

December 2018

Land off Langaller Road, Creech
St Michael

Proof of Evidence

Of:

**Silke Gruner BHons (Landscape
Architecture) CMLI**

in respect of:

Landscape Matters

LPA Ref: 14/17/0033

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on behalf of:

Gladman Developments Ltd

Report No: CSA/3042/07



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1.0 QUALIFICATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

- 1.1 This evidence has been prepared by Silke Gruner ((BHons) Landscape Architecture, CML), Associate Landscape Architect and Urban Designer, of CSA Environmental.
- 1.2 I am a Chartered Landscape Architect. I hold an Honours Degree in Landscape Architecture and a Diploma in Urban Design. I have 13 years experience undertaking landscape assessment, predominantly in relation to residential development throughout the country, ranging from single properties to mixed-use developments of over 2,000 dwellings.
- 1.3 I am employed at CSA Environmental, a multi-disciplinary environmental planning practice which was established in 1999. The practice acts for the public and private sector and has an in-house team of urban designers, ecologists, heritage consultants and landscape architects. We operate from offices in Sussex, Hertfordshire and Worcestershire.
- 1.4 CSA Environmental is currently involved in projects that range from the masterplanning of major urban extensions to redevelopment of inner city brownfield sites. We work throughout the UK, in both the rural and urban environment and are currently working on a number of schemes in and around Somerset and Devon.
- 1.5 I have given landscape and urban design advice on numerous schemes, and been involved in the preparation of evidence for Planning Appeals.
- 1.6 The evidence I have prepared and provide for this appeal is true and has been prepared and is given in accordance with the guidance of my professional institution and I confirm that the opinions expressed are my true and professional opinions.

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2.0 SCOPE OF EVIDENCE, BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

- 2.1 This evidence is submitted on behalf of Gladman Developments Ltd in respect of an appeal against the refusal of an outline planning application ('the Application') for the erection of up to 200 dwellings with public open space, landscaping and sustainable drainage system with vehicular access off Langaller Lane, Creech St Michael ('the Appeal Site'). The Application is in outline with all matters reserved save for access. The Appeal Site lies within the administrative area of the Taunton Deane Borough Council ('TDBC'; the 'Council').
- 2.2 My evidence should be read in conjunction with the evidence of Mr Tait who deals with planning matters.
- 2.3 CSA Environmental has been involved from the outset of the planning application, and we produced the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment ('LVIA'), as well as the Development Framework Plan, Illustrative Masterplan and Design and Access Statement ('DAS') that were submitted in support of the application. I shall draw upon that information as part of my evidence. A copy of the Development Framework Plan is contained in **Appendix J** and the Illustrative Masterplan in **Appendix K**.
- 2.4 The Application was refused under delegated powers by the Taunton Deane Assistant Director of Planning and Environment, on 17 April 2018. The refusal notice identifies four reasons for refusal. My evidence is concerned with the third reason which states that:

***Reason 3.** The development of this large open unallocated greenfield area outside the settlement boundary of Creech St. Michael it is considered would be contrary to Policies CP8, DM1, DM2, and SP4 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy 2012, and Policies ENV1, and SB1 of the Taunton Deane Site Allocations and Development Management Plan 2016. The proposed development if allowed would create a significant visual intrusion into this area of countryside changing the character and appearance of the environment surrounding Creech St. Michael, and would lead to a direct loss of the important gap separating Taunton and this outlying village settlement. The coalescence of the village with the greater Monkton Heathfield development planned for the eastern side of the M5 motorway is considered unacceptable in visual terms notwithstanding any proposed open space buffer set out with this application and the Green Wedge buffer which partially separates the*

Monkton Heathfield development from the Motorway. The site is valued for its own intrinsic sake as part of the countryside surrounding the village and should therefore be protected from sporadic unplanned development.

- 2.5 Throughout this evidence I will refer to the Case Officer's consideration of the Application, as well as those of the Landscape and Biodiversity Officer.
- 2.6 I will show that the Appeal Scheme will not materially harm the landscape character of the surrounding area, nor result in coalescence between Creech St Michael and Monkton Heathfield.

Methodology

- 2.7 To inform my assessments and in order to provide my evidence, I have visited the Appeal Site and surrounding area and I have undertaken my own assessment of the effects of the proposed development. I visited the Appeal Site during the autumn, and as such, the vegetation had started to lose leaves. I have made assumptions in relation to the visual effects during both the summer and winter months.
- 2.8 My assessment takes into account the guidance contained in the third edition of the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment ('GLVIA'). The methodology for my assessment is contained in **Appendix M**, along with a summary of the potential landscape and visual effects arising from the Appeal Scheme.
- 2.9 Photographs contained in **Appendix C** have been taken from within the Appeal Site or from public vantage points within the vicinity. Photographs were taken using a digital camera with a lens focal length approximating to 50mm, to give a similar depth of vision to the human eye. In some instances images have been combined to create a panorama. Photographs were taken during periods of good visibility.

3.0 LANDSCAPE POLICY CONTEXT

3.1 The policy background relevant to the appeal is identified in the evidence of Mr Tait, and as such, I do not repeat it here other than to highlight those policies that are relevant to my evidence. For ease of reference I have highlighted in bold the policies that are cited in the reasons for refusal.

Local Planning Policy

3.2 The Development Plan for Taunton Deane comprises a number of documents which include:

- Saved Policies of the Taunton Deane Local Plan (adopted 2004);
- Taunton Deane Core Strategy (adopted 2012); and
- Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (adopted December 2016).

3.3 In addition, the Council are in the early stages of preparing a new Local Plan.

3.4 The following adopted policies are of relevance to this evidence.

Taunton Deane Core Strategy 2011 – 2028 (adopted 2012)

3.5 The Core Strategy sets out the strategic vision for Taunton Deane and the spatial strategy and policies to achieve this vision.

3.6 Strategic Objective 8 states the following in relation to the environment of the Borough:

'To maintain and enhance biodiversity, the natural and man-made environment, minimising the need to travel, waste, pollution and the use of non-renewable resources and to promote good design and materials which respect and enhance local distinctiveness.'

3.7 **Policy CP8** states the Council's intention to conserve and enhance the natural and historic environment. The policy notes that unallocated greenfield land outside of settlement boundaries will be protected, and where possible, enhanced. The policy states that development outside settlement boundaries will be permitted where it will:

- *'Be in accordance with national, regional and local policies for development within rural areas (including those for protected Natura 2000 and Ramsar sites);*
- *Be appropriate in terms of scale, siting and design;*
- *Protect, conserve or enhance landscape and townscape character whilst maintaining green wedges and open breaks between settlements;*
- *Protect, conserve or enhance the interests of natural and historic assets;*
- *Not exacerbate, and where possible improve the quality, quantity and availability of the water resource, reduce flood risk (fluvial and surface water);*
- *Protect habitats and species, including those listed in UK and Local Biodiversity Action Plans, and conserve and expand the biodiversity of the Plan Area;*
- *Provide for any necessary mitigation measures.'*

3.8 The land to the north west of the M5 is identified as falling within a Green Wedge which separates Monkton Heathfield and Priorswood. The supporting text to Policy CP8 notes the following purposes of the Green Wedge:

- Prevent the coalescence of settlements and maintain a sense of place and identity for neighbourhoods;
- Maintain the open character of a green lung contributing to health and wellbeing for residents;
- Bring the countryside into the heart of town;
- Provide accessible formal and informal recreation, sport and play;
- Provide valuable wildlife corridors and habitat;
- Protect areas of landscape importance and visual amenity; and
- Provide a positive approach to land use.

3.9 Policy SS1 identifies Monkton Heathfield, which lies a short distance west and north of the Appeal Site beyond the M5, as a strategic site for approximately 4,500 new dwellings. Policy SS1 sets out the requirements of this new sustainable neighbourhood, which include:

- A new mixed use district centre;
- 22.5 ha of employment land;
- 3 new primary schools;
- Country park;

- Belt of landscaping between the motorway and development areas; and
 - Park and ride site.
- 3.10 **Policy DM1** sets out the general requirements for new developments. It notes the proposals should not lead to unacceptable harm to any affected landscape, settlement, building or street scene.
- 3.11 **Policy DM2** sets out which uses will be supported outside of the defined settlement limits, including community uses, Class B business uses, holiday and tourism uses, and agricultural uses, amongst others.
- 3.12 **Policy SP4** deals with growth within the Major and Minor Rural Centres, and does not relate to any specific landscape or visual issues. This policy is dealt with in more detail in the evidence of Mr Tait.

Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (adopted 2016)

- 3.13 **Policy ENV1** Protection of Trees, Woodland, Orchards and Hedgerows, states that development should seek to minimise impact on these features where they are of value to the area's landscape, character or wildlife. Proposals should seek to provide a net gain where possible and make adequate provision to compensate for any unavoidable loss.
- 3.14 Policy ENV2 notes that tree planting will be sought in new developments where this would benefit wildlife and biodiversity, enhance landscape or public amenity. Proposals, where possible, should include a broad mix of native and non-native tree planting.
- 3.15 Policy ENV3 Special Landscape Features, stated that development which would significantly harm the appearance, character and contribution of landscape quality within Special Landscape Features will not be permitted, unless appropriate mitigation measures would reduce such harm to an acceptable level. The Appeal Site does not lie within, or in the vicinity of, any designated Special Landscape Features, as identified on the proposal maps within the Site Allocations and Development Management Plan.
- 3.16 Policy D7 Design Quality notes that new housing proposals should create a sense of place by, amongst other things, reflecting the site and its context, including topography, landscape features and the historic environment.
- 3.17 **Policy SB1** states that, in order to maintain the quality of the rural environment and to ensure a sustainable approach to development,

proposals outside the boundaries of settlements will be treated as being within open countryside, except for in specific circumstances, and will thus fall to be considered against Core Strategy policies CP1, CP8 and DM2. The only specific requirement within policy SB1 is that proposals are designed and sited to minimise landscape and other impacts.

