



Land at Britwell Road, Watlington
Application Ref: P17/S3231/O

Landscape and Visual Review

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1. Introduction

1.1 I have been commissioned by South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) to carry out a review of the landscape and visual aspects of a proposed residential development on land off Britwell Road, Watlington (P17/S3231/O). A landscape and visual appraisal (LVA) has been submitted in support of the application and forms the main focus of this review.

1.2 The aim of this report is to:

- confirm whether the LVA is consistent with best practice;
- comment on whether its conclusions are reasonable and robust;
- review relevant features of the proposed masterplan; and
- identify any concerns or matters requiring clarification.

1.3 Reference has been made to the following documents:

- LVA (EDP, August 2017);
- Design and Access Statement (Barton Willmore, August 2017);
- Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (GLVIA3);
- Watlington Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP, July 2017);
- Landscape Capacity Assessment for Additional Sites on the Edge of Larger Villages (LCALV, August 2015); and
- Chilterns AONB Management Plan.

1.4 This review does not purport to be an LVA in its own right. It does not, for example, attempt to identify and categorise all the potential effects, and places a degree of reliance on the submitted material. Neither does it address non-landscape issues such as sustainability, biodiversity or cultural heritage, or the degree to which the proposal may comply or conflict with relevant policy. Finally, it does not provide an opinion on whether the application should be permitted or refused on landscape grounds.

2. Overview of the LVA

2.1 The LVA has been reviewed in terms of its compliance with the main requirements of the process as set out in GLVIA3 and prevailing practice; this is presented in the table below.

Criterion	Response	Comment
1. Overall Approach		
1.1 Does the assessment distinguish between landscape and visual effects?	Yes	
1.2 Are the methodology and terminology clearly explained?	Yes	Ref LVA Section 1.
1.4 Does the assessment state whether the effects are beneficial or adverse?	Yes	
1.5 Does the assessment distinguish between the effects of construction and the completed development?	No	But physical changes occurring during construction are referenced at Year 1.
1.6 Where adverse effects are identified, has mitigation been proposed and its effectiveness	Yes	The assessment takes account of the Illustrative Landscape

assessed?		Strategy (Plan EDP L7).
1.7 Does the assessment distinguish between the effects at Year 1 (completion) and allowing for the growth of landscaping (typically Year 15)?	Yes	
2. Presentation		
2.1 Is the LVA clearly structured and presented?	Yes	
2.2 Is it adequately supported by:		
- Maps/plans?	Yes	
- Photos?	Yes	
- Visualizations?	No	See below.
2.3 Does this material comply with good practice (e.g. LI guidance on photography)?	Yes	
3. Landscape Character		
3.1 Has reference been made to published LCAs at the appropriate levels?	Yes	
3.2 Have the character of the site and its immediate context been adequately described?	Yes	
3.3 Have relevant designations been identified?	Yes	
3.4 Has landscape sensitivity been assessed on the basis of its susceptibility and value?	Yes	Although it is not always clear how levels of sensitivity have been derived.
4. Visual Impact		
4.1 Has a ZTV/ZVI been produced?	Allegedly	Ref LVA 4.2, but the relevant plan (Plan EDP L6) has been omitted from the LVA. A plan showing a "Zone of Primary Visibility" is included in the DAS.
4.2 Were the assessment views agreed with the LPA?	No	
4.3 Are these views sufficiently representative?	Largely	But see below.
4.4 Have seasonal influences been taken into account?	Not explicitly	But the assessment views were taken in February, and therefore represent a worst-case scenario.
4.5 Have all potential receptors been identified and their sensitivity properly assessed?	Largely	But see below.

2.2 The LVA complies with the guidance and prevailing good practice. However, the following comments should be noted.

Visualizations

2.3 No visualizations are provided; instead, the assessment views identify the extent of the site within each photo. Whilst this approach is commonplace, even a simple wireframe version of perhaps two or three of the most sensitive views would have helped to illustrate the potential impacts and to demonstrate whether the conclusions of the LVA are reasonable.

Assessment Views

2.4 It is understood that the views were not agreed with the LPA. Whilst this is not necessarily critical (and may not always be achievable), it would have been desirable. The scope and number of views appears to be broadly representative of the potential visibility of the development. However, it would have been helpful to consider the following additional views (and their associated receptors):

- a westward view along Cuxham Road (to complement EDP View 3);
- a southward view on Britwell Road opposite the access to Windmill Piece (to complement EDP View 2); and
- a view from the edge of Britwell Salome and/or from Turner's Lane (a PROW that crosses rising ground to the north).

