



Harry Johnson

**Red House Farm, Leamington Spa, Warwickshire**

**LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL APPRAISAL**

July 2013

**FPCR Environment and Design Ltd**

Registered Office: Lockington Hall, Lockington, Derby DE74 2RH

Company No. 07128076. [T] 01509 672772 [F] 01509 674565 [E] [mail@fpcr.co.uk](mailto:mail@fpcr.co.uk) [W] [www.fpcr.co.uk](http://www.fpcr.co.uk)

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Rev	Issue Status	Prepared / Date	Approved/Date
E	-	KMS / 25.07.2013	CPR / 25.07.2013
F	Final	KMS / 26.07.2013	KMS / 26.07.2013

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report has been prepared by FPCR Environment and Design Ltd, addressing the proposed development of land at Red House Farm (the Warwick District Council development allocation), Leamington Spa. The WDC allocation is situated adjacent to the eastern urban edge of the town (Figure 1). The report comprises a summary Landscape and Visual Appraisal and recommendations for the maximum development capacity from a landscape and visual perspective, and advises that the allocation can be successfully expanded to accommodate further development and Green Infrastructure.
- 1.2 The report is accompanied by an Ecological Appraisal, an Archaeological Assessment and an Agricultural Land Quality Report.

## 2.0 LOCAL PLANNING POLICY CONTEXT

- 2.1 The current development plan for Warwick District is the Warwick Local Plan 1996-2011 (adopted September 2007). The Council's "New Local Plan" is at the 'Preferred Options' stage.

### Warwick District Council Local Plan

- 2.2 The adopted Local Plan within its Core Strategy lays out a number of Aims to define the strategy for the District. These are subdivided into Objectives, which are intended to influence and help structure the policies within the Local Plan. Aim 2 is the "Effective Protection of the Environment", under which Objectives 2B, 2C and 2D are of relevance to landscape matters:

OBJECTIVE 2B: To protect and enhance the natural environment

*"We will... protect the landscape character... and wildlife habitats and species of value and acknowledged national, regional or local importance from inappropriate new development in urban and rural locations. We will aim, wherever possible, to enhance all of these assets.*

*We will also support proposals which enhance and secure the positive long term management of natural environmental assets."*

OBJECTIVE 2D: To maintain and enhance the quality of landscapes and townscapes

*"The landscape quality of our rural areas and the character and setting of the District's towns and villages are important in giving Warwick District distinctiveness and identity. We will protect sensitive areas from new development"*

- 2.3 The following saved policies are of relevance to landscape and visual resources:

### POLICY DP1 – LAYOUT AND DESIGN

*"Development will only be permitted which positively contributes to the character and quality of its environment through good layout and design. Development proposals will be expected to demonstrate that they:*

*Relate well to local topography and landscape features, including prominent ridgelines;*

*Reflect, respect and reinforce local architectural and historical distinctiveness;*

*Enhance and incorporate important existing features into the site;*

*Integrate with existing paths, streets, circulation networks and patterns of activity;*

*Provide adequate open space for the development in terms of quantity and quality;*

*Ensure all components e.g. buildings, landscaping, access routes, parking and open spaces are well related to each other and provide a safe and attractive environment"*

#### POLICY DP3 NATURAL AND HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT AND LANDSCAPE

*"Development will only be permitted which protects important natural features and positively contributes to the character and quality of its natural and historic environment through good habitat / landscape design and management. Development proposals will be expected to demonstrate that they:*

*Protect and enhance the landscape... of the area, particularly respecting its historic character;*

*Integrate the amenity space and proposed landscaping into the overall development;*

*Secure the long term management and maintenance of habitat / landscape features"*

#### **Warwick District Council New Local Plan - Preferred Options**

- 2.4 The New Local Plan (published May 2012) sets out the Council's Preferred Options and provides the basis for consultation in the document's continuing evolution. Although this is not adopted as District policy, reference has been made where applicable to landscape and visual matters.

#### PO15: GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE

*"Development will only be permitted which protects and enhances important green infrastructure assets and positively contributes to the character and quality of its natural and historic environment through good habitat / landscape design and management.*

*Development proposals should take a positive, integrated approach to designing green infrastructure on site, particularly urban extensions"*

#### PO16: GREEN BELT

*"Our preferred option for the Green Belt is to... Alter the existing boundary in the following locations in order to accommodate development [including] East of Lillington"*

