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THAMES VALLEY PARK & RIDE

LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL APPRAISAL

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Wokingham Borough Council

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LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL APPRAISAL

APPROACH TO ASSESSMENT

A desk based review of existing information in the public domain was undertaken in order to identify existing potentially sensitive landscape and visual receptors within or adjacent to the Site, including landscape features, landscape character, and potentially sensitive visual receptors which may constitute a constraint to the proposed works. The desk based review included review of existing information such as aerial photographs and ordnance survey maps.

The study area for the purposes of this constraints review has been generally defined as a 1 km radius from the centreline of each route option for national statutory designated site searches, and 500m radius search area for local statutory designated sites.

The landscape and visual baseline study has been undertaken with reference to the 'Landscape' sub-objective from the Department for Transport WebTAG Environmental objective (TAG Unit 3.3.7) since the proposed Site lies within a predominantly rural context and is also broadly based on the methodology set out in the following best practice guidance documents:

- Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, 3rd Edition. The Landscape Institute and Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment (2013); and
- Interim Advice Note 135/10 Landscape and Visual Effects Assessment. The Highways Agency (2010).

TOPOGRAPHY AND HYDROLOGY

The Site is located at a level of around 40m AOD, being surrounded to the north by the flat landscape of Reading Marina and the River Thames. Land rises slightly to the east and south-east towards Earley, with a high point of around 62m AOD some 1.4km away to the south-east (Woodlands Avenue/ University of Reading Campus) and 62m AOD some 1.4km away to the east (Water Tower at Little Gogs), beyond Thames Valley Business Park. Land to the north, west and south-west are located at a similar level to the Site, being located along the River Thames flood plain.

The Site is surrounded to the north by the river Thames and Reading Marina, with the Kennet and Avon canal to the south-west and joining the River Thames immediately to the west of the Site.

A review of implications of the Proposed Development on these water bodies from an ecological perspective are outlined in the **Ecology** section, with the hydrological implications outlined in the **Water Environment** section. However, both the canal, River Thames and Marina significantly contribute to the immediate setting and local character of the Site.

LAND COVER AND LANDSCAPE PATTERN OF THE SITE AND SURROUNDING AREAS

The c1.9 hectare Site, located at central grid reference SU 73463 73895, is bordered by the River Thames to the north and north-west, Thames Valley Park Drive to the east, parkland to the west and the railway line to the south. The general landscape is urban to the south, west and east, with open water and more rural land to the north-east, with natural habitats along the water's edge.

The Site itself is predominantly thick scrubland with scattered trees. The north - eastern section of the Site is well maintained, containing a clearing of mown grass, timber edged steps, seating and surrounded by trees. The clearing contained a pitched tent. The south - eastern section of the Site

contains a derelict area of hard standing, piles of rubbish and debris and edged by encroaching trees and scrub.

The central and western section of the Site contains largely scrub vegetation and trees, not readily accessible, but with small clearings and informal paths and evidence of camping and informal use present. The Site is also littered with debris, including metal sheeting, barbed wire, concrete blocks and litter.

The Site has a semi-enclosed almost rural feel due to the unmanaged vegetation, and being located adjacent to the River Thames with views across water towards a further tree filled landscape. Periods of relative tranquillity are obtained but interrupted by traffic noise in the south-east (A3290), railway noise in the south (mainline railway), maritime noise (motorboats to the north) and by aviation noise across the Site due to the proximity to Heathrow airport. Views are also partially interrupted by large electricity pylons and the elevated railway infrastructure.

DESIGNATED NATURE CONSERVATION SITES AND ANCIENT WOODLAND

There are no Local Nature Reserves (LNR) or blocks of ancient woodland located within 500m of the Site. The nearest is an unnamed block some 850m to the north of the Site on an island within one of the Caversham Lakes.

There are no national nature reserves or country parks within 1km of the Site boundary

PLANNING DESIGNATIONS

There are no Sites of Urban Landscape Value (SULV) or Areas of special character located within 1km of the site.

TRANQUILLITY

Elements of the Site are relatively tranquil, given its proximity to large infrastructure. The eastern boundary is located adjacent to a main road and traffic is visible and audible. The southern boundary is located adjacent to the railway embankment and is therefore partially screened from the highways and buildings beyond although periodic railway noise is clearly audible. The eastern boundary of the Site is therefore the least tranquil, along with the southern boundary. Further north towards the River Thames the tranquillity, or perception of, increases, with the tranquillity disrupted periodically by aviation noise, rail noise from passing trains and from boat engines. The thick vegetation cover within and surrounding the Site helps provide some visual screening (and perception of noise screening) particularly in summer with rustling leaves,

CULTURAL CONTEXT

There are no statutory designated heritage assets located within the Site but there are three listed building located within 500m of the Site boundary as follows:

