

## CHAPTER SEVEN - NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, GREEN INFRASTRUCTURE AND LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

### Objectives

- To enhance the community's countryside setting and maintain the visual connectivity between settlement and countryside.
- To protect green infrastructure, support linkage, and accessibility with a net gain being achieved by the end of the plan period.
- To ensure development is sympathetic to the valued local landscape features and so prevent coalescence with surrounding communities Stansted Mountfitchet's relationship with the countryside.

### Protecting the Natural Environment and Landscape Character.

- *The Landscape Character* – The community has relatively contained boundaries contrasting with the adjacent open countryside which consists of some valued views from the north-south hills, open farmland and sparse woodland. (See Appendices 1 and 2)
- The landscape is valued by residents for access and panoramic countryside views.(see Appendix 3)
- The surrounding landscape varies in character:
  - East, South east, South and South West is enclosed by the Green Belt which has elements of a peri-urban character with some uncultivated fields and horse grazing.
  - East are the valleys of the Ugley Brook, Stansted Brook and The Bourne, all creating a varied topography reflecting glaciofluvial deposits. It also includes the historic Parkland of Stansted Hall.
  - Further East, east of the M11, is designated within the ULP as a Countryside Protection Zone which acts as a buffer to Stansted Airport. This would benefit from extended tree-planting.
  - West is the valley of the River Stort
  - North West is productive farmland that is the start of a vast tract of rural countryside.

Agricultural land in the Neighbourhood Plan Area is predominantly grade 3 (good to moderate), with small areas of grade 2 (very good) on the eastern and northern edges of Stansted Mountfitchet, and on the western and south-western edges of the Plan Area.

The Landscape Setting of the Village report (see Appendix 4) provides an assessment of the local landscape character and illustrates how the 24 Local Landscape Character Areas fit into the hierarchy. The village is set in a rural farmed landscape and the deficit of legally accessible open space means that residents use the Public Rights of Way around the Plan Area for recreation.

Stansted Park has provided a substantial additional contribution to publicly accessible open space and wetland with permissive paths which are open to all. This gain arose from the Elms farm Development, a new housing development right in the centre of Stansted village.

### PHOTO OF STANSTED PARK

Other descriptions of the area from Natural England and Uttlesford District may be found in Appendix 4.

- **Footpath Network** – There is a large and well used Public Rights of Way (PROW) footpath and bridleway network throughout the Plan Area (see Appendix 5). Most public rights of way are well maintained apart from some in the east and south-east whose poor condition stems from motorway or railway realignments and resultant flooding, together with a complete lack of way-

markers. The recent opening of further additional permissive paths, at Digby Wood and at Bentfield Bower, has improved the footpath network. (see [Stansted Mountfitchet: Overview of the Rights of Way 2015 updated 2019, Bishop's Stortford and District Footpaths Association](#))

- **Woodland Access** – The Aubrey Buxton Nature Reserve, 9.7 hectares located 1.5km north east of the village, is free to access and contains an interesting amount of native woodland and ponds. Birchanger Wood, which is free to access and has user-friendly all-weather paths, is located 2.5km south-west of the village. This comprises ancient woodland and covers some 69 acres with a small section, conveniently situated for access, to the east of the busy A120. There is also a small area of woodland around Turners Spring, together with a small Permissive Footpath. Additionally, there is Digby Wood situated on the edge of Birchanger and adjacent to Stansted bridleway no.27 (no. 5 in Birchanger). Turners Spring Nature Reserve is situated close to Burton End and is inhabited by over sixty species of birds.

#### INSERT PHOTO OF NATURE RESERVE

Based on Woodland Access Standards, residents in the Plan Area have good access to woodland areas.

- **Access to Open Space** – Based on The Green Infrastructure and Open Space with an Audit of Open Space and Green Infrastructure (see [Appendix 6](#)) and Statutory and Non-Statutory Designations (see [Appendix 7 and 8](#)), the current position in the village in terms of Formal and Informal Recreation is summarised.

Based on the Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards (ANGST), the parish is well short of meeting these standards as is Uttlesford District. In part this reflects the failure to provide additional recreational and accessible greenspace relative to new development and consequently and substantial increase in population.

- **Village Gateways** – The highway approaches into Stansted Mountfitchet village are very attractive, and as 'gateways' into the village, form an important element of the rural character and appearance of the area, they create the 'first impression' of our village. The gateways have grown ergonomically, surrounded by older overhanging trees, historic buildings, changing levels, views of countryside, spring bulbs and grass verges. These attractive entrances (see [Appendices 9 and 10](#)) for key features relating to each entrance) must be protected if development is proposed or indeed enhanced.

