LATTON PRIORY DRAFT STRATEGIC DESIGN CODE TESTING REPORT

FEB 2024

EFDC Implementation Team

Introduction and background

This report contains the findings of the design code testing that was undertaken between December 2023 and February 2024 to identify opportunities to improve the Strategic Design Code for Latton Priory Masterplan Area, which is being produced by officers in the Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) Implementation Team.

Epping Forest District Council (EFDC) were awarded funding by the Department for Levelling Up, Homes and Communities (DLUHC) to produce a strategic design code for the Latton Priory masterplan area. Latton Priory is allocated in the Local Plan as one of three new Harlow and Gilston Garden Town (HGGT) communities in the District. The site is located to the south of Harlow, but within the administrative area of Epping Forest District. It is allocated to provide a minimum of 1, 050 new homes, two schools, a local centre with retail and community facilities as well as a rich and multi-functional network of green infrastructure.

The design code has been produced with specialist input for transport expertise and engagement. It follows on from the Latton priory Strategic Masterplan Framework (the SMF), which was produced by the site promoters' consultants and endorsed by EFDC. The SMF establishes key spatial principles for the site and the strategic design code builds on these and develops strategies in line with the aims and vision of the District and the Garden Town. Once endorsed, the design code will sit alongside the SMF with material weight in the decision making of future planning application for the Latton Priory site.

Figure 1 Draft Strategic Design Code cover

Purpose of Testing

Testing was undertaken to test the usability and deliverability of the design code with architects, simulating how it would be used in practice. The testing outcomes, alongside consultation feedback, would inform updates to the design code prior to endorsement at EFDC Cabinet to form a material planning consideration.

Testing is intended to help refine the design code by answering the following questions:

- How usable/ legible is the design code and what would improve ease of use?
- How deliverable/ achievable are the requirements of the design code? Particularly around typologies, parking and bins and bikes. Is any further information/ clarification required?
- Are there significant loopholes that would allow poor design/ placemaking?
- Does the code inspire good design? How could it go further?
- What should be included on a compliance tracker to aid those designing and reviewing future applications.

Testing Process

This was the first-time design code testing had been undertaken at EFDC and therefore there was no set format prior to the exercise being undertaken. The brief was relatively open, with a few key aspects identified as essential to test. The process evolved as required as the testing progressed.

An initial brief and fixed was sent to the architecture firm 'Jas Bhalla Architects' (JBA) as follows:
It is intended that an Architect or urban designer, possibly with input from a landscape architect, uses the code to design a portion of the masterplan (c. 200 homes) at high-level. This should include a range of street types and typologies as identified in the code. Plans can be in sketch/ CAD block form but should include indicative parking arrangements and bin and bike storage in line with the requirements of the code and based on a provisional ratio of 1 car per dwelling (with additional cars located in car barns as required). This would be undertaken remotely and does not require in-person attendance or site visit. A CAD site plan will be provided as well as mark-up of the testing area. Other necessary information can be found in the SMF and the draft strategic design code.

Testing will be followed by a collaborative workshop with a small group of officers from EFDC planning team and industry peers where the consultant will informally present their findings to inform discussions around any issues arising.

The initial testing period was 5 days followed by a further half day collaborative workshop at EFDC offices with EFDC officers, the testing Architects, industry peers from the EFDC/ HGGT Quality Review Panel and a CEG/ Hallam (site promoter) representative. JBA informally presented their findings at this workshop and this led to discussions around various aspects of the code and the requirements.

Due to limited time spent on the block testing aspect prior to the workshop, JBA were commissioned to continue with this following the workshop. This allowed further development and investigation of potential issues or questions raised during the workshop.

1. Block Testing

The initial testing area was approx. 200 homes as shown in red below. This was revised down to a smaller area as shown in blue to accommodate the limited timeframe for testing, noting that it was seen as more important to look at block testing in some detail, e.g. bin storage capacity and car parking rather than testing a larger area in less detail.

The testing area represents the tightest portion of the site due to the constraints of the distance between the southern build-to line and the access to Dorrington Farm. It is important to note that the typologies used to address the limited depth and the design code requirements for this part of the site may not be directly applicable to other parts of the site where site constraints allow more flexibility.

Figure 2 Design Code Illustrative masterplan with testing area mark-ups

It should also be noted that the testing layouts show just one way of meeting design code requirements in a very basic way to test deliverability. Detail, such as detailed street design or trees and green infrastructure has not been included for these purposes. There will be a variety of ways to meet the design code requirements, and this will need to be developed through a high-quality design process with appropriate specialists and consultants working collaboratively.

The following block testing diagrams illustrate how the four blocks can be delivered with associated street types, green infrastructure, car parking and bins and bicycle storage and other technical requirements such as emergency and refuse access.

An initial composite diagram was produced from the various strategic diagrams in the code and this was developed into simple block testing.

