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environment landscape planning



Colchester Borough Council
**Assessment of Open Countryside between
Settlements in the Borough of Colchester**

Final Report

21 July 2009



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Final Report

Approved

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'D. Watkins'. The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'D' and 'W'.

Dominic Watkins

Position

Director

Date

21 July 2009

Revision

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CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

1.0	COLCHESTER TO ROWHEDGE	8
1.1	Landscape Context	8
1.2	Baseline Review	8
1.3	Evaluation	13
1.4	Conclusion	16
2.0	COLCHESTER TO WIVENHOE	17
2.1	Landscape Context	17
2.2	Baseline Review	17
2.3	Evaluation	22
2.4	Conclusions	24
3.0	COLCHESTER TO GREAT HORKESLEY	25
3.1	Landscape Context	25
3.2	Baseline Review	25
3.3	Evaluation	28
3.4	Conclusions	29
4.0	COLCHESTER TO WEST BERGHOLT	30
4.1	Landscape Context	30
4.2	Baseline Review	30
4.3	Evaluation	34
4.4	Conclusions	35
5.0	STANWAY TO COPFORD	37
5.1	Landscape Context	37
5.2	Baseline Review	37
5.3	Evaluation	42
5.4	Conclusions	43

6.0	COLCHESTER TO EIGHT ASH GREEN	44
6.1	Landscape Context	44
6.2	Baseline Review	44
6.3	Evaluation	48
6.4	Conclusions	49
7.0	COLCHESTER TO LAYER-DE-LA-HAYE	50
7.1	Landscape Context	50
7.2	Baseline Review	50
7.3	Evaluation	54
7.4	Conclusions	57
8.0	COLCHESTER TO LANGHAM	58
8.1	Landscape Context	58
8.2	Baseline Review	58
8.3	Evaluation	61
8.4	Conclusions	62
9.0	COLCHESTER TO BOXTED	63
9.1	Landscape Context	63
9.2	Baseline Review	63
9.3	Evaluation	66
9.4	Conclusions	68
10.0	COPFORD TO MARK'S TEY	69
10.1	Landscape Context	69
10.2	Baseline Review	69
10.3	Evaluation	72
10.4	Conclusions	73
11.0	MARK'S TEY TO LITTLE TEY	74
11.1	Landscape Context	74
11.2	Baseline Review	74
11.3	Evaluation	78
11.4	Conclusions	79

12.0	MARK'S TEY TO EASTHORPE	80
12.1	Landscape Context	80
12.2	Baseline Review	80
12.3	Evaluation	84
12.4	Conclusions	85
13.0	SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	87

Figures and Photographs

Study Area Context Plan

Figure 1.1: Colchester-Rowhedge Landscape Context Plan

Figure 1.2: Colchester-Rowhedge Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan

Figure 1.3: Colchester-Rowhedge Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan

Colchester-Rowhedge Photosheet 1

Colchester-Rowhedge Photosheet 2

Figure 2.1: Colchester-Wivenhoe Landscape Context Plan

Figure 2.2: Colchester-Wivenhoe Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan

Figure 2.3: Colchester-Wivenhoe Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan

Colchester-Wivenhoe Photosheet 1

Colchester-Wivenhoe Photosheet 2

Figure 3.1: Colchester-Great Horkesley Landscape Context Plan

Figure 3.2: Colchester-Great Horkesley Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan

Figure 3.3: Colchester-Great Horkesley Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan

Colchester-Great Horkesley Photosheet 1

Figure 4.1: Colchester-West Bergholt Landscape Context Plan

Figure 4.2: Colchester-West Bergholt Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan

Figure 4.3: Colchester-West Bergholt Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan

Colchester-West Bergholt Photosheet 1

Figure 5.1: Stanway-Copford Landscape Context Plan

Figure 5.2: Stanway-Copford Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan

Figure 5.3: Stanway-Copford Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan

Stanway-Copford Photosheet 1

Stanway-Copford Photosheet 2

Figure 6.1: Colchester-Eight Ash Green Landscape Context Plan
Figure 6.2: Colchester-Eight Ash Green Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan
Figure 6.3: Colchester-Eight Ash Green Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan
Colchester-Eight Ash Green Photosheet 1
Colchester-Eight Ash Green Photosheet 2

