

## Heritage Impact Assessment: Land to the North of Stevenage, November 2015

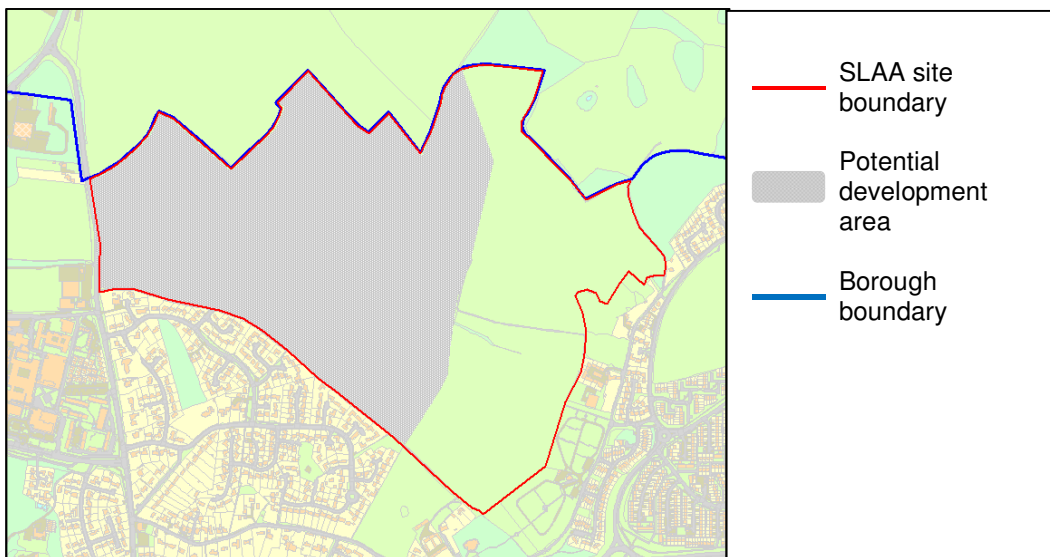
### Introduction

As part of the evidence base to inform our emerging Local Plan, we have assessed a number of potential development sites within the Strategic Land Availability Assessment (SLAA). The SLAA identifies sites that are suitable, available and achievable for development, in simplistic terms, without taking into account other policy considerations.

The site known in the SLAA as 'Land to the North of Stevenage' has been submitted to us by the landowner(s) for residential use. This covers a large expanse of open space to the north of the town, as identified by the red line on the map below.

Following further discussions with the landowner, it is clear that it is not the entire site that is being considered for development. The most recent scheme submitted to us by the landowner shows the rough area of development, as identified in grey below.

**Map 1: Potential development site**



Part of this site is designated as a conservation area and its development has the potential to affect the significance of a number of listed buildings and a non-designated heritage assets. As such, we need to ensure that any site allocation in the Local Plan follows the principles of sustainable development and is acceptable and appropriate in terms of its impact on the heritage assets.

Government Guidance<sup>1</sup> places great importance on the preservation and enhancement of heritage assets. It requires local authorities to 'set out a positive and clear strategy for the conservation, enjoyment and enhancement of the historic environment, in which the desirability of sustaining and enhancing the significance of heritage assets should be considered' (Para.126). The associated statutory duties regarding the desirability of preserving or enhancing the character or appearance of a conservation area and of preserving the setting of listed buildings must also be considered in this regard (Sections 66 and 72, Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990).

<sup>1</sup> The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, 2012).

Both national policy, and best practice guidance published by Historic England<sup>2</sup>, emphasise the importance of using an up-to-date evidence base to assess the significance of heritage assets, the contribution they make to the environment and the impact of any proposed development on these assets. Development proposals should seek to 'avoid or minimise conflict between any heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal' (NPPF, para.129).

This Assessment aims to fulfil these requirements and to determine whether the potential development site is appropriate, and what might be done to minimise the impacts of development on the heritage assets. Any residual harm to heritage assets would need to be balanced against the public benefits of the proposed development.

The emerging advice note from Historic England<sup>3</sup> recognises that a positive strategy for the historic environment in Local Plans can ensure that site allocations avoid harming the significance of heritage assets, which includes effects on their setting. At the same time, it also recognises the allocation of sites for development may present opportunities for the historic environment.

The advice note includes guidance specifically relating to site allocations for Local Plans. It sets out a methodology that local authorities can follow in order to ensure the historic environment is taken into account during the site selection process.

Five steps are identified, as follows:

**STEP 1:** Identify which heritage assets are affected by the potential site allocation

**STEP 2:** Understand what contribution the site (in its current form) makes to the significance of the heritage asset(s)

**STEP 3:** Identify what impact the allocation might have on that significance

**STEP 4:** Consider maximising enhancements and avoiding harm

**STEP 5:** Determine whether the proposed site allocation is appropriate in light of the NPPF's tests of soundness

This methodology has been used as the basis for this assessment.

### **STEP 1: Heritage assets affected**

The potential development site being considered by this assessment encroaches into the St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area to the east, as shown in Map 2. The remainder of the development site also has the potential to impact upon the conservation area, as such, the site as a whole will be considered within this assessment, and not just the part within the conservation area.

