

# North Hertfordshire District Council

## Building Conservation comments

**File Ref:** 24/01444/FP

**Date:** 27/08/2024

**Planning Officer:** AHD

**Address:** Land north of Ashwell Street and south of Lucas Lane between Huntsridge and East Lodge, 22 Lucas Lane, Ashwell, Hertfordshire

**Subject:** Erection of 14 dwellings (including affordable housing) including creation of access from Ashwell Street, footpath link to Lucas Lane, public open space and soft and hard landscaping, biodiversity enhancement and, associated infrastructure on land north of Ashwell Street, Ashwell.

### 1.0 Recommendation

1.1 I raise an **OBJECTION** and offer the following reason for refusal:

*The application site makes a very positive contribution to the character and appearance of the Ashwell Conservation Area, having historic and archaeological significance and which includes Viewpoint 10 of the Ashwell Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan (February 2023) and Significant View 12 of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan (made on April 2022). The site represents the last area of open land on the north side of 'The Ruddery' substantially removing the sole remaining opportunity to experience the village nestled in the 'valley' to the north and unfettered by development in the fore or mid ground. It is considered that developing this site would impair views towards an area to the east of the historic core and which includes 'The Springs' (Viewpoint 10/SV12) and will impact upon the inter-visibility between Townsend House, 5 High Street, and the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin. Furthermore, the development would have an adverse impact upon the character of the medieval route that is Ashwell Street. It is considered that the development would occasion less than substantial harm to the significance of the Ashwell Conservation Area and that the level of harm is moderate to high on the continuum such that this harm would outweigh the public benefits associated with the delivery of 14 dwellings. Accordingly, the proposal would fail to satisfy the provisions of Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990, the aims of Paragraph 135c), Section 16 of the NPPF, Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 and Policy ASH3 A of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan 2022.*

1.2 There remains a case for including the second RforR under 22/03094/FP:

*The creation of an access onto Ashwell Street including the removal of trees and surface upgrading would have a transformational impact upon the western end of this informal track which forms part of the ruddery (which is part of Ashwell Street and is also part of the Icknield Way ancient track). This would have a detrimental effect on the rural character of Ashwell Street and would not add to the overall quality of the area and would not be sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape. Accordingly, the proposal would fail to satisfy the provisions of Section 72 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and as supported by the aims of Paragraph 135c) and Section 16 of the NPPF and Policy HE1 of the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 - 2031 and Policies ASH3 C (i), ASH3 C (ii) and ASH8 of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan 2022.*

## 2.0 Introduction

- 2.1 Under ref: 22/03094/FP, I commented on 14/03/2023 and 28/06/2023 for the *'Erection of 14 dwellings including creation of access from Ashwell Street, footpath link to Lucas Lane, associated infrastructure, public open space and landscaping'*. At the time, I offered a heritage-based Reason for Refusal and a further R f R relating to the access and trees. I note that the applicant has recently appealed that decision (which was made at Planning Committee)
- 2.2 Earlier this year a fresh pre-app was submitted under ref: 24/00189/PRE for *'Residential development of 14 dwellings including creation of access from Ashwell Street, footpath link to Lucas Lane, extensive public open space, hard and soft landscaping and associated Infrastructure'*.
- 2.3 Whilst I was given opportunity to comment on pre-app 24/00189/PRE, I chose initially not to as I thought that the officer feedback would be similar to that of the refusal under appn ref: 22/03094/FP. When I realised that that was not the case, it was too late, and the officer feedback had been issued on 23 April 2024. On 5 June 2024, I provided some observations on that scheme after formal officer advice had been issued and which I placed on file. The current application was received on 1 July 2024.
- 2.4 At 1.16 of the submitted Heritage Statement ['HS'] prepared by Asset Heritage Consulting it states that the current application proposes a new scheme of 14 dwellings, arranged on a different layout and using a different design aesthetic to the 2022 scheme. This has been subject to pre-application discussions and feedback from the Council which concluded that:
- 'Overall, it is considered that positive progress has been made to revise the layout and appearance of the proposal in the context of the previously refused scheme. It is likely that the Council's Conservation Officer would sustain an objection to development on this site, as the previous reasons relate to the principle of development in this location from a heritage perspective and urbanising impacts upon part of the track, rather than objections to layout/design. However, amendments to the scheme that are now proposed would in my view result in a better-quality housing development. As case officer, I would be happy to support the layout and design of the proposal that has been considered in this pre-application submission...'*
- 2.5 As stated in the officer's pre-app response in April, the principal reason for refusal of appn ref: 22/03094/FP was drafted by me and primarily considers the contribution that the site makes to the Ashwell Conservation Area as an open area of land, rather than having any concerns with the design and layout of the proposal.

