

10.0 LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL IMPACT

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This section of the ES describes the existing and proposed landscape of the site and its surroundings and the likely impact of the proposed development on landscape character and visual amenity. Mitigation measures are also described where appropriate.

Impacts on Landscape Character and impacts on visual amenity are separate but related issues. Landscape impacts are changes in the character and quality of the landscape as a result of the development. Visual impacts are changes in the available views of the landscape and the effects of those changes on viewers.

The closely related subject of ecology is covered in detail in *Section 9*. However, as many of the recommendations in the ecological studies will be implemented with the landscape proposals they are also noted in this section. Other subjects affecting landscape such as soils, which are covered in detail elsewhere, are also noted with a reference to the main section. Further information on the landscape strategy is provided in the Detailed Planning Application which accompanies this document.

10.2 METHODOLOGY

The assessment was carried out in late 2004 and reviewed in 2007. It consisted of baseline studies of the site, its context and the development proposals. The information was collected by desktop studies and by site surveys.

Assessment of landscape is based on character, quality, value and sensitivity. Character refers to the different features between landscapes that make them distinct and recognisable. Quality refers to the condition of the character. Value is the relative value attached to each landscape based on either national or local criteria. Sensitivity is the ability of the landscape to accommodate change without detrimental effect on the character.

Regional landscape character information was obtained from the *Character Map of England* produced by the Countryside Commission and English Nature 1996. Local character assessment was carried out by site assessment in accordance with *Landscape Character Guidance* by the Countryside Agency 2002

Visual impact was assessed by the initial identification of outward views from within the site and from the study of maps for likely viewpoints. These viewpoints were then visited and actual visibility checked by an experienced landscape architect. The assessment is based on *Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment* by IEMA and The Landscape Institute 2002.

10.3 BASELINE CONDITIONS

10.3.1 Topography

There are three main parts to the overall site; The Matheson Road Estate to the east, The Reclamation Site or "Mound" in the centre and the Foundry Lane Estate to the west. Much of the site except in the north-west was originally low lying marshland known as Ditton Marsh that has subsequently been reclaimed largely by the deposition of waste products from surrounding industry. Much of this material is thought to be galigu, which is a waste product of the local soap industry.

The overall site has an area of around 42 ha. and is fairly flat with an elevation of between 6 and 14m above ordnance datum (aod). There are some higher areas, particularly the Mound, which was created from landfill and remediated in the late 1990s. The Mound is steep sided with a flat top at approximately 28m aod. There is also a smaller, approximately 6m high bund on the southern boundary of the Mathieson Road Estate.

A steep sided, tidal watercourse, Steward's Brook, runs through the site from the north-east. A similar watercourse, Ditton Brook, forms the western boundary of the site. They both converge at the south side of the Mound before flowing into the River Mersey.

10.3.2 Geology and Soils

This is covered in detail in *Section 14*. In summary, the geology is generally made ground over alluvium, glacial till and sandstone. There are no original natural topsoils at ground level following the historic reclamation process. These original topsoils would probably have been moderately fertile, wet, loamy, clayey soils associated with wet brackish coastal flood meadows and grazing marsh (*Ref. National Soils Research Institute*) and remnants of original alluvium and peat soils have been found at depth below the made ground. However, new topsoils have begun to form and soils have also been imported for planting as on the Mound.

Five representative samples of the existing site topsoils were taken and analysed for consideration for future planting and the results are provided in the Appendices to *Section 14*. In summary, the samples were alkaline to strongly alkaline and in texture sandy loams to clay loams. Some of the samples had nutrient and organic matter deficiencies and inadequate structure. One sample had slightly elevated levels of arsenic and lead. The samples taken were not considered detrimental to either human or animal health, or necessarily to plant health given that all the deficiencies identified can be remedied.

On this basis, following appropriate remediation, the soils are considered capable of use for landscape planting as described in the soil analyst's report. Interestingly, the ecological survey has shown that some of the more interesting existing flora on the site is growing on the highly alkaline soils exposed on banks of the brooks as discussed in *Section 9* and there may therefore be considerable advantage from using local alkaline soils and thereby reflecting and enhancing the existing local ecology of interest. The selection and remediation, as appropriate, of top soils will be considered further, in liaison with all interested parties, as part of the detailed design and materials management plan for the site.

10.3.3 Vegetation

Most of the site is un-vegetated. On the eastern side, Mathieson Road and DeSoto Road have some roadside trees, mainly lime, sycamore and birch with some elder scrub on DeSoto Road. The bund on the south boundary of the Matheson Road Estate, although mainly rough grass, weed and bramble, has some young, recently planted trees including ash, oak and horse chestnut.

