

Western Otmoor Ecotown

First Stage Assessment of Landscape and Visual Impact

Volume 1: Main Report (Final Draft)

Contents

- 1.0 Introduction
- 2.0 Site Description
 - Physical influences:
 - Site Location
 - Geology and Drainage
 - Topography
 - Human Influences
- 3.0 Site Description - Landscape features:
 - Vegetation
 - Wildlife Habitats
 - Rural Buildings and Settlements
 - Other Features
- 4.0 Landscape Character
 - Otmoor Lowlands
 - Special Features
 - Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands
 - Enhancement Strategy
- 5.0 Proposals
- 6.0 Landscape Impacts
- 7.0 Visual Impacts
- 8.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 Broadway Malyan were appointed by Cherwell District Council to carry out a first stage assessment of the landscape and visual impact of the proposed Western Otmoor Eco-town. The scope of the study is to give an indication of the approximate extent of the proposed development's visual impact and impact on the character of the landscape.
- 1.2 The study was carried out in July / August 2008 and was based on a desktop study and field survey of the site and surroundings. The study area is defined as an area of approximate radius 2.5 - 3Km centred on the site.
- 1.3 The following baseline data has been examined:
 - OS mapping
 - Historic maps
 - Aerial photographs
 - Ecological mapping
 - Soil and geological mapping
 - Archaeological information, Sites and Monument Register
 - Limited available web based information from Parkridge Holdings on proposals for Western Otmoor eco-town
 - Cherwell District Landscape Assessment dated November 1995 (which was taken forward in the Council's Countryside Design Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) of 1998)
- 1.4 Additional information was supplied by Parkridge, (dated August 2008), after the initial desktop study and fieldwork was undertaken. This information was reviewed and incorporated into the text and further site visits were made in December 2008 to check viewpoints after leaf fall.
- 1.5 This report should be read in conjunction with Volume 2: Figures.

2.0 Site Description

Physical influences

Site Location (see Figure 1)

- 2.1 The site is located to the south of Cherwell district in the county of Oxfordshire. It comprises an area of predominantly agricultural land with an airfield in the north of the site. It is bounded by the M40 to the east, the Bicester to Oxford rail line and field boundaries to the south, field boundaries and the B430 to the west and by Akeman Street to the north.
- 2.2 The site is bisected by the A34 and junction 9 of the M40 running from east to west. A 'B' road runs parallel and to the south of this, dividing a narrow strip of land from the southern third of the site.
- 2.3 The village of Weston on the Green and a small business park lie on the west boundary.
- 2.4 The River Ray, an upper tributary of the River Thames, lies to the south of the site at a distance of approximately 1.8Km.

Geology and Drainage (see Figures 2 & 3)

- 2.5 Across the centre of the district, Great Oolite forms an outcrop aligned in a south west to north east alignment, as a wide band, creating a distinctive belt of undulating, rising ground which separates the higher ground to the north from the southern lowlands. This is the oolitic limestone of the Cotswolds which is much paler, and whiter, in colour than the ironstone. There is a marked visual contrast between the villages in this belt with the ironstone villages to the north.
- 2.6 The low-lying Otmoor basin is located on Oxford Clay which is overlain by alluvial deposits associated with the River Thames and River Ray floodplains, giving rise to the typically flat and poorly-drained, lowland landscape. To the south, the Oxford Clay passes into Kimmeridge Clay where outcrops of Frits, Ampthill Clay and Coral Rag gives rise to isolated hills and low ridges to the south of Otmoor. South and East of Bicester, the clays are underlain by the concealed Oxfordshire Coalfield, a series of carboniferous upper coal measures which extend to Reading and Stow-on-the-Wold.
- 2.7 Soils across the district reflect the underlying and superficial geology remarkably clearly and their distribution has had a profound influence upon the landscape through agricultural practice. The soil types vary from the distinctive Redlands around Banbury, made up from a mix of well drained loams with a high iron content arising from the underlying ironstone, to the seasonally waterlogged clayey soils of the Lower and Middle Lias (with their tendency to landslip, creating irregular, hummocky landform) and of the glacial till and Oxford Clay, to the shallow, chalky, well-drained loams, which overlie the oolitic limestones. The soil of the site is defined as Category 2 Agricultural land.
- 2.8 The site drains from north to south. A small spring arises near the north boundary and flows on a natural meandering course through the site to the south west corner. This stream flows into the River Ray, south of the site. A short length close to the spring is culverted under the airfield. There are a few small ponds, which are generally on line, scattered along the stream and a manmade reservoir lies close to the M40 on the east boundary, see Figure 4.

Topography (see Figure 4)

- 2.9 The site lies within the gentle, undulating area which forms the valley floor of the River Cherwell to the west of the site and River Ray basin, to the south. This area is bounded by the high land of the Chilterns, much further south. There is a wooded hill at Graven Hill to the east of the site which rises to a height of 115m AOD.
- 2.10 The site itself falls gently from a high point of 85m AOD at the north west corner to a low level of 60m AOD on the south boundary.

- 2.11 The M40 and A34 are built up on embankments at Junction 9 and the surrounding roads are similarly raised above the site at crossing points. Elsewhere, the boundary roads are at the same level as the site.

Human Influences (See Figure 5, for National Heritage Sites and Historical Maps)

Early History

- 2.12 Evidence indicates that there has been human activity within the area since the Stone Age. The most distinctive feature from this period are a number of prehistoric ridgeways which intersect the area, running roughly north - south. One of these runs along the same line as the present A4260, approximately 10km west of the site, from Kidlington to Banbury and northwards. Another lies to the west of Epwell along the course of Traitors Ford Lane / Ditchedge Lane, running south through the Cotswolds and north west along Edge Hill, and a third (known as the 'Jurassic Way'), approximately 20km north-west of the site, runs to the north of Hook Norton to Banbury via Tadmarton and Broughton. These would have provided a means of travel and trade, connecting with local areas such as the Berkshire Downs and the Cotswolds and more distant regions such as South Wales. Earliest evidence of human settlement dates from the Iron Age. A string of hill forts concentrated within the ironstone hills between Madmarston and Hempton indicates that the area was relatively densely populated during this period.
- 2.13 Little visible evidence now remains of the extensive Roman occupation of the area, although a number of villa sites are scattered across the district. Alchester, a planned Roman military settlement, was located at the intersection of the north-south Towcester to Doncaster route and the east-west Akeman Street. The route of Akeman Street between Chesterton and Kirtlington still persists today, and forms the northern boundary of the Site.

Anglo Saxon and Medieval Periods

- 2.14 Many of the district's villages originate from the Anglo Saxon period, although it is likely that some village sites were simply taken over by the newcomers during this period and have been settled for far longer. Most of the village names are recorded in Domesday Book. The system of land tenure which operated throughout the Medieval period established a field pattern that is still clearly visible in places as areas of 'ridge and furrow', characteristic long narrow 'S' shaped fields and strip lynchets where steeper ground was terraced to facilitate cultivation.
- 2.15 Most of the once forested higher ground, particularly the fertile Redland soils around Banbury, was cleared for agriculture in the early history. There was already a shortage of woodland in this area as early as the seventh and eighth centuries and the nearest parts of the royal forest of Wychwood around Charlbury supplied timber to the Banbury area, 30km to the north-west. Further south, steady progress of reclaiming 'waste' land, woodland, marsh and heath, accelerated with the population expansion throughout the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Fencott and Murcott, 2-3km south-east of the site, established as new settlements set amongst marshy fields reclaimed from Otmoor during this time.
- 2.16 There are numerous visible remains of Medieval features. Castle sites and fishponds are frequent and can often be located by their earthworks, and various monastic remains occur within the district, including Augustinian, Benedictine, Cistercian and Gilbertine houses. Village churches are prominent features, and represent the earliest surviving examples of stonework.
- 2.17 Economic and social change, led to widespread desertion and contraction of late Medieval villages. The south of the district, in the vicinity of the Site, was particularly badly affected, with a third of the total number disappearing and a further third exhibiting shrinkage. Shrinkage was less common in the ironstone area, which depended largely upon the expanding wood trade for its wealth. Here, only about a fifth of the villages contracted in size and very few disappeared altogether.

