

Consultee Comments - Urban Design

Consultee:	BNE – Urban Design
Reference Number:	23/03204/OUT
Proposal:	Outline application (with all matters reserved) for the demolition of existing buildings and structures and redevelopment of the site for a new local centre (E (a-f), F1(b-f), F2(b,d)), open space and employment (office and laboratory) floorspace (E(g)(i)(ii) to the ground floor and employment floorspace (office and laboratory) (E(g)(i)(ii) to the upper floors, along with supporting infrastructure, including pedestrian and cycle routes, vehicular access, car and cycle parking, servicing areas, landscaping and utilities. (The Development is the subject of an Environmental Impact Assessment)
Site Address:	Beehive Centre Coldham's Lane Cambridge CB1 3ET Cambridgeshire
Case Officer:	Cuma Ahmet
Responding Officer:	Sarah Chubb
Date:	09.11.23

Recommendation

The fundamental issues identified within these comments demonstrate that the proposed intensity of use for the site cannot be accommodated and represents overdevelopment.

The amount proposed is simply too great for what the site and the context can support, which is manifesting in unacceptable harm on the skyline of the City, local townscape and immediate neighbours of many existing residential properties that back onto the site. The Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel (GCDRP) also raised the proposed amount, scale and massing as a significant problem. Spatially, the proposed structure lacks coherence, with a confused internal movement network and poor integration of open space. The proposal fails to recognise the current inadequacy of Coldham's Lane roundabout perpetuating highway dominance, and an inconvenient and uncomfortable experience for pedestrians and cyclists at an important gateway. A significant change to the spatial layout and massing strategy is required. Therefore, in its current form, the proposal does not comply with policies 55, 56, 57 and 60 of the Cambridge Local Plan 2018 and is not supported in urban design terms.

However, we believe that this site does possess immense place and people potential; a unique once in a generation opportunity to remake a new piece of City, that is meaningfully embedded into the fabric in a climate and context responsive way. We have therefore set out an alternative approach for reorganising and re-imagining the site to respond positively to our concerns set out in these comments, other technical consultees and the community. We look forward to discussing this with the applicant and their design team and using the alternative approach as a platform for negotiating a revised proposal for the site.



Object for the following reasons: see comments and recommendation

SUMMARY OF URBAN DESIGN ISSUES

To be read in conjunction with more detailed comments

- 1 Highway dominated junction; inconvenient, uncomfortable gateway for pedestrians and cyclists
- 2 Weak frontage and poor continuity of building line onto Coldham's Lane
- 3 A confused internal movement structure
- 4 Indirect main link for cyclists
- 5 A weak "spine" and sprawling local centre
- 6 Front and back issues
- 7 Poorly defined arrival space
- 8 "Dead end" destination space
- 9 "Back door" southern arrival
- 10 Edge interface issues – potential overbearing (multiple locations see comments)
- 11 Legibility issues
- 12 Tallest plots have weak role in masterplan



STRUCTURE: MOVEMENT FRAMEWORK

1 - Highway dominated junction, uncomfortable and inconvenient gateway for people, weak building line onto Coldham's Lane.

The principle of remaking the site by taking a street-based approach is a good and solid urban design approach. However, we have concerns about the coherency of the key structuring framework that is being fixed through the outline application.

The proposed outline for the Beehive Centre is arguably one of the most significant urban renewal projects since CB1 and when considered alongside the redevelopment potential of Cambridge Retail Park, it presents a once in a generation opportunity to re-imagine the busy and traffic dominated highway of Coldham's Lane. To change it from a "main road" condition into an urban street; with the goal to make it more comfortable and convenient for people to walk along and cross. We are therefore disappointed and concerned that the proposed access will continue to be facilitated by a roundabout.

In our view this is the wrong approach; it is a standard highway solution that is land hungry, prioritises vehicles, maintains the current uncomfortable pedestrian and cycle environment and will undermine the expected modal shift towards more active travel. Maintaining a roundabout, continues to create wide sweeping junction curves, which forces cyclists and pedestrians away from the natural crossing desire lines. This maintains the current, inconvenient detour for pedestrians and cyclists, rather than attempting to address the problem. (See fig 1)

Spatially, the proposed roundabout concept is having a negative impact on the positioning of the buildings which are responding to the geometries of the road by following the wide, land hungry, cut back corners. This means that the "road" will define the space at the junction rather than the buildings which will create a weak and poor continuity of building line along the key frontage of Coldham's lane, a leaky and poorly defined key arrival space (see further explanation under section 3) and is pushing Plot A close to the existing residential boundaries of Silverwood Close.

A simpler junction arrangement with tighter radii corners would form a better approach for people and place. It would allow pedestrian/cycle crossings to be located on the junction to respond to desire lines; help to reclaim space so that Plot A could be arranged to help create a stronger building line along Coldham's Lane, to better hold the junction and help to create more breathing space between Plot A and Silverwood Close properties. These changes are indicatively shown on our alternative spatial layout. Given that the application claims reduced motorised vehicle traffic movements on Coldham's Lane, we see no reason why this cannot be achieved.

