

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 1 is located within on the western edge of the Bassingbourn portion of the parish, beyond the Development Framework but within an indentation in the settlement pattern.

Site 1 comprises a small parcel of land currently used as grazing land. The site is bound to the north and east by residential development and gardens, to the south-east by Brook Road and to the west by two individual properties and further grazing meadows. The site has a contained and domestic scale character and is assimilated into the surrounding vegetation framework that characterises this portion Bassingbourn.

The northern boundary is formed by single-storey outbuildings associated with the Grade II listed Poplar Farmhouse; beyond this is the residential development of Poplar Close that provides the access to the site. The eastern boundary is provided by the well-vegetated garden of afore-mentioned Poplar Farmhouse.

To the south-east, the site abuts Brook Road and is separated from the street by a hedge and individual standard trees. The hedge is in a fair to poor condition and affords occasional views through. A narrow footpath lines the north-western side of the road. The facing frontage of Brook Street is provided by individual properties of varying ages set in well-vegetated plots.

The site is bound by residential development (Poplar Close) to the north, the rear elevations and gardens of properties fronting North End to the east, Brook Road to the south and a new property and further grazing lands to the west. The site has a contained and smaller scale character and is assimilated into the surrounding vegetation framework that characterises this portion Bassingbourn.

The northern portion of the western boundary is formed by the plot of a single two-storey property recently constructed on the site of some piggeries. The rear gardens of No.8 Brook Road provide the southern-most portion of this boundary. The remainder of the boundary abuts grazing meadows with a strongly parkland character. A belt of woodland separates these meadows from the open arable land beyond and provides a gateway feature to the village.

Public access

There is no public access on to the site.

The narrow footway provides some pedestrian access along Brook Road to the immediate south-east of the site.

Public footpath No. 21/5 rises on Brook Road, to the immediate west of the band of woodland that defines the western edge of Bassingbourn, and follows a line northwards to meet public footpath 21/3 that in turn provides access to North End via Mill Lane. At its nearest point this footpath is c.280m from the site; the intervening land comprising the parkland-type meadows.

A further public footpath (No. 21/13) extends southwards from Brook Road between Bassingbourn School and Bassingbourn College to meet the east to west orientated byway (No. 21/14) that commences on South End. The northern end of the byway is c.85m from the site.

Topography

Site 1 is relatively level between 25m and 30m AOD. Beyond the site, there is a very gentle slope down north-westwards towards Mill River and associated drainage ditches to the west of Bassingbourn.

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 units of Site 1 date back to at least the late 1800s, although the piggeries (the site of the recent new build) do not appear until later. The site appears well vegetated, possibly with orchards.

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.

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

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 of existing shelter belts: these should be restocked to encourage young tree growth and fill gaps.
- 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.

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 contained nature of Site 1 is such that there is little comprehension of the character of the wider landscape beyond the village.

The Village Context diagram, in the vicinity of Site 1, makes reference to *“Mature trees and views of church spire at approach”*.

Visual context

Close proximity views into Site 1 are available from the section of Brook Road which adjoins the site boundary. From the entrance into the village from the west views are available above an established hedgerow, across an area of parkland towards the western site boundary. The main part of the site is screened by mature trees within the parkland and is further obscured by a house at No.8 Brook Road. These views are heavily filtered by existing vegetation. The southern boundary of Site 1 adjoins Brook Road. This boundary consists of a hedgerow (part of which is native, and part of which is shrubby honeysuckle) with hedgerow trees (ash and sycamore). The hedgerow filters views to the pasture and the farm beyond. The boundary has been identified as an Important Countryside Frontage and it does contribute to the character of the street and the Conservation Area – see below. The site continues to be visible from a short section of Brook Road to the east of the site and from the village green which is found at the junction with North End. Views here are filtered by vegetation in the neighbouring garden (particularly in summer months); however, the site frontage makes a notable contribution to these views. Altogether, the site is visible from a short section of Brook Road.

From North End views are almost completely obscured by intervening vegetation in the neighbouring garden. Site 1 is not visible from other streets.

Public footpath No. 21/5 follows a line to the west of the village beyond an area of parkland, to the west of a stream corridor. The stream corridor is well-wooded, and the foreground trees filter views towards the parkland beyond. The site itself is more distant and views are heavily filtered by existing vegetation even in winter months.