The conservation area contains a number of Listed Buildings, and other features recognised for their importance to the area.

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<sup>2</sup> Historic England Advice Note. The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans (Consultation Draft, June 2015); The Historic Environment in Local Plans. Historic Environment Good Practice Advice in Planning 1 (Historic England, March 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Historic England Advice Note: The Historic Environment and Site Allocations in Local Plans (Consultation Draft, June 2015)

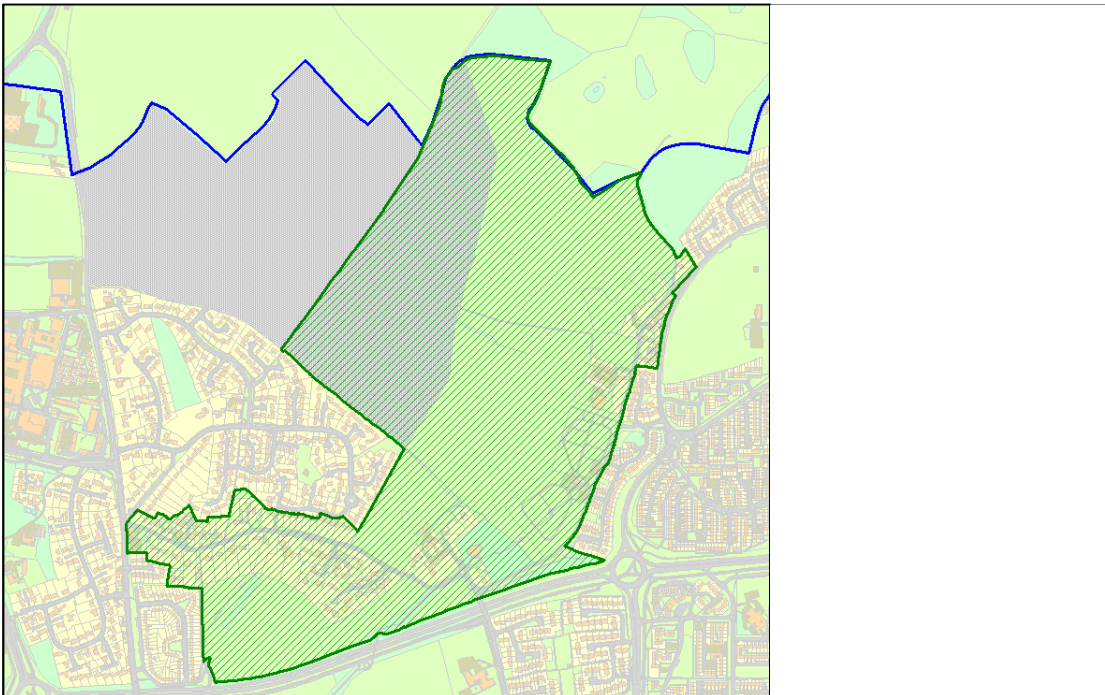
A number of evidence studies relating to the St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area already exist, and are in use by the Borough Council. The majority of these were produced by BEAMS, a specialist consultancy offering expertise in the historic environment across Hertfordshire in particular. This includes:

- A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas, November 2005, BEAMS
- St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area Appraisal, 2009, BEAMS
- St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area Management Plan Supplementary Planning Document, 2012

The Borough Council chose to formally adopt the latter as a Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) in 2012, making its guidance a material consideration when assessing planning applications.

These studies and reviews have formed the basis for this assessment, and should be referred to for further information on these heritage assets.

#### **Map 2: Conservation area boundary and the potential development area**



The St Nicholas / Rectory Lane area is the oldest part of Stevenage and the location of the original village settlement. The conservation area was originally designated in 1982. The boundary was amended in 1984, and then again in 2007. It has a part rural and part semi-rural character. Its core is centred round St Nicholas' Church where it forms a group with The Bury, The Old Bury, and the surrounding buildings. The roads that lead into this core are Rectory Lane (from the west) and Weston Road (from the northeast). Both form part of an historic road system that led east from the former Great North Road and continued northwards past Rooks Nest Farm to the village of Weston past Chesfield Park. The fields to the north of the Church / The Old Bury and Rooks Nest are part of the setting of some of the listed buildings within the conservation area and provide important views into and out of the conservation area.

The principal features of St Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area are:

- The core group of buildings including St Nicholas Church, The Old Bury, The Bury and Dominic and Moonhill cottages
- The green and hedged, tree-lined roads, Rectory Lane and Weston Road
- Views to and from the gently undulating fields forming the northern part of the conservation area
- Green spaces including the open countryside, playing field, water meadow and land associated with The Old Bury
- Significant historic and landmark buildings; singular, in groups and on corner plots (nine Listed Buildings are located within the conservation area)

The conservation area has a historical link with E.M. Forster, author of 'Howard's End'. He spent some of his childhood between 1883 and 1893 living at Rooks Nest, now known as Howards, which is located towards the northern end of Weston Road.