There are some areas of trees and scrub alongside Steward's Brook and gorse, broom and alder have been planted in the area adjacent to the Mound. There are also scattered birch and goat willow along the banks generally and a more substantial area of young, naturally regenerated, birch, willow and elder at the northern end. The ecology report *Section 9* describes Steward's Brook as having a fringe of saltmarsh/emergent vegetation and points out that saltmarsh is a priority habitat in both the Cheshire and Halton Local Biodiversity Action Plans (BAP). It also notes that the outcrops of alkali soils on the banks are of particular ecological interest as they support a diverse flora that includes orchids and several calcicole species uncommon in the area.

Ditton Brook has no trees on its banks and only small patches of elder and low scrub. It also has areas of saltmarsh and reedbeds. Reedbeds are priority habitats in the Cheshire and Halton BAPs.

The Foundry Lane Site is also largely un-vegetated with few trees. There is a line of mature Lawson cypress on the north boundary and some areas of scrub birch, willow and hawthorn occurs in the north-east and north-west corners.

The Mound was reclaimed and planted in the mid to late 1990s. Most of the flanks were planted as woodland or thicket with a mixture of native species including alder, ash, birch, elder, oak, poplar and pine. This planting is now approximately 1-2m high. The flat top is meadow grassland.

Several relatively small areas of Japanese Knotweed were identified on the site in 2004 but these have now been eradicated.

In summary, the site is largely un-vegetated and there are no significant trees or mature woodland. There is some flora of ecological interest mainly associated with Steward's and Ditton Brooks and more detail of this flora is provided in *Section 9*.

10.3.4 Ecology

Detailed surveys were carried out including an enhanced Phase 1 habitat survey, and bat, reptile, aquatic invertebrate and wintering bird surveys. These are described in detail in *Section 9*. The main features of ecological interest are the Mound, the two watercourses and the north west corner of the Foundry Lane site. The Mound, although recently constructed, is beginning to develop a good habitat structure. It supports a range of bird species including skylark, and the meadow area has a moderately diverse flora. Steward's Brook and Ditton Brook have areas of saltmarsh and reedbed that are priority BAP habitats and their banks support interesting flora. *10.3.2 above and Section 9*. They are also important wildlife corridors. The wasteland in the north west corner has interesting ephemeral/short lived perennial vegetation.

10.3.5 Land Use and Public Access

The majority of the site is covered by buildings, roads, railways and other hard surfacing. The main areas of landscape interest are the Mound, the two watercourses, various small areas of amenity grass and planting at the east side and various small patches of wasteland vegetation throughout the site. There is no public access within the site.

10.3.6 Landscape Character

Landscape character areas differ in their range of landscape features and the patterns these create, and consequently in their ability to accommodate different types of development. Some areas may be particularly sensitive and others more resilient. Some landscapes may present opportunities for landscape improvement that will help with the eventual integration of the development with the surrounding landscape.

Regional Landscape Character

The site falls within Countryside Character Area 60, The Mersey Valley, as described in the *Character Map of England* produced by the Countryside Commission and English Nature 1996. It is described as:

..a distinctive river valley landscape centred on the Mersey, its estuary, associated tributaries, waterways and reclaimed mosses. Large scale, highly visible industrial developments are a feature of the area along with the railway, canal and road communications necessary to sustain them. The area is largely treeless with any woodland generally associated with residential development. The main building material is red brick with some sandstone villages.

Local Landscape Character

The site and its surroundings have been subdivided into local character areas by site survey and analysis. The local landscape character largely reflects the regional industrial character. However, the Mersey estuary is not very apparent, as it is at a distance of approximately 150m and hidden by intervening development.

Local Landscape Character Areas

- The Mound, together with the adjacent Hutchinson Hill. These form a distinctive local character area due to their height and green and wooded nature. This area has moderate visual quality and moderate sensitivity to change.
- The courses of Steward's Brook and Ditton Brook. Important green features with interesting ecology providing wildlife corridors and potential for enhancement. Moderate visual quality and moderate sensitivity to change.
- The Railway Corridor on the north and east boundaries. Busy elevated main line with some lineside vegetation forming a strong visual barrier. The Runcorn-Widnes Bridge is an important local landmark. Low visual quality and low sensitivity to change.
- The Site Entrance Area. Consisting mainly of the entrance road from the DeSoto Road roundabout. Some narrow grass verges and roadside trees. Potential for some enhancement. Moderate visual quality and high sensitivity to change.
- The Industrial Area including the hardstandings, roads and railways on the remainder of the site. Gritty, degraded, utilitarian areas with very few green areas or trees. Low visual quality and low sensitivity to change

