

Chapter 3

Guides, briefs and master plans

Any planning authority has an array of tools at its disposal that can offer broad scope for positive and creative influence if used in the right way. However, progress cannot be made by relying solely on the tactical use of procedures, permissions and agreements. They can only be successful when set in the context of design guides and site-specific guidance. This aspect of design control is of prime importance as it is the means by which all relevant aspects of a planning authority's policy are conveyed to a potential developer at the time when planning permission is sought. They enable all parties to know in advance what is expected of them and what the intentions of others are. The incremental nature of the development control process creates uncertainty. The purpose of plans, policies and guidance is to deal with this uncertainty.

The experience at Chelmsford, as set out in Part Two of this book, was that, in the event, developers, and potential developers, reacted very positively to proposals at this level of detail. Their position was that if the council had a view then they wanted to know it as clearly, and as far in advance, as possible.

A planning authority can produce a wide range of different types of planning guidance to suit a variety of circumstances. These types can include

- *Design guide* – guidance on generic aspects of urban design that apply across broad areas, such as residential neighbourhoods, throughout a planning authority.
- *Area strategy* – a long-term strategy for change for a wider area, such as an urban quarter or series of linked development sites, which paves the way for infrastructure, development and improvement projects.
- *Urban design framework* – an integrated design approach to a number of related sites and public spaces.
- *Master plan* – a definite structure of routes, building blocks, spaces and uses for a large development area, often with an implementation programme.
- *Planning brief* (sometimes called a *design* or *development brief*) – guidance for the development of a specific site containing detailed guidance on land use, access and urban design and planning obligation requirements.

- *Concept statement* – a short statement of the preferred layout and design approach to a site, produced quickly the pending approval of documents with more formal status.
- *Character appraisal* – a definition of the special architectural and historic interest of an area providing the basis for more detailed advice on design guidance and enhancement proposals.
- *Village design statement* – a description of the positive and negative elements of a village produced as a snapshot by a local community, which may ultimately be adopted by the planning authority and used in the consideration of planning applications affecting the village.

Design guides

The purpose of a design guide is to give assistance to developers, and prospective developers, through practical illustration of how policies could be fulfilled, and quality development realised, independent of site-specific considerations. During the 1970s and 1980s in Britain, the original version of the *Essex guide* (ECC, 1973) was possibly the only comprehensive guide for residential development. Other such guides that were produced had limited coverage, normally shopfronts or house extensions (Hall, 1996, 13). The situation improved enormously in the late 1990s, when many British planning authorities began producing their own comprehensive guides. Wherever they were produced, what was remarkable was the high degree of commonality of content, reflecting the progress in urban design thinking from the late 1980s onwards.

The 1973 *Essex design guide*

By virtue of its location, the guides that influenced the situation in Chelmsford were, naturally, those for the County of Essex. The original Essex County Council's *Design Guide for Residential Areas* (ECC, 1973) had been a ground-breaking document inasmuch as the content had not been set out before so clearly and as public policy. It was comprehensive, being a guide that covered all aspects of residential layout. In the early 1970s, its authors had become concerned at the poor quality of the standard suburban housing being built for sale by volume house builders, although their prescriptions could equally have applied to much of the council housing of the period. This type of development lacked any sense of place, being 'anywhere housing' that did not reflect local character. Excessive amount of space was devoted to roads and footways and was both un-aesthetic and inefficient.

The guide showed how more efficient layouts with higher densities could be achieved in urban settings but with enhanced space at the rear of the property. Such layouts could enclose space more efficiently and use traditional forms and materials to evoke a local character, in this case the Essex vernacular. On the other hand, it also argued that low-density layouts should really be low density with planting, especially trees, used to enclose space. In other words, new housing

should either be at low density, with space contained by landscaping, or at medium and higher density, with space contained by buildings and being explicitly urban in form. It held that 'unsatisfactory suburbia' fell between these two positions.

Although drawn up by Essex County Council and used largely within Essex, the guide could just as easily have been adopted by any planning authority in the country. Although the illustrations depicted the Essex vernacular style, and advice was given on it, the overwhelming bulk of the content covered fundamental urban design principles that were applicable anywhere. One of these principles was that style should reflect local character and offer a distinct sense of place. This principle could apply to any locality. Moreover, adoption of a distinct contemporary style could also be pursued without conflict with the other precepts of the guide.

The real political achievement was to get the support of the highway engineers. This involved agreement to reduction of the amount of footway and carriageway space in front of dwellings, to reflect the actual amount of movement and the use of shared surfaces. This approach was consolidated and expanded in a separate publication, the Highway standard supplement to the design guide (ECC, 1980). Unfortunately, the highways policy also contained what was to prove the principal problem with the precepts of the guide, and one where there was to be a major change when the guide was ultimately revised. This was the control of traffic through the use of extended cul-de-sac arrangements and an elaborate road hierarchy. Furthermore, segregated foot-path networks separate from the road and block structures were recommended. It has to be understood that, in this period, traffic calming had not been invented as an integrated concept and such techniques would have been illegal even if it had. In the period following the publication of *Traffic in Towns* (MoT, 1963) known as the Buchanan report, the received wisdom was that the only way of obtaining both vehicle access and a reasonable standard of environment was by the separation of traffic routes from other uses.

The 1997 Essex design guide

The revised *Essex design guide* (EPOA, 1997) was a comprehensive text of 117 pages, and space does not allow discussion of all of its recommendations here. What follows is a summary of the principal changes from the original version.

The revised guide differed from the 1973 version in two significant ways. The complete turnabout was in road layouts. Extended cul-de-sac systems were no longer acceptable, and grid structures, reflecting perimeter block forms, were now the policy. By 1997, not only had there been substantial changes in urban design thinking on this matter, but traffic calming was legal, popular and in increasing use. The guide recommended a subtle use of such techniques to control vehicle speeds naturally. Visitor parking could be accommodated within parking courts using shared surfaces. More importantly, grids of permeable and legible streets could be created, thus facilitating the creation of character spaces and the maintenance of the urban grain.

