PARCEL NLP411, ALMA FARM, TODDINGTON

Initial Landscape Appraisal
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aspect Landscape Planning Ltd has been appointed by Denison Investments Ltd to undertake a Landscape Visual Appraisal relating to the potential exclusion of Parcel NLP411, Alma Farm, Toddington, from the Green Belt for residential development. The location and context of the site is illustrated on Plan ASP1 Site Location and Plan ASP2 Site and Setting.

1.2. This Strategic Landscape Appraisal (SLA) is not a detailed Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) but seeks to reinforce the principle of development into the context of the existing landscape character and visual environment to assess the ability of the site to integrate future development. Within their publication ‘Site Assessment Technical Document – Appendix D: Preliminary Site Assessment Results’ (July 2017), Central Bedfordshire identifies the site as parcel NLP411. This document concluded that further consideration had to be given to the site and did not report it as having failed any of the assessment stages.

1.3. The assessment of potential effects has been derived from guidance provided within GLVIA3 (Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment 3 Edition) published by the Landscape Institute and the Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment in April 2013. The methodology is contained within Appendix 1 of this document.

1.4. This assessment should be read alongside the other supporting material which accompanies this report.
2. BASELINE ASSESSMENT

2.1. The site is located along Leighton Road, on land at Alma Farm, Toddington and consists of a pasture which is directly adjacent to the western built-up edge of Toddington.

2.2. The site is situated at approximately 730 metres from the closest Conservation Area. However, it is acknowledged that the site is located within the Green Belt. The location and setting of the site regarding these designations is illustrated on ASP2 Site and Setting.

2.3. The site is gently sloping, from 146m AOD in north-western part of the site up to 153m AOD in the south-eastern part of the site. At a larger landscape scale, the site is located on a localised plateau surrounded by an undulating landscape made of a series of hills.

2.4. The site comprises a pasture surrounded by established mixed native hedgerows and hedgerow trees that enclose almost entirely the application site. However, the site’s north-eastern boundary is characterised by a limited extent of vegetation structure.

2.5. The immediate context to the site is made up of residential developments associated with Toddington to the north, north-east and south-east, while a number of agricultural lands are located to the west, south-west and south of the site.

2.6. Other than the area of pasture and some patches of overgrown rough grassland, the internal components of the site offer little in the way of landscape value. However, where present, the mixed-native mature hedgerows and trees along the boundaries afford a degree of visual and physical containment to the site.

2.7. A number of Public Rights of Way (PRoW) are located within the setting of the site, however, there are no footpaths located within the site. The closest public footpath is located approximately 95m from the site’s north-western boundary. Other PRoW located within the site setting are shown on ASP2 Site and Setting Plan.
Landscape Character

2.8. At national level, the site is located in the centre of the Bedfordshire Greensand Ridge (NCA90). This assessment provides a useful introduction to the landscape of the region but is too broad to apply at a more site-specific level.

2.9. Central Bedfordshire Council Landscape Character Assessment identifies the site as being located within the Clay Hills Character Area (8), which has the following key characteristics:

- “Series of hills with an undulating, rounded landform and a distinct sense of elevation.
- Settlements typically located on the hill tops and set within a wooded context.
- Dominated by arable crop production but interspersed in places with pockets of pasture.
- Hedges and hedgerow trees form field boundaries and create a strong landscape pattern and wooded context in places.
- (…)

2.10. The Clay Hills Character Area (8) is subdivided into four different landscape character types. The landscape character assessment identifies the site within the Hockliffe Clay Hills (8A) Landscape Character Type, which is described as follow:

“This large area of connected rounded hills extends from Toddington in the east to Leighton Buzzard in the west. The hills form a transition between the dramatically different landscapes (…)”

2.11. At a more site-specific level, Aspect has undertaken an assessment of the landscape character of the site and its immediate setting. This assessment identifies that the site is located within a settlement fringe landscape, being adjacent to the built-up edge of Toddington. The mixed-native hedgerow lining most of the site boundaries creates a
robust green edge. The close proximity of existing residential built-up areas gives an urban fringe character to the site.

