

Canterbury Draft Local Plan Consultation:

Landscape and Visual Assessment of Policy R15 (The Hill, Littlebourne)

By: Richard Andrews, December 2022

A recent application for the development of far fewer houses than the Draft Local Plan would allocate under Policy R15 was refused as recently as September 2021. One of the reasons for refusal was “The proposed development is located outside of any settlement and is not identified as suitable for residential development within the Canterbury District Local Plan 2017 and as such, if allowed, would result in an **unsustainable...urbanisation of the countryside.**” The associated Officer’s Report stated that “the introduction of a development of this size ...would urbanise and dilute the verdant setting of the village experienced upon entry into Littlebourne from the west, **adversely impacting the rural landscape character of the settlement.**” It also states: “the effect of changing the site from open rural land to suburban housing would alter the rural setting of the Littlebourne Conservation Area. As such the proposal would **fail to preserve or enhance the setting of the conservation area**”.

***COMMENT:** The site and its rural context has not changed since September 2021. If development of 115 houses was seen as ‘not suitable’ and ‘unsustainable urbanisation of the countryside’ only last year, how can allocation for c.300 houses under draft Policy R15 (more than double what was refused in 2021) be any different in the professional opinion of Canterbury Council’s planners and in the minds of the planning committee members? This would make a mockery of Canterbury’s recent planning decisions and undermine the process.*

The **current Local Plan (2017)** includes the following relevant statements and policies related to Landscape:

Paragraph 10.1: "One of the City Council's objectives is to protect and enhance the countryside, acknowledging its own intrinsic value, the diversity of its landscapes, heritage and wildlife and recognising that a high quality rural environment contributes to the economic, social and cultural well-being of the District."

***COMMENT:** Draft Policy R15 directly acts against this stated objective in Paragraph 10.1 of the current Local Plan.*

Paragraph 10.18

"The Landscape Character and Biodiversity Appraisal (Draft 2012) will be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance and will be used as a material consideration when determining applications for development within the rural areas".

Policy LB4

"In considering development proposals, the City Council will take every opportunity to reinforce, restore, conserve or improve, as appropriate, the landscape character of the area in which development is proposed. Development will be permitted if...development would safeguard or strengthen tranquillity, features and patterns that contribute to the landscape character and local distinctiveness of the area; ...The **development should have regard to the Canterbury Landscape Character and Biodiversity Appraisal** to identify the character areas and features affected."

In the previous Landscape Character and Biodiversity Appraisal (2012), the recommended strategy for the 'Littlebourne Fruit Belt' was to "**conserve and improve**" this typical character. It also says that the **arable areas are generally more visually sensitive** due to their lack of screening vegetation. **Where these open areas coincide with the ridgelines, the sensitivity is the greatest.** The guidance advised the Council to resist unsympathetic land uses on visually sensitive ridgelines.

Draft Policy DS22 of the Draft Local Plan refers specifically to the Canterbury Landscape Character Assessment and Biodiversity Appraisal (2020), which provides the following guidance for development in this landscape character area:

- Avoid urban fringe uses which detract from the otherwise simple pattern of the landscape and rural setting to the historic Canterbury City.
- Conserve the rural character of the landscape ensuring that it continues to play a role in the separation of Canterbury City with outlying villages to the east, and the separation of Bekesbourne / Patrixbourne and Littlebourne.

The Canterbury Landscape Character and Biodiversity Appraisal (2020) lists the relevant "Littlebourne Fruit Belt's" key characteristics as:

- **Gently rolling landform** with deep loamy soils.
- Encompassing most of the Littlebourne, Bekesbourne and Woolton Farm and Little Barton Farm Conservation Areas, providing some **rural setting to their associated historic buildings.**
- Strong **field pattern** created by **windbreaks and crops.**

***COMMENT:** Policy R15 is not in keeping with current and proposed local planning policy, in particular because the site is on land rising up the valley side towards a visually-prominent ridgeline overlooking the village of Littlebourne (see Figures 1 to 3 below). This visual prominence has been made more so by the recent felling of approximately 80 mature trees along the site's eastern boundary shelterbelt. The allocation of c.300 new houses into rural agricultural land here will do the opposite of "safeguard or strengthen the tranquillity and patterns" of what is currently a farmed rural landscape with relatively open views to three sides.*

(Photographs (Figures 1-3) provided on next pages)



Figure 1 *View of northern part of the draft Policy R15 allocation from the south looking north. Note slope gradient, rising to from east to west to a prominent ridge overlooking the village, with typical landscape features of the “South Canterbury and Littlebourne Fruit Belt”.*



Figure 2 View from bottom (east) of draft Policy R15 allocation looking uphill towards prominent ridge and shelterbelt/windbreak trees (western boundary of proposed site).



Figure 3 View from ridge (west side of allocation in draft Policy R15) overlooking proposed development site and the village beyond. Note that many village houses in the background are obscured by tree leaves due to the summer season. These houses are much more visible in the late autumn, winter and early spring period. Also note distant views to the ridge on the other side of the Little Stour valley (right of photo).