The other difference was more a matter of greater emphasis and tightening up. What the revised guide did was to reinforce the distinction between low-density form, where space was contained by planting, and that at medium and higher densities, where space was contained by buildings and which was explicitly urban in form. For the lowest-density range, less than 8 dph, the picturesque landscape design with houses appearing at intervals from between the trees, termed *arcadia* in the guide, was recommended. For densities between 8 and 13 dph, a more formal approach with avenues of trees but still landscape dominated was recommended. For densities in the range 13–20 dph, a form termed *boulevard planning*, where space was enclosed by a combination of trees and buildings, was proposed.

The most significant tightening up was proposed for schemes with densities in excess of 20 dph. These had to be urban with space enclosed by buildings. This urban form was to have

- continuous frontage;
- building on, or near, the footway;
- modest front-to-front distances;
- shallow-plan dwellings;
- good size and shape for the back gardens.

Vehicle storage was to be behind the frontage, and within the curtilage, as shown in Figure 3.1. Proper corner types were also required. As most residential development at the time in Essex was around 25 dph, this brought all of it within the ‘urban’ definition. It therefore required terraced housing in most schemes and the elimination the detached houses separated only by, say, 1.5 m. An example from the guide of the recommended form for an urban street is shown in Figure 3.2.

An issue that arose in the implementation of the guide was how much semi-private space to allow in front of the dwelling. Although the guide generally showed, and appeared to advocate, none at all, there are important urban design arguments for allowing space for personalisation and other practical functions, such as refuse bin storage (Hall, 2006). The examples described in Chapters 4 and 5 generally incorporate very shallow front gardens, with decorative planting, separated from the public realm by low railings, although parts of some of the schemes do, indeed, have the houses directly fronting the footway or shared surface.

Site-specific guidance

For all the site-specific types of guidance, standard planning methodology provides, fortunately, a commonality of approach to structure. They should normally contain:

- a review of the purpose, status and setting of the guidance;
- a site appraisal;
- the policy context including relevant aspects of statutory plans and supplementary guidance;
- the design principles to be applied to the particular site.

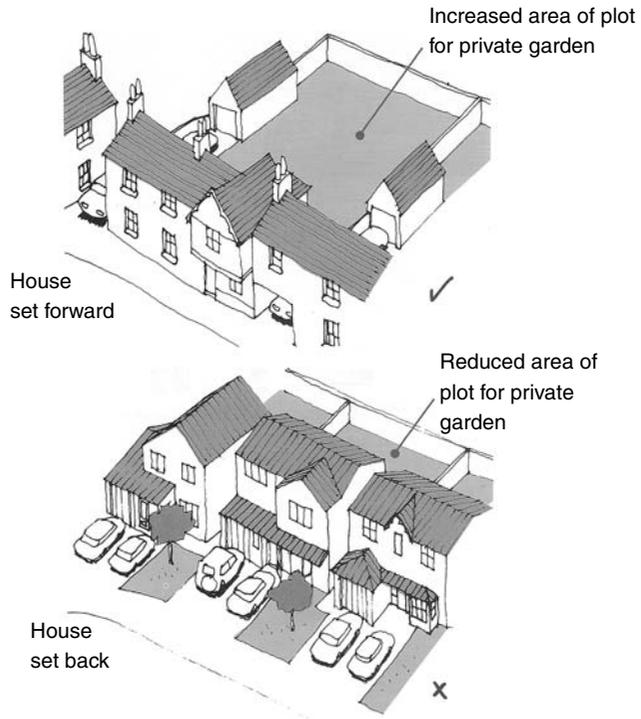


Figure 3.1 *Essex design guide* (EPOA, 1997) – recommended dwelling arrangement for layouts at densities over 20 dph. *Source:* Essex County Council.

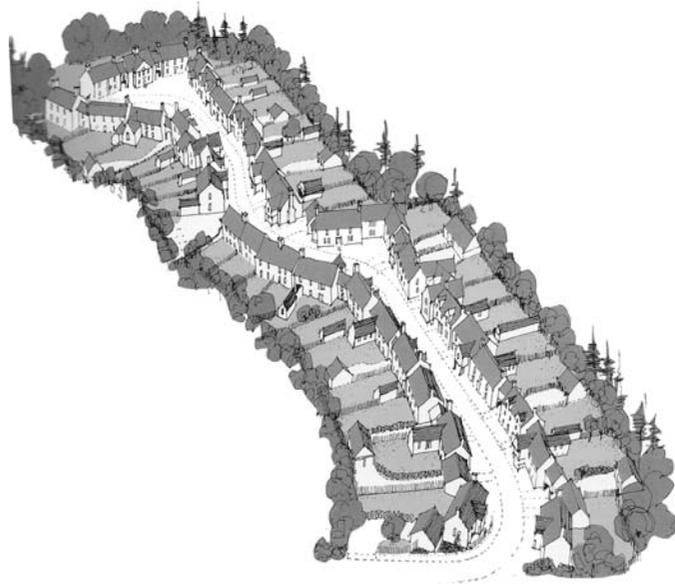


Figure 3.2 *Essex design guide* (EPOA, 1997) – case study for an urban street at over 20 dph. *Source:* Essex County Council.

What is required, in addition, for a proactive approach is for frameworks, master plans and planning briefs to include

- diagrams of the desired physical structure, blocks, frontages, access and uses;
- guidance on issues relating to implementation.