#### PHOTOS

#### What is needed for the next fifteen years?

The objective of the Neighbourhood Plan in this context is to ensure that the natural environment and out-of-door activities are not only protected but enhanced and improved. The need to implement effective policies has become even more pressing given the growing risks to the environment, many of which accrue from human factors and the lessons being learnt from the current pandemic.

- The footprint that has been created at the recently completed Elms Farm development, which completely integrates housing and accessible landscape, represents a good example of development.
- New developments should include the establishment of community areas which integrate gardens, trees, paths and seating areas where residents can meet and socialise.
- Access for residents along the water-ways - River Stort, Stansted Brook, Ugley Brook and the Bourne have to be improved/constructed.

#### INSERT PHOTOS

- Access to the River Stort and the existing River Stort path is required to avoid crossing the B1383 at Pesterford Bridge.
- For every new dwelling constructed, a specified number of native deciduous trees - say 2/3 per property (not fruit trees)- must be planted on a dedicated site. Every new development must include integrated foot and cycle link/s to local PROWs and/or riverside walks.

In addition, regardless of the amount of development, sites need to be identified to plant additional woodland. The following sites are put forward for further investigation and negotiation (see map at [Appendix 11](#)):

- 1 - Burton End, east and west of Belmer Road
- 2 - land west of Pines Hill
- 3 - land west of Pennington Lane
- 4 - land south of Forest Hall School
- 5 - land to the east of the M11, north and south of the Elsenham Road
- 6 - land north of Walpole Meadows

*Protect and enhance all features of the natural environment.*

This target covers biodiversity, flora and fauna, local wildlife and their habitats and key local environmental features. For development proposals to be supported any impact on the natural environment will have to show benefits such as additional access to the countryside for recreation, creation of wildlife corridors and long-term net biodiversity gains.

*Requirement for Ecological Assessments –*

Where development proposals may impact the environment will be required to produce an Ecological Assessment outlining the potential consequences. To win support, if the evidence is adverse, 'like-for-like' replacement, relocation or compensation towards the loss of habitats will need to result in a net biodiversity gain with improved habitats, whether in quantity, quality or connectivity, as close as possible and in advance.

*The provision of green corridors*

Green networks can bring the following benefits:

- Increases in levels of walking and cycling promote physical activity and help social interaction.
- Additional tree planting protects against pollution by improving air quality. The shade of tree canopies provide a sense of well-being
- Provides a natural network in which wildlife and plants can disperse and extend their habitat thereby increasing biodiversity and saving some challenged local species.

The ten Local Wildlife Sites (see [Appendix 12](#)), support the safe movement of wildlife and additional recreational opportunities and the creation of a further five green corridors (see [Appendix 13](#)) which improve connectivity between green infrastructure features.

*Bentfield Upper and Lower Greens*

The plan designates Bentfield Upper Green as a Local Green Space albeit not designated as a Protected Open Space by Uttlesford District Council.

**INSERT PHOTOS BENTFIELD GREEN**

Bentfield Lower Green is a protected Open Space includes a pond, a children's play area and grass verges that contribute to the setting of the historic buildings within the Conservation Area.

The areas are designated as Village Greens and is popular for walking whether dogs, children or adults. This total area must be safeguarded from any additional development which could threaten its tranquillity or its recreational value.

### *Key Valued Views*

The Landscape Setting of the village (Dr Liz Lake 2019) identifies scenic routes and key views in the Plan Area (see [Appendix 3](#)). The scenic routes include the seven Village Gateways, the routes along Protected Lanes and Valley Floors.

The identified views reveal the key characteristics of an area, are landmark views and are valued by the community. They offer uninterrupted views of countryside with little or no housing in sight. The undulating landscape hides communities nestling in dips in the landscape. The presence of woodland adds to a character and variety. ([see Appendix 13 for a selection of photographs](#))

### **PHOTO – MAY WALK**

A good example is the May Walk with its westward landscape over the Ugley Brook providing one of the best views over Stansted Mountfitchet. It is easily accessible to most residents and links up to the Aubrey Buxton Nature Reserve where entrance is free and dogs are accepted.

The bridleway is wide and safe for accompanied children, connects with other PRoW paths and can be easily accessed from the centre of the village.

Our landmark views need to be protected for the benefit of the whole community.

### *Village Gateways*

As explained earlier the highway approaches into Stansted Mountfitchet village are very attractive. Any development proposals which may infringe on the gateways must show how they are protected and indeed enhanced.