3. Conclusions of the LVA

3.1 The landscape character effects are summarised in LVA Appendix EDP3, and are as follows:

- Topography: Minor/negligible beneficial;
- Hydrological features: Minor/negligible beneficial;
- Perceptual and sensory character: Minor/negligible adverse;
- Landscape fabric and habitats: Moderate beneficial;
- Cultural and historic landscape: Minor/negligible neutral;
- Open Rolling Downs LCT: Minor/negligible adverse; and
- Setting of Chilterns AONB: Minor neutral.

3.2 The visual effects are set out in LVA Appendix EDP 4 and are summarised in LVA Table ECP 6.2. There are apparent inconsistencies between the two, but the effects as reported are understood to be as follows:

- View 1: Minor adverse effect on users of Britwell Road (Year 1), partially mitigated at Year 15;
- View 2: Moderate adverse effect on users of Britwell Road and moderate adverse effect on occupants of nearby residential properties (Britwell Road/Windmill Piece) at Year 1, partially mitigated at Year 15;
- View 3: Minor adverse effect on users of Cuxham Road, partially mitigated by Year 15;
- View 4: Minor/negligible adverse effect on users of PROW (Year 1), with no change at Year 15;
- View 5: Minor adverse effect on users of open access land (Watlington Hill) at Year 1, with little change at Year 15; and
- View 6: Minor/negligible adverse effect on users of PROW (Year 1), with little change at Year 15.

3.3 The LVA identifies (LVA 7.19) the key issues as follows:

- site capacity, which it considers to be greater than set out in the Larger Villages Capacity Study (LCALV, sites WAT 11 and WAT 12);
- the setting of the AONB;
- the setting of Watlington;
- impact on the Open Rolling Downs LCT; and
- impacts on the approach to Watlington along Britwell Road and on views from Watlington Hill, towards the “White Mark” and from nearby PROWs.

3.4 The LVA highlights the detracting effect of the current use of the site (a piggery and associated intensively-managed farmland), both on site character and on its contribution to the Open Rolling Downs LCT and the setting of the AONB. The LVA concludes that the site is less sensitive than reported in the LCALV, and is therefore able to accommodate a larger quantum of development without detriment. It also emphasises the benefits of the proposed landscape strategy to site character, the LCT and visual amenity.

4. Queries and Comments

Site Character

- 4.1 The LVA considers all the landscape receptors (i.e. features or attributes) within the site to be of low sensitivity, apart from its landscape fabric (i.e. significant vegetation), which is considered to be of medium sensitivity. This evaluation mainly reflects the detracting influence of the current use, which is acknowledged. Two observations should be made, however.
- 4.2 Firstly, the pig farm is an agricultural use, and is therefore consistent with the perception of the site as forming part of the countryside. Secondly, the piggery buildings and associated enclosures and features occupy the western third of the site. The remainder comprises an arable field (the southern third, fronting onto Britwell Road) and an area of rough pasture and scrub (the northern third, fronting onto Cuxham Road, which historic mapping indicates was formerly occupied by watercress beds).
- 4.3 These two areas retain an open and greenfield character that comprises one of the site’s attributes, and is intrinsically sensitive to built development. This is not acknowledged in the LVA. Whilst the area occupied by the piggery may reasonably be considered to be of low sensitivity, the remainder of the site should perhaps be considered to be of medium sensitivity. This is consistent with the Larger Villages Capacity Study, which categorised the overall sensitivity of sites WAT 11 and WAT 12 as medium.
- 4.4 If a medium level of sensitivity is accepted for the greenfield parts of the site, and it is accepted that built development represents a high magnitude of change, the resulting effect – on the basis of EDP’s own methodology (LVA Table EDP1.3) - would be moderate, and must be considered to

be adverse (due to the loss of openness and greenfield characteristics). Such an effect is not reported in the LVA.

- 4.5 The sensitivity of the site affects its capacity to accommodate development. This is addressed in Section 6 below in terms of the comparison between the LVA and the Larger Villages Capacity Study.

Open Rolling Downs LCT

- 4.6 The LVA does not consider the site to be highly characteristic of the LCT, and emphasises the influence of detractive features (LCA 3.3-7). Whilst this analysis seems reasonable, the southern part of the site is more characteristic of the LCT, retaining an open appearance and a high degree of visual continuity with the farmland to the south and west. The northern part of the site is more enclosed and in pastoral use, and thereby perhaps more characteristic of the Semi-Enclosed Rolling Downs LCT, which also occurs in the vicinity.
- 4.7 Such differences in character are not unexpected at a local level, particularly in a settlement-edge location, and the fact that a parcel of land may be atypical of the LCT in which it is located should not necessarily be assumed to reduce its sensitivity. It is acknowledged, however, that the piggery detracts from the scenic quality of the site, and that its sensitivity is reduced as a result. The overall medium level of sensitivity ascribed to the LCT in the LCALV otherwise appears to be reasonable, and is consistent with the “moderate” sensitivity to change identified for this character type in the district-wide LCA.
- 4.8 The Open and Semi-Enclosed LCTs differ primarily in their degree of enclosure; their overriding, and unifying characteristic is of Rolling Downs. Regardless of the precise representativeness or sensitivity of the site, the proposed development would have a suburbanizing effect that would override this characteristic.

