

Former Hook Estate and Kennels, Northaw Landscape Review

Prepared for: Welwyn Hatfield Borough
Council

Date: February 2024

Application Reference: 6/2023/2418/OUTLINE

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Version Control

Version	Author	Changes from previous version	Checked by	Date checked
P01	LR	None	RB	26/02/2024

1 Introduction

This report has been prepared by Lewis Reynolds, Senior Landscape Architect and reviewed by Robert Browne, Director and Chartered Landscape Architect, in response to a brief from Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council. The report reviews landscape and Green Belt related documents submitted in support of planning application 6/2023/2418/OUTLINE for outline planning application with all matters reserved except for primary means of access for up to 150no. C2 (extra care) dwellings, ancillary community facilities, landscaping, and access from Coopers Lane Road. In addition, the report considers whether the landscaping proposals illustrated on the submitted landscape masterplan will be sufficient to mitigate the landscape and visual effects of the development in the long term.

In order to provide an opinion on the proposed development, a site visit was undertaken to make observations on the site character, the visibility of the site and the potential landscape impact of the proposals.

2 Application Documents

The following submitted documents that describe the design, landscape and visual impact, and mitigation of the proposals have been reviewed:

- Site Application Boundary SK01 Rev. R9 – Lambert Smith Hampton (September 2023)
- Topographical Survey Dwg No. 100/001
- Building Heights SK026R1 – Lambert Smith Hampton (February 2023)
- Land Use and Heights Parameter Plan SK023R1 – Lambert Smith Hampton (February 2023)
- Illustrative Masterplan SK23 Rev. R2 – Lambert Smith Hampton (September 2023)
- Landscape General Arrangement Plan 100 Rev. A – RPS (April 2023)
- Planning Statement 333100205/A5/P1 Rev. A – Stantec (November 2023)
- Design and Access Statement – Lambert Smith Hampton (November 2023)
- Arboricultural Impact Assessment 1051742 Rev. A – ADAS (May 2023)
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment JSL4303 Rev. V4 – RPS (November 2023)
- Green Belt Assessment P20-0497 Rev. V3 – Pegasus (September 2023)

3 Proposed Site Layout

The proposed development comprises an extra care facility (use class C2) for up to 150no. apartments in the form of bungalows, together with two and three storey buildings and a pavilion arranged in a series of terraces. Most of the buildings would form a series of terraces sitting broadly between lines of existing trees which follow the remnant fence lines that previously enclosed the pens and dog kennels. The new buildings would step down the north facing slopes within the lower part of the site towards Northaw Brook, but would stop short of the overhead electricity cables which cross the site along an east to west alignment.

Access to the site would be via the extension of the Firs Wood Close and the give-way priority junction with Coopers Lane Road. Routes are proposed between the development parcels. At the entrance from Coopers Lane Road is proposed an area of ecological enhancement, creating a naturalised woodland and meadow entrance to the site and existing development.

To the south of the pavilion, the proposals include a series of stepped plateaus which are proposed to be relatively formal, consisting of lawns, planting beds and paving, set within herbaceous planting. Mown paths will lead residents out into the wider landscape to the south and west.

To the south, a large community garden will be provided on the site for use and cultivation by residents.

The courtyards created between the apartment blocks are proposed as a formal counterpoint to the broad swathes of naturalistic landscape around and would accommodate areas of communal lawn framed by simple paths allowing space for walking, meeting, socialising and other activities. The immediate space surrounding the apartments is proposed to be planted similar to a front garden and will form a defensible space to the ground floor dwellings. Space will also be provided for seating and mobility buggy parking.

The proposed development also includes integrated SuDS features, such as swales to provide opportunities for increased biodiversity and landscape setting.

The scheme is reported to achieve a 28.87% biodiversity net gain.

4 Review of the Submitted Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

4.1 Methodology and Baseline Assessment

The Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) submitted with the application considers the landscape effects of the development and the potential visual impact. The report includes a methodology that is broadly in line with the 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment' Third Edition (GLVIA3) and provides the necessary level of information for a development of the size proposed. The LVIA (Para 1.10) also references 'An approach to Landscape Character Assessment' (2014) and its predecessor 'Landscape Character and Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland' (2002).

The Landscape Institute's Technical Guidance Note (TGN) 'Assessing the Value of Landscapes Outside National Designations' 02-21 appears to have been referenced within the LVIA (Para 3.26). The inclusion of this guidance is good practice where it builds on the details within GLVIA3 and introduces additional factors that should be considered as part of assessments and the importance of those different factors used to determine landscape value.

The LVIA also provides a description of observed baseline character and visual amenity. This identifies the key landscape characteristics and outlines the perceptual effects arising from existing infrastructure including the nearby M25 which is a little over 1km south of the site.

