Peripheral landscape study – Langport/ Huish Episcopi

Conservation and Design Unit
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Contents –

1. Background to study 3
2. The settlement 4
3. Landscape character 5
4. Landscape sensitivity 10
5. Visual sensitivity 14
6. Values and Constraints 18
7. Landscape capacity 19
8. Proposals 21
9. Appendices 23
   (1) - capacity matrix
   (2) - historic landscape character
   (3) - photos (1-8)
10. Plans
    - 1) site context and study area
    - 2) landscape character sensitivity
    - 3) visual sensitivity
    - 4) values and constraints
    - 5) landscape capacity
1) Background to the study:

1.1. The forthcoming South Somerset Local Development Framework (LDF) will be required to allocate new development sites for both housing and employment for the period 2006-2026, with the focus of major growth placed upon Yeovil, thereafter the district’s major towns and rural centres. As part of the process of finding suitable sites for development, a landscape study to assess the capacity of the settlement fringe to accommodate new development in a landscape-sympathetic manner, is commissioned. This will complement other evidence-based work that will contribute to the LDF process.

1.2. PPS 7 commends the approach to the identification of countryside character developed by the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) and suggests that it can assist in accommodating necessary change due to development without sacrifice of local character and distinctiveness. National landscape guidelines similarly advise that visual impact can be determined as being significant when judged against the context and sensitivity of the landscape, and where there is an incompatibility of scale and character between a proposal and the attributes of the receiving landscape: Consequently this landscape study seeks to evaluate both the landscape character and visual sensitivity of each of 13 selected settlements, to enable an assessment of their capacity to absorb additional development, and an indication of potential growth areas (areas of highest capacity).

1.3. Each assessment will establish and refine a study area for each settlement in 3-stages;
   i) Using the settlement centre as fulcrum, a circle is drawn to include and contain the furthermost spread of development, to thus define an area within a radius encompassing all growth associated with that settlement. This central focus is for the purpose of seeking settlement growth in close proximity to the town’s commercial centre.
   ii) Where pertinent, a second line is drawn beyond the town boundary, at a set distance from the current edge (the distance proportional to settlement size) to allow potential for a coherent urban extension alongside the town’s current extent.
   iii) Finally, these lines are adjusted to coincide with established and credible landscape boundaries to thus establish the study area. Adjacent villages in close proximity may be included within the study, to enable their separate identity to be considered in relationship to the main settlement.

Structure of the report.

1.4. A general description of the settlement acts as a preface to a character study of both the settlement and its surround. The sensitivity of the local landscape’s character is then assessed, particularly in relationship to development form, alongside an appraisal of the visibility of each site, and its visual sensitivity. The potential of each study area’s capacity to absorb an impact of built form and associated development is then evaluated using these character and visual profiles, with constraints factored into a capacity matrix, to arrive at an indication of potential development sites.

1.5. This study considers Langport, and the adjoining parish of Huish Episcopi.
2) The settlement

2.1 Langport is a small town to the north of the district, approx 12 miles northwest of Yeovil, conjoined to the parish of Huish Episcopi, which is also considered within the scope of this report. The town originated from a defensive hilltop above the southern moors where its church now stands, to the east of the River Parrett’s passage through the Mid Somerset Hills, and lays by the intersection of major roads that link the town with Taunton, Bridgewater, and the A303. The name means ‘long market-place’, considered to be based upon the Bow Street causeway that originated in Roman times, and the town was established as a royal Saxon borough by the 10th century, whilst Huish Episcopi passed into the ownership of the bishop (of Bath and Wells). Langport prospered from its strategic location for river-based trade from Saxon times onward, which lasted until the arrival of the railway in 1853. It has seen steady growth throughout its history, which has accelerated over the last sixty years toward a joint parish population approaching 3000 inhabitants.

2.2 The settlements have merged to the north of their parish churches at the head of Langport Hill, though the main commercial area of the town is concentrated at the east end of Bow Street, immediately below the hill. Residential growth spread initially along the main arterial roads from the early 18th century, whilst the 20th century witnessed the residential infill of land between these roads, primarily spreading to the north of the original settlements in the form of large housing estates. The main employment area lays to the west of both the town and the River Parrett, on the south side of the A378 Taunton Road.

2.3 The immediate landscape setting of the settlements is defined by the open moors to both south and west, whilst the broad shoulder of the Mid Somerset Hills rise to the north of Wearne hamlet. These features broadly contain the spread of the town and its immediate rural edge. To the east the setting is less defined, with the town having a degree of roadside linkages with the small hamlets of Picts Hill, Wagg and Pibsbury. The low ridgeline of Picts Hill provides a degree of containment in this quarter.

Identification of the study area:

2.4 Based upon the methodology outlined in para 1.3, the Langport study area is broadly defined by the roads that link to run on an east-west axis above the hamlets of Combe and Wearne to the north, turning south to follow a line to the east of Picts Hill that projects along Furpits Lane, through Wagg, to Pibsbury’s west edge. The line thereafter turns west to follow Thorney Moor drain, to link with Litness and Huish droves through to Frog Lane, below Westover. The west boundary of the study area runs north from Hurds Hill, to cross the River Parrett and thereafter follow Common Moor Drove to Combe hamlet, to thus complete the definition of the area, which is indicated on figure 1 – context.
3) Landscape Character

The national context:

3.1 Landscape character assessment is an approach that aids recognition and understanding of the differences between landscapes, and states what constitutes local distinctiveness. In 1996, the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) undertook a national study of the character of England’s landscape, to enable definition and description of the range and diversity of the English landscape, and its categorisation into ‘character areas’. This study was published as a national map, with accompanying regional volumes that describe the resultant areas in detail. Volume 8: South West England, places Langport and Huish Episcopi at the junction of character area 142 – Somerset Levels and Moors, and character area 143 – Mid Somerset Hills. The key characteristics of these areas as noted by the assessment are:

- Flat, open landscape of wet pasture, arable and wetland divided up by wet ditches or ‘rhynes’.
- Absence of dispersed farmsteads or any buildings on levels and moors. Nucleated settlements on ridges/islands.
- Surrounded, and divided up, by low hills, ridges and islands which form distinctive skylines.
- Peat working and nature reserves contrasting with the rectilinear planned landscape of the Moors.
- Sparse tree cover on Levels and Moors contrasting with woodland, hedges and orchards of surrounding hills.
- Sparsely populated Moors but settlements common on hills, ridges and islands.
- Historic landscape strongly evident in features ranging from prehistoric trackways and lake villages to postmedieval enclosures and peat working.
- International nature-conservation significance for wetland, waders and waterfowl. Flooding in winter over large areas.

