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By email only

Application Ref: 25/03080/HYA

Description: Hybrid application for a residential-led development comprising residential (Use Class C3), educational use (Use Class F1), a community hub (Use Class F2) with associated new internal roads, access, parking, cycling infrastructure, landscaping and other associated infrastructure. Full application comprises the construction of vehicle access and an active travel link via Mendip Way, with associated landscaping and drainage works. The outline application, for which all matters are reserved except means of access, comprises the erection of up to 640 dwellings (Use Class C3), a site for a primary school, further land reserved for educational use (Use Class F1), a site for a community hub (Use Class F2), with associated infrastructure.

Location: GA2, Land North-East of Great Ashby Stevenage Hertfordshire

Introduction

The proposal seeks hybrid planning permission for a mixed-use development to the north-east of Great Ashby, including up to 640 dwellings, land for a primary school, a community hub, green infrastructure, drainage infrastructure and associated works. Full planning permission is sought for the principal access via Mendip Way.

The principle of development at GA2 is generally established under Policy SP18 and the approved Masterplan Framework. This response therefore focuses on the likely effects on landscape character and visual amenity, and the proposed green infrastructure framework and mitigation strategy. Particular emphasis is placed on matters that must be secured through the Design Code and subsequent Reserved Matters submissions.

The submission is supported by an Environmental Statement (Chapter 11 LVIA and accompanying appendices), Design and Access Statement, Green Infrastructure Framework, Parameter Plans and access planting details.

Site Context

The site lies to the north-east of the existing Great Ashby neighbourhood and currently comprises open arable farmland defined by hedgerows, woodland blocks and a network of PRoWs. The landscape forms part of the transitional interface between the Middle Beane Valley and the Weston Plateau Parklands.

The site contributes to the rural setting of Stevenage and forms part of the perceptible separation between the existing urban edge and the wider Beane Valley landscape. PRoWs cross the site and currently afford open views across farmland, woodland and the existing settlement boundary. Ancient woodland blocks including New Spring Wood, Longdell Wood and Nine Acre Spring are defining landscape features and contribute significantly to local character.



Review of Submitted Information

The LVIA has been prepared in accordance with Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Third Edition (GLVIA3), LI Institute Technical Guidance Note 02/21 and LI Technical Guidance Note 06/19, using a representative selection of viewpoints covering key receptors. The methodology is clear and proportionate and considers construction, operational and residual phases.

Assessment of Effects

Landscape Character

At the scale proposed, the development will represent a major change to the character of the site and its immediate setting. The introduction of built form, internal streets, lighting and associated infrastructure across the currently open farmland will transform the landscape from an agricultural landscape to a large-scale urban extension.

The existing landscape is characterised by arable fields framed by woodland and hedgerows, forming part of both the Weston Plateau Parklands (22) and Middle Beane Valley (Area 39). It exhibits rural qualities, woodland blocks, perceptible openness and a simple, unified field pattern.

The Great Ashby (GA2) Masterplan Framework sets clear landscape principles to guide how the neighbourhood should respond to its setting. These include establishing a central green spine beneath the pylon corridor, retaining and buffering ancient woodland, reinforcing connectivity throughout the development and creating a new long-term settlement edge. The submitted Parameter Plans and Green Infrastructure Framework broadly reflect these intentions, proposing built form within the parameters set and providing structural planting and open space corridors.

The LVIA concludes that landscape effects on the site are major adverse during construction and early operation, reducing to moderate adverse by Year 15 as planting establishes, which is accepted. In terms of impacts on the Landscape Character Areas, we believe the magnitude of change has been slightly underestimated, however any change in judgement would not be substantial. Nonetheless, it should be recognised that the early and medium-term effects on the landscape represent a substantial alteration of character locally, particularly before structural planting matures.

Visual Amenity

The LVIA identifies significant adverse visual effects during construction and early operation for users of PROW crossing the site, where open views across farmland will be replaced by visible built form.

Visual change will also be apparent from surrounding rural lanes and elevated land to the north and east. In these locations, development will introduce a new settlement edge and visible roofscape where currently agricultural land forms the view. These effects are predicted to reduce over time as structural planting establishes and matures.

In longer-distance views, the development is anticipated to read as an extension of the existing Great Ashby neighbourhood rather than as a detached or isolated feature. Existing woodland blocks and proposed structural planting will assist in filtering and containing views, particularly at Year 15. However, residual adverse effects are likely to remain along sections of PROW and at the rural edge where built form will remain perceptible in middle-distance views.

The retention and reinforcement of woodland buffers, careful control of plot arrangement, the roofline, materials and colours will be important factors as the scheme develops. The lighting strategy will also play an important role in limiting night-time visual effects and preventing urban glow into the surrounding countryside.



The Parameter Plans establish an appropriate strategic framework for the built form and open space. Moving forward, structural planting, appropriate buffers and habitat creation will be particularly important in achieving a suitable green infrastructure network. The Design Code should therefore ensure that transitions are layered, that woodland buffers provide an appropriate species mix and character, and that SuDS and open space areas contribute positively to visual amenity, biodiversity and recreation.

Green Infrastructure and Open Space

The submitted Green Infrastructure Framework establishes the strategic landscape structure for GA2 and reflects the overarching principles set out in the adopted Great Ashby (GA2) Masterplan Framework. The framework identifies a central green spine aligned with the pylon easement, woodland buffers to ancient woodland blocks, east–west green corridors, recreational routes and areas of public open space integrated with SuDS features.