2.12. In terms of landscape quality, it is considered that the site is influenced by its proximity to the existing built-up edge, detracting from the remoteness and tranquillity of the site. The established vegetation associated with the site and its immediate context, coupled with the sites topography ensures that the site is not apparent within the wider setting and as such does not contribute to the scenic quality of the area. There are no features associated with the site that are considered rare or representative in landscape terms. In terms of recreation value, it is acknowledged that the site is not publicly accessible and as such it is considered that the recreational value is low. It is acknowledged that the site is located approximately 300m to the west of Herne Poplar Farm (Grade II Listed Building). However, it is considered that the site does not contribute to the landscape setting of this historic asset. The site is covered by a Green Belt designation, which has no weight in terms of landscape value. To that end, it is considered that the value of the site is low.

2.13. The site is distinctly separate from the Green Belt area that extend to the west and south and which has limited intervisibility with the site. The sites localised setting is already largely developed and urbanised to the north, east and south-east. It is considered that the value of the site is low, based on the above analysis. In terms of susceptibility to change as a result of residential development, it is considered that the settlement edge landscape, with the existing built edge and the presence of urbanising features, means that the site has some capacity to accommodate change. It is considered that the site has a medium susceptibility to change as result of sensitively designed residential development. To that end, it is considered that the localised landscape character, in which the site is set, is of low sensitivity.

Visual Environment

2.14. A visual assessment of the site and its setting has been undertaken and a viewpoint local plan and a series of photographs are included within Appendix 1 that illustrate the site within its setting. The photographs
have been taken in accordance with published guidance from the Landscape Institute, from publicly accessible locations.

2.15. Viewpoint 1 is taken from Leighton Road, approximately 20m to the north-east of the site’s north-eastern corner and looks south-west towards the site. From this location, the site is visible due to the limited extent of the vegetation along its northern boundary. However, this view illustrates the relation between the Leighton Road corridor, which is visual and physically separated from the site due to the presence of a mature mixed-native hedgerow lining the site’s northern boundary. The residential properties located directly to the east of the site and which are associated with the built-up edge of Toddington are visible in the field of view, while the hedgerows lining their curtilages limits the intervisibility between the north-western part of the site and the road corridor. From Viewpoint 1, it is considered that by setting back the proposals from the road corridors, views of the proposed residential development can be efficiently mitigated by implementing an appropriate landscape strategy along the site’s northern boundary.

2.16. Viewpoint 2 is also Leighton Road, approximately 80m from the site’s south-eastern corner. This viewpoint illustrates the presence of vegetation structure lining the Leighton Road corridor on the approach to Toddington. The views towards the site are screened by this vegetation and existing residential built form in the field of view, while a telecommunication antenna is visible in the field of view. It is considered that if carefully designed, the proposals would not be visible. If visible, only the rooftscape would be perceived through glimpsed views and the proposals would not be prominent or overbearing in views on the approach to Toddington.

2.17. Viewpoint 3 is taken from Alma Farm Road, approximately 7m to the north-east of the site. The view looks south and provides another example of the limited extent of the vegetation structure along the site’s northern boundaries. This viewpoint also illustrates the relationship between the site and the south-western urban fringe of Toddington, which forms a backdrop to the site. From this location, it is considered that any proposals built on site would be visible due to the limited vegetation structure present along the site’s northern boundary.
However, the site is well related to the built-up edge of Toddington and taking into account that a robust landscape strategy will be implemented along the site’s northern boundary, it is considered that the site is a suitable location for a sensitively designed residential development.

2.18. Viewpoint 4 is located approximately 80m from the site’s northern boundary, within the residential built-up area associated within the south-eastern built-up edge of Toddington. A number of residential properties associated with Alma Farm Road are present in the field of view and filters the views towards the site located beyond them, while the telecommunication antenna located the south-west of the site is visible. It is considered that if any views of the proposals are available from this location, these would be limited to glimpsed views of the proposed roofscape. Taking into consideration that a landscape strategy will be implemented along the northern site boundary, it is considered that views towards the proposals can be efficiently mitigated after the first years of development.

2.19. Viewpoint 5 is taken from the junction between Chargrave Road and the Public Footpath FP23, located approximately 1.2km from the site’s south-eastern corner. The telecommunication antenna located to the south-west of the site is visible and allow identifying the approximate location of the site, which is not visible due to the intervening vegetation structure and landform located in the field of view. It is considered that the carefully designed proposals will not be visible from Viewpoint 5 due to the intervening vegetation and topography.

