

Land north of Ansford Hill, Castle Cary: Summary of review of landscape and visual impact assessment

- 1 LDA Design has reviewed the LVIA produced by Redbay Design Landscape Consultants in support of the planning application for up to 200 dwellings on farmland to the north of Ansford Hill, Castle Cary. We were not commissioned to undertake a comprehensive, independent LVIA of our own but have based our advice on our professional judgement and extensive experience in LVIA and a thorough review of the application documentation, policy background, landscape context and site visits. The key findings of our review are summarised as follows.
- 2 LVIA scope and methodology:
 - The LVIA scope and methodology broadly follow the process set out in best practice guidance for a non-EIA development. However, the methodology lacks clarity in some areas which makes it hard to follow the rationale behind some judgements.
 - We also note some concerns about how the methodology has been applied in practice, particularly in respect of how landscape and visual receptors are defined and their sensitivity to change evaluated.
 - These factors may explain some differences in judgements between ourselves and the applicant's LVIA.
- 3 Effects on site landscape character:
 - the LVIA concludes that the nature of the site will change permanently and irrevocably from rural farmland to urban development, resulting in a major adverse effect. However, as a result of the proposed landscape mitigation, these will decrease over time to moderate-major adverse effects.
 - We consider that no amount of new landscape planting can alter the fundamental change in the character of the site landscape from the current 'baseline' of rural farmland to urban development. We therefore consider that the effects on the character of the site landscape will remain as **permanent, major adverse** (i.e. 'significant' effect in EIA terms).
 - The site is not covered by any formal landscape designation but forms an integral part of the topographic and landscape unit of the clay vale, which is a 'locally' valued landscape.
- 4 Effects on character of surrounding landscape:
 - The LVIA concludes that developing this site will have some indirect urbanising effects on the character of the surrounding local landscape within the clay vale to the north (the Brue Valley). It judges these to be permanent, moderate adverse effects.
 - We agree that the effects on surrounding landscape character will not be widespread. However, we judge the effects to be slightly higher than the LVIA, i.e. **permanent, moderate-major adverse** effects (i.e. 'significant' effect) over this localised area, because we consider that this essentially undeveloped rural landscape has a high susceptibility and sensitivity to change.
 - The clay vale is not covered by any formal landscape designation but the LVIA supports an evaluation of 'local' landscape value (i.e. more valued than 'everyday' landscape appreciated only by the local community).
- 5 Effects on the landscape setting of Castle Cary/Ansford:
 - The LVIA assesses the effects on the settlement of Castle Cary/Ansford as moderate adverse but the nature of this 'landscape receptor' and the basis of this judgement is not clearly explained.

- We conclude that the extension of built development beyond the ridgeline of Ansford Hill would alter the historical relationship between the town and its enveloping landscape setting and bring the urban environment out into the sparsely settled and rural landscape of the vale, exacerbating the suburbanisation of the town's rural setting that has occurred to the west.
- We conclude that this will potentially cause considerable harm to public perceptions of 'a compact town' contained within its surrounding hills, and enjoyment of its immediate countryside setting.

6 Effects on visual amenity:

- The LVIA concludes that views of the development from the surrounding area would be restricted to a relatively localised area and that the most significant visual effects will be experienced by people using roads and footpaths within close proximity to the site. It concludes that these effects would be no higher than moderate adverse because of the effects of mitigation proposals in reducing the impact on the view.
- We reach broadly the same conclusion regarding visibility and key receptors but differ in our judgement of the significance of the effects. We conclude that there will be **permanent, major adverse** (i.e. 'significant') effects on the visual amenity of people at the station, pedestrians on the A371 and Monarch's Way footpath alongside the site, and major-moderate effects on the visual amenity of motorists on Ansford Hill, rail passengers, and recreational users of PRow across the vale.

7 Compliance with planning policy:

- The LVIA and Planning Statement set out some relevant national and local policies affecting landscape but these are not comprehensive.
- The LVIA does not address compliance with planning policy but the Planning Statement concludes that the development complies with listed national and local planning policies.
- We consider that the development proposals fail to comply with key landscape policies at a national, district and neighbourhood level regarding protection and enhancement of local landscape character and the unique countryside setting of Castle Cary and Ansford (i.e. NPPF para 170, adopted local plan policies EQ2 and EQ5, emerging local plan policies EQ2, EQ4 and HW2, and neighbourhood plan aims for the natural and built environment).

8 Key conclusions:

- The proposals would result in 'significant' harm (i.e. permanent major or major-moderate adverse effects) to valued and finite local landscape resources within the site and immediate surrounding countryside.
- The development would potentially cause considerable harm to public perceptions of the relationship of the town within its containing hills and public enjoyment of its immediate countryside setting.
- It would also have a 'significant' effect on the visual amenity of a range of people within a localised area of around 1km of the site.
- These effects would be difficult to mitigate because of the fundamental nature of the change in character from a rural to urban environment and the sloping topography of the site.
- The clay vale landscape is already under pressure from the spread of the town westwards and breaching of the town's 'natural' edge at Ansford Hill may establish a precedent for a continuation of this pattern of outward expansion along the northern hillside.
- The proposals conflict with aims and policies at a national, local and neighbourhood level and, in our opinion, built development of any scale is not appropriate within this sensitive location.