3.18 Policies MIN2, 3 and 4 identify 3 sites in Creech St Michael as residential allocations as follows (these have now been built out):

- Policy MIN2: Hyde Lane, Creech St Michael (recently built 35 dwellings);
- Policy MIN3: North of school, Creech St Michael (recently built 55 dwellings); and
- Policy MIN4: Land off Hyde Lane, Creech St Michael (recently built 44 dwellings).

Adopted Local Plan (Adopted 2004)

3.19 Few policies within the Local Plan are saved, and none of these are of relevance to landscape or visual matters.

Draft Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Development Plan 2018-2038 (Submission Draft April 2018)

3.20 The Draft Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Development Plan was submitted for independent examination in April 2018. It has not yet been made.

3.21 The Appeal Site is covered by Draft Policy CSM 11 – Green Wedge. The draft policy text states that development proposals in the Green Wedge will be resisted where they conflict with its purposes, which are to:

- Prevent the coalescence of settlements and maintain a sense of place and identity for neighbourhoods;
- Maintain the open character of a green lung contributing to health and wellbeing for residents;
- Provide accessible formal and informal recreation, sport and play;
- Provide valuable wildlife corridors and habitat; and
- Protect areas of landscape importance and visual amenity.

3.22 WYG produced a Green Wedge Assessment to support this draft policy, and this background study is considered in more detail later in my evidence and in **Appendix H**.

National Planning Policy Framework (July 2018)

- 3.23 National policy is set out in the Revised National Planning Policy Framework ('NPPF') and those parts relevant to my evidence are summarised below.
- 3.24 Paragraph 10 and 11 of the NPPF states that at the heart of the Framework is a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which should be applied in relation to both plan-making and decision-taking.
- 3.25 Paragraph 20 of the NPPF states that strategic policies should set out an overall strategy for the pattern, scale and quality of development, and make sufficient provision for, among other elements, the '*(d) conservation and enhancement of the natural, built and historic environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure, and planning measures to address climate change mitigation and adaptation.*'
- 3.26 Section 12 of the NPPF sets out that planning policies and decisions should support the creation of high quality buildings and places. Paragraph 125 states that '*... design policies should be developed with local communities so they reflect local aspirations, and are grounded in an understanding and evaluation of each area's defining characteristics.*'
- 3.27 Paragraph 127 states that planning policies and decisions, should ensure that developments, amongst others:
- '*will function well and add to the overall quality of the area, not just for the short term but over the lifetime of the development;*
 - '*are visually attractive as a result of good architecture, layout and effective landscaping;*
 - '*are sympathetic to local character and history, including the surrounding built environment and landscape setting, while not preventing or discouraging appropriate innovation or change...*'
- 3.28 Section 15 of the NPPF deals with conserving and enhancing the natural environment. Paragraph 170 of the document states that the planning system should contribute to the protection and enhancement of the natural and local environment through, among other things, protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, '*... (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan)*'. The Appeal Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory

designations for landscape character or quality, nor are any of its qualities identified within the Council's development plan.

- 3.29 The paragraph also outlines that the planning system should recognise the, '*...intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland.*'

Planning Practice Guidance

- 3.30 As set out on the Planning Policy Guidance ('PPG') website, the PPG will in due course be updated to reflect the changes following the publication of the Revised NPPF, and any hyperlinks to NPPF 2012 should be disregarded. The PPG paragraphs as set out on the website will therefore remain relevant until they are updated, insofar as they are consistent with the Revised NPPF 2018. The guidance as relevant to this assessment covers landscape and the natural environment and the design of new developments.

- 3.31 The Design section of the guidance describes the importance of good design as an integral part of providing sustainable development. Paragraph 6 (ID: 26-006-20140306) states:

'Design impacts on how people interact with places. Although design is only part of the planning process it can affect a range of economic, social and environmental objectives beyond the requirement for good design in its own right. Planning policies and decisions should seek to ensure the physical environment supports these objectives.'

- 3.32 The following issues should be considered:

- local character (including landscape setting)
- safe, connected and efficient streets
- a network of greenspaces (including parks) and public places
- crime prevention
- security measures
- access and inclusion
- efficient use of natural resources
- cohesive and vibrant neighbourhoods.

- 3.33 Paragraph 7 of the Design section notes that the successful integration of all forms of development with their surrounding context is an important consideration.

- 3.34 Paragraph 001 of the Natural Environment Section of the Guidance states, among other things that, '*Local Plans should include strategic policies for the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment, including landscape. This includes designated landscapes but also the wider countryside.*'

Evidence Base and Background Studies

Taunton Deane Green Wedge Assessment June 2015 (Extract at **Appendix F**)

- 3.35 As part of the evidence base for the Site Allocations and Development Management Plan (which was adopted in 2016), Taunton Deane prepared the Taunton Deane Green Wedge Assessment.
- 3.36 The assessment considered two new Green Wedges as well as proposed changes to the boundaries of existing Green Wedges. The individual Green Wedge assessments looked at the landscape character, historic features, topography and drainage, and nature conservation characteristics, and also carried out a visual assessment and landscape analysis to determine the factors which contribute to their character and function. This analysis then informed decisions in respect of the proposed changes to the Green Wedge boundaries, to be carried forward as designations within the Site Allocation and Development Management Plan.
- 3.37 It is important to note that the assessment did not consider identifying additional land between the M5 and Creech St Michael for inclusion within the Green Wedge designated area. The assessment does however omit land which forms part of the allocated housing site at Monkton Heathfield, but did not extend the green wedge boundary further east beyond the definitive boundary defined by the M5 motorway.

WYG Green Wedge Assessment April 2018, Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Plan (**Appendix G**, and my assessment of it is in **Appendix H**)

- 3.38 The Creech St Michael Parish Council commissioned WYG to undertake a green wedge assessment as part of the supporting evidence for Policy CSM11 'Green Wedge' of the emerging Neighbourhood Plan. The assessment notes that policy CSM11 reflects the spatial strategy established through the development plan at a more local level, by directing development to the most sustainable locations. It notes that the implementation of Policy CSM11 will ensure a rural gateway to the west of Creech St Michael is maintained, along with a degree of

separation between the urban and rural areas in the context of the planned Monkton Heath urban extension. In addition, it notes that the proposed Green Wedge will safeguard the green character and setting of villages and open countryside.

- 3.39 The report recommended that land within Area 1, which extends alongside the M5 corridor to the north of Creech St Michael, be included within the Green Wedge designation.
- 3.40 The Applicant has made representations in response to consultation on the Emerging Neighbourhood Development Plan as well as the WYG Green Wedge Assessment.
- 3.41 In **Appendix H** to my evidence, I have considered the methodology and finding of the Green Wedge Assessment in more detail, and my conclusion is that the Green Wedge Assessment is flawed, and its findings are of no merit.

4.0 APPEAL SITE CONTEXT, DESCRIPTION AND VISIBILITY

Appeal Site Context

- 4.1 The Appeal Site occupies a large arable field at the northern edge of the settlement at Creech St Michael. It is bordered to the north by Langaller Road; to the north west by the M5 motorway; to the south west is an area of grassland and farmland beyond which is a recreation ground; and to the south and south east is existing housing (including recently completed developments) within the settlement. Beyond the M5, development as part of the new urban extension at Monkton Heathfield is underway, with the fields to the west of the motorway forming part of the Green Wedge to the east of Taunton. The outskirts of Taunton lie some 2km to the south west of the Appeal Site. The Appeal Site location and context are illustrated on the Site Location Plan and Aerial Photograph in **Appendices A** and **B**.
- 4.2 Langaller Road marks the principal approach to Creech St Michael from the north of the settlement. It passes over the M5 motorway adjacent to the north western corner of the Appeal Site, descending as it approaches the northern entrance to the village. A band of young trees marks the northern boundary of the Appeal Site and the approach to the settlement.
- 4.3 Housing within the northern part of the village in the vicinity of the Appeal Site dates predominately from the latter half of the twentieth century and comprises a mix of detached and semi-detached houses and bungalows. The settlement has grown along the route of St Michaels Road which passes north-south through the village. There are a number of older dwellings located along the route of this road including several Listed properties. The settlement expanded significantly in the twentieth century, with the bulk of the built form comprising twentieth century estate development.
- 4.4 The western extents of the settlement are defined by the route of the M5 road corridor. To the west of this, the land at Monkton Heathfield is identified as an area for a new urban extension comprising approximately 4,500 new homes. As part of the development proposals, the Eastern Spine Road has been completed, providing a link between Langaller Road and Bridgwater Road, west of the M5. The new residential development lies to the west of the Eastern Spine Road, and is located around 470m from the western Appeal Site boundary, at its closest point. The new homes are separated from the Appeal Site by

(moving west to east), a tree belt and low embankment, the Eastern Spine Road, a series of arable fields and field boundary hedgerows, and the M5 motorway. In addition, there is a farm complex at Manor Farm, including several large barns, located to the south of Langaller Road, between the Eastern Spine Road and the M5.

- 4.5 The hamlet of Creech Heathfield lies to the north east of Creech St Michael, with the southernmost houses within Creech Heathfield located around 540m from the northernmost houses which bound the Appeal Site to the east, along North End.
- 4.6 Taunton and the outlying settlements lie within the Vale of Taunton Deane. The Vale is enclosed to the north by the Quantock Hills, to the west by the Brendon Hills at the edge of Exmoor, and to the south are the Blackdown Hills. To the east of Taunton are a number of smaller hills which lend some enclosure to the Vale at this point. These include the higher ground at Knap, Thorn Hill and Stoke Hill which are all visible landmarks in views out of the Appeal Site. To the north, the rising ground at the edge of the Quantock Hills forms the backdrop to views in this direction.