3.2 The full descriptive text of both the Somerset Levels and Moors, and the Mid Somerset Hills character areas is available on the Natural England website, [http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Landscape/CC/south_west/somerset_levels_and_moors_mid_somerset_hills.asp](http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Landscape/CC/south_west/somerset_levels_and_moors_mid_somerset_hills.asp) Typical of Langport and its surrounding landscape are the following extracts:

The hills are generally well-wooded, with good tree and hedgerow cover, and this softens the often frequent settlement. Small villages are commonly strung out near the junction with the wetlands from which trackways (droves) extend into the low-lying pastures.

The Moors lie within the inland basins formed by the hills. Many parts are largely treeless and are dominated by the strong rectilinear pattern of the ‘rhynes’: the sense of a planned landscape reclaimed from wetland is all pervading. However, the abiding character of the Moors is a predominantly pasture, wetland landscape of long views across a foreground of ‘rhynes’, pollards and occasional withy beds to varied, wooded hills. There are virtually no buildings.
The strong planned element in the Levels and Moors landscape is also evident in the towns
and villages. Langport, for instance, is laid out along a single street and many of the
villages are surrounded by strip fields.

The low ridges, hills and islands within the Moors have dense networks of lanes and
footpaths connecting numerous villages and hamlets: trackways lead to farms and run
down to the edge of the Levels. Although Blue Lias is quite frequently used, a variety of
other materials have been used in older buildings including oolite, sandstone and
conglomerate, whilst many 19th century buildings are in brick and pantile produced by the
local industry centred on Bridgwater or imported from Flanders.

The land is predominantly used for agriculture, with dairying being the major industry on the
Levels and Moors and a greater diversity of farming on the higher ground. On the Moors,
there are bands of willow-dominated scrub around peat workings and within nature
reserves. Clumps of trees are also present around farmsteads and decoy ponds. The land
is mainly pasture but there are some areas of arable cropping. The predominant field
pattern is rectilinear, bounded by deep, wide, wet 'rhynes'.

The local context:

3.3 A historic landscape characterisation study was undertaken by Somerset
County Council Heritage team, completed in 2001. This study differentiates
between unenclosed, anciently enclosed, and recently enclosed land, and notes
ancient woodland sites and historic parkland. The character plan for the Langport
area indicates much of the moorland to be recently enclosed land, whilst rising land
to the north and east of the town is shown to be anciently enclosed, with some
modification between the 17th and 19th centuries. The plan is included at appendix
2, and where pertinent, informs the landscape sensitivity appraisal, section 4.0.

3.4 SSDC undertook a detailed assessment of district-wide character; 'The
Landscape of South Somerset' in 1993. This study places Langport and its wider
surrounds within the ‘Fivehead and High Ham Escarpments, Valleys and Moors’
visual character region (VCR). Each VCR is sub-divided into landscape character
areas (LCAs) and the following LCAs cover the Langport study area, the number an
indication of the rich diversity of local landscape;

i) Moors and islands;
ii) River corridor;
iii) Moor fringe, and
iv) Lias clay dipslope.

3.5 The 'Moors and islands' LCA merges imperceptibly with the Parrett 'river
corridor' LCA within the south and western quadrants of the study area, and the
SSDC assessment identifies and describes these areas thus;
The Moors
This landscape is associated with the rivers Cary and Parrett and is part of the larger area known as the Somerset levels and moors. This landscape has great qualities which has inspired writers and artists:

“the strange landscape of the Somerset Levels; a vast reclaimed swamp, where the brilliant emerald green pastures are separated not by hedges or walls, but by a huge network of irrigation ditches….which, when caught by the setting sun, glistens a brilliant silver or gold; so that the whole basin……looks like a huge green fishing-net with its translucent ribs shimmering and glistening….” (Havinden 1981)

Painters such as Philip Jackson and photographers have celebrated the unique atmosphere of this area, highlighting the contrast between the vast open spaces and the detail of flower-filled meadows, willow pollards and lush sedge-fringed rhynes.

The semi-open moor (as identified in this vicinity by a 1989 MAFF report) is spacious, large scale, predominantly open and flat grassland. There is, however, a semi-enclosing feeling imparted by a pattern of shelter-belts, willows and hawthorn bushes:

• “An overall pattern and wetness created by high water tables and the extensive regular rectilinear network of wet rhynes.”

• “A spacious but patterned and punctuated openness created by grassfields with lines of pollarded willows and isolated groups and lines of planting picking out parts of the field boundaries.”

• “A naturalness due to herb-rich vegetation and grass, wet rhynes and the general lack of buildings and artefacts.”

River Corridors
The Lower Lias escarpment is breached by the river Parrett at Langport and the Cary at Somerton. There is also a narrow valley between High Ham and Pitney.

The river Parrett is a well-fed river which flows across the central plain from its source in the Dorset borderlands breaching the lower lias at Langport. Its riverside scenery is characterised by willows and grazing pasture and it forms an attractive setting to Langport. The river flows slowly and deeply in great curves out onto the moors where it is tamed by great banks, locks and sluices. Glimpses of this silvery river can be seen from the surrounding escarpments. The alluvial flood-plain stretches either side and sometimes in winter the river temporarily dominates the landscape with extensive flooding.

