



**Symmetry Park
Bicester, Phase 3**

**Landscape and Visual
Appraisal**

Prepared by:
**The Environmental Dimension
Partnership Ltd**

On behalf of:
Tritax Big Box Developments

November 2024

Report Reference
edp7480_r005c

Document Control

DOCUMENT INFORMATION

Client	Tritax Big Box Developments
Report Title	Landscape and Visual Appraisal
Document Reference	edp7480_r005c

VERSION INFORMATION

	Author	Formatted	Peer Review	Proofed by/Date
005_DRAFT	BCo	SCh	NPR	-
005a	BCo	-	AHu	CRo 101024
005b	BCo	-	-	CRo 151024
005c	BCo	-	-	SCh 191124

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Section 1 Introduction and Methodology

- 1.1 The Environmental Dimension Partnership Ltd (EDP) has been commissioned by Tritax Big Box Developments ('the Applicant') to undertake a Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) of Symmetry Park Bicester, Phase 3 (the Site) to accompany a full planning application for employment use under Use Class B2/B8.
- 1.2 EDP is an independent environmental planning consultancy with offices in Cirencester, Cheltenham and Cardiff. The practice provides advice in the fields of landscape, ecology, archaeology, masterplanning, arboriculture, rights of way and agricultural land matters. Details of the practice can be obtained at our website (www.edp-uk.co.uk).
- 1.3 EDP is a Registered Practice of the Landscape Institute. The primary purpose of EDP's appointment as chartered landscape architects is to conduct an assessment, in landscape and visual terms, of the effects of the forthcoming proposed development as it has evolved.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

- 1.4 The Site is centred approximately at Ordnance Survey Grid Reference (OSGR) SP60692 20626. The local planning authority (LPA) is Cherwell District Council. The location and extents of the Site are illustrated on **Plan EDP 1**, and described in the material supporting the planning application, particularly the Design and Access Statement.
- 1.5 The Site measures 7.34 hectares (ha) and is located at the south-eastern edge of Bicester, Oxfordshire along the A41, adjacent to the completed Symmetry Park Phase 1 and 2 developments. It comprises arable fields, bordered by hedgerows, with a small group of farm buildings in the north-eastern corner. Other features on site include a small block of woodland in the south-east, and an area of tall forbs. The Site has been largely used for hay production and cattle grazing land. The Site is bounded by the A41 to the south, Symmetry Park Phase 1 and 2 to the west, a scrap metal yard to the east and arable land to the north.
- 1.6 The majority of the existing Symmetry Park site (which the Site is immediately adjacent to) is located in an area allocated for development in the adopted Cherwell Local Plan 2011–2031 as a strategic allocation for employment development: Planning Policy Bicester 12: South East Bicester.
- 1.7 On 04 November 2024, Cherwell District Council published the Cherwell Local Plan Review 2042 (Regulation 19) Proposed Submission Plan, this is due to go out for public consultation in December 2024. The Site is identified in the Proposed Submission Plan as an Employment Site Allocation (site area 45.80 hectares developable area of 30). The draft allocation is for employment uses E(g)(i)/(ii)/(iii)/B2/B8 floorspace - Policy reference BIC E1 - Land east of J9, M40, Bicester.
- 1.8 EDP has been providing advice on landscape matters to the Applicant since the outset of the design process and in so doing, helping to ensure that the masterplan is as sensitive to its landscape context as possible.

PURPOSE

- 1.9 The purpose of this LVA is to identify the baseline conditions of the Site and its surrounding area, to inform the design layout and appearance, and to provide an assessment of the effects predicted to arise from the development on the landscape and visual baseline conditions.
- 1.10 In compiling the baseline assessment, EDP has undertaken the following key tasks:
- A review of the planning policy context for the Site;
 - A desktop study and web search of relevant background documents and maps. EDP's study included reviews of aerial photographs, web searches, LPA publications and landscape character assessments. EDP has also obtained, where possible, information about relevant landscape and other designations such as National Landscapes (formerly Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)), gardens and parks listed on Historic England's 'Register of Historic Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest in England' (RPG), Tree Preservation Orders (TPO), scheduled monuments, conservation areas and listed buildings;
 - A field assessment of local site circumstances, including a photographic survey of the character and fabric of the Site and its surroundings, using photography from a number of representative viewpoints, undertaken by a chartered landscape architect on 27 August 2024; and
 - An analysis of the likely landscape and visual effects of the proposed scheme, which is determined by combining the magnitude of the predicted change with the assessed sensitivity of the identified receptors. The nature of any predicted effects is also identified (i.e. positive/negative, permanent/reversible).