National Landscape Character

- 4.7 Natural England has produced profiles for England's National Character Areas ('NCA'), which divides England into 159 distinct natural areas, defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity, cultural and economic activity. The settlement at Creech St Michael lies at the eastern edge of the Vale of Taunton and Quantock Fringes character area (NCA 146). The NCA lies between the Brendon Hills at the edge of Exmoor to the west and the Somerset Levels and Moors to the east. To the north is the Bristol Channel and to the south is the Blackdowns Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty ('AONB'). The NCA encircles the Quantock Hills AONB.
- 4.8 The description of the NCA notes that within this character area there is considerable variety, united by its lowland mixed farming landscape, with dense hedges, sparse woodland, red soils and settlement pattern. The Profile states that the area is densely settled with a largely dispersed pattern of hamlets and scattered farmsteads linked by sunken winding lanes. The exception to this are the towns, which include Taunton and Wellington. It notes that Taunton is experiencing considerable expansion owing to its close association with the main transport corridor along the M5 motorway.

District Landscape Character

Taunton Deane Landscape Character Assessment (2011)

4.9 The Taunton Deane Landscape Character Assessment (2011), an extract of which is included in **Appendix E**, places the Appeal Site within Landscape Type 1: Farmed and Settled Low Vale, and Landscape Character Area 1a: Vale of Taunton Deane.

4.10 The document summarises the Farmed and Settled Low Vale as follows:

'A wide, flat to gently undulating vale landscape defined by an underlying Keuper Marl geology - giving rise to loamy soils. The fertile soils allow for a very productive agricultural landscape – arable, pasture, orchards and market gardening are all characteristic. There is a strong connection to the river, its many tributary streams and brooks that offer adjoining landscape interest and lend character in the form of well-wooded corridors and water-loving tree species. The vale landscape type is very clearly shaped by the hand of humans with urban areas and major transport corridors (road and rail) creating a marked contrast to the agricultural landscape and resulting in areas with a strong urban-fringe character. Villages, hamlets, scattered farms and individual dwellings are typical across this landscape type.'

4.11 Key characteristics of the Vale of Taunton Deane character area are described as follows:

- *'A low-lying vale landscape centred around the River Tone and the County town of Taunton extending up to the northern boundary of Wellington;*
- *A flat to gently undulating terrain with an elevation ranging from (15m-50m AOD) - the landscape generally being lower and flatter to the east, rising and becoming more undulating in the west;*
- *Principally underlain by a solid surface geology of Keuper Marls (of the Triassic Mercia Mudstone Group), giving rise to well-drained coarse and loamy soils (Grades 1, 2 and 3 agricultural land);*
- *Strong sense of being with a vale or wide, shallow bowl-like landform – with the surrounding Quantock Hills AONB and Blackdown Hills AONB offering visual and physical containment;*
- *Mixed agricultural land use system – dairying, stock rearing, cereals and fruit cropping (orchards);*
- *Strong hedgerow network (with striking hedgerow trees – mainly oak) defining a field system that is both of ancient and recent enclosure;*

- *Limited woodland cover – woodland generally restricted to occasional small copses on areas of higher ground;*
- *A number of villages, hamlets and dispersed farms connected by a network of roads and winding rural lanes;*
- *Notable rural-urban fringe character around the main towns of Taunton and Wellington;*
- *Varied building age and vernacular – in the north red sandstone is prevalent but in the south, blue lias is more common. Painted stone and clay tiles are common throughout;*
- *A number of hills that have been designated as Special Landscape Features make an important contribution to the wider landscape eg Knowle Hill, Norton Camp Hill, Rag Hill, the ridge between Stonegallows Hill and Lipe Hill and the river cliff at Bradford-on-Tone; and*
- *The A38 and M5 motorway have a visual and aural influence on many parts of the vale.'*

- 4.12 The assessment identifies the overall condition of the landscape of the character area as moderate. It notes that the areas in the poorest condition are at the rural-urban fringe of Taunton and Wellington where marginal farmland appears degraded. Other issues affecting the condition of the area include the generally poor condition of hedgerows; fly tipping along transport corridors; and sub-division of fields for horse paddocks by post and wire and electric fences which can appear unsightly and detract from the historic field pattern.
- 4.13 The assessment notes that the overall strength of landscape character is moderate to strong, but varies across the character area dependant on visual detractors and the condition of the landscape. Detractors include poor hedgerow management, transport corridors and associated linear development, intrusive signage, pylons and large industrial style agricultural buildings.
- 4.14 The landscape strategy for the character area is enhancement. The document notes that although the Vale contains distinctive elements, there are a number of human elements which detract from the character of the landscape.
- 4.15 From my own assessment of the Appeal Site and its immediate context, I find that the Appeal Site is fairly typical of the above description. The Appeal Site comprises a large singular field and is influenced by its proximity to the M5 road corridor, which detracts from its overall strength of character.

Landscape Character Assessment of Taunton's Rural-Urban Fringe –
Landscape and Sensitivity Study (December 2005)

- 4.16 Taunton Deane undertook a landscape character assessment of Taunton's urban-rural fringe in 2004/2005. The purpose of the assessment was to identify and make recommendations for potential locations for new development at the edge of the settlement. The assessment was undertaken in a number of stages, including a draft landscape character assessment of the Borough. The assessment considered in more detail the character areas which border the urban-rural fringe of Taunton. The report then considered the sensitivity of these areas in order to make informed judgements about the capacity of the urban-rural fringe to accommodate development.
- 4.17 The Appeal Site and Creech St Michael lie outside of the area identified as the urban-rural fringe of Taunton, however it does fall within an area identified as contributing to the wider setting of the town. The Appeal Site is identified as lying within the Farmed and Settled Low Vale landscape type (Landscape Type 1) and in character area 1C: Creech Farmed and Settled Low Vale. Key characteristics of this area are stated to be:
- *'With an elevation of 10m – 45m AOD, this is a medium scale landscape defined by a flat to gently undulating topography.*
 - *Cut by small tributary streams, running north west–south east towards the River Tone, forging subtle valleys that are not immediately perceptible.*
 - *Underlain by a solid geology of Keuper Marls (Mercia Mudstone Group) with some outcropping areas of River Terrace Deposits associated with the minor watercourses.*
 - *Agricultural land use defined by a mix of arable, pasture and dairying. Orchards, fruit farms and market gardening and areas of horseculture also occur.*
 - *Fields are varied in size and shape reflecting different periods of enclosure (ancient and recent with modifications). Hedgerows are variable but frequently overgrown, forming well-vegetated deciduous belts along roads.*
 - *Taunton Vale Golf Course accounts for a large part of the character area and evokes a highly managed, tamed landscape character.*
 - *Monkton Heathfield, Creech St Michael and Creech Heathfield are large villages with Langaller, Charlton and Durston characterising smaller settlements.*

- *The M5 cuts through the area and, in conjunction with the A358, A361 and A3259, generates considerable traffic noise across much of the landscape.*
- *A tract of pylons runs across the western half of the area, dominating views.*
- *General absence of woodland but overgrown hedges and orchards give the impression of a well-treed landscape in places.*
- *Building age, style and materials are variable – the smaller settlements maintaining a traditional character (thatch, rough-cast render, brick, and clay pantile roofs) with the larger villages exhibiting a real assortment of vernacular.*
- *Views across to the prominent wooded landscapes of the Blackdown Hills AONB and to the Enclosed Combes of the Quantock Hills AONB. Views are also possible to the North Curry Ridge.'*

4.18 In terms of landscape character sensitivity, this area is deemed to be moderate. The assessment notes that there is a sense of fragmentation that exists across much of this area as a result of the number of primary traffic routes, mixed management of hedgerows, pockets of unmanaged land and fly tipping. The assessment notes that visibility is variable across this character area and it has a moderate visual sensitivity overall. By combining these two judgements the assessment finds that this area's overall landscape sensitivity is moderate.

Statutory and Non-Statutory Designations

4.19 The Appeal Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality (Please refer to plan in **Appendix D**). The Blackdown Hills and Quantock Hills AONB's lie 5.5km and 4.5km to the south and north respectively.

4.20 There are no Conservation Areas in the immediate vicinity of the Appeal Site. The nearest Grade II Listed Building is North End Farmhouse which is located along North End a short distance east of the Appeal Site, however there is no intervisibility with the Appeal Site. There are several Grade II Listed properties located along St Michaels Road to the south, although again there is no intervisibility. In addition there are a number of Listed properties located at Langaller to the north of the M5.

4.21 The Hestercombe House Special Area of Conservation ('SAC') lies approximately 2.2km north west of the Appeal Site, and the Somerset Levels and Moors RAMSAR/Special Protection Area ('SPA') lies

approximately 2.5km to the east. The Curry and Hay Moors SSSI lies around 1.4km east of the Appeal Site. The Ecological Impact Study which was submitted with the Application, concludes that development at the Appeal Scheme will not have a significant effect on these designated ecological sites.

Public Rights of Way

- 4.22 There is a public footpath (T 10/14) which crosses the southern part of the Appeal Site in an east to west direction, leading from North End and exiting the Appeal Site at the south western corner. This footpath continues south (becoming T 10/23), passing through the recent housing estate along Hopkins Field to Hyde Lane. North of the junction with public footpath T 10/24, public footpath T 10/23 passes alongside the western Appeal Site boundary, terminating when it reaches the M5 road corridor.
- 4.23 There is a spur of a footpath (T 10/31) which extends along a track beyond the field to the north of the Appeal Site, however it terminates at a dead end. A footpath (T 10/20) follows the eastern edge of the M5 to the north, leading through to Creech Heathfield. In addition, there are numerous footpaths which cross the wider countryside to the north and east of Taunton.

Tree Preservation Orders ('TPO')

- 4.24 None of the trees located on or at the periphery of the Appeal Site are covered by a Tree Preservation Order. This was confirmed by searching on the Council's online Interactive Mapping on 20 November 2018.
- 4.25 An ash tree within the property at Ash Tree Cottage to the east of the Appeal Site, is covered by a TPO.