2.20. Viewpoint 6 is taken from the junction between an unnamed road and the public footpath FP10, approximately 1.2km from the site’s eastern boundary. From this location, the built form associated with Herne Poplar and Alma Farm Road are present in the field of view, while the site is not visible beyond the intervening vegetation structure located in its setting. It is considered that, if sensitively designed, the proposals would not be visible from Viewpoint 6. If the proposals are visible within views from Viewpoint 6, they will only be visible through glimpsed views and will not appear prominent or overbearing and will be seen as part of the existing built form associated with the south-eastern built-up edge of
Toddington. It is therefore considered that the site can accommodate a carefully designed residential development and integrate it without harm into the localised setting of Toddington.
3. Potential Landscape and Visual Effects

3.1. Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, 3rd edition (GLVIA3) prescribes the need for a site assessment to determine whether there are physical qualities or components of the site of value.

3.2. In terms of landscape quality, it is considered that the site is influenced by its proximity to the existing settlement edge, detracting from the remoteness and tranquillity of the site. The established vegetation structure associated with the site and its immediate context ensures that the site is not apparent within the wider setting and as such does not contribute to the scenic quality of the area. There are no features associated with the site that are considered rare or representative in landscape terms. The site is not publicly accessible and as such it is considered that its recreational value is low. It is acknowledged that the site is located approximately 300m to the west of Herne Poplar Farm (Grade II Listed Building). However, it is considered that the site does not contribute to the landscape setting of this historic asset. The site is located within the Green Belt, however, as the Green Belt is a planning designation, it has no weight in terms of landscape value. Therefore, it is considered that the value of the site is low.

3.3. It is acknowledged that the development of this site for residential use would extend built form into a previously undeveloped parcel forming part of the Green Belt. The site is however well related to the existing settlement edge of Toddington and is surrounded on two sides by the road corridors of Leighton Road and Alma Farm Road. Furthermore, the site is well related to the existing built-up edge associated with Toddington which has an urbanising influence on it.

3.4. The context of the immediate site setting is already characterised by the neighbouring built form associated with Toddington. The retention and reinforcement of the existing boundary vegetation with additional planting and the implementation of internal planting where appropriate will ensure that a defensible green edge to the site is maintained and enhanced where required. The introduction of a sensitively designed scheme could be integrated without significant harm to the site setting.
The development of the site would be perceived within the context of existing residential properties, road corridors and other urbanising features ensuring that it is not introducing new or alien components into the fabric of the landscape. The use of a considered and appropriate palette of materials, which have been informed by the local vernacular will ensure that the proposed residential development can be integrated into its setting. The incorporation of a comprehensive scheme of landscaping will also assist the integration of the proposals creating a high-quality environment in which to live.

3.5. It is therefore considered that the proposed development of the site for residential use can be integrated without significant harm to the existing landscape character of the site and its localised and wider setting.

Visual Environment

3.6. Within the context of the existing visual environment, it is considered that the site can integrate an appropriately designed residential development without compromising the amenities or qualities of the localised setting. As shown within the visual assessment, views of the site are localised, with the primary receptors being nearby residential dwellings to the north and east. It is considered that there are no long-distance views of the site, due to the strong degree of containment afforded to the site by the built-up area of Toddington and surrounding established treescape and mature hedgerow network. The presence of the established vegetation cover within the localised site context and the retention of the existing hedgerows where appropriate will ensure that carefully designed built form will not appear prominent or overbearing. The retention and enhancement of the landscaped boundaries will soften the proposed residential development and assist in the integration of the built form. The retention of these features will also ensure that any built form is afforded an appropriate set back from the existing residential areas and road corridors.

3.7. Therefore, it is considered that sensitively designed proposals can be integrated without significant harm to the visual environment and related
receptors. Any views of the proposed residential development would be highly localised and seen within the context of existing built form.

**Review of Site Allocation within Emerging Local Plan Process**

3.8. The site has already been considered for allocation within ‘Site Assessment Technical Document – Appendix D: Preliminary Site Assessment Results’ (July 2017) produced by Central Bedfordshire Council. The above-mentioned document concluded that further consideration had to be given to the site and did not report it as having failed any of the assessment stages.

3.9. It is acknowledged that the site is located within the Green Belt. Following the appraisal undertaken by Aspect Landscape Planning Ltd, the scale of the site is considered to be sufficient to provide appropriate green buffers. It is therefore considered that if an appropriate landscape strategy is implemented, the site would be self-contained with appropriate green buffers limiting intervisibility between the proposals and the setting of the site while maintaining a sense openness on the approach to Toddington.

