

Land East of the A10 Buntingford, Hertfordshire

Summary Proof of Evidence – Effects on Landscape Character and Appearance

Appeal by Countryside Partnerships Ltd and
Wattsdown Developments Ltd

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1 Introduction

1.1 Qualifications and Experience

1.1.1 This evidence has been compiled by Robert Browne, Director at Wynne-Williams Associates, a firm of Chartered Landscape Architects, registered with the Landscape Institute.

1.1.2 I hold a BSc (Honours) degree in Geography, an MA in Landscape Architecture, and I am also a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute (CMLI). I have 8 years' experience in both planning and design projects across the commercial, residential, education, and care sectors. I specialise in landscape planning work and regularly produce landscape and visual impact assessments (LVIAs), townscape and visual impact assessments (TVIAs), landscape character assessments (LCAs), site appraisals including Green Belt Assessments, and provide expert evidence for planning appeals on behalf of both appellants and Local Authorities. My work covers a range of scales varying from sites including a single proposed dwelling to advising on the effects of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs).

1.2 Appeal Context

1.2.1 The appeal is against refusal of planning permission for a "Outline planning application (with all matters reserved except for access) for up to 350 dwellings, up to 4,400 sqm of commercial and services floorspace (Use Class E and B8), and up to 500 sqm of retail floorspace (Use Classes E) and other associated works including drainage, access into the site from the A10 and Luyne Rise (but not access within the site), allotments, public open space and landscaping". The site is located on Land East off the A10 Buntingford, Hertfordshire, is currently undeveloped and is in use for agriculture. Planning permission for the scheme was refused for five reasons, with this evidence relating to Reasons 1 and 3 only.

1.2.2 I was appointed by East Hertfordshire District Council in May 2024 to prepare evidence for this Inquiry. I have reviewed the relevant application documents and applicable policy documents, and I have made multiple site visits to appraise the appeal site and its environs in terms of landscape character and visual impact. My evidence provides my professional opinion on the potential effects of the appeal scheme on the existing landscape character

and appearance. My methodology adheres to guidance set out in GLVIA3, as well as Landscape Institute TGN 02-21.

2 Summary of my Opinion

2.1 Landscape Susceptibility and Sensitivity to Change

- 2.1.1 I have established the planning context for the appeal by identifying the relevant national and local planning policies. My evidence also considers the relevant baseline landscape character documents ranging from a national to a local scale, as well as character observations made on site. It is my opinion that the area displays many of the characteristics identified within the baseline studies, in particular the local landscape character assessment. I have identified the relevant landscape receptors to the appeal scheme and assess the site itself to hold medium susceptibility, the Buntingford settlement edge to hold medium susceptibility, and the wider local character areas 141 Cherry Garden Arable Plateau and 142 High Rib Valley to hold a medium to high susceptibility to change.
- 2.1.2 Using Landscape Institute TGN 02-21, I have assessed the landscape value of the site and surroundings. Although the site itself does not hold any national landscape designations, it forms an important part of the character setting to Buntingford and a functional buffer between the settlement, the A10, and sensitive parkland to the west. However, I do not consider it as a 'valued landscape' for the purpose of NPPF Paragraph 180(a).
- 2.1.3 For each receptor I have assessed the sensitivity to the appeal proposals by combining the identified landscape value and susceptibility. The site itself and Buntingford settlement edge were assessed to hold medium sensitivity, with medium to high sensitivity assessed for the two adjacent local character areas.

2.2 Magnitude and Significance of Landscape Change

- 2.2.1 I have considered the predicted magnitude and significance of landscape change that would result from the appeal scheme. The proposals represent a considerable reduction in the agricultural land which forms a rural setting to the western edge of Buntingford, with largely undeveloped arable fields replaced by intrusive built form and associated infrastructure. This would equate to the local loss of a key landscape characteristic and would be detrimental

to the character of the settlement edge. The introduction of hundreds of dwellings, commercial buildings and associated infrastructure would considerably expand the suburban built influence on the area. Within the site itself landscape effects will be significant, with a considerable alteration from the baseline characteristics across the full site. In terms of the immediate surroundings, there will be a notable change in the character of the Buntingford settlement edge, further eroding the rural setting to the west of the town. Landscape effects will be restricted to a local level, however, with limited effects on the wider Cherry Green Arable Plateau and High Rib Valley as a whole. The predicted landscape effects will be permanent and irreversible. Effects will be amplified during construction due to the increase in activity and the temporary presence of uncharacteristic machinery and stockpiles of materials, as well as the temporary additional access point.