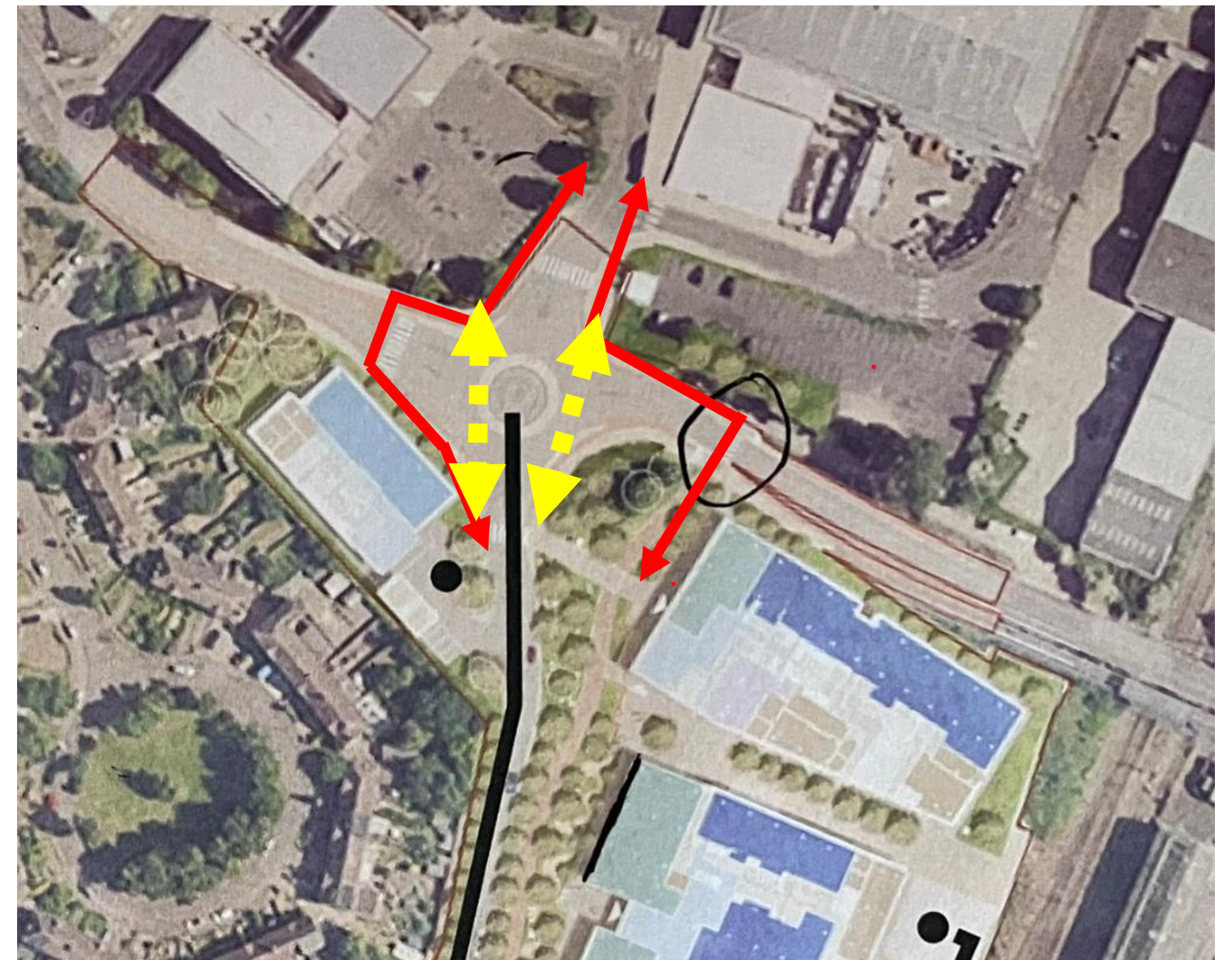


Fig 1 – Red arrows shows the inconvenient detour for pedestrians and cyclists, yellow arrows illustrates the natural desire line.

STRUCTURE: MOVEMENT FRAMEWORK

2 – A muddled internal movement structure, an indirect main link for cyclists, a weak “spine”, sprawling local centre, front and back issues.

It is critical that any proposal establishes the right movement framework as it defines the basic structure of a place that affects uses and activities, density of form, security and the impact on surrounding neighbourhoods. Unfortunately, as proposed, the overall spatial structure, in which the movement framework sits, lacks coherency.

Whilst it is important to stitch into existing connections, it is important to recognise that not all access points have equal roles in the wider movement network. In our view, Sleaford Street at the southwestern corner has a higher movement hierarchy status as it connects into the immediate network of streets that facilitate direct and attractive connections to the more strategic key movement generators such as Cambridge Railway Station and Mill Road to the south (via Aisworth Street, Ironworks, Devonshire Road) and Burleigh Street/Grafton Centre to the west (via Sleaford Street, Milford Street, Norfolk Street).

The masterplan incorrectly assigns equal weighting to these two existing pedestrian and cycle access points from York Street and Sleaford Street into the southern part of the site. This is producing a confused spatial street hierarchy, lots of hard vehicle circulation space that penetrates deep into the site, fronts and back issues along the northern western edge and an indirect main cycle link through the site. As a result, the main spine route through the site - which should be to the southwestern corner - is weak in legibility, and the footfall intensity or “heat” on this route will be watered down.

These structural movement problems is impacting upon the extent of local centre uses and frontages, which has overspilled and gravitated towards the northwestern part of the southern area of the site, further muddling the hierarchy of routes and spaces. The fundamental spatial layout proposed needs to be revisited. We have set out an alternative approach (see page 9 of comments).

We believe that a much stronger spine route through the site to the southwestern corner needs to be created; a direct and spatially legible route for both cyclists and pedestrians between Coldham’s Lane and Sleaford Street, that reflects the main desire line through the site, providing the focus for a rationalised and more consolidated “high street”, that in turn creates a more intense “hot route” of activity. Furthermore, the rationalisation of the ground floor retail space will help to absorb some of the loss of workspace that will need to occur to address scale and massing concerns.

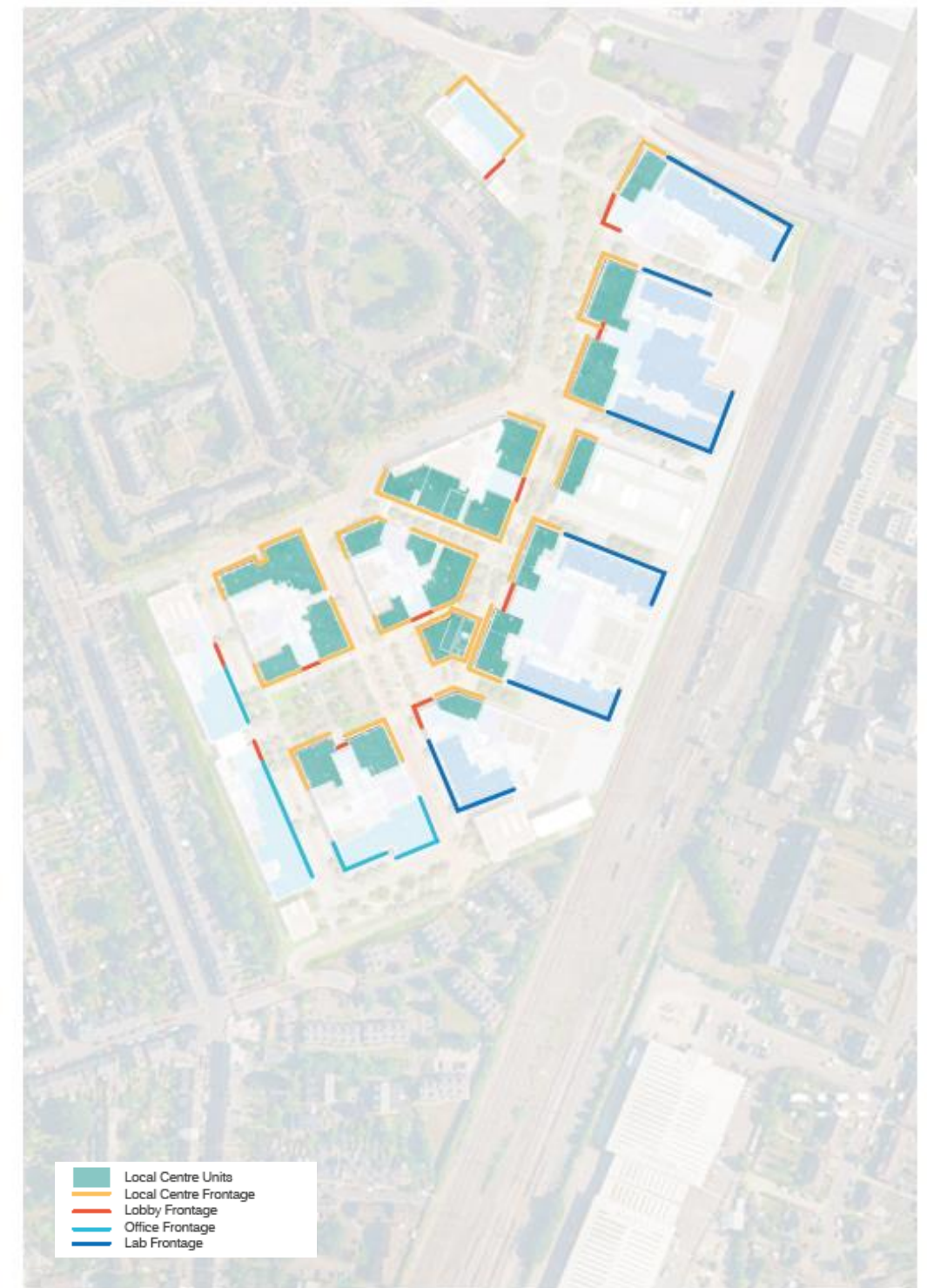


Fig 2 – Extract from the submitted Design and Access Statement, which shows the sprawling local centre gravitating to the northwestern part of the site.

