

Land off Villa Road, Impington

Technical Note on Landscape, Visual and Green Belt Matters

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7816/CC/CMi

1.0 Introduction

LDA Design have been appointed by Cirrus Land Limited to undertake a high-level study to consider potential landscape, visual and Green Belt constraints affecting land off Villa Road, Impington, culminating in a landscape strategy for the site to ensure the development sits appropriately within its surroundings. This note should be read alongside drawings and photopanel panels found in the accompanying Mapbook.

2.0 The Site and its location (Figure 1 - drawing 7816_001)

As shown on Figure 1, the 6.55 hectare site comprises two parcels of land lying immediately to the south-west of the village of Impington.

The larger (easternmost) parcel comprises an arable field with a small stretch of scrubland with orchard characteristics at its northern edge. The field is bounded to the north by Villa Road beyond which is a residential development of approximately 90 homes and associated open space. The eastern boundary is defined by inter-war housing backing onto the site from South Road. To the south the site is bounded by a mature hedgerow; to the west the boundary is defined by a watercourse or ditch known as Public Drain. To the south and west beyond the hedgerow and drain is arable farmland.

The smaller (westernmost) parcel adjoins the larger field at its north-western corner, separated by the watercourse. The land is characterised by grassland, scrub and groups of trees, bounded on its eastern edge by a hedgerow. The northern boundary is defined by Villa Road which leads to a NIAB facility. The southern boundary is open, defined by a post and wire fence.

Adjoining Impington to the north is Histon. Histon and Impington are two formerly distinct villages that have coalesced over time, with their historic cores now defined by respective Conservation Areas. The villages, often described as a single large village (as noted in the Histon and Impington Village Design Guide SPD), are located just to the north of Cambridge, separated from the city by the A14. To the west, the villages (and the site) are located approximately 1km from the village of Girton.

3.0 Landscape Overview

3.1 Designations (Figure 2 - drawing 7816_002)

The site lies within the Cambridge Green Belt (see section 5.0 below) but is otherwise unconstrained by designations. There are a numerous listed buildings associated with Histon and Impington Conservation Areas to the north of the site beyond the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway, and two located approximately 330m to the south-east associated with Impington Mill. There are no Public Rights of Way within the site. Public routes are located to the north of the site, connecting Histon and Girton; and National Cycle Route 51 is located along the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway.

3.2 Topography (Figure 3 - drawing 7816_003)

The site is located within an area of low-lying level terrain (around 10-15 metres AOD), forming part of an extensive tract of land that transitions to the wider Fens to east of Histon and Impington. To the south-west, terrain begins rising gently to a subtle ridge of high ground (approximately 20m AOD) along which the village of Girton runs, before rising more markedly to a series of broader ridges to the west of Cambridge.

3.3 Vegetation (Figure 2 - drawing 7816_002 & Figure 6 - drawing 7816_006)

Vegetation cover within the wider landscape beyond the settlements is relatively limited due to the large-scale, open field system. However in closer proximity to the site, blocks of woodland, hedgerows, hedgerow trees, shelter belts and small tree groups create a localised vegetation pattern near Histon and Impington and Girton, particularly along the settlement edges. This gives the landscape a relatively contained character, particularly within the area of agricultural land immediately to the north-west of the site, where views from publicly accessible locations often extend no further than one or two fields.

3.4 Landscape Character

Landscape Character describes a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of elements in the landscape that makes one landscape different from another. Landscape Character Assessments are undertaken at a National and Local scale and is defined as the process of identifying and describing variation in the character of the landscape, using this information to assist in managing change in the landscape.

The most relevant Landscape Character Assessment for this study is the recently published Greater Cambridge Landscape Character Assessment (February 2021). The site is located within the Fen Edge Claylands Landscape Type (LCT2) and within the Cottenham Fen Edge Claylands Landscape Character Area (LCA 2b). The character area is described as a *“a well settled landscape with several villages located on raised ‘islands’ above The Fens and urban influences extending from the edge of Cambridge”*.

