This report presents information on the landscape and character of the application site (Figure 1) and sets it in the context of Utkinton. It has been prepared by Blackfryers\(^1\) with the local community on behalf of the Neighbourhood Plan group and Parish Council and is based on a desk study, fieldwork and discussions with local people.

Landscape character assessment (LCA) describes and articulates what is special and distinctive about a place and identifies elements or characteristics that make one place different from another. Landscape is a broad and subjective area and depends on the interaction of both natural and human factors\(^2\). The human factor means that it is not possible to separate local people and their landscape.

The magnitude of landscape effects combines the size/scale (itself a combination of the nature of the effect and the sensitivity of the receptors), the duration and the reversibility.

Opinions and the value given by different individuals, professionals and communities to different features and views vary, and it is therefore simply not possible to assess landscape in the quantitative way that is possible in other environmental disciplines.

This report uses LCA techniques\(^3\) to provide a community and rural landscape context in which the proposed development and other potential development sites can be appraised both for this appeal and for development of the Utkinton and Cotebrook Neighbourhood Plan.

The built nature of the proposed development means that all the effects are both permanent and non-reversible. The effects on the residents and community in this rural, tranquil area in our opinion, fall into the ‘High Magnitude of Change’ category – changes that are prominent and have a strong influence on the overall view as experienced by residents, visitors and the community in general. This is not a criticism of the professionalism of the consultants engaged by the developer (who have naturally downplayed some of the changes but reflects the subjective nature of landscape assessment when seen from different viewpoints. However, it is the local community and visitors that will have to live with the landscape effects.

Members of the local community and local interest groups shared their knowledge and experience of the history and character of the area in the preparation of this document.

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\(^1\) The principal author, Peter Black is a chartered town planner with experience of over 20 years in commissioning and writing Landscape Assessments and working with local communities on planning, transport, landscape and other environmental issues.

\(^2\) European Landscape Convention definition.

\(^3\) The methodology set out in the Natural England 2014 guidance ‘Approach to Landscape Character Assessment’ has been tailored for this document and the neighbourhood planning process.
Context

Utkinton is a small village in Cheshire with about 220 properties and 516 people. Together with Cotebrook (190 residents) it is part of Utkinton and Cotebrook Parish which has 706 people overall (Census 2011).

The underlying sandstone geology has had a strong influence on the character of the village, defining landform, soils, vegetation, drainage and building materials.

National Planning Policy

NPPF Part 12, suggests ‘Neighbourhood plans can play an important role in identifying the special qualities of each area and explaining how this should be reflected in development’ and that: ‘policy and decisions should ensure that developments... are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting...’.

National Planning Practice Guidance states that ‘development should seek to promote character in townscape and landscape by responding to and reinforcing locally distinctive patterns of development’ and that the ‘successful integration of new development with their surrounding context is an important design objective’.

Local Planning Policy

The relevant local landscape policies are the Cheshire West and Chester Local Plan (Part One) Strategic Polices adopted in 2015 which incorporates a landscape strategy. Its aims include ‘taking account of the different roles and character of different areas and recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside’ and ‘identifying opportunities for protecting and enhancing the intrinsic character of the landscapes of Cheshire West and Chester’.

Utkinton village and the proposed development (which is outside the defined village boundary) is within open, rolling countryside designated as an ‘Area of Special County Value’ (ASCV).

Utkinton Character Assessment

This is not intended to be a formal character assessment for the whole of the Neighbourhood Plan area but focusses on the character of the application site and how its character fits in with the village and the proposed development. It also considers briefly other potential affordable housing sites.

Key Characteristics

The key characteristics visible within and around the village are:

- Sandstone as a building material in buildings, walls, gardens.
- Sandstone in shaping the wider landscape including topography, soils and vegetation.
- Walls are prominent in the village including around gardens and fields.
- Hedges are prominent in gardens and fields.
- Trees – in gardens, hedges to houses and fields
- Woods and hedgerow/solitary trees in wider landscape
- Character buildings including many with heritage interest are scattered around the village
- Topography – gently undulating, creating views, vistas and enclosure
- Panoramic views to the Clwydian Range and Cheshire Plain
Historical Development
Utkinton is a village and former civil parish, now the parish of Utkinton and Cotebrook, in the unitary authority of Cheshire West north of Tarporley and 9 miles east of Chester. Utkinton is at the heart of the local farming community and occupies the upper part of Utkinton known as 'Quarry Bank'.