STRUCTURE: PUBLIC SPACE FRAMEWORK

3 - Poorly defined arrival space, a dead-end destination space and a “back door” southern entrance, legibility issues.

The desire to create an open and welcoming public realm that integrates with surrounding communities is a good objective. Much of what we enjoy about Cambridge comes from the quality of its outdoor spaces; its streets, squares and parks. However, this is not wholly reflected in the proposal, and we are not convinced that the application is spatially fixing the “publicly accessible green areas” in the right location to create a convincing seamless piece of urbanism. We raise the following concerns:

(a) Poorly defined arrival space (Abbey Grove) – The proposed key arrival green space is “leaky”, poorly defined and fails to connect to its surroundings in a coherent way, creating poor levels of continuity and enclosure both along Coldham’s Lane and into the site. Legibility is poor within the long linear open space; the CGI looking south towards Block M, illustrates how it is unclear where the main street with is. Re-imagining the roundabout as outlined in section 1, will help to create the potential for better continuity of building line along Coldham’s Lane and a tighter entrance into the site. Though our revised approach, we have introduced a defined square as a key move to address these issues, to positively anchor the arrival sequence into the site and terminate the northern end of the high street. The “mouth” between Plots M and Plot 3 has also been widened to improve visual connectivity and wider legibility.

(b) Dead-end destination space (Garden Square South) – The ambition to create a new civic scaled space is welcomed, however we are not convinced that the location of the key public space (Garden Square S) is positioned or integrated into the masterplan in the right place. As proposed it terminates the end of what is meant to be the main street but doesn’t naturally go or lead anywhere. When considered with Garden Square N, the orientation doesn’t reinforce the natural line of direction through to the Sleaford Street (SW corner) which is a key integration and access point into the surrounding community. Sunlight access will be affected by Plot H to the south. The concept of the wetland planting is interesting, but any SUDs feature needs to be part of a larger space. The current illustrative concept means that the wetland area will take up most of the space, limiting activity to the edges. A city scaled destination space, should be the instrument for urban transformation, working as an integration tool to create a sense of continuity with the wider context. It would be better to amalgamate the spatial area of Garden Square South and Vera Gardens, to create one larger destination “park” space which would reduce competition for use and accommodate strategic tree planting.

(c) Southern entrance space (Vera’s Garden) – The southern open space feels confused and like a back door entrance to the proposal. The wide and shallow space is flanked by the existing wall and cycle stores; the southern façade of office Plot H does not balance this shallow space. Vehicle circulation pulling into the SW corner running in front of Plot H, further compromises this already constrained space. The CGI image on page 48 of the DAS offers little comfort; which demonstrates how the space fails to contribute to a wider legible structure. The proposed allotment use feels like an afterthought to try to give this space meaning.



Fig 3 (top) and Fig 4 (bottom) highlight the poor levels of visual permeability and wider legibility issues stemming from the proposed spatial layout.

SCALE AND MASSING

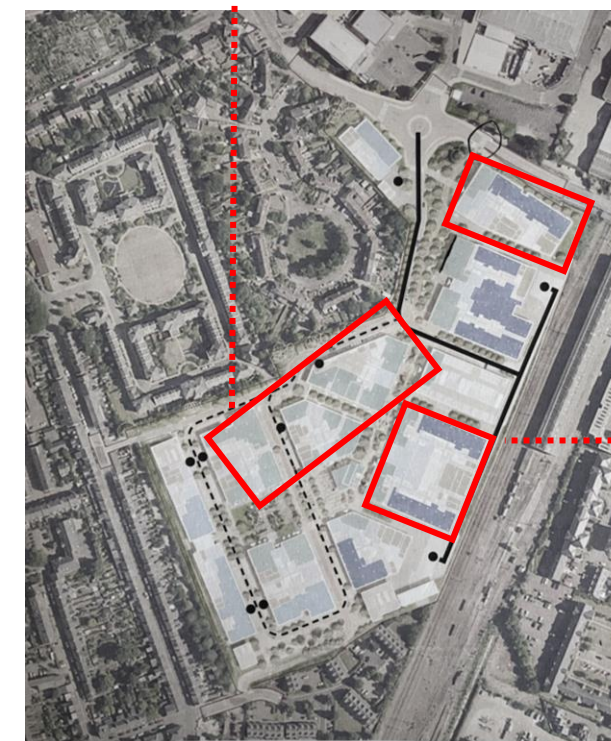
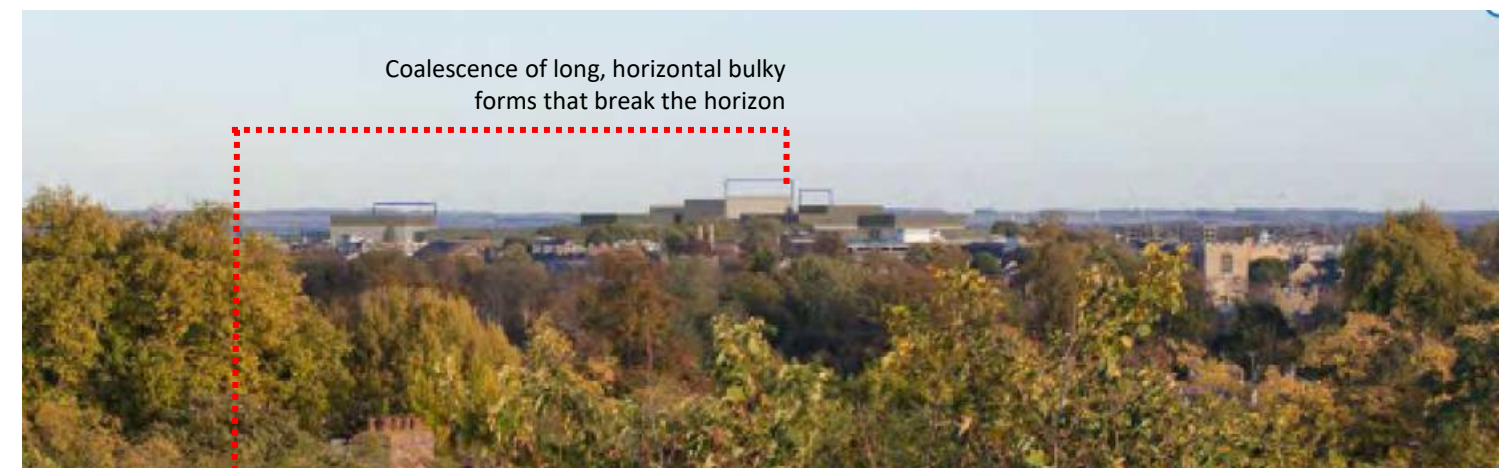
4 - Skyline and localised townscape harm, overbearing impacts

