



## **Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community**

### **National Model Design Code Testing**

#### **1. Executive summary**

The Tendring Colchester Borders Garden Community (TCBGC) has been allocated for mixed use development within the adopted [Shared Strategic Section 1 Local Plan](#), crossing the administrative boundary of Colchester and Tendring. Colchester Borough Council, Tendring District Council and Essex County Council ('the Councils') are working together on a masterplan and Development Plan Document for the TCBGC.

The TCBGC is testing the following aspects of the draft NMDC:

- Stage 1A: Scoping
- Stage 1B: Baseline
- Stage 2A: Design Vision
- Stage 2B: Coding Plan

As outlined in the NMDC, the scoping stage should align closely with the development of a consultation strategy, and it is therefore considered to be an opportunity for best practice in engaging the local representatives in this process. The TCBGC project already has an established [Engagement and Consultation Strategy](#), and the scoping and visioning activity fits neatly into the tools and mechanisms that are currently being deployed. A Community Liaison Group (CLG) has been established and the CLG will be engaged throughout the design process and beyond. The Councils have also launched an [Information website](#) and [Engagement website](#).

By the end of the six-month testing period, the Councils expect to have prepared a Baseline Synthesis including opportunities and constraints mapping, a draft vision statement and a summary scoping document that can provide a position on the design approach to inform future site specific masterplanning (in lieu of a coding plan).

#### **2. Use of the draft NMDC**

From the work the Councils have done to date, we have found the NMDC to be logical and flexible. This is undoubtedly useful as it enables a variety of places and approaches to evolve to fit local circumstances. It provides a clear framework for all stages related to masterplanning and design coding.

As we are deploying the early stages of the NMDC, we have only touched on a few of the stages to date (Scoping, Baseline and moving into visioning). Our approach is also specific and focussed on evolving a code for a defined large scale new community.

Key aspects of the draft NMDC that the Councils think could be improved include:

- In terms of the scoping stage, our project has already been identified and has some planning policy basis with an approach to now evolve a site specific DPD, additional design guidance and coding. The scoping stage could provide more guidance on how the potential relationship to established plans and policies (which may have set certain design parameters and principles) and also needing to consider how design detail could potentially layer up over time and for different stages.
- Our main focus is on the production of a site-specific masterplan. The sequence set out in the NMDC does not quite align with the stages for such a process, for example it is not appropriate to prepare a Coding Plan in advance of the site based Masterplan (which itself may define the character areas that would otherwise come from a Coding Plan). Some form of pre-application guidance may however be an appropriate part of the process to establish some early design principles.
- We have been considering how best to deploy the NMDC as part of public engagement and consultation. The specific areas set out to be covered by a Code are not all necessarily suitable for earlier stages of such engagement, and a higher-level thematic approach is considered more suitable for our audiences.
- There will need to be some thinking about the need for plain English and some simplification - some of the terminology and stages of the NMDC are difficult for the public to understand.

### **3. Early lessons learnt**

Some early lessons learnt include:

- Involvement in the NMDC programme has been helpful to reinforce a clear message that the Councils are serious about design quality, providing a tangible tool to demonstrate how the Councils will take forward the high design aspirations for the site and helping in overall communications.
- The TCBGC project was already in progress and commissioning of a masterplan was underway. We have learnt that the NMDC process does set out a sound basis for taking forward the design approach and aligns with how 'good' masterplanning should be done.
- Engagement is crucial as part of the approach and the NMDC does fit well with setting out information and engaging with wider stakeholders.
- We have also recognised the need to invest sufficient time over an appropriate timescale. The process cannot and should not be seen to be rushed, not least to allow for adequate periods of thinking and engagement. Our project is sensitive to local communities and needs to involve and bring people along without things being considered rushed, premature or lacking in public and stakeholder input.
- Our project is large and complex and a wide number of Council Officers are involved. We have needed to carefully consider how to integrate the masterplan and design coding process into the wider approach to evidence gathering for the DPD. This is a challenge for all large scale projects which need to involve various stakeholders and disciplines. Local Council Officers have separate specialisms and roles which need to be effectively integrated but can result in

large numbers of individuals being involved. Overall project management and coordination is particularly important.

- Our project requires expert external consultants to lead the masterplan process. The NMDC funding award has enabled us to go further with the design thinking, align it to the NMDC process, and adopt a more thorough approach to engagement than would otherwise been implemented. Consultancy costs related to an initial stage of masterplan development are circa £250k. Further costs will arise to take the masterplan forward and prepare design codes
- To enable a meaningful process to be undertaken, more time and resources will be required and we question how far we will be able to proceed in the limited time available for testing.
- There is political support for testing the draft NMDC and for applying lessons learnt across Colchester and Tendring.
- Based on the feedback from the CLG, early engagement shows that there is public support for the use of design codes.

#### **4. Consultation and engagement**

Our project has established and is using the following engagement techniques:

- An Interactive engagement website.
- A separate project Information website.
- Social media to provide project updates and generate interest.
- Non-digital offering such as print media.
- A cross boundary Members Group.
- A newly established Community Liaison Group (CLG).
- Delivering briefings for local Town & Parish Councils, which are available on the Councils YouTube channel.
- A school design project enabling local school children to design their ideal home or community of the future.
- Grassroots networks.