3.6 These areas are sub-divided to reflect the geographical location of the moors and river corridor in relation to the town, to better facilitate the subsequent sensitivity evaluation, as follows;

i) **western moors**, which describes the open moorland that lays between the River Parrett and the town’s built edge to the west of the town, and;

ii) **southern moors**, which identifies the moorland that lays beyond the River Parrett, which describes an immediate edge to the town’s southward extent.
3.7 The ‘**Moor fringe**’ LCA is identified as the area laying between the moorland and the rising ground of the Mid Somerset Hills, and within the study area covers land around the hamlet of Combe to the northwest of Langport. The LCA is described as follows;

This landscape zone lies between the moor and the steeper wooded slopes of the escarpment. The farms here benefit from the extensive grazing and lush grass of the moor as well as the drier ploughable soils of the hill footslopes. Hedges are usually species-rich and fields are sometimes long and thin emphasising the flow of the slope. These are a result of reclamation from the wooded slopes in one direction and from waterlogged marsh and swamp in the other. Ancient tracks and roads fringe the steep escarpment and link a thin ribbon of farmsteads and cottages separated by orchards and sheep-grazed paddocks. This linear roadside settlement is quite common in South Somerset.

Hedge trees are usually oak or ash, the latter often pollarded. Willows, often old pollards, are more common on the wetter land. Overall there is a great rural charm in this small-scale domestic landscape, which contrasts strongly with the vast unpopulated expanses of the moor and the enclosed secrecy of the wooded scarps.

3.8 The ‘**Lias clay dipslope**’ LCA, which covers the majority of the area including the two main settlements, is broadly described thus;

Viewed from the Blackdown Hills near Neroche Castle the scale of this immense geological feature is immediately apparent. Extending some ten miles from Curry Mallet/Fivehead to east of Somerton, the angle of the slope is emphasised by the north-south direction of the cross slope hedges and lanes.

The contrast between the character of the area and the northern moors and wooded escarpment is marked. There is less homogeneity in this landscape and the impression is of pockets of high quality ‘designed’ landscape often closely associated with the numerous settlements in the area. Midelney Place is typical. Between these high spots there are some quite mundane arable landscapes, though there are areas where traditional mixed farms or small-hedged fields remain.

Many hedges have been removed and those that remain are low, gappy and in a state of decay. Hedge trees, predominantly ash, are infrequent and suffer from die-back. Other trees are only associated with settlements. The effect of Dutch Elm disease is all too evident, having increased the likelihood of hedge removal. There are, however, some well managed and distinctive hedge patterns to be found for instance at Kingsdon Hill, south of Somerton and in the Drayton area. Here the elm is making a dramatic comeback.

The Low Ham gap is a north-south valley which is occupied by an insignificant water course but which forms a distinctive landscape feature. Beginning at Wagg Drove (Huish Episcopi), the landscape is small scale with rectilinear meadows, willow lined rhynes and orchards.

3.9 The area is here sub-divided on a topographical basis, to acknowledge the separation of Langport from the land rising toward Curry Rivel, by the course of the River Parrett, and the incision of the dip-slope by shallow valleys running south to the moors;
i) **settled low hills**, which includes the land slightly elevated above the moor edge, to encompass the parishes of Langport and Huish Episcopi;

ii) **the internal valleys** associated with the Mill Brook and Wagg rhyne, and;

iii) **Hurds Hill**, which is that area of rising ground to the west of the River Parrett that falls within the study area.

3.10 The resultant 6 local landscape character areas noted above are indicated on figure 2 – landscape sensitivity.
4) Landscape sensitivity

4.1 Landscape sensitivity can be gauged from an assessment of landscape character in respect of how intact and well expressed its character is, along with its condition and time-depth. Negative factors to influence a sensitivity assessment will include detractors to local character. As this project is reviewing the likely impact of urban development upon its rural fringe, the prospect of new build relative to its context will be the prime consideration in this sensitivity appraisal, as will the extent of remoteness from urban form. Looking at each local landscape area in turn, the outcome of this stage of the study will be to grade areas of Langport’s periphery as possessing either high, moderate or low landscape sensitivity to development. The resultant areas are indicated on figure 2 – landscape sensitivity.

4.2 The previous chapter identified four landscape character areas as falling within the study area, which where necessary are subdivided according to local variation in landscape type. Taking these sub-divisions in turn (as identified para 3.6 and 3.9) the first local character area to be considered is that of the ‘western moors’.

The western moors (character area A)

4.3 This character area lays to the west of the town and is that part of the moor associated with the River Parrett’s course toward the wider expanse of West Sedgemoor further to the west. Within the study area, the flat, expansive pastures of North Street, Langport Common and Poolmead moors lay between the river and the town, the Parrett’s sinuous line demarcated by raised grass embankments, to which lesser watercourses drain. The only disruption of the open moor is the raised embankment and brick-arched viaduct carrying the main London-Plymouth rail line, which bisects the moorland on an east-west trajectory. To the south of the rail line, the moor is composed of open pasture which sweeps up to the town’s historic burgage plots, their edge defined by a shallow drainage channel only. Whilst separated from the wider moorland by the rail embankment to the north, and Bow Street’s housing to the southeast, Northstreet moor remains typical of the open moorland character in its low elevation, pasture cover, and presence of drainage rhynes, supplemented by an imperceptible ‘ridge and furrow’ ground profile that assists drainage, yet also allows water to lay in long shallow fingers during winter months. This is an historic landscape, little changed and typical of the open moor. It is thus graded ‘high’ sensitivity, other than individual pockets of land by Westover (to the west of the Parrett) where development has eroded the moorland pattern and these areas are graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity.

4.4 To the north of the rail embankment, the general moorland widens as it spreads west, with the rising ground of the Mid Somerset Hills to north and east defining its limit. Poolmead rhyne drains much of this area, to the east of which the open pastures are divided into long narrow strips, defined primarily by rhynes, some of which are demarcated by pollard willows, also occasional and partial unkempt hawthorn hedge lines, interspersed with pockets of outgrown osier beds. A strong presence of juncus (reed) denotes that much of this land is poorly drained. This is ‘classic’ open moor landscape, its pattern typical of wetland enclosure and its
condition little changed since initial drainage work to reclaim the pastures. It is thus graded ‘high’ sensitivity.