In Chelmsford's case, the distinctive aspect was the lengths the council went to address the physical structure of the desired development in its site-specific guidance. Perimeter blocks, active frontages and location of open space were all normally shown in outline. The reason for the inclusion of details of block structure with frontages was that there was, in reality, little room for manoeuvre if all contemporary design principles were to be correctly followed. Perimeter blocks tended to have certain standard sizes with limited variation. The constraints on most sites were such that there was often only one, perhaps two, ways of fitting them in, if proper frontages were to be maintained. Once the local open-space requirements had also been calculated, both in terms of quantity and necessary dimensions for particular recreational activities, the options were further limited. In these circumstances, it saved a great deal of time and trouble if the limited options were conveyed to potential developers in advance.

Area strategies

This term can be used for a document that sets out design principles for an area where there will subsequently be a complete set of detailed briefs prepared. An example is the *Chelmer Waterside Strategy* (CBC, 2002c), described in Chapter 7, page 161. This covered a very large area of brownfield land straddling a river and canal basin and adjoining the town centre. The area was divided into nine sub-areas each the subject of a subsequent detailed planning brief.

Frameworks and master plans

These terms cover site-specific guidance for large and complex areas. There are no set definitions and there can be considerable overlap between them. At Chelmsford, the *frameworks* and *master plans* covered those areas that could be developed in different segments at different times but which might not necessarily merit separate sub-briefs. They differed from *area strategies* by going into considerable physical detail and covering aspects of implementation.

An example of a largely residential master plan was that for the urban extension to the village of Great Leighs (CBC, 2001b) described in Chapter 5, page 109. An example of master plan covering the regeneration of a very complex part of a town centre was that for the West End (CBC, 2000a) described in Chapter 6, page 143. The latter resulted from an extensive public consultation exercise involving all the major stakeholders. It recommended, amongst many other things, enhanced cultural objectives and a reordering of public space and routes within the area.

An example of a *design framework* was the guidance provided for land to the east of the High Street (CBC, 2002a). This land had been viewed in the 1991–2001 Borough Plan (CBC, 1997a) as an opportunity for the expansion of large-scale retailing and multi-storey car parks together with additional open space. This development never took place and, by 2000, planning thinking had moved on. Multi-storey car parks were no longer being promoted and the attitude to retailing and open space was much finer grain. A new planning brief was prepared that set out an intricate pattern of blocks that would connect the existing shopping centre with an opened-up river bank via pedestrian routes with active frontages. Figure 3.3 shows the development framework. Note the requirements for access and for retail and other uses. Figure 3.4 shows a layout plan indicating the block structure with use classes. Figure 3.5 shows the same turned into an axonometric sketch to indicate height and bulk in three dimensions.

Planning briefs

The term *planning brief* can be used as guidance for smaller sites where development can be expected in the near future. As explained earlier, a proactive approach would require them to provide detailed guidance on the structure of blocks and spaces. Although examples of the use of this type of brief can be found throughout Part Two of this book, two particular examples are described here.

One example of a Chelmsford planning brief, that for the redevelopment of a Council depot off Baddow Road (CBC, 2003a), illustrates the handling of a small but difficult site. The site was back land with access to two main roads and was surrounded by a complex pattern of other low-intensity back-land uses. Figure 3.6 shows the layout principles. Note the handling of the possible incorporation of adjacent land into the redevelopment. Figure 3.7 shows how the brief suggested two alternative illustrative layouts for blocks and open space.

An example of a brief for town-centre housing was that for the redevelopment of the former Nigel Grogan car showrooms site. Close to the town centre and public transport links, the site fronted a busy urban road, Parkway, with diverse character. It lay on periphery of residential neighbourhood and was judged suitable for urban intensification in accordance with both council and central government policy. The issues were those of scale, impact on neighbours, open-space provision, parking, building form and detailing. The planning brief (CBC, 2003b) provided guidance on land uses, site planning arrangements and the scale of buildings. The layout principles are shown by Figure 3.8. Note that the exact location and active frontage of the block was indicated together with private open space and location of trees. Indicative building height, varying with direction of frontage, was also shown. Not only was detailed advice given on the efficient incorporation of car parking in to the development, but four alternatives were proffered, as shown in Figure 3.9.

At Chelmsford, all planning briefs normally received political approval so as to give them the legal status of supplementary planning guidance.