METHODOLOGY ADOPTED FOR THE ASSESSMENT

- 1.11 The assessment methodology for assessing landscape and visual effects prepared by EDP is principally based on the following best practice guidance:
- Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment – Third Edition (LI/IEMA, 2013); and
 - An Approach to Landscape Character Assessment (Natural England, 2014).
- 1.12 This LVA is comprised of a study of two separate but inter-linked issues:
- Landscape character: the physical make-up and condition of the landscape itself, which arises from a distinct, recognisable and consistent pattern of physical and social elements, aesthetic factors and perceptual aspects; and
 - Visual amenity: the way in which the Site is seen, views to and from the Site, their direction, character and sensitivity to change.

- 1.13 The nature of landscape and visual assessment requires both objective analysis and subjective professional judgement. Accordingly, this LVA is based on the best practice guidance listed above, information gathering and field studies. It uses quantifiable factors wherever possible, subjective professional judgement and is based on clearly defined terms. The criteria referred to, but not defined within the guidelines, have been defined by EDP as set out in **Appendix EDP 1**, with terms clearly defined within the Glossary at **Appendix EDP 2**.
- 1.14 The methodology adopted comprised a combination of desktop and field studies including the following:
- An overview of statutory plans and other data regarding relevant designations and planning policies for the area;
 - A Geographical Information System (GIS) analysis of the Site, using Ordnance Survey (OS) profile data, to establish the topography of the area and Zone of Theoretical Visibility (ZTV) of the Site itself;
 - An assessment of the landscape character of the Site, together with the sensitivity of the landscape to change;
 - Identification of representative viewpoints and classifications of sensitivity; and
 - Consideration of the likely potential landscape and visual effects which might result from the proposed scheme options.
- 1.15 The visual analysis is based on views from external spaces within the public domain and not from inside buildings or private spaces. However, comments have been made in relation to likely views from private dwellings where appropriate. The camera location and details of each viewpoint were recorded.

STUDY AREA

- 1.16 In order to establish the baseline to inform the assessment of the potential limit of notable effects of the Site, a broad study area was adopted as the initial search area. This enabled the geographical scope of the assessment to be defined and provided the wider geographical context of the study. Within this area, the search focused on identifying the local planning policy context, identifying national and local landscape designations and other relevant designations (e.g. National Landscapes and RPGs), and providing a general geographical understanding of the Site and its broader context (for example, in relation to landform, transport routes and the distribution and nature of settlement).
- 1.17 Following this initial analysis and subsequent field work, and having an appreciation of the development proposed, the study area has been refined to focus on those areas and features that are assessed to be likely to be affected by the proposals. The extent of this study area is 2km from the Site boundary, largely due to local topography being gently undulating. Occasional reference may be made to features beyond this 2km area where appropriate. The study areas are illustrated on **Plan EDP 1**.

Section 2

Review of Relevant Planning Policy and Designations

INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 An appreciation of the ‘weight’ to be attributed to any landscape or visual effects arising from development starts with an understanding of the landscape designations and planning context within which any such development is to be tested for its acceptability.
- 2.2 EDP has conducted a data trawl of these relevant designations, the findings of which are set out below and the locations of which are illustrated on **Plan EDP 2**.

PLANNING POLICY

National Planning Policy Framework

- 2.3 At the heart of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF; updated December 2023) is a presumption in favour of sustainable development. For landscape, this means recognising the intrinsic beauty of the countryside (paragraph 180 (b)) and balancing any ‘harm’ to the landscape resource with the benefits of the scheme in other respects. This balancing exercise is to be undertaken by the decision maker (in this case the LPA) and falls outside the remit of this report. The benefits of the scheme are to be weighed against the effects on the landscape character and visual amenity as set out in this report, as detailed in the Planning Statement accompanying this application. The policy framework is supported by the National Planning Policy Guidance where relevant.
- 2.4 Planning applications are required to be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Material considerations include the NPPF (the Framework).