Parliamentary Enclosures

- 2.18 In response to the growth of the woollen trade, a widespread conversion of arable land to pasture took place, encouraging the process of enclosure. The rate of enclosure varied, depending on locally established agricultural practices and land ownership, with about a third of the district being enclosed by the end of the Tudor and Stuart periods. Such early enclosures can be located by hedgerow dating techniques, as the hedges are typically denser and contain a richer variety of species than the later hawthorn enclosures hedge. Two thirds of Broughton Parish, for example, was enclosed by the 1590's.
- 2.19 The district contains a high proportion of seventeenth and eighteenth century parkland. This frequently developed from a Medieval deer park nucleus. Middleton Stoney, which lies 3km north of the site, had a walled deer park by 1328 which was subsequently incorporated into a vast new park in 1825. Similar fashionable, landscaped parks were created at Kirtlington, Bletchingdon and Chesterton, which are all located within a 5km radius of the site. The characteristically intensive tree planting and long stone wall boundaries are still dominant features in today's landscape.
- 2.20 Architectural history within the region demonstrates the progressive conversion from timber framed structures to stone, beginning in the early sixteenth century. Vernacular buildings reflect the underlying geology. The warm honey coloured ironstone to the north of the district gives way to pale grey and white limestone around Bicester and on the Cornbrash Limestone outcrop across Otmoor. Timber framed brick buildings are found only in areas where stone was not readily available, such as the Oxford Heights which rise up to the south of Otmoor.
- 2.21 The exploitation of minerals for building materials and other purposes has given rise to landscape features associated with mineral extraction. Hornton Stone has been quarried locally for farm buildings since at least the early Medieval period, and until recently was exported for higher quality buildings and ornamental work. Deserted quarries and active limestone quarrying form significant but localised features within today's landscape.

Recent Changes

- 2.22 Changes in transportation and agricultural development have had the most significant influence upon the landscape during recent history. These include major transport corridors - the A34 and the M40 which connects Oxford, Bicester and Banbury with Birmingham and London, and has had a considerable influence upon both the rural landscape and upon the urban edges of Banbury and Bicester.
- 2.23 Airfields are another distinctive transport feature. They occur on expanses of flat land where they break the continuity of the agricultural landscape with security fences, sprawling sheds and hangers. The airfield within the site is typical of this character, and can be seen from the 1923 historic map. Shennington and Bicester airports are still in working use for gliding but military bases are progressively becoming redundant. The extensive Upper Heyford Air Base, which covers an area almost as large as Bicester, is disused.
- 2.24 Post-war trends in agriculture, including continued intensification and increased mechanisation, have led to the widespread expansion of arable cropping across the district. Semi-natural grasslands were ploughed-up and there was extensive field amalgamation and hedgerow removal across many parts of the district. Relict landscapes, such as ancient field systems and enclosures suffered considerable damage during this period. Similarly, extensive drainage of the heavy, wet soils of Otmoor flood plain was undertaken, enabling a change in emphasis from wet pasture to arable farming.
- 2.25 Despite these widespread changes, not all of the district's landscapes have been irreparably damaged and more recent changes in agricultural policy have slowed the rate of change. Certain key landscapes and habitats are given special protection from damaging change through designation, and encouragement is given in the form of management agreements and grants for their conservation and management. For example, the remnants of Otmoor's marshy pastures are designated as a Site of

Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and protected from drainage and agricultural practices which would alter the balance of flora and fauna (see Figure 7).

- 2.26 On a broader scale, the introduction of various initiatives designed to encourage more environmentally sensitive farming practice may help, in time, to reverse the process and restore greater diversity to the agricultural landscape. Schemes such as Set Aside, which encourages farmers to take land out of arable production, and Countryside Stewardship, which encourages the conservation, restoration and creation of valued landscapes, can potentially have positive benefits for the landscape. In particular, the designation of the Upper Thames Tributaries Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) should have beneficial implications for the landscape of the Cherwell Valley, Otmoor and the River Ray flood plain. Valuable though they are, these schemes are likely to result in only fairly modest and localised changes in the landscape of the district overall, and widespread change seems unlikely in the foreseeable future unless incentives are greatly improved.

3.0 Site Description - Landscape Features

Vegetation (see Figure 8)

- 3.1 The site contains a number of belts and blocks of predominantly deciduous, broad-leaved woodland. Field boundaries are well defined, with established hedgerows and individual trees. The stream corridor is defined by natural riverine planting, including trees, shrubs and marginal species. The airfield presents a contrasting open, flat landscape with rough grass.
- 3.2 The boundaries are generally well screened with existing belts of tree planting or established native hedgerows and trees. Parts of the west and east boundary to the north of the site are open.
- 3.3 Agricultural land is predominantly arable with some pasture. Near to Weston on the Green Village, some land is used for 'horsiculture'.

Wildlife Habitats (see Figures 6 & 7)

- 3.4 A range of wildlife habitats are found within the district. In the south, many of the most significant habitats are found in the formerly extensive areas of wetland which are associated with river floodplains. Traditionally these low-lying areas would have flooded during the winter and were managed either as wet grazing marsh, or as wet meadows mown annually for hay. Such sites contain a wide range of herb rich grassland habitats with many species of nationally uncommon plants and animals. These meadows were once widespread throughout southern England but owing to agricultural improvement and urbanisation are now increasingly rare. The most vulnerable remaining areas of wetland are protected by Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) status, and include the SSSI on the southern fringes of the site at Otmoor. Part of the South of the site lies within the Wendlebury Meads and Mansmoor Closes SSSI.
- 3.5 The river valleys are a landscape feature which provide a continuous linear habitat of some significance. The flood plain of the River Cherwell contains flood meadows and areas of wet grassland of national importance, whilst a range of water and water margin habitats are associated with both the river Cherwell and the River Ray, south of the site, and their tributaries.
- 3.6 Although much of the district appears to be reasonably well-treed, the area as a whole is noticeably lacking in woodland cover. The most ecologically rich and diverse woods are ancient woodlands, which are classified either as semi-natural, where the woodland originated before 1600 and has not been substantially underplanted since, and plantation, where a woodland has been subject to extensive replanting at some point since 1600.
- 3.7 Only a small number of woods with ancient indicator species have been identified within Cherwell district and all of the surviving ancient woodland is found in the south. Remaining ancient woods are small, isolated and fragmented and more than half of them are associated with the district's parklands. During the eighteenth century a considerable number of coverts were planted, primarily as cover for game birds, and these now form valuable managed habitats as well as being wildlife havens, linked together by the hedgerow network. Many of the small woods occur on hill tops or slight rises in the land and, for their relatively small areas, are visually prominent features. Ancient woodland lies within the southern sector of the site near Weston Park farm at Wormough Copse and also on the western boundary of the southern sector at Weston Wood (see Figure 7). Figure 8 shows areas of woodland belts and groups of trees together with hedgerows on the site.
- 3.8 The importance of hedgerow trees should not be underestimated in a county where arable land predominates. They act as species reservoirs and wildlife corridors and provide a framework for the landscape. Elm was formerly the dominant hedgerow tree, but since the heavy losses due to Dutch Elm Disease in the 1970's and 80's, Oak and Ash are now the dominant species. Hedgerow trees are scarce within the vicinity of the Site.

- 3.9 The area is of sufficient ecological interest to need a Phase 1 habitat study. It includes several sites with records of Cherwell locally protected species. We recommend that that this study should be carried out by an appropriate specialist.