The 2009 Appraisal<sup>4</sup> identified two distinct character zones within the St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area; Character zone 1: Rectory Lane and Character zone 2: The Bury / St. Nicholas Church with Weston Road and the open fields to the north. Both have different characteristics which relate to their past and present use and layout.

It is the impact of the development proposal on character zone 2 that this assessment concentrates upon. The key features within this zone are identified in Map 3 and a summary is provided below.

Character Zone 2 incorporates the core of the conservation area which includes the church of St Nicholas, the Old Bury, the Bury with its surrounding buildings, Dominic Cottage and Moonhill. It also includes the entire length of Weston Road and the area of open fields to the north once associated with the Bury and Rooks Nest Farm. The whole area around the front of the entrance to the churchyard, Church Corner, forms the primary focal point of the conservation area.

Weston Road from St. Nicholas Church to Rooks Nest and Keeper's Cottage beyond retains a rural character with trees and hedges lining both sides of the road which is narrow and has no pavement. More recent housing at St Albans Drive is partly hidden by the hedges and trees along the east side of Weston Road. Rooks Nest Cottages is a mid-twentieth century terrace of three houses, they are set back from the road and their simple design does not detract from the character of the area.

Weston Road cemetery is an extension of the parish churchyard at the core of the conservation area and is a semi-open space bounded in part by hedges or a low brick wall. The site includes some tree planting and is located between the church of St Nicholas and Rooks Nest Farm. Views from within the cemetery out towards Weston Road, north towards Rooks Nest Farm and south towards the church retain the sites link to its earlier rural character. There are also good views to the west over surviving open farm land. The cemetery building is of interesting architectural design and is set back from the roadside; as such it does not intrude upon the character and appearance of the conservation area.

#### Significant/Listed Buildings

The appearance of the buildings in Character Zone 2 is mixed and relates to their period of construction, however most buildings are two storey dwellings and constructed in brick. Most of the properties are set within large plots or are well screened from the road by trees. This zone does

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<sup>4</sup> St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area Appraisal, 2009, BEAMS

contain some single storey historic farm buildings at Rooks Nest Farm and a timber weather-boarded barn associated with The Bury. At the north end of Weston Road are a terrace of mid-twentieth century cottages (Rooks Nest Cottages), these are very plain in style and as such do not detract from the predominantly rural nature of this part of Weston Road.

There are seven listed buildings within Character Zone 2, including two which are Grade I Listed and of exceptional interest:

- The Old Bury. Grade II\*. 4/2. Listed 1948
- Church of St Nicholas. Grade I. 4/3. Listed 1948
- Moonhill. Grade II. 4/144. Listed 1976
- Dominic Cottage. Grade II. 4/157. Listed 1976
- Rooks Nest Farm. Grade II. 4/155. Listed 1976
- L-shaped outbuilding west of Rooks Nest Farmhouse. Grade II. Listed 1997
- Howards End. Grade I. 4/156. Listed 1976

Character zone 2 contains one building of local importance:

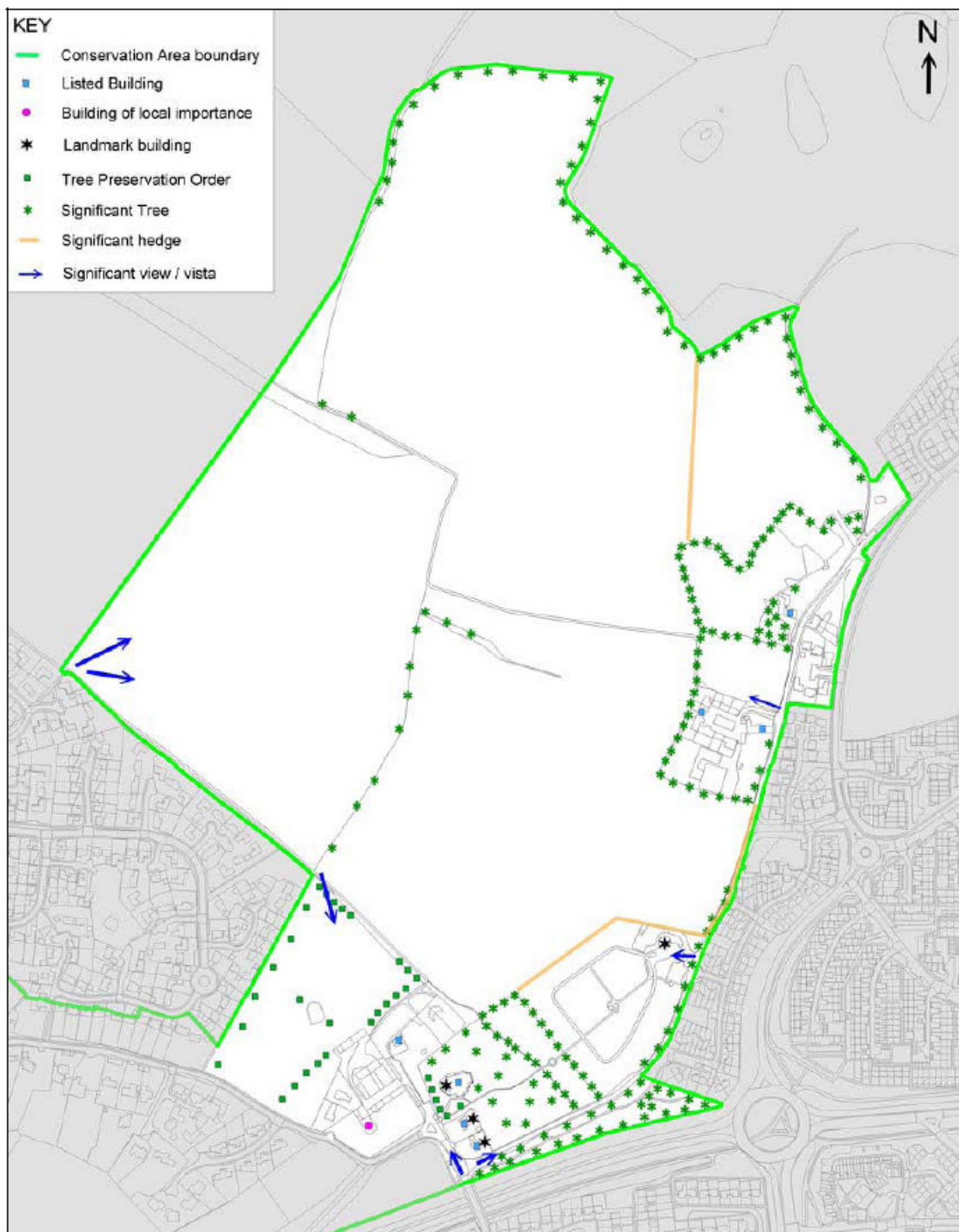
- The Bury, Church Corner, Rectory Lane.