Setting of Watlington

- 4.9 The site’s main influence on the setting of Watlington is to retain the agricultural character of views from Britwell Road and Cuxham Road on the approach to the settlement edge. Whilst unattractive, the piggery at least provides a logical transition between the surrounding countryside and the built-up area.
- 4.10 The adjoining part of the settlement is already characterised by modern (20thC) development, comprising the business park, recent housing in Windmill Piece and ribbon development along Britwell Road. However, the scale of what is proposed is notable, amounting to a significant extension to Watlington and an encroachment into the countryside (albeit of limited quality) that forms its immediate setting.

Setting of AONB

- 4.11 The boundary of the AONB lies about 90m to the south of the site, beyond the existing development on Britwell Road, at its closest point. Uninterrupted inter-visibility between the site and the AONB is confined to locations on the Chilterns scarp itself, such as Watlington Hill, about

1.8km to the east. Over such distances, the development will be seen to lie beyond the existing settlement and in the context of panoramic views across the vale.

- 4.12 Notwithstanding the absence of visualizations, it seems reasonable to conclude that the development would be visible in such views, but would not have a significant effect. Neither would it appear to intrude into important views towards the scarp (including the “White Mark”) from locations such as the vicinity of Cuxham. Whilst any further urbanisation of views from the AONB could be regarded as harmful, it seems reasonable to conclude that the effect of the current proposals would not be significant.

Visual Impact

- 4.13 The LVA’s conclusions relating to visual impact appear to be reasonable, subject to the absence of visualizations and the additional views identified in Section 2. The effects on the closest-range views (e.g. from Windmill Piece) would be significant, and may have material implications for the amenity of nearby residents. However, the effects would decrease rapidly with distance; over 1km or more, the development would either be glimpsed or would be seen in the context of the existing settlement, and is unlikely to have a material effect.

5. Key Features of the Proposals

Overview

- 5.1 The development comprises up to 183 dwellings, together with 650sqm of employment use, public open space, roads and other infrastructure. Built development would occupy the central and southern parts of the site, abutting the existing settlement edge and extending to the western boundary. The northern part of the site, fronting onto Cuxham Road, would be retained as public open space; it is understood that this is primarily to avoid an area of flood risk. A buffer of landscaped open space would be retained along the south-western boundary.
- 5.2 Access would be provided from Britwell Road, where the junction would be configured to give priority to traffic entering/leaving the site; and from the existing access to the business park from Cuxham Road. This layout allows the site access to form part of a future B4009 realignment, as reflected in the emerging Neighbourhood Plan.
- 5.3 The DAS states that the dwellings would be predominantly two-storey, with some 2.5 storey buildings. The proportion and location of the latter are not specified, but it seems reasonable to assume that they would relate to the “higher density” areas shown on the Density Plan (DAS page 44), and could therefore form a central zone of taller buildings. The employment use would be located close to the boundary with the existing business park, within 1-2 storey buildings of 8.5-10m height.
- 5.4 The Design Parameters (DAS page 42) indicate that built development would occupy about 61% of the site, leaving the remaining 39% as public open space.

Comments

- 5.5 The proportion of open space appears to be relatively generous and consistent with similar schemes in settlement-edge locations. The proposed treatment of the northern space (restoration of the chalk stream etc) and the creation of a landscaped edge along the south-western boundary are welcome, and will achieve both visual mitigation and enhancement to amenity and biodiversity. The buffer along the south-western edge would be 25-60m wide, and as well as accommodating play areas and an attenuation feature, would allow the creation of a designed settlement edge.
- 5.6 Around the western boundary, however, this buffer decreases to 5m wide, which will allow the establishment of little more than a hedgerow and associated trees. It is not clear why the wider landscaped buffer has not been carried around this boundary to link the two areas of open space. As a result, built development extends almost as far as the western boundary, and the road layout suggests that this may be intended to create an option for the future development of adjoining land.
- 5.7 The appropriateness of taller (2.5) storey buildings in settlement-edge locations can be questioned, particularly when such buildings are not already evident, as in this case; the dwellings in Windmill Piece and Britwell Road are 2-storey. The location and density of any 2.5 storey dwellings on this site will need to be carefully handled, since the development has the potential to create a built skyline when viewed from both Britwell Road and Cuxham Road.
- 5.8 The main areas of existing vegetation that would be lost comprise:
- the vegetated bunds around the piggery;
 - the hedgerow within the northern part of the site;
 - vegetation along the route of the proposed access road from the business park; and
 - the hedgerow along the Britwell Road frontage.
- 5.9 None of this vegetation appears to be of particularly high visual or amenity value, although the loss of the vegetation around the piggery and along Britwell Road will be particularly noticeable. It is acknowledged that the proposed landscaping could amount to a quantitative increase in significant vegetation within the site, as well as providing green spaces that are more attractive and of greater amenity value. However, these benefits will be achieved at the expense of the loss of countryside and the suburbanisation of the site. The conclusion in the LVA that some of the residual character effects would be beneficial is therefore a matter of judgement.