Appeal Site Description

- 4.26 The Appeal Site comprises a large, irregularly shaped, arable field at the northern edge of the built up area at Creech St Michael, 11.4ha in size. It is bound by the M5 road corridor to the north west; by Langaller Road to the north; by existing housing to the south east and south; and to the south west is an area of grassland and farmland. There are no landscape features of note contained within the Appeal Site. The Appeal Site has a distinctly domed landform, falling to the south, east and west from a highpoint located roughly centrally within the field. The character of the

Appeal Site is illustrated on the aerial photograph in **Appendix B** and on the photographs contained in **Appendix C**.

- 4.27 A public footpath crosses the southern part of the Appeal Site, leading from North End to the east through to the southernmost corner of the Appeal Site.
- 4.28 The north western Appeal Site boundary with the M5 is marked by a post and rail fence and by occasional pockets of scrubby bramble (Photographs 2 and 3). The M5 passes the Appeal Site broadly at grade, with vehicles and signage associated with the highway clearly visible from the Appeal Site.
- 4.29 To the north, a band of semi-mature woodland occupies the embankment where Langaller Road rises to pass over the M5 motorway. At the mid-point of the boundary is a field hedgerow, approximately 2m in height (Photograph 14). The eastern section of the boundary is marked by more semi-mature woodland which extends alongside Langaller Road as it swings round towards the south (Photograph 13). There is a field access gate located roughly centrally along this boundary.
- 4.30 To the east, the boundary is marked by the rear garden boundaries of several dwellings to the west of Langaller Road (Photograph 6). Boundary treatments are predominately timber close board fences, although there are sections of garden hedging.
- 4.31 To the south is the rear of properties at Cooks Close and West View, which is again marked by garden fencing and mixed hedging (Photograph 5). The landform within the Appeal Site rises up markedly from the rear of these dwellings, with the public footpath within the Appeal Site crossing the rising ground a short distance north of these rear garden boundaries.
- 4.32 To the west, there is a change in level between the Appeal Site and the adjoining field, as the land falls sharply to a ditch. A dense band of thicket vegetation occupies the rising ground above the ditch at the edge of the Appeal Site. The ditch continues alongside the south western corner of the Appeal Site (Photograph 4). Here it is marked by scrubby elder and bramble, with views available over it towards the recent development at Hopkins Field. Public footpath T 10/23 runs alongside this ditch and the south western Appeal Site boundary, but terminates at the M5.

- 4.33 There are views available from the higher ground in the central and northern parts of the Appeal Site, south and east over the adjoining settlement, with the high points at Knapp and Thorn Hill recognisable local landmarks in these views. Similarly, there are views northwards to the higher ground around West Monkton.

Topography

- 4.34 The Appeal Site has a distinctly domed landform with a high point of approximately 23.5m Above Ordnance Datum ('AOD') at the mid-point of the northern boundary. The landform generally falls to the south and west to a low point at the southern Appeal Site boundary of 16m AOD. There is a steeper band of land along the Appeal Site's southern boundary adjacent to the existing properties to the south, with the adjoining houses located lower than the land within the Appeal Site.
- 4.35 The wider topography is characterised by the relatively low lying Vale of Taunton Deane, in which the settlements at Creech St Michael and the nearby town of Taunton lie. The River Tome passes to the south of Creech St Michael, extending westwards to pass through Taunton. The expansive flat, flood plain landscape of the river continues eastwards leading towards the Somerset Levels.
- 4.36 The low lying, gently undulating landscape of the Vale is contained within a bowl, enclosed to the north and south/south east by the rising ground associated with the Quantock and Blackdown Hills respectively. To the east of Taunton are a number of smaller hills including the higher ground at Knap, Thorn Hill and Stoke Hill which are all visible landmarks in views out of the Appeal Site.

Visibility

- 4.37 An assessment of the visibility of the Appeal Site was undertaken and a series of photographs taken from within the Appeal Site and from public vantage points, rights of way and public highways. The viewpoints are illustrated on the Site Location Plan and Aerial Photograph contained in **Appendices A and B** and on the photographs in **Appendix C**.
- 4.38 The Appeal Site lies alongside development at the edge of Creech St Michael. Near distance views are available from the adjoining residential areas and the open land to the south west. Further afield, middle distance views tend to be limited as a result of neighbouring development, vegetation along the route of Langaller Road and the M5 road corridor. Due to the Appeal Site's location within the low-lying vale,

there are opportunities for far reaching views from the surrounding higher ground, with the existing development in and around Taunton visible from here. The key representative views of the Appeal Site are described in the tables contained in **Appendix M** and are briefly summarised below.

Near Distance Views

- 4.39 There are views to varying degrees of the Appeal Site from a section of Langaller Road which lies in proximity to the Appeal Site boundary. There are relatively open views where it passes over the M5 road corridor, seen within the context of the traffic on the major highway in the immediate foreground, and housing in the settlement in the backdrop (Photograph 15). Beyond the crossing over the M5 to the north east, views of the Appeal Site are prevented by the woodland on the roadside embankments. There are views over the hedgerow and field gate at the mid-point of the boundary (Photograph 14). Further east along Langaller Road, views of the Appeal Site are limited by a band of roadside vegetation, and by housing at the edge of the village further south east (Photographs 12, 13, 23 and 24).
- 4.40 There is a framed view along the public footpath from south of North End House, to the immediate south east of the Appeal Site, between the existing buildings (Photograph 11). As the footpath crosses the Appeal Site, there are open views available across the Appeal Site, with the rear of the existing housing in the settlement conspicuous to the south (Photographs 5 and 32). As the footpath passes to the south west into the existing settlement, views of the Appeal Site become screened by the surrounding housing (Photographs 11).
- 4.41 There are views of the rising ground in the southern and central part of the Appeal Site from the rear of properties at West View, Cooks Close and a small number of dwellings adjacent to the south east corner of the Appeal Site (Photographs 5 and 6). There are also partial, framed views available from public vantage points on West View and Cooks Close, through gaps between and over the adjoining houses (Photographs 9 and 10).
- 4.42 There are partial views of the Appeal Site from the recent housing within the north of Hopkins Field and along Hyde Lane, as well as filtered views from the playing fields at Creech St Michael Park (Photographs 8, 29, 30 and 31).
- 4.43 There are open views from a section of public footpath (T 10/23) which passes to the south west of the Appeal Site. Where this footpath passes

alongside the western boundary, views of the Appeal Site are heavily filtered by the hedgerow at the Appeal Site boundary, although winter views will be more open (Photographs 27 and 28).

- 4.44 There are glimpsed, fleeting, partial views of the Appeal Site available to motorists travelling along the M5.

Middle and Long Distance Views

- 4.45 Views of the Appeal Site from public footpath T 10/31 north of Langaller Road are prevented by the intervening vegetation on either side of the road, as well as the fact that the road rises up towards the west to cross over the M5.
- 4.46 There is a middle distance view available from the public footpath (T 10/20) which crosses the farmland to the north east of the Appeal Site (Photograph 16). In this view, the interior of the Appeal Site is contained by intervening field boundary vegetation, but the upper floors of a small number of properties at the edge of the village are visible to the left of the view. Views from the footpath to the north west of the stream are prevented by the intervening vegetation, as are views from the houses within Creech Heathfield.
- 4.47 There is a distant view from public footpath T32/27 on the higher ground near Walford House to the north of the Appeal Site, west of the M5. In views from here, the Appeal Site and settlement at Creech St Michael are often screened in views by intervening vegetation. Where breaks in the vegetation permit, housing at the northern edge of the settlement can be perceived in the distance (Photograph 17).
- 4.48 There are views available from the higher ground in the vicinity of West Monkton to the north. These views extend across the low lying vale landscape to the east of Taunton, with the rising land in the vicinity of Knapp and Thorn Hill forming the backdrop. Where views are available, the Appeal Site and the settlement at Creech St Michael are generally contained by the intervening framework of field hedgerows and tree lines and/or seen in the context of existing and emerging development at Monkton Heathfield (Photographs 18 and 19).
- 4.49 In middle distance views from the houses and road on the eastern edge of the new development at Monkton Heathfield, the Appeal Site will be partially visible during the winter months, in heavily filtered views through the intervening vegetation, although summer views will be screened by this vegetation (as seen in Photographs 3 and 35).

- 4.50 There are views from localised highpoints to the south east of the Appeal Site. Photographs 21 and 22 show representative views from the higher ground at Knap and Thorn Hill. In views from the edge of Knap, the Appeal Site and the settlement at Creech St Michael are relatively well contained by a combination of topography and the well-treed character of the intervening farmland. There is an expansive panoramic view available from Thorn Hill, which includes Creech St Michael, with the Appeal Site visible at the northern edge of the settlement.
- 4.51 In very long distance views from the high ground along the Quantock Hills and Blackdown Hills, the Appeal Site will be visible as a very small part of the overall views, and will be seen within the context of, and adjacent to, the existing built development at Taunton and Creech St Michael.

Landscape Quality, Sensitivity and Value

- 4.52 The Appeal Site comprises a large, irregular arable field alongside housing at the northern edge of Creech St Michael. It contains no landscape features of note and is undistinguished in terms of character. To the north is Langaller Road, whilst the traffic and highway infrastructure associated with the M5 road corridor are conspicuous in views over the north western Appeal Site boundary.
- 4.53 The trees and hedgerows along the Appeal Site boundaries are of moderate landscape quality, however, the interior of the Appeal Site is pleasant, but undistinguished. The Appeal Site is considered to be of medium landscape quality and sensitivity.
- 4.54 The surrounding agricultural landscape of the Vale is considered to be of medium landscape quality and sensitivity, and similarly, although pleasant, is undistinguished and influenced by detracting urbanising features. These findings are consistent with the conclusions of the landscape character assessment work undertaken at a Local Level, which considered the Creech Farmed and Settled Low Vale to have a moderate landscape sensitivity. The Appeal Site is considered to be generally of lower quality and sensitivity, owing to its proximity to the existing settlement and the M5 road corridor.
- 4.55 The adjoining townscape in the vicinity of the Appeal Site is not designated for its architectural or historic value or quality, and comprises mostly 20th and 21st Century development. The residential areas are pleasant, and are assessed as being of medium townscape quality, sensitivity and value.