3.10. It is considered that the site presents opportunities to accommodate a sensitively considered residential development and that its development would constitute a logical urban extension to the settlement.

**Green Belt Review**

3.11. As identified within section 2 of this report, the site is located within the Green Belt. Within the NPPF, Paragraph 80 identifies that the Green Belt serves five purposes. These are outlined as being:

- “to check the unrestricted sprawl of large built-up areas;
- to prevent neighbouring towns merging into one another;
- to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
- to preserve the setting and special character of historic towns; and
- to assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land”.

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3.12. In addition, Paragraph 85 states that “When defining boundaries, local planning authorities should:

- “ensure consistency with the Local Plan strategy for meeting identified requirements for sustainable development;
- not include land which it is unnecessary to keep permanently open;
- where necessary, identify in their plans areas of ‘safeguarded land’ between the urban area and the Green Belt, in order to meet longer-term development needs stretching well beyond the plan period;
- make clear that the safeguarded land is not allocated for development at the present time. Planning permission for the permanent development of safeguarded land should only be granted following a Local Plan review which proposes the development;
- satisfy themselves that Green Belt boundaries will not need to be altered at the end of the development plan period; and
- define boundaries clearly, using physical features that are readily recognisable and likely to be permanent.”

3.13. It is considered that the proposed development of the site would form a logical extension to Toddington, with existing development located to the north-east, east and south-east of the site. Existing residential development surrounding the site already forms a notable urbanising feature within the site’s localised and wider setting, and any proposed development would be seen within this context. The proposed development would not breach the limits to Toddington as currently perceived from the wider setting.

3.14. Alongside any proposed development, it is considered that substantial offsets will be provided to existing field boundaries and tree belts which already afford a strong degree of containment to the site from the wider setting to the west and north. Inclusion of robust landscape buffers will be provided where breaks in boundary vegetation occur to create an enduring Green Belt boundary. The proposals would accord with the
NPPF paragraphs 85 and 80, ensuring boundaries are redefined utilising physical and permanent features such as the treebelts and roads with landscape buffers to define the new Green Belt edge. A suitable undeveloped ‘gap’ would be maintained between the redefined Green Belt edge and settlements located in the wider site setting. Proposals would ensure that the separate settlements within the site’s localised and wider context will not merge through the use of the physical and permanent features as well as maintaining a substantial undeveloped ‘gap’, and development of the site would therefore not result in coalescence. This also ensures that the setting and separate characters of the settlements are preserved.

3.15. The third purpose of the Green Belt is to assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment. New development proposals will inevitably require some green field land, however the site is not of particularly high landscape value, is influenced by its settlement fringe setting and is well contained by adjoining residential development. It is considered that the extent of mature vegetation within the site’s localised and wider setting would ensure that any impact upon the wider countryside as a result of development would be localised. It is considered that whilst proposed development of the site would develop some green field agricultural land on the edge of Toddington, it would not represent a significant encroachment into the countryside, being contained by the existing urbanising features that are already characterised by the urban edge, and the opportunities that are provided to form a new logical Green Belt boundary along the north-western and south-western boundaries of the site through reinforced and new planting.

3.16. In terms of the fourth purpose, this is not considered relevant for this particular site. In terms of the fifth purpose of Green Belts to assist in urban regeneration, at a prima facie level it seems that the use of a Green Belt site is likely to discourage rather than encourage the use of derelict and other urban land. However, Councils are struggling to meet development targets on previously developed land alone and as such some green field sites of lower landscape value need to be considered particularly in terms of the opportunity to meet housing needs and
provide a comprehensive scheme with wider social and economic benefits. Consequently, it is considered that the fifth purpose of Green Belts is not being materially compromised by any proposed development within the site.

3.17. It is therefore considered that the exclusion of the site from Green Belt will not significantly affect the characteristics of the surrounding Green Belt designation.

