

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

The Landscape Partnership

25th March 2019

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 4 abuts the eastern edge of the village of Bassingbourn portion and thus occupies part of the gap between Bassingbourn and Kneesworth to the east.

Site 4 comprises a portion of a larger agricultural field fronting The Causeway. The field is currently in arable production and is managed in a contiguous manner with the field to the south, there being no visible demarcation.

The site area is bound to the north by a low and well managed native hedge, with a narrow grass verge and The Causeway beyond. The eastern boundary is partly formed by the gardens of the ribbon development: Nos. 144 to 170, The Causeway; the remainder of the eastern boundary and the southern boundary are open to the wider fields. The western boundary abuts the rear gardens of Windmill Close and Willmott Road.

The field to the south-west of the site and to the east of Spring Lane has outline planning consent for up to 30 dwellings; the illustrative proposed site plan allocates the eastern extremities of the site for public open space.

Public access

There is no public access to the site. A public footpath (No.21/12) follows a line south-eastwards and then eastwards towards the site from Spring Lane, before continuing southwards to the south of the site and then eastwards to meet the A1198 Old North Road. At its closest, it is some 100m from the edge of the site. A short section of footpath follows a line southwards from The Causeway along a narrow alley between the rear gardens of Wilmot Road and Windmill Close before terminating.

There is currently no public access to the site; however, there would be benefits in creating a link through the site to connect The Causeway to the footpath to the south of the site and the future development area to the south-west.

Topography

The site is located on a relatively flat plateau at or around 31m AOD.

Beyond the site, there is a very gentle slope down northwards towards the River Cam (5km) and to the west towards Mill River and associated drainage ditches to the west of Bassingbourn. To the south, the land rises gently and then more steeply to the chalk escarpment in the vicinity of Therfield to the south and west of Royston where it reaches heights of 127m AOD.

Soils and drainage

The soils surrounding the site are described¹ as freely draining lime-rich loamy soils, of medium fertility that drain to chalk or limestone groundwater.

Historic landscape features

The field in which the site is located dates back to at least the late 1800s but has been subject to encroachment – the short section of pre-war ribbon development fronting The Causeway, to the immediate north-east of the site and Windmill Close, a more recent (c.2010) residential close to the west of the site.

The 1891 OS map shows sporadic development along the northern side of The Causeway, along with a number of orchards; the latter being shown as present on maps from the 1960s. The South Cambridgeshire Village Capacity Study – see below- notes that the village was famous for its cherries.

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 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.

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

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 makes reference to *“long views across farmland”* from The Causeway east of the ribbon development and to *“long views towards Royston Heath”* from points to the west of the ribbon development (although such views from the road itself are largely blocked by the bounding hedge – see below).

Visual context

Close proximity private views are available into the site from properties in Windmill Close, from the rear elevations of Nos. 144 to 170, The Causeway, and from the front elevations of localised properties fronting the northern side of The Causeway where not screened or filtered by garden vegetation. The listed Cherry Tree House appears to have been orientated to take advantage of long-distance views out over the site towards Therfield Heath; however, views from ground floor windows are likely to be blocked by the hedge on the edge of the site.

The presence of the built development to the west, north and east is such that there are limited public views into the site from points beyond its immediate boundary. From points to the east of the ribbon development, open views are available across countryside to the chalk escarpment at Therfield Heath. The right-hand side of such views encompass the site area. It is unlikely that development at the site would interrupt views to the escarpment itself, or the associated woodland; however, it is likely that a substantial woodland belt would be required along the site’s eastern edge in order to create an appropriate new edge to the village and safeguard the view from the introduction of prominent built form.

Middle distance views from points on the Old North Road in the vicinity of Kneesworth are largely blocked by vegetation and development. Any views from private properties would be experienced in the context of the existing settlement beyond, including the harsher edge of Windmill Close.

From points on the Old North Road further to the south, on higher land, closer to the junction with the A505, long distance views are available to the site. Although these views are fleeting in experience, the ‘break’ in the settlement edge formed by the site is visible, along with the ribbon development and the, less satisfactory, Windmill Close development. Planting on the southern boundary of the site, e.g. a native hedge containing hedgerow standard trees, would help provide a vegetated framework to assimilate new development into the landscape.

Similar, but shorter-distance, views into the site are available from the footpath to the south of the site. Again, a vegetated structure would be required to integrate new development. Views from the Harcamlow Way long-distance footpath, further to the south, are effectively blocked by dense hedgerows and blocks of farm woodland which line the southern side of the route.

A panoramic view is available northwards from Therfield Heath (a popular visitor destination on the chalk escarpment) over the broad valley of the Cam. Bassingbourn lies towards the centre of the view approximately 3.2km from the viewer on lower ground within the valley. Whilst the village is some distance from Therfield Heath, the view continues much further into the distance to higher ground to the north of Wimpole Hall. The villages of Bassingbourn and Kneesworth are a noticeable feature of

the view. These villages sit within the context of a much wider expanse of countryside which extends to the horizon. Clear views are available towards Site 4. However, development here would be seen within the context of existing development within the village and would affect only a small part of the overall view. There would be a small increase in the extent of development at the village but the overall character of the view would be unaffected.

Approach to the village

The wider field in which the site is located forms part of the open space between Bassingbourn and Kneesworth south of The Causeway. This sense of openness has been partly compromised by the presence of ribbon development. To the east of the ribbon development, there is no demarcation between the road and the field, save for an intermittent line of trees, and long-distance views are available across open countryside towards the chalk escarpment at Therfield Heath. To the west of the ribbon development, a native hedge bounding the road partly screens views of the countryside; however, there is still a sense of openness beyond.

The Causeway's northern frontage is more developed, containing a range of development set in relatively well-vegetated plots. In the vicinity of the site, the cemetery provides a green break in the streetscape and contributes the sense of a gateway into the village. Further west, an open plot fronting The Causeway is being developed for residential uses.

The views across open countryside, native boundary hedges, and development set back from the road in well vegetated plots gives the streetscape a green character. Any development at the site would need to respect this character through the safeguarding of the boundary hedge, the retention of long-distance views and appropriate breaks in the street frontage in order to maintain the separate identity of Bassingbourn and Kneesworth.

Separation

The parishes of Bassingbourn and Kneesworth were amalgamated in 1966. Historic OS maps show that the boundary that divided the two parishes approximated to the line of Old North Road.

The ribbon development (Nos. 144 to 170, The Causeway) and the development north of The Causeway were originally within Bassingbourn parish. It is therefore the open area to the east of the ribbon development, rather than Site 4, that is the most important in maintaining the settlement pattern and preventing the coalescence of the two villages.

Landscape-related planning policy

The site is located beyond the settlement edge; it is not encompassed by any designations for its particular landscape quality, neither does it contribute to the landscape setting of such designations.