Scale and massing were fundamental concerns that were raised by officers throughout pre-application discussions and formed a significant issue raised by the GCDRP. This continues to be a significant issue raised by all and indicates a significant change to the massing strategy is required. Our concerns are outlined below:

a) Longer view impact – The proposed scale, mass and bulk will result in an unacceptable harmful visual impact on the skyline of the City and the historic core, completely changing how we view and understand the City from longer distance policy 60 viewpoints. This impact is most obvious in the verified views from Worts Causeway, Little Trees Hill, Red Meadow Hill and Castle Mound. The change is very prominent from Castle Mound (view 01) which due to the large floorplates and massing envelopes being established in the parameter plans, the proposal will appear as a dominant, discordant and bulky intrusion on the skyline; competing with the horizon and the fine, layered grain of the City fabric that is formed by the interplay of mature tree cover and buildings. Plots H, K, L, M, G and F coalesce into a monolithic, bulky cluster that form uncomfortable, overly horizontal and jarring additions to this prominent view. The proportions of Plot C rise above the prevailing townscape in a boxy and ungainly manner. The illustrative scheme visualisations demonstrate to us, that the imposing visual impact cannot be mitigated by variations in elevational design or roofscape that the design code seeks to control. A reduction in scale is required to these Plots to manage the bulky volumes generated by the large floorplates, and then a more targeted and contextual approach to taller additions is required that seeks to create more slender proportions on the skyline.

b) Localised views – From an urban design perspective, the railway edge could in principle potentially accommodate an increased sense of scale as per other railway corridor sites, however as proposed, we object to the heights and massing being sought through the outline application. The verified view from Coldham's Common (view 03) illustrates how the bulk of the proposals feel incongruous and foreign within the view. Transitions between volumes appear awkward. The scale and bulk of Plot F is particularly monolithic and will loom over its immediate surroundings and will dominate views from this part of the common. A reduced datum height of around 20m for the railway plots would as a start help to mitigate this harm. The prominence of Plot F is unjustified and confused in placemaking terms, which currently has a weak role in the masterplan. Plot C's ungainly proportions and horizontal emphasis only serves to exacerbate the stark contrast in bulk with the layered foreground fabric consisting of domestic rhythms and mature trees punctuating the articulated roofscapes. There is the opportunity for a marker building to announce the entrance into the scheme, but this needs to read as a discrete element on the skyline with more slender, vertical proportions, working hard to find a more domestic silhouette.

The proposed scale of the plots that line the railway are also problematic from corner of Sleaford Street (view 04). From this view, the massing volumes of Plots H and G coalesce above the trees striking an overly horizontal emphasis in a finger grain context of the conservation area, where vertical proportions and rhythms predominate and roofscape notches form a key characteristic.



SCALE AND MASSING continued

c) Edge interface issues: potential overbearing

We acknowledge the principle of the proposed scale stepping down towards existing residential edges and the attempt to set out a more prescriptive massing envelope for Blocks J and I that back onto York Street. However, we have concerns about the proposed height and proximity, which is creating unacceptable interface relationships with some of the closest of the existing residential properties that surround the edges of the sites.

The limited number of cross sections provided within the DAS do not allow us to assess the potential for overbearing impacts from rear gardens. No verified views have been produced to attempt to show the perception of the degree of change in scale and massing.

Using the latest VuCity model that was shared with officers during the pre-application process and the submitted parameter plans, we have generated our own views. Clearly, these are not verified views, however we have set them up with the technical parameters of a 1.6m eye height and 50mm focal point, and they help to provide a good indication of the likely impact.

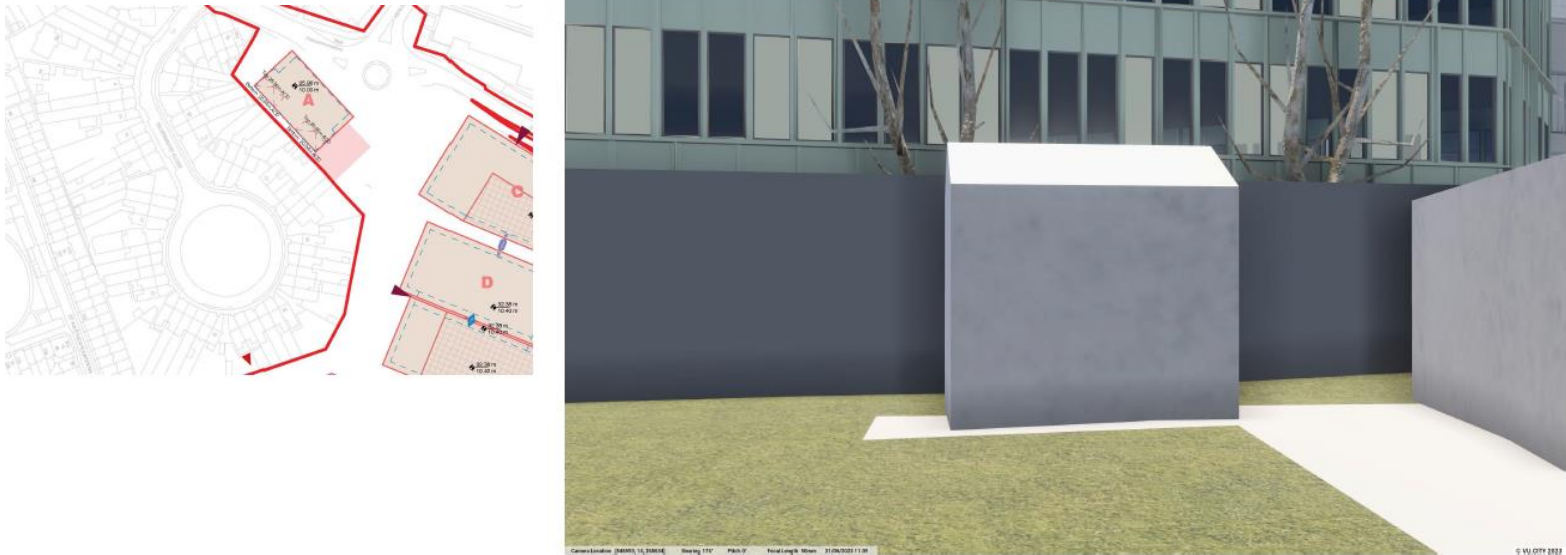
The proposed upper limit of 20.2m proposed for Plots I and J is of concern, which will create an unacceptable overbearing impact when viewed from the rear gardens of York Street. Therefore, to create a more comfortable relationship the upper limit of these blocks should be fixed at 15.1m, and the inclined slope parameter extended across the entire length of these buildings. The existing, mature green edge along Rope Walk, currently provides an effective screen between properties and the existing beehive buildings and will be important to mitigating the impacts of a change in scale and mass around this part of the site. It is unclear whether the proximity of the proposed plots has been determined with the objective to safeguard the health and therefore the current screening effectiveness of the existing vegetation in addition to any of the assumed works. Further clarification is needed.

The proximity of Plot A which sits tight to the rear boundary of Silverwood Close and the length of the northern edge of Plot M is of concern, which according to our modelling work will create an overbearing impact. As indicated on our alternative approach, a better relationship could be formed by pulling Plot A away from this boundary and shortening the length of the northern boundary of Plot M so that it reflects the length of the terraces found in Silverwood Close.

Fig 5 – Illustrative masterplan proposal from rear garden of 52 York Street



Fig 6 – Illustrative masterplan Proposal from 34 Silverwood Close



MIX

5. A better balance of uses, establishing better edge transitions

The vision to create an engaging public realm that is framed by active frontages is laudable and forms a good urbanism principle. Also, the desire to manage the large R&D floorplates by sleeving them with finer grain uses at ground floor, is again, good in principle.

