

Committee: Planning Policy Working Group

Agenda Item

Date: 28 November 2016

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Title: Thaxted Neighbourhood Plan: Evidence Base documents

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Summary

1. In preparing their Neighbourhood Plan (NP), Thaxted NP Group has commissioned a Heritage Assessment and a Landscape Assessment to help inform the NP. The documents can be viewed on the [Thaxted Neighbourhood Plan website](#). A summary of the documents produced by the Group is appended to this report.
2. The group has asked the Council to include these reports as part of the Council's local plan evidence and take it into account in the local plan process.

Recommendations

3. To note the documents and include them as part of the local plan evidence base.

Financial Implications

4. None

Background Papers

5. The following papers were referred to by the author in the preparation of this report and are available for inspection from the author of the report.

None

Impact

- 6.

Communication/Consultation	These documents will form part of the background studies to support the neighbourhood plan when on consultation.
Community Safety	N/A.
Equalities	N/A
Health and Safety	N/A

Human Rights/Legal Implications	N/A
Sustainability	N/A
Ward-specific impacts	Thaxted and the Eastons
Workforce/Workplace	N/A

Situation

7. Thaxted Neighbourhood Plan Group has commissioned Heritage Consultants, Grove Lewis to undertake a detailed analysis of the importance of heritage views. They considered each of the main approach routes but also views into and out of specific sites where development has been suggested through the District Council's 'Call for Sites'.
8. Liz Lake Associates undertook a comprehensive study of the rural hinterland of the village. The report records the physical form of the landscape but also considers the consequences of development on sixteen parcels of land which can be used to access development suitability.

Risk Analysis

9.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
If the NP evidence is not included and considered in the Local Plan process vital local evidence may be overlooked when allocating sites in the parish.	1 - Low	Delays in adopting the Local Plan	The NP, if 'Made' will become part of the Development Plan. The Council are working with all NP to ensure the Local Plan and NP will be aligned and sharing evidence is part of that process.

1 = Little or no risk or impact

2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.

3 = Significant risk or impact – action required

4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.

ASSESSMENT OF HERITAGE SETTING – A SUMMARY OF A REPORT BY GROVER LEWIS, AUGUST 2016

THE NEED FOR AN ASSESSMENT

Much has been written about the centre of Thaxted. The importance and the setting of its listed buildings within the Conservation Area is well documented and is in any case, the subject of a detailed character study being undertaken by volunteers as a part of the Neighbourhood Plan evidence gathering.

The importance of two of our most iconic buildings however, the church and the windmill, is as much related to their setting within the wider landscape as it is to their innate architectural quality. Both church and windmill are dominant features in the wider landscape and are seen from just about every approach to the village. In planning for the future of Thaxted it is therefore important to fully understand the relative importance of the various views of our most important buildings, and the Conservation Area within which they sit, in order to assess the impact any new development would have.

THE COMMISSION

Heritage Consultants, Grover Lewis were therefore commissioned to undertake a detailed analysis specifically of the importance of heritage views. They were asked to provide an objective assessment on the wider setting of our key heritage assets based on Historic England guidance and other town planning principles. They were to consider each of the main approach routes but also views into and out of specific sites where development was being contemplated under Uttlesford's Local Plan 'Call for Sites'.

Their report has now been published and is available to view on the Neighbourhood Plan website. This brief summary provides an overview of the approach and findings.

FOCUS

The report focuses principally on the setting of the windmill and the church, these being the two most important heritage features in terms of prominence. It also however considers the potential impact of development on other listed buildings that are on the periphery of the Conservation Area (or beyond it) where these have a visual or functional relationship with a possible development site. Although Grover Lewis's terms of reference do not extend to the area covered by the Conservation Area itself they have expressed a view that the Thaxted Conservation Area gains considerable significance from its setting within the open countryside. This is particularly so on the south and west side where the Conservation Area boundary immediately abuts open fields.

THE APPROACHES TO THE VILLAGE

From Saffron Walden – the church is a dominant feature particularly from the Sampford Road junction, from adjoining footpaths and from a number of other viewpoints along the route. The village itself is largely obscured however, by hedges and 20th century suburban housing.

