



Land at Sodbury Road, Wickwar

Proof of Evidence of:

Will Gardner

BSc (Hons), MSc, CLMI

In respect of:

LANDSCAPE MATTERS

On behalf of:

Bloor Homes South West

PINS Ref

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Section 1

Summary of Case

WITNESS QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

- 1.1 My name is Will Gardner. I am a Chartered Member of the Landscape Institute, and Director at The Environmental Dimension Partnership Ltd (EDP).
- 1.2 EDP is a Registered Practice of the Landscape Institute and a corporate member of the Institute for Environmental Management and Assessment (IEMA). The practice represents public and private individuals and organisations with land and development interests throughout the UK.
- 1.3 Since the formation of the business in 2005, my colleagues and I have been commissioned to provide environmental planning inputs to over 1,500 development-related projects across the UK, and as a team are working on over 200 residential related development projects in England and Wales at any one time. We specialise in the consideration of the development interests of land through the entire planning and development process – based on analysis of environmental receptors, design and mitigation, assessment of effects and implementation.
- 1.4 I have 15 years' experience as a landscape architect and environmental consultant, during which I have increasingly specialised in the assessment of development proposals in landscape terms, including effects on designated and sensitive landscapes. In my career with EDP, my project portfolio has spanned major urban extensions, urban regeneration, masterplanning, strategic site assessment, expert witness and some objector work.
- 1.5 The evidence that I have prepared and provided for this inquiry is true and has been prepared and is given in accordance with the guidance of my professional Institute. I confirm the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions, irrespective of by whom I am instructed.

AUTHOR'S KNOWLEDGE OF SITE AND APPEAL CONTEXT

- 1.6 EDP were appointed by the Appellant in January 2020 to prepare a Landscape and Visual Appraisal. The Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) produced as part of the 2022 Outline planning application (**CD1.11**), was undertaken and peer reviewed by different landscape architects at EDP.
- 1.7 I have been provided with the LVA and all of the previous application material and have reviewed these as part of the preparation of my evidence. I have also visited the Site on a number of occasions, walked the network of local Public Rights of Way (PRoW) and driven local roads as part of my consideration of the scheme. I have also walked around the Site and the local area.

- 1.8 Having discussed the proposals with the project team, including the planners, Turley's, it is clear that the LVA was prepared alongside, and fed into, the original (and revised) landscape mitigation scheme and development layout, which together comprised central aspects of the 2022 planning applications.
- 1.9 I was therefore not personally involved in the iterative assessment and design process that led to the planning application but am content that the principles of the LVA have informed the Appeal Proposals. Before the appeal I had not liaised in any way with the Local Planning Authority (LPA).
- 1.10 Based on my own Site visits and analysis, I concur with the general conclusions in respect of landscape and visual effects contained within the LVA, although as part of the Appeal Process, I have had the opportunity to review the proposals (through Site visits and documentary review) in further detail. As is to be expected for a different Landscape Practitioner applying their own professional judgement, some of the conclusions reached in respect of sensitivity, magnitude of change and the anticipated level of effect do, however, differ.

SUMMARY OF CASE

- 1.11 I consider that the Site is technically unconstrained and undesignated in environmental terms, and nowhere near valuable enough to preclude development in principle.
- 1.12 Regarding visual change, there will be localised and limited harm to visual receptors as would be expected, particularly stretches of the PRow network adjacent to and within 700m of the Site, however such receptors already experience the settlement edge as a tangible and visual feature.
- 1.13 With respect to the impacts on visual openness and landscape harm, it is not considered that any specific views (rather than general visual amenity) valued highly by the general public or essential to the appreciation of the area, would be harmed to more than a limited degree by the Appeal Proposals. Whilst the development would evidently impact openness at the Site level, I do not consider the Site to be a 'Valued Landscape' as per NPPF paragraph 174(a). This view is shared by SGC.
- 1.14 Limited harm to openness and rural character is an unavoidable result of development or change. This harm needs to be weighed against the benefits of the proposals in other respects, and that balance is undertaken in the evidence of Mr Richards.
- 1.15 The weight attached to this limited harm to openness/rural character on the Appeal Site is directly linked to its status in planning terms. As detailed above, I do not consider that there is the imperative to 'protect and enhance' the landscape in this location, but there is the need to 'recognise' the Site's intrinsic character and beauty. All the work done leading up to the application, and the design itself, demonstrates that the landscape qualities have been fully recognised and factored in as far as possible (e.g., the limited impacts on dimensions of landscape character and the degree to which the proposals positively respond to the published management guidelines), and the retention of representative and valued features

