

Landscape and Impact of Urban Sprawl

Winchester is nationally and internationally famous as a historic city and its landscape setting is an integral part of its special character. Building an urban extension on this greenfield site in Winchester's immediate countryside would destroy the distinctive long, open views to the south at the entrance to the city, and be visually intrusive from a range of view points across the surrounding Downland. For many people their first view of Winchester is seeing the wide sweep of open countryside across Barton Farm, from the train, coach, car or bicycle. The rolling downlands and dramatic ridgeline silhouetted against the sky characterise the site under threat.

Winchester District Landscape Character Assessment (WDLCA)

The principles of the Winchester District Landscape Character Assessment (WDLCA) have been overlooked in considering this application. It is a tool enabling the local landscapes to be recognised and valued as distinctive character types. It emphasises the contribution the setting makes to the quality of life of the residents, visitors and tourists.

The site is broadly an open, arable landscape and one of the important points of the WDLCA is:

“The potential visual intrusion of built elements in the open landscape....particularly if sited on the more prominent crests.”

The WDLCA also identifies strategies for protecting and enhancing the environment and does this for this site by using the word “conserve” very much in the context of the landscape area of the site by stating that development should:

- *“Conserve.....the wide panoramic views*
- *Conserve the historic rural character.....*
- *Conserve the....scattered settlement pattern...”*

Inspector's Report from the 1997 WDLP Inquiry

The Inspector's report from the last Inquiry recognised the distinctive contribution of countryside which stretches to the boundaries of the City.

“Winchester is characterised by long wedges and fingers of countryside running into the City. These create the green setting of Winchester for which the City is famous. The Objection site forms one such wedge of countryside. Its openness and rolling character,....makes a substantial contribution to the setting and character of Winchester, particularly when approached from the north along Andover Road. The impact of housing development on the Objection site would, in my opinion, be substantial in that it would be intrusive in the landscape and would affect the views into and over the Objection site. It would bring the urban edge of Winchester out into the countryside in what I consider to be an unacceptable manner thereby seriously

affecting the setting and character of Winchester and the visual amenities of the area.” (Page 229, para.11.79)

The previous Inspector’s report summarised the importance and distinctiveness of Barton Farm, particularly because the landscape is open and has long, distant views, and the unacceptable damage development would cause, supporting the case against development, made in 1996 by WCC at their WDLP Inquiry.

This proposed development in an area of designated countryside, is contrary to planning policies such as PPG3 (housing), which clearly maintain the use of previously developed land should be prioritised, using brownfield sites in urban areas in order to protect the environment from urban sprawl. This proposed development will do exactly that ie needlessly subject Winchester to urban sprawl.

The previous Inspector’s report refused an application for a development of just 450 homes, on the grounds that the development would detract from the setting of Winchester, its scale and its character. SBFG contends that this evidence is equally relevant in 2005 and even more significant when Barton Farm is now threatened by a proposal for 2,000 homes and supporting infrastructure on this same site.

However, it is not just Barton Farm which is endangered but the entire compact city of Winchester, which with its narrow congested streets, would be irretrievably damaged by the sheer size of this proposal. We give specific evidence in other sections of this Proof, showing for example, the impact of the increased traffic from the proposed development and its patent unsustainability.

This is emphasised by the The Future of Winchester Study which states that the City core could support only limited expansion without its character being radically changed.

“The imposition of further housing development should become a proud addition to our heritage, rather than a creeping blight which destroys both the quality of the city boundary and the countryside without any compensating visual gain.”

This proposed development is purely to satisfy the highly questionable need for housing numbers, which we expand on in another section of this Proof, showing that on statistical, practical and moral grounds, the housing proposed for this site is not needed and more importantly, is not wanted. Indeed, the developer has composed its application, irrespective of the potential damage to this unique cathedral city. The Study claimed

“Damage to one part will echo throughout the entire structure to the degradation of the whole.”

This is supported further in the “Winchester City and Its Setting Report (1998)”. The report carries a description of the countryside north of Winchester and states:

“An area of supportive landscape extends southwards from the A34(T) and the road junction and roundabouts at Three Maids Hill. The importance of the area in relation to Winchester lies in the strength of the open rural landscape penetrating the heart of

the City. There is a clean break from rural to urban along the built edge of the City at Abbotts Barton. The views to the housing edge are softened by belts of woodland within the adjacent farmland, notably at Barton Farm, (my emphasis), south of Well House Lane and also on the perimeter of the built up area.”(para 5.6.5)

The importance of the site to Winchester’s landscape setting is further emphasised in the Report:

“The sites at Barton Farm and Bushfield have a major role in the setting of the City and how it addresses the surrounding landscape. They are both very high profile sites, sensitive in their location and importance for the setting of the City...” (para 5.7.9)

River Itchen Sustainability Study

We are concerned that the Environment Agency has yet to publish “The River Itchen Sustainability Study”, though we understand the document has now been sent to prime contributors.