**Original submission  
20/00126/FP**



**Original submission**

**Amended layout  
20/00126/FP**



**Revised scheme**

22/03094/FP



22/03094/FP



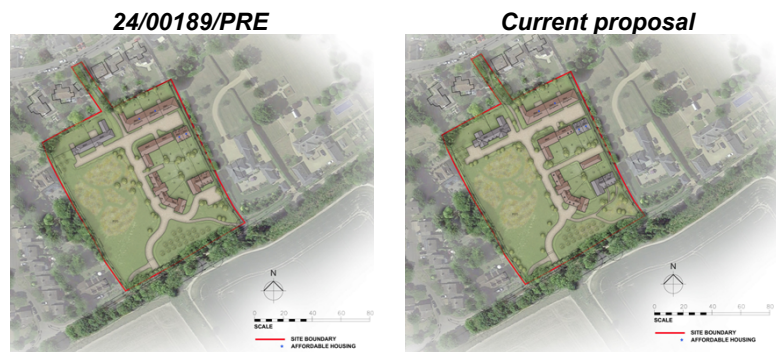
2.6 In my 5 June 2024 internal email response to the officer's pre-app response and under the subheading 'General', I commented that I did not share the view that positive amendments have been made in terms of the general layout and appearance of the proposed development since the previous scheme. I did not consider the development to be 'simplified' and 'less suburban in character' and I would not say that it has an improved agrarian aesthetic. I said that I don't recall it being suggested that the previous scheme was considered to reflect a suburban layout and character and I probably would not have encouraged a more farmstead/courtyard style considering my objection in principle to development on this site. Whereas the concept of a main farmhouse with a cluster of ancillary buildings may work in some settings i.e. Police Row, Therfield, I was unconvinced that such an approach would be appropriate here. I also did not agree with the officer's 'Conclusion' heading that the latest iteration has progressed positively.

2.7 The problems as I saw it were as follows:

- *The number of units remains at 14, I would have anticipated a reduction in the number of units if moving towards an 'improved' scheme.*
- *The layout is less 'loose knit' with effectively two streetscenes being created (one following the access road down the slope and the other which I have even more concern with, is the formal layout at the bottom of the slope). I do not consider the linear layout of units 1-9 as a positive.*
- *I see none of the four iterations for the slate roof, built form (Units 1 & 2) at the bottom of the slope making a positive contribution at all and this impinges on what was previously set aside as an open space at the bottom of the site. These buildings will have a greater adverse impact when compared with the previous pre-app. In fact, I do not consider any of the house-types to be particularly positive in design terms.*
- *There are three distinct linked blocks of built form creating the impression of an increased density/built form rather than less.*

2.8 I did, however, note that some of the dwellings have been moved north away from Ashwell Street, which would reduce the impact of built form on the character and appearance of this historic thoroughfare. This was the only real positive intervention creating an open area at the top (southern end) of the site but this is not sufficient to garner conservation support.

2.9 Over the page, there is a comparison between the pre-app and the current submission. Whilst it is acknowledged that the amount of development has been reduced from that considered in 2020, the current scheme remains at 14 dwellings i.e. the same number as that in 2022.



### 3.0 The Proposal

3.1 At 6.1.2 of the submitted Planning Statement it says that:

*This planning application follows the refusal of the previous application (22/03094/FP) for 14 dwellings, which was refused on 30 January 2024 and subsequent pre-application engagement with officers.*

3.2 At 6.1.3 of the PS it states:

*Since the previous refusal, it has been accepted that the principle of residential development on the site would be acceptable and would meet housing need for the residents in Ashwell which is supported by Local Plan and ANP policies. Through the pre-application engagement, the applicant has worked collaboratively with officers to devise a scheme that is acceptable in terms of design, scale and layout that responds sympathetically with the site constraints and local context.*

It should be noted that this 'collaborative' approach did not include input from the Council's Conservation Team.