Private short-distance views into Site 1 are available from a small number of properties on the opposite side of Brook Road. The existing hedgerow on the Brook Road frontage is a prominent feature within these views. The existing hedge and hedgerow trees are likely to filter views into the interior of the site from this viewpoint, particularly from ground floor windows.

The existing hedge would need to be protected, retained and reinforced within any development proposals for the site to protect the general character and amenity of views from Brook Road and from private properties fronting the street. New planting would be required to reinforce the existing hedge and plan for the long-term replacement of existing hedgerow trees.

Private properties immediately to the north of the site at Poplar Farm Court and No.1 North End have occasional short distance views into the site from localised windows. The new build barn would have clear close proximity views from windows in its front elevation.

Approach to the village

When approached from the west along Brook Road, there is a strong sense of a gateway to the village at Brook Bridge. Here, the belt of woodland extending northwards and the hedge bordering the road to the south provide a clear delineation between the open arable lands to the west and the more settled village-scape to the east. However, the character beyond the gateway varies.

To the south the road is bordered by the large scale and relatively recent buildings, car parks and open spaces associated with Bassingbourn School and Bassingbourn Sports Centre, albeit set within a relatively well treed landscape. Beyond this, individual properties set within well vegetated plots front the road.

To the north of Brook Road, the landscape has a more rural character with grazing meadows, woodland belts and parkland-style trees, all set behind a hedge. This tract of lands extends into the village as far as North End.

In combination, the various land uses give the western gateway to Bassingbourn a green character. In contrast, the streetscape to the east, closer to the centre of the village, is altogether more tight grained and urban.

The section of Brook Road east of No. 8 and extending northwards along North End to No.1 North End, and so along the southern edge of the site, is allocated in the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan (Adopted 27th September 2018) as Important Countryside Frontage (Policy NH/13).

Policy NH/13 states:

1. *Important Countryside Frontages are defined where land with a strong countryside character either:*
 - a. *Penetrates or sweeps into the built-up area providing a significant connection between the street scene and the surrounding rural area; or*
 - b. *Provides an important rural break between two nearby but detached parts of a development framework.*
2. *Planning permission for development will be refused if it would compromise these purposes.*

The supporting text notes:

In many places land with a strong countryside character penetrates or sweeps into South Cambridgeshire's villages or separates two parts of the built-up area. Such land enhances the setting, character and appearance of the village by retaining the sense of connection between the village and its rural origins and surroundings. The frontage where this interface particularly occurs is identified to indicate that the frontage and the open countryside beyond should be kept open and free from development. In most cases it is land which adjoins the village built-up area but in some cases it separates two parts of the village and the open intervening land therefore assumes an importance for the character of the village as a whole.

It is noted that the policy applies not only to the frontage itself, but also the open countryside character of the land beyond.

If development at the site is to be considered acceptable, it must respect the open character of this tract of land, but of a low density, set back from the road frontage, and accompanied by a robust landscape scheme that would reinforce and enhance the green character. New built form should be of relatively low rise and present as occasional glimpses of varied roofscapes in surrounding views. There would be an opportunity to manage and, where necessary, infill the boundary hedge using more appropriate species to ensure its long-term useful life expectancy. New trees could replace those of poor health of which are coming to the end of their life. Particular care would be required to ensure that rear garden elevations did not influence the street scene and that lighting did not have an adverse effect on the nightscape. It is unlikely that any new access point could be accommodated within this section of Brook Road.

It may be appropriate to replant the boundary hedge with native species inside the line of the existing hedge, with a view to removing the existing hedge (only fair condition and including non-native species) once the new hedge is established. This would enable widening of the narrow footway lining Brook Road. The addition of hedgerow standards to the hedge would provide further long-term contribution to the streetscape.

Separation and settlement patterns

As noted above, Site 2 is contained within the village's well vegetated edge. The development would not compromise separation of Bassingbourn with Kneesworth or other villages.

Other 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 land to the west of the existing Conservation Area along North End and South End from The Old Vicarage, in the north to and including 26 South End and the Village College in the south, and including land associated with The Mill and Millstream.

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.”*

Again, the open character of the site, and particularly the green frontage, make an important contribution to the Conservation Area.