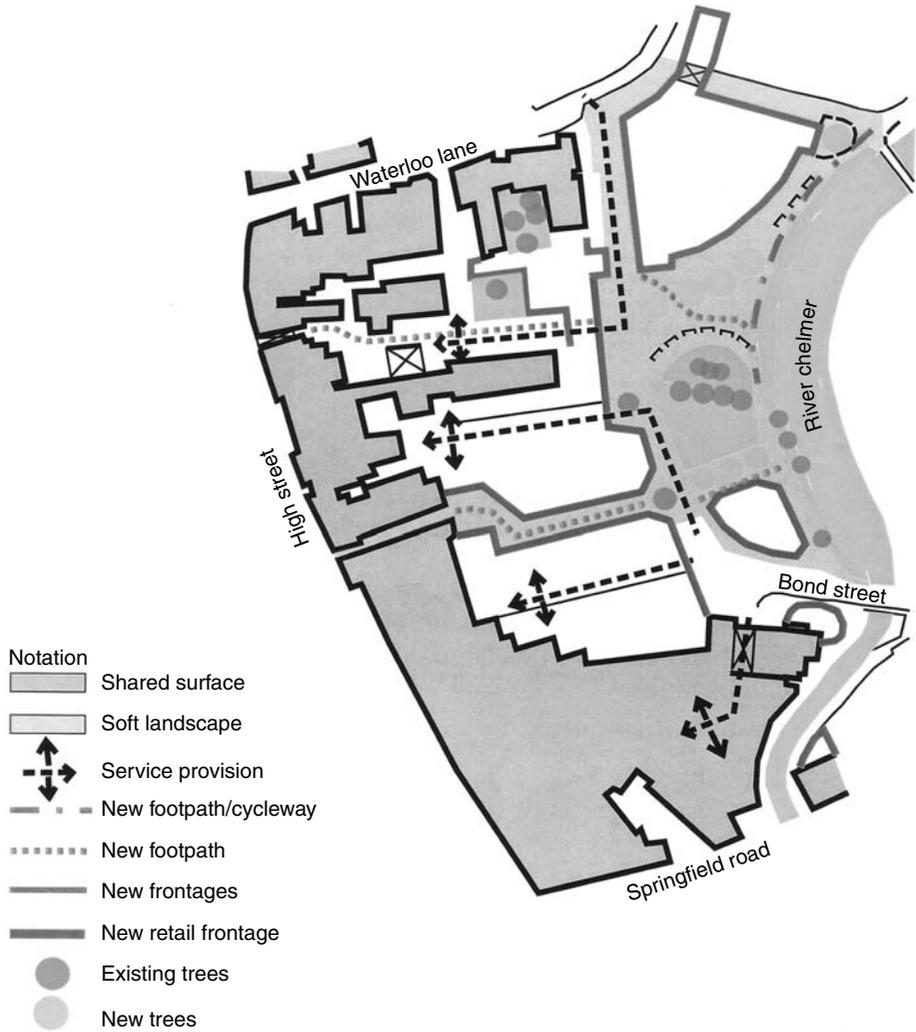


Figure 3.3 East of High Street framework (CBC, 2002a) – development framework diagram. See also Plate 3.1. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.

If development came forward at unexpectedly short notice then a *concept statement*, prepared by planning officer in advance of political approval, was used. The presence of a very substantial background of general policy and guidance made this a relatively safe procedure. An example of the use of a concept statement was the development called Telford Grange, described in Chapter 5, page 105. If time and circumstances permitted, the concept statement could be converted into a fully fledged planning brief.

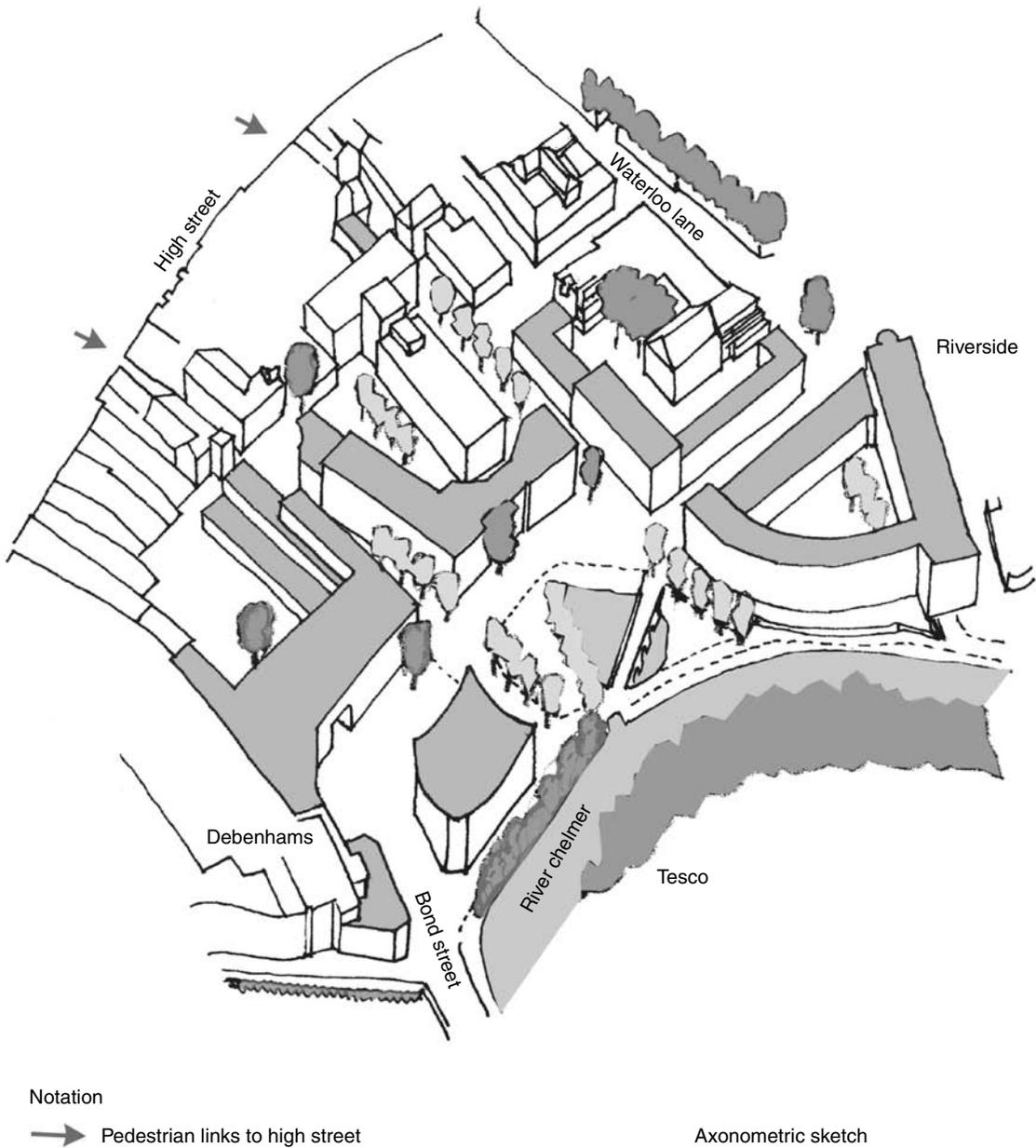


Figure 3.5 East of High Street framework (CBC, 2002a) – axonometric sketch. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.