Rural Buildings and Settlements

- 3.10 Settlement pattern within the district is comprised of evenly scattered dispersed villages, with the two principal market towns of Banbury and Bicester. The other major settlement within the district is Kidlington, a twentieth century garden city and dormitory town, based on the much smaller historic settlement. Villages within Cherwell district are important and highly prominent features within the rural landscape.
- 3.11 Villages to the south and west of Banbury are probably the most well known, with their distinctive deep orange and ochre coloured stone and thatched roofs. The regional style of the Banbury area extends beyond the boundaries of Cherwell district into Northamptonshire and Warwickshire.
- 3.12 Further to the south, the white oolitic limestone has also been used for local building purposes, while the area is close enough to the Cotswolds to benefit from higher quality building stone for more prestigious country houses.
- 3.13 Village distribution conforms to a clear pattern. In the steeply hilly areas they are usually located on the valley sides, where such a location provides a sheltered site and a reliable water supply. Villages are also frequently located towards the brow of the hill, such as Deddington, Wroxton and the Astons.
- 3.14 In the south, the location of settlements is likewise closely related to the landform, with villages occurring on ground arising even a few metres above the flood plain, as is the case with Islip, Oddington, Charlton on Otmoor, Merton and Weston-on-the-Green to the west of the site. These are located on the Cornbrash outcrop across the Oxford Clay Vale. Villages on the limestone have survived wherever there is an adequate permanent water source.
- 3.15 A particular range of village structures are illustrated within the district, all of which are common within villages across most of the south and Midlands. A village may have expanded or contracted several times throughout its history but usually the historic core has remained as a reasonably constant indicator of its shape. Cherwell district includes a number of good examples of nucleated settlements, where dwellings are grouped around a central village green. However, the linear layout is more common, where houses are strung out along on either side of one main street. The most common layout is a more random pattern where houses cluster together around a double-loop of lanes, forming a village group which lacks a central nucleus.
- 3.16 Stone built dwellings with thatch or stone slate roofs at Weston on the Green can be seen at viewpoints 8 & 10 on the site photographs.

Other Features

- 3.17 A variety of other features make a positive contribution to the Cherwell landscape. High stone walls enclosing large tracts of seventeenth and eighteenth century parkland, with prominent woodland belts and distinctive parkland trees surround impressive country houses. These mansions themselves are often out of sight, however, several estate villages represent highly visible features in the landscape. Village houses at Bletchingdon, 4km west of the site and Middleton Stoney, 3km north of the site, display elements of style and detail typical of estate villages.
- 3.18 Agricultural features include the complex network of hedges which knit the landscape together, especially in the river valleys and more undulating areas of countryside; and the stone barns, walled enclosures and farm buildings which characterise the rural landscape.

Landscape Designations

- 3.19 Planning issues are dealt with elsewhere, but it is worth mentioning landscape designations at this section. The majority of the site south of the A34 lies within the Greenbelt, and as such, there is a presumption against development in this area. (See Figure 9).
- 3.20 Part of the site near the south boundary and adjacent to the rail line forms part of a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, the Wendlesbury Meads and Mansmoor Closes SSSI (January 2008). North of this there is an area of Ancient Woodland at Wormough Copse and there is another area of Ancient Woodland on the west boundary at Weston Wood. Any such woodland and the SSSI will need to have a prescribed buffer zone around it, without any development.
- 3.21 The village of Weston on the Green on the west boundary lies within a conservation area and contains a number of listed buildings. The village of Wendelbury, 600m to the east of the site, also contains a number of listed buildings. Sites recorded on the National Monument Record are also indicated at these locations. There is a Scheduled Ancient Monument at Otley Abbey, adjacent to Oddington Grange and 600m west of the site. These are indicated at Figure 5.

4.0 Landscape Character and Landscape Policy

4.1 Cherwell District Council commissioned Cobham Resource Consultants (CRC) to provide a landscape character assessment for the Cherwell District of North Oxfordshire. This was produced in 1995 and has been used by the District Council as the basis for the development of a consistent, co-ordinated approach to planning policy, development control, landscape management / conservation, recreation and tourism. The report was based on the current guidance and methodology for landscape assessment produced by CRC on behalf of the Countryside Commission at that time. The following section draws on this report.

Landscape Character Area - Otmoor Lowlands (see Figure 10):

- 4.2 The site lies on the western boundary of an area characterised as the Otmoor Lowlands, as defined by the Cherwell District Landscape Assessment. This site abuts another character area referred to as Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands.
- 4.3 This is essentially a flat, wet, low-lying landscape, but it displays considerable variation owing to particular landform features and built development. It stretches northwards to include Bicester's urban fringes, and to the south includes the edge of the Oxford Heights.
- 4.4 The site is characterised as having the following landscape types,
- R1 Large scale, open farmland comprising elevated or low lying arable farmland with weak structure.
 - R3 Large scale, enclosed farmland comprising large scale arable farmland enclosed by woodland belts.
 - R4 Small scale, enclosed farmland comprising a strongly undulating complex of farmed hills and valleys.
 - T2 Amenity use.
 - T4 Airfield.
- 4.5 The Otmoor Lowlands demonstrates a range of distinctive physical features. Most of the area lies on Oxford Clay, a mudstone of the middle Jurassic period. At the northern edge of the area the edge of the band of Cornbrash limestone begins to rise gently away from the clay vale. South of the area the Oxford Clay is superseded by Kimmeridge Clay where the Corallian Beds dominate. These have a fairly complex geology, where layers of medium and fine grain sandstone, the Upper and Lower Calcareous Grits, are separated by Coral Rag, a limestone interbedded with marl and mudstone. (Refer to Figure 2)
- 4.6 The outcrops of the Corallian Beds cause the land to rise up to the Oxford Heights which lie to the south of Cherwell district. However, within the Otmoor area the Grits and Coral Rag outcrop, creating distinctive hills isolated from the main ridge of rising ground. These hills rise up to 100m, some 40m higher than the surrounding low-lying flat floodplain, e.g. at Graven Hill.
- 4.7 Faulting within the Oxford Clay causes the Cornbrash to outcrop in a south-west to north-easterly line, which is apparent in the slight rise in ground to the north of the River Ray. The river winds its way across its floodplain, where alluvial deposits overlie the clay. South of the river is Otmoor, an area of poorly drained land where the level sinks to below 60m, which is subject to flooding and poor drainage.
- 4.8 Owing to its poor drainage, traditional land cover has consisted of grazed wet meadows, some of which remain in and around Otmoor, with willow pollards lining streams and drainage ditches. Much of the grassland is now divided into fields with hedge and ditch boundaries. However, owing to improvements in drainage, a substantial part of the land is now in arable cultivation. Fields are large with weak boundaries, giving rise to an open, exposed landscape.

- 4.9 Where the land rises up at the southern edge of the area a pattern of smaller fields has developed on the steeper slopes, while open grazing persists on the higher open ground. Some remnant upland heath characteristics occur, with sheep grazing and bracken and gorse on the highest slopes. The isolated hills which form such distinct focal features have woodland cover on their brows and tend to be surrounded by military development which sprawls across the landscape to the east of the area, surrounding Bicester.
- 4.10 Where drainage has been improved, the heavy clays have been brought into arable cultivation, creating a low lying flat arable farmland with weak structures (R1a). Fields are large, regular and open, surrounded by ditches and hedges. The roads which cross this landscape are usually built up above the level of the surrounding fields, so the hedges appear to be sunken and have little impact on the landscape. There are very few trees to interrupt the long views across the floodplain.
- 4.11 The Urban Fringes (T5) around Bicester are particularly associated with Ministry of Defence development at Graven Hill and with Bicester Airfield. Consequently, they are characterised by high security fences and Ministry of Defence housing development.

Special Features

- 4.12 Otmoor is noted particularly for its outstanding sites of ecological interest, much of which is of international importance. Unimproved neutral grasslands are found at Wendlebury Meads, Murcott Meadows and Arncott Bridge Meadows. They all show some evidence of ploughing during the Medieval period, but essentially have a long uninterrupted history as grassland under traditional management. More than 160 botanical species have been recorded in these outstanding examples of calcareous clay pasture. Wendlebury Meads is particularly noted for its large numbers of butterflies and its different species of dandelions *Taraxacum* spp. and the hedges and scrub around Murcott Meadows supports the rare Black Hairstreak butterfly, a species restricted to the Oxford Clay. The meadows are also breeding ground for snipe and curlew.

Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands (see Figure 10):

- 4.13 The area characterised as Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands wraps around the Otmoor Lowlands to the north and west. Land adjacent to part of the west boundary of the site, including the adjacent Weston on the Green Village, lie within this character area.
- 4.14 The area is characterised primarily by the extensive remains of eighteenth century parklands and estate farmland.
- 4.15 The land adjacent to the west boundary of the site is characterised as being,:
- R3 Large scale, arable farmland enclosed by woodland belts.
- R4C Low lying, pastoral landscape with willow lined watercourses.