### Open spaces

Important green spaces help to create the character and appearance of St Nicholas / Rectory Lane conservation area and form a combination of types, public and private. These include:

- *The open fields forming the northern part of the conservation area* – These fields have an important visual relationship to the conservation area affording views from Weston Road, Rectory Lane, from within Rooks Nest Farm, from the rear of St Nicholas Church and from Weston Road cemetery. The boundary is delineated by an old field boundary and woodland to the north and a public footpath to the west. The area contains several other footpaths leading north, south and east. The open land frames long distance views from the edge of the conservation area towards key buildings or building groups such as the Church and The Old Bury and Rooks Nest Farm. These views are important from both inside and outside of the conservation area. The topography of this area is important. Weston Road is a ridge, then moving west, the first field declines, while the second inclines gently, rising to another ridge located before you reach the western border of the conservation area. Beyond this, the land declines again to the west until it reaches North Road.
- *Land to the north and west of the Old Bury* – This meadow has a particularly close relationship to both of the adjacent listed buildings. It can be clearly seen from Rectory Lane where it is raised up above the level of the road and from the footpath behind the church. The fields in this area are thought to contain evidence for a Deserted Medieval Village as part of this early settlement and there are earthwork features within the meadow next to the Old Bury which may have archaeological potential, the area is designated as an area of archaeological significance. It is also an important open space which helps to enhance the setting of the nearby listed buildings. Many of the trees within the meadow are protected by a Tree Preservation Order (TPO 85).
- *The strip of land dividing Martins Way dual carriageway from Weston Road* – This green strip of land contains a footpath and a number of trees; it forms an important division between Weston Road and the dual carriageway.

**Map 3: Character zone 2 – key features**



**STEP 2: The contribution of the site (in its current form) to the significance of the heritage asset(s)**

Contribution of the site to the significance of the conservation area



Our previous work identifies the open fields to the north of the conservation area as one of its key features. This countryside surround helps to retain the area's rural/semi-rural character.

The Conservation Area Review<sup>5</sup> detailed the significance of these fields (which were then outside the conservation area) to the heritage asset; 'to the west, the setting is formed by open farmland over which there are extensive views from the conservation area. This land frames long distance views towards key buildings or building groups such as the church and The Old Bury and Rooks Nest Farm. These views are important from both inside and outside of the conservation area'.

The conservation area boundary was expanded in 2007, to include these open fields. The Review recommended this, identifying the fields as 'an integral part of the landscape in which the buildings in the conservation area sit' (para.4.31).

The amended boundary was based on the vistas from within the conservation area, from Weston Road and Rectory Lane, and also looking back into the conservation area. The Review clearly confirms that it was not considered appropriate to include any wider tracts of countryside than this within the revised boundary, as these would not have the same visual and physical relationship with Weston Road and Rectory Lane (para.4.32). The revised boundary is shown in Maps 4 & 5.

A further Appraisal was carried out by BEAMS in 2009, after the boundary was expanded. This specifically states that 'The fields to the north of the Church / Bury and Rooks Nest are vital to the setting of the conservation area and form important views into and out of the conservation area' (para.3.2).

**Map 4: Conservation Area boundary (1984)**



**Map 5: Boundary revision (2007)**



Taking into account all of the previous evidence work, it is clear that the fields within the conservation area, to the north, were designated as such to ensure the setting of the historic core of the conservation area and the Listed Buildings is protected, primarily to retain the rural feel of the area and the views.

