

Rolling Valley Farmlands

Landscape Sensitivity & Change

This is a sloping valley side landscape largely associated with the rolling and undulating farmlands south of the river Gipping, not with the clay plateau landscapes north of the Gipping valley. These valleys are distinct, in terms of both cultural pattern and history, from the clayland valleys north of the River Gipping

The Rolling Valley Farmlands are generally comprehensively settled with substantial villages, such as Lavenham, Bildeston and Clare, that can have the character of small towns. These villages have distinctive and often dense late mediaeval cores, containing large numbers of high quality medieval buildings and more ornate churches than those found in north Suffolk. The Rolling Valley Farmlands are also the location of the towns of Hadleigh, Sudbury and Haverhill, which are subject to pressure for settlement extension.

These south Suffolk valleys are locally distinctive and even the areas outside “Constable Country” such as the villages of the Brett valley, have some of the highest national profiles of any Suffolk landscape.

The surrounding landscapes are rolling, sometimes steeply in the west of the county, with blocks of ancient woodland being a consistent feature. This woodland frames the valleys and is often present on the upper slopes.

The spatial relationship of this landscape to the adjacent valley floor means that change and development here can have a profound visual impact. In addition, some of this landscape is adjacent to or within the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). This is an additional sensitivity in a landscape that is already highly sensitive because of the landform and the particularly rich built heritage.

Key Forces for Change

- Expansion of settlements.
- Construction of large agricultural buildings.
- Expansion of garden curtilage.
- Change of land use, especially the creation of horse paddocks.
- Impact of deer on the condition of woodland cover.
- Mineral extraction.

Development management

Exaggerated visual impact of the height of buildings and structures

In these valley side landscapes, the visual impact of new vertical elements is increased by the landform. Therefore new buildings are likely to have a significant impact on both the character and visual amenity of valley floor and valley side

landscape types. The setting of specific features and elements of these landscapes, such as small-scale enclosure patterns or historic buildings and monuments, can also be significantly damaged.

The majority of development will, to some degree, be subject to this problem. Therefore, it is essential to manage this issue effectively, taking every opportunity at the earliest stages of the development of the proposal to modify and improve it or to be clear with the applicant that the impact of the proposal is unacceptable or may be at a high risk of refusal due to landscape impacts.

Settlement form and expansion

Valley side landscapes have historically been a focus for settlement. However, large-scale expansion should be confined to the adjacent plateau. In this location the landscape and visual impact can be more easily mitigated with effective planting and design.

Settlement extension in a valley side landscape is likely to have a significant visual impact and adversely affect the character of the landscape, including that of the adjoining valley floor. A comprehensive Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment is essential to identify the risks and the options for mitigation. These developments tend to create a highly visible new “roofscape” on the sides of valleys. The effect of this can be partially mitigated by planting within the development as well as on the perimeter and offsite. It is essential to ensure that there is sufficient space within the development for effective planting, and that any requirement for offsite planting is considered at the earliest stage. The proposals for mitigation planting must always be commensurate with the scale of the development and the capacity of the landscape to absorb the development without damage to the landscape character.

It is important to maintain the existing pattern of settlement clusters on the valley sides and minimise visual intrusion on the very sensitive landscapes on the valley floor. New building here needs to be carefully located; it must be of appropriate scale and style as well as being integrated into the existing pattern of vegetation and settlement. There may also be specific styles related to a particular landed estate, which should be considered as a design option. Avoid, wherever possible, ribbon development on valley sides and slopes when this will cause settlement clusters to merge.

Large-scale agricultural buildings on or near valley sides

The siting, form, orientation and colour of these buildings make a considerable contribution to mitigating their impact. However in a valley side situation, especially if located on the skyline, they will have a considerable visual impact. It is preferable to seek a location outside the valley where the visual impact of this type of development can be mitigated much more effectively.

Barn conversions and extensions

These proposals require careful consideration and considerable attention to the detail of form and styling. Redevelopment proposals should also enhance the contribution these historic sites make to the wider landscape. In this landscape type much of the stock of barns and associated buildings are especially large and striking because of the long history of profitable arable farming

Specifically, any new building should usually be close to the existing cluster of buildings and should be subordinate in size to the principal buildings. The design, including the finishes such as tiles, brickwork, mortar, or wooden cladding should be appropriate for the style of buildings present. Staining used for exterior boarding should be capable of weathering in the traditional way, as a permanent dark or black colouring is not locally appropriate. As farmsteads in this landscape have usually developed over an extended period there may be a range of styles on site.