Local Planning Policy

- 2.5 In order to properly assess the effects of the proposal in landscape terms, EDP has conducted a review of relevant planning policy and landscape designations to identify what ‘value’ the local authority places on the landscape and what value it has in planning terms. This review focuses on local plan policy since such policy is: (a) more specific to the Site; and (b) reflects the advice of regional and national advice regarding landscape issues.
- 2.6 The statutory development plans which are relevant to the Site comprise:
- Cherwell Local Plan 2011–2031 Part 1 (adopted July 2015); and
 - Saved Policies of the Adopted Cherwell Local Plan 1996.
- 2.7 Cherwell District Council are currently undergoing a review of its Local Plan, including supporting evidence base documents (relevant Landscape Character Assessments are discussed further in **Section 3**). While this is under preparation, Cherwell Local Plan 2011–

2031 Part 1 and the saved policies of the Cherwell Local Plan 1996 remain part of the current development plan.

Cherwell Local Plan 1996 Saved Policies

2.8 The Local Plan Proposals Map shows no specific policies applying to the Site.

2.9 The following saved policies to be retained under the new 2011–2031 Local Plan are considered relevant in the context of this assessment:

- Saved Policy C7: Landscape conservation, requires development to take into account the surrounding topography and landscape character so as not to detract from important views; and
- Saved Policy C28: Layout, design and external appearance of new development, which relates to the design of development (including siting, layout, size, scale, architectural style, building materials, means of enclosure and landscaping), and which should be sympathetic to the character of its landscape context.

Cherwell Local Plan 2011–2031: Part 1 (Adopted July 2015)

2.10 The over-arching policies contained within the Cherwell Local Plan 2011–2031 that are considered relevant in the context of this baseline appraisal are discussed below.

2.11 Policy SLE 1: Employment Development relates to new employment sites, setting out a number of criteria that relate to landscape matters, including that:

“New employment proposals within rural areas on non-allocated sites will be supported if they meet the following criteria:

- *They will be outside of the Green Belt, unless very special circumstances can be demonstrated;*
- *Sufficient justification is provided to demonstrate why the development should be located in the rural area on a non-allocated site;*
- *They will be designed to very high standards using sustainable construction, and be of an appropriate scale and respect the character of villages and the surroundings;*
- *They will be small scale unless it can be demonstrated that there will be no significant adverse impacts on the character of a village or surrounding environment;*
- *The proposal and any associated employment activities can be carried out without undue detriment to residential amenity, the highway network, village character and its setting, the appearance and character of the landscape and the environment generally including on any designated buildings or features (or on any non-designated buildings or features of local importance); and*
- *The proposal will not give rise to excessive or inappropriate traffic and will wherever possible contribute to the general aim of reducing the need to travel by private car.”*

2.12 Policy ESD 10: Protection and Enhancement of Biodiversity and the Natural Environment relates to the retention, enhancement, and extension of existing features of nature conservation, and creation of new ecological resources, where possible, to bring a net gain in biodiversity. The protection of existing trees and new tree planting is encouraged to increase the number of trees in the district.

2.13 Policy ESD 13: Local Landscape Protection and Enhancement states:

“Opportunities will be sought to secure the enhancement of the character and appearance of the landscape, particularly in urban fringe locations, through the restoration, management or enhancement of existing landscapes, features or habitats and where appropriate the creation of new ones, including the planting of woodlands, trees and hedgerows.

Development will be expected to respect and enhance local landscape character, securing appropriate mitigation where damage to local landscape character cannot be avoided. Proposals will not be permitted if they would:

- *Cause undue visual intrusion into the open countryside;*
- *Cause undue harm to important natural landscape features and topography;*
- *Be inconsistent with local character;*
- *Impact on areas judged to have a high level of tranquillity;*
- *Harm the setting of settlements, buildings, structures or other landmark features; or*
- *Harm the historic value of the landscape.*

Development proposals should have regard to the information and advice contained in the Council's Countryside Design Summary Supplementary Planning Guidance, and the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study and be accompanied by a landscape assessment where appropriate.”

2.14 Policy ESD 15: The Character of the Built and Historic Environment requires that new development should complement and enhance that character of its context through sensitive siting, layout and high-quality design. It states that:

“New development proposals should:

- *Be designed to deliver high quality safe, attractive, durable and healthy places to live and work in. Development of all scales should be designed to improve the quality and appearance of an area and the way it functions;*
- *Deliver buildings, places and spaces that can adapt to changing social, technological, economic and environmental conditions;*
- *Support the efficient use of land and infrastructure, through appropriate land uses, mix and density/development intensity; and*

- *Contribute positively to an area's character and identity by creating or reinforcing local distinctiveness and respecting local topography and landscape features, including skylines, valley floors, significant trees, historic boundaries, landmarks, features or views, in particular within designated landscapes, within the Cherwell Valley and within conservation areas and their setting."*

2.15 Policy ESD 17: Green Infrastructure relates to pursuing opportunities to improve the Green Infrastructure network. It states that:

"The district's green infrastructure network will be maintained and enhanced through the following measures:

Ensuring that green infrastructure network considerations are integral to the planning of new development. Proposals should maximise the opportunity to maintain and extend green infrastructure links to form a multi-functional network of open space, providing opportunities for walking and cycling, and connecting the towns to the urban fringe and the wider countryside beyond."

