



August 2016

## **Land at Whitchurch, Bristol**

### **Landscape Issues**

#### **Introduction**

- 1.1 This note has been prepared by FPCR Environment & Design Ltd on behalf of Bovis Homes, Land Improvement Holdings and Taylor Wimpey in relation to landscape matters within the Bath & North East Somerset Placemaking Plan (2015)

#### **Landscape Character & Visual Amenity**

- 1.2 FPCR undertook a review of landscape character and visual amenity in relation to potential development at land around the edge of Whitchurch<sup>1</sup>. The findings of this report formed part of the New Community Growth Options at Whitchurch (Jan 2016) and Representations to West of England JSP Issues & Options Consultation (Jan 2016) that was submitted to the Bath & North East Somerset Council (B&NES).
- 1.3 A summary of the landscape work is set out below.
- 1) Whitchurch forms the southern extent of the urban area of Bristol;
  - 2) In broad terms the local landscape that extends from the edge of Whitchurch comprises comparatively level and gently sloping agricultural land that is bounded to the south by the prominent escarpment of Maes Knoll (part of Dundry Hill);
  - 3) The context of Whitchurch (and the wider urban area Bristol) has an influence on landscape character and much of the landscape around the settlement edge has intervisibility between the built-up area;
  - 4) The site and the wider landscape around Whitchurch is not subject to any landscape quality designation;

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<sup>1</sup> Land at Whitchurch, Bristol Review of Landscape Character & Visual Amenity (January 2016)  
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- 5) The local landscape around Whitchurch is pleasant and attractive in places, but does not display any pronounced sense of scenic quality such that it sets it apart. Certainly not in comparison, for example, with the very distinctive landscape of the Mendip Hills AONB, or the more intimate and rural landscape of the Chew Valley to the south of Maes Knoll;
  - 6) The local landscape does not contain any particularly unusual landscape features being predominantly in agricultural use and subject to agricultural practices. Open agricultural fields, that are generally medium in size, are bounded by hedgerows that are often well treed and include some ditches and associated ponds;
  - 7) Whilst the fabric of mature trees, hedgerows and a network of local Footpaths are of some local value and worthy of conservation, they are commonplace elements within this landscape context. In any event, none of these features preclude the ability in which to deliver well-designed high quality development and, moreover, they can be designed as an integral part of a green infrastructure strategy for development proposals;
  - 8) Visibility of this landscape from the wider landscape is effectively prevented by the natural containment of higher land at Maes Knoll to the south, and by the built -up area of Whitchurch and Bristol. Hedgerows and mature trees provide a further degree of containment.
  - 9) As a consequence, views of development would be limited to a comparatively small visual envelope. There would be localised views for footpath users, residents around the edge of Whitchurch/Bristol and highway users as move through the landscape.
  - 10) From the elevated Footpath on Maes Knoll the urban area of Bristol and the settlement edge of Whitchurch is clearly visible. From this vantage point any built development in this location would be observed against the backdrop of the existing built-up area and experienced with this context of built features are already apparent within this landscape.
- 1.4 A detailed analysis of landscape and visual resources through a Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment would inform development within this landscape. It is considered that the landscape around the edge of Whitchurch is tolerant of change and has the capacity to absorb well-designed and well-planned development though a sensitively designed Masterplan that is founded on landscape conservation and enhancement.

## **Bath & North East Somerset Placemaking Plan (2015)**

- 1.5 The following is a review of the Placemaking Plan.
- 1.6 The chapter on Environmental Quality includes a sub-section on Landscape. Within this section the report addresses the national policy context and states that:

***"The NPPF requires local authorities to take a criteria based approach to protecting the landscape". § 241***

- 1.7 This statement is somewhat misleading as it gives the impression that the crux of the NPPF is simply about "protection" of the landscape per-se, whereas in fact, the NPPF refers to the ***"protection and enhancement of valued landscapes*** [emphasis added] and that the approach is about: ***"recognising the intrinsic character"*** of the countryside, and that the planning system should ***"contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment"***.
- 1.8 The landscape text leads to Policy NE2 which is set out in full below.

