



**Sandown Park  
Racecourse, Esher**

Proof of Evidence of:

**Ben Connolley**

BSc (Hons), PG DipLA, CMLI

In respect of:

**Landscape Matters**

On behalf of:

**The Jockey Club**

**Racecourses Ltd**

**PINS REF:**

APP/K3605/W/20/3249790

**LPA REF:**

2019/0551

**Volume I:**

**MAIN TEXT**

October 2020

Report Ref:

**JCR3/1:**

**edp5237\_r009b**

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	Report Ref: edp5237_r009			
	Author	Formatted	Peer Review	Proofed by/Date
009_FIRST DRAFT	BC	ER	CJM	
009a_SECOND DRAFT	BC	FD	-	-
009b	BC	-	-	FJ 191020

## Section 1 Introduction

- 1.1 This Proof of Evidence (PoE) on landscape matters has been prepared by Ben Connolley. I am an Associate Landscape Architect at The Environmental Dimension Partnership Ltd (EDP); EDP is a Registered Practice of the Landscape Institute and Corporate Member of IEMA.
- 1.2 I have provided full details of my qualifications and experience as **Appendix BC 1**.
- 1.3 The evidence that I have prepared and provided for this appeal in this statement is true and is given in accordance with the guidance of my professional institution. I confirm the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.

### Structure of Evidence

- 1.4 This written evidence (Volume I, Text) of my evidence is structured as follows:
- In **Section 2** I briefly review the character of the appeal site and the proposed development;
  - **Sections 3** address three main matters in response to the Reasons for Refusal (RfR), provided in my **Appendix BC 2**; and
  - I summarise and conclude in **Section 4** which, in the interests of brevity and simplicity, duplicates as my 'Summary of Evidence', Volume III.
- 1.5 My evidence also includes a companion A3 Volume II which contains plans, photographs and appendices drawn from relevant background material. Where possible and pragmatic to do so, I include relevant extracts of background documents as Plans and Appendices to facilitate the review of my evidence. Where this is not practical, core document numbers are provided.

## **Section 2**

### **The Appeal Site and the Proposed Development**

#### **The Appeal Site and its Landscape Context**

- 2.1 The character of the appeal site and its context is described in the Landscape/Townscape Visual Appraisal (LTVA) Design and Access Statement (DAS) and elsewhere. I do not propose to repeat detailed descriptions at length in the PoE, but a brief ‘scene setting’ exercise is helpful as a precursor to the case-making in **Section 3**.
- 2.2 The location of the Appeal Site is shown on **Proof Plan BC 1** which provides a broad scale Ordnance Survey map.
- 2.3 During the application process, at no point were the findings of the LTVA challenged by the Local Planning Authority (LPA). However, for completeness, I provide a brief summary at my **Appendix BC 3**.

## Section 3

### Case for the Appellant

- 3.1 In response to the RfR, with regard to landscape/townscape character and visual amenity, I address three main matters below.

#### **Main Matter 1:**

##### **Status of the land in Policy Terms and Weight to be attached to Landscape Change**

- 3.2 In considering the intrinsic landscape value of the appeal site, as provided within my **Appendix BC 4**, the appeal site has no designatory status in landscape terms, nor is it proposed to have such status. Notably, with the exception of Site 5, all residential development sites outside Character Area UW6 are considered to form part of the urban context.
- 3.3 Para 6.59 of the Council's Statement of Case (SoC) makes reference to the "*valued character of the area*", although it is not made clear what is defined as 'valued character' nor is there an express reference to National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) Para 170 (ref Valued Landscapes). To date, it has never been suggested - either in the internal consultation response, the Officer's Report to Committee, or in the Council's SoC - that the appeal site is expressly part of a 'valued landscape' with elevated intrinsic value commensurate with the 'protect and enhance' directive of the NPPF's para 170 (a).
- 3.4 There is large-scale built form present within the Appeal Site and within its local context, including commercial uses on Portsmouth Road. There are also areas of smaller scale residential development, including those on Lower Green Road, which would be considered to positively contribute to the local urban context. However, as is confirmed in the Case Officer's Report to Committee in relation to Site 2 (paragraph 9.8.2.9), the northern areas of the Racecourse are "*well-screened by mature trees and shrubs from More Lane and Lower Green Road*".
- 3.5 The assessment of existing townscape and landscape character and the proposal's effects needs to be undertaken having regard to the appeal site's situational context. Insofar as the on-site character is concerned, the published Surrey Landscape Character Assessment is helpful in some respects, but caution should be adopted because it is largely focussed on the central areas of the Racecourse and areas to the east, with the majority of the proposed development parcels being defined as urban.