Table 3.1: Listed Buildings within 500 m of the Site

NAME	GRADE	ENGLISH HERITAGE BUILDING ID	NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE (NGR)	DISTANCE/ DIRECTION FROM SITE
Railway Bridge And Attached Accommodation Bridge Over River Kennet At Su 7306 7381	II	39279	SU 73060 73810	250m west
St Bartholomew's Church Hall	II	39024	SU 73599 73365	330m south

NAME	GRADE	ENGLISH HERITAGE BUILDING ID	NATIONAL GRID REFERENCE (NGR)	DISTANCE/ DIRECTION FROM SITE
Newton School	II	39163	SU 73039 73643	490m south-west

The Proposed Development will not directly impact upon any statutory designated heritage asset, although their significance in terms of landscape is defined in terms of their contribution to the creation of local landscape character. A review of implications of the route options in heritage terms (including setting of heritage assets) is provided in the **Archaeology and Cultural Heritage** section.

Reading Cemetery is on the English Heritage Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest (Grade II). It is located approximately 530m to the south of the Site and was laid out in 1842-3 over c4 ha at the east edge of the town by the principal architect Nathaniel Briant (1813-49). By the 1870s the cemetery was extensively planted with trees, a significant proportion being coniferous, with a specimen planted at the centre of each of the roundels which punctuate the path system. By the 1890s the cemetery had been extended to the east by a further 1 ha, apparently in conjunction with the development of terraced houses in St Bartholomew's Road which enclosed the extension to the north, east and south.

The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) is located approximately 4.5km away to the north-west of the Site. Given the intervening vegetation and low-rise nature of the Proposed Development, it is not anticipated that there would be any intervisibility between the AONB and the Site.

Public Rights of Way

There are no Public Rights of Way (PRoW) located within the Site itself but there are a number located adjacent to or surrounding the Site, as outlined in the table below.

Table 3.2: PROW within 500 m of the Site

PROW TYPE	ROUTE DESCRIPTION	DISTANCE AND DIRECTION FROM SITE
National Trail Footpath	National Trail footpath running for 184 miles from its source in the Cotswold hills to the sea. Passing through peaceful water meadows, unspoilt rural villages, historical towns and cities, and finally through the heart of London to end at the Thames Barrier in Greenwich. As it follows the banks of the river, the path is flat, making for easy walking.	20m north / north-west
Sustrans National Cycle Route No. 4: Thames Valley (Section 2: Putney /bridge to Reading)	A 432 mile long distance route between London (Greenwich) and Fishguard. The route is fully open and signed in both directions. Section 2 from Putney Bridge to Reading, loosely follows the River Thames, passing through Richmond Park and Windsor Great Park. This section of Route 4 is also known as the Thames Valley cycle route; at Reading the Thames Valley cycle route continues to Oxford on National Route 5 whilst Route 4 continues west.	20m north / north-west
Sustrans National Cycle Route No. 5: Thames Valley	This long distance route, currently 372 miles long, connects Reading and Holyhead. National Route 5 begins in Reading and follows the northern half of the Thames Valley cycle route crossing the Chiltern Hills and passing through Wallingford, Didcot and Abingdon.	220m west

KEY SITE FEATURES - LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

The study of Landscape Character is undertaken at different scales, with each larger scale adding greater detail onto the previous layer. Natural England has undertaken to characterise these areas of similar landscape character, resulting in the creation of National Character Areas (NCAs), which was updated in 2005.

There are a total of 159 NCAs and the Site and On line Improvement A329(M) fall into Countryside Character Volume 7: South East and London and within National Character Area 115: Thames Valley. The Thames Valley is a wedge-shaped area widening from Reading to include the Bracknell, Slough, Windsor areas, the Colne Valley and the south-west London fringes. The key characteristics of the Thames Valley Character Area include the following:

- Hydrological floodplain of the River Thames, which as a landscape feature provides unity to the large areas of fragmented poor agricultural land;
- The western Thames valley which is wide and flat with the river barely discernible, occupying only a small part of the wider geological floodplain;
- Woodlands which characterise the north-western part of the Character Area, extending up to the southern edge of the Chiltern Hills;
- Within the south of the Character Area, the open Thames floodplain dominates with its associated flat grazing land becoming characterised by a number of formal historic landscapes on higher ground such as Windsor Park; and
- Towards London within the east of the Character Area, urban influences dominate with a dense network of roads including the M25 corridor, Heathrow Airport, railway lines, golf courses, pylon lines, reservoirs, extensive mineral extraction and numerous flooded gravel pits.