has been considered from the outset. The proposals have been designed to accord, where possible, with the published LCA.

1.16 In conclusion therefore:

- Neither the Appeal Site or the surrounding area is a 'designated landscape' or even a 'Valued Landscape' for the purposes of paragraph 174(a) of the NPPF. The status of the Site and its surroundings is a key determinant contributing towards the weight to be applied to harm within the hierarchy of landscapes within England. The Planning Officer did not consider the Site to be a 'Valued Landscape' during their consideration of the planning application. Furthermore, it is agreed between the Appellant and LPA (Landscape SoCG, **CD7.8**) that the Site is not a 'Valued Landscape' for the purposes of paragraph 174(a) of the NPPF. Therefore, the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside within which the Site is located should be 'recognised' rather than 'protected and enhanced', which acknowledges the Site's lower position in the hierarchy of landscapes;
- The Appeal Site does not form part of the conservation area of Wickwar, and the Conservation Officer agrees that there would be no harm to the conservation area;
- The location of the Site within a number of fields in the gently undulating landscape to the west of Wickwar allows some views from local roads and PRoW; however, local landform, vegetation and areas of residential development, combine to diminish the geographic extent of views;
- The Appellant has sought to integrate the Appeal Proposals with the surrounding landscape and evolving settlement pattern and structure through careful design and embedded mitigation measures, such as the careful selection of field parcels, sympathetic location and development parameters, retention of structural landscape features and the inclusion of buffers. The Appellant has also incorporated additional mitigation measures during the planning application process. While the Appellant considers these landscape proposals to be acceptable, additional planting has been included as part of the Appeal Proposals to maximise all available opportunities for planting within the Site, and help to further alleviate any landscape or visual effects;
- A structured and objective assessment of the Appeal Site's landscape sensitivity has been undertaken. This assessment finds the Site to be of no more than of 'ordinary' landscape value on balance. The Site does not demonstrate the presence of a sufficient number of indicators of landscape value, nor does it have a single indicator of such importance, to elevate it above other more everyday landscapes;
- In terms of susceptibility to change, it is not considered that the Appeal Site is highly susceptible to residential development of the nature proposed, and that overall, the Site and its context exhibit a medium sensitivity to the Appeal Proposals;
- There is nothing within the immediate Site surrounds that would indicate an elevated value or susceptibility to change; and

- An updated assessment of the effects of the Appeal Proposals on landscape character and visual amenity concludes that there would be some limited harm to the Appeal Site and its immediate surroundings. This limited harm must be considered within the context of the Site and the surrounding landscape not being a 'valued' landscape for the purposes of the NPPF (paragraph 174(a)) and the other important material considerations that weigh in favour of the Appeal Proposals (such matters are addressed by Mr Richards). The Appeal Proposals would result in a limited degree of harm (adverse effects) on the character, appearance and function of the land, including its recreational, scenic, tranquil and natural/cultural heritage attributes.

1.17 The limited harm to existing visual character and openness needs also to be weighed against the positive changes to other dimensions of the landscape resource on-site. It is not only about 'what we see' but also about what is created within the 'new landscape,' which in this instance relates to the significant gains in terms of landscape fabric and biodiversity.



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