##### ***The Appeal Site's Sensitivity***

- 3.6 The appeal site taken as a whole is a large site. Whilst EDP's LTVA defines its overall sensitivity as 'medium,' it stands to reason that due to its size, sensitivity to built development is not uniform across the whole site.

- 3.7 In relation to the LTVA, the Council's SoC states that *"The appraisal concludes that the overall townscape sensitivity of the Racecourse is Medium. The Council will challenge this assessment and demonstrate with a site-specific appraisal the adverse landscape/townscape impact on the character of the surrounding area"*. Having authored the LTVA, and with a lack of specific landscape evidence being put forward by the Council to challenge any of its key conclusions, I find no reason to revise the conclusions of the LTVA. Importantly, as set out within the Case Officer's Report to Committee, at no point during the application process were the findings of the LTVA challenged by Officers.
- 3.8 As set out in my **Appendix BC 5**, and shown on **Proof Plan BC 4**, the Council have recorded five additional viewpoints to those included within the LTVA and, as such, I undertook a further appraisal of the appeal site context on the 02 September 2020 with these locations in mind. I find no reason to alter the level of medium sensitivity stated within the LTVA which, for the Racecourse as a whole, is defined by the LTVA methodology as being a *"Townscape area or setting of feature with a diversity of elements that combine to produce a recognisable but inconsistent character. Where the man-made, historic and natural elements are generally balanced and in fair condition. Where there are some detractors but overall, a pleasant scenic quality"*.
- 3.9 The five additional views provided by the Council provide limited additional understanding of views experienced within the local context. In my opinion, the views provided by the Council fail to adequately show the full context of each site, rather a framed view which shows little built form within it. As such, any conclusions drawn from views that are not deemed to be representative of the local context are at risk of being misguided.
- 3.10 To conclude, as set out within the Council's own assessment of landscape character within the Surrey Landscape Character Assessment (SLCA) (**Appendix BC 6**), and also within the Elmbridge Borough Landscape Sensitivity Study (**Appendix BC 7**), whilst there are some higher quality landscape elements at the Racecourse boundaries and within the local context, the Racecourse is impacted by its urban context. Other than having value in its function as a racecourse, there is no reason to conclude that each development site has any elevated landscape value of importance over and above Character Area UW6. Importantly, areas proposed for residential development, with the exception of Site 5, are located outside Character Area UW6 and, as confirmed by the SLCA, within an urban area. The SCLA confirms that areas of green space within UW6 provide *"a contrast and relief to the surrounding Built Up Areas"*. It is these 'urban' areas where development is proposed.

### **Main Matter 2 (RfR 2):**

**What are the effects of the appeal proposals on the defined character of the landscape and will any specific views, valued highly by the general public or essential to the appreciation of the area (in terms of open character or otherwise), be unacceptably harmed by the appeal proposals?**

- 3.11 A breakdown of the effects arising from each of the development sites was included within the LTVA (**Core Document CD5.52**). Little detail has been provided by the Council thus far to



challenge its conclusions. However, with regard to the more specific statements provided by the Council within their SoC, I include a further consideration of the effects arising from the development proposals within Sites 1, 3, 4 and 5 at my **Appendix BC 8**.

