

Landscape and Visual Statement

File Ref: 22131 Abingdon Southern Bypass

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Introduction

1.1 This landscape and visual statement provides a preliminary strategic overview of the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass route and its potential landscape and visual effects. In doing so, an initial desk based review of baseline material has been undertaken to understand the landscape and visual character surrounding the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass. In addition, and subsequent to the desk based work, a site visit to document and photograph the landscape and visual character of the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass has also been undertaken and this landscape and visual statement constitutes the output from the site visit undertaken on the 16th April 2013 summarising the key landscape and visual issues including:

- key landscape features of the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass route and its context;
- landscape character assessment; and
- visual baseline.

1.2 This statement should be read in conjunction with the following illustrative material:

- **Figure 1:** Landscape and Visual Appraisal Plan at 1:10,000 scale @ A1
- **Site Context Photographs (1 – 5)** which illustrate the character of selected viewpoints towards the proposed route.

Background

1.3 The Vale of White Horse District Council has published a Draft Local Plan 2029 for consultation. The Draft Plan identifies a possible long-term approach to alleviating traffic

congestion in the south side of Abingdon on Thames would involve the provision of a new southern by-pass for the town. In section 5.31, the Draft Plan states that:

"The Abingdon on Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area is highly constrained in transport terms. The most significant constraints are linked with the challenge of creating appropriate crossings of the River Thames, the historic town centre of Abingdon on Thames (with its narrow roads) and capacity issues associated with the A34."

- 1.4 Core Policy 11: Safeguarding of land for transport schemes in the Abingdon on Thames and Oxford Fringe Sub-Area states that *"land is required to be safeguarded, as shown by the map in Appendix E."* Although Section 5.37 states that *"the detailed design of any schemes for which land has been safeguarded has not yet been undertaken"*.
- 1.5 'Topic Paper 6: Transport and Accessibility' of the Consultation Draft states that Oxfordshire County Council commissioned a study (Abingdon-on-Thames bypass, Initial Route Assessment Report) in 2009, although it is unclear if an assessment of alternative routes has been undertaken and it is therefore queried whether the proposed route is the most suitable option in landscape and visual terms.
- 1.6 In 2008, the Vale of White Horse District Council also commissioned a landscape study to evaluate the potential landscape implications of further residential development to the south-west of Abingdon. This document identifies that particular areas such as Stonehill are not robust enough to accommodate moderate or large scale residential development. The land being safeguarded for the proposed route crosses directly through the woodland surrounding the property which is considered particularly sensitive to development. Consideration is given to the above report within this statement; however any judgements are primarily based on initial desk work and site survey work which involved a walk over of the route on the 16th April 2013.

The Development Proposal

- 1.7 The proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass route links the A415 at Culham in the south-east to the A415 adjacent to the A34 in the north-west. The majority of the proposed route lies within the Vale of White Horse District west of the River Thames, while to the east of the River, the route crosses adjacent to the settlement of Culham which is washed over by Green Belt within South Oxfordshire District. The route requires a new crossing over the River Thames and River Ock, passes adjacent to the Southern Town Park and Abingdon Tennis Club and crosses through Abingdon Rugby Club; it also crosses a National Trail (Thames Path) and a number of Public Rights of Way (PROW), a flooded gravel works (reservoirs), the Ock Meadow Nature Reserve, the Scheduled Ancient Monument of Sutton Wick settlement site and lies partly within Culham Conservation Area and adjacent to a number of Grade II

Listed Buildings. In addition, the route will require the removal of a number of trees with Tree Preservation Orders east of Drayton Road and appears to cross along the edge of Culham Conservation Area where all trees (over 75 mm (3inches) diameter at breast height) are protected.

- 1.8 Set out below is a review of baseline material which identifies those receptors with the potential to experience significant adverse landscape and visual effects as a result of the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass.

Site Location & Context

- 1.9 The proposed route is located close to existing development on the southern edge of the settlement of Abingdon and north of the settlement of Culham as illustrated with reference to **Figure 1**. Landform is generally low lying across the route and the local area acts as floodplain for the River Thames. Landform to the east falls gently towards the River Thames at Culham (approximately 50m AOD) which is located close to the east of the proposed route (see **Figure 1**). The route corridor is partially influenced by development within Abingdon, the sewage works along the centre of the route and the busy road networks and pylons which cross the area. Although the area to the west of the River is influenced visually by development, the River Thames and particularly the areas to the east surrounding Culham retain a strong sense of tranquillity including views along the river to St Helens Church which is prominent. Distant views of the Didcot Power Station are afforded from parts of the route particularly from the more elevated area to the west of the B4017, however the station is due to be demolished.
- 1.10 The landscape pattern and vegetation surrounding the proposed route varies across the area. The small scale pattern associated with residential settlement within Culham presents an intimate scale, while the pattern opens out to medium scale fields of a riparian character along the River Thames. Mature vegetation along the River and within the parkland landscape surrounding Culham provide a strong sense of enclosure. The flooded gravel works now comprising three large reservoirs to the west of the River Thames provide a more open character although dense wetland vegetation breaks up the open pattern. The sports pitches immediately south of Southern Town Park are surrounded by deciduous hedgerows and small clusters of woodland which divide the area and screen views of the sewage works immediately to the south. Further west, small woodland blocks and mature hedgerows surround Stonehill House and line local roads. Between Drayton Road (B4017) and the A34 the field pattern is generally larger and more open with a higher degree of visibility due in part to the elevated landform which rises to the west from the B4017 to a plateau before falling towards the River Ock. This area is broadly under arable farming and the medium to large scale fields are partially enclosed by a few managed hedgerows. On the western end of the proposed route the River Ock is enclosed by woodland and the Ock Meadow Nature