The report describes an acceptable process for identifying a Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV). This was an approach utilising a combination of desktop analysis and fieldwork observation refinement. Within the identified 3km study area, the LVIA presents an accurate description of baseline character, referencing the necessary precedent landscape character studies at the multiple scales.

As acknowledged in the LVIA (Para 1.14), the site visit and photography used to inform the original assessment were undertaken in July 2022 (Summer) during full leaf cover. Additional fieldwork was carried out in February 2023 (late-Winter) where deciduous trees would have less leaf cover and therefore more representative of the worst-case scenario. Whilst more recent winter fieldwork would have been appreciated, the photography and our own site visit reveal that the surrounding landscape structure is mostly intact and therefore has undergone little change since.

The assessment includes a desktop study, a review of the landscape and visual baseline, ability of the site to accommodate the proposed development,

including an assessment of landscape and visual effects and a conclusion. The Site's characteristics are suitably described and the range of views that are available are appropriately summarized. However, we consider the assessment itself underestimates the likely effects of the proposed development on landscape character and visual amenity.

There are some unfortunate omissions from the Assessment Methodology. For example, the LVIA does not offer a consideration of susceptibility, despite the LVIA Methodology at Appendix A (Para A1.24) directly referencing GLIVA3 (Para 5.55) which states that:

"...susceptibility to change and value can be combined into an assessment of sensitivity for each receptor, and size/scale, geographical extent and duration and reversibility can be combined into an assessment of magnitude for each effect. Magnitude and sensitivity can then be combined to assess overall significance".

An assessment of value would normally be combined with an assessment of susceptibility to form an opinion on the landscape sensitivity for the site. The LVIA (Para 1.6) however, appears to have assessed the development *"...through consideration of the sensitivity or susceptibility of the landscape or visual receptor..."*. Furthermore, there are no supporting methodology or tables provided within the LVIA which demonstrate how judgements of landscape sensitivity have been made. This is surprising and an incomplete baseline assessment can somewhat undermine the subsequent assessment of landscape and visual effects.

4.2 Landscape Effects

The LVIA (Paras 3.17-3.22) has identified the landscape character baseline of the site and immediate surroundings as including, National Character Area profiles (NCA 111: Northern Thames Basin), the Welwyn and Hatfield Borough Landscape Character Assessment (LCA 53: Northaw Common Parkland) and the Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study (2016). We note that the Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (2019) has not been included within the baseline but would have been available at the time of the assessment.

GLVIA3 (Para 5.26) recognises that landscape value is not always signified by designation *"the fact that an area of landscape is not designated either nationally or locally does not mean that it does not have any value"*. This has been generally considered in the assessment (Para.3.26) which is good practice. Overall, the landscape value of the site is considered to be of 'Medium' value, with the wider, rural landscape within the valley also considered to be of 'Medium' value.

With regards to the value of landscape receptors, the LVIA (Para 3.27) has considered the site against a brief set of factors which are suggested by GLVIA3 (Box 5.1) and the report appears to have considered the complementary factors suggested by the LI TGN 02/21 (Table 1). Though it is noted that TGN 02/21 (Para 2.4.5) also makes clear that “...once evidence for each factor has been collated and assessed, it is important to step back and judge the overall ‘weight of evidence’ in coming to an overall judgement on landscape value”. For example, the LVIA (Para 3.37) currently states that:

“Most features of the Site, including its woodland, semi-improved grassland, scrub and riparian habitats are typical and commonplace landscape elements, albeit they are worthy of retention. The veteran trees are distinctive features and are important and valued landscape elements. Whilst not within the Site itself, the Deresar at the Oshwal Centre, including its extensive car parking area, is a particularly distinctive and unusual feature, albeit one which contrasts with the rural character of the local area”.

The LVIA however, does not conclusively state what judgement has been afforded to this particular factor (i.e., ‘distinctiveness’) or other factors in accordance with LI TGN 02/21. GLVIA3 (Para 5.31) states that the “assessment of the value attached to the landscape should be carried out within clearly recorded and transparent framework so that decision making is clear”.

It is our professional opinion, that the LVIA, as currently presented, does not conclusively state what judgements have been afforded to individual factors and we would advise that it is good practice for an LVIA to provide a more robust assessment of the individual factors, components or particular landscape features pertaining to the site. We would have also expected that judgements about the value of landscape receptors and factors to be recorded on a scale of high, medium or low and supported by clear methodology and tables.

With regards to the susceptibility of landscape receptors, GLVIA3 (Para 5.43) sets out that judgements about susceptibility of landscape receptors to change should be recorded on a scale of (for example of high, medium or low), but the basis for this must be clear and linked back to evidence from the baseline.