- 4.56 In terms of landscape value, the Appeal Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality, nor are any of its qualities identified within the Council's development plan. It exhibits relatively ordinary landscape qualities and is subject to a number of visual detractors. There is limited public access to the Appeal Site via the public footpath which crosses it, with further public footpaths adjoining it.
- 4.57 In relation to paragraph 170 of the NPPF, the Appeal Site is not considered to be a valued landscape, and this is not disputed by the Council. I have also assessed the Appeal Site against Box 5.1 of the GLVIA, which is accepted as a useful tool for assessing value, and my assessment is set out in **Appendix M**. The Appeal Site is assessed as being of medium landscape value.

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5.0 THE ABILITY OF THE APPEAL SITE TO ACCOMMODATE THE PROPOSED DEVELOPMENT

5.1 In the following section I assess the ability of the Appeal Site to accommodate the proposed development and consider potential impacts on landscape character and visual amenity. In Section 6, I then go on to address the specific issues identified in the reasons for refusal. It should be noted that the Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer in her response to the consultation on the Application, raised no objections, and supported the findings of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment produced by CSA Environmental as part of the Application, concluding that the '*new development would be well related to the existing settlement edge of Creech St Michael*' (my underlining).

5.2 The proposals, which are in outline, are for a residential development of up to 200 new dwellings, with associated infrastructure and open space. The key development principles shown on the Development Framework Plan (**Appendix J**) and described in the Design and Access Statement which accompanies the Application, are as follows:

- New access to be formed off Langaller Road. Proposals to minimise loss of established vegetation along the Appeal Site frontage;
- A 90m buffer zone to be provided alongside the M5 road corridor;
- Woodland belt and acoustic bund/fence to be incorporated alongside the M5 motorway, to screen views of the highway infrastructure from within the Appeal Site and to reduce the level of noise on the Appeal Site from the adjoining motorway;
- Housing proposals to be set back from the boundary with West View and Cooks Close to respect the visual amenity of the neighbouring properties. New structural planting to be installed alongside the rear of these properties;
- Housing to be mostly 2 storeys in height, with some use of 2 ½ storey houses;
- Existing public footpath T10/24 to be retained along its current route and incorporated into the development within a generous green corridor;
- Public open space to be provided centrally on the higher ground, and along the west and south of the development;
- Existing landscape features at the perimeter of the Appeal Site to be retained wherever possible, and reinforced;

- Walking routes to be provided through open space areas at the periphery of the Appeal Site, linking to the public rights of way;
- Surface water drainage to be incorporated in landscaped attenuation features within open space areas;
- Potential to provide allotments/community orchard; and
- Provide appropriate level of children's play facilities within open space areas.

5.3 The key landscape and visual effects are summarised in the tables in **Appendix M** and described below.

Relationship to the Existing Settlement

5.4 The Appeal Site is well related to the existing settlement edge of Creech St Michael, a fact noted and agreed by the Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer in her consultation response to the Application. I have included a context plan in **Appendix L**, showing the Appeal Scheme within the context of Creech St Michael and the development at Monkton Heathfield.

5.5 The Appeal Site lies off Langaller Road, the principal approach to Creech St Michael from the north west. It is bordered by existing residential development to the south and south east and lies in close proximity to recent development at the northern edge of the settlement. The Appeal Scheme also benefits from strong, defensible boundaries, forming robust separations between the proposed development at the Appeal Site and the wider countryside and adjoining settlements. The M5 road corridor to the west of the Appeal Site forms a robust boundary to further western expansion of the settlement, and forms a clear boundary between Creech St Michael to the east and Monkton Heathfield to the west, particularly in combination with the Green Wedge on the north western side of the motorway. Langaller Road to the north of the Appeal Site separates the proposed development from the countryside beyond, and marks a clear edge to the settlement.

5.6 The Development Framework shows how new pedestrian and cycle links can be provided to the existing residential area and to the public footpath network, linking the new homes within the existing residential areas in Creech St Michael.

Impact on Landscape Features

- 5.7 The landscape features of note on the Appeal Site are limited to the boundaries, and comprise hedgerows and tree belts. The Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer agreed that there are no landscape features of note contained within the Appeal Site. The vast majority of the existing hedgerows and trees at the perimeter of the Appeal Site can be retained.
- 5.8 There will be a loss of sections of hedgerow and boundary vegetation alongside the boundary with Langaller Road, which will require removal to facilitate access to the Appeal Site and the associated visibility splays. A short section of Category C (as assessed within the Tree Survey which accompanied the Application) hawthorn hedgerow requires removal to the west of the proposed access, to allow for widening of the existing field access and to incorporate a short section of visibility splay to the west. To the east, a longer length of hawthorn hedgerow (Category C), and a part of a young, self-seeded tree group comprising ash, hawthorn and field maple (Category C), are required to be removed to facilitate the widening of the field access and the new visibility splays. The Development Framework Plan shows that there is scope to accommodate compensatory planting alongside this boundary. In addition, there is scope for significant areas of new tree, shrub, woodland and species-rich grassland creation within areas of public open space throughout the development area. Overall, the proposals can deliver a significant net increase in tree cover and species diversity. The Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer did not raise any concerns regarding the loss of this vegetation, and there were no comments recorded from a Tree Officer.
- 5.9 A Sustainable Drainage System ('SuDS') is proposed to be incorporated within the Appeal Scheme, with a new drainage basin proposed within the south of the Appeal Scheme, north of the public footpath. This basin can be designed and landscaped to enhance the Appeal Site's biodiversity and habitat value, while being an attractive landscape feature.

Public Rights of Way

- 5.10 The Development Framework Plan shows that the existing public footpath across the Appeal Site can be retained along its current alignment within a green corridor. There will therefore be no direct effect on the route of the footpath, although it is likely that it will require surfacing in anticipation of its increased use. There will be indirect visual

effects to a section of the route as a result of the new housing, which are discussed in more detail later. Somerset County Council's Right of Way Officer did not object to the Appeal Scheme.

- 5.11 The proposals make provision for new footpath connections to the existing rights of way, and will provide new areas of publicly accessible open space and a new play area which will be accessible to both the new and existing community.

Visual Impact and Effects

- 5.12 The visual appraisal in Section 4 identified that there are a number of localised views of the Appeal Site from neighbouring dwellings and public vantage points. In addition, there are some long distance views over the low lying Vale landscape from the surrounding higher ground. A summary of the effects of the proposals on the key views of the Appeal Site is contained in **Appendix M** and these are briefly described below.
- 5.13 Development at the Appeal Site will be visible from Langaller Road on the approach to and from Creech St Michael, to the east of the M5 road corridor. For the most part, the tops of the proposed homes will be partially visible over the intervening hedgerow and tree belts along the south of the Langaller Road, although the proposed development will be more visible at the mid-section of the boundary over the existing hedgerow and along the proposed vehicular access. Additional structural vegetation can be incorporated within the north of the development, to further filter the views of the new homes. Although there will be some loss of the presently open character along this section of the road, new housing will not appear out of context in this location, given the proximity of existing housing in the village which is similarly partially visible from further south along Langaller Road (Photographs 12, 13, 23 and 24). Accordingly, a well-considered housing scheme which positively addresses the road, would provide an appropriate approach into the village and would not appear incongruous in this location.
- 5.14 The new homes will be visible from the Langaller Road bridge over the M5, and from a short distance west of the bridge. In these views, the new homes will be seen adjacent to the M5 motorway and behind an area of open space. The existing houses within the north of Creech St Michael are already visible from here, and the new homes will not appear out of character, although they will be closer to the viewer. New tree planting within the development will soften the built form in time, in views from here.

- 5.15 The new homes will become visible as the viewer moves west beyond the current existing houses which bound the public footpath (T 10/24), however, existing housing is already conspicuous to the south. The Development Framework Plan illustrates how the footpath can be accommodated within a green corridor within the development, with new landscaping incorporated to provide interest and soften views of both the existing and proposed housing along the route.
- 5.16 There will be views from the dwellings which adjoin the Appeal Site to the south east. Development in proximity to these properties should adopt appropriate separation and privacy standards to minimise the loss of visual amenity from these properties. New vegetation is also proposed to be incorporated along the Appeal Site boundary here, to filter views between the existing and new homes.
- 5.17 The new housing will be visible from the rear of properties at West View and Cooks Close. The Development Framework Plan shows housing is proposed to be set back from the rising ground immediately alongside these properties, with the intervening land retained as open space, incorporating new landscaping. Development would not therefore be overbearing in views from these properties, and their visual amenity and privacy can be respected. Partial views of the proposed development will be visible from sections of the streets at West View and Cooks Close, seen over the existing properties. New landscaping within the development will soften the built form in these views.
- 5.18 There will be views of the new housing at the Appeal Site from the recent development at Hopkins Field and Hyde Lane and from the playing fields at Creech St Michael Park. Housing at the Appeal Site will be seen across an area of farmland and in proximity to other modern housing development at the northern edge of the settlement. Accordingly, the proposed development will not appear out of character in these views.
- 5.19 There will be views of the new development, to varying degrees, from the public footpath (T 10/23) which passes in proximity to the western Appeal Site boundary. There will be open views from the section of path to the south west, however, from further north the hedgerow at the western boundary will assist in partially screening views of the new homes, although the upper floors of development will likely be visible. Despite this, the footpath lies in proximity to existing housing in the village and is truncated by the route of the M5, it is therefore less sensitive to development of this nature than a footpath which lies within the open countryside. Strengthening the existing boundary vegetation with

additional native tree and thicket planting will further screen and/or filter the views of the new homes.

