

Round Table Discussion

Effect on the character and appearance of the area including landscape character
Appeal Reference 6008238 - Land North of A507, West of A10, Buntingford

Summary positions of the main parties – Council and then the appellant (up to 10 mins each).

Good afternoon, Sir, I appear as the landscape witness for the Appellant. My name is Natasha Jones and I am Director of Landscape Architecture at Stantec UK.

My evidence addresses the Council's landscape reason for refusal and, drawing on my work on the LVIA and addendum, my site visits, my analysis of the site and its context, and my consideration of the relevant policy framework, it is my professional opinion that the proposals would not result in the significant landscape harm alleged by the Council. Instead, I consider this to be a well-related and logical growth of Buntingford, informed by a careful analysis of landscape character, settlement form and landform, and capable of being successfully integrated into its surroundings.

At its core, this appeal comes down to three landscape issues.

Firstly, would the development cause significant harm to Landscape Character Area 141, Cherry Green Arable Plateau?

Secondly, would it harm the Rib Valley setting of Buntingford?

And thirdly, is this an appropriate location for future growth in landscape and visual terms?

It is my considered opinion that the proposal would not cause significant harm to LCA 141.

It would not undermine the Rib Valley setting of Buntingford.

And it is, in my opinion, an appropriate location for growth in landscape and visual terms.

The remainder of my evidence explains why I have reached those conclusions.

Starting with the Appeal Site itself, this is an area of intensively farmed arable land adjoining the edge of Buntingford. It is influenced by the A10 and the A507 and sits alongside existing development and infrastructure. Importantly, it is not covered by any national or local landscape designation, and the parties agree that it is not a valued landscape in the meaning of the previous NPPF.

In landscape terms, it is typical rather than exceptional. It does not possess particularly high scenic quality, rarity or distinctiveness. It is representative of the wider landscape, but it is not a special or unique example of it. In my opinion, weighting should be moderate, which is in keeping with the agreement between me and Mr Browne that the site is of medium value.

Turning then to LCA 141, I do not agree with the Council's suggestion that the development would fundamentally harm or urbanise this character area.

LCA 141 is a large landscape character area. The appeal site occupies only a small part of it, which is adjacent to the existing settlement, and the proposed development would affect only a limited proportion of the character area as a whole. In fact, there is a greater extent of LCA 141 from which the development would not be visible than there is where it would be visible.

The character area is also described in the Council's own Landscape Character Assessment SPD as being a 'fairly frequent' landscape type, with no major distinctive characteristics. That assessment notes it is in poor condition, with a strategy of improvement and restoration, and of a moderate strength of character.

That is important, because the proposals would deliver substantial woodland planting, new hedgerows, habitat creation including ponds, green-blue infrastructure and public access for recreation and to open space. Those elements directly support the published landscape strategy for the area.

Even taking a precautionary approach and assessing LCA 141 as having high sensitivity, the LVIA concluded that effects would be minor adverse at Year 1 and, once planting matures, minor beneficial by Year 15. In my opinion those conclusions remain entirely robust.

I therefore do not consider that the development would redefine, fundamentally alter or undermine the character and distinctive features of LCA 141.

A second important issue concerns the A10.

A large part of the Council's case appears to rely on the idea that the A10 should be regarded as a permanent and firm boundary to growth.

My review of the historic development of Buntingford does not support that position.

Historically, Buntingford evolved from a linear settlement along Ermine Street into the cluster settlement we see today. Growth has taken place in several directions over time, extending well beyond the town's original form.

The A10 bypass was introduced to remove traffic from the town centre. I have found no evidence that it was ever intended to define a permanent landscape boundary or prevent future growth.

Nor does it align particularly closely with landscape character boundaries, historic field patterns or even the underlying landform. Landscape character areas cross the A10, and there has always been development on both sides of it, including the current Buntingford Business Park.

In my opinion, therefore, the argument that the A10 represents some fixed limit to the settlement is not supported by the landscape evidence. Instead, I consider the proposals to be a continuation of Buntingford's established pattern of growth.

Moving onto the Rib Valley setting, it is my evidence that the proposals have been carefully positioned in relation to the surrounding landform.

A key part of my analysis identifies what I refer to as the Rib Valley landscape cell; a contained landscape formed by the surrounding ridgelines and spurs which wrap around Buntingford and the River Rib valley.

What is particularly important is that the proposed built-form area of development remains within that contained landscape cell.

It is not located on the western ridgeline.

It does not extend onto the higher plateau to the west.

And it does not extend onto outward-facing slopes where development would have much wider landscape consequences.

Instead, built development is concentrated on land adjacent to the existing settlement, while the western side of the site remains open and forms part of the proposed country park.

In landscape terms, that is precisely the approach to limit wider effects and respect the valley setting. In my opinion, if growth is to be accommodated within the Rib Valley landscape cell, the Appeal Site represents the most logical and least harmful location. It is an area closely related to the existing settlement, with clear influences from existing urbanising features, and it is capable of landscape integration. Locating development in the Rib Valley landscape cell would avoid adverse effects on the wider and more rural countryside area.

Landscape and visual effects arising from the development are assessed as being greatest within the site and its immediate surroundings, and within 0.5km to 1km. Beyond that, the effects are not significant.

The proposals are also notable for the extent of green infrastructure being delivered.

Not all of the site would contain built development. Around 50 to 60 per cent is proposed as green-blue infrastructure, including open space, planting, habitat creation and recreational routes.

The visualisations demonstrate that as this planting establishes and matures, it would soften and filter views of development, helping the proposals sit comfortably within the landscape in the long-term.

Mr Browne suggests the LVIA consistently underestimates the magnitude and significance of landscape effects. However, there is considerable agreement between Mr Browne and me.