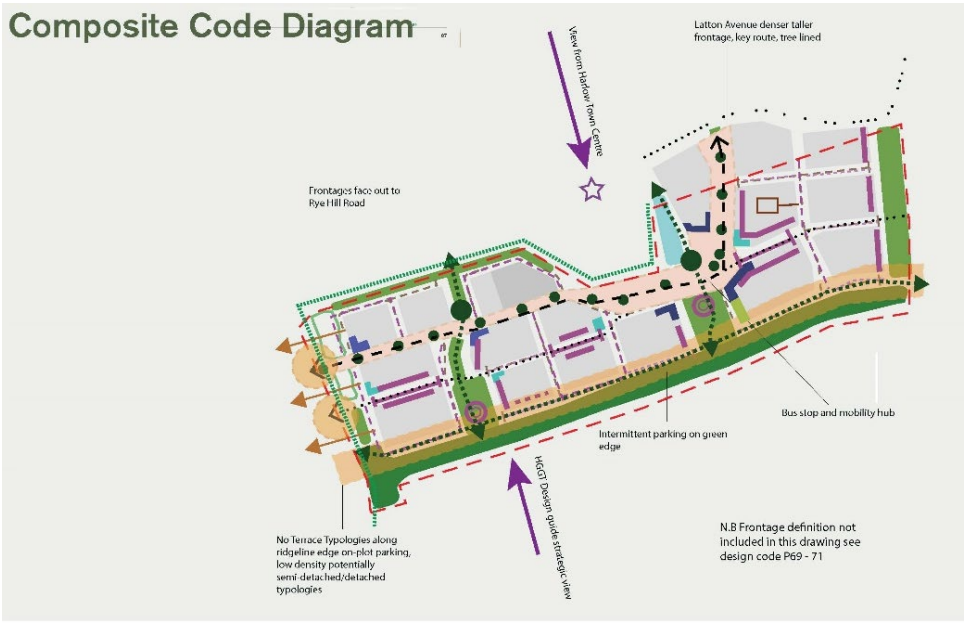


Figure 3 Composite code diagram (JBA)

Figure 4 Block testing diagram (JBA)

Block Test diagram illustrates a depth of 154.7 m between the green buffer south of Dorrington farm to the green buffer to the pitches and allotments to the south can accommodate three blocks plus Latton Avenue, two local streets and a car-free play street.

Two options have been shown for the car-free play street. One option assumes that a refuse vehicle can turn into the end of the play street and individual bin stores are provided to the houses on the car-free play street. In the second option, communal bin stores are provided so that the refuse vehicle can collect from the local street without the need to turn in and reverse out.

Figure 5 Blocks around car-free play street, with individual bin stores (JBA)

- Individual refuse and bike store for all dwellings, resulting in all dwellings having a greater setback from the pavement line. In this test layout, the result is a minimum setback of 2.2m from the pavement edge. This conflicts with the Building Line and Threshold Requirements table on page 70, which states "*Small setbacks: 0.5m - 1m*." To mitigate this, all individual refuse positioned along the pavement edge, to read as a continuous building line.
- For visitor parking, we intend to have it on-street in line with Requirement 3.35, allowing an extra two spaces for visitor parking .
- On-plot parking for two dwellings on southern edge, with a minimum dimension of 6m by 3m.

Figure 6 Blocks around car-free play street, with communal bin stores (JBA)

- Option with 2 communal refuse areas, each large enough to contain 2 x 1100 Lt bins. Each refuse area services 4 units, with a maximum drag distance of 22m.
- In this current arrangement the drag distance from the from front door to the Refuse is 22m and 15 – 15.5m from refuse to the main streets. This is an overall distance of 37m.
- Additionally, 2 communal bike stores, in total large enough to accommodate 10 Sheffield bike stands, providing 20 cycle spaces for the 8 units along the play street.
- In this option, a fire tender will still need to drive part way into either end of the street in order to be able to 'get within 45m of the further part of any dwelling', however this is showing the worst case and the extents of fire tender access may be shorter once actual dwelling layouts are tested. Furthermore, as access would only be required in an emergency, these spaces at the ends of the street could be landscaped in way that is not designed for vehicles but will not prevent vehicle access in an emergency.

2. Document Usability & Legibility

JBA provided the following feedback and suggestions on the overall document usability and legibility:

Latton Priory Design Code Testing

Structure and Useability Feedback

One aspect of our brief was to look at the code from a useability perspective, offering insights into the experience of working with the code having not had sight of it before. This note sets out the key strengths and weaknesses of the code structure and suggests a range of potential responses. These are organised by the intensity of effort/scale of change required and were refined via dialogue with design review panel members in a workshop held on 15th December 2023.

Strengths

1. Comprehensive – the code establishes a comprehensive set of urban design principles across a wide range of themes that, taken together, should elevate user's proposals far above that of a standard application.

2. Visually Engaging – the use of colour, maps, diagrams, visualisations and precedent imagery helps bring the principles of the code alive for the user.

3. Structured – there is a clear thematic structure set out in the contents, with colour coded chapters that clearly indicate which theme is being covered.