The 2005 Review clearly differentiates between the fields that were recommended for inclusion in the conservation area and those beyond this point (further west and north), and the impact they have upon the conservation area. The open fields adjacent to the conservation area, which form the main part of the development site being assessed, were not included, as it was considered they do not have a significant physical or visual relationship with the conservation area or the Listed Buildings.

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<sup>5</sup> A Review of Stevenage Conservation Areas, 2005, BEAMS

### Contribution of the site to the significance of listed buildings

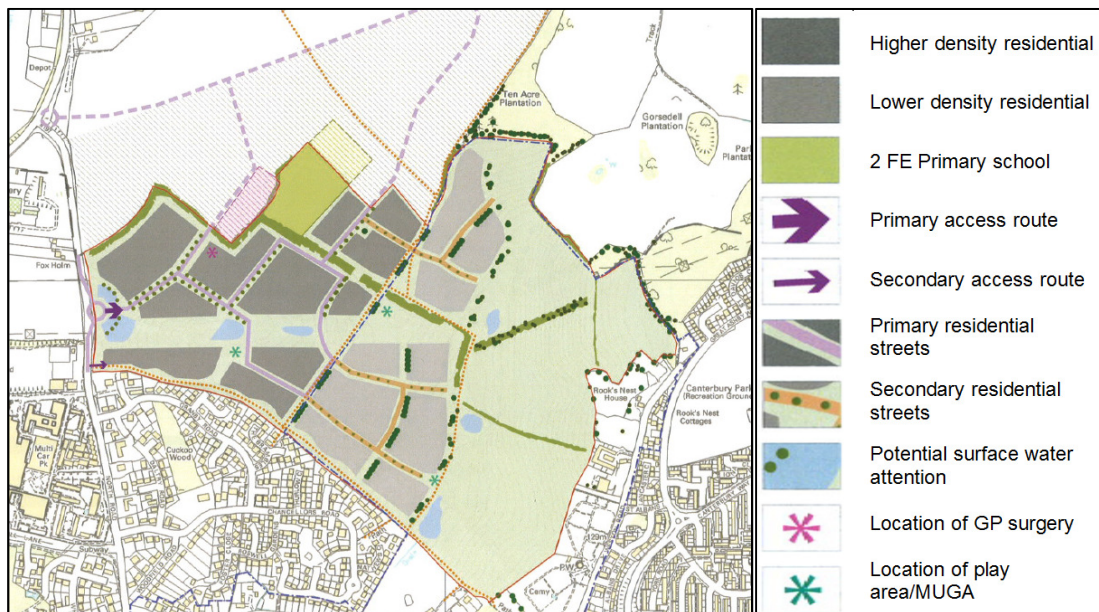
The eastern section of the proposed development site forms part of the setting of the Church, The Old Bury, Rooks Nest Farm and its former outbuilding (now converted for residential use), and Howards End. The proposed development site contributes to the significance of these five listed buildings as it provides part of the agricultural setting that informs an understanding of their historic interest. The other listed buildings within the conservation area are further away from the development site and are separated from it by intervening buildings and trees.

### **STEP 3: The impact the proposed allocation might have on that significance**

Although it is at a relatively early stage, understanding the likely key features of the proposed development will enable us to come to an informed view on its potential impact on the conservation area and the listed buildings.

The most recent scheme submitted as part of the SLAA suggested that the site could accommodate around 1,100 new homes. With higher density housing (around 40dph) outside of the conservation area and some lower density, aspirational homes (15-30dph) in the development area within the conservation area. A draft scheme is illustrated below (this is indicative only).

**Map 6: Indicative North Stevenage scheme**



Due to the likely size of the development, the scheme will also incorporate a new primary school and a small neighbourhood centre. These will be located within the northern part of the development site.

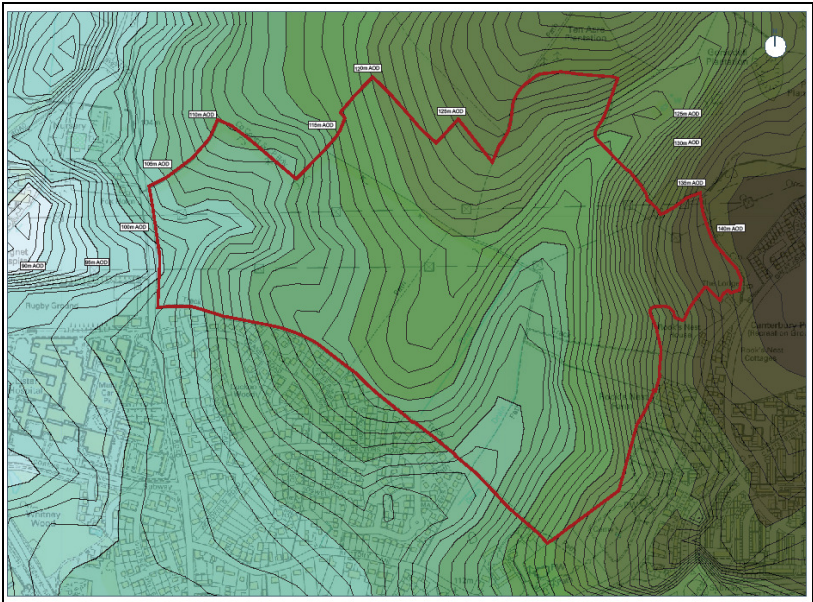
Access will be taken from North Road, meaning the traffic impact on the conservation area and the other heritage assets would be insignificant. There would not be a need for increased traffic within the conservation area, as North Road provides key links north and south, towards the town centre and the main roads outside of the town.