However, we share the disappointment of the Greater Cambridge Design Review Panel that the proposal cannot integrate an element of residential into the mix. Further justification needs to be provided as to why this is not possible. In our view, integrating an element of residential use - and we believe the best place for this would be in Plots I & J - would create highly valuable benefits for people and place, helping to create a more dynamic, inclusive place, creating non-commercial activity beyond the 9-5, that could foster a better sense of community and make the centre even more attractive for business and residents.

Proposing residential on the southwestern edge could go a long way in helping to create a better built form interface with the established York Street residential area. A residential edge here would be much easier to achieve a convincing finer grain and much easier to manipulate the massing to achieve a better edge transition. Under our suggested revised height parameter for this edge of 15.1m (see point c under scale and massing section), 4 floors of residential homes could be delivered; a different housing model could be adopted to support this.

Other uses that could facilitate better edge transitions and finer grain forms, include creative practitioners and businesses, such as maker facilities and dedicated workspaces for artists, in which there is an identified gap in provision and a strong demand for centrally located studios ([see Greater Cambridge Creative Workspace Supply and Demand Study, March 2020](#)). We believe a much richer proposition could be created through integrating these uses. We would like to see artists' studios considered as part of a meanwhile use strategy who could occupy a loose fit retail unit, until the commercial demand exists. This could help to create a more vibrant community from the outset, by bringing a space, which may not be commercially viable at the start into productive use. Note our comments under section 2 advising a rationalisation of the ground floor retail space to create a more concentrated high street.

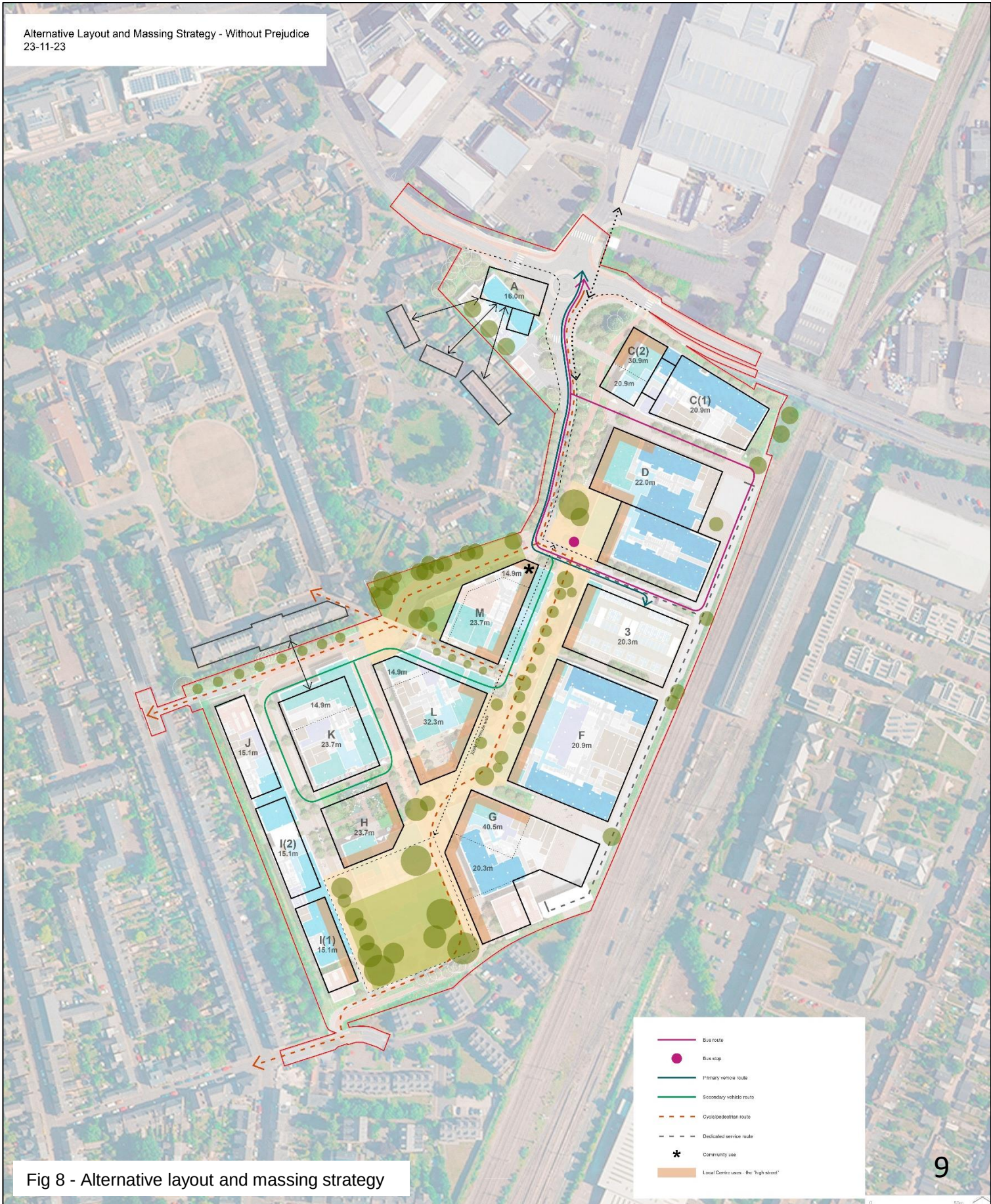
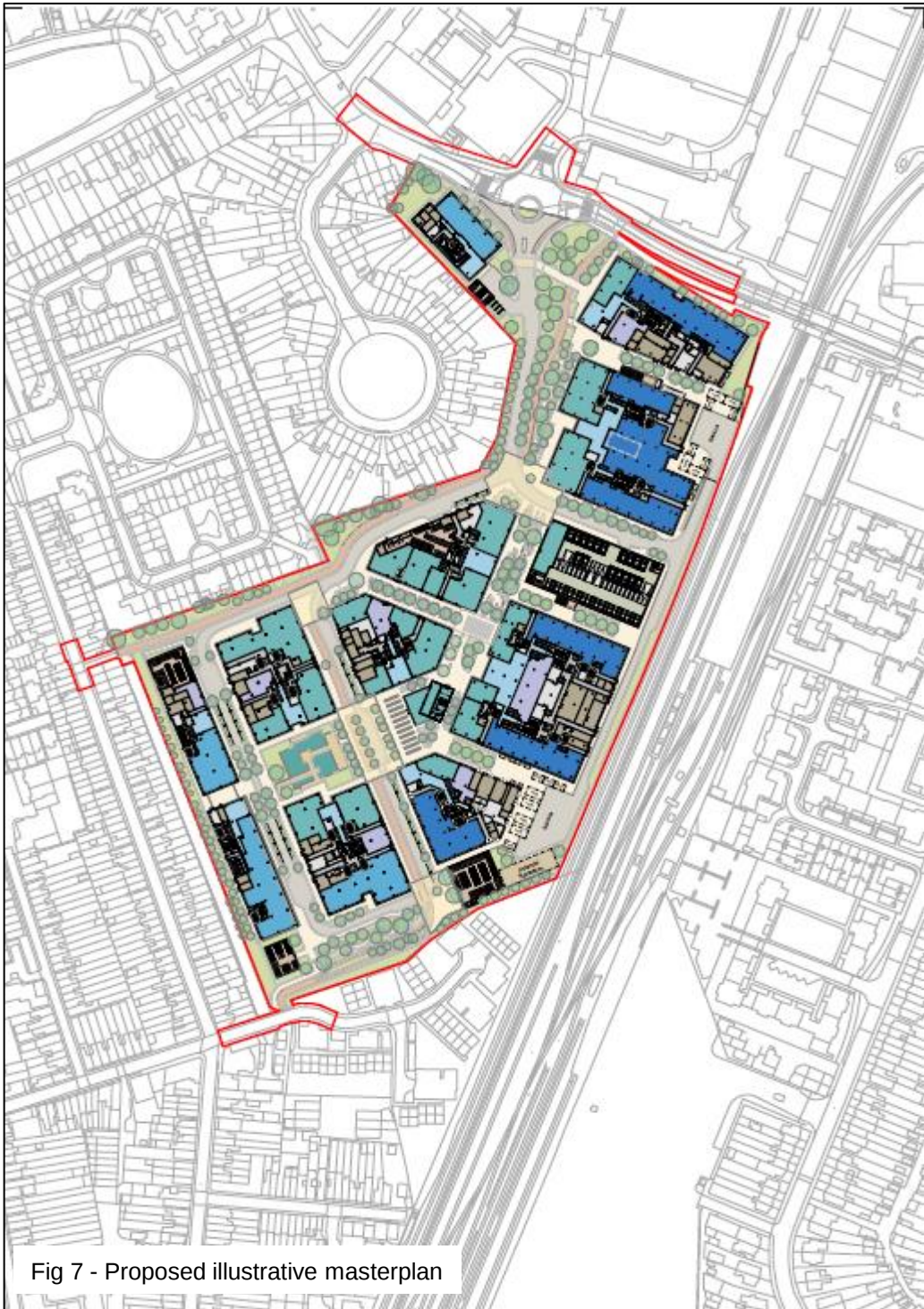
A better place justification for the loss of the supermarket needs to be provided, as from an urban design perspective it forms an important community function. We could see a more urban, stacked, mixed use supermarket model working well here, with the food store occupying the ground and first floor, wrapped and capped with other uses above.