### ***"Policy NE2***

#### ***Conserving And Enhancing The Landscape And Landscape Character***

##### ***1 Development will be permitted***

###### ***where it:***

***a conserves or enhances local landscape character, landscape features and local distinctiveness***

***b incorporates green space within the scheme that positively contributes to creating a high quality environment by enhancing landscape character and biodiversity and providing sustainable public access and other landscape benefits***

***c is demonstrated that the whole scheme, including hard landscape and planting proposals, will contribute positively to the local area including reference to relevant existing landscape assessments supplemented by any additional assessments***

***d conserves or enhances important views particularly those to significant landmarks and features and take opportunities to create new local views and vistas.***

***2 Development should seek to avoid or adequately mitigate any adverse impact on landscape.***

***3 Proposals with potential to impact on the landscape / townscape character of an area or on views should be accompanied by a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment undertaken by a qualified practitioner to inform the design and location of any new development.***

- 1.9 In summary, development is considered to be acceptable as long as it "***conserves and enhances landscape character***", delivers "***greenspace***" and seeks to "***seek to avoid or adequately mitigate any adverse impact on landscape***".
- 1.10 Given that NE2 neatly ties in with the Core Strategy Policy CP6: Environmental Quality that seeks to conserve and enhance the distinctive character and quality of the District's landscape, it is considered that Policy NE2 provides a well-reasoned policy position on landscape. The Policy ensures that any development that comes forward has regard to landscape character and the adoption of appropriate design and mitigation strategies to minimise effects. Furthermore, NE2 advocates that the use of Landscape Visual Impact Assessments (LVIAs) to assist proposals for development. This will provide detailed and site specific analysis with judgments on landscape and visual effects to assist the decision making process.
- 1.11 It is considered that Policy NE2 provides a clear, reasoned and robust policy. Despite this, the report goes on to introduce an additional Policy: NE2A, that defines areas around settlements that "***will be afforded specific protection under the policy***" – this includes the landscape around Whitchurch.
- 1.12 NE2A is set out below:

***POLICY NE2A:  
Landscape Setting Of Settlements***

***Any development should seek to conserve and enhance the landscape setting of settlements and their landscape character, views and features. Development that would result in harm to the landscape setting of settlements will not be permitted.***

- 1.13 The preceding text states:

***"There is on-going need for further development; in particular for housing which is primarily focused on the larger settlements, but, also in the villages throughout B&NES. The purpose of Policy NE2A is to ensure the protection of key landscapes and landform, landmarks and views / viewpoints which particularly contribute to the landscape setting of settlements.*** § 252 [Emphasis added]

- 1.14 There is a very clear acknowledgment that there is pressing need for development and the report explicitly states that new housing should be **"primarily focussed on the larger settlements"**. The landscape adjacent to Whitchurch/Bristol is an obvious example of where development can be 'focussed'. And yet, despite this objective, NE2A seeks to prevent and stifle development through the **"protection"** of the **"landscape setting of settlements"** and that these areas should be **"afforded specific protection"**. This is baffling to say the least and is contrary to the landscape character based approach that is promoted within the Placemaking Plan. It is inevitable that in releasing any greenfield sites for development will result in a degree of landscape harm. However, in order to minimise the impact of development on the landscape, it is widely accepted that sites that are on the edge of settlements, or within the context of the urban and settlement edge (such as the landscape setting of Whitchurch), are likely to have greater ability and environmental capacity to absorb change. In essence, development would be observed within the context of the existing settlement/urban edge and is likely to have far less impact on landscape character and visual amenity than those sites that are away from the influence of the built-up area.
- 1.15 There is no compelling qualitative or quantitative evidence to support the assertion that the landscape around Whitchurch is a **"key landscape"** or one that should be **"afforded specific protection"**. Indeed, the preceding paragraphs of the report goes onto lists those **"key areas, characteristics and features of particular value"** within the district - none of which is the landscape around Whitchurch. These comprise:
- "The City of Bath World Heritage Site and its setting  
- Mendip Hills and Cotswolds Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty  
- Registered Historic Parks & Gardens  
- Conservation Areas  
- Historic parks and gardens of local importance"***
- 1.16 The landscape around Whitchurch is **not** covered by any landscape quality designation at either national or local level. Whilst it recognised that designations do not render a landscape as having no value, it is, however, commonly accepted that designated landscapes are of particular importance and it is **these** landscape that should be **"afforded specific protection"**, rather than commonplace and agricultural land that borders the urban edge. For the most part, the local landscape around Whitchurch comprises relatively flat agricultural fields that are interspersed with sports pitches, horsiculture uses, scattered farmsteads and buildings set within the context of the A37 and the built up area of Whitchurch and Bristol. In comparison with the distinctive and pleasing landscape of Maes Knoll, the Dundry Hills and the Chew Valley, the local landscape around the Whitchurch is rather ordinary.