3.18. While it is acknowledged that the development of this site would extend built form into greenfield land, the site is well related to the existing urban edge, with development to the north, west, south, south-west and south-east with a number of urbanising influences extending to the south. The site presents opportunities to provide sustainable land for residential use within the localised context of the north-western and south-western settlement edge of Toddington that can be integrated without harm to the wider landscape setting or Green Belt purposes. Opportunities exist for a redefined Green Belt boundary that could create a more robust and enduring Green Belt edge through the use of tree planting along the north-western and south-western site boundaries. It is considered that development of the site for residential uses comply with the aims and objectives of the NPPF, and would not significantly affect the characteristics of the surrounding Green Belt designation. It is therefore considered that the site could be developed in accordance with landscape policies and it is a suitable site in landscape and visual terms for residential development.
4. Conclusions

4.1. Aspect Landscape Planning Ltd have received instruction on behalf of Denison Investments Ltd to provide landscape advice for the exclusion of the parcel NLP411 (Alma Farm, Toddington) from the Green Belt.

4.2. Within their publication ‘Site Assessment Technical Document – Appendix D: Preliminary Site Assessment Results’ (July 2017), Central Bedfordshire identifies the site as parcel NLP411. This document concluded that further consideration had to be given to the site and did not report it as having failed any of the assessment stages. Following this appraisal, Aspect Landscape Planning Ltd agrees with the finding of the assessment and consider that the site is capable of accommodating residential development.

4.3. It is acknowledged that the development of this site would extend built form into greenfield land, however the site is well related to the existing urban edge, with development to the north-east and south-east with a number of urbanising influences extending to the north-east and east. The site presents opportunities to accommodate residential use within the localised context of the western settlement edge of Toddington that can be integrated without harm to the wider landscape setting or Green Belt purposes. Opportunities exist for a redefined Green Belt boundary that could create a more robust and enduring Green Belt edge. It is considered that development of the site for residential uses comply with the aims and objectives of the NPPF, and would not significantly affect the characteristics of the surrounding Green Belt designation. It is therefore considered that the site could be developed in accordance with the adopted and emerging policies of the Local Plan.

4.4. In terms of landscape quality, it is considered that the site is influenced by its proximity to the settlement edge of Toddington. The established vegetation associated with the site’s boundaries and its immediate context ensures that views of the site from the wider setting will be very limited. There are no features associated with the site that are considered rare or representative in landscape terms and the recreation value of the site is considered to be low. It is acknowledged that the site
is located approximately 300m to the west of Herne Poplar Farm (Grade II Listed Building). However, it is considered that the site does not contribute to the landscape setting of this historic asset. It is acknowledged that the site is located within an area designated as Green Belt, however, this designation is planning related and has no weight in terms of landscape value. To that end, it is considered that the value of the site is low.

4.5. The context of the immediate site setting is already characterised by the neighbouring built form associated with Toddington. The retention and reinforcement of the existing boundary planting and internal planting where appropriate will ensure that a robust green edge to the site is maintained or implemented where necessary and will effectively screen the views from its immediate setting.

4.6. A carefully considered layout alongside with an appropriate landscape strategy will ensure that the proposed development can be integrated in this location and appear as a natural addition to the existing urban grain. Views of the proposed development will be highly localised and will not give rise to significant adverse effects. The proposed development will not introduce new components that would appear alien or out of character within the context of the adjoining street scenery and built-up areas.

4.7. Therefore, it is considered that the proposed development of the site for residential development can be supported from a landscape and visual context and the site would be appropriate for taking forward.
ASPECT PLANS
APPENDIX 1
VISUAL ASSESSMENT
N.B. IMAGES TO ILLUSTRATE THE EXISTING LANDSCAPE CONTEXT ONLY. Panoramas are created from multiple photographs taken using a digital equivalent of a 35mm camera with 50mm lens in line with best practice and current guidance. Images illustrate a horizontal field of view of 65° and when printed at A3, should be viewed at a distance of 330mm curved through the same radius in order to correctly illustrate the existing landscape context. To ensure considered judgements are accurately assessed, images should not be substituted for visiting the viewpoint.
Telecommunication antenna located to the south-west of the site

Approximate location of the site beyond intervening treescape and landform

Public footpath FP23

Viewpoint 5

Viewpoint 6

N.B. IMAGES TO ILLUSTRATE THE EXISTING LANDSCAPE CONTEXT ONLY. Panoramas are created from multiple photographs taken using a digital equivalent of a 35mm camera with 50mm lens in line with best practice and current guidance. Images illustrate a horizontal field of view of 65° and when printed at A3, should be viewed at a distance of 330mm curved through the same radius in order to correctly illustrate the existing landscape context. To ensure considered judgements are accurately assessed, images should not be substituted for visiting the viewpoint.