The Southern Moors (Character Area B)

4.5 Below Langport, the open moorland sweeps up to the town’s southern edge, with the course of the River Parrett in closest proximity to the town to the south of Bow Street and The Hill, whose raised level forms a visual stop to the moor’s northward extent. The winding course of the river juxtaposes with rectilinear patterns of rhynes, whose arrangement often disappears under water during winter months, leaving lines of pollard willows and osier beds as the only features visible in the wetland landscape, along with the double lines of hedgerows denoting access droves. The River Yeo flows into the Parrett below ‘The Hill’ and to the south of the Yeo, the moorland becomes more open, the pastures large scale. This contrasts with the small pasture plots which are typical of the landscape at the southern edge of Huish Episcopi, defined by both rhynes and trimmed hedges, broken intermittently by the cumulus clouds of mature willow canopies. Housing groups dovetail into this pattern to the east of the parish church, whilst northeast of Bicknell’s bridge, the abattoir is a substantial built element at the moor’s edge. Given both the atypical intrusion of the housing pattern, the detractor of the abattoir’s scale and the ragged condition of a number of the field hedgerows, yet acknowledging that much of the field pattern and the typical moorland components remains intact, the area between the abattoir and the A372 is graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity. The remainder of the moor land, as with the Western Moors, is typical of the wider ‘Levels and Moors’ landscape character and is thus graded ‘high sensitivity’.

The Moor Fringe (Character Area C)

4.6 Within the study area, this area identifies land around Combe hamlet, which is separated from Langport by the sweep of Poolmead’s open pastures. The area is characterised by a series of narrow rectilinear pastures which fall across the contour toward the moor, defined by bushy hedgerows on rising ground, whose cover becomes sporadic at the moor’s fringe, where the pattern is reinforced by drainage rhynes. Scattered farmsteads and small orchards contribute to the diversity of the area, and with the historic enclosure pattern little changed, the character relatively intact, and the strong degree of detachment from Langport placing it in a clear rural context, this area is graded ‘high’ sensitivity.

Settled Low Hills (Character Area D)

4.7 It is within this character area that the greater part of Langport and Huish Episcopi resides. The historic cores of the settlements are defined and contained by the low ground of the open moorland to both south and west, which provides the main its setting to the town. Thus the settlements have grown and conjoined to the north, on land that lays above the general level of the moors, and is thus secure from seasonal flooding. With the settlement well-contained to west and south by the moorland, it is only to the north and east that the town lays adjacent to peripheral land that may have a potential for development, namely:
a) To the north and east of Newtown/Old Kelways, and;
b) In the vicinity of Ham Down and Picts Hill.

4.8 The town’s current north edge extends east from housing alongside the Bridgwater Road to include land allocated for housing by Newtown, and the former Kelways nursery site that now (March 2008) has a residential consent. Further to the east, the Somerton Road defines the current built edge to the point of the Mill brook crossing, whose south flowing valley demarcates the east edge of the Brooklands residential estate. The area to the north of the Somerton Road, contained by the Mill brook valley, is primarily a single arable field. Alongside the surrounding pastures, it appears large scale and open, its scale the consequence of twentieth century field boundary removal. This scale, however, contrasts strongly with the intricate patterns of housing blocks to the south and southwest, and in most part lays within a rural context which thus informs a pervasive rural character. It is thus graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity, as are those fields alongside the immediate edge of both Kelways and Newtown, due to the close proximity of urban form to two sides and a degree of degradation to former plant nursery land. Further north, the small rectilinear fields both below and above Wearne hamlet are a mix of arable and pasture, defined by native hedgerows and supplemented by small orchards which are interspersed amongst the small farmsteads and scattered housing which contribute to Wearne’s linear settlement form. Woodland belts further contribute to the landscape mosaic of this area, which is relatively intact and in fair condition and is thus graded ‘high’ sensitivity. Finally, to the east of Bridgwater Road and opposite Newtown, two pasture fields lay over rising ground between the moor and town. Their pattern is intact, expressed by robust hedgerows, inclusive of specimen trees, and they are well buffered from the town by both the road and hedgerow system. They are thus graded ‘high’ sensitivity.

4.9 Land in the vicinity of Ham Down and Picts Hill is separated from the town by the Mill brook valley, which is evaluated to be a distinct and thus separate character area (E). Whilst this separation is breached to partial degree by development around Kelways nursery to the north and the housing block of Portland Road by Huish village to the south, the area of land associated with this character area laying to the east of the internal valleys (Area E) is considered detached from Langport’s built extent and for most part rural in both expression and context. The field pattern is primarily rectilinear and mid-scale, defined by cropped hedgerows, with the occasional specimen tree adding height to the field boundaries. Tree groups are in greater evidence by building nuclei, as by the former site of Hamdown House and the housing cluster by Picts Hill. This is a landscape of little incident, and the SSDC local character study notes that the wider area includes some ‘quite mundane arable landscapes’

It is noted that a high degree of hedge removal has taken place within the study area, particularly around Larks Rise Farm (to the north of Picts Hill) and to a lesser degree over Ham Down. Non-native plantings have also been introduced, hence these areas are graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity. Exceptions are the group of rectilinear pastures to the south of Union Drove where the hedgerow pattern remains robust and intact, and it is similarly so for the fields to the west of One Elm, both consequently being graded ‘high’ sensitivity. Finally, within the settlement envelope, 2 individual sites to either side of Garden City are graded ‘low’ sensitivity, due to their emphatic urban surround, whilst the
meadow by Huish Episcopi Church, is graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity, for whilst built around, it forms part of the church’s setting.

**The Internal Valleys (Character Area E)**

4.10 This character area combines the valleys associated with the Mill brook and Wagg rhyne, both of which drain north-south to the River Yeo, and incise a course through the low lying hills to the east of the settlement. The Mill brook valley is particularly narrow, comprising small fields that are restricted in width, and lined by rows of pollard willows and unkempt hedgerows which endow a strong sense of enclosure. The valley is broken by the east-west alignment of the railway and built form is a dominant element to its west side. Consequently it is graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity, which acknowledges that the landscape pattern of the valley is both intact and its components typical, yet notes the poor condition of a number of these features and the pervading urban character.

Whilst narrow, the valley associated with Wagg rhyne is less enclosed than Mill brook valley and characterised by small pastures, lines of pollards and the occasional orchard block. At its southern end, the valley is enclosed on 3 sides by housing and this degree of built dominance informs a ‘low’ sensitivity grading, whereas the fields above Wagg and those areas where the landscape components are intact and characteristically expressed, are graded ‘high’ sensitivity. A single field below Wagg, where built form is not so strongly expressed, and the pasture is bounded by pollards and linked with rural land, is accordingly graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity.

