

LANDSCAPE & VISUAL APPRAISAL OF GREENFIELD SITES SOUTHEND-ON-SEA BOROUGH

Introduction

The landscape of the Borough is covered by the Essex Landscape Character Assessment (ELCA) published in 2003. Whilst this study classifies landscape types at a county level it provides insufficient detail to inform the appraisal of individual development sites. It is intended to provide a framework for more detailed studies at district/borough level; a landscape character study of Southend-on Sea has not yet been undertaken. As a consequence the landscape appraisal of greenfield sites as part of the SHLAA study is based upon a site appraisal undertaken by an experienced Chartered Landscape Architect, and background information provided in the previous Local Plan and adopted Core Strategy.

Two greenfield sites are being promoted within the borough:

- CON107 – Land at Bournes Green (north of A1159)
- CON114 – Land at Bournes Green (north of A13)

Planning and environmental context

All of the sites lie within the Metropolitan Green Belt (saved Local Plan policy G1, Core Strategy policy KP1) the boundary of which may be subject to minor amendments to enable the delivery of objectives and policies that could not otherwise be achieved in a sustainable manner (Core Strategy, policy KP1).

Sites CON107 and 114:

- lie within a Landscape Improvement Area (saved Local Plan policy G3)
- are of high agricultural land quality (Core Strategy policy CP5).

CON107 lies within a Special Countryside Area (saved Local Plan policy G4).

CON114 is identified for its brickearth deposits and has consent for a golf course.

The Core Strategy indicates (in indicative form) part of the proposed Green Grid extending across parts of each site which links with a proposed Country Park within Rochford.

Sites CON107 and 114 lie within the Crouch and Roach Farmland landscape character area (F2), as defined in the ELCA. Typical characteristics (as evident in this area) are:

- Rolling or gently undulating arable farmland between the estuaries.
- Regular fields of variable size and thick or intermittent hedgerow boundaries.
- Frequent long views across the farmland to the estuaries from higher ground.
- Strongly right angled pattern of lanes.
- Small villages, a scattering of hamlets, farmsteads, and newer suburban properties are concentrated along the lanes on higher ground.

The study notes that the LCA is:

- Highly sensitive to major urban extensions (>5ha)
- Moderately sensitive to small urban extensions (<5ha)

On the northern edge of the town this is principally due to the moderate to high levels of intervisibility that exist.

Site appraisal

Site CON107

The site comprises a broadly triangular area of land immediately north of the A1159, extending northwards towards the southern side of the loose linear settlement that follows Wakering Road which runs northwards towards Stonebridge (hereinafter referred to as Stonebridge).

The principal landscape characteristics are as follows:

- Broadly level land falling gently in the south eastern part towards the urban edge
- The western and central parts are occupied by the south eastern part of the extensive Essex Golf Course which is centred on land north of Garon Park to the west. The golf course is a highly modified landscape comprising a series of low rounded artificial landforms, tees, greens, bunkers linked by paths (occasionally gravel surfaced). It is unclear if brickearth deposits existed in this area and, if they did, whether they were worked prior to the golf course construction.
- The remaining eastern part is an arable field with a small area of uncultivated land north of the A1159/A13 junction.
- Land to the north of the site comprises a large arable field that extends to the properties on the southern edge of Stonebridge alongside Barling Road.
- Vegetation cover is limited to two hedgerows (gappy in places); new planting within the golf course (principally of native species) is not sufficiently established yet to be a significant feature.
- The land to the north of the site supports some occasional mature trees located mainly within the hedgerows and along the fringes of the settlement to the north
- There are mature trees along the urban edge/A1159 south of the site where housing on the urban edge forms a locally prominent and harsh edge; a prominent tree belt along the eastern side of Wakering Road that forms the eastern boundary of the site.
- A significant area of vegetation lies on the nursery land located on the eastern side of the arable field directly north of the site.
- A well-used right of way runs along the northern edge of the site.

The principal visual characteristics are:

- Close visual association with the urban edge to the south due to the absence of significant vegetation cover; tall tower blocks located within the urban area are readily apparent.
- Views northwards are limited by the band of properties located beyond the arable field immediately to the north of the site; consequently the site is screened from the landscape to the north of this settlement although it is apparent in views south from the southern side of the houses and Barling Road. In the latter views the artificial landforms within the golf course assist in partially screening the urban edge beyond.
- Views out from the site to the east, beyond Wakering Road, and towards the site from the land beyond the adjacent schools, are reasonably well contained by the belt of trees alongside the road (in summer these views are likely to be almost totally screened by this vegetation).
- Views to the west/north west are broken by hedgerows and related trees (notably the hedgerow and trees that runs northwards from the western end of the site). Although there are views towards the leisure centre at Garon Park which is located on slightly higher land, which in turn limits views towards the site from the landscape beyond Garon Park.

Conclusions

Two thirds of the site is a highly modified and immature landscape with the eastern part a large open field. The site is generally well contained from the wider landscape by a combination of gentle topography (north west) development (north) and vegetation (north and east). It largely falls within the existing visual envelope of the urban fringe. There are few landscape constraints to its development and the site offers an opportunity to bring forward development that would be generally well contained from the wider landscape (which is at odds with the general nature and sensitivity of the land identified in the Crouch/Roach Farmland LCA). A large proportion of the site is not agricultural land; however, the loss of the golf course here may lead to a desire for replacement elsewhere, which could result in loss of high quality land.

In terms of its function as part of the Green Belt, the land appears to contribute to purposes 1 (checking sprawl) and 3 (safeguarding countryside). However, any land on the fringes of the town could be said to fulfil these purposes. Most importantly, it would appear that the release of this land from the Green Belt would not prejudice the continued function of the Green Belt beyond although it may be difficult to resist further northward expansion (across the field to the north of the site) up to the settlement (not a 'neighbouring town' within the context of the second purpose of Green Belt).