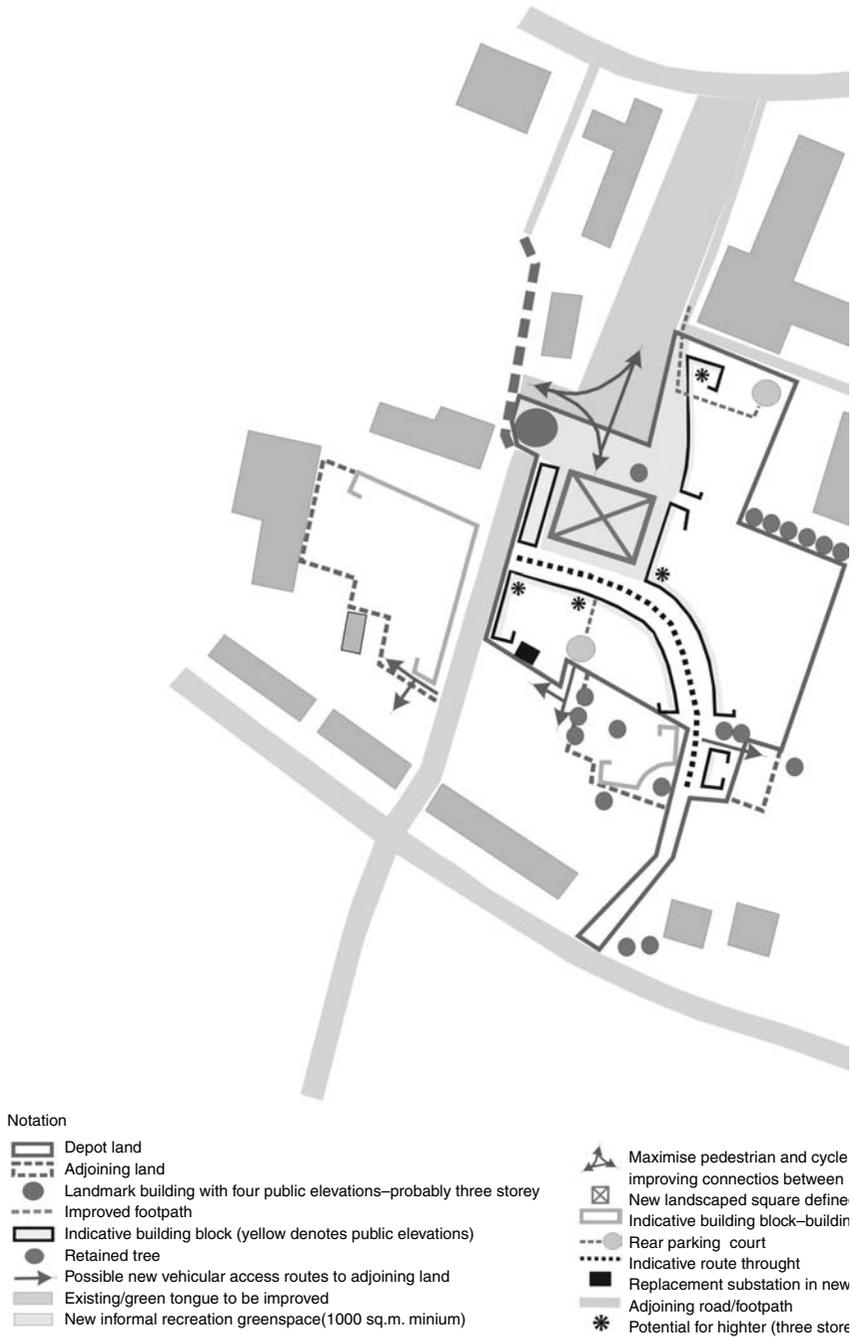
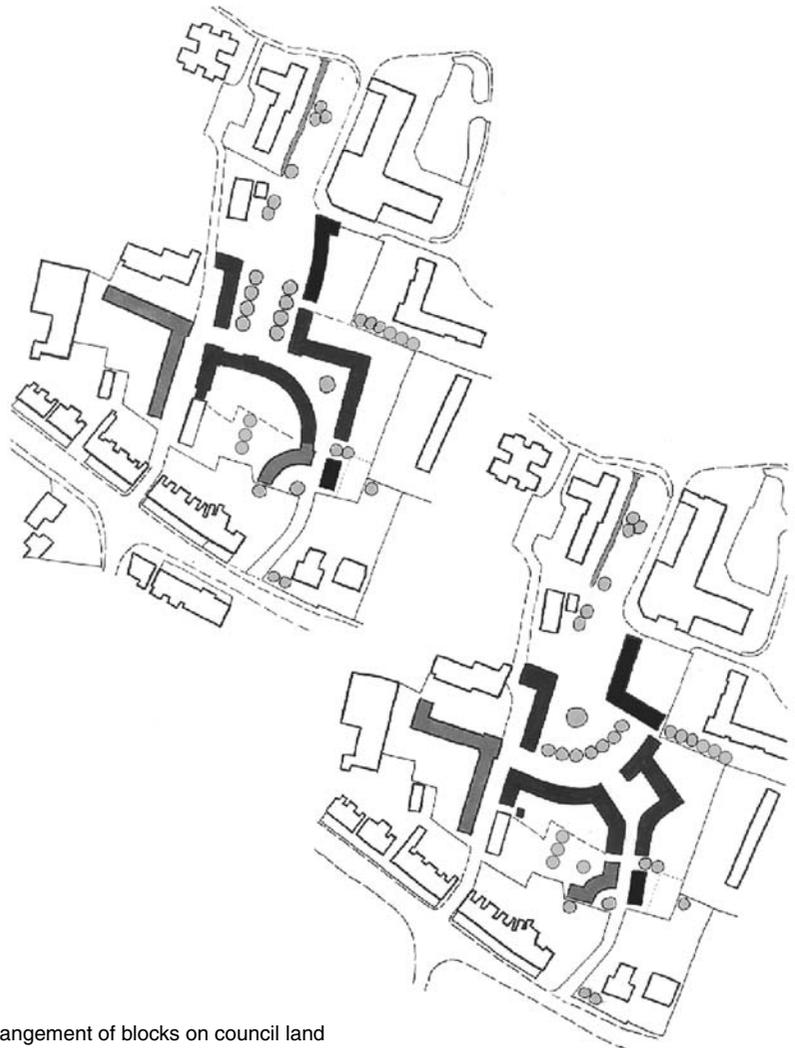


Figure 3.6 Baddow Road Depot site brief (CBC, 2003a) – layout principles. See also Plate 3.2. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.