3.3 At 1.3 of the submitted Heritage Statement, I note:

*The report is a revised and updated version of a Heritage Statement prepared and submitted with an application for the same site made in 2022. The first part of the report remains largely unchanged from that submitted with the 2022 application; this focuses on the contribution that the site makes to the character and appearance of the Ashwell Conservation Area and on the contribution it makes to the significance of other designated and non-designated heritage assets as part of their physical setting. **The second part of the report has been revised; this describes the development proposals and assesses the potential impact the scheme may have on these heritage assets.***

3.4 Further on at 1.17, the applicant's own heritage consultant says:

*My own view, based on the assessments in this report, is that **the assessed harm remains less than substantial in terms of its impact on the conservation area.** I do not identify harm arising to listed buildings. This harm falls to be weighed in the balance of public benefits under paragraph 208 of the NPPF.*

It is important to note that the applicant's heritage consultant does acknowledge some degree of less than substantial harm.

3.5 At 3.2.1 it states:

***The site is a remnant of a formerly extensive system** of small fields extending back to Ashwell Street. Unlike other such fields, which extended from a back lane in*

*the heart of the village, the site and the two fields to its east lay outside the purview of the back lane, as did three such fields at the western end of the series.*

The fact that the site is remnant of a formerly extensive system increases rather decreases the significance of the site and is good reason to preserve what remains.

3.6 At 3.2.3 it states:

*Without surviving context, it is now difficult to appreciate the site as part of this former farming system; although the origins of the street pattern of High Street/Lucas Lane and Back Street/Silver Street can still be recognised, the use of the land encompassed by it has entirely changed, with development cutting across the former plots (e.g. Angell's Meadow and Dixie's Close) so that the pattern of strips has also been heavily degraded and is no longer legible as a single entity. **Once agriculture started to become less dominant and farmsteads became simple homesteads, the fields directly associated with them fell out of agricultural use, inevitably leading to pressure for development as the town's population expanded in the 20th century.***

3.7 At 3.2.4 it states:

*In this context, the intrinsic heritage significance of the site is relatively low. It is no longer part of a legible and meaningful 'whole,' that is, one element of a series of similar fields making up a single system, but a **single plot of land which has lost context and therefore significance as part of the whole.** In other words, the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. **Nevertheless, the site (apart from the bungalow development along its northern edge) has survived as open land, and therefore retains a limited degree of interest in this respect.***

Once again, HE offers the following:

*However, developing this land will (as stated before) reduce the contribution the plot makes to the significance of the conservation area and **so result in harm to that significance.***

3.8 At 3.2.20 the HS refers to the fact that the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan ('the NP') includes a map of Ashwell identifying 'important village views' referring to 'extensive (over 90°)' view (SV12) looking north across the site from the gateway, described as *'To the North – from Ashwell St (also known as The Ruddy). An important distant view through Hunts Close pasture land across Lucas Lane housing and beyond to open countryside in the North towards Wrestlingworth. The view projects a strong feeling of space and rural tranquillity.'*

This is the same view as KV23 identified in the CACS and Viewpoint 10 of the Ashwell Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan (February 2023). It is worth noting Historic England's response on 29 July 2024 in which it is stated:

*This patch of open ground is probably the only location from which this view, mostly undisturbed by recent development, can be appreciated.*

3.9 At 3.2.21 the HS application says:

*This description is more indicative of the particular qualities of the view, focusing on landscape rather than heritage attributes. KV23/SV12 looks north and north-west*

*across the field comprising the application site, across the roofs of the bungalows and other 20th-century houses on Lucas Lane, beyond which is the tree-lined playing field (only the treetops are seen) and beyond that a distant view of a gently rolling agricultural landscape of fields extending to the horizon. **It is an attractive layered view across the later edge of the settlement, which enables some appreciation of the topographical setting of the village and conservation area.***

Whilst acknowledging the layered qualities of the view, the application site has a more positive role than just this. It is not just about the proposed development's impact upon Key View 23 (KV23) in the ACS but rather about the overall contribution that this field makes to the character and appearance of the Ashwell Conservation Area.