Figure 7.1: Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye Landscape Context Plan
Figure 7.2: Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan
Figure 7.3: Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan
Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye Photosheet 1
Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye Photosheet 2

Figure 8.1: Colchester-Langham Landscape Context Plan
Figure 8.2: Colchester-Langham Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan
Figure 8.3: Colchester-Langham Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan
Colchester-Langham Photosheet 1
Colchester-Langham Photosheet 2

Figure 9.1: Colchester-Boxted Landscape Context Plan
Figure 9.2: Colchester-Boxted Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan
Figure 9.3: Colchester-Boxted Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan
Colchester-Boxted Photosheet 1
Colchester-Boxted Photosheet 2
Colchester-Boxted Photosheet 3

Figure 10.1: Copford-Mark's Tey Landscape Context Plan
Figure 10.2: Copford-Mark's Tey Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan
Figure 10.3: Copford-Mark's Tey Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan
Copford-Mark's Tey Photosheet 1
Copford-Mark's Tey Photosheet 2

Figure 11.1: Mark's Tey-Little Tey Landscape Context Plan
Figure 11.2: Mark's Tey-Little Tey Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan
Figure 11.3: Mark's Tey-Little Tey Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan
Mark's Tey-Little Tey Photosheet 1
Mark's Tey-Little Tey Photosheet 2
Mark's Tey-Little Tey Photosheet 3

Figure 12.1: Mark's Tey-Easthorpe Landscape Context Plan

Figure 12.2: Mark's Tey-Easthorpe Landscape and Visual Analysis Plan

Figure 12.3: Mark's Tey-Easthorpe Contribution to Separation of Settlements Plan

Mark's Tey-Easthorpe Photosheet 1

Mark's Tey-Easthorpe Photosheet 2

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

National planning policy, as set out in Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas, recognises that the countryside is a major environmental asset, contributing significantly to the quality of life for local communities. This Planning Policy Statement sets out some of the Government's objectives for rural areas, which include to raise the quality of life and the environment in rural areas through the promotion of, amongst other things, "good quality, sustainable development that respects and, where possible, enhances local distinctiveness and the intrinsic qualities of the countryside", and "the continued protection of the open countryside for the benefit of all, with the highest level of protection for our most valued landscapes and environmental resources".

The work carried out by Colchester Borough Council (CBC) as part of the Core Strategy consultation confirmed that the existing pattern of settlements in the Borough is strongly valued by local people. CBC commissioned Chris Blandford Associates (CBA) in September 2008 to undertake an assessment of the contribution provided by open countryside in maintaining the physical and visual separation between Colchester and adjacent settlements (see Study Area Context Plan). The study included open countryside between the following settlements:

1. Colchester to Rowhedge
2. Colchester to Wivenhoe
3. Colchester to Great Horkesley
4. Colchester to West Bergholt
5. Stanway to Copford
6. Colchester to Eight Ash Green
7. Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye
8. Colchester to Langham
9. Colchester to Boxted
10. Copford to Mark's Tey
11. Mark's Tey to Little Tey
12. Mark's Tey to Easthorpe

The study considers that protection of this open countryside is essential to the maintenance of the distinct character of the above settlements. Adopted Core Strategy Policy ENV1 – Environment of the adopted Core Strategy states that "*Where new development needs, or is compatible with, a rural location, it should demonstrably (amongst other things) protect, conserve or enhance landscape and townscape character, including maintaining settlement separation;*"

The findings of this study confirm that the open countryside between settlements generally provides a high contribution to the separation of settlements. The limitations on inter-visibility (i.e. visibility between settlements) and intra-visibility (i.e. the ability to see the edges of two or more settlements from a single point in the intervening landscape) resulting from visual enclosure by landform and vegetation in the open countryside, and the strength of rural character provide a significant contribution to the actual and perceived separation of settlements in many instances. On the basis of the work carried out for this study, areas that provide a high contribution to the separation of settlements are considered to be essential in helping retain the character and identity of the Borough's key settlements, and should be safeguarded from inappropriate development. Any new built development on this land is likely to seriously undermine the sense of settlement separation and the strong rural character of the land.