Reserve comprises an open landscape south of the Tesco Superstore. The area surrounding the proposed route is illustrated with reference to **Figure 1** and **Site Context Photographs**.

Site Features

- 1.11 The majority of the route is generally flat at an elevation which varies between approximately 50m – 65m AOD. The more elevated areas are located to the west of the route, while the lowest lying land is associated with the River Ock and River Thames. Although a low lying landscape, distant views are often curtailed and filtered by linear hedgerows which screen distant views.

Landscape Character

- 1.12 The proposed route is located within the Vale of White Horse District and South Oxfordshire District and the relevant Landscape Character Areas (LCA) are set out below.

South Oxfordshire Landscape Character

- 1.13 Within South Oxfordshire District the route is located within and adjacent to the following character types - Flat Floodplain Pasture, Semi-enclosed Farmed Hills and Valleys and Parkland and Estate Farmland. The character area to the east of the River Thames is the Nuneham Courtney Ridge LCA where the floodplain landscape type within the area is described as an area with "*distinctive ribbon of fringing riverside meadows*". It is noted that overall, the Nuneham Courtney Ridge has an attractive, rural and generally unspoilt character but with some localised variations in quality and condition (i.e. expansion of Abingdon, sewage works, pylons). The key characteristics of the Flat Floodplain landscape character type along the River Thames are:

- flat, low-lying riverside meadows alongside the River Thames, typically dominated by permanent pasture with a distinctively 'wet', riparian character;
- prone to flooding with distinctive network of drainage ditches;
- comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside;
- intimate and pastoral character;
- generally low intervisibility, although views along the valley may be possible in some more sparsely vegetated areas;

- 1.14 The key characteristics of Wooded Hills and Valleys character type which comprise the area to the north of Culham are:

- strong structure of hedgerows and trees which provide clear definition of field pattern;
- occurs mostly in association with settlements (e.g. Marsh Baldon), where a smaller-scale field pattern and the hedgerow structure remain more intact;
- predominantly intensive arable land use but some pockets of permanent pasture occur, particularly around settlements and on steeper hillsides;
- predominantly rural character;
- landform and landscape structure create enclosure and reduce intervisibility;
- strong relief, mixed land use and blocks of woodland create an attractively diverse landscape;
- intervisibility reduced by landform and landscape structure to create a more enclosed and intimate landscape, but long views possible from hillsides and higher ground across Thames valley;
- predominantly rural character with few detracting influences.

1.15 In addition, the key characteristics of the Parkland and Estate Farmland character type associated with Culham House and the surrounding settlement are described as:

- well-managed parkland character with formal features such as avenues and free-standing mature trees in pasture, clumps and blocks of woodland, exotic tree species, formal structures and boundary features;
- associated 'estate' landscape extending into a few areas beyond listed parkland and characterised by large blocks of woodland, open grassland and mature trees;
- rural and unspoilt character;
- generally enclosed character with strong landform, woodland and tree cover, low intervisibility but with some visually prominent hilltop and valleyside locations.

1.16 Within the Nuneham Courtney Ridge LCA there are areas of landscape which have retained a strong structure of woods, hedgerows and trees, have a particularly rich, diverse and well-managed character and are of high scenic quality. They principally comprise the historic parkland and wooded landscape associated with Nuneham Park and Culham. Key landscape enhancement priorities should be to encourage the maintenance and restoration of historic parkland landscapes and features at Nuneham Park and Culham, and to manage existing

hilltop and valley-side woods to the north of Culham to maximise their landscape and nature conservation value.

1.17 Within the South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment, the area to the east of the River Thames is identified as an asset to conserve and enhance and one of the key landscape enhancement priorities should be to *"maintain permanent pasture and riverside trees to reinforce the tranquil, pastoral character of the river valleys"*. Of particular relevance is the section on 'Planning and Development Issues' which states that large-scale development of any kind will be inappropriate within this essentially rural and unspoilt landscape. The ability of the landscape to accommodate small-scale development will depend upon:

- the potential impacts on distinctive landscape and settlement character and;
- the potential impacts on intrinsic landscape quality and valued features and the overall quality sensitivity of the landscape to change;
- the visual sensitivity of the receiving landscape.

1.18 In addition, it is noted that within the Nuneham Courtney Ridge LCA *"the parkland/estate landscapes and the remote, low-lying floodplain landscapes are particularly vulnerable to change and are likely to be unsuited to new built development"*.

