

Appendix D

Development of Evidence for Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan: Landscape Sensitivity Assessment – Summary

Introduction

In March 2019 LUC was commissioned by Welwyn Hatfield Borough Council to prepare a Landscape Sensitivity Assessment specifically to potential built development. The outputs of this assessment provide evidence to support the development of the Welwyn Hatfield Local Plan. The Landscape Sensitivity Assessment was undertaken alongside, but discrete from, the LUC Green Belt, Green Corridor and Settlement Gap studies.

Purpose

The overall aim of this study was to undertake a robust and transparent comparative assessment of landscape sensitivity by landscape character area, to inform decision making in relation to site selection as part of the Local Plan review process.

As well as providing an overall indication of relative landscape sensitivity of different areas, the study provides some guidelines relating to key sensitivities and the potential for mitigation. This information provides useful context for more detailed assessment of specific site options.

Methodology

The approach taken in this study builds on Landscape Character Assessment Guidance for England and Scotland Topic Paper 6: Techniques and Criteria for Judging Capacity and Sensitivity (Scottish Heritage and the former Countryside Agency, 2004)

Using the Borough's Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) as a basis for defining assessment areas, this study considered the sensitivity to residential development of all land within Welwyn Hatfield other than:

- Settlements large enough to be inset from the Green Belt.
- Areas which have 'absolute' constraints that preclude such development.

As this is a borough-wide study it cannot assess the landscape on a field by field basis. It considers sensitivity of landscape character areas, or subdivisions of them, to the 'principle' of 2-3 storey residential development.

The assessment uses clearly defined criteria in order to accurately measure the landscape sensitivity of a character area. These are as follows:

Landform - This considers the shape of the landscape. Smooth, gently undulating or flat landforms are likely to be less sensitive to development than a landscape with distinct landform features, such as hills and valleys, as development may mask distinctive topographical features that contribute to landscape character.

Landscape pattern and time depth - This considers the field pattern and historic origin of the landscape area. Landscapes with more irregular field patterns, particularly those of historic origin, are likely to be more sensitive to the introduction of modern development.

'Natural' character - This considers the 'naturalistic' qualities of the landscape area in terms of the coverage of semi-natural habitats and valued natural features (e.g. trees and hedgerows) which contribute to landscape character.

Built character - This considers the built character of the landscape area with particular reference to the presence of heritage assets that contribute to landscape character.

Recreational value - This criterion considers the presence of features and facilities which enable enjoyment of the landscape, and the importance of these.

Perceptual aspects - This considers qualities such as rurality (traditional land uses with few modern, human influences), sense of remoteness or tranquillity

Settlement setting - The extent to which the landscape area contributes to the identity and distinctiveness of a settlement by way of its character and/ or scenic quality

Visual prominence - This considers the visual prominence of the landscape area, reflecting the extent of openness or enclosure in the landscape and extent to which potential development would be visible

A five-point rating from 'low' to 'high' landscape sensitivity is used to indicate the typical landscape sensitivity within each assessment parcel, with supporting justification.

Results

The evaluation for each LCA includes the following information:

- Overall summary of the location and context of the LCA;
- Outline of assessment areas;
- Presentation of descriptive information against the landscape sensitivity indicators for the overall LCA;
- A 1:25,000 scale Ordnance Survey map showing the boundaries of the assessment area with key landscape designations that represent a constraint to development and absolute constraints;
- A justification of the landscape sensitivity rating(s) applicable to the area,
- A list of guidelines and recommendations in relation to mitigation potential on the key sensitivities of the LCA;
- Representative photographs of the assessment area;
- A map of the sensitivity ratings applicable to the LCA.

Whilst the landscape sensitivity assessment results provide an initial indication of landscape sensitivity, they should not be interpreted as a definitive statement on the suitability of individual sites for a particular development or land use change. All proposals will need to be assessed on their own merits.

This information provides useful context for more detailed assessment of specific site options. The following questions provide a structure for appraising a specific site within a broader assessment area:

- Which assessment area /sub-area does the site fall within, and what is its sensitivity level?
- Are there any indications of which areas would have higher or lower sensitivity and how does the site fit with this?
- Would development on the site affect any of the 'key sensitivities'?
- Could development on the site be designed so as to avoid effects on the key sensitivities highlighted, and/or provide mitigation in line with any suggested opportunities?