Movement and connectivity
The village is dominated by quiet, sometimes narrow roads. It is not on or near any strategic network. Almost all traffic appears to be local and the feeling is overwhelmingly tranquil which is reflected by designation of some 20mph roads. There are no physical boundaries (such as railway lines or rivers) and no gateways, although as you top the small surrounding hills around Utkinton the village becomes visible from all approaches. The village, roads and rights of way are on designated and advised routes for cycling (NCN regional route 71), walking (various routes) and horse riding (Delamere Loop).

Land use and levels of activity
Levels of activity are low. Land use is mainly grazing outside the designated village area and low-density residential inside with a school and some leisure uses. There is a low-key farm shop with post office and associated functions such as a café which is used by locals and visitors, particularly those visiting for quiet recreation such as walking (including on the nearby Sandstone Trail) and cycling. The main character is a feeling of tranquillity.

Urban structure and built development
The village is nestled in the folds of the countryside and consists of one or two-storey detached and semi-detached housing. While the size of houses varies, plot sizes are mostly relatively large which gives each dwelling and the village in general an open feel. Many streets are enclosed by sandstone walls and hedges with trees. This gives a very intimate feel to the village overall, although the low density of the housing means that the feeling is never claustrophobic. Architectural styles and detailing are extremely varied, and the general prosperity of the area means the village and buildings are well-kept and attractive.

There is no defined village centre. Rose Farm is the busiest place, with café, shop and post office however this area is still relatively quiet, and the pace of life is slow.

Green space and public realm
There is relatively little public open space, no Church and no public play space. The school has a small playing field limited only to pupil use. The only recreation space is at the Village Hall (capacity 70) and this includes a junior tennis court. The nearest playing fields are in Tarporley or Duddon. Rose Farm is the principle public meeting place.

Views
Views are intrinsic to the character of Utkinton in a way that is different from many villages in Cheshire. The position on the edge of the sandstone ridge and its undulating topography creates three key types of view:

- Intimate local views around the village. Travelling through creates a very varied series of scenes, enclosed by hedges, sandstone walls, curvature of roads and rising and falling ground. Generally, it is not possible to see far ahead, but the open and green nature of the streets and gardens means that there is never a closed-in feeling.
- Views from the village of the small hills around Utkinton, the sandstone ridge and Cheshire Plain, and away to the middle-distance magnificent views of the Clwydian range. These appear and disappear as you move around the village, creating drama.
• Views into Utkinton from outside the village from a range of viewpoints. These give the impression of a small, green, sleepy village.

Positive character aspects
Our survey identified the following key positive landscape characteristics. Consultation with the residents confirmed that local community is fiercely proud and protective of these aspects.

• Sandstone is prominent in buildings and the many walls around the village.
• The many historic buildings (No 16 and Bumblebee Hall are both Grade II listed) positively contribute to character and appearance of the village and sense of place.
• Many of the buildings shown on the 1838 Tithe Map (Figure 4) are still standing and occupied: the whole of Northgate (Upper and Lower) has buildings existing in 1838 currently occupied.
• Mature native trees and hedges create an overwhelmingly verdant and green feel in a way that is not present in many Cheshire villages, particularly those that are growing quickly.
• The village is readily legible (easy to navigate and understand) and permeable; the road layout is simple, and the character of individual buildings give a good impression of where you are in the village.
• Curving streets, banks, walls and hedges restrict sight lines and create enclosure/intimacy.
• The tight village development boundary with grazing right up to houses creates a close relationship with farming and the surrounding countryside.
• Rose farm provides a village centre with units arranged around an open car park
• Civic buildings (school, Village Hall) are scattered, but contribute quality and variety.
• More modern (post 1945) houses generally maintain the tradition of larger plot sizes, with generous front gardens. While some of the design and materials are poor, many are hidden, and most houses fit well into the urban form.

Negative character aspects
• Some modern development is poorly designed and incongruous.
• Lack of pavements and safe road crossing points in many parts of the village. There are no safe footways to any of the surrounding settlements.

Sensitivity to Change
It is considered that the following landscape elements are sensitive to change.