Weaknesses

1. Volume of information: There are 14 strategic diagrams across different themes. This is useful in the ways highlighted above but challenging for a new user to figure out how they all layer up. For example, gaining a comprehensive understanding of movement requires the user to read across several different plans.

2. Hierarchy of importance: – "Musts and Should's" – greater clarity could be given visually to help the user distinguish between what information is advisory vs mandatory and what is policy vs what is explanation.

3. Navigation: the user journey of the document could be improved with greater clarity about when certain guidance should be consulted and applied in what order and to which design stages. e.g. what information informs broad site principles at outline vs detailed plot design within a full planning application.

Level	Responses to Observations		
	Volume of Information	Hierarchy of Importance	Navigation
More time/ capacity	Digitise strategic diagrams so layers can be overlaid, turned on/off and zoomed into		
	Edit to reduce volume of text	Colour code "musts" and "shoulds".	Expand "how to use" section on page 4 to provide sequential set of steps (see possible example below)
	Consider combining/consolidating some of the strategic diagrams	Colour code rule vs explanatory text.	Also use the above section to explain any additional colour coding (see Hierarchy of Importance)
	Consider combining linked pieces of information, e.g. road types and parking treatment	Order "musts" and "shoulds" so they are grouped together and "musts" come first.	
Less time/ capacity	Include checklist for easy compliance/completeness	Add "illustrative" caveat to strategic diagrams.	

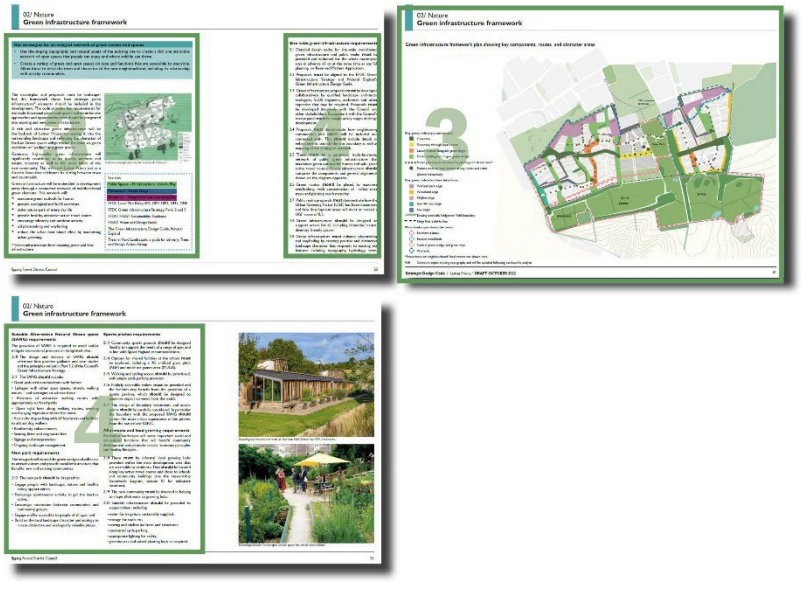
Possible approach to "how to use" section

1 Read the introduction and background sesction to understand context

2 Read the strategic design code section to understand the overall spatial spproach

3 Read the key strategies and framework section of each theme to develop design principles

4 Read the detailed guidance to refine final design



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3. Opportunities and Actions

Opportunities that emerged during the process range from specific to general amendments and from those that are more critical and beneficial to the use and understanding of the code to those that would be helpful but could form part of the wider planning process. The actions noted below consolidate the results of the testing on the previous two pages as well as input from industry peers at the collaborative workshop on 15th December:

Actions to improve usability/ legibility of the design code:

- Reduce overall volume of text, focussing particularly on text-heavy pages.
- Review 'musts' and 'shoulds' – including the number of requirements to ensure that the design code priorities are understood. Consider visually differentiating 'musts' and 'shoulds' though noting that 'shoulds' should not be ignored and are not less important, but may just be more subjective than the 'musts'.
- Review strategic diagrams. Consider colour changes to aid clarity and/ or combining/ consolidating information to reduce the need to cross-reference between different parts of the design code.
- Consider how to combine linked information/ requirements to reduce the need for cross-referencing, particularly around street requirements
- Expand on 'how to use' section to set out process for designing using the code. The process section should also include a process for deviating from the Code in certain circumstances, requiring designs to be reviewed by the QRP to demonstrate that they are an improvement.
- Produce compliance tracker to aid document use and review of proposals.

Actions to improve design outcomes:

- Add more information about green infrastructure requirements e.g. green buffers at key edges or treatment beside existing hedgerows.
- Reconsider the requirement around all mature trees from the outset to balance with longevity. A mix may be more appropriate.
- Review the requirements for building-line set-backs. These may be overly restrictive in places and may not allow for front garden bin/ bike storage where required.
- Review 'frontage/ building line' requirements to allow more flexibility and make code easier to understand/ less complex. The principle of maximising frontage is positive but its extent should be reduced to allow more gaps in the built form. Gaps should be a minimum of 2-3m.
- Sections showing how buildings relate to the street would be beneficial.
- Possible further coding around site perimeter roads and the character of these.