

# *Milltown Way, Leek*

*Appeal by Gladman Developments Ltd*

*Appeal Ref: APP/B3438/W/15/3005261*

*LPA Ref: SMD/2014/0618*

*Landscape and Visual Impact  
Mark Steele Summary Proof of Evidence*

*on behalf of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council*

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## **1.0 Introduction**

### **1.1 Experience and Scope**

**1.1.1** My name is Mark Steele and I am a fully qualified landscape architect and a chartered member of the Landscape Institute. I have over thirty years' experience of landscape planning and design in Great Britain, Ireland, Australia and Hong Kong.

**1.1.2** MSC was instructed to act on behalf of Staffordshire Moorlands District Council in July 2015, to address matters relating to the landscape and visual impact of the proposed residential development at land off Milltown Way, Leek, Staffordshire.

## **2.0 Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Methodologies**

### **2.1 Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment Methodologies**

**2.1.1** The FPCR LVIA confirms that it '*...has been prepared based upon the 'Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment, Third Edition (GLVIA3)'*'.

The MSC landscape and visual impact assessment (LVIA) methodology accords with current guidance and is set out in MSC Appendix A.

### **2.2 Baseline Studies**

**2.2.1** A key landscape and visual consideration is the setting of Leek (as described in the '*Leek Settlement Character Assessment*'). The FPCR LVIA methodology does not describe how the effects upon the setting are assessed.

2.2.2 GLVIA3 does not define 'landscape setting'. However GLVIA3 paragraph 5.5 refers to *'techniques of townscape character assessment'* (which tend to assess landscape character as well as views towards the settlement from the surrounding landscape (with a particular emphasis on landmark features) as well as views from the settlement towards the landscape).

Therefore the setting of a town is important when experienced from within or on the margins of the settlement. This is recognised in the Council's Adopted Core Strategy, Policy DC3 (Landscape and Settlement Setting) which refers to *'...important views into and out of the settlement'*.

## 2.3 Landscape Effects

2.3.1 GLVIA3 confirms that *'The fact that an area of landscape is not designated either nationally or locally does not mean that it does not have any value'*.

The *'Leek Settlement Character Assessment'* identifies an area to the southeast of Leek as an *'important landscape setting'*. Therefore, although not designated, the landscape is nevertheless of value.

2.3.2 GLVIA3 confirms that *'Landscape receptors need to be assessed firstly in terms of their sensitivity, combining judgements of their susceptibility to the type of change or development proposed and the value attached to the landscape'*.

However, the FPCR LVIA fails to combine the assessments of landscape susceptibility and value to give a level of landscape sensitivity as well as

the landscape magnitude criteria to give a magnitude of landscape change.

## 2.4 Visual effects

2.4.1 The FPCR LVIA also fails to combine the assessments of visual susceptibility and value to give a level of visual sensitivity as well as the visual magnitude criteria to give a level of magnitude of visual effect.

2.4.2 With reference to the significance of visual of effects, the FPCR LVIA use of the term '*decision process*' is inappropriate as GLVIA3 confirms that LVIA is a tool to identify and assesses the significance of effects.

Nevertheless it may be assumed that the FPCR LVIA sets the threshold of significance at '*Major/ Moderate*'.

2.4.3 The MSC methodology takes a more flexible approach which considers that '*very major*' through to '*moderate/major*' levels of effect are significant and that a '*moderate*' level effect may be either significant or not, subject to detailed assessment.

## 3.0 Landscape Impact Assessment

### 3.1 Landscape Designations

3.1.1 The site is not within a designated landscape. However, the '*Staffordshire Landscape Character SPG*' explains that the Structure Plan adopts a '*character approach*' to landscape protection and restoration, and consequently it makes no reference to local designations...'

3.1.2 Therefore the findings of the *'Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment of Staffordshire Moorlands'* are a key consideration.

### 3.2 *Landscape Character Baseline*

3.2.1 The *'Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment of Staffordshire Moorlands'* Leek settlement description states that *'Important landscape settings to the south east extend up into the town as green wedges'*.

The proposed development is located in a *'green wedge'* and the Pickwood Recreation Ground is mapped as part of the *'important landscape setting'*.

3.2.2 There is currently informal public access to the development site and as a consequence the setting of leek (and its skyline) can be appreciated from within the site as well as the Pickwood Recreation Ground.

### 3.3 *Landscape Character of the Site and Environs*

3.3.1 The FPCR LVIA description of the site and its environs contains inaccuracies:

- The *'green corridor'* is not to *'the west of the site'*;
- The development site is not *'surrounded on three sides by housing'*;
- The absence of a buffer to development on Milltown Way identifies the need for landscape treatment rather than providing a justification for further residential development; and
- It is inaccurate to state that *'the adjacent recreation ground lacks character and contributes to the site's urban edge character'*, as the *'Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment: Open Space Assessment'* describes it as a *'...valuable recreational ground providing a development buffer on the edge of a recent*

*development*'. The assessment also highlights panoramic views of Leek and the countryside beyond from the *'west to north east'*.

3.3.2 The MSC assessment of the landscape character finds that:

- The scale of the landscape is both intimate, as well as expansive;
- The complexity of the landscape is strongly influenced by topography and the grounds of Pickwood Hall, as both have determined historic landuse and in particular the extent of urban development;
- There are picturesque views across the Leek skyline; and
- Whilst the proximity of the proposed development site to the town centre and residential development compromises tranquility, its rural landscape characteristics provide a strong landscape contrast that enhances its role as a *'important landscape setting'* to Leek.