**Hurds Hill (Character Area F)**

4.11 This small area to the west of the River Parrett contains the rising ground above Westover and marks the eastern most extent of the Fivehead/Curry Rivel dip-slope. Whilst Westover has hosted a small building cluster at the west side of the Parrett’s bridge crossing since medieval times, a position now reinforced by the buildings of the Langport trading estate, the rising land towards Hurds Hill has no urban linkage and sits within a wider rural context. The grounds of Hurds Hill House are particularly sylvan and provide an appropriate setting to the listed house, as do the pastures to the south of the house and are thus graded ‘high’ sensitivity. The remainder of the land, whilst possessing a landscape pattern that is relatively intact and well expressed by robust hedge lines and specimen tree groups, is interspersed by small pockets of development that disrupts the rural pattern, thus the remainder of this character area is graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity.
5) Visual sensitivity

5.1 This section identifies the location and extent of the visual envelope that contains Langport, and the nature of those landscape elements that visually buffer the town from an external perception. It then reviews first the intervening land between the town’s edge and its immediate envelope; and second the land outside this envelope; to assess its visual relationship with Langport /Huish and prime sensitive receptors, along with identifying valued views and vantage points, and visual detractors. From this a measure of visual sensitivity to development will be graded low, moderate or high. The resultant sensitivity areas are indicated on figure 3 – visual sensitivity.

Visual envelope and containment

5.2 Langport and Huish Episcopi are settled at the edge of the Levels and Moors over a raised table of land that is no more than 5-15 metres above the general level of the moors, yet sufficiently elevated to be visible across the flat, open moorland to the south and west of the town. It is from vantage points within these quadrants that the town has its widest visual profile, whilst to north and east, perception of the town’s built presence is limited to local vantage points.

5.3 The town’s visual envelope can most clearly be defined to its north side, less than 1 km distant, where the southern edge of Aller and Bowden Hill rise to over 50 metres above the general level of the town, to obscure all views towards the settlement from High Ham and its associated hamlets. The scarp head is broken at the point where the Mill Brook incises its southerly course, but then continues south parallel with the brook’s course, from Culver Hill through Picts Hill to Ham Down, and this shoulder of elevated land visually contains the town and obscures views towards it from the direction of Pitney and the Somerton road approach.

5.4 The main railway line cuts through the southern end of Ham Down where the prime visual envelope of the elevated land to the north is now sufficiently reduced to enable long views towards the town from distant rights of way above Long Sutton. These views are limited and partially obscured by an intervening mix of woodland, hedgerows, and the heads of folding ground, to ensure a limited public perception of the town from this quarter. However, to the south of Long Sutton, the flat, low, open level of the moors enables clear inter-visibility between Langport and public vantage points within the parishes of Long Load, Martock and Kingsbury to the south, as well as the footpaths which follow the courses of the rivers Parrett and Yeo. From this southern quadrant, the settlement is characterised by the two church towers and associated housing over the southern face of the raised ground on which the churches stand. Their towers are the prime focal point in all instances, and signal the town’s presence, but it should be noted that the greater part of the town is ‘hidden’ by this southern edge, and its spread across the moor’s neck by Bow Street is not apparent until within 1 km of the town, where tree and shrub presence along the rhynes is not sufficiently dense to obscure low trajectory views.

5.5 To the southwest, the gently rolling folds of the Fivehead dip-slope, combined with estate woodlands to the north of Drayton obscure most views toward the town in this quadrant and the land rises towards Wick to restrict wider views.
toward the town to the west. It is to the north of the rail line that the moor opens out again to allow long views toward the town, but in this northwest quadrant the rail embankment obscures most low trajectory views toward the town, other than the church tower and tall specimen trees of Langport’s ‘Hill’ which stand above the embankment level. The housing alongside the raised level of the Bridgwater Road by Newtown is a further indicator of urban presence, and these visual elements are glimpsed from as far afield as Burrow Mump and Stoke St Gregory. As with views to the south, much of the town is hidden from view behind its outer raised edge.

5.6 The town’s wider visual envelope (which defines its ZVI – zone of visual influence) can thus be drawn well beyond the study area to include Long Load, Martock and Kingsbury parishes to the southeast and Stoke St Gregory and Stathe to the northwest, from which the focal point of church towers and ground rising above the moor crowned with an element of building form are the prime visual characteristics. Most of the town is hidden behind these outer raised edges, thus emphasising their importance in the visual containment of the greater part of the town. However, the north and northeast quadrant aside, it is also noted that a combination of topography and woody landscape features, provide secondary containment and a level of diffuse screening in closer proximity to the town, particularly to the west of Hurds Hill, and east of Ducks Hill, to thus assist in definition of the town’s immediate setting.

Visual Profile of Langport’s immediate edge

5.7 The moorland to the west and south of Langport forms an emphatic edge to the town, and its open pasture is in clear contrast to the intricate pattern of development, and demonstrates a strong, rural character. Hence for the purposes of this section of the assessment, the moors are not included within a definition of the town’s immediate edge, other than the small area of Northstreet Moor above Bow Street, which is contained adjacent the town by the rail embankment. The main open areas adjacent to the town’s edge are thus defined as:

i) Land between Bowdens Lane (above Wearne) and Newtown;
ii) Fields to the north of Somerton road;
iii) Between Mill Brook valley and Union Drove;
iv) Fields to either side of Wagg Rhyne;
v) Land between the A372 and the River Yeo;
vi) Land by Westover, and;
vii) Northstreet Moor and land to its west.

Area (i)

5.8 Wearne hamlet lays circa 300-400 metres to the north of Langport’s current edge, on land that is raised above the general level of the town, yet below the hillsides that rise steeply to Bowdens Lane. This latter area is an extension of the steep escarpment that runs east from Aller to Combe. As part of this prominent landmark, with its clear rural expression, and visibility from local vantage points, it is graded ‘high’ sensitivity. The intervening land between Wearne and the town has a lesser visual profile, but provides separation, as seen from elevated public rights of way above Wearne (photos 6 and 7) and is expressed as a coherent block of
agricultural land extending to established boundaries by the town’s edge. This area is thus graded ‘medium’ sensitivity, other than by Newtown/Kelways’ immediate edge, where land is partially obscured from local view, seen against a built backdrop, and has its boundaries partially domesticated by both adjacent housing and previous nursery use, and is thus graded ‘low’ sensitivity. Finally, to the west of the Bridgwater road, the hillside falls to the moor. As one of the rising edges that defines the town’s rural edge and masks its extent, and with a high degree of visibility (photo 4) this area is graded ‘high’ sensitivity.