However, there are also some parts of the open countryside between the following settlements that provide a less significant contribution (i.e. medium level) to settlement separation:

- Colchester to Rowhedge (see Figure 1.3)
- Colchester to Wivenhoe (see Figure 2.3)
- Colchester to Boxted (see Figure 9.3)
- Copford to Mark's Tey (see Figure 10.3)
- Mark's Tey to Easthorpe (see Figure 12.3)

Land identified as providing a medium contribution to the separation of settlements has some potential to accommodate new built development without significantly diminishing the sense of separation between the settlements or the rurality of the remaining undeveloped land. This land is typically not visually prominent in views from the wider landscape and its character is influenced by existing built development.

The study also identified a number of areas located close to edges of certain settlements, where open countryside provides a much more limited contribution to settlement separation. Areas that provide a low contribution to settlement separation have the potential to accommodate some new built development, if required, subject to appropriate design, and appropriate landscape and visual mitigation measures. Parts of the open countryside between the following settlements provide only a limited contribution (i.e. low level) to settlement separation:

- Colchester to Rowhedge (see Figure 1.3)
- Colchester to Wivenhoe (see Figure 2.3)
- Colchester to Great Horkesley (see Figure 3.3)

- Colchester to West Bergholt (see Figure 4.3)
- Colchester to Eight Ash Green (see Figure 6.3)
- Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye (see Figure 7.3)
- Colchester to Langham (see Figure 8.3)
- Mark's Tey to Little Tey (see Figure 11.3)
- Mark's Tey to Easthorpe (see Figure 12.3)

Land identified as providing a low contribution to the separation of settlements has the most potential in relative terms to accommodate new built development and land this typically either under a strong urban influence or has a high degree of visual containment. Any new built development on these land parcels would not significantly diminish the sense of separation between the settlements or the rurality of the remaining undeveloped land.

Any development within areas identified as having low or medium contribution to settlement separation must ensure that the strength of rural character and sense of separation between settlements in the remaining areas of open countryside is not significantly diminished, and that the distinctiveness of the settlements is maintained. Further studies at a more detailed level would be required to establish the capacity of these areas to accommodate new built development.

INTRODUCTION

Study Background

Colchester is a diverse and growing Borough, with a vibrant town centre, attractive villages and important natural landscapes. The Colchester Borough Core Strategy submission document (July 2007) proposed, amongst other things, the designation of 'Green Breaks' to help prevent coalescence between the built up edge of Colchester and the surrounding villages. The document was subject to Examination in Public during 2008, and the Inspector's Final Report in October 2008 recommended that 'Green Breaks' should be removed from both the Key Diagram and the proposed 'Environment' policy in the Core Strategy. The Inspector considered that the concerns, expressed by Colchester Borough Council (CBC) at the Examination in Public, about potential coalescence should be addressed by a criteria based policy in line with Planning Policy Statement 7: Sustainable Development in Rural Areas.

Adopted Core Strategy Policy ENV1 – Environment of the adopted Core Strategy states that *"Where new development needs, or is compatible with, a rural location, it should demonstrably (amongst other things) protect, conserve or enhance landscape and townscape character, including maintaining settlement separation;"*

The work carried out by CBC as part of the Core Strategy consultation confirmed that the existing pattern of settlements in the Borough is strongly valued by local people. CBC commissioned Chris Blandford Associates (CBA) in September 2008 to undertake an assessment of the contribution provided by open countryside in maintaining the physical and visual separation between Colchester and adjacent settlements and in maintaining the distinct character of these settlements (see Study Area Context Plan).

Aim and Objectives of the Study

The key aims of the study were to:

- (a) provide a critical assessment of the contribution provided by open countryside in maintaining the physical and visual separation between Colchester and adjacent settlements, and in maintaining the distinct character of these settlements; and
- (b) provide the technical background evidence to inform, guide and support the formulation and application of policies in CBC's Local Development Framework.

The objective of the study was to identify areas of open countryside that are considered to be essential in helping retain the character and identity of the Borough's key settlements, and therefore may be desirable to safeguard from new built development.

The findings of this study may be used for development control purposes and should provide developers, members of the public and CBC officers with a greater understanding of open countryside issues relating to settlement separation and maintenance of settlement distinctiveness and identity.

The study took into account the proposals for growth set out in the Colchester Core Strategy¹. The assessment of the countryside between settlements has therefore excluded these areas of committed development, as defined by the Core Strategy and the subsequent site allocations consultation document².