In conclusion the site and its environs not only enhance the setting of Leek they provide excellent vantage points for viewing and appreciating the setting of Leek.

3.3.3 The Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment for the *'Dissected Sandstone Cloughs and Valleys'* Regional Landscape Character Type states that the *'Planning for Landscape Change Supplementary Planning Guidance to Staffordshire and Stoke on Trent Structure Plan, identifies this landscape character type as locally very sensitive to the impacts of development and land use change'*

Furthermore, the *'visual character'* description that *'small intimate wooded valleys alternate with distant views...'* is exemplified by the proposed development site and its environs.

3.3.4 The Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment undertakes '*...a more in depth assessment identifying the distinctive qualities of the individual settlements*'. These include:

- '*Key characteristics and features of the landscape character types present in the area (e.g. views, townscape setting, visually prominent landscape features, skylines etc)*;
- '*Importance of landscape setting to the settlement and the relationship between the two including the presence of any 'natural' limits to development*'.

The environs of the proposed development site provide unrivalled (and therefore important) public and private views of the distinctive townscape skyline, its visually prominent landmark buildings and its juxtaposition with a '*rural*' landscape.

Furthermore, the valley topography to the northwest and north forms a '*natural limit*' to the town centre, the grounds of Pickwood Hall form a boundary to the west and the Pickwood Recreation Ground forms a '*strong and defensible*' boundary to residential development to the northeast.

### 3.4 *Landscape Character Impact Assessment*

3.4.1 The FPCR LVIA does not specifically assess effects on the Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment '*Settlement Setting*' or '*Visual Open Space*' and finds no significant effects on the '*Dissected Sandstone Cloughs and Valleys*' LCT.

3.4.2 The MSC assessment finds significant, adverse and permanent landscape effects upon the northern part the *'Dissected Sandstone Cloughs and Valleys'* LCT Sub-Area 1c: *'Cheddleston and Longsdon'*, the *'green wedge'* within the southeastern Leek *'Settlement Setting'*, the Pickwood Recreation Ground *'Visual Open Space'* as well as the site itself.

## 4.0 Visual Impact Assessment

### 4.1 Visual Baseline and Viewpoints

4.1.1 The selection of viewpoints is questionable, as LVIA Viewpoint 7 is orientated away from the proposed development and Viewpoints 9 to 19 are from locations with limited (or no) views of the site.

4.1.2 In the opinion of MSC there should also have been more representative viewpoints located within the Pickwood Recreation Ground and residential properties to the east of the proposed development.

### 4.2 Viewpoint Assessment

4.2.1 The FPCR LVIA finds short term, adverse significant visual effects at LVIA Viewpoints 1, 4 and 6 and no long term significant visual effects.

4.2.2 The MSC assessment finds permanent and adverse significant visual effects at LVIA Viewpoints 1 to 6.

4.2.3 The MSC assessment also finds permanent, adverse and significant visual effects on users of the path between the Pickwood Recreation Ground and town centre, as well as residential properties on the edge of Leek and on the eastern edge of the proposed development.



## 5.0 Review of Siting and Design

### 5.1 Siting

5.1.1 MSC finds that the proposed development does not respect or enhance the *'important landscape setting'* identified in the *'Landscape and Settlement Character Assessment'* and that the *'green infrastructure'* claimed to surround the proposed development is part of the existing *'green wedge'* that forms the *'important landscape setting'* of Leek.

5.1.2 MSC finds that the FPCR LVIA does not properly assess the *'Local Character (including landscape setting)'* and the proposed development is imposed upon rather than integrated with its *'surrounding context'*.

Neither does the proposed development *'reinforce and sustain local distinctiveness'* nor does it *'contribute to a sense of place'*. In addition the FPCR LVIA does not give sufficient weight to *'views into and out of'* the proposed development site.

5.1.3 The MSC assessment finds that the FPCR LVIA does not properly take into account *'...the local context and character, and those features which contribute to local character, having regard to national and local design guidance, landscape character assessments...'* and in particular the *'important landscape setting'* of Leek identified in the *'Leek Settlement Character Assessment'*.

5.1.4 The Design and Access Statement claims that *'The proposals will retain the existing green buffer along the south eastern edge of Leek by the retention of the majority of the site as multifunctional green infrastructure, with housing within only the flatter eastern portion of the site'*.

However the *'green buffer'* as well as the *'flatter eastern portion of the site'* forms an integral part of the setting of Leek. Furthermore, the site forms the foreground to picturesque views of the distinctive Leek townscape skyline (particularly when viewed from the Pickwood Recreation Ground and associated path linking to the town centre).

5.1.5 Design and Access Statement Figure 10 is flawed, as the Pickwood Recreation Ground has been excluded from the *'green infrastructure'*. This gives the false impression that the development is an extension to existing residential development, when the development is actually an intrusion into the *'green infrastructure'* with only the eastern corner juxtaposed with existing residential development.

## 5.2 Design

5.2.1 The Design and Access Statement places an emphasis on the design of the proposed development. However, no landscape design or mitigation measures can adequately address the inappropriate siting of the development within the *'important landscape setting'* of Leek.

## 6.0 Conclusion

### 6.1 Conclusion

6.1.1 The MSC evidence concludes that (contrary to the FPCR LVIA findings) the proposed development would give rise to permanent, adverse and significant landscape and visual impacts and that these effects would *'...harm or be detrimental to the character of the local and wider landscape or the setting of a settlement and important views into and out of the settlement'*.

Therefore, the landscape and visual elements of the Reasons for Refusal identified in the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council Decision Notice are justified.

*Mark Steele – October 2015*