Generally, this structure is appropriate and consistent with the landscape-led principles set out in the Masterplan Framework document. In particular, the central green corridor presents a opportunity to deliver a multifunctional network combining recreation, biodiversity enhancement, drainage and visual amenity. However, without careful coding, there is a risk that this area reads as residual land dominated by attenuation features. The Design Code will therefore need to clearly define character, planting structure, enclosure and active frontage principles to ensure that the corridor operates as a cohesive landscape corridor.

Accessible Greenspace

At this outline stage, the typology, hierarchy and detailed distribution of open space across phases is indicative rather than fixed. While the overall quantum of green infrastructure appears to meet requirements, the Design Code will need to provide further requirements on open space function, design and character, ensuring that strategic green spaces, corridors and smaller incidental green areas operate as an integrated network.

Sustainable Drainage

The Drainage Strategy indicates that sustainable drainage will be integrated throughout the green infrastructure network, with basins and swales incorporated within open space and along corridors.

The integration of drainage within the GI framework is supported in principle. However, the effectiveness of this approach will depend upon the degree to which SuDS are genuinely landscape-led. The Design Code should ensure that SuDS features are multifunction and designed with gentle landform and appropriate planting for both dry and wet conditions. Swales and rain gardens should be embedded within streets and public realm where appropriate, contributing to character and biodiversity. Larger basins within strategic open space should read as landscape features, potentially incorporating wet meadow, marginal planting and informal recreation areas.

Play

The illustrative location plan of recreation spaces is welcomed and demonstrates the provision of LAPs, LEAPs and NEAPs distributed across the site. The principle of a hierarchy of play spaces is supported and aligns with the wider Green Infrastructure Framework.

As well as LAP, LEAP and NEAP provision, the scheme should incorporate smaller “doorstep” play opportunities and informal play trails through green corridors and residential parcels. These can provide incidental and natural play features, ensuring children of different age groups have access to play within a short walking distance of their homes.

The Design Code should define play character and design principles, including the type of equipment/activity and potentially themes across different play spaces. This would help provide variety, improve accessibility and encourage imaginative play.



Outline Landscape and Ecological Management Plan

The submitted Outline Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (OLEMP) provides a framework for habitat retention, creation and long-term management. It appropriately identifies habitat typologies and includes provision for monitoring and Biodiversity Net Gain validation. At outline stage this is acceptable in principle; however, a number of matters require greater precision and should be secured through the Design Code and a condition requiring submission of a detailed Landscape and Ecology Management Plan (LEMP).

The monitoring provisions are welcomed, but habitat objectives are expressed largely in qualitative terms. The detailed LEMP should introduce measurable criteria for woodland, grassland and SuDS habitats, aligned to BNG condition requirements, together with clear triggers for remedial management.

Also, whilst responsibility is assigned to a Management Company following establishment, long-term governance arrangements and replacement provisions for structural planting are not clearly defined. These should be secured through the detailed LEMP to ensure landscape mitigation is delivered successfully.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The submitted documents establish a proportionate baseline and sets out a strategic framework for delivery of the GA2 allocation. The Parameter Plans and Green Infrastructure Framework broadly reflect the principles of the adopted Masterplan Framework and provide an appropriate structure for built form, green corridors, woodland buffers and drainage infrastructure.

Notwithstanding this, the scale of development will result in substantial landscape change at the site level. The existing arable farmland, currently contributing to the rural setting of Stevenage and the perceptible separation from the Beane Valley landscape, will transition to a large-scale urban extension. Whilst the LVIA anticipates effects reducing over time as planting matures, short to medium-term change to local character will be significant and residual visual effects are likely to remain along parts of the site edge and PROW network where built form will remain perceptible in views.

As such, the effects will depend heavily on the Design Code and subsequent Reserved Matters submissions. In particular, the following matters should be secured through condition and embedded within the Design Code:

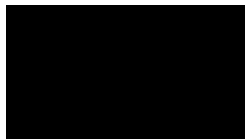
- The establishment of substantial and layered woodland buffers to woodland blocks, including early implementation of structural planting to assist in mitigation during the initial phases.
- Clear coding of the central green spine to ensure it functions as a cohesive, multifunctional landscape corridor rather than residual land dominated by attenuation features, with defined character, enclosure, planting structure and active frontages.
- Landscape-led integration of SuDS, ensuring basins and swales are designed as naturalistic landform features with appropriate planting and recreational value.
- A defined hierarchy of open space and play provision, including informal and doorstep play opportunities embedded within residential parcels and corridors, with clear design principles to ensure variety and accessibility.
- Controls on roofscape, materials and lighting along sensitive edges to reduce visual prominence and prevent urbanising effects at night.
- Submission of a detailed Landscape and Ecology Management Plan with measurable habitat objectives, long-term governance arrangements and replacement provisions for structural planting to secure delivery of mitigation and Biodiversity Net Gain commitments.

Subject to these matters being secured and delivered through planning conditions and the design code process, the scheme is capable of providing a comprehensive and integrated landscape framework consistent with the objectives of the GA2 allocation and Masterplan. However, it should be clearly recognised that the development will result in a permanent urban extension into currently open countryside, and that the success of the proposal in landscape and visual terms will rely on implementation and long-term management of green infrastructure across the site.



Should you have any questions or require further clarification, please let me know.

Kind regards,



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Please note: This advice note is advisory and should only be considered as the opinion formed by specialist staff in relation to this particular matter. Any additional information, queries or comments on this advice that the applicant or other interested parties may have, must be directed to the Planning Officer who will seek further advice from us where appropriate and necessary.