## **POLICIES**

- SMEGI 1** (a) Development proposals must protect, and where possible enhance, the natural environment and green infrastructure within the Neighbourhood Plan Area. All proposals should seek to deliver net green infrastructure and biodiversity gains, in addition to protecting existing habitats and species.
- (b) Any proposals which negatively affect, or have the potential to negatively affect, green infrastructure, the natural environment, biodiversity (including flora and fauna, and local wildlife (including wildlife habitats), must demonstrate through an Ecological Assessment how impacts will be adequately mitigated.
- (c) Proposals which improve Parish residents' access to greenspace in accordance with Natural England's Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards and/or establish new green corridors linking green infrastructure features within the Neighbourhood Plan Area will be supported.
- SMEGI 2** The natural environment and green infrastructure features identified [within Appendix](#) (Recreation, SUDS and Nature Conservation: Inventory 2019) will be protected and enhanced for the future use and enjoyment of residents of the Neighbourhood Plan Area. Development proposals which are likely to have negative impacts upon these features will only be permitted where the benefits of development clearly outweigh any negative impacts to the nature conservation value of the feature, or to its contribution to wide biodiversity objectives.

- SMEGI 3 The following site (identified on the proposals map) is designated as a Local Green Space where planning permission will not be granted for inappropriate development, except in very special circumstances:
- LGS 1: Bentfield Upper Green
- SMEGI 4 Development proposals will be expected to retain and protect prominent trees which make a significant contribution to the character of the local landscape, natural flood prevention and are considered to have reasonable life expectancy. The removal or significant alterations (such as pruning or crown lifting) of trees which make a significant positive contribution to the character of and appearance of their surroundings will not be supported unless there is a good arboricultural reason to do so.
- SMEGI 5 Any incursion into the Countryside Protection Zone for Airport related activity will be strongly resisted.
- SMEGI 6 All areas of the Neighbourhood Plan Area that are outside of development limits are considered to be in the countryside. In order to protect the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside development will be restricted to that which supports countryside uses.
- SMEGI 7 The open countryside surrounding the village of Stansted Mountfitchet provides an important role in maintaining the rural character and appearance of the Neighbourhood Plan Area and the village. It provides a physical gap in development between the urban fringe of Bishop's Stortford and the surrounding villages of Birchanger, Elsenham, Ugley and Manuden. Development proposals in the countryside must demonstrate how they will:
- enhance the rural character and appearance of the Neighbourhood Plan Area
  - protect and enhance the special features which contribute to the landscape character of the area
  - protect and where possible improve access to open countryside
  - maintain and enhance the physical gap in development between the urban fringe of Bishop's Stortford and surrounding villages; and
  - be of a scale, massing and visual appearance which will not detrimentally impact upon the rural character and appearance of the Neighbourhood Plan Area
- SMEGI 8 Any proposals for development in the open countryside outside of development limits will require a Landscape and Visual Impact Appraisal/Assessment, outlining the impact of development on the character and appearance of the surrounding area and demonstrating the impact of the development and proposed mitigation measures on views from key areas of the Neighbourhood Plan Area, including Stansted Mountfitchet village.
- SMEGI 9 Development proposals located outside of development limits, or adjacent to development limits, will be required to demonstrate how they will maintain clear separation and avoid any potential coalescence between settlements within the Neighbourhood Plan Area and adjoining Parishes.
- SMEGI 10 The approaches to Stansted Mountfitchet village identified in Appendix 6 and the Proposals Map are an important part of the character, appearance and heritage of the village identity. Development affecting a village gateway will be required to demonstrate how the proposals protect and enhance the key characteristics of the gateway.

Development proposals, which have a detrimental impact on the character and appearance of identified village gateways, will not be supported.

- SMEGI 11 To pursue the possibilities of large-scale tree planting and the implementation of Green Corridors (see Appendix 13 for location plan)

## CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

- 1 Which are your favourite views in and around Stansted?
- 2 What are your favourite countryside and green areas within and around Stansted?
- 3 Where would you like to see more native trees planted?
- 4 Are you happy with, and do you use, the network of footpaths and bridleways?
- 5 Do you think that there are sufficient Open Spaces in Stansted? If not, where could more be provided?
- 6 Could existing areas be improved?
- 7 Do you have any ideas which would protect and encourage wildlife?

### Relevant policies in the ULP and UDLP

ULP Policy S6 Metropolitan Green Belt  
ULP Policy S8 The Countryside Protection Zone  
UDLP Policy SP10 Protection of the Countryside  
UDLP Policy EN7 Protecting and Enhancing the Natural Environment  
UDLP Policy EN8 Open Spaces  
UDLP Policy EN9 Ancient Woodland and Protected Trees  
UDLP Policy C1 Protection of Landscape Character

### Relevant Evidence Base Documents

UDC Open Space, Sports Facility and Play Pitch Strategy, The Landscape Partnership, 2012  
Braintree, Brentwood, Maldon and Uttlesford Landscape Character Assessments, Chris Blandford Associates. 2006

Landscape Character of Uttlesford District, Chris Blandford Associates, 2006  
Stansted Mountfitchet Community Landscape Project, Liz Lake Associates, 2013

Landscape Setting of the Village, Dr Liz Lake, 2019