General Approach

The general approach to assessing the existing landscape character of the open countryside follows guidance set out by the former Countryside Agency³. The approach to the study builds on current best practice and CBA's experience from previous and ongoing studies, including "Assessment of Gaps and Green Wedges within Wokingham District" prepared for Wokingham District Council. The criteria for evaluating the contribution of open countryside to the separation of settlements were developed specifically for this study.

Study Methodology

This study was undertaken in three stages, as outlined below:

Stage 1 - Data Collection and Review

This stage involved a review of the:-

- existing planning context, proposals for growth set out in the Core Strategy;
- Colchester Borough Landscape Character Assessment (LCA) Report⁴, the Review of Countryside Conservation Areas⁵ and the Landscape Capacity of Settlement Fringes Report⁶;
- the topography and key vegetation of the district (identified in existing landscape planning and landscape character assessment reports);
- public rights of way (identified from 1:25,000 scale Explorer Maps); and
- settlement patterns;

1 Colchester Borough Local Development Framework Core Strategy (Adopted December 2008)

2 Colchester Borough Local Development Framework Site Allocations Regulation 25 Consultation (Jan.16 – Feb. 27, 2009)

3 Landscape Character Assessment – Guidance for England and Scotland (Countryside Agency/Scottish Natural Heritage, 2002).

4 Colchester Borough Landscape Character Assessment Report, prepared for Colchester Borough Council by CBA (September 2006)

5 Review of Countryside Conservation Areas, prepared for Colchester Borough Council by CBA (September 2006)

6 Landscape Capacity of Settlement Fringes Report, prepared for Colchester Borough Council by CBA (September 2006)

Stage 2 - Field Survey and Assessment

This stage involved a landscape and visual appraisal of the land between the following settlements, as identified on the Study Area Context Plan overleaf:

1. Colchester to Rowhedge
2. Colchester to Wivenhoe
3. Colchester to Great Horkesley
4. Colchester to West Bergholt
5. Stanway to Copford
6. Colchester to Eight Ash Green
7. Colchester to Layer-de-la-Haye
8. Colchester to Langham
9. Colchester to Boxted
10. Copford to Mark's Tey
11. Mark's Tey to Little Tey
12. Mark's Tey to Easthorpe

The field survey work included identification of topography, land uses, existing key vegetation patterns, settlement edges, key physical features that contribute to the physical and visual separation of settlements, key views, broad areas of inter-visibility (i.e. visibility between settlements) and intra-visibility (i.e. the ability to see the edges of two or more settlements from a single point in the intervening landscape) and a validation of landscape character (as reported in earlier landscape character assessment studies).

Stage 3 - Evaluation

This stage involved a synthesis of the desk and field assessments, and included an assessment of the contribution provided by open countryside in maintaining the physical and visual separation between Colchester and adjacent settlements, and in maintaining the distinct character of these settlements

A series of landscape context photographs and landscape and visual survey/assessment plans were prepared, with mapping undertaken predominantly at 1:20,000 scale. The mapping included:

- Settlement boundaries;
- Ridgelines, slopes and watercourses;
- Harsh settlement edges;
- Key blocks of vegetation;
- Approach roads and public footpaths;

- Key views of settlements;
- Public rights of way;