10.3.7 Landscape Designations

In the Adopted Halton UDP the landscape related policies directly affecting the site are:

- GE6. Protection of Designated Green Space. This policy protects most of the Mound.
- GE28. The Mersey Forest. This aims for a general 20%+ of woodland over parts of the site specifically the Mound (where this cover already exists) and the entrance area from DeSoto Road.
- Various other policies, for example, BE1, 2 & 3 contain requirements to protect the environment and to provide high quality of design and landscape.

Outside the site, the main designations that may impinge on the development are those that protect the ecology of the Mersey Estuary. This is a Ramsar site, an SSSI and a SPA. As the Ditton Brook is a major tributary any change to this could therefore also affect the estuary. The main importance of the estuary is for birds. The ecological studies in *Section 9* checked if the proposed development would have any impact on the ecology of the estuary and concluded that this was unlikely.

Other relevant documents/guidance are:

- The draft DSRFP SPD prepared by Atkins for HBC which includes a Landscape Strategy and Design Guide as part of an overall master plan for the area.
- Halton's Biodiversity Action Plan.
- Halton's Natural Assets Strategy.

10.3.8 Potential Visibility

Visual Environment

A receptor is a user group of people, for example residents and walkers, or an area used by people for a certain use, for example a footpath, allotment garden, house or public open space. Publicly accessible areas are particularly important. Residential receptors are generally considered to be the most sensitive receptor group owing to their proprietary interest and their prolonged exposure. Recreational receptors are also considered to be sensitive. Users of trains or roads are of moderate sensitivity as they pass through the area.

Viewpoints

The site and its surroundings are on flat land and there are few elevated viewpoints. Therefore few views of the area, particularly from publicly accessible areas, are possible. The main views of the site are from the mainline railway to the north and east. Glimpses of the site from ground level plus clearer views from upper windows may also be possible from some parts of the Hale Bank housing area. More detail of visibility is given in *sub-section 10.4*.

10.3.9 The Proposed Development

Descriptions and illustrations of the proposed development are given in *Section 3* and more detail is provided in the Detailed Planning Application which accompanies this document. In summary, the development consists of a single large highbay and lowbay building with supporting offices for B8 (storage and distribution) use with a total ground floor area of around 107,177m² plus associated road and rail access, parking, container storage areas and new planting. All the existing buildings on the Foundry Lane site will be replaced.

The layout and design of the development is heavily influenced by the constraints of rail related use, by the requirements of the UDP policies and by the DSRFP SPD. It also incorporates a high standard of architectural and landscape design as both the developer and HBC wish to create a high quality 'flagship' development both for commercial reasons and to assist with the regeneration of the DSRFP and its surrounding area.

The main lowbay unit will have wall heights of 18m whilst the highbay element will be 40m to top of ridge. Walls and roofs will be microrib and profiled metal cladding with appropriate detailing, as described in *Section 3*. The importance of the visual impact of the proposed development, particularly from the elevated railway viewpoints and the possibility of glimpsed views from Hale Bank has been recognised. Mitigation measures have been taken to minimise the impact of the development on these views and on the area generally, as follows:

- A high standard of site planning and design will create an organised layout of co-ordinated buildings and support areas with minimum clutter.
- Sympathetic architectural design will create attractive modern structures which although large will have a sculptural quality in the mainly distant and glimpsed views.
- There will be consistency in design of buildings and choice of materials to create a 'family' of buildings reinforcing the sense of place.
- The draft DSRFP SPD *Landscape Strategy and Design Guide* has been followed.
- Boundary planting will be enhanced.

Landscape Proposals

The aims of the landscape proposals are as follows:

- To help create the high quality ‘flagship’ development required by both the developer and HBC.
- To upgrade the currently degraded landscape of the site and increase green areas and tree cover.
- To acknowledge the industrial character of the site and surrounding area and the large scale utilitarian nature of the proposed DSRFP use and provide a strong and practical landscape response to this character. This will be done by planting along the diverted stream (Steward’s Brook) banks, at the entrance, on the boundaries and in defensible ‘nodes’ or focal points within the site. Hard landscape treatments will similarly respect this robust approach.
- To create a sense of place or identity by design and choice of hard and soft materials, site furniture, signage etc.
- To create a high quality entrance landscape from the DeSoto Road roundabout into the site.
- To provide immediate impact by the use of large trees including Extra Heavy Standards and Semi-mature specimens.
- To enhance the wildlife values of the existing habitats with particular reference to the stream banks and the creation of new habitats where possible.
- To follow the Landscape Strategy and Design Guide contained in the DSRFP SPD produced by HBC so that the landscape strategy for the development will relate to other parts of the DSRFP when they are developed.