Enhancement Strategy

- 4.16 The Cherwell District Landscape Assessment outlines an enhancement strategy, together with evaluation and guidelines, for the local landscape areas.
- 4.17 The Cherwell landscape district has much to offer, not only as a visual resource, but also as an historical, architectural, cultural and nature conservation asset. The study also addresses issues of landscape value and sensitivity to change and identifies conservation and enhancement priorities within the district.
- 4.18 Strategic priorities for landscape conservation and enhancement are identified followed by brief recommendations for specific actions or improvements to conserve and enhance particular landscape elements which contribute to landscape character.

- 4.19 On the whole, the district's landscape has remained remarkably unaffected by the pressures of urbanisation or land use change and has retained a predominantly rural and unspoilt agricultural character. Certain parts of the district stand out for their individual character and strong sense of place, and for their historical, cultural or ecological associations, such as the Ironstone Hills and Valleys, Otmoor and the Cherwell Valley. These, and other intact landscapes in the Thames Valley, North Ploughley and Muswell Hill areas, are properly represented within the District Council's designated Areas of High Landscape Value and, to a lesser extent, within the Cotswolds AONB.
- 4.20 There are other areas which have fared less well and whose landscape character has been adversely affected by urban development or intensive agricultural activity. These areas tend to lie, correctly, outside the district's designated landscapes.
- 4.21 However, these general distinctions conceal a more complex pattern of variation in landscape quality and condition. Inevitably, there are pockets of good quality landscape which lie outside the designated areas as well as pockets of poorer landscape within them. The study's approach has been to set designations to one side and, instead, to look critically at the intrinsic, rather than the relative quality of individual landscape types as they occur across the district and to indicate the most appropriate strategy for action. The strategic principles are essentially concerned with ensuring that the most valuable landscape assets within the study area are safeguarded; that resources for landscape enhancement are targeted to the most needy areas and that the capacity of different landscapes to accommodate change, including change brought about by development, is properly considered.
- 4.22 Four main strategies for landscape 'intervention' have been defined. Their distribution across the landscape of the study area is shown in Figure 11. The strategies are:
- Conservation
 - Repair
 - Restoration
 - Reconstruction
- 4.23 These strategies indicate the scope for restoring or creating new landscapes, as well as showing where there is less need for extensive intervention. Clearly, landscape considerations need to be balanced against other socio-economic, transport and environmental considerations within the wider planning framework for the district.
- 4.24 The site is identified as having areas where the following treatment is recommended:
- | | |
|---|----------------|
| The airfield: | Reconstruction |
| Strip between A34 and B road to south: | Restoration |
| Remaining, (predominant area), of site: | Repair |
- 4.25 The adjacent area of Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands is identified as 'needing repair'.
- Landscape policy
- 4.26 The site is not covered by specific landscape policy. However the southern section of the site is protected by Green Belt. Refer to Figure 9.
- 4.27 The purposes of the Oxford Green Belt, as set out in Structure Plan policy G4, are to:
- (i) preserve the special character and landscape setting of Oxford;
 - (ii) check the growth of Oxford and prevent ribbon development and urban sprawl;
 - (iii) prevent the coalescence of settlements;
 - (iv) assist in safeguarding the countryside from encroachment;
 - (v) assist in urban regeneration, by encouraging the recycling of derelict and other urban land.

- 4.28 Policy GB1 Within the Local Plan states that proposals for inappropriate development will not be permitted unless the applicant can demonstrate that very special circumstances exist. Development proposals within or conspicuous from the green belt which, although not prejudicial to its main purpose, might be visually detrimental by reason of their siting, materials or design will not be permitted.

5.0 Proposals

Parkridge Masterplan

- 5.1 At the time that this report was commissioned and the baseline study and fieldwork was carried out, (July / August 2008), very little information was available from Parkridge, the promoter / developer for the proposed Western Otmoor eco town. For example no detail was given regarding appearance and density of development levels or proposed planting, so it is difficult to assess the proposals. Our landscape and visual impact assessment, therefore, concentrates on the visibility of the existing site and its sensitivity to change.
- 5.2 The information available comprised a broad brush scope for the new eco town, which we understand is to accommodate 15,000 new dwellings, together with supporting infrastructure and mixed use development including employment, community.
- 5.3 Infrastructure includes proposals to upgrade and extend Junction 9 of the M40, a new railway station on the Bicester to Oxford rail line adjacent to the M40 dualling of the existing rail line and a tram system within the site, which may extend west over the B430 to include the additional land shown on Parkridge Revised Masterplan.
- 5.4 A conceptual masterplan was available, see Fig. 12. This shows the site divided by 3 major transport routes running north to south, forming two loops. The central route is indicated as the 'High Street'. The site is divided into sub plots by a network of planting. It is not clear where these coincide with existing, established hedgerows and belts of trees. Existing blocks of woodland on the site appear to have been retained and there is a buffer strip for woodland planting and green open space around the north part of the site. Housing is concentrated to the north of the A34 and land for employment to the south. The main stream and surrounding planting and three new or realigned watercourses are indicated on the north of the site and an area of new wetland habitat to the south.
- 5.5 All vehicular access to the site is off Junction 9 of the M40 via a single road with a large car park adjacent to the rail station to allow 'Park & Ride'. The north / south roads each cross the A34 at a different point, which will require 3 additional road bridges.

Parkridge Revised Masterplan

- 5.6 Further details on the proposals for Western Otmoor became available on 11 September 2008. These are described in the document; Western Otmoor - Making the Place, Parkridge Final Bid Submission

This contained similar information to the earlier proposals, with a revised masterplan, see Fig. 13. The document contained some hand drawn sketches of proposals and extracts from a more detailed masterplan, see Fig. 14. Parkridge have confirmed that these sketches are indicative of the kind of development they envisage at Western Otmoor.

- 5.7 The revised proposals included Appendices produced to inform and support the masterplan. These included the following reports (some of which are marked 'Draft') which relate to landscape issues:

- Non Technical Summary August 2008
- Appendix 2 Section 2 Water & Drainage
- Appendix 2 Section 6 Archaeological Desk Based Assessment
- Appendix 3 Section 1 Sustainability Action Plan
- Appendix 3 Section 3 Ecology Assessment
- Appendix 3 Section 4 Green Infrastructure Strategy

- 5.8 We have reviewed these documents and highlight below key points which will have a bearing on the landscape character and visual impact of the proposals of the site:

5.9 Non Technical Summary

The Weston Otmoor Ecotown will have 15,000 new dwellings and sufficient employment development to provide 15,000 new jobs. The masterplan has been designed to allow over half of the total site area as green space.

“A starting point is the retention, protection and enhancement of all existing features of landscape and conservation value. This is followed by the creation of a hierarchy of open spaces with a progressive, graded urban / rural interface to ensure a successful assimilation of the eco-town into its surrounding environment.”

Restoration of a village green and common land for Weston on the Green is mentioned but not indicated on the masterplan. The masterplan shows the new town surrounded by planting belts including trees rather than a graded rural / urban interface to ensure assimilation.

A network of

“greenways and blueways will be part of a substantial overall qualitative and quantitative net gain in landscape, biodiversity and community access, within a hierarchy of new landscape assets varying from formal tree-lined boulevards to community orchards and woodlands.”

We note that it is not clear whether the existing network of public footpaths and bridle-path together with existing hedgerows and tree belts will be retained.

5.10 Water and Drainage

SUDs will be employed on the site using techniques “which reduce the volume of flow to watercourses and maximise infiltration”. These include bio-retention areas – designed to store rainfall, an area 450m² per 1 Ha or 5% of total area will be needed and these areas will be designed to integrate with the landscape. Swales – typically 0.5m deep, top width 3m.

Future maintenance and ownership for these areas is not yet agreed although swales and bio-retention areas for the highway will be separate and adopted by the highway authority.

