of these fences would help the new place settle in to the context.
Cycle parking could not be found for the apartments, although it is stated in the travel plan.

Homes for everyone	a		<p>Provision of houses and flats could potentially provide a good mix, subject to confirmation of mix. Housing officer to confirm mix meets requirements and that lack of affordable housing provision is acceptable.</p> <p>It is not clear where the amenity space for the two new flats added to the assembly hall is. A clear measured strategy showing areas given to apartment amenity, house amenity, and strategic open space was not found, so could not be assessed.</p>
Making the most of what's there	B		<p>The proposals do incorporate the mature trees on the site, which is a positive point, and a key feature also of the Avenue.</p> <p>It is a shame to lose the Grade A tree currently at the rear of the assembly hall. It is suggested this could be retained and that the resulting loss of rear garden to the affected home could be acceptable on balance given the amenity value this tree would provide and shading in the summer to reduce overheating of homes.</p>
A memorable character	a		<p>Following a site visit with applicant and heritage officer, the generic/pastiche traditional approach was changed for a contemporary approach which is supported in principle; however, it does not appear that the extent of the opportunity to create the quality of architecture befitting of the site has been taken. The withdrawn local plan encouraged applicants to run design competitions to select consultants as a way of achieving high quality design, and in this scenario, this did not happen, and could have enabled a design team with a passion for, and experience of, designing exemplar contemporary architecture (an element of the success of the Avenue).</p> <p>The vision is weakest for the 3-storey block and this is reflected by the lack of detail in the DAS. A good design process would start by defining a vision and design concepts for the architectural approach which referenced analysis of the existing building and precedents. Analysis of the existing buildings and vernacular (including the Avenue) would use drawings, diagrams, and detailed photographs to understand what elements might be used or reinterpreted. There should be a similar exploration of previous examples of high quality contemporary buildings in similar contexts, again from which to draw understanding and reference when forming new designs. In summary, there is a lack of good process and rationale backing up the final designs, which suffer as a result. The fenestration is uninspired and the roofs are awkwardly resolved.</p> <p>The LPA asked for a 'contemporary' approach which has misconstrued by the applicant as 'stripped-back' - some contemporary architecture is 'stripped-back', but some is materially rich with detailed decoration, if appropriate to the scheme, and this is possible when supported by a comprehensive design process.</p>
Well defined streets and spaces	r		<p>From the Essex Design Guide about the Avenue: 'The lack of a pattern book of designs meant the architect was able to develop its own kit of parts, without reducing individuality or variety across the scheme ... The housing off the main avenue forms a series of courtyards that strike a clever mix of coherence and community for the owners.' The proposal scheme is let down by the use of pattern book house types (namely the Oak) which results in a design for south-eastern corner of the site which is not sensitively tailored to the site shape and results in poorly hidden parking, left over pieces of land with no clear public or private function, and awkward driveways. Particularly problematic is the garage and exposed parking on the prominent face of the Oak house type addressing the important avenue of trees, the facade should have an active elevation with window to a habitable room.</p> <p>The National Design Guide states: The Avenue house types are 'visually integrated, creating a mixed neighbourhood that faces onto a tree-lined avenue'. The homes in the proposals do not necessarily need to have their primary frontage addressing the tree lined avenue, but I would suggest that a brick wall and an active elevation with window to a habitable room is the minimum to expect, with the high timber fence and car parking currently proposed being unacceptable.</p> <p>The proposals have instances of inactive frontages addressing public realm, and in some cases prominent car parking, whereas the Avenue ensures that buildings facing public realm are activated by way of windows to habitable rooms or balconies.</p> <p>A particularly clever element of the Avenue is the long red brick wall which is punctuated by windows and openings, ties together buildings along the main route, and provides a quality boundary treatment. This type of wall can be found all around historic Saffron Walden and is a strong character feature. The proposals on the other hand have 1.8m timber fences addressing key areas of public realm which is not in keeping with the character of local/existing materials, does not create a quality environment, and is synonymous with poor quality volume housebuilding.</p> <p>The proposals show bin stores as prominent standalone buildings in the public realm, whereas good design principles would suggest they were incorporated into larger buildings/apart blocks, as they are in the Avenue.</p>
Easy to find your way around	a		<p>There is technically a pedestrian and cycle route through the development which would enable a sustainable connection through the site, however the surface materials should be used to make this route clearer, and guide people across the car park.</p>
Healthy streets	a		<p>The proposals show black tarmac for the shared surface drives whereas the Essex Design Guide requires a 'special surface' for these routes such as coloured block paving and the Avenue uses quality pavers which creates the feel of a rural lane rather than engineered highway. The Avenue uses grasscrete for temporary bin stations and visitor spots which is a good principle to be used.</p>

Cycle and car parking
Green and blue infrastructure
Back of pavement, front of home

a		
g		
g		

There are certain areas where there are more than 4 car parking spaces in a run without a sub-dividing tree pit as per the Building for a Healthy Life guidance and the Avenue, although it is recognised that the constraints of the site and Uttlesford's parking standards are a challenging combination.

Given the accessibility of the location, the opportunity could be taken to reduce car parking standards on this site, which would enable more landscaping to settle the parking into the streetscape, although no parking plan or confirmation of numbers could be found.