3.10 At 3.2.23 it states:

*The part of the settlement over which KV23 looks is not part of the historic core but for the most part later ribbon development extending eastwards from its edge. Apart from Nos.14 & 16 Lucas Lane at the extreme right of the view, the exceptions are the jumble of roofs of buildings in the extreme left of the view, which include the unlisted Ringstead House and an associated barn, unlisted Victorian red brick Nos.10-12 Springhead, and the Grade II listed Spring Cottage, all on Springhead, which lie at the historic built edge.*

Whilst it is agreed that KV23 does not look over the historic core of Ashwell it does represent an important and significant opportunity to not only experience this part of ACA but to also visualise the character of other parts of Ashwell directly to the north of the Ashwell Street before other developments took place.

3.11 At 3.2.24 it states:

*Fig.4 of the 2018 Pre-Submission Version of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan (reproduced below as Fig.9 because it has been omitted from the 'made' version) shows a pre-1970 postcard view from Ashwell Street looking north over Angell's Meadow (west of the application site), a former field strip extending between Silver Street and Ashwell Street, before it was developed with housing in the 1970s. While this is therefore a view with a similar context to KV23, the view across Angell's Meadow was towards the central historic core of the village and St Mary's Church, very much showing the historic village in its topographical setting.*

3.12 At 3.2.25 it states:

***KV23 is clearly not of this quality in terms of what it reveals of historic character, but is a lesser view, giving a sense of a village in its landscape setting, but not the historic core of that village. It looks instead over land which was historically outside the main built-up area of the village, with only a few scattered cottages on Lucas Lane, and which has since become developed with post-war housing.***

Even though this may be regarded as a lesser view when compared with the point made at 3.2.24 it is nonetheless a Key View worthy of preserving. Even this lesser view makes an important contribution to the character of the area.

3.13 At 3.2.26 it states:

***I would therefore consider KV23 to make a low to moderate contribution to the character and appearance of the conservation area. The greatest value of the conservation area, and the reason for its designation, lies in the interest of the historic***

*built environment of its core. KV23 reveals something of its wider physical setting in the landscape.*

The Heritage Consultant does not stop at suggesting a low contribution but goes further to include 'moderate.' This appears to infer that the consultant considers that there is indeed more to this site beyond an appreciation of the wider physical setting in the landscape.

3.14 At 3.2.28 it states:

*The lack of development on the application site feeds into the more rural character of this section of Ashwell Street, but the experience of that character is not wholly dependent on the site. Immediately having left the late 20th-century housing developments and tarmac road by Hunt's Ridge, one is at the field gate and KV23.*

The Heritage Consultant is acknowledging that the site contributes to the rural character of this part of the ACA.

3.15 At 3.2.30 it states:

*In summary, the site, as an open field, particularly in the winter months, **makes some contribution to the semi-rural character of this part of Ashwell Street** but the character of Ashwell Street does not rely on the site.*

Whilst the character of Ashwell Street does not wholly rely on the application site for its semi-rural character it goes some way in reinforcing this character. The development of the application site would denude this part of ACA of part of its special character.

3.16 At 3.2.33 it states:

*In summary, I am of the opinion that the contribution of the site to the character and appearance of the conservation area, as that is described and understood in the CACS, is low to moderate, and **derives chiefly from the ability to appreciate the wider setting of the village** (albeit a later edge of the village) in KV23.*

3.17 At 4.6 it states:

*This revised layout for the 14 dwellings has moved away from the traditional housing types presented proposed in 2022 and is based on a new 'farmstead' concept for the site, using a traditional courtyard type of layout and a rural agricultural aesthetic.*

This 'farmstead' concept simply does not work as such. Whilst there are elements of agrarian form and design the linear layout at the bottom (north) of the site, particularly the positioning of Plots 1 & 2, is unconvincing as is the continuous built form of Plots 10, 11 & 12 with its large areas of glazing, boarding and several large roof lights.

3.18 At 4.17 it states:

*When considered as a whole, I draw a similar conclusion of less than substantial harm arising from this scheme on the character and appearance of the conservation area as I did in relation to the 2022 scheme. While the respective schemes differ in terms of layout, the differing impacts can be balanced to result in a similar conclusion.*

The heritage consultant further acknowledges harm arising from the proposed scheme.

