

**Briefing note: Initial observations on landscape and visual opportunities and constraints**

The Landscape Partnership

25<sup>th</sup> March 2019

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The Landscape Partnership has been instructed by Endurance Estates to provide initial observations concerning potential landscape and visual opportunities and constraints of three sites (Site 1, Site 3 (incorporating Site 2) and Site 4) within Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire with regard to its capacity to accommodate residential development.

The observations below are made following an initial desktop study and a site visit. The site visit was undertaken on a bright and clear day in late February 2019, when deciduous trees were devoid of leaf cover and visibility was good. A further site visit was undertaken in mid March 2019 to review the site's visual context; again, the weather was bright and clear.

It was assumed that the site might be developed for residential uses. At this stage, no layout options have been tabled.

**Location**

The parish of Bassingbourn cum Kneesworth is located 3km to the north-west of Royston, 22km south-west of Cambridge; it incorporates two settlements, connected by The Causeway: Bassingbourn and Kneesworth, which until 1966 were two separate parishes.

Bassingbourn has developed to the north of the ancient track Ashwell Street (one of many trackways connecting to the Icknield Way) and now comprises a collection of roads and lanes extending out from an historic hub centred around North End, Brook Street and High Street. Kneesworth has a more linear character and has grown on the route of the Roman Ermine Street, now the A1198 Old North Road.

To the north, the village encompasses the former RAF Bassingbourn, which was in use between 1938 and 2014. To the south, it extends to meet the A505 Royston bypass and the county boundary.

**Site features and context**

Site 3 abuts the north-eastern edge of the Bassingbourn portion of the parish, beyond the Development Framework but is located within a wider indentation in the settlement pattern.

Site 3 is to be considered in conjunction with Site 2. Site 2 comprises a small parcel of land currently used as allotments. The site is bound by established planting and so is well contained and has a strong association with the edge of the village, being well assimilated into the surrounding vegetation framework that characterises this portion Bassingbourn.

To the west, a mixed native woodland belt c.30m wide separates the site from the plots of properties fronting Saddleback Lane and Church Close. To the north, a woodland belt of c.45m separates the site from a wide grass verge and Park Close; the woodland principally comprises alder in need of management to secure its long-term viability. The eastern boundary is defined by an established hedge with standard trees, with an arable field (Site 3) beyond. On the southern boundary, a 20m to 30m woodland divides the site from the small field beyond.

The vegetated boundaries contain various earthworks including the remains of a moat.

Site 3 comprises the greater part of a larger arable field. The western boundary abuts the established hedgerow and public footpath that provides a strong feature through the eastern fringes of the village.

The southern boundary is formed by the line of a track that provides access to Rectory Farm, and is partly defined by a line of vegetation that surrounds a drainage feature immediately beyond the site.

The landscape to the east is altogether more open and larger scale. The boundary here is defined only by a line of telegraph poles and a continuation of the farm track which leads to Rectory Farm; the short northern boundary is not marked by any physical feature. Both boundaries are devoid of vegetation save occasional scrub.

### **Public access**

A public footpath (No.21/6) follows a line from High Street to Guise Lane, following a line along the western edge of Site 3. The path enables a loop to be made around the northern portion of the village and appears to be well used. A further public footpath (No.21/19) follows a line eastwards and then north-eastwards from public footpath No. 21/6 to Bassingbourn Barracks, from whence it continues south-eastwards to meet Old North Road; at its closest point it is c.345m to the north of the site.

Public footpath No. 21/7 commences in North End and follows the route of Saddleback Lane and then the southern edge of Site 2 to meet public footpath No. 21/6.

The routes of these footpaths and their aspect would need to be respected in any future development and there is the opportunity to further their amenity value by enhancing their routes and providing new links to them.

### **Topography**

Sites 2 and 3 are located within a plain. Site 2 is largely level at or around 28m AOD and situated slightly below Site 3. Site 3 slopes very gently downwards to the north, from c.30m AOD on the southern boundary, though the fall is virtually imperceptible on the ground.