Site CON114

Broadly, this site forms the western half on an extensive tract of open, flat arable farmland that extends some 2km between Wakering Road north of Bournes Green Chase, and Star Lane (the minor road north of North Shoebury).

There is no obvious landscape boundary along the eastern side of the site – the boundary mostly crosses open fields. The site projects eastwards as a 'tongue' of land south of Southend Road to within approximately 500m. of the western edge of Great Wakering.

Principal landscape characteristics of the site, shared across the wider area to the east, are:

- Generally flat, featureless, open arable fields with straight-sided boundaries defined predominantly by ditches, with occasional remnant sections of hedgerows
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- Bounded on three sides by roads (A13 on most of southern side; Wakering Road, Southend Road. Star Lane forms the eastern edge of the land to the east, alongside the western edge of Great Wakering that lies immediately beyond

A right of way runs north south between Bournes Green and Southend Road.

The main visual characteristics are:

- High level of intervisibility across the whole area, with visual connections with land to the north, notably from the eastern part of CON114 and land to the east.
- Varying levels of vegetation around most of the periphery of the wider landscape compartment which frame the space and provide some overall containment.
- Expansive wide open views and 'big sky', with slightly more containment in western part of the area (western part of CON114) due to the enclosure provided by vegetation along the western side (associated with the two schools) and combination of properties (including a large nursery) and related vegetation on the northern side of the western part of Southend Road.
- Open views southwards from Southend Road; the urban edge, whilst more apparent alongside the south western edge, is generally well softened by the hedgerows, new planting and significant trees that lie along the A13. This forms a reasonably well-defined visual limit to this edge of the town.

- Medium and longer distance views across the wider agricultural land from some locations along the A13 and Poynters Lane which contribute to a sense of separation and openness along the town's periphery.

Conclusions

The promoted site forms approximately half of a single landscape compartment that extends seamlessly to the east, and to the north (most notably from the eastern part of the promoted site). The land, whilst lacking in landscape features due to intensive arable farming, together with the land to the east, extends the countryside right up to the periphery of the town and contributes to its setting. There is no boundary or distinction between the land within the site and the wider landscape beyond.

In terms of Green Belt purposes it is possible to conclude that the land contributes to purposes 1 and 3 (which are inter-related purposes) and similar comments to those provided in relation to site CON107 apply. However, in this location the site does not benefit from containment from the wider area and any development within it (and particularly larger scale commercial/employment development (a mixed use development is promoted) would be highly visible; this would engender a perception of encroachment, and consequently development may also be perceived as 'unrestricted sprawl'. Whilst robust mitigation as part of an overall landscape improvement strategy (preferably extending over the wider area) could assist, over time, in creating a new edge and providing containment it is possible that such treatment may appear out of place within the wider landscape (although off site landscape restoration, such as replanting/strengthening field boundaries could assist in overcoming this). If this approach were to be adopted it is unlikely that a further extension of development towards Great Wakering could be resisted based upon a similar strategy. The influence of lighting is unlikely to be contained and this will enhance the perception of encroachment.

With regard to the second Green Belt purpose (prevent merging of neighbouring towns) Great Wakering could not be considered to constitute such a settlement due to its size. However, development within CON114 would undoubtedly narrow the gap between the edge of the town and this outlying settlement.

Whilst the site has consent for a golf course (saved Local Plan policy P7c refers) the nature of the changes (including safeguarding of any viable brickearth deposits and the retention of land quality – grade 2 according to promoter's submission) are safeguarded by saved Local Plan policy R4. Such a use is not in conflict with Green Belt policy (and would contribute to Core Strategy policy CP4, item 11) and the land would remain as predominantly open land within the Green Belt; furthermore it would contribute to the proposed Green Grid (Core Strategy policy CP4 item 10). Although the character of the land and, potentially, its visual relationship (through planting) would change, such changes are likely to strengthen the boundary to the urban edge as opposed to weaken it. A well designed golf course could provide a valuable 'buffer' along this edge of the Green Belt as has occurred at the Essex Golf Course at Garon Park. If development were to be permitted the mineral deposits and land quality are likely to be sterilised permanently (unless the brickearth is excavated prior to development); with regard to the former this may conflict with saved Structure Plan policy MIN4, and policy CP5 of the Core Strategy.

Other land to the west of CON107

Land to the west of CON107 has not been promoted. However, our preliminary landscape appraisal of this area concludes that:

- Land occupies a slightly higher area of land on northern side of town
- Most of land is in leisure/recreation uses centred around the leisure centre and Essex Golf Course
- The course is maturing and has retained significant vegetation and there are areas of substantial new native planting
- The leisure centre is a substantial complex with many external facilities that are evidence of considerable investment in the facilities; the leisure centre building is a dominant and imposing building which is apparent from the surrounding area
- A large school and area of allotments occupies land to the west of the leisure centre

- Recent commercial development occupies land to the west at Fossett's Farm

The extensive golf course provides a significant landscape buffer between the northern edge of the town and the arable landscape that falls away gently towards the River Roach to the north, within the Crouch and Roach Farmland LCA. As the planting within the course develops it will assist in reinforcing a landscape framework along this periphery of the town.

This slightly higher area of land is apparent in views back towards the town from the countryside beyond. At present it appears that the land contains much of the urban area to the south.

Conclusions

Overall, we conclude that this is an area that is unlikely to be suitable for accommodating development due to the fact that the land already fulfils important leisure/recreational functions which would need to be replaced elsewhere, which is likely to give rise to effects in alternative location(s).