# EIA Quality Mark Case Study

## West Cambridge Masterplan

### Key Issues –

The University of Cambridge’s West Cambridge site is located on the western outskirts of the city of Cambridge and adjacent to two Conservation Areas and the Cambridgeshire Green Belt. To the west of the site is an elevated area of land with key viewpoints overlooking the city and its historic spires and towers. As such, the site is sensitive to new development which could result in the perception of urban encroachment into the surrounding rural landscape. This is a particularly sensitive issue because the historic core of Cambridge is characterised by the old college buildings and meadows along the River Cam. These provide an appealing sense of the countryside integrating with the oldest part of the city and is a key reason for the success of Cambridge as a tourist destination. Any sense of a loss of this character is viewed as being harmful to the appeal of Cambridge as an historic destination.

This case study focuses on the landscape and visual impact assessment and how this informed the emerging design. In particular, whether the baseline should be the existing situation or the existing consent for the 1999 masterplan for the site.

### Purpose of the project

A masterplan for the site was produced in 1999 and reviewed in 2004. The implementation of this masterplan has resulted in piecemeal development that fails to unify the site. The University of Cambridge applied for outline planning permission for a new masterplan which seeks to vary the mix of uses, enhance the quality of the built form and increase the density of development. This will be achieved by building on unused plots and surface car parking which currently detract from the appearance of the development. Atkins was commissioned by the University to undertake an EIA in support of the application.

### Description of the project

The new masterplan seeks an additional 383,300m² of floorspace comprising academic, commercial / research, food and drink, assembly and leisure, and nursery uses. The proposed development is defined through a series of parameter plans and design guidelines appropriate to an application for outline planning permission. The new masterplan seeks to improve the design quality of the development and provide a unifying character which marks West Cambridge as a destination within the city.
Lessons learnt
The EIA Scoping Opinion made it clear that Cambridge City Council expected the results from the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA) to inform the emerging masterplan due to the critically sensitive situation of the site. In particular, views to the site from the south and west were regarded by the City Council as being particularly sensitive, whilst the setting of two conservation areas and numerous listed buildings was also of concern.

Working closely with the masterplanner, AECOM, Atkins landscape assessment team identified the key aspects of the proposed development, which could result in significant effects to landscape character and receptors at representative viewpoints. Atkins heritage team undertook the same exercise for the nearby conservation areas and associated listed buildings. This served to refine the parameter plans and identify specific design related mitigation measures for inclusion in the Design Guidelines.

A great deal of discussion was had over what would be the most appropriate baseline to assess effects against. Because of the existing masterplan consent there were two potential baseline options:

1. Consider the existing conditions to be the baseline, or
2. Consider the existing consent for the site to be fully built out to represent a future baseline.

Lessons learnt cont. -
The benefits of assessing against the existing conditions baseline, were that it was considered easier to define; easier for members of the public, stakeholders, and the competent authority to understand; and facilitated easier use of analytical tools, such as viewshed analysis and visualisations. The problems encountered with this approach were that it did not reflect a situation when parts of the proposed development are brought forwards many years in the future and it was considered to show greater landscape and visual effects than would be experienced with the consented scheme built out. The benefit of assessing against the future baseline was that it was deemed to reflect better the situation in the future when the later stages of the proposed development are brought forwards. Furthermore, it would show a reduced landscape and visual effect in line with what had already been accepted by the City Council when it consented the existing masterplan.

It was agreed that for clarity and overall robustness of the assessment the existing conditions would be used to form the baseline of the assessment.

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