- 5.20 There will be glimpsed fleeting views of the housing at the Appeal Site available to motorists travelling along the M5, over the proposed noise attenuation fence along this boundary. These views are not considered particularly sensitive given their transitory nature, and the proposed development will be screened in due course by the proposed woodland planting adjacent to the Appeal Site boundary.
- 5.21 The upper floors of housing at the Appeal Site will be visible from a section of the public footpath (T 10/31) which crosses the land to the north of the Appeal Site. Existing and proposed structural vegetation along the Appeal Site's northern boundary will assist in softening the development in these views in due course. There will be partial, heavily filtered views of the new homes from parts of public footpath T 10/20 west of Creech Heathfield, however, the existing housing within the north of Creech St Michael is already partially visible from here, and the proposed development will therefore not be introducing a foreign element into these views.
- 5.22 Development at the Appeal Site will be visible in a number of views from vantage points on the higher ground to the north of the Appeal Site. Where views are available, and they are not interrupted by intervening vegetation, housing at the Appeal Site will form a small component of a wider panorama which extends over the low lying landscape of the Vale. In these views, other development in the Vale, including expansion within the Monkton Heathfield sustainable urban extension, is visible and housing at the Appeal Site would comprise a small addition to development in this location, and would not alter the character of the existing view.
- 5.23 Similarly, in distant views from Thorn Hill, as well as very long distance views from the high ridges at the Quantock Hills and Blackdown Hills, housing at the Appeal Site would result in a small expansion of the built area to the north of Creech St Michael and would have a negligible impact on the character of the wider panoramic view of the Vale.

Landscape Change and Effects

- 5.24 As set out in Section 4, the Appeal Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality, and comprises an arable field of ordinary character, with the landscape features of importance contained to the boundaries. It is subject to a

number of urbanising influences such as modern housing at the northern edge of Creech St Michael and the M5 road corridor. Accordingly, the Appeal Site is considered to have a medium sensitivity to appropriate residential development which respects the scale and character of the neighbouring settlement.

- 5.25 The majority of the trees and hedgerows along the Appeal Site boundaries will be retained and strengthened, with new planting incorporated within the development to filter views of the new homes, enhance the Appeal Site's landscape structure and diversity, and increase biodiversity. New areas of public open space will be created within the development, and will allow space for species-rich grassland and habitat creation. The public footpath will be retained along its current alignment.
- 5.26 Although the character of the Appeal Site will change from an open field to residential development and associated infrastructure and open space, the new homes will not be out of character within the receiving landscape, which already contains 20th Century housing development, as well as main roads. The Appeal Site benefits from clear, defensible boundaries which will form a firm settlement edge, marking the separation between the built development and the countryside, and adjoining settlement, beyond. Where the new homes are visible from the wider surroundings, they will most often be seen within the context of the existing settlement at Creech St Michael and the M5, and will not introduce an uncharacteristic element into these views. Development at the Appeal Site will therefore not have a significant effect on the wider landscape character.
- 5.27 A summary table detailing the anticipated Landscape Effects can be found in **Appendix M**.

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6.0 RESPONSE TO THE REASONS FOR REFUSAL

6.1 The third Reason for Refusal states:

***Reason 3.** The development of this large open unallocated greenfield area outside the settlement boundary of Creech St. Michael it is considered would be contrary to Policies CP8, DM1, DM2, and SP4 of the Taunton Deane Core Strategy 2012, and Policies ENV1, and SB1 of the Taunton Deane Site Allocations and Development Management Plan 2016. The proposed development if allowed would create a significant visual intrusion into this area of countryside changing the character and appearance of the environment surrounding Creech St. Michael, and would lead to a direct loss of the important gap separating Taunton and this outlying village settlement. The coalescence of the village with the greater Monkton Heathfield development planned for the eastern side of the M5 motorway is considered unacceptable in visual terms notwithstanding any proposed open space buffer set out with this application and the Green Wedge buffer which partially separates the Monkton Heathfield development from the Motorway. The site is valued for its own intrinsic sake as part of the countryside surrounding the village and should therefore be protected from sporadic unplanned development.*

6.2 For ease of reference, I have broken the reason for refusal down into its constituent parts and comment as follows.

Visual Effects

6.3 The Reason for Refusal alleges that the proposed development would create a significant visual intrusion in this area of countryside.

6.4 I have set out in Section 5 of my evidence, that although the new homes will be visible in places, they will for the most part be seen within the context of the existing settlement.

6.5 The new homes will be visible from the public footpath which crosses the Appeal Site. However, the Development Framework Plan shows how the views of the new homes can be softened and limited, by retaining a 38m deep green area of open space between the path and the new homes. Residential development is also not a foreign element in views from the public footpaths on or adjacent to the Appeal Site, with views of the existing and recently built houses to the south, south west and east of the Appeal Site, also visible in these views. Although the character of the

views will change, the introduction of the proposed development within these views will not be out of character with the area.

- 6.6 The new homes will also be partially visible from Langaller Road to the north of the Appeal Site. On the approach to Creech St Michael from the west, the new homes will be visible in glimpsed views over the M5 from the bridge, where it crosses the motorway. The existing houses on the northern edge of the settlement are already visible from here, and the proposed development will merely transpose this built edge closer to the viewer. An area of public open space is proposed within the west of the Appeal Scheme, and the new homes will be seen behind the area of open space, and not immediately adjacent to the motorway.
- 6.7 Travelling further east along Langaller Road, the tops of the new homes will be partially visible over the intervening vegetation and bank, and the houses will be visible in glimpsed, open views along the new access road, for a short section of the road. The new homes will become heavily filtered in views from Langaller Road, as the proposed replacement and enhancement planting along the northern edge of the development matures. The resulting view will be similar in character to that currently available from Langaller Road, of the existing houses east of the Appeal Site, as seen in Photographs 12, 13, 23 and 24 in **Appendix C**. Except for the short section of open views, the new homes will be heavily filtered by the boundary vegetation, and will appear as an extension of the existing settlement to the east, which is similarly partially visible behind intervening vegetation. There will be no significant effects on views from Langaller Road.
- 6.8 I have set out in Section 5 how the proposals have been designed to minimise the visual effects on residential views. I have also set out that, where the new development is visible in long distance views, it will be seen as an extension of the existing settlement, and will not appear discordant. The proposed development will not impact on any key views identified within the Development Plans or Landscape Character Assessments.

Character and appearance of the environment surrounding Creech St Michael

- 6.9 The Reason for Refusal alleges that the proposed development would change the character and appearance of the environment surrounding Creech St Michael.

- 6.10 While the character and appearance of the Appeal Site would change, there will be no significant effects on the environment surrounding Creech St Michael, and the new homes will be well related to the receiving landscape. Creech St Michael is bound by the M5 motorway to the west and Langaller Road to the north, while to the south, the settlement is bound by the Bridgwater and Taunton Canal and the River Tone. The landscape to the east of the settlement is rural in nature, with the settlement here lying adjacent to the countryside.
- 6.11 In the vicinity of the Appeal Site, Creech St Michael lies adjacent to the M5 motorway (to the south at the houses at Sweetings Close), as well as adjacent to Langaller Road (the houses east of the Appeal Site). If the Appeal Site were to be developed, Creech St Michael will still be bound by agricultural fields to the north, albeit wholly beyond Langaller Road, as opposed to partially north of Langaller Road as is currently the situation. The Appeal Site also only makes up a part of the environment around the settlement, and changes to this north western part, which is already characterised by new housing development, will not affect the character of the whole settlement.
- 6.12 The Appeal Site is also partially bound by existing residential development, which is characteristic of the northern part of Creech St Michael. Additional housing development will not be out of character, and will not significantly affect the character of the environment around Creech St Michael. The Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer supported the findings of the LVIA which concluded that the new development would be well related to the existing settlement edge of Creech St Michael.
- 6.13 The draft Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Development Plan does not contain a more detailed analysis of the area's landscape character or setting. I have set out the characteristics of the landscape of the Vale of Taunton Deane, as contained in the Council's Landscape Character Assessment, in Section 4. The proposed development is capable of being accommodated within the landscape around Creech St Michael, without having any significant effects on the key characteristics of the area, as set out within the Council's Landscape Character Assessment.
- 6.14 I have set out above how the view, or appearance, of the settlement will change, and that the new views will not be out of character within the surrounding environment. At the detailed design stage, the layout and new homes can be designed to reflect the positive historic vernacular of Creech St Michael, in terms of the type, design and layout of the new homes and spaces.

Gap separating Taunton and Creech St Michael

- 6.15 The Reason for Refusal alleges that the proposed development would lead to a direct loss of the important gap separating Taunton and Creech St Michael. It further alleges that the coalescence of the village with the Monkton Heathfield development '*planned for the eastern [sic] side of the M5 motorway*' is considered unacceptable in visual terms, notwithstanding any proposed open space buffer set out within the Appeal Scheme, and the Green Wedge which '*partially*' separates the motorway and Monkton Heathfield.
- 6.16 The Plan at **Appendix I** shows the distances between the proposed development, existing housing within Creech St Michael, and the proposed Employment Area within the Monkton Heathfield development. The existing housing at Sweetings Close (which was an allocated housing site) to the south west of the Appeal Site lies 228m from the proposed Employment Area boundary, at its closest point. In comparison, the proposed housing at the Appeal Site would be located 294m from the proposed Employment Area, at its closest point, with the intervening distance increasing to the north of this point. The proposed housing at the Appeal Scheme will therefore not be closer to the proposed development at Monkton Heathfield, than the current situation.
- 6.17 The existing housing at Sweetings Close lies 90m from the M5 motorway. The proposed housing at the Appeal Site will also be located at least 90m from the motorway, and the residential development within Creech St Michael will therefore not extend closer to the motorway than the current situation.
- 6.18 The M5 motorway, along with the designated Green Wedge at Monkton Heathfield, and the proposed open space within the Appeal Scheme, form a physical separation between the development at Monkton Heathfield and that within Creech St Michael. At its narrowest point in the vicinity of Creech St Michael, the Green Wedge west of the motorway is 85m wide (roughly opposite the development at Sweetings Close), growing wider as one moves north east towards the Appeal Site. Development at the Appeal Site will clearly not result in physical coalescence between the settlements.
- 6.19 The Reason for Refusal alleges that the Appeal Scheme would result in a direct loss of the important gap separating Taunton from Creech St Michael. I have set out above and shown on the plan at **Appendix I**, that the new development will be no closer to the M5 motorway or the

proposed development at Monkton Heathfield, than the current built extent of Creech St Michael to the south west of the Appeal Site, and the gap between the settlements will be no narrower than currently.