5.11 Archaeological Desk Based Assessment

This identified that further work on archaeological evaluation should be undertaken and that the site contains a number of historic hedgerows which may need to be preserved insitu. The impact of development on the adjacent conservation area at Weston on the Green and on listed buildings within this area and at Staplehurst Farm should be considered. In our view no consideration has been made of these items.

5.12 Sustainability Action Plan

Site constraints and opportunities are identified which have been used to inform the masterplan at page 8. We note these do not include Public Rights of Way, the existing landscape framework (apart from two areas of Ancient Woodland) and adjacent and nearby areas of settlement including Weston on the Green Conservation Area. These are in our view important omissions.

8 key objectives and targets are identified for Weston Otmoor including green infrastructure (page 11) and localised control of waste and energy through the use of a site wide biomass combined heat and power plant (CHP plant) together with anaerobic digestion facilities. The proposed site for these facilities is in the Greenbelt north of the SSSI to the south of the site in an area identified as ‘green infrastructure’. This development will have an industrial appearance and include large scale buildings and structures. It is sited within an otherwise green and undeveloped area apart from the new road network.

The existing green network of public footpaths and landscape framework is identified as being integrated within the transport and movement strategy. It is not clear from the masterplan how these have been retained and integrated.

5.13 Ecology Assessment

This assessment included a Phase 1 habitat and protected species survey – key habitats and species are identified as follows:

“Two SSSIs are located around the circumference of the site. The first being Weston Fen on the western boundary and the second being Wendlebury Meads and Mansmoor Closes situated at the south eastern border of the site. A number of County Wildlife Sites are also situated within the site and in the immediate vicinity. These include Black Leys Wood, located to the west and Weston Wood and Wormough Copse, both in the southern half of the site.”

This statement is in our view slightly misleading: Weston Fen is adjacent to the west side of the additional land shown west of the B430. Part of the Wendlebury Meads and Mansmoor Closes SSSI lies within the south part of the site. The report identifies a number of habitats and species of value on the site. Habitats include:

“the mosaic of semi-improved grassland (supplemented by field strips of set-aside land), unimproved grassland, hedgerows, mature trees, plantation woodland, ancient woodland, semi-natural woodland, ponds, damp ditches, watercourses and open water. All of these habitats provide corridors of movement, foraging, roosting and breeding habitat.”

Species include badgers, birds including red kite, reptile species, 1 great crested newt, invertebrate fauna, bats, brown hare.

Survey work is ongoing.

5.14 Green Infrastructure Strategy

The strategy describes the landscape character of the site as of low value and little interest. We disagree with this assessment and refer to our assessment at Section 6. Key points from this strategy include the following:

- Excess 50% green space (we note open space is predominantly sited south of the A34 and on the area of additional land west of the B430. Land to the north of the A34 has much less than 50% open space allocated to it).
- Robust protection for the adjacent SSSI's (we note a SSSI lies within the site, a green buffer zone is allocated for this, however we note two tram routes pass through this zone close to or adjacent to the SSSI).
- Overall quantitative and qualitative net gains in landscape, biodiversity and community access (we note that existing valuable habitats and species are not protected apart from the Ancient Woodland and SSSI).
- A progressive graded urban / rural interface ensuring successful assimilation of the Eco-town with its surrounding environment (the masterplan does not appear to show this assimilation).

5.15 We have made a preliminary assessment of these revised proposals and added this to our earlier work. We outline in summary form, the revisions made to the scheme:

- Housing, together with majority of land for employment, now in northern part of the site (15,000 dwellings, 15,000 jobs), north of A34.
- Southern part of High Street moved to east side of south part of the site as an additional through route to the station, (i.e. 3 routes plus main access road).

- Green buffer zone around northern part of the site reduced in size, particularly on north and east boundary and replaced by housing to the north and employment to the east.
- The proposed large car park omitted and replaced by a commercial centre adjacent to the new station.
- Majority of development removed from south part of the site, replaced by nature conservation areas and sports village, together with an energy and waste management centre.
- More links indicated to wider landscape to west of the site..
- Road alignments changed, particularly west loop, which is now nearer to the B430.
- No road indicated to give access to north area of land for employment.
- Energy and waste management centre added on green belt land shown as 'green infrastructure' to south of site.
- Site area expanded and include land to west of B430.
- Text refers to car park near station for 6,000 cars for 'Park and Ride' – not indicated on masterplan.

5.16 Fig. 14 indicates the following:

- Buildings on High Street from 3 storey to 4 - 5 storeys tall, largely terraced. The High Street is shown stretching the length of the site, running from north to south.
- School 4 - 5 storeys tall, (3 No. secondary schools, 8 No. primary schools).
- High Street and buildings shown built on bridge over A34.
- Commercial quarter by railway and M40 shown as 1 - 4 storey buildings.

6.0 Landscape Impacts

- 6.1 The site contains three areas of different landscape character. These comprise the open airfield to the north of the site, the larger scale farmland north of the A34 and the smaller scale, enclosed farmland south of the A34.

Airfield

- 6.2 The Cherwell District Landscape Assessment identifies this area as being in need of reconstruction. (See para. 4.1 for description of this study's status). It lies on the western edge of the area characterised as Otmoor Lowlands and is, therefore, important in terms of its potential capacity to reinforce this area's landscape character. We assess the open airfield as having a degraded landscape character. As such, this part of the site could absorb some development, although some mitigation measures should be undertaken to restore the landscape framework and the Otmoor Lowland boundary to the west of the airfield.

It is worth noting that the Cherwell District Landscape Assessment recommends the following treatment to reconstruction landscapes.

- 6.3 These landscapes are those where the landscape has been so modified by human activity that they no longer bear any resemblance to their former character. They include quarries and airfields which occur in significant numbers throughout the study area.
- 6.4 These landscapes have a high capacity to accommodate appropriately designed change which is of a rural nature and scale because they have already lost their intrinsic character. They would gain very positive benefits from the introduction of a new character and strong sense of place. Created new identities need to be distinctive, but also need to respond to the surrounding landscape context. A strong landscape framework can help to achieve successful integration of new development in these areas. The following opportunities should be considered:
- Contain new development within a strong, distinctive landscape framework that is sensitively designed so as to integrate with the surrounding landscape character, paying particular attention to the distribution of woodlands, scale of field pattern and local building styles.
 - Take advantage of the good opportunity for extensive woodland planting across the district, which as a whole lacks woodland cover. Woodlands should be of a form appropriate to the character area and species should be indigenous broadleaves. Establishment of a green framework of woodland should be a priority, and can occur before development proposals are made.
 - Ensure that new development has a strong sense of identity, but also knits into surrounding landscape. Seek to divide and structure denuded open landscapes of disused airfields with development contained in a strong landscape framework.
 - Good management of hedgerows. Removal of hedges should be strongly resisted and gapping up carried out where hedges are becoming thin.
 - Continued renewal of hedgerow trees should be encouraged to prevent the decline of the hedgerow tree network, which locally tend to all be of the same age structure. Care needs to be taken that trees appropriate to the character area are planted, with oak and ash on heavier soils and beech on limestone outcrops.
 - Traditional management of willow trees along watercourses and ditches should be encouraged and supported by landscape conservation grants.
 - Continued management of existing copses, coverts and small woods is important.

- Development should be permitted only if the scale, size, materials and character of the scheme are designed so as to blend in to the area with sensitive siting, for example, as already occurs with most of the high quality infill housing found in many of the district's villages. Care needs to be taken, however, that the characteristic spatial structure of villages is not too greatly changed.
- Care should also be taken with any road improvement schemes that the character of the rural road network does not become urbanised through the use of standard urban kerbs and that features such as hedgebanks and sunken lanes are not lost.