Considering the more detailed but critical functional use of cycle parking, we are not convinced by the approach being fixed through the use parameter plan, which assumes off plot cycle provision for some substantial workspace plots (F, H, K, L) This approach needs to be reviewed as part of any redesign, we are looking for best practice approaches, which better integrates on plot provision and end of trip facilities for employment use.

AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Spatial Layout and Massing Strategy

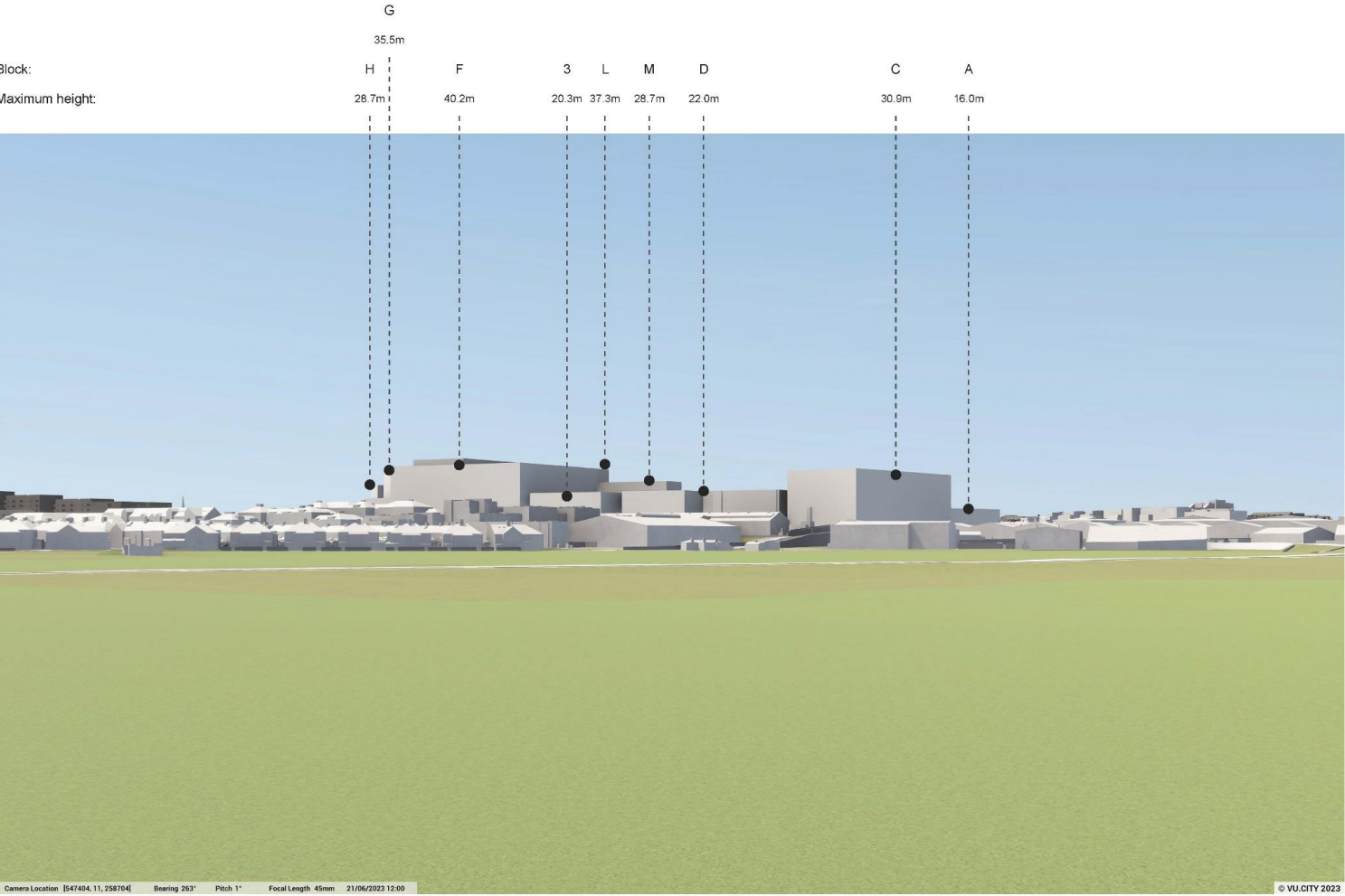
The following pages set out an alternative approach for reorganising and re-imagining the site in a way to respond positively to our concerns, other technical consultees and the community. The suggested layout and massing strategies are given without prejudice, providing alternative concepts and approaches for further design development and testing through verified views, including additional viewpoints from the rear gardens of existing residential properties.