#### **Warwick District Council New Local Plan – Evidence Base**

##### Joint Green Belt Study

- 2.5 A review of the Green Belt boundaries within Coventry, Nuneaton, Bedworth, Rugby and Warwick was undertaken to assess the capacity of the Green Belt to make a significant contribution to meeting development land supply needs whilst minimising compromise of its purpose and integrity.
- 2.6 The allocation falls principally within the area defined as WL10, and partially within WL11. At Appendix 11 (Landscape Value) of the JGBS, for WL10 (assessed as medium value) it is stated:
- "The setting is greatly influenced by the post war development of Lillington – which finishes at the ridge above the valley (Landscape Character)*
- You cannot get away from the Lillington Backdrop (Visual Issues)*
- Reasonably good condition but the boundary of Lillington could be improved*
- On land that drops below the existing ridgeline, settlement could be quite visually contained... it is conceivable that the upper slopes could be developed and with sensitive design might enhance the existing situation. We recommend that this area is considered for further detailed study, but that the majority of it is retained within the Green Belt. (Conclusion)"*

- 2.7 WL10 has been identified as one of the Study's 'Least Constrained Parcels' (JGBS, Appendix 14, Figure 9.4).
- 2.8 The Visual Issues noted with WL11 (assessed as high value) state:  
*"The Ridge (Campion Hills) at the west end of the area is one of the highest parts of Leamington... Visual connections with Offchurch and the A425 corridor to Radford Semele (Description)"*
- 2.9 The expanded allocation boundary does not incorporate any land higher than that already within the Parcel E site, it does not extend westwards, nor does it encompass land within the Campion Hills.  
Considerations for Sustainable Landscape Planning, 2012
- 2.10 Warwick District Council is required to identify 'options for future Urban Expansion in Warwick District' on the premise that the majority of development land supply will need to be on greenfield due to the low level of available brownfield sites.
- 2.11 Published in November 2012, the 'CSLP' report examines five land parcels close to Warwick and Leamington Spa with the aim of providing guidance on their sensitive development, minimising or mitigating potential adverse effects. Of these, the WDC allocation is identified as parcel 'E': "Red House Farm, Lillington".
- 2.12 The 'Summary of site assessments and conclusions' at section 8.0 (at paragraph 8.6) states the following:  
*"This generally flat, Greenfield site is situated on high ground south of the Lillington residential estate and is included in the WDC SHLAA report as site L23. In spite of the topography, it is concluded that a sensitively considered development here could avoid being visually prominent and might have potential landscape benefits e.g. opportunities to make good some urban fringe problems and also to create a better transitional zone at the urban-rural interface. It is recommended that a slope at the south-east corner of the site is not developed."*

### **3.0 LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL BASELINE**

- 3.1 A preliminary assessment of the local area has been carried out, using field evaluation and analysis of maps, and examination of the character guidelines currently available. Figure 1 illustrates the local context of the landscape surrounding the WDC allocation.

#### **Baseline Landscape Character**

##### **Warwickshire Landscape Guidelines**

- 3.2 The guidelines provide, amongst other things, advice on the conservation of the County's landscapes. The landscape has been divided into Project Areas; within which a number of composite Regions are divided into Landscape Types.
- 3.3 Within the Guidelines, the landscape encompassing the south of Warwick and Leamington Spa is covered by the *Dunsmore/High Cross Plateau/Mease Lowlands* Project Area, and more specifically the *Dunsmore* Region. The WDC allocation and Leamington Spa fall on the boundary between the *Plateau Farmlands* Landscape Type and the *Plateau Fringe* Landscape Type.
- 3.4 A description of the Plateau Farmlands Landscape Types includes the following:

- Overall Character and Qualities: *A simple, often heavily wooded farmed landscape, typically confined to low plateau summits and characterised by sandy soils and remnant heathy vegetation*
  - a gently rolling topography of low glacial plateaux
  - an 'empty' landscape of former waste with few roads and little settlement
  - a regular geometric field pattern defined by closely cropped hawthorn hedges
  - many mature hedgerow oaks
  - large blocks of ancient woodland
  - a historic land use pattern reflected in the local abundance of 'heath' names
  - remnant heathy vegetation in woodlands and roadside verges
- *Management Strategy*
  - Maintain and enhance the distinctive historic character of the landscape
 

*“one of the special features of the Plateau Farmlands is the undeveloped empty character of the landscape with few roads and little settlement... Ensuring that built development is carefully controlled and well integrated into the landscape is a key element in maintaining the distinctive character”*

3.5 A description of the Plateau Fringe Landscape Type includes the following:

- Overall Character and Qualities: *A rather variable, often large scale farmed landscape with a varied undulating topography and characterised by a nucleated settlement pattern of small, often shrunken villages.”*
  - An undulating topography of low rounded hills and narrow meandering valleys
  - large arable fields, often with a poorly defined field pattern
  - pockets of permanent pasture and smaller hedged fields, usually associated with more steeply sloping ground
  - a nucleated settlement pattern typically comprising loose clusters of dwellings
  - isolated brick built farmsteads
- *Management Strategy*
  - Enhance the overall structure and key features within the farmed landscape
 

*“the pattern of large hedged fields and woods is a key visual element... The priority in such areas should be to enhance the structure and unity of the landscape by restoring and strengthening primary linear features”*

### Site Character

3.6 The site (the WDC allocation) is heavily influenced by existing development at Lillington, both in terms of its situation immediately adjacent to the built edge of Leamington, and visually by virtue of the abrupt urban-rural interface and presence of prominent multi-storey residential buildings, including Eden Court. Towards the allocation's eastern extent and away to the south, land begins to slope to the river valley corridor.