The key disagreements concern the effect on LCA 141 and the weight to be given to mitigation at Year 15, particularly for the Site and its immediate surroundings, the footpaths within the Site and certain visual receptors. In my opinion, Mr Browne gives insufficient weight to the mitigation measures and to the way maturing planting would soften, filter and integrate the development over time.

The remaining differences, including those relating to LCA 140 and LCA 142, do not result in effects that are important or significant under the LVIA methodology. Those disagreements are therefore differences of degree, not conclusions of significant harm.

I remain satisfied that the LVIA is balanced, robust and properly assesses the scheme as proposed, including its mitigation. Its Year 15 conclusions are reasonable and should be relied upon.

My assessment is that the most impacted receptors would be the Site itself and users of the footpaths crossing it. Beyond those receptors, the effects are limited and the degree of harm reduces substantially. In my opinion, the proposals would not result in widespread or significant harm to the character and appearance of the countryside and would not fundamentally alter the character of the surrounding landscape.

Regarding the BUNT3 allocation, should that be built out, change would principally affect land closest to the employment allocation and would reinforce an urbanising influence that already exists in this part of the Appeal Site. In my opinion, it would not fundamentally alter the character of the wider landscape, but it would be perceived as part of the growth of Buntingford.

In my opinion, the Appeal Site is not perceived as an isolated parcel of countryside beyond a clear settlement boundary. It is a transitional landscape at the urban-rural edge, where the influence of countryside and settlement varies across the Site. The western parts are more strongly rural in character, whilst the eastern parts are clearly influenced by Buntingford, the A10, the A507 and existing development. In my opinion, the Site is physically, visually and functionally well-related to the settlement and cannot reasonably be characterised as countryside that is wholly separate from the town.

I accept that the new roundabout would open up new views into the Site for a short length of road, and that the effects would be most noticeable in the period immediately following construction. The LVIA recognises this. At Year 1, the replacement hedgerow and tree planting would not yet be sufficiently established

to provide the intended landscape and visual functions, resulting in a noticeable change in views from the A507 assessed as a Medium magnitude of change with a Minor adverse effect.

However, it is important to recognise the extent of agreement between Mr Browne and myself on this matter. We agree that people in vehicles will be travelling at speed and experiencing oblique views, we agree on the Year 1 effects, we agree on the Year 15 effects, and we agree on the level of significance during construction. The only difference between us relates to the magnitude of change during the construction period.

In my opinion, the LVIA provides the more balanced assessment because it takes account of the proposed construction mitigation. Temporary hoardings would help restrict views into the Site from the A507 during construction and would reduce the extent of visual change experienced by road users. For that reason, I remain satisfied that the LVIA's assessment of effects is robust.

Whilst there are differences between Mr Browne and myself regarding the magnitude and significance of certain visual effects, the evidence demonstrates our broad agreement that visibility and visual effects are principally confined to the area closest to the Site, with the most notable effects occurring within approximately 1 kilometre or less, and reducing substantially beyond that distance.

The proposed development would have its greatest effects on users of Public Rights of Way within and around the Site up to 0.5km. Those effects are recognised by both parties as being important within the LVIA assessment framework. However, the evidence also demonstrates that effects reduce with distance, are generally less pronounced for road users, and reduce beyond the immediate surroundings of the Site. The proposed development would therefore result in localised and contained effects, rather than widespread visual effects across the wider landscape.

I consider the proposal complies with the landscape objectives of DES2, ES1 or HD1, because it:

- reflects the settlement pattern of Buntingford, and thus is appropriate to and maintains the Rib valley setting;
- it responds appropriately to landscape character and topography and is sensitive to the landscape in terms of height and location of built form;
- it provides landscape improvements and represents a logical and well-related location for growth of the existing settlement within the Rib Valley landscape cell, conserving the character and distinctive features of the wider Buntingford Community Area landscape.

In landscape terms, in my opinion, the area of built development within the site is well related to Buntingford, because,

- there is already, and always has been, built development on both sides of the A10. The Proposed Development is situated adjacent to Buntingford Business Park, which is located on the west side of the A10.
- Historically, there has been some form of development west of the A10 in addition to a Reservoir, as can be seen on historic maps, which illustrates a small amount of built form located to the west of the A10 and adjacent to the A507 / A10 roundabout, which is now the southern end of the current Buntingford Business Park.
- There are existing PROW connections between Buntingford and the Appeal Site, which would be retained within green corridors as part of the Proposed Development.
- When the development is built out, the A10 would simply be viewed as part of the settlement's urban structure. The A10 does not provide complete visual containment and enclosure to the existing settlement, which is demonstrated where there is intervisibility between the Appeal Site and existing built form of Buntingford.
- There would be no intervening open countryside between the development and Buntingford.

I therefore conclude that the development that in landscape terms would be well-related to the settlement.

Drawing these points together, my overall conclusion is straightforward:

The appeal site is not a Protected Landscape or a valued landscape in planning terms of the previous NPPF, nor is it an area of exceptional landscape quality.

The proposal would affect only a small part of the large character area LCA 141 and would not fundamentally alter its defining characteristics.

Built development would remain contained within the Rib Valley landscape setting, below the surrounding higher landform and integrated through substantial green infrastructure.

The landscape and visual effects are localised. There are no long-distance significant effects, due to the landform and vegetation within the landscape.

The A10 should not be regarded as a permanent landscape limit to growth, and the proposal represents a logical continuation of Buntingford's established evolution as a clustered settlement.

For those reasons, I conclude that the proposal would not result in the significant landscape harm alleged by the Council and that it accords with the relevant landscape objectives of local and national planning policy.