Purpose of the project:
The 75ha site is allocated for residential development within the Stevenage Borough for up to 800 residential units, primary school, local centre and open space. The south-eastern area is located within the St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area.

Bellway Homes and Miller Homes jointly applied for outline planning in 2019, requiring an ES. Outline planning permission was given in January 2020.

Description of the project:
E.M. Forster (1879-1970) once lived east of the site at Rooks Nest House (Grade I listed due to his association), the basis for the house, in the novel Howards End. The area was described by Forster as being dominated by farming activity, meadows, hay-cutting, harvesting and animal husbandry. This landscape is now partly lost and degraded through hedgerow loss and conversion to arable farming practices.

To mitigate, 38ha of the site is to be restored to its C19th landscape character by replanting lost hedgerows, tree planting, conversion from arable land to hay meadow. Grass and wild flora seeding will increase the biodiversity. Screening of views of the housing from within the Conservation Area and Rook’s Nest will also be achieved.

One power line will be partly undergrounded. The loss of pylons would reduce visual impact. SuDS and public open space, containing trees and shrubs, below the remaining pylons make efficient use of land.
Key Issues:
This case study illustrates the benefits of close working and coordination between a multi-disciplinary team, particularly with the landscape, ecological and heritage professionals.

The Land North of Stevenage is being developed as a large urban extension within an open greenfield site. It lies partly within a Conservation Area, also with cultural associations with the novelist E.M. Forster. Two high voltage power lines run across the site which mar the landscape, also acting as major constraints.

The key issue for the EIA process was to balance development to meet the requirements of the developer and Council without resulting in unacceptable environmental impacts on the sensitive landscape and heritage assets. A challenge was also how to develop around the HV pylons and cables.

An innovative approach to the spatial arrangement and the open space design in the sensitive heritage areas was employed. This included the provision of St Nicholas’s Meadow, within which the restoration of the C19th landscape is proposed. Within the main built development, a network of public open space and SuDS basins is proposed, assisting integration of the pylons and cables.

The site’s literary association, together with the Conservation Area, gave rise to a high level of scrutiny by both statutory and non-statutory consultees.

Lessons Learnt:
A detailed level of baseline environmental data in terms of landscape character, visual context, trees, biodiversity and heritage assets, with associated opportunities and constraints, was undertaken before master planning commenced. This established some key guiding principles and allowed early assessment of outline proposals.

Early on the client recognised the importance of allocating a large part of the site to the restoration and future long-term management of St. Nicholas’s Meadow. This, alongside early dialogue with the Council Officers and heritage consultees, was instrumental in giving assurance to the appropriateness and effectiveness of the proposed mitigation.

By providing public access via a network of paths and cycleways, along with access to the meadows, it allows the space to also become a valuable local asset to existing and the new community.

Habitat connectivity along new and restored hedgerows and through woodland blocks, along with increased wild flora will increase biodiversity. Incorporation of some of the SuDS features will add to habitat ranges.

The re-creation of something of the character of the area as it was known by Forster will result in an enhancement of part of the St. Nicholas/Rectory Lane Conservation Area and an enhancement of part of the setting of Rooks Nest House.
Project consultants were involved in both the impact assessment and design process which facilitated efficient design solutions. Interactive work was undertaken with the urban designer to ensure suitable building heights adjacent to the meadow and in the siting of woodland screening blocks.

The use of high-quality photomontages of key views through winter and summer over a 15-year time frame enabled designs to be checked against key visual parameters to accurately demonstrate the effects of the proposals to stakeholders.

The main built development area is located in the central and western area of the site where undergrounding some power lines and removal of pylons, whilst costly, will result in the efficient land use and loss of a visual detractor. Integrating the remaining power lines carefully into the SuDS and POS network below the pylons and cables corridor has prevented the sterilisation of land whilst providing amenity for residents.

Close working with the drainage and services engineers has resulted in an integrated series of basins and swales proposed to be planted and seeded with wild flora. Pedestrian and cycleways will link the new neighbourhoods and existing communities.

The retention of existing tree shelter belts on the northern edges to the site both provides visual screening in views from public rights of way and helps integrate the buildings. Further planting on the site’s western and southern perimeters will also assist in this and strengthen wildlife corridors.

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