Larger Scale Farmland

- 6.5 The larger scale farmland lies to the north of the A34 up to the north boundary. It contains open, relatively large scale fields with existing native hedgerows and individual trees on the boundaries, together with some small blocks of woodland and belts of native planting along the existing streams. These are important features in the landscape. The area to the east and south is adversely impacted by traffic noise and glimpsed views of the M40 and A34. The Cherwell District Landscape Assessment identifies this area as being in need of repair. We assess this area as being capable of accommodating limited areas of sensitively sited and integrated development within a strengthened landscape framework.
- 6.6 It is worth noting that the Cherwell District Landscape Assessment recommends the following treatment for repair landscapes.
- 6.7 These are areas where the landscape character is still reasonably strong and worthy of conservation, but where some or all of the individual features or overall structure are showing noticeable decline. They typically include most of the unspoilt rural landscapes which do not fall within the conservation category, incorporating large areas of the Oxfordshire Estate Farmlands, the Upper Cherwell Basin and Otmoor Lowlands.
- 6.8 Landscape intervention should concentrate on repair of the weakening hedgerow and hedgerow tree structure, strengthening or replacement of traditional landscape features and screening or integration of intrusive features. Usually only a minimal degree of intervention would be necessary to bring these areas up to the standard of conservation landscapes. Development in these areas must be sensitively sited, designed and integrated to ensure that the rural, unspoilt character of the landscape is maintained. However, precisely because their existing structure is so strong, these landscapes should be able to absorb limited areas of sensitive development. Specific enhancement measures should take into account the following:
- Good management of hedgerows. Removal of hedges should be strongly resisted and gapping up carried out where hedges are becoming thin.
 - Continued renewal of hedgerow trees should be encouraged to prevent the decline of the hedgerow tree network, which locally tend to all be of the same age structure. Care needs to be taken that trees appropriate to the character area are planted, with oak and ash on heavier soils and beech on limestone outcrops.
 - Traditional management of willow trees along watercourses and ditches should be encouraged and supported by landscape conservation grants.
 - Continued management of existing copses, coverts and small woods is important.
 - Development should be permitted only if the scale, size, materials and character of the scheme are designed so as to blend in to the area with sensitive siting, for example, as already occurs with most of the high quality infill housing found in many of the district's villages. Care needs to be taken, however, that the characteristic spatial structure of villages is not too greatly changed.

- Care should also be taken with any road improvement schemes that the character of the rural road network does not become urbanised through the use of standard urban kerbs, and that features such as hedgebanks and sunken lanes are not lost.

Smaller Scale, Enclosed Farmland

- 6.9 The area to the south of the A34 is characterised as being small scale, enclosed farmland with well established field boundaries and blocks of woodland. There is an area of Ancient Woodland at Wormough Copse and at Weston Wood adjacent to the west boundary. The site contains the stream which lies within the flood plain and is marked by riverine planting, including willows. This area has a more intimate character which is emphasised by the existing stream course vegetation and undulating topography. The eastern and northern parts of the area are adversely affected by the M40 and A34.
- 6.10 There is a narrow strip of land between the A34 and the B road, which is badly impacted by the A34 and Junction 9 of the M40. This strip of land has largely lost its field pattern and has been affected by previous construction of the A34 embankment and road widening. It is identified as requiring restoration. The remainder of the area is identified as requiring repair.
- 6.11 We assess that the area has capacity to absorb limited areas of sensitively sited development within a strengthened landscape framework. The points noted at paragraphs 6.7 and 6.8 apply equally to the majority of this area.
- 6.12 The Cherwell District Landscape Assessment recommends the following treatment for restoration. This applies to the narrow strip of land immediately south of the A34.
- 6.13 Restoration landscapes are somewhat further along the scale of decline. Their character and structure are often quite seriously degraded, although they do retain some discernible remnants of their former character. Typically, these areas are those where intensive agricultural practices have resulted in widespread loss of hedgerow and woodland structure, or where the landscape has lost its rural character and become visually degraded, in some instances as a result of intrusive built development, around the urban fringes or along transport corridors.
- 6.14 These landscapes have lost part of their inherent landscape character and, therefore, have some capacity for positive restoration and change. Positive intervention should concentrate on strengthening the landscape framework in order to improve landscape quality and create a stronger sense of place. Where intensive agricultural practices have led to locally universal loss of landscape structure, it may be necessary to create a new rural landscape character appropriate to the character area, establishing a stronger sense of place. This does not imply topographical change where landscapes are otherwise flat and mounding would appear alien in character.
- 6.15 Great care should be taken that new development is well sited and sensitively designed so that it does not simply worsen the existing problems of poorly integrated, intrusive development. The following landscape intervention measures should be encouraged to enhance these landscapes:
- Replanting of hedgerows and hedgerow trees where these have been removed should be encouraged, together with gapping up and improved maintenance of weakening hedges.
 - There is a good opportunity for extensive woodland planting across the district, which as whole lacks woodland cover. Woodlands should be of a form appropriate to their character area, with smaller woods near the brow of hills in the Ironstone areas and larger, sweeping woodland belts interspersed with smaller copses in the lowlands. Species used should be indigenous broadleaves.
 - Existing development should be contained within a strong, distinctive landscape framework. There is considerable scope for tightening the landscape structure along road corridors and around the urban fringes.

- New development should be integrated with a strong landscape framework which should be based on features found within the relevant character area and should respect long views over open countryside.

Conclusion to Impact on Landscape Character

- 6.16 The landscape character of the existing site has been assessed as having pockets of degraded character which require reconstruction and restoration and can absorb new development. The majority of the site is assessed as having an existing landscape character which requires reinforcement and enhancement to improve its quality, but which could also absorb limited, sensitive development within a restored landscape framework.
- 6.17 The proposals for the Western Otmoor Eco town will involve large scale urban development, with invasive supporting infrastructure in an area which is currently rural, undeveloped and valued for its landscape character. This development will spread beyond the site into the market garden area to the west, beyond the M40, to the east near to Wendlebury and near to the SSSI and into the Greenbelt to the south of the site. This will inevitably impact the landscape character of a much wider area than the site plan implies.
- 6.18 In our view, the scale of the proposed development and likely density and 'urban' character, (buildings of 4 - 5 storeys in height in terraces), will be completely alien to the site. It will have an affect both day and night with the introduction of lighting in an otherwise dark site. It will be incompatible with the requirement for:
- 'Reconstruction and restoration' of the area of degraded landscape character.
 - 'Reinforcement and enhancement' to absorb limited, sensitive development within a restored landscape framework on the majority of the site, i.e. smaller scale, rural development for agricultural or residential purposes.
- 6.19 Existing development at Weston on the Green is largely two storey, detached or semi-detached dwellings with some terraced development set in gardens interspersed with fields and planting belts. Development with a similar kind of scale and density would be more appropriate for any new small scale development, rather than the Western Otmoor proposals.
- 6.20 The developers have not adequately demonstrated how the existing landscape framework is to be retained and enhanced. The site currently contains many areas of different habitat, linked by a framework of hedgerows and woodlands and criss crossed by public footpaths, (5 No. to the north and 6 No. to the south). The masterplan, (Figure 13), doesn't show these as being retained. There, will, therefore, be a complete change to the existing landscape character.
- 6.21 The necessity to connect the site over the A34 by three separate road bridges will have a further impact on the landscape character, as will the building of an expanded Junction 9 and a new railway station.
- 6.22 Part of the existing B road south of the A3 is shown as removed; at present this meandering boundary is well planted and provides a useful road link between areas on either side of the M40. It also serves to reinforce the riverine character of the Otmoor Lowlands character area.4.
- 6.23 In summary, we believe that the landscape character of the site will be very severely compromised by a development of this size and density.