Our masterplan team started discussions with the CLG in June 2021 to consider what makes a good place to live, and the CLG were tasked to go away and take photos of local places they really like (and why) and local places they really dislike (and why). This photo-based engagement will be extended to the wider public over the summer of 2021, prompted by a set of themes, which will broadly align with the 'area types' as set out in the NMDC.

Additional digital engagement with the wider community will take place prior to the end of the testing programme. A 'Places' Tool (interactive mapping) will be used on the engagement website to gain a better understanding of how people use the existing area and what is important to retain or consider through the DPD and masterplanning process.

#### **5. Interim outputs**

The EOI envisaged producing interim contributions (at the 3 month point) to share knowledge and lessons learned from applying the NMDC to a large strategic site –

and in particular the approach to engagement, and make these available through the 1-2-1 and collective sessions.

Our Part 2 Submission includes our Engagement Strategy, an overview of the detailed engagement activities to be undertaken over the next few months and an example of recent engagement activity with the Community Liaison Group which is the start of the process to engage to build understanding of the masterplan development and design coding approach.

The Councils working with our consultant team will also be submitting a Baseline Report, which will meet the requirements of stages 1A and 1B. This will assemble and synthesise this information to provide a more granular level of spatial information upon which accurate design development and masterplanning can take place going forward. This will not be available for 30<sup>th</sup> June but will also be supplied to MHLC as an additional element of our Part 2 submission in mid-July.

## **6. Assessment**

Broadly our programme is on track and there are no real significant changes to the scope as set out in our bid and where we intend to be by September.

There have been some changes that have influenced our progress:

- Both Colchester and Tendring Councils have had ongoing Local Plan Examinations in Public which has meant that local resources have been heavily involved on that side. The project has been able to maintain momentum through a separate programme team, but Officer availability and input has been challenging under such circumstances.
- The Local Elections has brought about a change in administration in Colchester. This has introduced a different political dimension and a need to bring Local Members along (through an active Members Group).
- There has been a delay to the announcement of the Developer Partners which has resulted in no developer input to the TCB project since adoption of the Section 1 Local Plan. This is now planned to be announced in July 2021.
- We have had to retain flexibility over how public engagement is undertaken, and as the approach to the masterplan has evolved this has brought about a reordering and redefinition of the timing and scope of some of the engagement activity. This will now mainly occur later than was originally envisaged.

## **7. Programme**

The EOI envisaged producing a Baseline Synthesis including opportunities and constraints mapping, a draft vision statement and a summary scoping document that can provide a position on the design approach to inform future site specific masterplanning after the 6-month testing period.

Beyond the 6-month testing period, the Councils anticipate continuing to work on stage 2C: masterplanning as part of progressing work related to the DPD and to inform and influence how the developers will bring forward planning applications. The work carried out as part of the testing programme will provide strong foundations to move forward with this further masterplanning work.

The Councils will be considering, within and most likely beyond the testing period, what specific level of design guidance and design coding will be included in the DPD, or whether the level of detail is best set out separately and accompanying the high level DPD policy. This has a longer time frame, with anticipated submission of the DPD for examination in Autumn 2022, examination early 2023 and anticipated adoption in Summer 2023. There is also a key consideration in respect of the level and timing of input from the developers in the process, which will become clearer once joint working with them commences from July onwards. It is anticipated that work on more detailed planning applications will need to commence alongside the preparation of the DPD and therefore will need to be guided by sufficient design parameters, guidance and control mechanisms over the same timeframe, to enable delivery of new homes in 2024 to align with Local Plan housing trajectories. It will be interesting to see how the use of the NMDC evolves beyond the testing programme, especially as the DPD makes progress, and how this is taken forward by the developers. The next stages will be necessary but costly and resource intensive.

The Councils will explore the options, subject to resources, for using the approach and outputs of the design coding for the TCBGC to inform design development at other major development sites and enhance design skills for both planning policy and Development Management Officers in line with the NMDC.

## **8. Final outputs**

Alongside the Baseline Synthesis work, the final output will include a 'Strategic Brief', which will include a draft vision statement, and a summary scoping document that can provide a position on the design approach to inform future site specific masterplanning.

This will have been evolved through the process of inclusive engagement as set out in the Engagement Strategy and activities planned for over Summer. Where appropriate, this work will include appropriate illustrations and be prepared in a visual and engaging way.

## **Potential involvement in other testing projects**

The TCBGC project is relatively unique in that it is testing the application of the NMDC to a cross-boundary large scale new community. Whilst there are some other projects in the programme with large growth proposals, they are not of similar scale, nature or stage in the planning process. The Councils will however be exploring how the approach in general can be applied in other contexts, not just for other major sites, but also within local settlements and as such will follow with interest the progress and learning from others.

Being involved with the NMDC has also led to other projects outside the programme sharing knowledge and experience such as Brentwood Borough Council who are sharing their approach to the preparation of site specific design guidance and coding for Dunton Hills Garden Village elsewhere in Essex.