The LVIA, as currently presented, does not conclusively provide judgements about the susceptibility of the site and its immediate surroundings nor does it provide judgements of susceptibility for the aforementioned landscape receptors (those referenced and absent from the assessment) but is expected for an LVIA to ensure that the assessment links back to, and is informed by, evidence from the baseline study. Whilst the LVIA Methodology at Appendix A

(Para A1.6) acknowledges "...susceptibility to change" as a factor of landscape sensitivity, it does not explicitly state within the report, tables or methodology how judgements of susceptibility have been made or recorded.

Notwithstanding these omissions, the submitted LVIA does offer a description of potential landscape effects that would arise from the development. I disagree with the stated changes that have been highlighted within the report.

Currently, the LVIA suggests that the site specific effects (Para 5.2) would result in 'Moderate adverse' effects. The land would undergo a noticeable change in use, with a noticeable shift away from recognisable woodland, grassland and rough grassland with some dense scrub to 150no. extra care (use class C2) dwellings (i.e., bungalows, two and three storey buildings and a pavilion) arranged in a series of terraces which would step down the Northaw Valley towards the Northaw Brook on a series of terraces, retaining walls, regrading works and interspersed with car parking and access roads.

Whilst the landscape character of the site would undergo substantial change as acknowledged at Para 5.4 of the LVIA due to the proposed development forming "*...a visible and recognisable feature within the landscape*". The LVIA has ultimately judged that the site specific effects would be 'Moderate adverse' and 'Minor adverse' effects to Northaw Common Parkland and further suggests that elements of the proposals as being "*...uncharacteristic of the Site, i.e. new buildings, retaining walls, access roads and footpaths, and would contrast with its rural character...*".

As noted above the report does not include a detailed methodology, includes a varying degree of omissions and does not provide clear and transparent framework for the levels of significance that are given. It is therefore difficult to gauge the levels of landscape significance that are predicted within the report. Although an assessment of predicted landscape effects on the wider landscape character area has been considered, it is my opinion that given the impacts of the proposed development and its inconsistency, as a result of the lack of evidence from the baseline study as required by GLVIA3 and supporting best practice guidance, the judgements of susceptibility, value and sensitivity are either too low or unclear and should therefore be provided for review.

Because of these judgements, there is concern that the landscape receptors' magnitude of change and the overall significance of landscape effects may also differ from that stated.

4.3 Visual Effects

When considering potential visual effects of the scheme, it is my opinion that the LVIA provides an accurate description and assessment of most predicted changes to visual amenity. The identified visual receptors are correct and

appropriate representative viewpoints have been included. I agree with the stated level of visual sensitivity for all receptors.

Once again however, due to the lack of detailed methodology in the LVIA, it is difficult to fully understand the significance ratings that have been applied to potential visual effects. Therefore, my comments are based on a general understanding of standard terms.

The report is correct to assess 'Major adverse' effects at Year 1 on people viewing the site from private views which would then reduce to 'Moderate adverse' at Year 15. However, it is my opinion that the assessment of 'Negligible adverse' visual effects for people viewing the site from Hook Lane (e.g., Bridleway Northaw 010 and Byway Northaw 016) to the west of the site is understated. For these receptors, I would assess the predicted effects to be 'Minor adverse' at Year 1 and remaining at this level to Year 15. However, this is a slight difference of opinion.

During the site visit, I noted that the bridleway and byway as being popular with horse riders. The photography from these locations (Viewpoints 4-7) has been taken from a person's eye height as standing on the ground, to represent a pedestrian, as these were likely considered the more representative user of these routes. Consequently, it would have been good practice to note the views of horse riders (given the additional height of horses) by taking representative viewpoint photography using a step ladder. I would assess the predicted effects as 'Minor adverse' at Year 1 and Year 15 consistent with other receptors.

We also note the LVIA (Para 3.49) identifies that *"St Thomas A Beckett Church at Northaw and adjacent buildings within the conservation area are also visible within views from parts of the Site"* but this does not appear to have been highlighted within the assessment itself. GLVA3 (Para 6.5) states that *"Interrelationships with the cultural heritage topic area need to be borne in mind when developing the visual baseline and identifying visual effects"*.

5 Effects on the Green Belt

We note that the site is identified as lying within the Green Belt and the application has been supported by a Green Belt Assessment (2023) which is appreciated for review. The report suggests (Para 3.16) that *"whilst technically this land is classed as countryside as it lies outside a defined settlement boundary, it is previously developed land from evidence on the ground..."*.

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (December 2023) emphasises that *"The Government attaches great importance to Green Belts. The fundamental aim of Green Belt policy is to prevent urban sprawl by keeping land permanently open; the essential characteristics of Green Belts are their openness and their permanence"* (Para 142).

The NPPF (Para 154) also stipulates that local planning authorities should regard *"...the construction of new buildings as inappropriate in the Green Belt"*. One exception to this includes [among others] for *"...limited infilling or the partial or complete redevelopment of previously developed land, whether redundant or in continuing use (excluding temporary buildings), which would:*

- *not have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development; or*
- *not cause substantial harm to the openness of the Green Belt, where the development would re-use previously developed land and contribute to meeting an identified affordable housing need within the area of the local planning authority"*.