7.0 Visual Impacts

Visual Impact of the site

- 7.1 Following the desktop study of baseline information on the site and its context, a number of potential viewpoints were identified. These covered publicly accessible views within the site, on the site boundary and further a field, or roads and footpaths, and from areas of settlement. A site visit was made in August 2008 and the viewpoints were checked. Where there are views of the site typical viewpoints were chosen and recorded. These are shown on figure 15 and 16 and described in the following section. A second visit was made in December 2008 to re-examine the chosen viewpoints after leaf fall. At this point some additional views were added.
- 7.2 Views within the site at site level are limited to near or mid distance with some partial or glimpsed longer views on the horizon. Existing hedgerows and belts or blocks of trees limit these views, see Figure 8. In some cases local mounding or changes in level which are either natural or manmade due to road construction, screen long views across the site. The open airfield affords the longest views from west to east across the north part of the site. Hedgerows and trees are largely deciduous, so their screening effect would be less in winter, this is corroborated by our site visit in early December after leaf fall.
- 7.2 There are a number of public footpaths, 6 to the north of the A34, 4 to the south, which cross the site. Some of these (to the north of the A34), have been truncated by the M41 and no longer connect to settlement to the east of the motorway. There are also some existing dotted farms and dwellings within the site. These include New Barn Farm, Weston Park Farm, Weston Farm Barn, Holts Farm and Caerleon. Clear views would be available of any new development from these footpaths and dwellings, and we assess that the visual impact would be severe from these locations (see viewpoints 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5). Likely receptors are walkers, residents and farm workers.
- 7.3 The site boundary is generally relatively well screened due to existing planting comprising overgrown hedges and belts of trees. Exceptions to this are on the north boundary where there are glimpsed views of the airfield from Akeman Street, see Viewpoint 12. However, this road has established planted tree and shrub belts on both sides so longer views into the site are not available from further north or from Middleton Stoney. It would be possible to remove deadwood and plant up the gaps to reduce views into the site. Parts of the west boundary adjacent to the airfield are open, and clear panoramic views are available from the B430 in this location, see Viewpoint 11. Dense planting to the west of the road screens longer views of the site from further west. Receptors will be residents and people working on the adjacent business park and people using the B430.
- 7.4 At Weston on the Green there are dwellings and farms to the east of the B430 which will be severely impacted by the proposed development, both night and day, because of their immediate proximity to the site. Receptors will be residents, farm workers, visitors to the B&B, people employed at offices situated in former farm buildings and visitors to the farm shop.
- 7.5 There are dwellings to the west along the B430 in Weston on the Green, many of which will be severely impacted by the development, including listed buildings (see viewpoint 8 and 10). The impact will be worse where existing screening along the west boundary is intermittent (see viewpoint 9 and 10). Receptors in these locations will be residents, visitors to the restaurants, pubs and The Weston Manor Hotel and people travelling along the B430 by car, bus or walking.
- 7.6 Part of the east boundary to the north of the site is also open and unplanted. There are clear views onto the site from the adjacent M40 and this area is therefore particularly heavily impacted by traffic noise and views of traffic, which detracts from the site (see viewpoint 13).
- 7.7 There are four points on the site boundary, where surrounding roads are elevated on road bridges. These are at the north east corner Viewpoint 13, at Junction 9 of the M40 on the east boundary and at the road bridge south of this - see viewpoint 8, and where the B430 crosses the A34 on the west boundary viewpoint 7). Clear views into the site are available from these road bridges, although owing to existing vegetation and topography these views are only of part of the site. We assess the visual

impact in these locations to be moderate to severe, the effect will be worse in winter after leaf fall. Receptors would include vehicles travelling on these roads and walkers.

- 7.8 There would be views of part of the south section of the site from the railway line. We assess the visual impact from trains on this site to be low to moderate, as they would be travelling at speed.
- 7.9 Properties lying on or near to the boundary are generally partially or well screened by existing planting. However, where views do exist into the site, we assess that the impact could be severe due to close proximity of new development. Properties that would be impacted in this way include those on the eastern edge of Weston on the Green and dwellings at Weston Business Park (see paragraphs 7.4 and 7.5)
- 7.10 There are a number of small villages and historic parkland estates within 2.5Km of the site. These include Blechingdon, Kirtlington, Middleton Stoney, Chesterton, Wendlebury, Charlton on Otmoor and Heathfield. There are also some scattered farms within this area. The topography is undulating and the area contains a number of belts and shaws of woodland, which provide screening in longer views. The historic parkland estates tend to be surrounded by established, mixed woodland, further restricting long views. There is higher land at Blechingdon, (100m AOD), Kirtlington, (100m AOD), and Graven Hill, (113m AOD). These points were checked, but no views could be obtained of the site, apart from at Blechingdon where there is a partial view of part of the southern part of the site available at one point, on the eastern edge of the village. The view from here is a wide panorama of the River Cherwell valley basin looking south extending to the Chilterns in the far distance. Our assessment is that the visual impact would be low from this point because the site forms a very small part of a much larger complex view.
- 7.11 The villages of Wendlebury and Little Chesterton, which lie to the east of the M40 are currently well screened from views of the site by planting and the M40. However, we note that the much enlarged road network proposed for the new junction 9 will encroach much nearer these villages than the existing junction, and will involve elevated spiral roads and a new roundabout close to Wendlebury. It is likely that there will be some visual impact on both villages from the new junction. This will need assessing when more detail is available.
- 7.12 Chesterton is a small village lying to the east of the north corner of the site beyond the M40, at a level of 80m AOD and a distance of 1km. Part of the north part of the site can be seen from housing at 'The Green' on the south edge of Chesterton, and from the adjacent recreation ground. This view forms part of a wide view across open fields. Traffic on the M40 is apparent, but it is possible to see the windsock on the airfield between trees beyond the motorway. This section of the site is currently not well screened with planting. We assess that the visual impact from The Green would be low to moderate because of the distance. Additional planting on the site boundary might help to mitigate this impact. A similar but nearer view is available from the road to Little Chesterton (viewpoint 14).
- 7.13 Generally, apart from the west boundary the existing site is well screened from the surrounding area by existing changes of level and planting. However, the existing planting is largely deciduous and would be less effective in winter. The impact on footpaths and dwellings within the site and on settlement on or near the boundary at Weston on the Green will be severe. There will be a moderate to severe impact from adjacent road bridges. There will be a low to moderate visual impact on views from The Green at Chesterton, the railway and the eastern edge of Blechingdon.

Visual Impact of the Proposed Development

- 7.14 Further proposals submitted by Parkridge in September gave more detail on the likely height of buildings together with a revised concept master plan. This showed the development area to be larger than before in the north part of the site, thus reducing the size of the buffer zone strip for screen planting around the site and presumably increasing density. Previous areas of planting are replaced by housing along the north boundary and a broad band of employment on the east boundary adjacent to the M40. At the same time parts of the development will be much higher, (4 - 5 storeys high), than existing development at Weston on the Green which is 2 storey. In our view this will make the visual impact greater and will be difficult to mitigate. Three new road bridges are shown, one of which

appears to have buildings on it (the High Street, see Figure 13). This will have a visual impact on a much wider area than the existing site currently has. Similarly, the construction of a new commercial centre adjacent to the M40 and the new railway station, together with the large scale energy and waste centre, will have a visual impact on people travelling on the M40 and on the Bicester to Oxford rail line. The construction of a much larger and extended Junction 9 above the M40 is likely to impact receptors both to the west and east of the M40. In particular nearby areas of settlement such as Weston on the Green, Wendlebury, Little Chesterton and Chesterton are likely to be affected.

7.15 There is a lack of detail on the available information from Parkridge regarding density, massing, materials and form of development. However, it is possible to describe in general terms the effect of the proposed new town on the existing site and surrounding. To help with this process we have superimposed our viewpoint locations on the revised masterplan, see figure 17. The following section takes a limited number of typical viewpoints (two within and four around the site) and describes the likely changes to the view.

7.16 Viewpoint 2

At present this view, taken from a junction of two footpaths is completely rural in nature, giving a wide open view over a large field bounded by hedgerows and hedgerow trees. A block of Ancient Woodland can be seen on the right and longer views of Graven Hill, traffic on the M40 boundary and the rail line on the south boundary.

After development this viewpoint will be on the High Street (see figure 14) with 4-5 storey tall densely developed urban frontages on both sides behind which there may be views on the left of much larger scale warehouses and office buildings and of the large tram terminal / station. The street itself will contain a tramway route and road for conventional traffic, together with footpaths for pedestrians. Behind the buildings lining the High Street to the right there will be new planted areas. It is unlikely there will be any views of the existing planting on the site including the woodland.

7.17 Viewpoint 4

This view is taken from a public footpath looking over an open field, bounded by hedges and mature oak trees. Buildings at Weston Ground Farm and along the B430 at Weston on the Green can be seen between trees and above an intermittent hedge. This is a small scale, predominantly rural view, with some small scale two storey dwellings and larger agricultural buildings.