Detailed elements of housing styles and materials have not been determined at this stage.



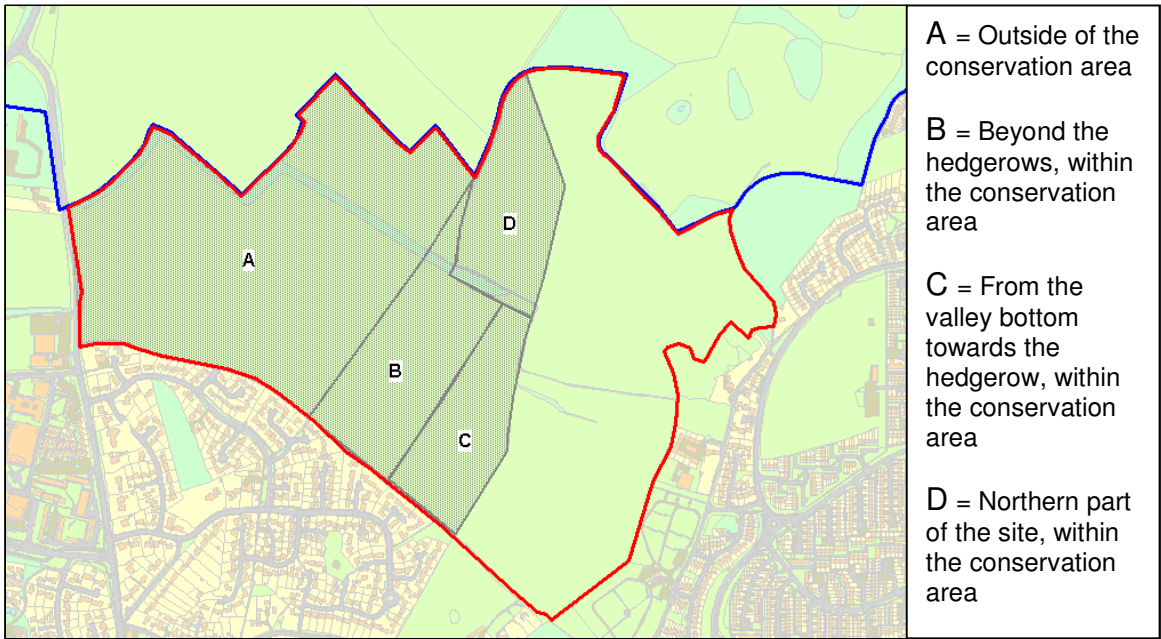
The topography of the site is important in determining both visual and other impacts of the proposed development. Map 7 illustrates the higher land (darker green) and where the land declines (lighter green). The land declines from Weston Road, and then rises again as it moves towards the west of the conservation area, to form a valley at the bottom. The land then declines again until it reaches North Road.

**Map 7: Topography and ridgelines**



For ease of assessment, the proposed development site can be split into four distinct parcels based on these differences in topography and other physical site boundaries. These all have varying characteristics, which may lead to differing impacts on the conservation area and the other heritage assets. Map 8 illustrates these parcels of land.

**Map 8: Land types within the proposed development site**



- A = Outside of the conservation area
- B = Beyond the hedgerows, within the conservation area
- C = From the valley bottom towards the hedgerow, within the conservation area
- D = Northern part of the site, within the conservation area

Development outside of the conservation area (parcel A) would have minimal impact on the heritage assets visually, as it would largely be out of sight, although development close to the ridge that forms the south-eastern boundary of this parcel would be visible. It would also have limited impact in terms of noise, lighting and other social issues, due to its lower land levels. As discussed previously, the boundary amendment of 2007 already acts to preserve the setting of the historic core of the conservation area, the listed buildings and important views. It is not considered that the fields beyond this boundary have the same physical or visual relationship to the conservation area or the listed buildings.

Parcel B is within the conservation area, on the upper part of the valley side. Some of this site is beyond the ridgeline, so the impact of development here would be similar to parcel A, above. For the remainder, the hedgerows provide an element of natural screening, which would minimise the visual impact of any development. Development of this parcel would have an impact on the heritage assets, but this could be partially mitigated.

The development of parcels C and D would have a more pronounced impact upon the conservation area and the listed buildings, as (like parcel B) they are within the designated area, but they also have more limited existing screening. Development here would be more visible from both the lower land levels (i.e. the valley bottom) and the higher land levels towards the north of Weston Road.

In more general terms, a development of this size is likely to have a negative impact on the rural feel of the area. Reducing the visual impact of development will be crucial to ensuring this part of the conservation area's character is retained.