In this regard, Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) (Paragraph: 001 Reference ID: 64-001-20190722) helpfully states that when *"assessing the impact of a proposal on the openness of the Green Belt, where it is relevant to do so, requires a judgment based on the circumstances of the case. By way of example, the courts have identified a number of matters which may need to be taken into account in making this assessment. These include, but are not limited to:*

- *openness is capable of having both spatial and visual aspects – in other words, the visual impact of the proposal may be relevant, as could its volume;*
- *the duration of the development, and its remediability – taking into account any provisions to return land to its original state or to an equivalent (or improved) state of openness; and*
- *the degree of activity likely to be generated, such as traffic generation"*.

We note that the submitted Green Belt Assessment consistently acknowledges the site as contributing to openness. For example, the report states that the site *"...has an open aspect northwards to this valley..."* and *"...the site itself has a moderate sense of openness..."*, *"...is classed as countryside"*, *"has an 'open' character"*, *"much of the site is open in terms of its character"*, *"...would undoubtedly introduce built form where it is limited currently to derelict structures"*, *"would introduce a quantum of built form in the countryside"* and that *"...the level of harm on the openness of the Green Belt would be moderate..."* (Paras 2.3, 3.16, 4.2, 4.4 & 4.5).

It is also recognised within the assessment (Para 4.5) that the proposed scheme would *"...be permanent and not time limited..."* and that there would be *"...some degree of activity with a residential neighbourhood as proposed, principally around the comings and goings of people living their lives in this small residential community"*.

There is a concern however, that the overall conclusion assessing the impact of the proposal on the openness of the Green Belt is somewhat underplayed, particularly where the report goes on to state that *"...there would be no substantive reasons for refusing planning permission for the proposed residential scheme, as far as Green Belt matters are concerned"* (4.11).

It is our professional opinion that this would in fact conflict with the preceding assessment, which clearly describes the open nature of the site against the proposal of a new retirement village. The proposed development would therefore have a greater impact on the openness of the Green Belt than the existing development at conflict with Para 154 (g) of the NPPF.

6 Conclusions

This report has been commissioned to provide an independent assessment of the landscape impact of the proposals for outline planning application with all matters reserved except for primary means of access for up to 150no. C2 (extra care) dwellings, ancillary community facilities, landscaping, and access from Coopers Lane Road on land at the Former Hook Estate and Kennels in Northaw. The scheme has been examined by reviewing the submitted documents and my own observations of the site and surroundings.

The LVIA submitted with the application considers the landscape effects of the development and the potential visual impact. The report includes a methodology that is broadly in line with the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Third Edition (GLVIA3) and provides the necessary level of information for a development of the size proposed.

There are some unfortunate omissions from the LVIA methodology. The report fails to provide an assessment of landscape susceptibility for the existing site and surroundings. This is surprising and an incomplete baseline assessment can somewhat undermine the subsequent appraisal of landscape and visual effects.

With regards to predicted landscape effects, the report does not include a detailed methodology and does not provide clear and transparent framework for the levels of significance that are given. The LVIA predicts the site specific effects as 'Moderate adverse' and 'Minor adverse' landscape effects to Northaw Common Parkland. Although an assessment of predicted landscape effects on the wider landscape character area has been considered, given the substantial change of the proposed development and its inconsistency, because of the lack of evidence from the baseline study as required by GLVIA3 and supporting best practice guidance, the judgements of susceptibility, value and sensitivity are either too low or unclear. Because of these judgements, there is concern that the landscape receptors' magnitude of change and the overall significance of landscape effects may also differ from that stated.

When considering potential visual effects of the scheme, it is my opinion that the LVIA provides an accurate description and reasonable assessment of most predicted changes to visual amenity. The identified visual receptors are correct, with some minor omissions however, for the most part, appropriate representative viewpoints have been included. I agree with the stated level of visual sensitivity for the receptors that have been assessed.

However, it is my opinion that the assessment of 'Negligible adverse' visual effects for people viewing the site from Hook Lane (e.g., Bridleway Northaw 010 and Byway Northaw 016) to the west of the site is understated. From these receptors, I would assess the predicted effects to be 'Minor adverse' at Year 1 and remaining at this level to Year 15. During the site visit, I noted that the bridleway and byway as being popular with horse riders. The inclusion of additional viewpoint photography using a step ladder would have been appreciated.

St Thomas A Beckett Church at Northaw and adjacent buildings within the conservation area were noted as being visible within views from parts of the site however representative viewpoints do not appear to have been highlighted within the assessment itself.

The proposals represent a considerable incursion into the Green Belt. Effects on Green Belt openness have been assessed as Moderate with the submitted Green Belt Assessment.

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