Cherwell Local Plan 2040 Consultation

2.16 As set out above, the Site is identified for development in the emerging Cherwell District Council Local Plan Review 2040: Bicester Vision 2040 Consultation Draft (Regulation 18), which was published for public consultation in September to November 2023, as a preferred employment site allocation as an extension to the existing Symmetry Park at Bicester.

Cherwell Local Plan Review

2.17 In September 2023, Cherwell District Council released its Local Plan Review: Consultation Draft (Regulation 18) to prompt discussion and feedback on new planning policies to guide the delivery of sustainable development across the district. The Cherwell Local Plan Review 2040 Consultation Draft (Regulation 18) (2023) has been prepared to facilitate discussion and feedback on new planning policies to guide the sustainable development within CDC.

2.18 'Draft Core Policy 27: New Employment Development on Unallocated Sites' states new employment development proposals will be supported on unallocated sites provided that the benefits are not outweighed by any harmful impacts. This should also take into account criteria such as the effect on the amenities of nearby residents and businesses.

2.19 The Site is identified in the Consultation Draft as a Preferred Employment Site Allocation for 40 hectares of Employment Land. The draft allocation is for employment uses E(g)(i)/(ii)/(iii)/B2/B8 floorspace (Site Reference LPR38).

2.20 On 04 November 2024, Cherwell District Council published the Cherwell Local Plan Review 2042 (Regulation 19) Proposed Submission Plan, this is due to go out for public consultation in December 2024.

2.21 'Draft Policy LEC 3: New Employment Development on Unallocated Sites' states new employment development proposals will be supported on unallocated sites provided that

the benefits are not outweighed by any harmful impacts. This should also take into account criteria such as the effect on the amenities of nearby residents and businesses.

- 2.22 The Site is identified in the Proposed Submission Plan as an Employment Site Allocation (site area 45.80 hectares developable area of 30). The draft allocation is for employment uses E(g)(i)/(ii)/(iii)/B2/B8 floorspace – Policy reference BIC E1 – Land east of J9, M40, Bicester

OTHER DOCUMENTS OF RELEVANCE TO LANDSCAPE MATTERS

- 2.23 The following evidence based documents have been considered as part of this appraisal:

- ENV06 Bicester Environmental Baseline Report (September 2013);
- ENV07 Bicester ‘Green Buffers’ Report (September 2013); and
- Cherwell Green and Blue Infrastructure (GBI) Strategy (November 2022).

- 2.24 While the above documents may be of some relevance, limited weight is given to them as it is noteworthy that, as part of the examination to the adopted Local Plan, the Council had included ‘Policy ESD 15’, which related to the definition of ‘green buffers’ on the Policies Maps, whereby the Council sought to retain the identity and settings of towns and villages, protect the landscape, gaps and views, prevent coalescence and help define limits to settlements. However, commentary within the Inspector’s report to the examination of the local plan stated that (with my emphasis) “...*this policy has been the subject of major criticisms from others. This is partly on the basis that it seeks to introduce an unnecessary and unjustified level of overall restraint on development in the defined areas, when other plan policies, such as ESD 13, are entirely suitable to protect those areas from inappropriate and/or harmful proposals in the countryside*”.

- 2.25 The Inspector continued to state that “*whilst the Council says that it is not intended to preclude development, the true purpose of the policy is questionable at best if that is not the case, given the duplication with other plan policies in relation to aspects such as the protection of important landscape features and heritage assets*”, and that “[*Policy ESD 15*] *is unsound as submitted and as modified and should be deleted*”.

- 2.26 Land Use Consultants Ltd (LUC) prepared the Cherwell Green and Blue Infrastructure on behalf of Cherwell District Council in 2022. The LUC report largely focusses on opportunities for improving Bicester’s Green and Blue network within the central areas of the town, with no reference to the Site itself. The Site, as illustrated at **Appendix EDP 3**, is located within the ‘Recovery Zone’, which is defined by the Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Network, and extends east beyond Blackthorn Hill. The LUC report defines a set of principles for new development, including guidance on natural capital, building the nature recovery network, tree planting and maintenance. Further detail on the landscape strategy embedded within the Proposed Development is included at **Section 5**.