Notations

■ Arrangement of blocks on council land

■ Possible arrangement of blocks on adjoining land dependent on development of council land

Figure 3.7 Baddow Road Depot site brief (CBC, 2003a) – illustrative block layouts. See also Plate 3.3. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and by the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.

Character appraisals

Character appraisals are documents designed to guide the redevelopment of areas where there is not only to be new building but also considerable potential both for preserving and retaining existing heritage and for incorporating it to advantage in the new scheme. This is especially important where the area is not protected by conservation-area or listed-building designations and where the potential of the site may not have been previously identified.

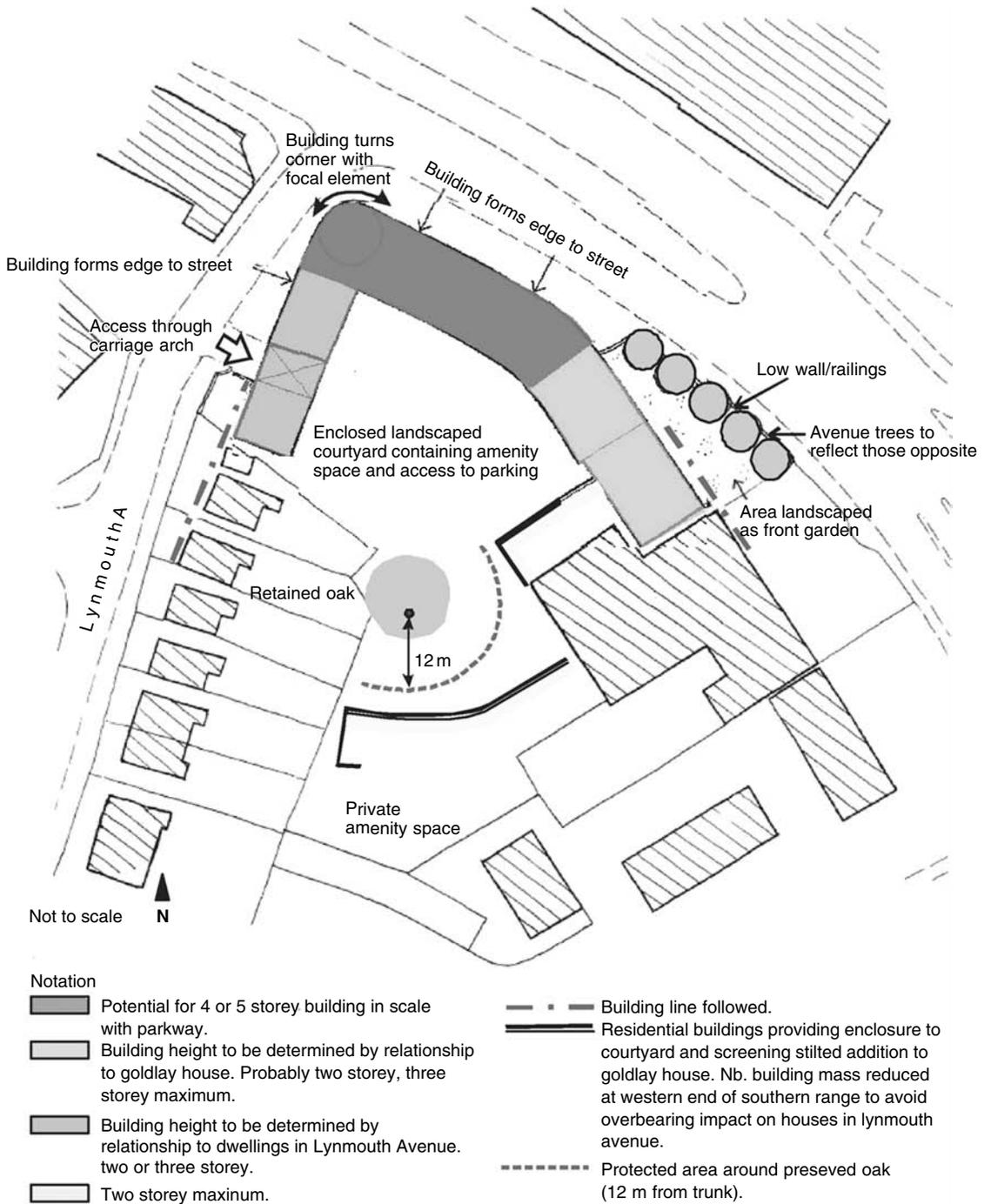
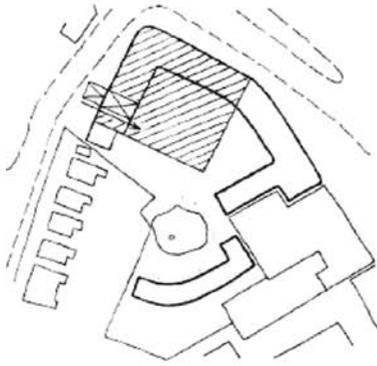
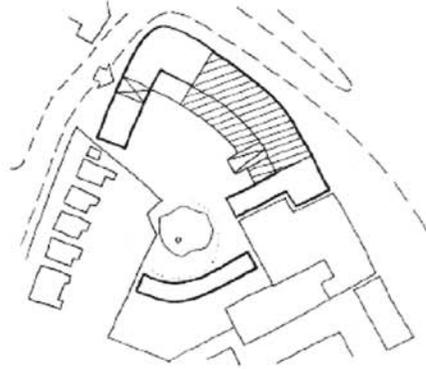


Figure 3.8 Nigel Grogan site brief (CBC, 2003a) – layout principles. See also Plate 3.4. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.



