Commentary from Dr Michael Jones - Housing and living at NW Cambridge

The site at NW Cambridge offers an exciting opportunity for the University to develop not only a new community, but one which is integrated into the broader life of the City and the University.

The University is not only a large employer, but has a high turnover of staff, primarily the result of the short term, two to three year, funding for research staff. As a result, the University recruits around 2,000 people every year, less than 150 of whom are Lecturers or Professors. Over half of the staff recruited, including over 80% of academic and 70% of research staff, move to Cambridge on appointment, from elsewhere in the UK or from abroad.

At present, these staff must find somewhere to live in the private rented sector, before either buying a home or leaving Cambridge at the end of their funding. This adds to the pressures in the overheated Cambridge housing market, and NW Cambridge offers a unique opportunity for the University to relieve some of this pressure by building homes to rent to its own staff.

The resulting community at NW Cambridge will have a high proportion of staff at the beginning of their careers, and on modest incomes: just under a third will still be single, rather over a third will already have a partner, and just under a third will be starting a family. The majority will have moved to Cambridge to take up perhaps their first job after postgraduate study, and most will only stay in Cambridge for perhaps two or three years. Few will be affiliated to a College.

NW Cambridge offers the opportunity to create a new community which may be able to offer not only shared services but also a shared intellectual life to the staff who will live there. The masterplan envisages that the first phase of development will contain mainly housing for staff and graduate students, together with some private housing.

A critical factor in developing this large 140 hectare site will be to ensure the rapid creation of the critical mass of inhabitants that is needed to support local services and to establish the early seeds of community. The charrette has helpfully shown that higher densities can be achieved in the first phase than envisaged in the masterplan, allowing lower densities to be developed in later phases.

There are obvious tensions between the idea of an identity for the University staff and graduate housing, and the desire for an integrated community; between the desire for a sense of place and the dislike of the separate ‘gated community’; between the need to provide for community facilities and the need for the community to develop spontaneously and organically.

The charrette has explored some of these tensions, and has suggested a number of possible approaches, including the development of the square, the marking of the centre of the new community, and the provision of the “Porters’ Lodge” to mark the entrance. It is to be hoped that these suggestions will prompt new ideas and responses from the architects appointed to design the first phases of this new community.