- 6.20 The Reason for Refusal states that the Green Wedge buffer partially separates the Monkton Heathfield development from the motorway. In the vicinity of the Appeal Site and Creech St Michael, the Green Wedge is continuous along the length of the M5 motorway between the development at Hankridge Way in the south and the Langaller Road in the north, and forms a continuous buffer between the existing and proposed development to the west, and the motorway. The proposals map of the adopted Site Allocations and Development Management Plan, shows the land west of the motorway, between Langaller Road in the south and a point a short distance north west of Heathfield Farm (located east of the motorway in Creech Heathfield) designated as 'Area reserved for Green Spaces'. Although the area north of Langaller Road and west of the motorway is not designated as a Green Wedge, it still benefits from policy protection restricting built development within that area.
- 6.21 Notwithstanding this 'Area reserved for Green Spaces' designation to the north, the Appeal Scheme will be wholly separated from the adjoining Monkton Heathfield development by the Green Wedge designated land, as well as the M5 motorway and informal open space between the motorway and the built form to the east.
- 6.22 The Reason for Refusal specifically mentions that the alleged coalescence is considered unacceptable in '*visual terms*'. As evident from Photographs 1, 3, 26, 33 and 35 in **Appendix C**, there is no intervisibility between the built development at Monkton Heathfield and Creech St Michael, and winter views are expected to be heavily filtered.
- 6.23 In terms of intervisibility once the Employment Area at Monkton Heathfield is developed, the distance between the proposed Employment Area, and the motorway and the Appeal Site, is roughly similar to the distance between the easternmost sheds at Manor Farm south of Langaller Road, and the motorway and Appeal Site. As evident from Photograph 3, the existing sheds at Manor Farm are barely discernible from within the west of the Appeal Site, due to the intervening vegetation. The proposed Employment Area buildings will be of a similar scale to the sheds at Manor Farm, and will similarly be located to the west of a dense tree belt. In addition, the proposed development at the Appeal Site will most likely incorporate an acoustic fence along the western boundary, which is currently visually open to the M5, and

the Development Framework Plan also shows how a new area of woodland planting is proposed to be incorporated along the western Appeal Site boundary, which will further prevent intervisibility between the development at the Appeal Site and that within Monkton Heathfield. Although there may be heavily filtered views between the proposed employment buildings and the proposed development at the Appeal Site, the proposed woodland planting within the west of the Appeal Site will screen views in time. There will therefore be no unacceptable visual coalescence between Monkton Heathfield and the Appeal Scheme, in terms of intervisibility. The intervening vegetation will ensure a clear visual distinction between the settlements, when viewed from within them.

- 6.24 In terms of visual coalescence when travelling along the M5 motorway, the open route of the motorway, along with the existing and proposed vegetation on either side of the motorway, clearly separate the development to the east from that to the west. In addition, development to the west will comprise employment buildings, while to the east the character will be very different, with residential development characteristic here. There will be no visual coalescence experienced from along the M5.
- 6.25 When travelling along Langaller Road, a clear physical and visual separation will be retained between the development at Monkton Heathfield, and the Appeal Site and Creech St Michael. Moving east along Langaller Road from the roundabout at the Eastern Relief Road, views are tunnelled east along Langaller Road by the adjoining trees and hedgerows on either side of the road (Photograph 33). The Appeal Site and development at Creech St Michael are screened in views from here by the intervening vegetation and banking along Langaller Road where it crosses the motorway (Photographs 33 and 35). As the viewer moves east along the road, there will be a glimpsed view of the new homes on the Appeal Site from along the bridge (the existing settlement at Creech St Michael is currently visible from here), however, the existing (and proposed) development within Monkton Heathfield will be behind the viewer, and therefore no longer visible. Once over the bridge, the tops of the new homes will be partially visible in heavily filtered views over the intervening hedgerow and tree belt, for approximately 190m, before there will be clear views along the new access road. There will therefore be no visually discernible coalescence between Monkton Heathfield and Creech St Michael, when viewed from vehicles travelling east along Langaller Road. The sense of leaving one settlement and approaching another will be retained.

- 6.26 When travelling west along Langaller Road from the North End junction, the existing houses are partially visible in heavily filtered views through the intervening vegetation. The tops of the new homes will similarly be partially visible in heavily filtered views, with clear, glimpsed views available opposite the new access point to the Appeal Site. Beyond the access point, the tops of new houses will again be partially visible in heavily filtered views, with the development within Monkton Heathfield becoming visible once the viewer is on the bridge over the M5. The existing development at Monkton Heathfield is not visible from opposite the Appeal Scheme's proposed entrance, as seen on Photograph 14, and the new houses will therefore not be seen within the same view as the development at Monkton Heathfield, from along Langaller Road when travelling west.
- 6.27 The exception to these views moving east and west along Langaller Road between the two settlements, are those available to pedestrians when on the bridge over the motorway. As pedestrian move slower and are able to turn their heads safely to look towards the east and the west consecutively, they will be able to see both the development at Creech St Michael, and that at Monkton Heathfield, from the same viewpoint. It will however be clear to the viewer that one settlement lies to the east, and the other to the west, as the view (and settlements) are clearly bisected by the motorway (and the green infrastructure either side of it). The viewer would also have walked along a stretch of road where all development is screened by intervening vegetation, thereby ensuring a transition area is retained when walking between the settlements, which is visually free from development.
- 6.28 I have set out above that the proposed development at the Appeal Site will not result in physical or visual coalescence between Monkton Heathfield and Creech St Michael. Notwithstanding this fact, I have additionally considered the Appeal Scheme against the criteria within draft Policy CSM 11 – Green Wedge, of the emerging Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Development Plan¹. The supporting text to the policy sets out the purpose of the Green Wedge, and I comment on each purpose below:
- *Maintain the existing settlement pattern* – I have set out above how the pattern of development at Creech St Michael will be respected, with the proposed development located a similar distance from the motorway to that to the south west at Sweetings Lane, and to the north, the new development will be contained by Langaller Road,

¹ I defer to Mr Tait on the weight to be attached to the provisions of that Plan.

as are the existing houses east of the Appeal Site. At the detailed design stage, the exact layout of the streets and buildings can be designed to reflect and respect the existing pattern of development within Creech St Michael.

- *Preserve the identity, character, setting and amenity of the village* – The proposed development will not affect the identity of Creech St Michael, and the settlement will remain clearly separated from Monkton Heathfield and Taunton to the west, as well as from Creech Heathfield to the north. At the detailed design stage, the layout and appearance of the new homes can be designed to reflect the existing character of the historic vernacular in Creech St Michael. I have explained earlier that development at the Appeal Site would respect the character of the surrounding landscape and townscape, and that, although the character of the Appeal Site will change, the wider character of the settlement will not be materially affected. I have also set out how the setting of Creech St Michael will not materially change, although the north western edge of the settlement will be formed by Langaller Road for a longer distance than currently. The settlement will still remain bound by the M5 to the west, and agricultural fields to the north and east. The Appeal Site currently has some public access via the public footpath which crosses it, and there are views of the Appeal Site from this public footpath and the one to the south west. The Appeal Scheme shows new areas of public open space to be incorporated within the development, as well as a new children’s play area and informal recreational routes.
- *Prevent the coalescence of Taunton and Creech St Michael, which have very different functions in the Core Strategy settlement hierarchy* – I have explained that there will be no physical or visual coalescence of Taunton and Creech St Michael, due to the Appeal Scheme.

6.29 Draft Policy CSM 11 does not preclude development within the designated Green Wedge, and sets out that development will be resisted where it conflicts with identified purposes. Below, I assess the Appeal Scheme against these six principles:

- *Prevent the coalescence of settlements and maintain a sense of place and identity for neighbourhoods* – I have explained above how the Appeal Scheme complies with this principle.

- *Maintain the open character of a green lung contributing to health and wellbeing for residents* – The Appeal Site is currently private land and only accessible along the public footpath, however, the Appeal Scheme will enhance the Appeal Site’s function in terms of benefiting the health and wellbeing of residents. Although the character of the Appeal Site will change from an open field to an area of new housing, the Development Framework Plan shows 4.6ha of new public open space, including new publicly accessible recreational routes. The areas of public open space are also proposed to be landscaped to enhance the area’s structural vegetation cover and biodiversity, thereby creating areas of open space which offer a range of different experiences, for people of various ages and abilities. The Appeal Scheme also shows an area of proposed allotments or a community orchard, which will further benefit new and existing residents’ wellbeing and health. In addition, the proposed Green Wedge extends over a larger area than the Appeal Site, and the sense of a green lung will be retained.
- *Provide accessible formal and informal recreation, sport and play* – As shown on the Development Framework Plan, the Appeal Scheme includes a children’s equipped play area and recreational routes around the new homes, as well as large areas for informal recreation, which will be accessible to current residents of Creech St Michael as well as to residents of the new homes.
- *Provide valuable wildlife corridors and habitat* – The Appeal Scheme has been designed to maintain and enhance the potential wildlife corridors on the Appeal Site, by retaining the mature boundary vegetation where possible, and by incorporating new native vegetation along these existing boundary features. In addition, new areas of tree, woodland, meadow/long grass and wet habitats are proposed to be created on the Appeal Site, which will not only retain the existing wildlife corridors and habitats, but enhance them.
- *Protect areas of landscape importance and visual amenity* – The Appeal Site is not covered by any designations for landscape or visual quality or value. I have set out earlier that the Appeal Site is relatively ordinary in character, and that its character is influenced by its proximity to the adjoining motorway. In terms of visual amenity, the Appeal Site is visible from the public footway which crosses it

and those to the south west, however, there are already houses visible from these footpaths, and the Appeal Site does not form the only open land visible from here. Although part of the Appeal Site will be developed for new homes, there will also be large parts which will remain as open space, and which will still be visible as such from the footpaths to the south.