Area (ii)

5.9 The fields to the north of the Somerton road, inclusive of the Mill Brook valley, form an extension of that same tract of open land between Wearne and the town’s north edge, with a similar visual profile (photo 7) and is graded ‘medium’ sensitivity accordingly. Above (to the east of) the valley, the land rises sharply towards Picts and Culver Hills, whose open head forms part of the town’s prime visual envelope. As this raised shoulder ground contributes to the town’s rural setting; acts as both backdrop in, and buffer to, views toward the town; and expresses a rural character, it is graded ‘high’ sensitivity.

Area (iii)

5.10 To the south of the Somerton road, the Mill Brook valley is both strongly enclosed; perceptible to only immediate view; and runs alongside the domestic form of the Brooklands housing estate, and is consequently graded ‘low’ sensitivity. Conversely, the broad shoulder of land along the head of which runs Union Drove, is a southward extension of the Picts Hill visual envelope. As this shoulder of land fulfils a similar containing role, it is graded ‘high’ sensitivity. The fields that lay between the valley and the ridge, face toward Langport. They express an agricultural land-use, and separated from the town by the Mill Brook, are viewed as a rural backdrop to the town as they rise toward Ham Down. With only a local visual profile, they are graded ‘medium’ sensitivity.

Area (iv)

5.11 Wagg rhyne lays in a shallow valley that is contained from wider view and, where abutted by domestic form, is graded ‘low’ sensitivity. To either side of the valley, low hillsides connect to land of rural character and with the rising ground combined with open land to the south enabling a fair degree of local inter-visibility, the remaining land is graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity.

Area (v)

5.12 to the south of the A372 and to the east of the abattoir, there is a degree of openness that on the one hand allows views of the settlement edge between Huish Episcopi church and Wagg Rhyne, yet also enables the vast space of the moor to sweep up to the settlement edge, the scale of which is minimal when set beside the expanse of the moor. As this area is at low elevation and thus has only a local visual profile, it is graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity, other than those areas where open land is either bounded by domestic form far much of its perimeter – as to the east of
Courtfield – or lays in the ‘shadow’ of the abattoir site, to thus have a minimal visual profile, to consequently be graded ‘low’ sensitivity.

**Area (vi)**

5.13 To the west of the River Parrett, the land rises steeply towards Hurds Hill. The hill’s prominence is given emphasis by its wooded crown, and as a local landmark that both acts as a buffer to views toward the town, and contains its westward extent, it is graded ‘high’ sensitivity. Land to the sides of Hurds Hill is primarily rural in character, though interspersed with small pockets of development that are detached from the town. As their visual profile is locally contained, their sensitivity is graded as moderate. Finally, two pockets of land both north and south of Langport’s main employment area at Westover are perceptible only to immediate view and have a strong relationship with employment form on adjacent plots. They are thus graded ‘low’ sensitivity.

**Area (vii)**

5.14 It has been noted that Northstreet Moor shares a similar physical character to that of the moorlands to both the south of the town, and to its west where laying north of the main rail-line’s embankment. It is this raised bank that brings a level of containment to the moor, thus reducing its visual profile whilst confirming a prime relationship with the town (photo 3). It is thus graded ‘medium’ sensitivity throughout, as is land to the west of the river that shares the same visual context. A minor exception is land to the west of the sewage works, which in facing away from the town, expresses a strong rural character, sufficiently free from urban influence to be graded ‘high’ sensitivity.

**Visual Profile Of Land Beyond Langport’s Immediate Visual Envelope**

5.15 The moors to south and west of the town define its setting and are altogether of a larger scale and contrasting character. Expressing an emphatic rural character and clear to view from all areas of elevated ground at the moor’s fringe, the moorland is graded ‘high’ sensitivity. An exception is a small area of semi-open moor that lays to the north of the river, immediately below Langport’s Hill. This area has a local visual profile only, which is barely perceptible at the town’s edge due to the intervening lines of woody vegetation that obscures long views into the site. The area is thus graded ‘moderate’ sensitivity, falling to ‘low’ where its visual profile is at its minimum (i.e. by the foot of the hill). Finally, the outer face of Ham Down lays outside the town’s visual envelope and clearly ties with adjacent countryside as expressed by rural landscape features. Whilst a small housing cluster is sited at its head, it is sufficiently divorced from Langport’s built form, and of insufficient scale to be regarded as non-urban in character. Hence in the context of the wider hillside, and noting its prominence relative to local approach roads from the east, and its contribution to Langport’s visual containment, this general hillside area is graded ‘high’ sensitivity.
6) Value and Constraints

6.1 The study to date has already noted a number of landscape and historic features of interest, and their intrinsic value will have already been weighted in the report. However, areas of wildlife value (and their margins) plus sites with specific cultural association or high recreational and amenity value are also considered, similarly the topographical constraints of floodplain and slope, as factors that may limit potential - and thus a capacity - for development. These elements are indicated on figure 4; values and constraints.

6.2 The South Somerset Moors are highly valued for their wildlife interest, and there are numerous designated wildlife sites in close proximity to Langport. Prime amongst them are the extensive areas of Hay Moor and Muchelney Level to the south of the town, which are wet grassland areas designated as county wildlife sites (CWS) for their importance to over-wintering birds. To the west of the town, North Street and Langport Moors are both CWS areas of semi-improved grassland, crossed by a network of species-rich rhynes.

6.3 Alongside the River Parrett to the south of Bow Street, Cocklemoor is an open grass area managed for access and amenity for the town’s enjoyment. The Parrett Trail runs along the riverbank to north and south of the town, and links with the town by Cocklemoor to the south, prior to crossing North Moor to rejoin the river’s edge. The trail links with a number of footpaths and droves to provide circular walks between town and moor that appear intensively walked.