After development this viewpoint will be on a tram route and road. The hedge and trees to the left will be replaced by a tram line with associated paths, tram stops and an adjacent road. The field will be covered with housing and there will be a planted path to the right of the photograph linking to the B430 and Weston on the Green. Part of the hedgerow and tree planting in this position may be retained. Tree planting may be visible (when established) behind the new houses.

7.18 Viewpoint 7

At present this shows a rural view of the site with medium sized fields bounded by hedgerows and hedgerow trees. Buildings can be seen at Weston on the Green with existing screen planting and on an embankment at the edge of the site to the left. The A34 is in the foreground, rising up to junction 9 in the far distance. Traffic on the M40 can be glimpsed in the far distance below the horizon line.

After development there will be an increased area of woodland / screen planting in the immediate foreground - middle distance. Whilst planting is becoming established, there will be views of new housing on fields in the middle and far distance. There will be three new bridges over the A34. These will predominate in the view of the A34 with a far glimpse of the new junction 9 road layout on the horizon. This will represent a more urbanised view, dominated by infrastructure despite the proposed woodland planting.

7.19 Viewpoint 11

This is a wide panoramic view over the flat airfield and down the B430. Airfield buildings can be seen to the left, and tree belts and planting bound the distant view in the middle of the panorama. Higher ground can be seen in the distance to the right of the picture with tree belts and hedgerows below this confining views of the southern part of the site and Weston on the Green.

After development this panorama will disappear and be replaced with a swathe of housing. There will be a strip of planting between the housing and the B430. There are no details of this proposed planting, type, size or density and so it is difficult to evaluate whether it will be an effective screen. There will be two new crossing points over the B430 to the right of the view. These will include tramlines, footways and presumably required sight lines will mean that some of the existing screen planting to the west of the B430 will be removed.

7.20 Viewpoint 13

This view taken from a road bridge over the M40 shows the open east boundary at this point and a rural view beyond this of fields bounded by tree belts and woodland with hedgerows. A glimpsed view of a further field in the far distance can be seen at the centre of the picture with higher land on the horizon to the left of the view.

After development this view will be completely changed with large scale buildings for employment, together with associated service access and yards, parking, cycle stores and roadways covering the visible part of the site. The employment uses have been identified as B1 and B8, ie. warehousing or distribution and mixed employment. Warehouses are likely to be large scale structures with an extended footprint and a general height of 10-12m up to 18m height at ridge. Compare this with the traffic on the adjacent motorway and it can be seen that these buildings would completely change and detract from this pleasant rural view. A very narrow belt of planting is indicated on the east boundary. No detail has been given of this planting. It is likely that the proposed housing behind the employment area would be hidden from view.

Conclusion to Visual Impact

- 7.21 Currently the site represents a totally rural area, which, when visible from beyond the site provides a pleasant and characteristic view of the countryside of the Cherwell District. There are a number of footpaths which cross the site and some parts of the boundary where there is little screening and clear or partial views are available of the site. There are a number of sensitive receptors which currently have views of the site. These include residents, visitors, locally employed people, walkers, tourists and large numbers of people using the major infrastructure network which passes through or abuts the site.
- 7.22 Generally, apart from the west boundary the existing site is well screened from the surrounding area by existing changes of level and planting. However, the existing planting is largely deciduous and would be less effective in winter. The impact on footpaths and dwellings within the site and on settlement on or near the boundary at Weston on the Green will be severe. There will be a moderate to severe impact from adjacent road bridges. There will be a low to moderate visual impact on views from The Green at Chesterton, the railway and the eastern edge of Bletchington.
- 7.23 Further information provided by Parkridge has allowed a slightly more detailed understanding of the proposals. The revised masterplan changed the space allowed for a landscape framework and the disposition of development which is now concentrated in the northern two thirds of the site.
- 7.24 Our assessment is that the visual impact of the development will be very severe or severe for a large number of receptors despite the fact that the site is currently relatively well screened. This is because of the high density of development and the proposed infrastructure, combined with a lack of space for effective mitigation.

- 7.25 Little or no detail has been given regarding mitigation although the text and plans mention and indicate planted areas and mounding. More detail should be given of proposed species, density and size of planting and management and maintenance. Similarly more detail is needed of surrounding eco-retention areas and swales as these will all take up part of space allocated as 'green infrastructure'.
- 7.26 Currently the site is dark at night. A new town will cause light pollution for both nearby settlement and for ecology.
- 7.27 More detail is required to assess the likely visual impact of the proposals. Further information required includes a more detailed masterplan indicating density and likely heights and form of development, plus an indication of materials, some proposed and existing levels particularly where these are likely to change at road bridges, Junction 9, the new railway station, etc. To help with this assessment we suggest a limited number of photomontages should be produced based on wire frame 3D images produced by Parkridge from agreed viewpoints.

Overall based on the latest information available we assess although the existing site is relatively well contained visually, the scale, density and urban nature of the proposed development would have a much more severe visual impact on a wider area than the existing site. In our view these effects would be difficult to mitigate with the proposals as shown. Further work needs to be done by Parkridge to allow further consideration of the potential visual impact.

8.0 Conclusion and Next Steps

- 8.1 Our initial assessment has highlighted that the landscape character of the site can absorb some small scale development, providing it is sensitively sited and set within a strengthened landscape framework. However, over development or an insensitively developed scheme, which ignores the recommendations for repair of the landscape, could degrade and detract from the landscape character of the area. In our view the Western Otmoor proposals would constitute such 'over development' because of their sheer scale and density and because of the design of the overall masterplan. The proposals would degrade the landscape character of the site
- 8.2 The visual containment of the existing site on the surrounding area is assessed as being largely contained. There are a limited number of locations at 1 - 2.5Km distance where there will be views of part of the site. Clear views are limited to areas of public access such as footpaths and dwellings within the site and on or near to its immediate boundary, together with vehicles on the M40 and A34 and passengers on the railway.
- 8.3 The revised masterplan and sketches provided by Parkridge indicate a very urban development form and density which is completely out of character with the scale and density of other areas of settlement in the area. This will in our view be difficult to contain visually and to mitigate. The revised masterplan includes proposals for several major elements of development including the remodelling of Junction 9, a new railway station and dualling of the current rail track which passes through a SSSI at this point, large areas of employment, a new waste water treatment plant, an energy and waste centre including a large CHP plant and anaerobic digestors, a 6,000 place car park for Park and Ride and possible new wind turbines. This development is on top of the provision of 15,000 new homes and associated schools, health centres, shops and community uses and employment development to provide 15,000 new jobs, together with infrastructure. This is obviously a very major development for the area and it is disappointing that so little information has been made available.
- 8.4 It is not possible to adequately assess the likely landscape and visual impacts of any of the major elements of development identified because there is no detail provided. However, we have carefully examined the visual containment of the existing site and compared this with the revised masterplan. In our view the visual impacts will be much more severe over a wider area with more receptors than our initial assessment of the visual containment of the site suggests.
- 8.5 The fieldwork was carried out in summer, when trees and shrub planting are in full leaf. Further field survey work was done after leaf fall and viewpoints were double checked; areas of screening were found to be, in many cases, less effective, exposing larger open parts of the site to public view.
- 8.6 This broad brush study would need to be re-visited and updated once there are further or more detailed proposals for the Western Otmoor eco-town. It was not possible to assess in any detail the likely impact of the new infrastructure, including the proposed new Junction 9, roundabouts, road network and railway station because so little information is available. Similarly, no detail of the waste to energy plant and proposed water treatment plant have been provided. However, we note that it appears that the existing road south of the A34 is shown as removed; at present this meandering boundary is well planted and provides a useful road link between areas on either side of the M40. It also serves to reinforce the riverine character of the Otmoor Lowlands character area.
- 8.7 We have concerns that the current level of detail on the masterplan doesn't explain adequately, how the landscape characteristics of the area are to be retained and enhanced, nor does it adequately demonstrate that enough space has been allowed for the proposed 'strong landscape framework'. Similarly, the built form and density of the development is not clear. More Information is required from the developers to allow a more detailed landscape and visual impact assessment to be undertaken. Photomontages would be helpful to help with this process.
- 8.8 Our initial assessment is that overall the proposed Western Otmoor eco-town would have an unacceptable Landscape and Visual impact on the site and surrounding area.