The landscape proposals developed from the above aims is shown on *Figure 10.3.9 – Landscape Strategy*.

10.4 ASSESSMENT OF IMPACTS

10.4.1 Method

As described in *10.2 Assessment Methodology*.

10.4.2 Construction Impacts

The main change will be the activity of demolition, groundwork and the construction of the new buildings, roads etc. This activity is not expected to have a significant impact on the existing landscape character or have significant visual impact.

10.4.3 Impact on Landscape Character

The existing landscape character of the site is degraded industrial, and in poor condition, *Section 10.3.6*. The proposed development will provide positive improvements and will therefore have a moderately beneficial effect on the overall landscape character.

10.4.4 Visual Impact

Views From the North

The railway embankment, trees and intervening buildings screen views from north of the mainline railway including views from Ditton Road and the A562. For users of the mainline railway many of the views are screened by intervening industry, particularly the O’Connor site, and lineside trees, see *Photographs 10.4.4B - P4-9*. However, partial views of the proposed new buildings, particularly the high bay unit, will be possible in several places. The visual impact of these buildings will be mitigated by good quality architectural design. These views will also be in the context of the overall industrial landscape character of the area in which the new buildings will not be inappropriate. In addition, as the train users are moving through the area, views will be fleeting. The proposed development will therefore have a low to moderate and beneficial visual impact.

Views From the East

Views from the A533 to the east are largely blocked by the structures of the Runcorn bridges and the intervening railway and industry. Views from the railway towards the site are clearer but the

site is largely screened by intervening industry. As in *Views from the North* above, partial views of the new buildings will be possible but for the same reasons the proposed development will have a low to moderate beneficial visual impact. *Photographs 10.4.4A – P2&3*

Views from McDermott Road, Bush Road and DeSoto Road east of the site are screened by intervening buildings and by vegetation. Some partial views of the higher parts of the proposed buildings may be possible from these locations but for the same reasons described above the visual impact will be low to moderate.

Views From the West

From the west there will be limited partial views or glimpses from between the buildings on the Hale Bank industrial area. The Hale Bank housing area is further west at approximately 500m from the site. There are some very limited views from the Hale Road side of the housing area *Photographs 10.4.4C – P10 – 13*, but these views are exclusively through recently demolished parts of the Hale Bank industrial area which presumably will be rebuilt and the views closed. There are also likely to be some views from the upper floors of the houses on Hale Road. For the reasons previously described plus the substantial new planting proposed along Ditton Brook the visual impact will be low to moderate and beneficial..

Views From the South

To the south the Trans Pennine Trail long distance footpath and a cycle route run along the north bank of the Mersey at a distance of approximately 200m. There are currently no views into the site due to intervening industry, Hutchinson Hill and the Mound. As the Mound is to be removed and the site built over there will be a few limited views of the development but softened by new planting. The visual impact will be low neutral.

From further south there may be limited glimpsed views from the railway where it is elevated to cross the bridge at approximately 1.2km. *Photograph 10.4.4A – P1*. For the same reasons as in *Views from the North* above and the greater distance the visual impact will be very low beneficial.

Night Lighting

This is described in detail in *Section 11*. In summary, the amount and type of proposed night lighting is expected to be greater than the existing situation. but will be more controlled with upward wasted light reduced. The impact on landscape character and visual impact is therefore expected to be neutral.

10.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The existing site and the surrounding area have an overall large scale, often degraded, industrial landscape character with low visual quality, low value and low sensitivity to change. The Mound and the two watercourses, however, are of moderate quality and sensitivity

There are few views into the area. The main views are from the main Liverpool - Warrington railway line to the north and east. Some views from Hale Bank may also be possible.

The proposed development will replace the existing run down buildings and facilities of various ages and designs with a good quality, well designed and coordinated development including substantial tree planting and good quality landscape treatment to create a 'flagship' development which will result in a considerable improvement to the existing landscape character of the area.

The impact of the proposed development on landscape character is assessed as moderately beneficial. The visual impact will generally be low to moderate and beneficial.