6.4 The Rivers Parrett and Yeo and their tributaries have extensive associated areas that are seasonally prone to flooding (identified as flood zone 3 by the EA) in the immediate proximity of the town, and throughout the length of the main river. With parts of these areas often under water during the winter months, it is recognised that floodplain is regarded as an undesirable area for development, and without associated attenuation and balancing features being built into any development, its form, extent and type will be constrained by flood risk.

6.5 Part of Langport’s southern edge is built over rising ground, and in areas of marked slope, an adverse visual impact of building mass can occur. It is also accepted that building over steep slopes is contrary to sustainability objectives, for the increased energy and resources expended in detailed cut and fill works; additional import and use of construction materials; and the difficulty of achieving appropriate urban densities, are all negative factors. Visually, building mass over rising ground is difficult to mitigate, and can be an adverse and dominant element in the townscape. Hence slopes in excess of 15° are indicated as placing a constraint on development form, and will be factored into the capacity equation.
7) Landscape Capacity of Urban Periphery

7.1 In sections 4 and 5 of this report, both landscape character and visual sensitivities have been assessed, graded and mapped (figures 2 and 3). A landscape’s capacity to accommodate built development will be the direct converse of the overall sensitivity judgement (a matrix representation of both character and visual sensitivities, see appendix 1) unless specific landscape values or development constraints are significant enough to reduce capacity one grade lower. The capacity plan for Langport resulting from application of the matrix is indicated on figure 5 – landscape capacity.

7.2 The resultant plan indicates the study area divided into 5 broad categorisations of landscape capacity to accommodate built development, graded high; moderate-high; medium; moderate-low; and low, coloured red; orange; yellow; green and blue respectively. As the aim of this study is to identify land that has the capacity to be developed without too adverse an impact upon the landscape resource, it follows that those areas categorised as high and moderate-high capacity, and in a credible relationship with the town, should be investigated as potential development sites.

7.3 It is immediately apparent from the landscape capacity plan that flood risk limits scope for development to the south and west of the town. Consequently, potential areas for development are indicated away from the moor’s edge in the following locations:

   i) Between the rail line and cricket pitch;
   ii) Between Garden City and Brooklands; and
   iii) To the north of Old Kelways.

Three further individual plots laying between the A372 and Tanyard Lane indicate a moderate-high capacity for development, but lay within the flood plain and thus are noted, but not considered further here.

Areas (i) and (ii)

7.4 These sites lay within the settlement, to the west of the A372 on its alignment between Huish Episcopi Church and Old Kelways. Area (i) is a single field to the immediate north of the cricket pitch, bound by housing to west and north, whilst the High School’s grounds lay to the east, on the opposite side of the road. Area (ii) is similarly bound by housing, though faced by Old Kelways to the north. A double line of beech hedging runs across this field, aligned on Kelway’s front, and is the only landscape feature of note. Given the context, residential development would appear to be the appropriate growth option.

Area (iii)

7.5 To the north of Old Kelways, the southern portion of 3 adjacent fields, plus a series of grass plots to the rear of Bridgwater Road, are indicated as having some capacity for development. The aggregated area is not substantial, and with residential areas laying to north and west, further growth for housing would appear
to be the appropriate option for development. Some consolidation of the area’s northern boundary would be required, to provide a distinct edge, and containment of the town’s northward extent relative to Wearne, and to ensure contained separation of the settlements.

7.6 Should planning need determine that additional land is required to provide strategic development at Langport, then the capacity plan indicates few options: No further sites indicated as high or moderate-high capacity are indicated, and of those areas indicated as having a ‘moderate’ capacity, and of sufficient area to accommodate strategic growth, only one area to the north of the Somerton Road, east of Old Kelways, has ready road frontage. This large single field is not advocated from a landscape standpoint but is noted for consideration in the following chapter (area iv) should the town be required to accommodate a higher level of growth than that the areas indicated by the capacity study are able to provide.
8) Outline Proposals

8.1 Three potential areas of development have been identified by the landscape capacity plan, and their potential uses outlined in the previous section, paras 7.4 - 7.5. This final section of the report provides further guidance on the form of development acceptable in landscape terms, any necessary mitigation, and an indication of the potential extent of development.

Areas with clear potential for development

8.2 Sites (i) and (ii) lay within Langport’s built area, and thus offer the potential for sustainable development in close proximity to the town’s core. The site areas amount to 0.60ha and 2.40ha respectively, and as the sites abut existing residential areas, and lay over ground that offers few constraints to development, then it is anticipated that housing densities rising to 50 dwellings per hectare (dph) can be achieved, with an allowance of 0.4ha open space in area ii.

8.3 To the north of Old Kelways, a further 3.50ha residential land is feasible. As this land lays at the northern edge of town, and grades into the open land between Langport and Wearne, medium densities (up to 40dph) would be appropriate, to better juxtapose with the surrounding urban:rural interface. A site of this scale would deliver open space in the region of 0.6ha, part of which could assist accommodation of the best examples of the many small hedgerows that currently sub-divide the area.

8.4 In summary, the following areas are proposed as having potential for development;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Land Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(i) South of Garden City</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>0.6ha (&gt;50dph)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii) South of Old Kelways</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>1.9ha (&gt;50dph)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.5ha open space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(iii) North of Old Kelways</td>
<td>Residential</td>
<td>2.8ha (40dph)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.7ha open space</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.5 In total this equates to 5.3ha of land capable of delivering 237 houses, with associated open space. However, no land is indicated as being suitable for employment (scope for growth by Westover being severely limited by flood risk and landscape sensitivity considerations) neither do the above development options appear to lend themselves to strategic recreational provision. Should Langport be required to accommodate growth of a larger scale than that amount provided by the areas noted in para 8.4 above, then it is expedient to consider the potential of land to the east of Old Kelways and north of the Somerton road (area iv).

Options for further development

8.6 This site (area iv) is a single field circa 9.5ha, whose northward extent lays close to Wearne hamlet. Such proximity is viewed with concern, due to the degree of detachment of this land from the town, and because it lacks definitive landscape containment relative to the town. Commensurate landscape provision to mitigate the adverse landscape impact of a substantial development footprint in this rural location would be essential, and would need to maintain an area of open space.
between urban built form, and Wearne’s rural setting. However, should the provision of a robust landscape edge to built development, plus a strategic allocation of amenity open space and open-field recreational facilities to serve not only this site but areas I-iii, be sited to ensure the continued separation of Langport from Wearne, then a mixed residential:employment allocation circa 5.5ha is deemed feasible, with densities ranging from 35>50dph in response to contextual sensitivities, which would also inform a constraint on employment building scale.