Key Characteristics of the Landscape Character Area, and typical of the site and surrounds, are:

- *Well settled rural landscape comprising a number of large villages with historic linear cores located on elevated 'islands'*
- *Pockets of remnant parkland alongside orchards, hedgerows and shelterbelts create a distinctive, localised vegetation pattern in proximity to the villages*
- *Urban influences associated with the urban edge of Cambridge and major road network in the south which are discordant with the otherwise rural character*

Specific Landscape Guidelines related to the character area, of relevance to the site are:

- *Ensure new development is integrated into the landscape sympathetically, is in keeping with the open, rural character, and does not affect long, framed views*
- *Ensure land developed for recreation enhances existing landscape features, creates links between villages and recreational assets and is in keeping with the open, rural character*

Generic landscape guidance for integrating development into the landscape (of relevance to the site) is as follows:

- *Conserve the overall rural character, with dispersed Fen Edge villages, farms and cottages linked by rural roads and historic droves and tracks*
- *Ensure new developments on the edges of villages are integrated by wide hedgerows, copses and shelterbelt planting reflecting the local mixes*
- *Maintain linear or rectilinear form of the settlements and avoid closes and cul-de-sacs where possible*
- *Ensure buildings are mostly set on the back edge of pavements, or face the street with small front gardens in the village cores*
- *Ensure new developments reflect the form, scale and proportions of the existing vernacular buildings of the area and pick up on the traditional building styles, height, materials, colours and textures of the locality*
- *Retain hedges and introduce them as boundaries alongside roads outside village core*
- *Integrate water features, such as ditches dykes and ponds, into new developments as part of open spaces*

4.0 Visual Analysis

The visual analysis of the site was undertaken as a two-stage process. Firstly, a Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV) Study was undertaken to determine the potential visibility of development on the site. This was followed by a site visit to determine the actual visibility of the site, taking account of localised vegetation and features not modelled in the ZTV desk study.

A ZTV study (Figure 4 - drawing 7816_004) was generated, based on buildings modelled at 10m above ground level (approximately 2.5 storeys) located across both parcels of the site (for assessment purposes). The analysis was carried out using a topographic model including settlements and woodlands as visual barriers in order to provide a more realistic indication

of potential visibility. The ZTV for the proposed development shows that potential visibility is located within an area of land contained by the settlement edges of Histon and Impington, Girton and the northern edge of Cambridge. Potential visibility extends north-westwards to Oakington, beyond which visibility becomes increasingly fragmented to the north-west and north-east.

The actual visibility of the site from the surrounding landscape was established during a site visit in September 2021 and is illustrated by the accompanying viewpoint photographs. Figure 5 (drawing 7816_005) identifies locations of viewpoints, with accompanying photo panels found within the Mapbook that accompanies this note. Site observations confirm that vegetation within the wider landscape would significantly reduce the extent of visibility of the proposed development from that illustrated by the ZTV.

Views from the west and northwest

To the northwest and west within 1km of the site, linear vegetation along the Cambridgeshire Guided Busway (see Viewpoint 3), field boundary vegetation and woodland blocks within the arable landscape (see Viewpoint 4), mature trees belts and hedgerow trees along Girton's eastern edge (see Viewpoint 5) and vegetation along roadsides (such as New Road and Oakington Road) all screen views towards Histon and Impington and the site. From further afield to the northwest, the layering effect of vegetation within the landscape, in combination with the level terrain, prevent views towards the site (see viewpoint 7).

Views from the south and south-west

To the south and south-west views are more open, where there is less field boundary vegetation in the land between the A14 and the site and limited vegetation lining the A14. The site is clearly visible from the A14. To the south of the A14, there is more vegetation within the landscape, partially obstructing views to the site. From Public Footpath 135/5 at the northern edge of Cambridge (see Viewpoint 6), glimpsed views of the proposals would be possible (although the baseline will change once land allocated for development is built). From these locations, the site is visible in the context of houses at the south-western edge of Impington and larger buildings associated with the NIAB facility and employment area to the north of the busway. There is an opportunity to integrate the site and the existing edge of the settlement with planting that softens and partially screens views to proposed and existing buildings, avoiding an abrupt edge but allowing glimpses of built form to maintain a settled rural character.