- 1.17 Intrinsic elements within this landscape such as hedgerows, mature trees, ponds and rights of way and can be readily conserved and enhanced. Indeed, the design approaches that are explored with the 'New community growth options at Whitchurch' (2016) demonstrate how masterplans and green infrastructure strategies can ensure that built development is located alongside the settlement edge of Whitchurch and can be assimilated within this landscape through the provision of new perimeter landscape habitats.

**Bath & North East Somerset, Landscape Setting of Settlements (NE2A), Placemaking Plan Evidence (2015)**

- 1.18 This report has been prepared to support Policy NE2A and considers the landscape setting of settlements. It reviews this based upon a methodology of 'natural factors', 'cultural and human factors' and 'visual and perceptual factors'.
- 1.19 In relation to Whitchurch Area 1, the report is rather limited in its assessment simply devoting no more than a couple of pages. It states the following:

***Cultural and Human Factors:***

***Lyons Court Farm, set in open fields on the west side of Whitchurch, is a grade II\* listed farmhouse dating from the 15th century. It is surrounded by medieval or earlier fields which are deemed an important feature in this attractive landscape setting. These fields form an interesting concentric pattern radiating out from the vicinity of the nearby St. Nicholas Parish Church (also Grade II \* listed). All of these fields are criss-crossed by footpaths and form a very popular walking area***

***The hedge and scrub covered embankment of the line of the old Bristol and North Somerset Railway line is included as a prominent local landmark within surrounding fields.***

***Both Maes Knoll and the adjacent line of the Wansdyke are important landmarks and are Scheduled Ancient Monuments***

***Visual and Perceptual Factors:***

***There are views to Maes Knoll and the steeply sloping edge of the Dundry ridge from the western part of the village and in particular from the fields around this part of the village which are criss-crossed by well used paths.***

- 1.20 It is noteworthy that the report provides no description of 'natural factors' and that the majority of this landscape analysis is focused upon the heritage

designations of Listed Buildings and the scheduled monuments of Maes Knoll and the Wansdyke. In any event, whilst these heritage features are of value, they need not bar well-designed development. Masterplan approaches can deliver an appropriate and sensitive interface between these features through, for example, the use of broad areas of greenspace, new planting, and development 'setbacks'.

- 1.21 Views of Maes Knoll can be incorporated within any development proposal. This can be achieved through the careful arrangement of the street pattern; providing specific viewing points within the layout and creating open or channelled views along the Public Footpaths.
- 1.22 As explored earlier, the setting of Mase Knoll is already influenced by its interrelationship with the wider urban area of Bristol. Nonetheless, any development within this landscape needs to have regard to this feature. Masterplans can be suitably developed to minimise impacts by adopting an appropriate 'setback' of built development based upon an analysis of landform and field patterns. The comparatively flat fields around Whitchurch - where built development would be appropriate - make way to the steeper slopes in and around the vicinity for Whitewood Farm -where built development is less appropriate. It is this change in landform that provides a logical southern extent to built development, whilst the use of woodland and accessible greenspace such as community parks, and the like, would provide an attractive transition between built development and the wider countryside.
- 1.23 The ***'hedge and scrub covered embankment'*** of the former railway line, which is feature of the local landscape, is not a significant constraint to development. On the contrary, this-and indeed other landscape components-can form integral 'green' elements of any development proposal.
- 1.24 Furthermore, what is perplexing is that the description of this landscape fails to acknowledge, or even refer to, the nearby built-up area of Whitchurch and the influences this currently has on the landscape, such as the rather unrelieved edge of modern housing at East Dundy Road and the transport route of the A37.

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