6. Larger Villages Capacity Study

- 6.1 The LVA disagrees with the assessment of site sensitivity and capacity set out in the LCALV. In summary, the LCALV concludes that WAT11 is of medium sensitivity and high capacity, whilst WAT12 is of medium sensitivity and capacity. The LCALV concludes that, taken together, both sites could accommodate in the order of 65 dwellings, which is well below (36% of) the total proposed in this application.

- 6.2 The proposed development comprises 183 dwellings within a developable area of 4.87ha (DAS page 42). This compares to the LCALV recommendation of 65 dwellings on a developable area of 2.6ha. The proposed developable area equates to an 87% increase over that envisaged in the LCALV, whilst the proposed density of 38dph is 52% higher than that envisaged in the LCALV (25dph).
- 6.3 The degree of divergence between the LVA and LCALV suggests a fundamental difference in their approach, and results in part from differences in their timing, purpose and methodology. Rather than one being “right” and the other “wrong”, the following influences appear to have been important:
- Up to half of site WAT11, together with the northern part of WAT12, appears to be undevelopable for flood risk reasons. As a result, the developable area for WAT11 shown in the LCALV cannot be achieved.
 - The “balance” of development has therefore been carried over to the central and southern (i.e. more elevated) parts of WAT12.
 - The LCALV did not consider the need to accommodate a safeguarded route for a realigned B4009. Whilst this is not a landscape issue as such, it influences viability and access arrangements (and thereby layout and density, which are landscape issues). The safeguarded route requires access to be provided from Britwell Road, whereas the LCALV envisaged that access would be provided only from the business park.
 - The LVA concludes that the site is of low sensitivity to development, which is materially different to the conclusion reached in the LCALV. As noted previously, the LVA focusses on the presence of the piggery, which has a detracting influence and provides a precedent for built development on the site (although of agricultural rather than residential character).
- 6.4 Despite the differences between the LVA and the LCALV, there is common ground between them in that they both consider the site to have capacity for development, and that this should be located adjacent to the existing settlement edge. The main points of divergence are the quantum of development and the extent to which it should extend across the site. Continuing the wider landscaped buffer around the western boundary would define a developable area that might be regarded as a workable compromise between the current proposals and the LCALV.

7. Summary and Conclusion

- 7.1 The LVA is compliant with the GLVIA3 and prevailing practice. However, reservations have been raised in relation to the absence of visualizations and the number of assessment views. Visualizations would have been of particular value in verifying the LVA’s conclusions relating to the impacts on site character and views.
- 7.2 The conclusions of the LVA relating to visual amenity and the setting of the AONB appear to be reasonable. The points it makes about the detrimental effect of the piggery and the benefits of the proposed landscape strategy are acknowledged. However, these benefits need to be understood in the context of what will be a fundamental change to site character. The proposals

represent a significant extension to Watlington and an encroachment into its immediate countryside setting.

- 7.3 The LVA and the Larger Villages Capacity Study draw different conclusions about the sensitivity of the site. Both make valid points, such that it is probably reasonable to regard the site as being of low to medium sensitivity. If a medium level of sensitivity is accepted (at least for some parts of the site), the landscape effects set out in the LVA may have been under-assessed. It remains a matter of judgement as to whether the positive effects reported in the LVA should be regarded as net benefits.
- 7.4 The overall provision of open space is welcome and is appropriate for a settlement-edge location. The provision of a designed and landscaped edge along the south-western boundary is also supported. However, this approach should have been extended around the western boundary to link the two main areas of open space. Reservations have also been raised about the appropriateness of 2.5-storey buildings in a settlement-edge location, particularly where they may form a built skyline.
- 7.5 The proposed quantum, extent and density of development exceed the parameters recommended in the LCALV by a significant margin. This appears to be partly for pragmatic reasons, such as the need to provide for the B4009 diversion and to avoid an area of flood risk on the northern part of the site. Whilst the LCALV accepts that development could be accommodated adjacent to the existing settlement edge, the scheme proposes to extend development across the site as far as the western boundary. The acceptability of the developable area as proposed should be re-considered in parallel with options for an enhanced landscape treatment of this boundary.
- 7.6 It is recommended that some of the conclusions of the LVA are not necessarily taken at face value, and that officers/members form their own opinion, having considered the matters identified in this review.