Beyond the site, there is a very gentle slope down northwards and eastwards towards the River Cam (4km) and to the west towards Mill River and associated drainage ditches to the west of Bassingbourn.

### **Soils and drainage**

The soils surrounding the site are described<sup>1</sup> as freely draining lime-rich loamy soils, of medium fertility that drain to chalk or limestone groundwater. A ditch follows the line of footpath No. 21/6, between Sites 2 and 3.

### **Historic landscape features**

The field unit of Site 2 and the field unit in which Site 3 is located date back to at least the late 1800s, as does the track around the southern and eastern boundaries of Site 3. Wooded features are illustrated within Site 2 and there is reference to 'The Mount'.

The 1891 OS map shows a well vegetated edge to the village with numerous and extensive orchards, in particular to the west of the line of footpath No. 21/6; the South Cambridgeshire Village Capacity Study – see below - notes that the village was famous for its cherries. The northern, eastern and southern boundaries of Site 3 do not feature any historic field boundary features.

### **Landscape character**

#### ***National level – National Character Area profiles***

The site falls within National Character Area 88: Bedfordshire and Cambridgeshire Claylands – *“a board, gently undulating, lowland plateau dissected by shallow river valleys that gradually widen as*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes/> accessed 08.03.2019

*they approach The Fens NCA in the east*”, close to its boundary with NCA 87: East Anglian Chalk to the south. The latter is characterised by: “*the narrow continuation of the chalk ridge that runs south-west–north-east across southern England*”; this “*creates a visually simple and uninterrupted landscape of smooth, rolling chalkland hills with large regular fields enclosed by low hawthorn hedges, with few trees, straight roads and expansive views to the north*”. In the vicinity of the site, it is expressed in the chalk escarpment in the vicinity of Therfield to the south and west of Royston.

The landscape characteristics present at the site are broadly commensurate with this description.

### **County level – Cambridgeshire Landscape Guidelines (1991)**

The site falls within Landscape Character Area 2: Chalklands. The supporting text notes:

- The complex history of settlement and the impact of people on the landscape over the centuries is particularly apparent in this part of the County. Roman roads, Anglo-Saxon earthworks, large fields, modern roads and developments are all interlinked.
- The region was mostly too dry for early settlement. However, this dryness and light vegetation meant that it was ideal for communications and it is traversed by a major prehistoric and historic highway, the Icknield Way. Its importance as a highway also gave it strategic value. In the Iron Age it was controlled by Wandlebury hill fort and in Anglo-Saxon times by the three great linear dykes which span the chalkland from the fen edge east of Cambridge to the wooded edge on the higher claylands.
- These artificial elements overlie the smooth rolling chalkland hills. The hills are dissected by the two gentle valleys of the Granta and the Rhee, which converge to form the river Cam just south of Cambridge.
- The majority of the chalkland is devoted to growing cereal crops, despite the frequently poor, thin soils. It is a broad-scale landscape of large fields, low mechanically trimmed hedges and few trees.

The landscape around Bassingbourn shares some of the characteristics described above. The rolling chalkland hills are not present but are evident in wider views in the vicinity of Royston to the south.

The guidelines cite principles for landscape improvement and management in the Chalklands and notes: “*The future pattern is for a large-scale landscape defined by rolling hills, large fields, bold shelter belts, sweeping masses of woodland and occasional beech hangers*”. Specific principles relevant to the site include:

- Management and creation of chalk grasslands; such grasslands should remain open and uncluttered. The promotion of species-rich grassland on thin chalk soils could provide visual and wildlife value.
- Management of existing shelter belts: these should be restocked to encourage young tree growth and fill gaps.
- Planting new mixed woodlands and shelter belts, carefully sited to enclose large tracts of rolling farmland and emphasise landforms.
- Hedgerows: selected hedgerows should be reinforced, or managed for particularly significant impact, based upon their visual and wildlife potential. Historically significant hedgerows should be carefully conserved, and new hedges planted to emphasise the existing landscape.
- Footpath corridor improvements: the Roman Road is an important route across the chalk landscape. Planting small woodlands at selected locations such as hill tops or to frame views, as well as carefully managing the existing rich flora, would enhance the route. A similar

approach could be adopted for other footpaths in the area, concentrating on a small number of linked corridors

Such measures should be considered when exploring means of accommodating development at the site.