1. Potential for underground car parking, freeing up the maximum site area for private amenity
Nb. Venting must, however, be designed so as to avoid conflict with the requirement for an active frontage to parkway



3. Potential for ground floor car parking beneath buildings. *Nb. Depth of Parkway building allows active frontage to be incorporated in front elevation*

3. Potential for semi-basement/decked car parking with buildings and amenity space over



4. Potential for car parking designed into a landscaped courtyard with high visual amenity. *Nb This option will only be supported if integrated with alternative parking solutions*



Figure 3.9 Nigel Grogan site brief (CBC, 2003a) – alternative parking arrangements. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.

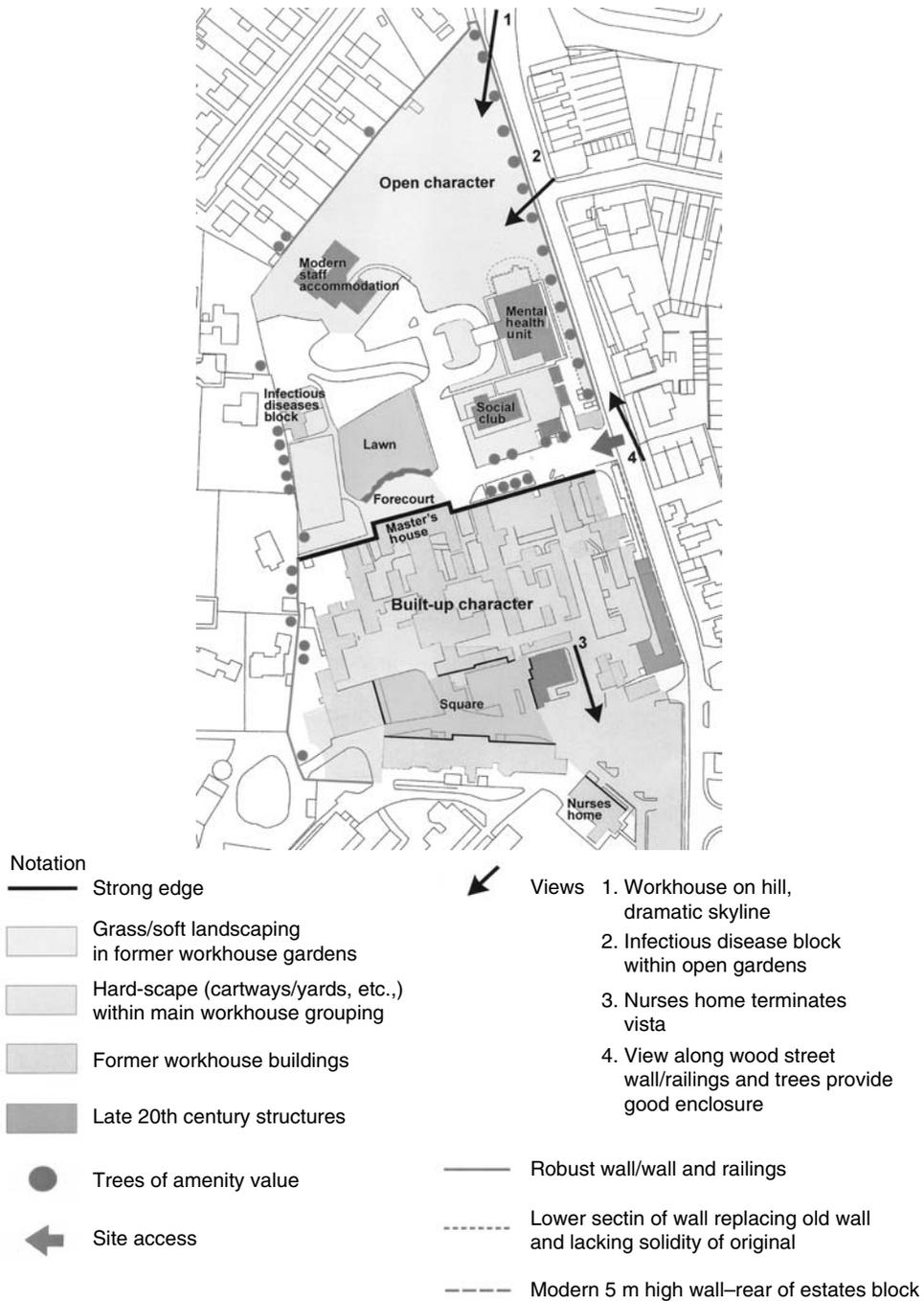


Figure 3.10 St John's Hospital character appraisal (CBC, 2003c) – townscape views and spaces. See also Plate 3.5. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.