- 3.7 Land is a combination of grazing and cropped fields; as are the neighbouring fields to the south. To the east the landscape appears larger-scale due to more intense arable farming and fewer comparative hedgerows and trees.

### **Visual Baseline Summary**

- 3.8 The WDC allocation is situated on relative higher ground adjacent to the visually prominent eastern urban edge of Leamington Spa. The edge of Lillington presents an abrupt boundary between the residential area and the surrounding agricultural landscape with properties backing directly onto fields, and three large scale multi-storey residential units.
- 3.9 Views have a relatively large scale open nature to and from the east of the allocation, although the rolling landform, combined with some hedgerow boundaries, provides successive screening. The settlement edges of Lillington and/or Cubbington are generally evident within views. Visibility towards Lillington is possible from Welsh Road between Cubbington and Offchurch.
- 3.10 To the south-southeast, the extent of visibility is controlled to a greater degree by the topography, both in the local context, and to the north and west on which Leamington and the Newbold Comyn Park/Golf Course are situated. Combined with the more medium-sized fields with hedgerow trees, the plateaux and undulating slopes create a landscape with localised senses of enclosure.
- 3.11 A number of long distance (over 1 km) views are possible from the south round to the east; however, all receptors see the allocation site in the context of the existing urban edge of Leamington Spa and the prominent residential buildings on the edge of Lillington.
- 3.12 Figures 2 and 3 present some key views towards the allocation from the south, south-east and north-east at short to medium distance.

## **4.0 SUMMARY**

- 4.1 The local plan policies recognise a need for sensitive development on the settlement edge. Existing allocation site features should be retained with a robust Green Infrastructure strategy brought forward as part of proposed development schemes. The Preferred Options New Local Plan identified the need to review the Green Belt boundary in order to accommodate the necessary future expansion within Warwick District, whilst ensuring minimal impact upon the character of the landscape and environmental assets.
- 4.2 The JGBS identifies the majority of the WDC allocation as within WL10. This area is defined as of medium value and the WDC allocation as a 'least constrained parcel' and therefore a candidate to consider in the process of forthcoming proposed modifications of the Green Belt boundary. A small proportion of the west of the WDC allocation falls within WL11, assessed as being of high value. However, although adjacent to highest ground and recreational land uses (factors which appear to underpin in part the definition of parcel WL11), the area is closely related to Lillington (as WL10) rather than being part of the wider rural landscape.
- 4.3 The JGBS notes with regard to the locating of development that the upper slopes could be suitable, with the lower slopes to the valley deemed unsuitable. In addition, the landscape to the east is 'large scale and open', suggesting there is scope for some contained development on the upper slopes to the plateau in a carefully considered location and distribution.
- 4.4 The proposed allocation boundary primarily comprises land considered in the CSLP report as one of several 'most sustainable locations for future development'. According to the report, Parcel

E (WDC's development allocation boundary) does not have any constraints to development. Indeed, it is recognised that it provides the opportunity to improve and soften the urban edge and promotes green infrastructure benefits with a more sympathetic boundary to the surrounding rural landscape. Land within the south east of the WDC allocation is recommended to be excluded from built development, but it is suggested as an appropriate location for open space.

- 4.5 The northern part of the proposed allocation is on the margin of the plateau farmland around the eastern edge of Leamington. While it displays the plateau characteristic, its situation immediately adjacent to the built edge reduces its capacity to be demonstrative of this Landscape Type. In general, the local landscape falls into the Plateau Fringe, which includes both WL10 and WL11 Green Belt parcels. Described as a 'rather variable, large scale farmed landscape with an undulating topography', the landscape local to the proposed allocation displays both the large arable and smaller hedged fields on sloping ground. The characteristic pattern of settlement for the Plateau Fringe is 'loose clusters of dwellings'. This is a development form that can be considered for incorporation along the southern built edge of the proposed extended allocation.
- 4.6 It is stated within the JGBS that a visual issue noted is the constant presence of Lillington within views. To the east, the landscape appears more open and visually exposed, and as such development would need to be sensitive to these constraints. This has been noted in the CSLP with the recommendation of open space to the south-eastern end of the WDC allocation (Parcel E). In views from the south-south east however, Lillington appears above the skyline as opposed to forming part of the horizon; as such along this section of the urban edge, a carefully considered scheme and plot distribution could facilitate a softer visual transition with development that sits in the landscape and provides a defensible settlement boundary that is well vegetated and responds to field patterns.