- 2.2.2 By Year 15, the significance of landscape effects was assessed to be high to moderate adverse for the site itself and Buntingford settlement edge, with slight adverse effects assessed for Area 141 Cherry Garden Arable Plateau and Area 142 High Rib Valley.

2.3 Magnitude and Significance of Visual Change

- 2.3.1 When considering visual effects of the appeal scheme, there is disagreement on the level and significance of visual effect to receptors. It is my opinion that the Appellant's LVIA underestimates the predicted visual effects of the appeal scheme and overestimates the effectiveness of proposed mitigation. I predict high adverse visual effects on residents at home along Longmead, Monks Walk, Oak End, and parts of Meadow View with properties along the boundaries of Fields A and B. From these properties, the proximity and indicated density of new housing would lead to a major deterioration in the existing rural view. It is my opinion that mitigation measures will not reduce the significance of effect at Year 1 or by Year 15. Views to undeveloped arable land forming the setting of the town will be permanently lost.

- 2.3.2 High adverse visual effects are also predicted for selected properties along Meadow View, Peasmead, Knights Close, and Barleycroft that back on to the northern boundary of Fields B and C. Existing views southwards, predominantly from upper floor windows, contain large arable fields as well as more intrusive elements including the Watermill Industrial Estate, the

sewage works, and the triangular storage area in Field B. Nevertheless, proposed residential, commercial, and community use buildings will still present a medium to high magnitude of change. After the disruption of the construction phase, visual effects on these receptors will reduce to moderate to high adverse by Year 1 and through to Year 15.

2.3.3 For people using Footpath 029 crossing Field A, the appeal scheme would transform rural views along the route to a narrower visual corridor within a suburban linear park. New housing would appear slightly set back, but still readily apparent in short-distance views and obscuring longer views southwards to the wider countryside. This would lead to a high magnitude of visual change and high adverse visual effects. It is my opinion that maturing vegetation within the linear park would not reduce effects enough to reduce the significance of effects by Year 15.

2.3.4 Users of Footpath 026 traversing Field B would also experience a high level of visual change, with proposed development very close to the route. New housing, car parking, and roads will completely alter the baseline visual experience, imposing suburban elements into short-distance views. This would lead to a high adverse visual effect, not reduced by any attempted mitigation measures.

2.3.5 Whilst the appeal scheme is likely to be visible from raised ground within the wider landscape, visual effects on people using surrounding public rights of way will be limited due to the distance of the views, presence of existing development within the view, and partial screening from intervening vegetation, buildings, and topography. This would lead to a slight to insignificant adverse significance of effect. Effects on vehicle users along the A10 have been assessed to be minor adverse by Year 15 following the establishment of planting indicated along the western boundary of the site.

2.4 Proposed Housing Density

2.4.1 After considering the proposed housing density of the appeal scheme, it is my opinion that the plans do not demonstrate how the proposed density of development has been informed by the character of the local area. Whilst the DAS concentrates on identifying the similarities between the proposed density and existing residential areas in the vicinity, the scheme does not reflect the necessary transition from suburban to rural landscape character. I have also

raised concerns about the restriction of proposed open spaces to the edges of the site and a narrow linear park along Footpath 029. These areas are not well integrated, further compounding the density of proposed residential clusters and not adhering to recommendations within the National Design Guide.

2.5 Conflict with Local and National Planning Policy

2.5.1 It is my opinion that the appeal scheme conflicts with both local and national policy. The proposals do not conserve, enhance or strengthen the character of the site and surrounding area, placing the scheme in conflict with Local Plan Policies DES2, DES4 and BCANP Policy HD4. The appeal scheme does not protect and enhance existing landscape features, nor does it maintain the Rib Valley setting of the Buntingford Community Area, placing it at odds with Local Plan Policy DES3 and BCANP Policy ES1. By failing to be sympathetic to the local character and landscape setting, the appeal scheme is in conflict with NPPF Paragraph 135, sub-section C and BCANP Policy HD2. In addition, the proposals do not recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside as required by NPPF Paragraph 180, sub-section B, as well as BCANP Policy BE2. Failure to incorporate a more open character informed by the existing site and surroundings is a missed opportunity and places the scheme in conflict with Local Plan Policy HOU2.

2.6 Summary Conclusion

2.6.1 For the reasons above, I conclude that the appeal scheme would result in development that would significantly and demonstrably harm the landscape setting, character and appearance of the site, as well as the settlement edge of Buntingford.

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