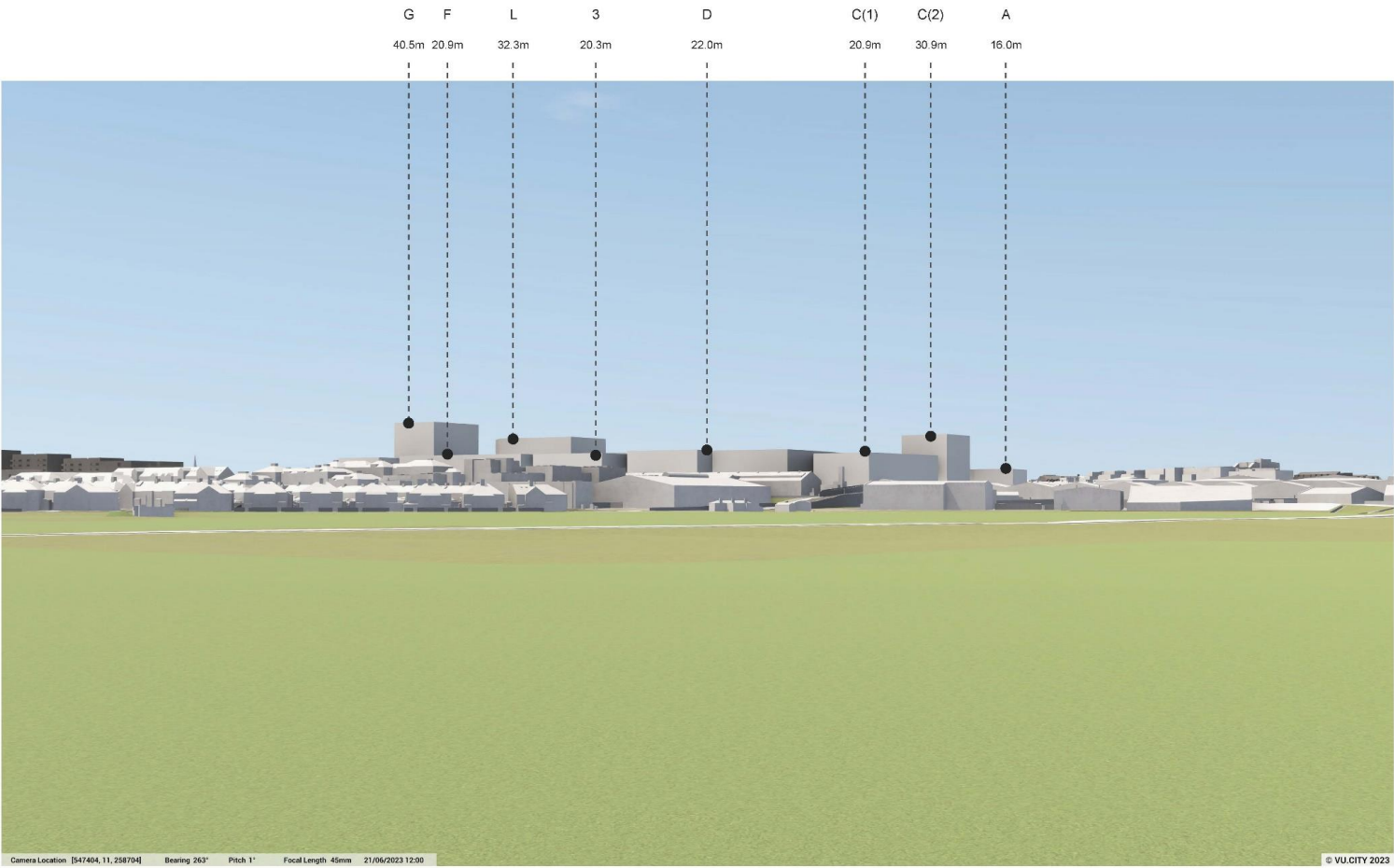
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Context led massing strategy

Proposed outline application – Coldham’s Common



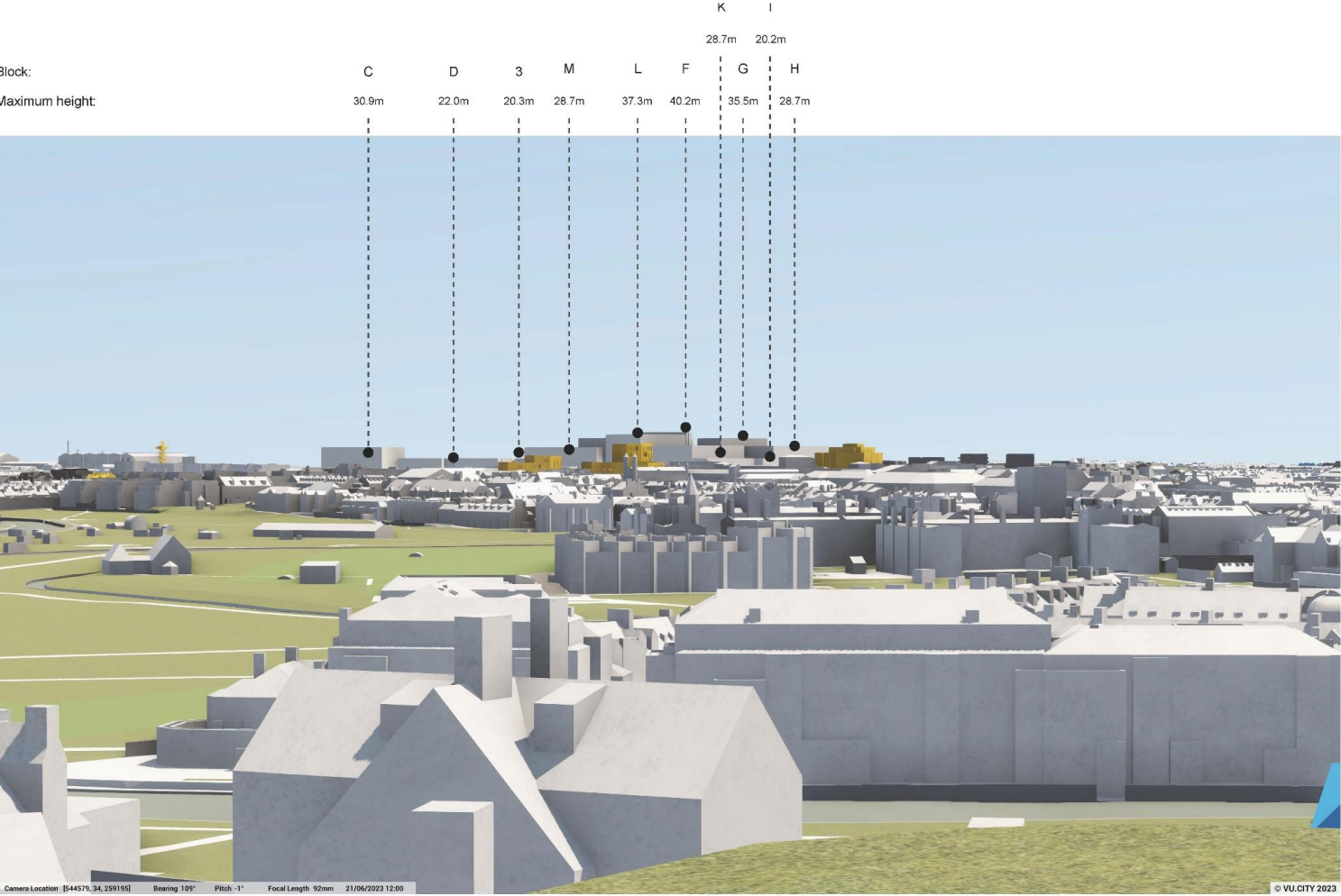
Alternative Massing Strategy - without prejudice