The views towards this proposed development area are effectively illustrated by Images 1 to 6.

**Image 1: View taken from the corner of the churchyard, looking towards the potential development site. This is a popular public footpath, so the views here are important to residential amenity.**



The second field marks the start of the proposed development site (parcels C and D). The development of these fields would have a significant visual impact, due to the incline of the land and the lack of existing screening. The hedgerow beyond this, marks the start of parcel B. Land here is at a much higher level and the hedgerow provides some screening to the field beyond. Development

within this part of the conservation area would be partially visible, but its visual impact could be effectively mitigated by expanding the existing screening. Development outside of the conservation area would also not be seen from this point if effective screening was provided.

**Image 2: View taken from Weston Road, with Rook's Nest Farm outbuildings left.**



The fields visible in the background form part of the proposed development site (parcels B and D). The development of these fields would affect the view from this point. Heavy landscaping throughout the development would help to mitigate its visual appearance, but the higher land levels mean it could not be hidden completely. Limiting development to just **the western of** these fields would also ensure some part of the view remains intact. Retaining the northern field (parcel D) would allow for more extensive views to the open fields beyond.

Another significant view is looking back towards the conservation area from the open fields. Images 3 to 5 illustrate the views towards Weston Road from various points along the public footpath that borders the Chancellors Road development.



**Image 3: View from the edge of the conservation area looking back towards Weston Road**



**Image 4: View from the hedgerow (boundary of parcels B and C) looking back towards Weston Road**



**Image 5: View from the valley bottom looking back towards Weston Road**



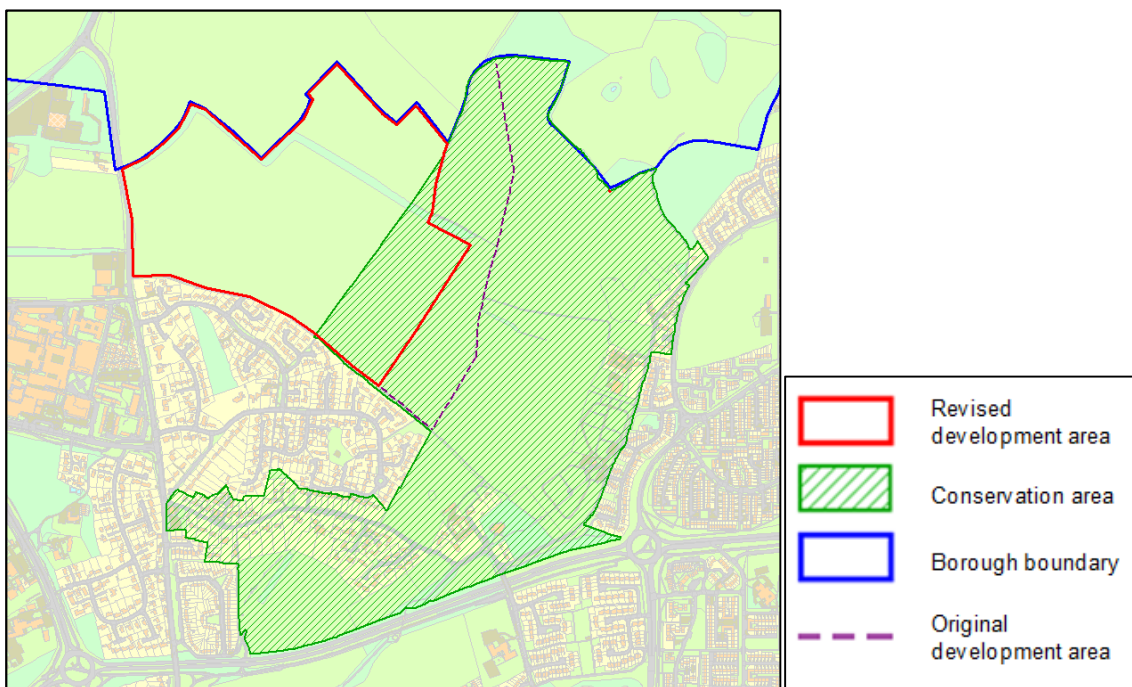
The view in image 3 is recognised in the Conservation Area Appraisal as a 'significant view'. The hedgerow partially screens the listed buildings in the distance. Image 4 provides a more extensive view due to its higher land level, and its location adjacent to the hedgerow means there is no interruption to the vista. The listed buildings are more visible in image 4. Therefore, the development

of parcel B could be permitted, whilst still retaining the significant views. Image 5 illustrates the view from the valley bottom. Although the listed buildings can be seen, it does not provide the same rural-feel, as the views are significantly less extensive. The development of parcel C would have a significant detrimental impact on this view.

The Conservation Area Management Plan for this area recognises the pressures for housing that currently exist. It states that new development will be avoided within the conservation area, 'in order to protect significant views which are integral to the character of the area' (Para.7.6). Overall, it is considered that some of the development proposed within the conservation area would have an unacceptable impact on these views. Within parcels C and D, development would clearly be more visible, particularly from the public footpath to the south, affecting the extensive views and the rural feel of the area. Development would also destroy the significant view back towards Weston Road. Development beyond the existing hedgerow (parcel B) benefits from some natural screening and its topography means that new homes would be much less visible. It is considered that development here could be successfully mitigated against, for the most part, through careful landscaping and increased screening.