From Debden – there is a *'very high degree of intervisibility between the Conservation Area and its countryside and its setting'* along this approach to the village. Both the church and the windmill, as well as the URC, are prominent. The juxtaposition of the Conservation Area and the surrounding landscape is a key factor in determining the significance of the Conservation Area on its western side. As you enter the Conservation Area itself the church provides a powerful stop to the vista along Bolford Street.

From Broxtden – a similarly close relationship between the Conservation Area and its surrounding countryside is also apparent on the Park Street entrance. Viewpoints here are

however at a lower level and greater prominence is therefore given to the church and windmill than to the village as a whole. You come across the built environment suddenly and are straight into the Conservation Area. The relationship between the Conservation Area and its rural setting is therefore of considerable importance in views from this direction.

From Dunmow – with limited roadside planting there are fine panoramic views of the village along this route.

From Bardfield – views on entering the village from the Bardfield direction are less spectacular. This is due to the continuous 20th century ribbon development. Similarly, there are no significant outward views or intervisibility between the Conservation Area and the surrounding countryside. There are however powerful views of the church particularly as you get closer to the centre.

From Great Sampford – There are prominent views of the church from some considerable distance out. The Thatcher's Grange development is however intrusive.

ASSESSMENT OF IMPACT

In considering the impact that specific developments would have on heritage setting, an assessment has been carried out related to both the importance or sensitivity of the heritage assets affected and also the scale or severity of the impact. Sensitivity levels are based upon:

High sensitivity – Grade I or Grade II* listed;

Medium sensitivity – Grade II listed;

Low sensitivity – locally listed or non-designated assets.

Scale or severity is then categorised as:

Major; Moderate; Minor; Negligible; or Neutral.

INDIVIDUAL SITES

The sites considered have been numbered in accordance with the numbering given to them in the 'Call for Sites'.

04: Land south of Sampford Road – *'Given the serial nature of the views ... (of the church along Sampford Road)... and taking into account the harmful impact already caused by the Thatcher's Grange/Bellrope Meadow developments, the potential impact on the grade I listed parish church is considered to be major/moderate adverse'.*

17: Land to the east of The Mead – *'Low-rise development would be unlikely to intrude significantly into views...(of the church)'.* Glimpsed roofscapes above the hedges would however sit uncomfortably in views of the church from Sampford Road.

14: Land at Claypits Farm – the replacement of existing buildings with sympathetic new development could enhance the setting of Claypits Farmhouse and the Conservation Area but *'an ill-conceived or over-intensive development would almost certainly harm the setting of both the listed building and the Conservation Area.'* *'Development of the eastern open part of the site would threaten to obscure the fine view of ...the church from a well-used public footpath.'*

15: Land east of Park Street – *'development... would result in a major change to the immediate countryside setting of the Conservation Area at a point that makes a well-defined entrance into the built-up area'.* There would be moderate adverse impact on heritage assets of medium sensitivity.

06: Enclosed Pasture Land opposite Totmans Farm – development would change the openness and verdant character and would adversely impact both the Grade II listed Totmans and the nature of the entrance to the Conservation Area.

08: Land east of Dunmow Road, to the north of Prior's Hall – ‘Development of this substantial rolling tract of open countryside would introduce an alien and incongruous feature that would seriously degrade the setting of...(the church and windmill) ... and the Conservation Area.’

CONCLUSION

Thaxted is considered to be a fine village that has retained its historic character. Its Conservation Area boundary defines well the historic core which is all the more important for its juxtaposition with its surrounding open countryside. Development on any of the potential sites considered could potentially have some degree of adverse impact on the setting of the heritage assets and/or the Conservation Area itself. The only site where development could possibly enhance the setting of heritage assets is 14: Claypits Farm where a sensitive scheme limited to the site of the existing buildings could improve the setting of the farmhouse itself without any significantly detrimental effect on the views of the church.