Nearby views from the north and east (settlement edge of Impington)

In close proximity to the site, from the roads at the edge of Impington, such as Villa Road (see Viewpoint 1 and 2) and South Road, views of the proposed buildings would be possible, either across the hedgerow that bounds Villa Road at the site's northern edge, or between buildings along South Road. The structure of the development should complement the existing grain of the settlement, helping reduce visual impacts by congregating open space and retaining a relationship with the open countryside.

5.0 Green Belt

5.1 Green Belt purposes

Paragraph 138 of the NPPF defines the purposes of the Green Belt (National Green Belt purposes) as follows:

- To check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas
- To prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another
- To assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment
- To preserve the setting and special character of historic towns
- To assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

At a local level, the purposes of the Cambridge Green Belt have been defined over a number of years in the Local Plans for Cambridge City, South Cambridgeshire and East Cambridgeshire Districts. These locally defined purposes (Cambridge Green Belt purposes), as set out in paragraph 2.30 of the South Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2018, are:

- Preserve the unique character of Cambridge as a compact, dynamic city with a thriving historic centre
- Maintain and enhance the quality of its setting; and
- Prevent communities in the environs of Cambridge from merging into one another and with the city.

5.2 Greater Cambridge Green Belt Assessment

In late August 2021, the First Proposals for the Greater Cambridge Local Plan were published, along with the supporting evidence base which includes the Greater Cambridge Green Belt Assessment (GCGBA) (LUC, August 2021). The GCGBA is an assessment of the full extents of the Green Belt within South Cambridgeshire District and Cambridge City.

The methodology used in the GCGBA divides the Green Belt into parcels and assesses each parcel in terms of its contribution to each of the three Cambridge Green Belt purposes. It then assesses the harm that would arise from development within each parcel in terms of loss of contribution to Green Belt purposes and impact on adjacent Green Belt. In considering the contribution to Green Belt purposes, the GCGBA makes use of the 16 particular qualities of Cambridge and its surrounding landscape that contribute to the performance of Green Belt purposes, as defined in the Cambridge Inner Green Belt Boundary Study undertaken by

LDA Design in 2015 on behalf of Cambridge City Council and South Cambridgeshire District Council to support the previous Local Plan review.

In considering Histon and Impington, the GCGBA identifies 29 parcels of Green Belt land surrounding the villages. The main part of the site at Villa Road lies in parcel HI18, which is bounded by Villa Road to the north, the Public Drain to the west, the A14 to the south and (largely) the existing village edge to the east. The western part of the site lies in parcel HI20, a larger parcel which extends west and north between Impington, Histon and Girton.

Since it is proposed that the western part of the site should remain in the Green Belt, free of built development, parcel HI20 is not considered further in this note. Our initial comments on the assessment of parcel HI18, in advance of a full review of the GCGBA, are set out below.

Green Belt purpose 1: Preserve the unique character of Cambridge as a compact, dynamic city with a thriving historic centre

The GCGBA assesses parcel HI18 as making a Moderate contribution to this purpose. At paragraph 3.28 the GCGBA acknowledges that this purpose is only relevant to land around the city and the assessment criteria in table 3.2 refer to 'the main urban area of Cambridge'. However, the assessment appears to treat villages close to the city as being part of the main urban area. Since Impington (and Histon) are separate and distinct from Cambridge, we would challenge this and would assess the contribution to this purpose as Limited, particularly in the northern part of the parcel where the site lies. Growth of the village in this location would not be relevant to the compactness of Cambridge.

Green Belt purpose 2: Maintain and enhance the quality of its setting

The GCGBA assesses parcel HI18 as making a Relatively Limited contribution to this purpose, as it is open farmland with some rural character but does not contain features or aspects that contribute specifically to the quality of the setting of Cambridge. We agree with this assessment.

Green Belt purpose 3: Prevent communities in the environs of Cambridge from merging into one another and with the city

The GCGBA assesses parcel HI18 as making a Relatively Significant contribution to this purpose, describing it as being open and in a moderate gap, with a degree of distinction from the urban area. This does not appear to meet the criteria for Relatively Significant in table 3.4, which suggest it should be rated as Relatively Limited.