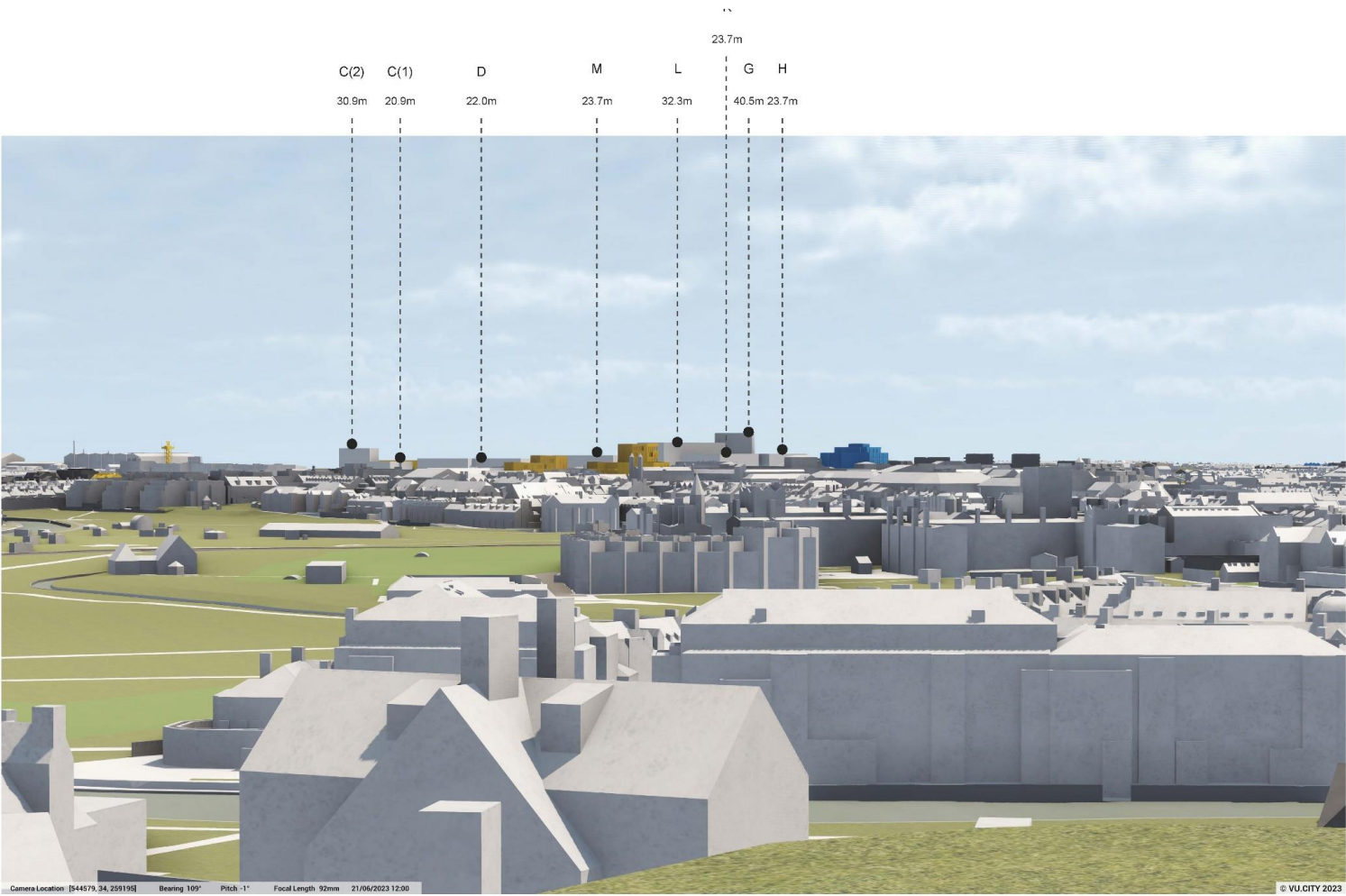
AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Context led massing strategy

Proposed outline application – Castle Hill



Alternative Massing Strategy - without prejudice



AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Context led massing strategy

Proposed outline application – York Street / Sleaford Street



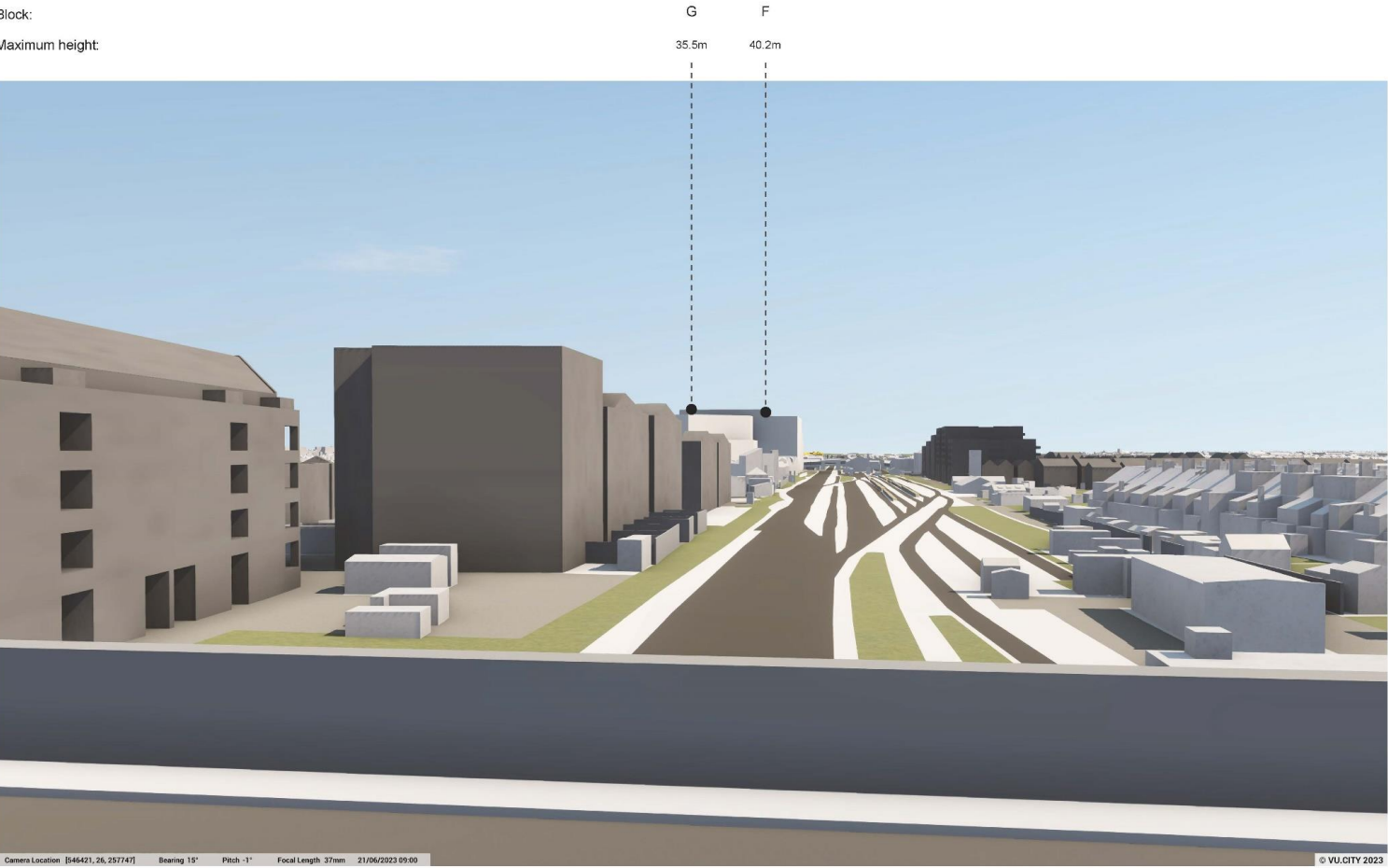
Alternative Massing Strategy - without prejudice



AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH

Context led massing strategy

Proposed outline application – Mill Road Bridge



Alternative Massing Strategy – without prejudice