***South Cambridgeshire Village Capacity Study, Chris Blandford Associates (1998)***

The study notes that the broad landscape of the village is of large arable fields. To the north, the landscape is more wooded in association with the River Cam. To the south, the arable landscape is *“very flat and open, leading to distinctive rising ground in the distance around Royston Heath”*. From the east, *“the land rises and forms a large farmed plateau, providing a slightly elevated view of the village”*.

The Village Context diagram, in the vicinity of Site 3, notes *“Approach provides wide views of village edge across flat arable fields”*; it is assumed that this refers to the experience of users of public footpath No.21/19.

**Visual context**

Close proximity views into Site 2 are available from footpaths No. 21/7 and No. 21/6 where they pass along the southern and eastern edges of the site. Likewise, views filtered by established bounding vegetation, are available from footpath No. 21/6 into Site 3. The aspect from these routes will require careful treatment if built form is to be accommodated at Site 2.

Middle and longer-distance views of Site 3 are experienced from points on footpaths No. 21/6 and No.21/19. These views encompass open arable farmland with a backdrop of the well-vegetated settlement edge. Most of the houses within the village are set within a framework of vegetation; however, a row of recently completed houses at Elbourn Way are much more prominent and present a harsh urban edge. The vegetated edge would need to be replicated, albeit further out from the existing settlement edge, in order to accommodate residential development at the site, such that the backstop to views from the footpaths remains a strong green and defensible edge to the village. Treatment here might include the planting of a woodland belt, or of native hedges with hedgerow standard trees, either side of a perimeter track.

Houses at Bassingbourn Barracks are not visible from the site, and it is assumed therefore that Site 3 is barely discernible from these properties. It is not clear if the public footpath through Bassingbourn Barracks is still in use. In any event views from the path would be partially obscured by Rectory Farm.

Site 3 is screened from The Causeway by intervening development and vegetation to the north of the road.

Beyond the most easterly property in Saddleback Lane, private views into Site 2 are screened by the established boundary woodland.

Private short-distance views into Site 3 would be available from particular properties within Elbourn Way. The introduction of built form at the site would result in a loss of longer-distance views over farmland. The visual effects of development could be reduced by planting on the southern boundary. Notwithstanding this, it is possible that such views would be blocked by future development in the foreground within the portion of the field beyond the site boundary.

A few properties at Tower Close afford views of the site which are partially filtered by existing vegetation within the gardens of the properties.

Private views into Site 3, filtered by established vegetation are also available from the rear elevations of properties in Park Close, Park View and Walnut tree Close.

### **Approach to the village**

Development at the site would have little influence on any of the approaches to Bassingbourn, save for the experience of users of public footpath No. 21/6 travelling towards the village from the north – see commentary above under visual context.

### **Separation and settlement patterns**

As noted above, Site 2 is contained within the village's well-vegetated edge; however, development at Site 3 would extend the settlement into open countryside.

The development of neither site would compromise the separation of Bassingbourn from Kneesworth.

### **Landscape-related planning policy**

Site 2 is contained within the Bassingbourn Conservation Area, whose eastern edge follows the line of footpath No. 21/6. The Conservation Area was originally designated in 1973 and extended in 1993 to encompass Manor Farm and The Mount, and so Site 2. No Conservation Area Appraisal is available but the planning notice notes: *"The purpose of the designations is to preserve and enhance those elements which make a contribution to the overall amenity of the village scene and to ensure that special regard is paid to the character of the area when proposals for change are considered."*