8.7 Should there be a requirement for this extra land, then its capacity to provide strategic recreational provision would also enable a degree of reduction in the open space need within areas (ii) and (iii). The following quantities note revised areas with the inclusion of area (iv) into the potential development area;

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Residential Type</th>
<th>Area</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South of Garden City</td>
<td>0.6ha residential (&gt;50dph)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South of Old Kelways</td>
<td>2.2ha residential (&gt;50dph)</td>
<td>0.2ha open space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North of Old Kelways</td>
<td>3.2ha residential (40dph)</td>
<td>0.3ha open space</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East of Old Kelways</td>
<td>5.5ha employment/residential (35-50dph)</td>
<td>4.0ha recreation/open space + structural landscape provision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8.8 In summary, the above areas offer the following options;

(i) 6.0ha min residential with the potential to rise to 11.5ha without attendant employment land. The areas equate to a minimum of 268 houses, rising to 488 maximum, net densities.

(ii) Up to 5.5ha employment land, and;

(iii) A 4.0ha strategic recreational/open space allocation

8.9 This capacity study indicates that Langport/Huish Episcopi has limited scope for landscape – sympathetic growth, hence the above sites maximise the scope of potential development areas, by inclusion of some land graded as ‘moderate’ capacity, to enable a range of development options to be considered. All sites lay to the north of the town, within the wider setting of the conjoined settlements, and thus avoids land of high landscape sensitivity. Hence a potential for development can be planned to avoid an adverse impact upon both the town’s immediate setting, and its wider landscape context, consistent with the objectives of this study.

Robert Archer
10 April 2008
Peripheral landscape study – Langport

Appendix 1  -  landscape capacity matrix
Landscape Capacity Matrix:

A landscape’s capacity to accommodate built development will be the direct converse of the overall sensitivity judgement (a matrix representation of both character and visual sensitivities) unless specific landscape values or development constraints are significant enough to reduce capacity one grade lower.

Landscape Character Sensitivity to Built Development

+ Visual Sensitivity to Built Development

= Overall Sensitivity to Built Environment

+ Constraints and Values

= Capacity to Accommodate Built Development

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Landscape Character Sensitivity</th>
<th>Visual Sensitivity</th>
<th>Overall Sensitivity</th>
<th>Capacity to Accommodate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low Capacity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>Moderate Low</td>
<td>Moderate Capacity</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low Capacity</td>
<td>Moderate Low</td>
<td>Moderate Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High Capacity</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Peripheral landscape study – Langport and Huish Episcopi

Appendix 2 - historic landscape character
key:

Unenclosed pasture

Anciently Enclosed Land pre-17th century. General field size, 6-12ha. Between 25% and 50% boundary loss since 1905.

Anciently Enclosed Land modified 17th to 19th century. General field size, 6-12ha. Less than 25% boundary loss since 1905.

Anciently Enclosed Land modified 19th to 21st century. General field size, 6-12ha. More than 50% boundary loss since 1905.

Recently Enclosed Land 17th to 18th century. General field size 6-12ha. Between 25% and 50% boundary loss since 1905.

Recently Enclosed Land 18th to 21st century. General field size, 3-6ha. Less than 25% boundary loss since 1905.

Replanted ancient woodland (as defined by English Nature).

Historic Parkland
Peripheral landscape study – Langport

Appendix 3 - photos
Photo 1: From Tanyard Lane, looking north toward Huish Episcopi church. Housing groups indent the field pattern between the village and the moor.

Photo 2: Looking across the southern moor’s edge from Huish Drove, toward Langport Hill, denoted by the church and housing profile along the skyline.
Photo 3: From the side of the River Parrett, looking southeast across the wide expanse of Northstreet moor, toward the edge of Langport,

Photo 4: Looking northeast across Common Moor toward Wearne hamlet, from the point of the rail crossing of the River Parrett.
Photo 5: From above Combe, looking southeast across Poolmead toward Langport, which is denoted by the tree and building cluster around the church.

Photo 6: Looking toward the north edge of Langport by Swallowhill, from the west end of Bowdens Lane.
Photo 7: From Bowdens Lane to the east of Edwards Wood, looking south over Wearne hamlet toward Langport, by Old Kelways.

Photo 8: Looking toward Huish Episcopi from Union Drove, immediately below the rail crossing.
Peripheral landscape study – Langport

Appendix 4 - plans
Figure 1 - Context

Langport

Study Area

scale 1:10,000 @ A3
Figure 2 - Landscape Sensitivity
Langport

Local Landscape Character Areas
A - Western Moors
B - Southern Moors
C - Moor fringe
D - Settled low hills
E - Internal valleys
F - Hurd's Hill

Area of low landscape sensitivity
Area of moderate landscape sensitivity
Area of high landscape sensitivity

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Figure 3 - Visual Sensitivity

Langport

- Prime line of Visual Containment
- Secondary line of Visual Containment
- Photo Vantage Points
- Long distance views across the moors

- Area of high visual sensitivity
- Area of moderate visual sensitivity
- Area of low visual sensitivity

Local Plan built allocation

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scale 1:10,000 @ A3
Figure 4 - Value & Constraints
Langport

- Langport Development Area
- International Wildlife Sites
- National Wildlife Sites
- Local Wildlife Sites
- Conservation Area
- Development Allocation
- Flood Zone
- Areas of 15° + gradient
- Recreational Routes and Areas

(The above categories as defined in the South Somerset Local Plan)

Scale: 1:10,000 @ A3
Figure 5 - Landscape Capacity Langport

Landscape with a high capacity to accommodate built development

Landscape with a moderate-high capacity to accommodate built development

Landscape with a moderate capacity to accommodate built development

Landscape with a moderate-low capacity to accommodate built development

Landscape with a low capacity to accommodate built development

Potential development areas, report sections 7 - 8

scale 1:10,000 @ A3