Supplementary Planning Documents

- 2.27 Although this is now considered very dated, the Countryside Design Summary (June 1998) is Supplementary Planning Guidance (SPG) adopted in 1998. This document was informed by the older Cherwell District Landscape Assessment by Cobham Resource Consultants (November 1995), which describes the landscape character of the District. Development proposals should reference the information and advice contained in this SPG, as well as the more recent landscape assessment within the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study. The intention of the SPG document is that it will “*encourage creative and imaginative approaches to new development, which reflects the existing distinctive character of the villages and countryside of Cherwell District*” rather than being prescriptive.

LANDSCAPE DESIGNATIONS

- 2.28 EDP has considered landscape-related designations, such as National Parks, National Landscapes and TPOs. In addition, it has also considered relevant heritage matters such as: registered parks and gardens, scheduled monuments or registered battlefields, listed buildings and conservation areas, but only insofar as they may influence landscape character or result in greater sensitivity to change in terms of visual amenity.

National Landscapes and National Parks

- 2.29 No part of the Site lies within, or close to, a national or regionally designated landscape. There are no designated landscapes within the wider study area.

HERITAGE MATTERS

- 2.30 There are no registered parks and gardens within the wider study area.
- 2.31 There are no conservation areas within the Site or directly adjacent. The closest conservation area is Bicester, approximately 2.1km to the north-west. There is no intervisibility between the Site and the Bicester Conservation Area and thus it is not considered further in this assessment.
- 2.32 There are no listed buildings within the Site. Listed buildings in the area are:
- Wretchwick Farmhouse (Grade II) at a distance of approximately 650m to the west of the Site;
 - Barn approximately 50m south of Wretchwick Farmhouse (Grade II) at a distance of approximately 700m west of the Site; and
 - Blackthorn Hill Windmill (Grade II) at a distance of approximately 380m to the east of the Site.
- 2.33 It is important to note that the assessment of potential visual effects of the Proposed Development on the settings of listed buildings are considered as part of this LVA only to the extent that they contribute to the overall local landscape and visual character and does

not relate to any potential effect upon the setting or character of the heritage asset. As such, the visual amenity of the above listed buildings will be considered as part of the baseline visual assessment in **Section 4**, but effects upon them are not considered within this assessment.

ECOLOGY MATTERS

- 2.34 A separate Ecology Assessment undertaken by EDP considers the ecological assets within the study area. While these are not landscape designations per se, as for the above referenced heritage assets, they do, on occasion, serve to influence the character of the landscape and can inform landscape value. The locations of ecology assets readily sourced from published data are illustrated on **Plan EDP 2**.
- 2.35 The ecology assets closest to the Site include a Local Wildlife Site to the north, the Arncott Bridge Meadows Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) approximately 1.7km to the south of the Site. The Site is also located outside the Ray Conservation Target Area (Refer to **Appendix EDP 4**) which, according to Wild Oxfordshire¹ “provide a focus for coordinated delivery of biodiversity work, agri-environment schemes and biodiversity enhancements through the planning system”.

OTHER RELEVANT CONSIDERATIONS

Arboricultural Matters

- 2.36 There are no known TPO trees or Ancient Woodlands within or adjacent to the Site.

Public Rights of Way

- 2.37 The locations of the public rights of way (PRoW) within the Zone of Theoretical Visibility of the Proposed Development, discussed further in **Section 4**, have been taken from Ordnance Survey Explorer Mapping (at a scale of 1:25,000) and PRoW route codes from the online Oxfordshire Countryside Access Map.
- 2.38 There are no PRoW within or adjacent to the Site. Potential views of the Site from the above routes and others within the wider countryside will be considered as part of the baseline visual assessment in **Section 4**.

SUMMARY: KEY POINTS ARISING FROM THE PLANNING POLICY AND DESIGNATION REVIEW

- 2.39 A review of the Site’s planning context has found that:
- The Site does not lie within, or contain, any nationally or locally designated landscapes;
 -

¹ <https://www.wildoxfordshire.org.uk/oxfordshires-nature/conservation-target-areas>. Accessed 29 August 2024.

- The Site is identified in the Cherwell District Council published Cherwell Local Plan Review 2042 (Regulation 19) Proposed Submission Plan as an Employment Site Allocation (site area 45.80 hectares developable area of 30);
- There are few listed buildings in close proximity to the Site and few, if any, with clear intervisibility with the Site;
- There was not found to be any visual relationship between the Site and any conservation area;
- There are numerous blocks of woodland throughout the study area, with mature trees present within some parts of the Site boundary;
- There are no PRoW within or immediately adjacent to the Site boundary. There are relatively few within the local context, with the closest being a bridleway, which provides access to Blackthorn Hill. A visual appraisal of the Site is considered in more detail at **Section 4**; and
- The closest scheduled monument is the Wretchwick deserted medieval settlement located beyond 1km of the Site to the west.