Accordingly, a significant reduction of the part of the development area that lies within the conservation area is recommended. The revised boundary is identified below; it includes parcels A and B only. This follows the physical boundaries created by the hedgerows and the field divisions on the ground. The development of parcel B would affect the character and appearance of this part of the conservation area (by allowing houses on an open field) but this is not fundamental to the significance of the designated area as a whole. It is considered that development within this part of the conservation area can be effectively mitigated and would minimise the harm to listed buildings.

**Map 9: Recommended development area**





#### **STEP 4: Maximising enhancements and avoiding harm**

Since the start of the Local Plan process, through the SLAA, we have investigated all of the potential sites we had submitted to us and all of those that we identified ourselves. The results of the most recent SLAA provide us with a final list of suitable, available and achievable sites which could be allocated for housing within the Local Plan. Taking other evidence and policy requirements into account, such as the need for employment and retail provision, and the results of the SHMA and the Green Belt Review, it is clear that we will be heavily reliant on a few large sites if we are to meet our housing needs. One of which is the North of Stevenage site.

Notwithstanding this, in accordance with the findings of stages 1 to 3 of this assessment, it is considered that the site allocation should be reduced to comprise the area beyond the existing hedgerows, as identified in Map 9. This allows for development in a small part of the conservation area and beyond. It is estimated that this will allow for around 800 new homes across the whole site.

As well as ensuring heritage assets are protected, Historic England also recognise that the allocation of sites for development may present opportunities for the historic environment. The allocation of North Stevenage provides the opportunity to ensure the preservation and enhancement (if required) of the remaining open fields, which form the setting of the St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area. As part of any development proposal, we will require the remaining open space to be retained as such, either via a Legal Agreement or through the transfer of land to the Borough Council. It also provides us with opportunities to gain developer contributions, which could be used to enhance other features of the conservation area.

In terms of minimising the impacts of the development, reducing the boundary provides the main mitigation measure, as such, limiting the overall prospect of development impacting upon the conservation area. In addition:

- The part of the site within the conservation area should be developed with larger, aspirational homes, in accordance with other policy objectives. This will help to create a more appropriate transition between the remaining open fields and the new housing. It will minimise any visual impact in terms of the number of homes that might be seen.
- Development within this area should also be heavily landscaped.
- The existing hedgerows and natural screening currently in place should be maintained and reinforced, and additional screening implemented to reduce the visual impact of the development. This has worked successfully for the adjacent development of Chancellors Road, which also directly adjoins the conservation area.
- Tall buildings should not be permitted in the eastern section of the development site. Building heights towards the east of the development site should be a maximum of two storeys.
- No vehicular access to the site should be permitted from Weston Road across the open fields.
- Public footpaths through the development site should be retained.
- Building styles and layout within the conservation area should reflect the key features of the conservation area.

The draft Historic England advice note states that 'site allocation policies are a positive feature of a Local Plan as they can highlight the specific criteria against which a development needs to be judged and thereby speed up the implementation process, providing clarity for a wide range of audiences'. The Local Plan should contain a specific policy to allocate the North Stevenage site, which sets out the mitigation measures that will be required alongside any other site specific considerations.

## **STEP 5: Conclusion**

This assessment recognises the importance of the St. Nicholas / Rectory Lane Conservation Area as a significant heritage asset within the Borough, together with its listed buildings. The development site originally proposed lies partly within the conservation area, from the valley bottom, and stretches out towards North Road.

The conservation area boundary was amended in 2007 to include the open fields to the east of Weston Road. Our previous evidence explains that this was to protect the setting of the Listed Buildings and the significant views. The fields beyond this do not share the same physical or visual relationship with the conservation area or with the other heritage assets.

Taking into account all of the evidence, it is considered that development adjacent to the conservation area could go ahead with very minimal impact upon the significance of the heritage assets, and that development up to the hedgerow within the conservation area (parcel B), could be effectively mitigated in the most part. This would enable the objectively assessed housing needs to be met, whilst also ensuring the development is sustainable and seeks to conserve the historic environment. In relation to the distinctions set out in paragraphs 133 and 134 of the National Planning Policy Framework it is considered that the harm to the significance of the designated heritage assets (the conservation area and the listed buildings) would be 'less than substantial'. This harm needs to be balanced against the public benefits of the proposed development, which include the provision of much-needed housing and securing the future use and maintenance of the remaining open fields within the conservation area.

The reduction of the development area, to exclude the part of the site to the north that lies within the conservation area and pushes development back to the hedgerow to the south (parcels C and D), is a justified approach, which aims to provide an effective balance between economic, environmental and social benefits.

In order to further minimise any impact of such a scheme, a specific policy will be required to allocate the site, which should set out policy criteria to mitigate against the proposal and enhance the heritage asset, where possible. A policy requiring the Conservation Area Management Plans to be taken into account, for all proposals affecting conservation areas, will also be included within the plan.