3.19 At 4.26 it states:

*In mitigation of the proposal to site Plots 1 and 2 within the view from the field gate, the new dwellings will be located at a distance within the view, close to the northern boundary of the site and on the lower ground, where they will be seen in conjunction with existing 20th-century bungalows on Lucas Lane. In addition, the high-quality detailed design of the dwellings, intended to express an Arts and Crafts vernacular that has a relationship with the agricultural-style character of the buildings in the rest of the site, can be seen to reflect their 'edge of settlement' location. In short, the dwellings will be designed to be attractive and representative of their location and thus add visual interest to the view.*

The opening sentence seeks to justify Plots 1 and 2, perhaps acknowledging the heritage impact of a building of this size in this location. I'm afraid that I do not read this built form as high-quality design reflective of Arts and Crafts vernacular and I fail to understand how this has a relationship with the agricultural-style character of other buildings on site.

3.20 I note the artist's impression (by AT Architecture) prepared to illustrate how the Plots 1 and 2 dwellings will appear in view KV23 and as also illustrated in the wireframe (Viewpoint 1, LVIA). Both images clearly illustrate the impact of the development, particularly Plots 1 and 2. Although the topography of the site and distant views over the top and to the side of Plots 1 and 2 will still be evident, the site's rural character will be significantly denuded.



3.21 I note at 4.31 that the scheme is described as being '*distinctive and without any sense of uniformity*'. Whilst there is some substance to this view, it should be noted that there is some sense of uniformity in the use of weatherboarding, through-eaves dormers (13 on principal elevations) and 4no. brick-faced, half-hipped, two-storey buildings. As stated at 2.7, the layout is less 'loose knit' when compared with the refused scheme creating effectively two distinct streetscenes (one following the access road down the slope and the other which I have even more concern with, is the formal layout at the bottom of the slope). I do not consider the linear layout of the units at plots 1-9 to be a positive. Furthermore, Although the layout of the units at Plots 10, 11 and 12 may to an extent echo that of Woodforde Close and Angell's Meadow, it is not reflective of the grain of development along The Ruddery and unlike farmsteads on flatter ground elsewhere in Ashwell, the continuous, agrarian built-forms in a linear arrangement on a sloping site are not typical of a traditional farmstead 'courtyard' concept in North Herts.



3.22 At 4.32, the Heritage Consultant says that *'the potential for a degree of less than substantial harm arising to the character and appearance of the conservation area, at the lower end of the scale. The harm is limited by the degree of significance of the view; by the high-quality detailed design of Plots 1 and 2; and the fact that fundamental aspects of the view will remain to be appreciated'*. I take the view that the degree of harm is much higher on the 'less than substantial' scale and that the built form of other buildings on site, particularly the massing of dwellings on Plots 10-12, will significantly and irrevocably impair the 'openness' of this space.

3.23 Whilst acknowledging that, to a limited extent, the western end of this part of Ashwell Street is different in appearance to the eastern end, which links onto Station Road and that the highway improvements have been designed to minimise their impact, I remain unconvinced that the vehicular access would not significantly change or harm the character and appearance of the Ashwell Conservation Area. I reiterate a point made previously that if trees are removed from the southern boundary, then this would weaken the positive contribution made by the "green tunnel." Not only that, but even if the trees to be removed are not of particularly high quality, the formation of the vehicular access is such that this will more fully reveal the proposed housing to the north and east thereof.



- 3.24 As stated previously, it is the combination of the “green tunnel” and the opening up of views north at Viewpoint 10/SV12/KV23 which captures the very essence of character of this part of the ACA. Furthermore, the surface upgrading and highway works will have a significant impact upon the western end of this informal track which forms part of the ruddery (which is part of Ashwell Street and is also part of the Icknield Way ancient track). I remain of the view that the proposed development would not add to the overall quality of the area and would not be sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape.