At a district level, Berkshire has undertaken its own character assessment (2003) with the Site located within Landscape Character Type B: Lower Valley Floor and more specifically within area B4 Hurley Thames. Key characteristics of Character Area B4 include the following:

- A long meandering corridor of land stretching from near Sonning to Hurley and Cookham, including the more well-known towns of Henley-on-Thames and Marlow;
- Enclosing scarp/dipslopes of the valley sides;
- Considerable recreational use/ nodes such as the Thames Path (National Trail) and marinas/locks such as at Hurley and Henley;
- Large numbers of prestigious, detached residences, some of high architectural quality, creates a distinct ambience and sense of 'exclusivity';
- Of particular note are the impressive mansions directly overlooking the river characterised by long gardens sloping down to the banks where there is often a small dock for harbouring boats. Many of these originate from the 18th century;
- Well wooded, creating an attractive setting to the river and its recreational uses;
- Rural context shows signs of decline with large arable fields enclosed by gappy hawthorn monoculture hedgerows or post and wire fences.; and
- Some important intact wetland habitats remain including Cock Marsh near Cookham Dean.

The Landscape Strategy for B4 is identified as follows:

- Overall the strength of character is good and the condition, although showing some decline is generally intact.

- The strategy should be to conserve the existing character and restore those aspects of landscape that have become weakened or fragmented and to prevent further deterioration. In particular it will be essential to manage visitors to prevent erosion and damage to fragile ecological habitats and to limit further encroachment of buildings along the river corridor, which should retain a predominantly soft and natural riverbank.

VISUAL AMENITY AND VISUAL RECEPTORS

The thick vegetation within and surrounding the Site helps to create a sense of enclosure, limiting some views out and creating a rural character. The trees within the Site also contribute to local views, with tree canopies creating the skyline of many views. Views are typically disrupted to the south by railway infrastructure, large electricity pylons and glimpses beyond the railway infrastructure of the large gas cylinders.

The following visual receptors are located within 250m of the Site and may have intervisibility with the Site:

- Residents along/off and users of Liverpool Road;
- Visitors to/workers at Suttons Business Park (Sutton Park Avenue);
- Users of/ visitors to/workers at the Thames Valley Park;
- Visitors to/ workers at Oracle Scotland Ltd office block (Thames Valley Park Drive);
- Users of the A3290 and railway line;
- Users of/ visitors to/ workers at the Redgrave Pinsent Rowing Lake;
- Users of/ visitors to/ workers along the River Thames and River Thames Long Distance Path;
- Users of/ visitors to/ workers at the Wokingham Waterside Centre.

Given the built form and infrastructure to the south, west and east of the Site, and the generally low-rise nature of the Proposed Development, it is considered highly unlikely that wider visual receptors will have intervisibility with the Site. There may be some intervisibility with slightly wider receptors to the north of the Site due to limited built form. Receptors may include:

- Users of/ visitors to/ workers at the Thames & Kennet Marina, Henley Road.

SUMMARY OF POTENTIAL LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL CONSTRAINTS

The Site has the potential to affect or alter the following:

- The local undulating topography, albeit localised and surrounded by man-made features;
- Setting of listed buildings;
- Local visual amenity for users of surrounding PRow network, river, marina, rowing lakes, Wokingham waterside Centre and Thames Valley Park;
- Local visual amenity for users of surrounding offices, businesses and highways; and
- The landscape character of identified Berkshire landscape character areas (area B4 Hurley Thames) primarily at construction, through change in an area of wooded green space to hard-surfaced construction/ infrastructure.

Construction activities associated with the Proposed Development have the potential to disrupt the existing landscape character of the Site and surrounding area, adversely affect the use and tranquillity of adjacent PRow; adversely affect the setting of listed buildings; and adversely affect the existing visual amenity of local residents, visitors, users of surrounding attractions and PRow and workers at local businesses. The construction activities will introduce many uncharacteristic

elements into the landscape and local visual amenity including artificial lighting, earthworks, removal of mature trees, machinery, plant, fencing and temporary accommodation.

Operational activities, although less disruptive than construction activities, will still have the potential to affect local landscape character and visual amenity through changes in the soundscape and lighting associated with increases in traffic as well as changes in views and visual amenity due to replacement of mature trees and scrub vegetation with new hard-standing, lighting columns and traffic.

OPPORTUNITIES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Opportunities to avoid or minimise landscape and visual effects include the following:

- The addition of stands of trees within/ around the Park and Ride site or the introduction of new boundary hedging with hedgerow trees can limit views of new infrastructure and enhance or at least maintain the sense of a more rural waterside landscape;
- Retention of mature trees around the boundaries and/ or within the Site wherever possible, particularly of high value trees;
- The design for the Park and Ride site should be accompanied by a landscape design plan to indicate proposed and retained planting; and
- Lighting should be in keeping with the existing minor road network to minimise light spill and glare.

Recommendations for further studies and surveys include the following:

- The identified landscape character assessment for the Site area (Character Area B4 Hurley Thames) is not wholly representative of the Site and therefore more detailed local landscape character assessments should be undertaken to understand the potential change to the local landscape character of the site. This should be done as part of more comprehensive landscape appraisal and / or LVIA to identify key views and areas for potential landscape mitigation planting;
- A tree survey to BS5837: 2012 standards is recommended to determine the location and value of the tree resource. This should include any hedgerows in the vicinity of the Site; and
- Production of a landscape mitigation planting plan.