- 3.12 In the long-term, my view is that there would be no unacceptably adverse effects likely to arise on the landscape or townscape Character of the Racecourse. In addition, although not surprising given that large areas of the appeal site fall outside Character Area UW6, the proposed development would have no material adverse effect on the defined key characteristics of areas beyond the urban context.
- 3.13 With regard to visual amenity, I do not consider the Racecourse as a whole a 'prominent' site, and I consider that the anticipated visual effects are limited by both landscape screening and existing built form within the townscape, including larger built form already associated with the Racecourse. Elevated visual effects for receptors at publicly assessable locations were only recorded in the short-term, largely for receptors on Portsmouth Road and on More Lane.
- 3.14 Further, the proposed development gives rise to beneficial effects on both landscape character and the landscape fabric of the appeal site. As set out within the ecological appraisal that supported the application, the proposed residential sites are on previously developed land or adjacent to existing developments and the majority of the habitats to be lost are of negligible ecological importance and no specific mitigation is required. The proposed development gives rise to beneficial effects on both landscape character and the landscape fabric of the appeal site, including the planting of approximately 225 trees.
- 3.15 Apart from glimpsed views along the proposed new accesses, the visual impact of the new proposed development is limited by the dense vegetation, trees and fencing surrounding the north, west and east boundaries of the Racecourse as well as the elevated Mound. Along Portsmouth Road to the east of the Racecourse entrance, views into the Racecourse are also limited for the most part, the character being of large villas and buildings set back from the road east of the Toll House. To the west of the Racecourse entrance and railings, a group of cypress trees form a visual barrier behind tall deciduous trees. Between these points, the elevated Racecourse grandstand and Eclipse building are seen in the middle ground behind car and coach parks. These large buildings will form the context of the new hotel building proposed to be located adjacent to them. Over time, new landscaping, especially in the foreground behind the entrance and railings on Portsmouth Road, will soften and enhance views and help to integrate the new development into the landscape.
- 3.16 As I set out at my **Appendix BC 8**, and as illustrated within the Design and Character Supplementary Planning Document Companion Guide: Esher (**Core Document 3.2**), Site 4 is located in close proximity to a 'Key Gateway'. As such, whilst the proposed development would be subject to detailed design, Site 4 is closely related to a 'gateway' site and a gateway building developed on it announcing arrival at Esher, visible from approaches to the Portsmouth Road junction, would be wholly appropriate with regard to townscape character.
- 3.17 In conclusion, it is accepted that there would be an inevitable change to some local views, although such change is very geographically limited and within in a landscape or townscape where change is ongoing. Further, effects of the proposed development on townscape and

visual receptors is contained within an area of less than 200m radius from the Racecourse. Beyond 200m, baseline landscape/townscape character and visual amenity are only marginally affected, if at all, and would not be harmful. Overall, there would be no material adverse effect and a number of beneficial effects on the character of the area.

### **Main Matter 3 (Reason for Refusal 1):**

#### **The role of the appeal site in the Green Belt in landscape terms**

- 3.18 The dimension of Green Belt policy relevant to landscape and decision-taking in this instance is the effect the appeal proposals will have on ‘openness’ - an ‘essential characteristic’ of Green Belts (NPPF para 133).
- 3.19 With regard to the consideration of the spatial openness of the Green Belt, being whether and to what extent the land is free from development, this is a matter considered within the evidence of Mr Robert Clarke of Rapleys. My evidence addresses the visual dimension of ‘openness’, being the appreciation of open character in views from the immediate landscape or townscape context.
- 3.20 At a local level, the Racecourse has been identified as falling within Local Area 52 by the Elmbridge Green Belt Boundary Review (EGBR) (2016) (**Core Document CD3.8**) which finds that there is an ‘important visual gap’ between settlements. The Council’s review finds that uses within the Racecourse “*contribute to a semi-urban character*”. There is not a gap between two settlements but a large open area of land within the urban area of Esher. Further, the ‘gap’ (if it is assumed to be a ‘gap’) is barely perceived visually in practice due to the surrounding vegetation, trees and fencing. The Racecourse is surprisingly visually well contained, as are the individual sites, acknowledged as such in the Case Officer’s report to Committee, such that there would be very few opportunities for views of the development from the surrounding area. In addition, perceptually, changes within the central areas within the Racecourse would largely remain as per the baseline context. External to the racecourse itself, the character of the Green Belt land forming the racecourse is not a visual one but spatial. Within the boundaries of the racecourse, the land forming the racecourse would not change materially visually in character or indeed spatially as a result of the proposed development. That is not to say that the proposed development would be invisible internally. It would be, albeit as a backdrop over a considerable distance especially when viewed from across the racecourse, a private view in any event. The character of the open landscape designated Green Belt (which is not a landscape character designation) is that of a semi-urban racecourse and that would remain as such without any material change or harm caused by the development.
- 3.21 As set out on Plan EDP 2 within EDP’s Green Belt Review (**Core Document CD5.50**), the Appeal Proposals would retain a ‘gap’ of up to 480m wide at the western end of the Racecourse, where views from More Lane are most apparent, reducing down to 135m at the eastern end of the Racecourse, where an appreciation of the ‘gap’ in this location is barely perceptible from Station Road. As such, the central areas of the appeal site, namely the