Vale of White Horse Landscape Character

1.19 To the west of the Thames, the River Meadowlands comprises a linear riverine landscape with a flat, well-defined alluvial floodplain. It has a pastoral character with meadows, wet and semi-improved pasture. Key characteristics include:

- Flat, low-lying topography with seasonally flooded alluvial floodplains;
- Meandering river channels;
- Grazing meadows and small fields of permanent pasture;
- Riparian character with a strong pattern of riverside willows and tree-lined ditches;
- Sparsely settled with a few roads.

1.20 The west of the River Thames, the Lowland Village Farmlands landscape character type is a variable, often large-scale farmed landscape closely associated with village settlements. Key characteristics include:

- A varied gently rolling and almost flat topography;
- Medium to large-sized arable and hedged fields;

- Thinly scattered hedgerow trees, which are mostly ash;
 - Ash, willow and poplars fringing ditches and streams;
 - Prominent village settlements scattered throughout the area.
- 1.21 The landscape strategy recognises the need to conserve, enhance and strengthen the existing pattern of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree-lined watercourses.
- 1.22 Further west, the alluvial lowlands landscape type includes flat landscapes of lowland river valleys, associated with alluvial soils. It is characterised by a regular pattern of medium-sized hedged fields with permanent pasture and arable cropping. Key characteristics include:
- Broad alluvial plains;
 - Mixed farming pattern with regular fields with both arable cropping and pasture;
 - Densely scattered hedgerow trees of ash and willow;
 - Dense willow corridors bordering a large number of ditches;
 - Sparsely settled.
- 1.23 The landscape strategy for the area is to maintain the tranquil nature of the landscape and promote the restoration and enhancement of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree-lined watercourses.
- 1.24 Following a review of the landscape character assessments it is considered that there are particularly sensitive areas along the proposed route which include the riparian character of the River Thames and the enclosed parkland landscape associated with Culham Conservation Area. In addition, the mature woodland and historic small scale field pattern surrounding Stonehill is also considered sensitive.

Visual Appraisal

- 1.25 The proposed route, located along the lower lying river valley is generally enclosed from the immediate vicinity and wider area due to woodland cover and mature hedgerows. The visual character of the landscape varies across the area and is broadly divided into three distinct areas by the B4017 and the River Thames. To the west of the B4017, the low hill with very few trees is open while to the east the lower lying and wooded landscape is more enclosed. The hill is visible from the northern edge of Drayton and when travelling along the A34 and Mill Road to the west and there are panoramic views out from the hill top plateau. To the south there are clear views to Didcot Power Station and a long section of the Berkshire

Downs. To the east the heavily wooded hills of Culham Ridge can be seen while to the north there are views of a long section of the heavily wooded Corallian Ridge.

- 1.26 To the north of the hill the levels fall gently away to the disused Wilts and Berks Canal at the western end of the proposed route. Here views to the south are restricted by the hillside and by the vegetation along the canal line. The area is visible from the adjacent housing on the south east edge of Abingdon and from Mill Road. To the east of the plateau there is a short moderately steep hillside sloping down to the B4017 from which it is visible.
- 1.27 In the area to the east of the B4017 the landscape is lower and flatter. The fields are on a much smaller scale with several important tree belts which has created a more enclosed landscape. The small fields surrounding the grounds of Stonehill House have strong boundary hedges and tree groups and areas of new woodland planting. This has created a small scale and enclosed landscape which is well screened on all sides. Further east and south of Southern Town Park and reservoirs, the character is more open and influenced by urbanising features associated with development surrounding Abingdon Marina.
- 1.28 Views along the Thames River are filtered in parts by mature riverside vegetation. Although tranquil, the area is currently visually influenced by pylons and Didcot Power Station (due to be demolished) to the south-east outside the area. Overall the River does retain a sense of tranquillity which is more noticeable to the east of the Thames. The area surrounding Culham, bound by the Abingdon Road (AA415) to the east and The Burycroft Road to the west comprises an enclosed parkland landscape which screens views out of the area.

Consideration of Potential for Development

- 1.29 Following a review of existing baseline information obtained during desk top work and a site visit, it is considered that the proposed route could adversely affect particular sensitive receptors. As stated, the proposed crossing of the River Thames and the division of an enclosed parkland landscape to the north of Culham Conservation Area could result in significant adverse effects on the character of the area. In addition, the mature woodland and historic small scale field pattern surrounding Stonehill is also sensitive to the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass. Any development within these more sensitive areas could undermine and significantly affect their existing characteristics including the setting of listed buildings and Culham Conservation Area. The tranquil setting along the River Thames with distant views towards St Helen's Church will be adversely affected by the construction of a major river crossing and as such careful consideration of the proposals affect on these assets is required.
- 1.30 With consideration to the land identified in the Draft Local Plan for the proposed Abingdon Southern Bypass it is identified that the proposed route could adversely affect particularly

sensitive receptors and therefore requires further, more detailed assessment of the landscape and visual effects including identification of alternative route options before land is safeguarded. Alternative options could include realignment of the proposed route away from Culham Conservation Area and Stonehill House. Any proposals would involve significant engineering works over the River Thames and as such, may result in significant adverse landscape and visual effects to sensitive receptors within close proximity.