## 5.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 The recommendations are addressed under three principal areas of consideration with regard to landscape and visual matters; these being the Green Belt designation, Landscape Character and the Visual Resources of the land comprising the proposed allocation within the local area.
- 5.2 The proposed expanded allocation incorporates additional land to the south-east of the CSLP's Parcel E, on which it is proposed that further development can be accommodated. The proposals are shown in Figure 4, indicative Masterplan (Figure 5), the Cross sections (Figure 6) and the Photomontage (Figure 7) from near Red House Farm.

### Green Belt

- 5.3 To the immediate west of the WDC allocation is the water treatment works, electricity substation and a transmissions mast. The parcel comprising these land uses is excluded from the Green Belt boundary along the edge of Leamington Spa.
- 5.4 As discussed above, it is recognised within the Warwick District New Local Plan Preferred Options document that the Green Belt boundary needs to be reviewed to accommodate future growth of the town, one of the locations for consideration being 'Parcel E' east of Lillington.
- 5.5 Proposals would not conflict with the retention of the majority of the Green Belt Study area WL10 as Green Belt, since either Parcel E or the proposed extended allocation form only a very small component of the WL10. It would also remain in compliance with the recommendation that it is *"conceivable that the upper slopes could be developed and with sensitive design might enhance*



*the existing situation*”, since the additional built development is situated on the upper slopes just off the plateau areas.

- 5.6 It would also be in compliance with recommendations in the JGBS.

#### Landscape Character

- 5.7 The *Plateau Farmlands* is typically of an “*undeveloped empty character ... with few roads and little settlement*”. Adjacent to the settlement edge, the proposed allocation, even as existing comprising undeveloped agricultural fields, does not demonstrate this due to considerable influence from the immediately adjacent urban edge of Leamington Spa.
- 5.8 With regard to the distinctive character of this Landscape Type, proposals seek to ensure that the indicative “*built development is carefully controlled and well integrated into the landscape*”. This has been achieved by responding to the varying topography, locating the additional development where higher relative ground envelopes it, and ensuring that it does not extend beyond the upper slopes from the plateau farmland. It is also proposed that this is set within areas of open space to the southern and eastern allocation site boundaries (as illustrated in Figure 4).
- 5.9 Retention of the hedgerows would maintain the field structure characteristic of the Plateau Fringe Farmlands Landscape Type, as would the promotion of a built development edge reflecting the settlement pattern comprising loose clusters of dwellings. This could be achieved through a varied south-eastern settlement edge, punctuated by hedgerows and open space (as shown), and more informal groupings of new dwellings contained within the existing field boundaries.
- 5.10 Woodland planting to the east and south of development would serve to link the Runghills, treelines along local watercourses and incidental wooded clumps, to woodland around Newbold Comyn Park and beyond. In addition, this would also screen the (existing and proposed) built development.
- 5.11 The Illustrative Sections (and montage) clearly demonstrate how effective this approach will be in containing built development.

#### Visual Resources

- 5.12 As noted in this assessment, as well as both the Green Belt Study and CSLP report, the edge of Lillington is ever-present in views in the locality.
- 5.13 Distribution of the proposed additional development as shown on the “*Illustrative Masterplan*” seeks to ensure that built development does not intrude in views from the wider countryside.
- 5.14 Proposed built areas have been located away from the highest ground to the south east of Parcel E, and are set behind robust areas of new woodland planting along the southern crest.
- 5.15 Proposed open space to the east and south would allow the Green Infrastructure of structural landscaping and woodland belts to provide a sympathetic transition from urban to rural environments, and provides an opportunity to soften the existing hard and abrupt urban edge.
- 5.16 The extent of visibility of the proposals within the landscape is therefore not considered to be any greater than that for the development solely within the bounds of Parcel E.

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## **6.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 6.1 The proposed extended allocation offers an excellent opportunity to accommodate approximately 12.4 ha of sustainable residential settlement expansion accommodating approximately 400 dwellings, comprehensively contained within a new Green Infrastructure framework of structural broadleaved woodland, wetland SUDS, and interconnecting cycleways and footpaths.
- 6.2 Working with the undulating topography of the area, and building upon the existing retained network of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and woodland, the new residential neighbourhood can be subdivided into discrete but interconnected parcels, each with accessible greenspace on their doorstep. Structural woodland planting along the higher south eastern and eastern slopes of the local landform will deliver effective filtering of views towards Lillington from the wider countryside beyond, whilst at the same time connecting The Runghills wood across to Newbold Comyn Park.
- 6.3 Combined with the planned demolition of the currently intrusive high rise developments set within Lillington, there is potential to create a much more sympathetic urban/rural interface than currently exists.