ASSESSMENT OF LANDSCAPE CHARACTER – A SUMMARY OF A REPORT BY LIZ LAKE ASSOCIATES, SEPTEMBER 2016

THE NEED FOR AN ASSESSMENT

The landscape that surrounds Thaxted is a vital part of its character. Not only does it provide a setting and context for the historic core but it is also important for its own sake. This was highlighted in the recent decision in the Gladman appeal against refusal of permission for development on land adjacent to Walden Road. Recognising this fact, Liz Lake Associates, a specialist firm of Landscape Architects were commissioned to undertake a comprehensive study of the rural hinterland of the village.

Using a combination of desk-top study and fieldwork Liz Lake have produced a report which not only records the physical form of the landscape but also considers the consequences of development on some sixteen different land parcels. The intention is to provide a helpful tool in the formulation of the Neighbourhood Plan which can be used to assess development suitability.

LANDSCAPE REVIEW

First, the report provides us with a comprehensive review of all of the previous studies that have been carried out relating to landscape character in our area from general guidance to regional level assessments, to Thaxted specific analysis. This is set against a background of relevant Town Planning policies and specific designations.

A comprehensive catalogue of photographs (now held on disc in the C.I.C.) was presented to accompany the report and to provide a record of the nature of the landscape as viewed from all principal approach routes into the centre.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

In terms of general visual amenity Liz Lake's conclusion is that views from the north-west; west; south-west; south; and south-east are all of particular importance – ***‘Certain views of the nucleated settlement, punctuated by the landmarks of the church and windmill and surrounded by expansive undulating countryside, are exceptional and iconic’.***

From the east; north-east; and north views are ***‘more restricted by intervening topography, vegetation and built-form’.*** Criticism is made against recent development that

has taken place – ***‘In places a harsh urban-rural interface is apparent where recent development abuts the surrounding countryside’.***

INDIVIDUAL PARCELS

Specific analysis of individual sectors is based on sixteen parcels of land defined by common characteristics which are referred to as Local Parish Landscape Character Areas (LPLCAs). The boundaries of each parcel are shown on a map forming a part of an appendix to the Landscape Character report. Each parcel has been considered in terms of its potential to accept future development and pro-formas are attached as an appendix which summarise the individual qualities and characteristics of each parcel. Conclusions are then drawn as to the capacity for development categorised as High; Medium-High; Medium; Low-Medium; or Low.

In the final analysis all parcels are seen to have significant sensitivity and no areas are considered to have a High capacity or even a Medium-High capacity to accommodate development. The areas where development would be least harmful are in the Medium category and these are parcel numbers 5, 12, and 13 (Claypits Farm/Totmans Farm; land beyond The Mead; and the recreation ground respectively). All other parcels are considered to have a very limited capacity to accommodate development.

OBJECTIVES AND POLICIES

To assist in the drafting of the Neighbourhood Plan, recommendations are made as to objectives and policies relating to Landscape. The following general principles are recommended:

Strategy Objectives – To conserve *‘Seek to protect and enhance positive landscape features that are essential in contributing to local distinctiveness and sense of place through effective planning and positive land management measures’.*

Strategy Objectives – To enhance *‘Seek to improve the integrity of the landscape, and reinforce its character, by introducing new and/or enhanced elements where distinctive features or characteristics are absent’.*

Suggestions are then made in relation to landscape planning guidelines specific to each parcel mostly related to the protection of existing views, field patterns, landscape features and, where it would be beneficial, enhancements and improvements (e.g. for Claypits Farm). Suggestions are also made on a parcel-specific basis in relation to land management guidelines. These relate to a large extent, to hedgerow and boundary conservation and the management of ecological structure.

CONCLUSION

Whilst this study only considers development potential from a landscape perspective (ignoring other planning and practical issues such as highways and access, and sustainability) it is clear that Landscape is a highly important factor in considering scope for development. It has been demonstrated what everyone probably knew, that the landscape around Thaxted is special and highly sensitive to change. Viewed in this context, any new development should probably be restricted to the already urban core rather than extending the village further into its surrounding rural fringe.