• Views are a key part of the character of Utkinton. Inappropriate development that impinge on views will erode the character of the village.
• Sandstone walls: this rock weathers quickly and is also vulnerable to development and replacement by modern poor-quality materials.
• Hedges, trees and front gardens are extremely important in defining the character of the village; some are protected by Tree Preservation Orders, but many are vulnerable to removal or poor management.
• There is currently a distinct edge between urban settlement and open landscape. Piecemeal development could erode this.
• Some more modern development in Utkinton is poor in landscape terms but is relatively well hidden; additional new development will be around the current village edge and this would be more visible both within and from outside. This will erode the landscape character.
Managing change in Utkinton

Change management should aim to retain or enhance the identified elements which create the landscape of the village and its unique landscape setting. The following general principles should be used when determining applications for planning consent and defining landscape policies for the forthcoming Neighbourhood Plan:

- Any development must respect the views into, out of and within Utkinton.
- Development should respect sandstone as the key character material, particularly in walls.
- A tree and hedgerow strategy should be adopted to protect and enhance these features.
- Open countryside should be maintained as distinct and separate from residential areas.
- New development should provide a sense of enclosure but be permeable to ensure that it is inclusive and part of the village rather than an enclave.

Appraisal of application site

The application site shares many of the same characteristics as the general assessment:

- Sandstone is prominent in the wall to Northgate Street and buildings (such as Bumblebee Hall) bordering the site.
- The mature wall and hedge with trees dominate the corner of John Street at 3 to 4m above street level and creates an overwhelmingly rural and green feel.
- The site is 3-4m above John Street, and this means that much of the surrounding countryside and hills are visible from the site (and the site is visible from these points too).
- The site feels open – at 1 hectare it is relatively large, and it bounded by hedges on two sides and the open Rose Farm site on the third side.

A sandstone wall with hedge runs from Bumblebee Hall on Northgate to the junction of Northgate and John Street (Figure 6). At this junction it is about 4m above street level and it is a very prominent feature. The hedge is exceptionally thick, with emergent trees. Maps suggest that as Northgate and John Street are ancient (they are also shown on the 1838 Tithe map: Figure 3) that this wall and hedge are probably on the course of a medieval field boundary. Using ‘Hooper’s Law’, the four tree/shrub species (oak, ash, sycamore, hawthorn in a 30m stretch) suggests the hedge is at least 400 years old. Hooper’s Law is only a rule of thumb; but given that the hedge fronts an old road and the map evidence of old field boundaries, it is reasonable to infer that the current hedge dates from at least 1550-1650 and could be ancient.

Views into and out of the application site

Figure 1 shows the indicative housing layout, and Figure 2 the site in relation to footpaths 15 and 17 from which the site is very visible. Figure 7 shows a photomontage of the view of the house proposed for plot 7 (other houses are not shown). This house and others will be extremely prominent in the landscape and visible from many directions. Other views are shown in a separate document submitted by the Parish Council. To avoid duplication, we have not copied them in this document.

The Rose farm side of the development is important as three proposed units (numbers 8-10 – see Figure 1 Indicative housing layout) directly face the site. Café visitors currently can see an attractive view of an open field (Figure 5 shows the current view from the cafe) backed by hedges and with views of the Clwydian Range in the distance.

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4 The I-tree tools ([https://www.itreetools.org/](https://www.itreetools.org/)) are a good way of starting this process.
Assessment of landscape effects

The built nature of the proposed development and the prominence of the site – some 3 to 4m higher than John Street means that the site itself will change out of all recognition from an agricultural field into a housing estate. The existing wall and hedge (Figure 6) will be removed. While the developer has suggested that the hedge (and possibly the wall) will be rebuilt, it will be in a different position (and therefore lose its historical meaning as a boundary) and the hedge will take decades to establish and resemble the existing hedge. Long-term effects are defined as ‘over five years’ so these changes are effectively permanent.

The views into and from the application site are shown in a separate document. Receptors are using recreational footpaths and signposted rights of way (on foot, cycle and horse) specifically to enjoy the landscape and receptors are therefore of high sensitivity. The new buildings will be prominent and visible from many directions. The effects will have a strong influence on the overall view as experienced by residents, visitors and the community in general. Spectacular views of the Clwydian Range will be changed and obscured.