From previous reports regarding the River Itchen, we believe that the Study will show that the character of Winchester, distinctive for its position beside the River Itchen (an internationally famous chalk stream), will be irreparably damaged if the application for the development is allowed.

Recreational facility

The proposed development would rob Winchester of one of its most accessible recreational amenities. Forming part of the Northern Downs, it is described in the “Winchester City and its Setting” report:

“A sweep of open farmland, punctuated by distinctive mature tree belts, extends into the heart of the city from the north of Barton Farm.”

SBFG submit that this is the essence of Winchester’s need to retain the farm - it is accessible and widely used, drawing residents from all areas of the City for informal recreation and exercise. It provides a safe network of footpaths to the City and surrounding villages, with superb views.

The land is a greenfield site which should be conserved as such. The site is a natural habitat for many forms of wildlife and is used daily by Winchester residents for walking, jogging, cycling and horse-riding. Thanks to Barton Farm, it is possible to walk from the centre of Winchester to the open countryside in around twenty minutes – this is something that should be preserved at all costs.

SBFG submit that the distinctive features of local landscapes contribute significantly to the physical and mental health of the community and their quality of life.

Residents and visitors have access to the countryside without using their cars.

If this countryside was developed it would be necessary to go by car to the far side of the A34 or through the city centre to the south or west to reach equivalent alternatives. The available rights of way and paths are on Barton Farm – any rights of way or joined up track way for walkers, are very limited east of the railway line and north of Wellhouse Lane.

A resident whose home overlooks the farm was amazed by the number of people using the footpaths on Barton Farm throughout the entire day; he wrote:

“...from early morning to last thing at night and on every day of the year people can be seen walking round the fields”.

The importance of farmland as a source of informal recreation for people of all ages cannot be over-emphasised. The open, gently undulating character of Barton Farm makes some parts accessible for the elderly, the disabled, wheel chairs and pushchairs.

It provides tranquillity and an ever-changing tapestry of colours, sounds and textures with the changing seasons and the varying crop rotations throughout the farming cycle. Every month has its own distinctive visual appeal for the community.

SBFG felt it was important to quantify the value of Barton Farm to the community. In June 2002, SBFG conducted a survey to find out how frequently people used Barton Farm, for what purpose, over how many years they had used it and how they would be affected by its development as a Major Development Area. Every effort was made to make the wording of the questionnaire neutral and unemotive.

We include the findings at Appendix ?? attached below.

The “Winchester City and its Setting” report, supports all the above, referring to the good access from the city to high quality countryside.

“This is much valued by Winchester’s residents and contributes to the appreciation of their city and its landscape...Residents enjoy the wide-ranging views over and across the city which reinforce the sense of belonging to this landscape.”(3.3.6)

Summary

Winchester is a City of the highest national and international importance because of its key role in England’s history, especially as the ancient capital of England. It has a unique character and atmosphere that has drawn many people to live here in recent years and which combined with its unique history, continues to draw thousands of visitors every year. We feel strongly that the loss of Barton Farm which provides an integral green wedge into the heart of the City, would strike a fatal blow to the unique character of the City. The sudden impact of thousands of new residents would also lead to dramatic change in the ambience of the City, for the worse, leading to inevitable further commercialisation of the City centre and overcrowding at key times

such as weekends. The official Winchester Visitor Guide for 2004 produced by the City Council contains a quote on page 2:

“You can tell from the special atmosphere of Winchester – with its history, its archaeology and its magnificent cathedral – that it’s where the suburban south of England ends and medieval Wessex begins”

If this development were to be approved, Winchester would become part of the “suburban south” and would lose its special character and atmosphere.

Indeed, at the time the protected zones (greenbelts) were set up in 1955, the Tory Minister for Housing and Local Government (Duncan Sandys), told MPs:

“For the well-being of our people and the preservation of the countryside, we have a clear duty to do all we can to prevent the further unrestricted sprawl of the great cities.”

It appears that all the published documentation recognising the need for any development in Winchester to:

- Retain the City’s compact character
- Protect the landscape character
- Maintain the green wedges
 - has been completely ignored.

We do not understand how a development can be contemplated for the site given:

- The Inspector’s comments in the previous Local Plan in 1997 – what has changed since then in the landscape and the setting of the site and its relationship to the historic core of Winchester, to make development now acceptable? The answer is nothing has changed
- The various studies quoted that repeatedly praise the relationship between Winchester’s cityscape and landscape and specifically the important role that the site plays in Winchester’s setting.
- Winchester’s historic importance to our country which will be irreparably damaged were development of the site to proceed.