Section 3

Baseline Landscape Resources

INTRODUCTION

- 3.1 This section considers baseline landscape character matters and identifies other landscape resource receptors that are relevant to the assessment. Visual amenity is considered in **Section 4**.
- 3.2 Baseline conditions in respect of the published landscape character assessments are summarised below, followed by a summary of EDP's own assessment of the character of the Site and local context.

REVIEW OF PUBLISHED LANDSCAPE CHARACTER ASSESSMENTS

National Landscape Character

- 3.3 The landscape of England has been subject to a nationwide Landscape Character Assessment, The Character of England: Landscape, Wildlife and Natural Features (Natural England). The Site falls within National Character Area (NCA) Profile 108 Upper Thames Clay Vales.
- 3.4 While the descriptions of NCA 108 are useful in that it provides a context for the Site, and a broad framework for more detailed landscape character assessments, it is considered that the description of landscape character undertaken at the sub-regional level is more relevant in establishing the landscape resource baseline.

Local Landscape Character

- 3.5 Of more relevance, is the landscape character outlined within local publications. There are three published documents relating to the landscape character which are relevant to the Site and its context:
- Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (2004);
 - Countryside Design Summary (1998); and
 - Cherwell District Landscape Assessment (1995).
- 3.6 Each of the adopted landscape character assessments are now over 20 years old and, as such, do not account for recent changes to the local landscape, particularly with regard to recent planning consents. A more recent assessment of landscape character was undertaken by The Environment Partnership (TEP) in September 2022 as part of the evidence base for the Council's Local Plan Review. Though this also does not account for recent planning consents, consideration is given to it below.

Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study

- 3.7 As illustrated on **Plan EDP 1**, the Site lies within 'Clay Vale' Landscape Character Type (LCT), and within that, the 'Launton' Local Character Area (LCA).
- 3.8 The geology and landform for the Clay Vale LCT is described as clay beds which “give rise to a low lying almost completely flat landform with heavy, poorly-drained soils.”
- 3.9 Key characteristics of the Clay Vale LCT relevant to the Site and its context include:
- “A flat, low-lying landform;
 - Mixed land uses, dominated by pastureland, with small to medium-sized hedged fields; and
 - Many mature oak, ash and willow hedgerow trees”.
- 3.10 Other relevant landscape characteristics specific to the Launton LCA include:
- “The area is largely dominated by medium-sized semi-improved grass fields;
 - Fields are enclosed by hawthorn hedges;
 - Hedges are often gappy and fragmented in the northern part of the area; and
 - Mature ash, oak and sycamore hedgerow trees are scattered throughout the area”.
- 3.11 The 'Forces for Change' for this LCT include “industrial, commercial and residential development on the fringes of larger settlements”, which can be “visually intrusive”. However, the development of commercial units adjacent to the Site within the last five years has resulted in a fundamental change to the character of the Site’s local context.
- 3.12 The Landscape Strategy for this LCT is to “conserve the intimate, tranquil and small-scale pastoral character of the landscape. Conserve and enhance the well-defined pattern of hedgerows, hedgerow trees and tree-lined watercourses.”
- 3.13 Though somewhat out of date, being 20 years old, the guidelines for this LCT which are considered relevant to the Proposed Development include:
- “Minimise the visual impact of intrusive land uses at the fringes of towns, villages and farms with the judicious planting of tree and shrub species characteristic to the area. This would help to screen the development and integrate it more successfully with its surrounding countryside;
 - Strengthen the small-scale field pattern by planting up gappy hedges using locally characteristic species such as hawthorn, and hedgerow trees such as oak and ash particularly within roadside hedges;
 - Promote environmentally-sensitive maintenance of hedgerows, including coppicing and layering when necessary, to maintain a height and width appropriate to the landscape type; and

- *Promote small-scale planting of deciduous woodland blocks using locally characteristic species such as oak and ash”.*

Countryside Design Summary SPG (Adopted 1998)

3.14 The Countryside Design Summary states that it:

“Needs to be considered by those contemplating proposals for development on, or close to the edge of the urban areas which may have an impact on the character of the rural areas, for example, by visual intrusion, traffic impact, loss of amenity, impact on wildlife.”