The change of land use, especially to residential curtilage, can often be more disruptive to the wider landscape than modifications to the buildings. The changes to the surrounding land from agricultural to residential use, which entails the introduction of lighting and other suburban features, can be extremely intrusive. Unless the site is well hidden, it may be necessary to impose clear conditions relating to the extent of garden curtilage and how this is screened from the wider landscape. Usually the risk of new domestic curtilage damaging the visual amenity and character of a valley side landscape is significant because of the shape of the land.

Manage the expansion of garden curtilage

The expansion of a garden which is not in keeping with the existing local pattern has a significant impact on the local character and form of the built environment, as well as on historic patterns of field enclosure. The visual impact of domestic clutter and garden paraphernalia can be particularly intrusive in these sloping landscapes. New or expanded curtilage should always be designed to fit into the local context and respect the established pattern.

In many cases the extent of gardens in a village or cluster within a parish is relatively uniform, with all gardens following a defined boundary with agricultural land. If settlement expansion is required then the local pattern must be respected wherever possible. However, new garden curtilage may be required in other situations, such as in association with barn conversions, or dwellings for agricultural workers in open countryside.

If a large area of agricultural land is to be attached to a domestic dwelling the planning authority should define the extent of the garden curtilage. The objective is to create a clearly defined and agreed distinction between the wholly domestic areas and, for example, land to be used as a paddock.

Effective boundary planting is essential for reducing the visual intrusion of garden extensions into the open countryside. This should be conditioned as part of the change of land use and is especially important when a section of arable land is taken in, because in these cases there are often no existing hedgerows or other boundary features present.

The style of boundary fencing and hedging to be used can have a significant impact. The use of appropriate low impact materials, such as post and wire fencing is preferable to close boarded fencing or fence panels. If the latter are required they should be screened by appropriate hedging. The use of locally appropriate hedging species including hawthorn, field maple, dogwood and other typical clayland species

should be specified in preference to non-native plantings such as leylandii or laurel for example.

Change of land use to horse paddocks

The proliferation of post and rail fencing and subdivision of land into small paddocks using temporary tape can have a significant negative landscape impact. In ecologically sensitive areas the impact on the quality and condition of grassland can be adverse. Mitigation strategies in terms of design, layout and stocking rates should be employed where possible.

It may be possible to screen the site with an effective and appropriate planting scheme. However, it may also be necessary to specify the type and extent of fencing to be used. On a sloping site post and rail or white tape can be particularly intrusive. If necessary brown or green fencing tapes should be conditioned and planting should be required to soften the impact of the post and rail fencing. Furthermore the location of field shelters and material storage areas should be specified, to minimise the landscape impact of these activities.

Opportunities should also be taken to design a field layout that is in keeping with the local field pattern or the historic pattern of boundaries.

Impact of deer on the condition of woodland cover

Large-scale deer control should be supported and individual sites may require deer fencing. New woodland plantings, as well as screening and mitigation schemes, will require effective protection from deer to support their establishment.

Mineral extraction and post working uses

As the location for mineral operations is dictated by the availability of economically viable aggregates, alternative siting is not an option. However, careful design and mitigation proposals during extraction, together with effective management and oversight of the restoration of sites, can minimise the impact of mineral extractions.

The post extraction uses of minerals sites can often be problematic. They can make ideal recreation centres, often based around fishing, but these can neutralise the wildlife benefits and be a source of intrusive landscape clutter on the valley side. In some cases former mineral workings can be the focus for large-scale development because the land is perceived to be of low value. The visual impact of such developments can be very significant in a confined valley landscape.

Land Management Guidelines

- Reinforce the historic pattern of sinuous field boundaries.
- Recognise localised areas of late enclosure hedges when restoring and planting hedgerows.
- Maintain and increase the stock of hedgerow trees.
- Increase the area of woodland cover; siting should be based on information from the Historic Landscape Characterisation and in consultation with the Archaeological Service.
- Maintain and restore the stock of moats and ponds in this landscape.