Assessment of harm

In considering the harm that would result from a Green Belt release for development, the GCGBA divides the parcel into two sub-parcels: area 2 covers the north and east of the parcel, adjacent to the existing village edge, whilst area 1 covers the west and south of the parcel, further away from the village edge. The site lies in area 2. Release of area 2 is assessed

as having a minor-moderate impact on adjacent Green Belt land which, combined with the loss of contribution to Green Belt purposes, results in a High level of harm.

As stated above, the GCGBA appears to overstate the contribution made by the parcel to Green Belt purposes, which results in an exaggerated assessment of harm. Being at the northern end of the parcel, framed by the existing village on two sides, the site is the least sensitive part of the parcel in Green Belt terms. Adopting the landscape strategy proposed in section 6.0, the main part of the site could be released from Green Belt without diminishing the performance of Green Belt purposes by the remainder of the parcel and adjoining Green Belt land, resulting in minimal harm to the Green Belt.

6.0 Landscape Strategy

The following is a summary of the Landscape Strategy and is intended to inform the site's development parameters, ensuring proposals respond to and integrate with the site's landscape setting. It should be read in conjunction with Figure 7 (drawing 7816_100) and Figure 8 (drawing 7816_101).

Key Considerations are as follows:

Public Drain Watercourse:

The site's key landscape feature is Public Drain, a watercourse that marks the edge of the larger, easternmost field. Public Drain should act as the defensible boundary to the site and settlement. The following should be given consideration when developing the masterplan:

- Continue the character of the wooded watercourse (as evidenced immediately to the north of the site) by planting trees along the alignment of the watercourse. Planting would serve to soften the appearance of houses, avoiding an abrupt urban edge to the countryside. There is no need for a woodland belt to fully screen the development, as glimpsed views towards the settlement from the wider countryside would be characteristic of the settled fen edge (although views to the site from public locations are limited).
- Development to be set back a minimum of 10m from planting, to allow sufficient space for trees to mature without conflicting with buildings.
- Within the landscape buffer, seek to provide an informal footpath along Public Drain (as identified in Histon and Impington Village Design Guide SPD), helping to deliver the aspiration within the SPD to provide greater access between the village and countryside.
- Create and enhance habitats along the watercourse.

Easternmost parcel:

The easternmost (larger) parcel is defined at its western edge by Public Drain and relates well to the existing settlement edge. As such it can accommodate housing and associated uses. The following should be given consideration when developing the masterplan:

- At the parcel's north-western corner, an area of public open space should be defined in the masterplan, reflecting the scale of open space within the neighbouring development to the north of Villa Road. The provision of a broader area of open space, in conjunction with the site's western parcel, would bring wider benefits to the community. This landscape could act as an arrival space into the development.
- To integrate the development with the existing built context, reflect the building line along Villa Road, ensuring that the first block of houses facing the road extends no further westwards than the existing development.
- Buildings within the parcel (as a whole) could be up to 2.5 storeys, particularly where they front larger areas of open space. Along Villa Road, houses would likely be two storey to reflect the existing scale of development.
- Along the southern boundary, buffer the hedgerow by 5m and plant occasional hedgerow trees to soften views towards the development from the south.
- All open space (including the main open space and landscape buffers to Public Drain and the southern hedgerow) should be fronted by houses (rather than backed onto), helping define the definitive and defensible edge to the settlement.
- Potential to reflect the rectilinear field pattern and nearby street pattern (to the east) by providing a grid structure within the development, using streets as east-west SuDS corridors (subject to the drainage strategy).

Westernmost parcel:

The westernmost (smaller) parcel's location beyond Public Drain separates it from the settlement edge (in this part of the village) and as a result it should remain free of buildings and be retained within the Green Belt. The following should be given consideration when developing the masterplan:

- There is potential for the land to be used as open space to deliver Biodiversity Net Gain on site. The land could have restricted access (if this increases the value of habitats) or be publicly accessible, forming part of a larger community open space in conjunction with provision in the eastern parcel and the existing play area to the north of Villa Road. Given fields at the edge of settlements within the area were orchards, (thus the location of the Fruit Preserving Factory), planting a community orchard would reintroduce historic characteristics.
- Plant hedgerows along the northern and southern boundaries, mitigating for the likely loss of hedgerow along Villa Road and providing a boundary between the development and NIAB facility.