## 4.0 Summary of the application site’s significance

### Historic Significance

- *Each side of the High Street had parallel ‘back lanes’ running along the backs of its properties (which included several farms), giving access to strips of field beyond; to the south, these field strips extended south from the back lane to Ashwell Street, in a series running from Partridge Hill to the west to Station Road to the east. (2.6, HS)*
- *Surrounding the village were large open fields divided into furlongs, indicating a surviving pattern of medieval strip farming (the word ‘furlong’ deriving from the Old English furh (furrow) and lang (long) and originally referring to the length of the furrow in an acre of ploughed open field). (2.7, HS)*
- *The application site (numbered plot 252 on the map; see Fig.3) comprised one of these fields, immediately beyond the main built-up edge of the village. It, like the adjoining plot 249 to the east, was of greater width than the majority of the plots, and had perhaps been created out of two parcels. It was known as Hunt’s Close and was owned by the Master & Fellows of Pembroke College and occupied by William Bacon (who held much land in the parish), who used it for pasture. In its north-west corner was a small orchard (253) in the same ownership and tenancy. (2.9, HS)*
- *According to OS Area Book when the 1888 OS map was drafted (actually surveyed in 1877) the application site (plot 313) was in arable use and there was still a small orchard in the north-west corner against Lucas Lane (2.15, HS).*
- *The site is a remnant of a formerly extensive system of small fields extending back to Ashwell Street. Unlike other such fields, which extended from a back lane in the heart of the village, the site and the two fields to its east lay outside the purview of the back lane, as did three such fields at the western end of the series (3.2.1, HS). However, the fact that the site is now a single isolated example of these heightens its significance rather being without recognisable context and losing much of its meaning (3.2.2, HS). Whilst some significance may have been lost it has not lost its significance overall and retains more than just a ‘limited degree of interest.’ (3.2.4, HS)*
- *Significance is derived from the site probably being a site of paired furlongs (double-width) – a survival of medieval strip farming from which views are afforded towards the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin. Although the ‘layered’ view from the field gate entrance does not focus on the historic centre of the village, it does include a view towards (albeit not readily discernible) of Ashwell Springs and several properties at the head of Springhead.*
- *According to Gil Burleigh (North Hertfordshire Archeaological Society) the known archaeology of this field is considered to be of ‘national importance’*

*and that the site is covered in highly significant archaeological remains of the prehistoric, Iron Age, Roman, Saxon, and Medieval periods. These comments are supported by those received from the Senior Historic Environment Advisor, Hertfordshire LEADS dated 20th August 2024.*

### **More recent significance**

- *Included in the Ashwell Conservation Area (designated in 1968)*
  - *Although less obvious than the other sites listed below it is considered that the application site together with i) the Registered Park and Garden at The Bury, ii) the paddock on the east side of Mill Street, iii) the land forming part of Viewpoint 13, iv) Dixies Meadow opposite Dixies Farmhouse and v) the recreation ground, are all key to maintaining a relatively verdant character throughout the ACA. Development of any one of these sites has the potential to occasion harm to the ACA.*
  - *Key View 23 in Ashwell Conservation Area Character Statement April 2019 (Wood).*
  - *Significant View 12 of the Ashwell Neighbourhood Plan (made on April 2022).*
  - *Viewpoint 10 of the Ashwell Conservation Area Character Appraisal and Management Plan February 2023 (Place Services).*
- 4.1 Historic England and the applicant's Heritage Consultant, attribute some significance to the application site. For instance, Historic England has consistently noted the significance of the site as part of the conservation area and the harm to the area which could result in it being built on. Whilst Asset Heritage Consulting says that the site has survived as open land, and therefore retains a limited degree of interest in this respect. (3.2.24) and makes a low to moderate contribution to the character and appearance of ACA (3.2.33). Furthermore, AHC also state that there is some impact arising from limited development proposed within the purview of KV23, the view identified in the CACS (and the CAAMP and NP) from the field gate looking north across the site over Lucas Lane and towards the countryside beyond. (5.3)
- 4.2 At 5.4.32 of the submitted Planning Statement it is stated that '*whilst the proposed development would lead to 'less than substantial harm' to the character and appearance of the Ashwell Conservation Area, the identified public benefits of the scheme would significantly outweigh any harm*'. In my view the harm 'bar' is set higher than what the applicant has indicated which is, in my view, reinforced by Historic England's comments. As such the bar for public benefits should be set accordingly.

**Mark Simmons**  
**Senior Conservation Officer**