Cherwell District Landscape Assessment (1998)

3.15 This landscape assessment refers to the landscape to the south and east of Bicester as the ‘Otmoor Lowlands’ LCA. This landscape is described as *“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.”*

3.16 It is considered that both the Countryside Design Summary SPG (1998) and the Cherwell District Landscape Assessment (1995) are somewhat out of date, having been carried out over 20 years ago. Each of the three landscape character assessments listed above reference very similar areas, albeit with slightly different names. Therefore, the assessment of effects below will consider the most recent assessment carried out by the Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (2004), as detailed above.

The Cherwell Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (2022)

3.17 A recent assessment of landscape character was undertaken by TEP in September 2022 as part of the evidence base for the Council's Local Plan Review.

3.18 The Cherwell Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (CLSA; 2022), identified the Site within assessment unit ‘LS BIC 3: Blackthorn Hill and Surroundings’ (Refer to **Appendix EDP 5**). The assessment unit is described as being located *“to the south-east of Bicester and comprises 100.54ha of primarily agricultural land. Existing built development within the assessment unit includes the Bicester Caravan and Leisure Sales Area, LC Hughes Metal Recycling, Mill House Farm and Stone Pits Farm. The northern boundary is defined by the Chiltern Main Line Railway, southern boundary by Aylesbury Road (A41) and the eastern and western boundaries by existing field boundaries. Logistics warehousing at Symmetry Park is to the immediate south-west. The assessment unit extends across two LCTs: Clay Vale and Pasture Hills. The assessment unit is undulating, reaching a high point of 81m AOD at Blackthorn Hill, which is a distinctive feature in the local landscape. The meadows in the north-west of the assessment unit are designated as a Local Wildlife Site”.*

3.19 The character of this settlement edge Site is evolving, already being influenced by existing commercial development within the Wretchwick Green allocation to the west and a caravan park and car breakers’ yard in close proximity to the eastern boundary.

3.20 In providing a judgment on the sensitivity of this parcel, the CLSA states that the assessment unit as a whole has *“a high sensitivity to commercial and logistics development”*. However, importantly, the CLSA provides comment on the Site itself, stating that *“The exception to*

this are the fields in the south-western corner of the assessment unit, adjacent to Symmetry Park where a limited amount of logistics development of a similar scale, bulk and mass could be accommodated". Therefore, the CLSA does not preclude commercial development in this location.

- 3.21 Notably, the key sensitivities of this land parcel with relevance to the Site, as defined by the CLSA, include "*Existing field boundary hedgerows and trees*", with other key sensitivities relating only to the wider LS BIC 3 land parcel.
- 3.22 The CLSA goes on to provide guidance and recommendations for new development, stating that any new development should:
- "*Avoid building on prominent and open slopes or elevated areas where development is likely to have localised visual prominence.*
 - *Protect the Local Wildlife Site.*
 - *Woodland planting should not detract from Blackthorn Hill as a landmark feature.*
 - *Use existing boundary vegetation to help integrate any future development into the landscape.*
 - *There is opportunity to enhance green corridors and green infrastructure associated with existing footpaths and cycle routes which have high recreational value for local residents.*"
- 3.23 Though useful in informing the landscape response to the Site and any proposals within it, limited weight is given to this guidance and recommendations as these have yet to be fully adopted, and the landscape context of this assessment unit has evolved further since the production of the CLSA.

EDP Landscape Character Assessment

- 3.24 EDP conducted an assessment of the Site's characteristics on 27 August 2024, in dry, clear weather conditions. The individual elements of the Site were noted, as were the differences in the composition and the character of the Site's physical components to the published assessment, and their value and ability to accommodate change (for definitions see **Appendix EDP 2**).
- 3.25 The aerial photograph provided at **Plan EDP 3** illustrates the character and features of the landscape across the Site and near context. The photographs taken from the illustrative viewpoint locations also illustrate the character of the landscape across the Site area and surrounding area (**Photoviewpoints EDP 1 to 11** at **Appendix EDP 6**).
- 3.26 As indicated on **Plans EDP 1** and **3**, the Site lies within an area of flat lowland agricultural landscape on the south-eastern edge of Bicester, which is contained by Blackthorn Hill to the east and Graven Hill to the south-west. The containing effect of the landform is reinforced by trees and woodlands, most notably the wooded hilltop of Graven Hill. To the north, the rural lowland landscape stretches away over towards Poundon Hill, though there is little relationship, if any, with land to the north of the railway line. Within the lowland

landscape, the flat landform and over-lying pattern of trees and hedgerows, in combination with the existing units within Symmetry Park, filters and contains views.