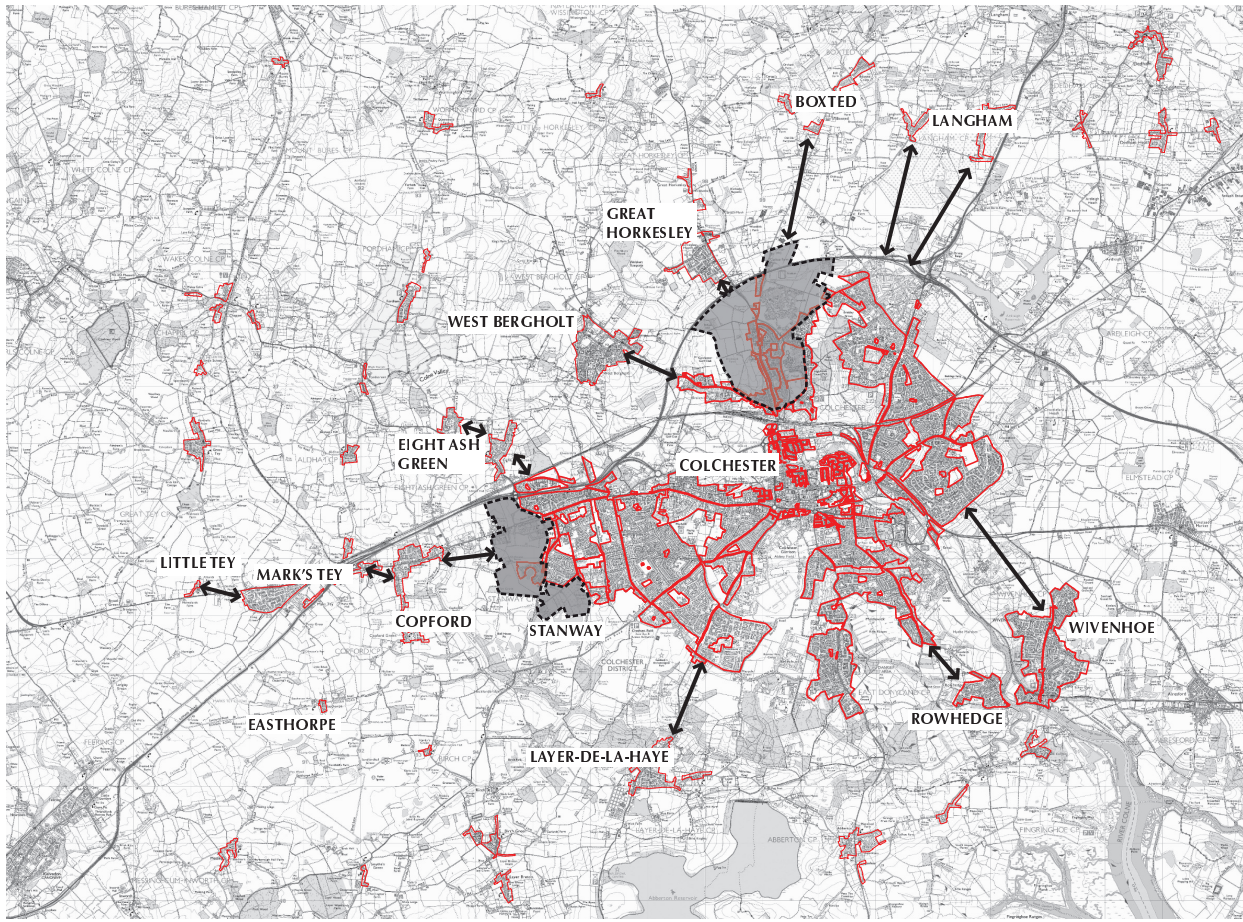
Professional judgements were made about the degree of contribution that open countryside provides to the separation of settlements and to maintaining the distinct identity of settlements. These judgements are not absolute but are broadly based on the evaluation criteria set out in the following table:

Open Countryside Evaluation Criteria

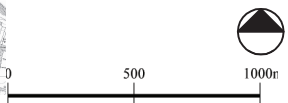
Level of Contribution	Evaluation Criteria
Low contribution	Land provides only a limited contribution to either the clear visual separation of settlements (in terms of inter-visibility or intra-visibility) or to maintaining settlement identity (in terms of the strength of rural character and a coherent settlement structure)
Medium contribution	Land provides a moderate contribution to both the clear visual separation of settlements (in terms of inter-visibility or intra-visibility) and to maintaining settlement identity (in terms of the strength of rural character and a coherent settlement structure)
High contribution	Land provides a particularly significant contribution to both the clear visual separation of settlements (in terms of inter-visibility or intra-visibility) and to maintaining settlement identity (in terms of the strength of rural character and a coherent settlement structure)

Consideration has been given to the effects of introducing new built development into the open countryside between settlements. For the purposes of this study, it has been assumed that this development comprises:

- Approximately 500 dwellings arranged either as a freestanding new settlement or as an extension to the existing settlements;
- Estate design layout at building densities in line with current Government policy guidance;
- Detached, semi-detached or terraced buildings up to 2 storeys in height;
- A small number of community infrastructure buildings up to 3 storeys in height;
- A strong structure of tree/shrub planting of an appropriate scale, extent and design to help integrate the development into the landscape.



- LEGEND**
- Local Plan Residential Boundary
 - Growth Areas
 - ↔ Study Areas for Open Countryside etween Settlements



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