While the new built form is clearly non-reversible, the developer has suggested that mitigation planting could provide some screening, but new residents are unlikely to want trees and hedges screening their views, and therefore mitigation planting will probably be kept low, or removed altogether. In any case, the loss of tranquillity cannot be mitigated against.

The receptors are of high sensitivity and the effects are assessed as a high magnitude of change and are both permanent and non-reversible. Overall the level of effect is assessed as major.

Assessment of landscape effect on Rose farm and other development

The effect on Rose Farm is particularly important given its importance to the community as a place to shop, meet and socialise. The owner and operator at Rose Farm states that should the development at the appeal site go ahead, then this would damage the tranquillity of the area and the business such that they would seek to develop their site for residential use too. This might not achieve consent but indicates the threat to what is a vital facility for village residents.

The future view will change from a field backed by mature hedges and trees into a housing estate showing the rear of the houses and gardens of units 8 to 10. Residents in the houses will not want intrusion from Rose Farm users and will inevitably erect fences and other barriers to protect their privacy, whatever mitigation is proposed, or planning conditions or agreement imposed.

Receptors at Rose Farm are High Sensitivity, and the effects they will experience are also of high magnitude and are both permanent and non-reversible. Overall the level of effect is assessed as major.

Summary of landscape effects

Therefore, the effects on the immediate landscape of the field, and the effects on views to and from the site, surrounding footpaths, roads, residential areas and Rose Farm are both permanent and non-reversible.

The effects on the residents and community in this rural, tranquil area in our opinion, fall into the ‘High Magnitude of Change’ category – changes that are prominent and have a strong influence on the overall view as experienced by residents, visitors and the community in general.
Why is this assessment different than that submitted by the developer?

Consultants working for the developer have assessed the magnitudes of change as medium (some change in the view that is clearly notable and forms an easily identifiable component in the view). Our view based on local knowledge of the site and conversations with the community suggests that the effects on the landscape and sensitive receptors should be categorised as major because the new development forms more than just a new component in the view, but the elevated nature of the site means that the new component will be prominent, have a strong influence on the overall view, and significantly affect how residents and visitors view both the local landscape and the views from Rose Farm.

This is not a criticism of the professionalism of the consultants engaged by the developer but reflects the subjective nature of landscape assessment when seen from different viewpoints. Our assessment is that the changes are prominent and have a strong influence on the overall view. We also believe that it is not possible to mitigate removal of an ancient boundary hedge and wall by moving it, and that the landscape mitigation proposed will be ineffective as new residents may well ignore mitigation measures or remove new planting, and in any case it is not possible to mitigate against loss of tranquillity.

Landscape appraisal of alternative sites

Four other sites have been suggested for housing recently. Three are in Utkinton, all outside the current settlement boundary and all would have landscape impacts which are not assessed in detail here. All three would have a lower impact on walls and hedges (assuming the same amount of development as proposed for the appeal site), and all three are less prominent in the landscape so would have lower impact. The fourth site is the former Cotebrook Primary School site. Cotebrook will form part of the Neighbourhood Plan area and providing for affordable housing need will be part of this plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Site</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>John Street (behind Village Hall)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>These sites both have landscape issues and face the Clwydian Range and Sandstone Ridge but a small development of affordable housing could be acceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Street (War Memorial)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>A development of this size would be far too large for Utkinton, but a small development might be acceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quarry Bank</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Outside village but could provide affordable housing for Utkinton residents. Landscape impacts are far lower for this site. A planning application was made for five houses (3 x affordable and 2 x market) but this was withdrawn.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cotebrook (school site)</td>
<td>???</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A planning application was made for five houses (3 x affordable and 2 x market) but this was withdrawn.
Plans and photographs

Figure 1 Indicative housing layout

Figure 2 - appeal site with footpath 15 (left) and 17 (right)
Figure 3 - 1838 Tithe map

Figure 4 - Showing juxtaposition of site onto 1838 Tithe Map (identifying historic properties)
Figure 5 - Current view of development site from café

Figure 6 - Hedge and wall at junction of Northgate and John Street

Figure 7 - Photomontage of plot 7
Figure 8 - Aerial view of Utkinton in its landscape setting