racecourse itself, is sufficiently large and diverse in character that it would continue to fulfil the open character of the land comprising the racecourse, if permission were granted.

- 3.22 New views into and across the Racecourse would be created as part of the development. The orientation of the access points into both Site 3 and Site 5 are such that new views would encompass existing built elements and the open character of the Racecourse; the Grandstand would be visible in the distance in a framed view between proposed built form at the access point to Site 3. The northern boundary of the Racecourse would be visible in a framed view from the access point to Site 5. Views across the racecourse would be obtained from More Lane. All these would add interest and legibility to the area which along More Lane and Lower Green Road is currently absent.
- 3.23 In terms of potential landscape and visual effects, as set out within EDP's LTVA submitted as part of the application, and also within **Main Matter 2** above, the overall limitation in views available of a proposed development in this location confirms that development on the appeal site would have little, or no, effect upon either sensitive or non-sensitive receptors, with any change limited to public receptors passing along Portsmouth Road and More Lane. With regard to private views, at the access points to Sites 3 and 5 as described above, views into the Racecourse would be limited to approximately a 50m section of both Lower Green Road and Portsmouth Road.
- 3.24 I agree with the Council's Committee Report (**Core Document CD7.3**) which concludes that *"In terms of their impact on the character of the area in general, the developments are unlikely to be harmful..."*, and that *"Due to their location near/adjacent to the town centre, where such built form is commonly present, it is unlikely that this [the proposed development] would be out of place in principle"*.
- 3.25 Notably, all of the development sites are located within Esher and beyond the appeal site's inclusion within the Green Belt there is no local policy which identifies or protects, either spatially or visually, a local 'gap'. As stated above, there is no 'gap' as such between settlements; the Racecourse is an open area within the built-up area of Esher, surrounded by development on all sides. There is no visual quality of the land forming the Green Belt which would be harmed by the proposed development.
- 3.26 I consider that the proposed development will address the constraints of the appeal site and would retain, at least where views into the Racecourse are possible, views across the open land, thereby retaining and where views are opened up enhancing the sense of open character within the Racecourse and not materially changing its semi-urban character.

## Section 4

### Conclusions

- 4.1 My Proof of Evidence addresses the landscape, townscape and visual related matters contained within RfR1 and RfR2.
- 4.2 There were no objections raised by the Council during the application process on landscape, townscape and visual matters, nor was the scope or methodology of the LTVA challenged by the LPA.
- 4.3 The application has been accompanied by a suite of environmental reports and, read as a whole, this work demonstrates convincingly that the proposal will not result in material harm to the natural or built environment.
- 4.4 Following on from my reasoning set out above, I have provided my responses to third party comments at **Appendix BC 9**.
- 4.5 For the reasons set out above, whilst the proposed development would be subject to detailed design, I believe this scheme represents a suitable addition to the appeal site in landscape and townscape terms and one which is compliant with relevant guidance and policy when read as a whole. I respectfully recommend that insofar as landscape matters pertain to the determination of this appeal, that planning permission should be granted.



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