- 3.27 As illustrated on **Plan EDP 3**, the Site comprises a single medium-sized rectilinear field, subdivided by old post and wire fencing. The surrounding fields to the north which form the immediate rural context of the Site, are semi-improved grassland with field boundaries defined by native hedgerows. The majority of the hedgerows are maintained agricultural hedgerows with scattered hedgerow trees (**Image EDP 3.1**), although there are some overgrown hedgerows that contain views in the landscape, including parts of the A41 highway boundaries (**Image EDP 3.2**).
- 3.28 The hedgerows bounding and within the Site comprise mostly hawthorn and blackthorn. Further, mitigation measures delivered as part of the neighbouring Symmetry Park scheme are starting to provide some visual screening to existing units and also to the generally well-treed character of the immediate context (**Image EDP 3.3**). whilst the south-western boundary, which bounds Symmetry Park appears more frequently managed in character.
- 3.29 As illustrated at **Images EDP 3.4** and **3.5**, the character of the A41 corridor where it bounds the Site is also relatively well treed, though mown grass and numerous signboards associated with local businesses contribute to a more peri-urban character in this location. **Image EDP 3.6** illustrates the character of the A41 further west, where mitigation measures delivered as part of the earlier phases of Symmetry Park have maintained this well-treed character to the A41, with built form set back beyond native landscaping.



Image EDP 3.1: View from the western edge of the Site, looking towards the car breakers yard, which is set within a relatively well-treed setting.



Image EDP 3.2: The southern boundary of the Site, which bounds the A41, is also well-treed, though vehicle movements are perceptible both visually and audibly.



Image EDP 3.3: The existing units within Symmetry Park can be seen from within the Site, though mitigation measures delivered as part of the scheme are now starting to mature and will further contribute to the landscape fabric of the local context in time.



Image EDP 3.4: The landscape mitigation measures within the earlier phases of Symmetry Park, though not yet fully mature, has maintained the well-treed character of this busy vehicular route.



Image EDP 3.5: The character of the A41, at the south-eastern corner of the Site, is influenced by numerous signboards at the access to the car breakers yard.



Image EDP 3.6: The landscape mitigation measures within the earlier phases of Symmetry Park, though not yet fully mature, has maintained the well-treed character of this busy vehicular route.

- 3.30 The Ecological Appraisal prepared by EDP provides additional information on the land use, hedgerows and other plant species and habitats found on-site, and their ecological value.
- 3.31 For the most part, this is not a piece of agricultural land with particularly high ecological value. In common with much of intensively managed lowland England, the Site has probably experienced considerable decline in biodiversity in recent decades. It is not being managed under the auspices of any agri-environment scheme, so dramatic improvements in ecological value in the future seem highly unlikely. However, there are areas of semi-improved grassland and a number of species-rich hedgerows throughout the Site.
- 3.32 In terms of the access route to the Site, this passes through the completed Symmetry Park site to the west. **Image EDP 3.7** illustrates the urbanised character of this route north of the A41.



Image EDP 3.7: The access to the Site is to be provided via the existing Symmetry Park estate road.

- 3.33 The historical settlement pattern to the south-east of Bicester is characterised by a dispersed pattern of farmsteads and wayside properties in the rural landscape. However, this pattern of settlement has been impacted by more recent development spreading out from Bicester, which includes the commercial uses immediately to the west of the Site. This will evolve further as the development of allocated land within the immediate context of the Site progresses. While there are a number of heritage assets present within the local context, in relation to landscape matters, there is no reason to believe that heritage issues should influence the character of the landscape and therefore constrain development of the Site.
- 3.34 Within the rural landscape, there are many prominent urbanising features which are visible in the surrounding context of the Site, including: commercial warehouse units located adjacent to the western boundary of the Site; a caravan park and car breakers yard in close proximity to the eastern boundary of the Site; the busy A41 road to the south; Ministry of Defence (MOD) depot buildings on the eastern side of Graven Hill; container storage depot approximately 1.6km to the west; Bicester urban edge to the north-west; and large scale commercial development, including a DHL warehouse, off Charbridge Lane to the north. The existence of visually intrusive industrial and commercial development, in particular the lower slopes of Graven Hill, and the urban fringe of Bicester, are acknowledged in the published landscape character descriptions for the local landscape, as described above. Furthermore, the Site is acknowledged within the CLSA as being suitable for appropriate scale commercial built form, largely due to the influence of neighbouring units and the general enclosure of the Site from the wider BIC 3 land parcel by landform, woodland and industrial uses.