Indicative layout

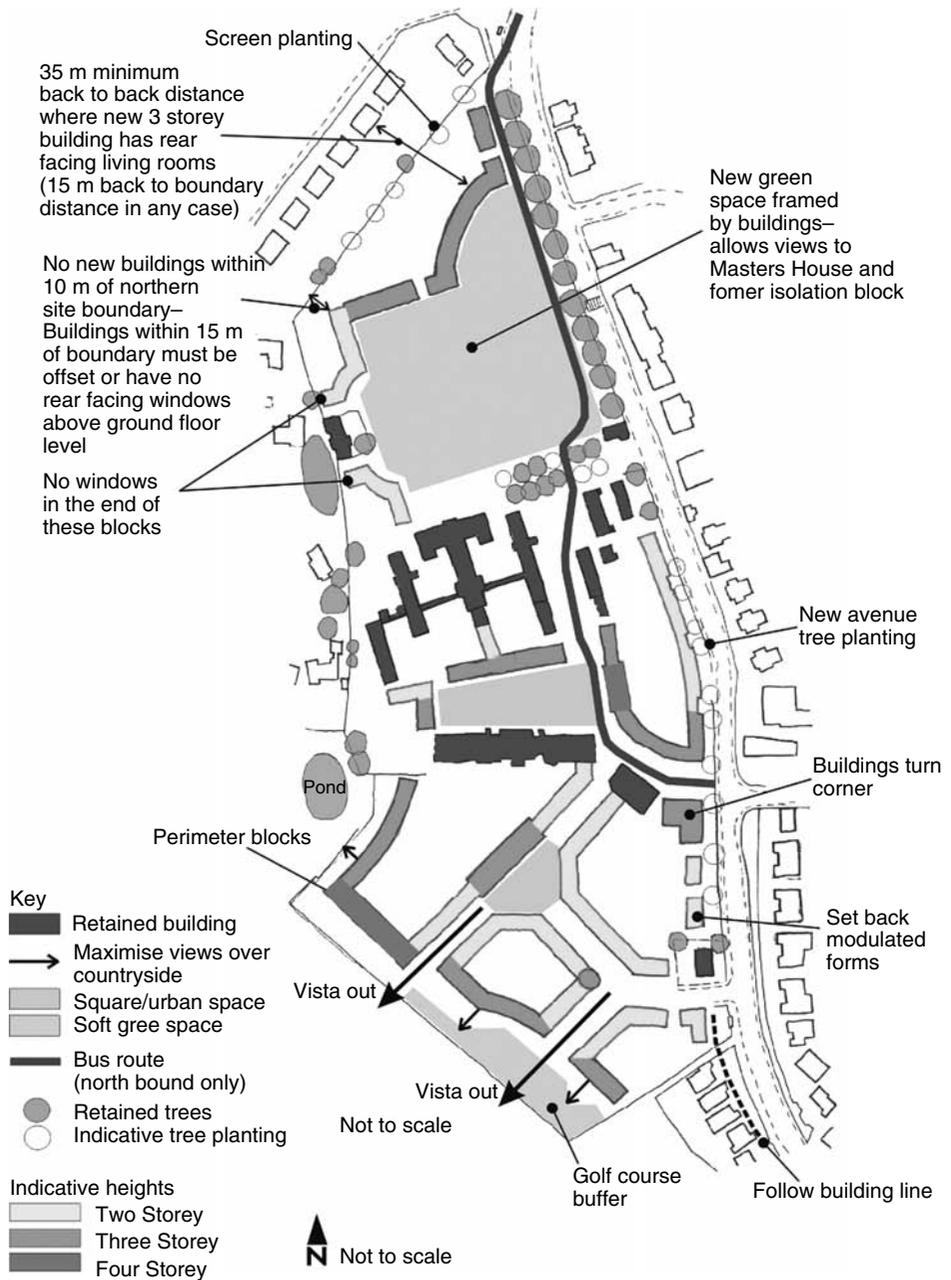


Figure 3.11 St John's Hospital brief (CBC, 2006) – indicative layout. See also Plate 3.6. Reproduced with the permission of Chelmsford Borough Council and the Ordnance Survey on behalf of HMSO. © Crown copyright 2007. All rights reserved. Licence number 100046642.

The first major character appraisal in Chelmsford (CBC, 2003c) was for the St John's Hospital site in the south-western suburbs. This site had been allocated for housing in the 1991–2001 Borough Plan (CBC, 1997a) but had, in the event, not yet been released by the Hospital Trust. The site contained buildings from different periods dating back to when it had been a 19th century workhouse. The analysis covered the origin and development, physical context, townscape characteristics and building form and character of the site. It also went on to identify both the site's negative features and its potential for improvement. At the time of the appraisal, no part of the site was protected by conservation-area or listed-building status but, on the basis of the appraisal, the northern two-thirds was designated a conservation area in the same year. An extract illustrating the analysis of townscape views and spaces is shown in Figure 3.10. The character appraisal formed the basis for a subsequent planning brief approved in 2006 (CBC, 2006). The indicative layout from this brief is shown in Figure 3.11.

Village design statements

Village design statements were first promoted in Britain by the Countryside Commission in the early 1990s (Countryside Commission, 1993, 1994). It had commissioned a number of trial studies that were successful and led to the idea being promoted nationally as standard practice. In the Chelmsford area, they were prepared by groups of people, both lay and professional, at the instigation of a parish council and with the assistance of the Rural Community Council of Essex. The scope for new development was usually limited to small scale infill and changes within conservation areas. The question of permitting, and planning for, new development and the designation of conservation areas was, of course, a matter for the Borough Council. However, once a village design statement had been completed and approved by the parish council, the parish council could invite the Borough Council to approve the document as supplementary planning guidance. Bearing this possibility in mind, the Borough Council produced a leaflet (CBC, 2000c) advising on the content of village design statements.

The first village design statement to be produced and subsequently adopted as supplementary planning guidance was for the village of Great Waltham in 2002 (CBC and Great Waltham PC, 2002). Great Waltham lies to the north of the Chelmsford urban area and has a population of approximately 2000 people. A notable feature of this particular village was that, in addition to possessing considerable historic charm and being set in a rural landscape, it also incorporated an estate of modern houses, dating from 1967 to 1971, with an unusual and innovative layout.

It is worth noting that most parishes in Essex have significant populations, some way in excess of 2000, and some are substantially urban in character. The settlements within them can be of significant size. By 2005, village design statements had been approved by the Chelmsford Council as supplementary planning guidance for five further villages.