- 6.30 In this section, I have shown that the Appeal Scheme will not result in physical or visual coalescence of Creech St Michael with Taunton or Monkton Heathfield, and so would not conflict with draft Policy CSM 11 even if it were to attract weight (an issue dealt with by Mr Tait). I have explained that the Appeal Site is capable of accommodating built development as proposed within the Development Framework Plan, while respecting and reflecting the purposes of the draft local Green Wedge designation.

Valued Landscape

- 6.31 The Reason for Refusal alleges that the Appeal Site is '*valued for its own intrinsic sake*' as part of the countryside around the village, and should therefore be protected.
- 6.32 As set out within GLVIA3 paragraph 5.25, the European Landscape Convention promotes the need to take account of all landscapes, with recognition that ordinary landscapes also have their value. There are many ordinary landscapes around England, including the Appeal Site adjacent to Creech St Michael, and it can be expected that the vast majority of ordinary landscapes on the settlement edges are valued for their own intrinsic sake, i.e. valued as they are open land on the settlement edge. It can clearly not be the case that all countryside around every settlement 'should be protected' because of its intrinsic value. Indeed, the NPPF in paragraph 170a states that valued landscapes should be protected and enhanced '*... (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan)*'. It is therefore clear that the mere fact a landscape is intrinsically valued does not mean it has to be protected from development.
- 6.33 The Appeal Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations, nor are any of its qualities identified within the Development Plan. The Appeal Site is not a valued landscape in relation to paragraph 170a of the NPPF (and the Council do not allege that it is), and my assessment of the Appeal Site against the criteria in Box 5.1 of

the GLVIA3 (**Appendix M**), finds that the Appeal Site is of medium landscape value.

Policy DM1

- 6.34 Policy DM1 states that development proposals, taking into account any mitigation measures proposed, must, amongst other criteria, not lead to unacceptable harm to the appearance and character of any affected landscape, settlement, building or street scene. I have explained above and in Section 5 that development at the Appeal Site will be well related to the existing built form, and will not significantly affect the wider landscape character. The proposals for the Appeal Site therefore conform with this policy requirement.

Policy CP8

- 6.35 Policy CP8 relates to the environment, and includes the statement that development proposals which would harm the natural or historic environment, or the setting of the towns and rural centres, will not be permitted, unless other material factors are sufficient to override their importance. I have explained above how the proposed development will respect and reflect the natural environment of Creech St Michael. I have also set out how the setting of the village will be respected and retained.
- 6.36 The Policy further sets out that development will be supported at sustainable locations to improve green infrastructure, public access, visual amenity and the overall quality of the natural environment. Development will also need to mitigate adverse impacts on the landscape. The DAS shows how a large new area of public open space is proposed to be provided within the south and west of the proposed development, and how this public open space can incorporate new native landscaping, a children's play area, allotments or an orchard, and recreational walking routes. These proposals, along with further tree and shrub planting within the housing areas and along the Appeal Site's boundaries, as well as the proposed woodland planting in the west of the Appeal Site, will filter views of the new homes and help to assimilate them into the surrounding landscape. The new landscaping will lead to a net increase in tree cover and biodiversity on the Appeal Site, and although the Appeal Site is not mentioned within the Green Infrastructure Strategy, the proposals reflect and contribute to the key aims of the Strategy. In addition, the new open spaces will be publicly

accessible, and will allow for recreation within a natural parkland setting, and therefore enhance public access to open space.

6.37 The Policy states that development outside of settlement boundaries will be strictly controlled, and will be permitted in certain instances where it will, amongst other criteria:

- *'be appropriate in terms of scale, siting and design'* – At the detailed design stage, the exact siting, scale and design of the new homes will be decided, however, the DAS shows how the development can be designed to reflect and respect the local historic vernacular and townscape character of Creech St Michael.
- *'protect, conserve or enhance landscape and townscape character whilst maintaining green wedges and open breaks between settlements'* – I have set out earlier in this section how the proposals will have no material effect on the townscape or wider landscape character around the Appeal Site. I have also explained that an undeveloped area will be retained between the M5 motorway and the proposed houses, and that the development will not affect the individual characters of Creech St Michael, Monkton Heathfield or Creech Heathfield.
- *'protect, conserve or enhance the interests of natural and historic assets'* – The Archaeological Desk Based Assessment which was submitted as part of the Application, sets out that there are no Conservation Areas or Listed Buildings in the vicinity of the Appeal Site, and that there is no likelihood of significant archaeological remains within the Appeal Site. The DAS shows how the development can be accommodated while retaining and enhancing the majority of the landscape features on the Appeal Site's boundaries.
- *'protect habitats and species ... conserve and expand the biodiversity'* – The large proposed areas of open space could accommodate areas of new native tree, woodland, thicket and wildflower planting, which would increase the biodiversity of the Appeal Site. The proposals amount to a net biodiversity enhancement.
- *'provide for necessary mitigation measures'* – The proposals allow for new structural vegetation to be incorporated along the boundaries

of the Appeal Site to screen and filter views from the houses to the south and east, and views from the roads to the north and west, mitigating near distance views of the proposed development.

Policy ENV1

- 6.38 The policy deals with the protection of trees, woodland, orchards and hedgerows, and states that development should seek to minimise impact on these features, and should seek to provide a net gain where possible. I have set out earlier in my evidence that some structural vegetation will require removal in the north of the Appeal Scheme to accommodate the new vehicular access and visibility splays, however, as evident on the Development Framework Plan and as I have set out before, the proposals allow for large areas of open space which could accommodate new trees, woodland and hedgerows. As shown on the Development Framework Plan, the Appeal Scheme will result in a net increase in tree, woodland and hedgerow cover.

Policy DM2, Policy SP4 and Policy SB1

- 6.39 These policies are concerned with settlement limits and development location, and are dealt with by Mr Tait.

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7.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

- 7.1 This evidence is submitted on behalf of Gladman Developments Ltd in respect of an appeal against the refusal of an outline planning application for the erection of up to 200 dwellings with public open space, landscaping and sustainable drainage system with vehicular access off Langaller Lane, Creech St Michael. The Application is in outline with all matters reserved save for access.
- 7.2 The Application was refused under delegated powers for four reasons, of which reason 3 is of relevance to my evidence. The Reason for Refusal alleges that the Appeal Scheme will be a significant visual intrusion and change the character and appearance of the environment around Creech St Michael. It further alleges that the development will lead to a direct loss of the gap separating Taunton and Creech St Michael, and that it is unacceptable in visual terms, due to coalescence. Finally, it alleges that the Appeal Site is valued for its own intrinsic sake as part of the countryside, and should therefore be protected from sporadic unplanned development.
- 7.3 The Appeal Site comprises a large, irregularly shaped, arable field at the northern edge of the built up area at Creech St Michael, 11.4ha in size. It is bordered to the north by Langaller Road; to the north west by the M5 motorway; to the south west is an area of grassland and farmland beyond which is a recreation ground; and to the south and south east is existing housing (including recently completed developments) within the settlement. Beyond the M5, development as part of the new urban extension at Monkton Heathfield is underway, with the fields to the west of the motorway forming part of the Green Wedge to the east of Taunton.
- 7.4 There is a public footpath (T 10/14) which crosses the southern part of the Appeal Site in an east to west direction, leading from North End and exiting the Appeal Site at the south western corner.
- 7.5 The Appeal Site has a distinctly domed landform with a high point of approximately 23.5m AOD at the mid-point of the northern boundary. The landform generally falls to the south and west to a low point at the southern Appeal Site boundary of 16m AOD.
- 7.6 Taunton and the outlying settlements lie within the Vale of Taunton Deane. The Vale is enclosed to the north by the Quantock Hills, to the west by the Brendon Hills at the edge of Exmoor, and to the south are

the Blackdown Hills. To the east of Taunton are a number of smaller hills which lend some enclosure to the Vale at this point. These include the higher ground at Knap, Thorn Hill and Stoke Hill which are all visible landmarks in views out of the Appeal Site. To the north, the rising ground at the edge of the Quantock Hills forms the backdrop to views in this direction.

- 7.7 The Taunton Deane Landscape Character Assessment (2011) places the Appeal Site within Landscape Type 1: Farmed and Settled Low Vale, and Landscape Character Area 1a: Vale of Taunton Dean, with the landscape condition of Area 1a assessed as being moderate, with a moderate to strong strength of landscape character. It also notes that there are detracting features, including transport corridors, intrusive signage and pylons.
- 7.8 The Appeal Site is not covered by any statutory or non-statutory designations for landscape character or quality. It contains no landscape features of note and is undistinguished in terms of character. To the north is Langaller Road, whilst the traffic and highway infrastructure associated with the M5 road corridor are conspicuous in views over the north western Appeal Site boundary. The trees and hedgerows along the Appeal Site boundaries are of moderate landscape quality, however, the interior of the Appeal Site is pleasant, but undistinguished. The Appeal Site is considered to be of medium landscape quality and sensitivity.
- 7.9 The adjoining townscape in the vicinity of the Appeal Site is not designated for its architectural or historic value or quality, and comprises mostly 20th and 21st Century development. The residential areas are pleasant, and are assessed as being of medium townscape quality, sensitivity and value.
- 7.10 In terms of landscape value, the Appeal Site is not covered by any designations for landscape character or quality, nor are any of its qualities identified within the Council's development plan. It exhibits relatively ordinary landscape qualities and is subject to a number of visual detractors. There is limited public access to the Appeal Site via the public footpath which crosses it, with further public footpaths adjoining it. My assessment of the Appeal Site against the criteria in Box 5.1 of the GLVIA3 finds that the Appeal Site is of medium landscape value. The Appeal Site is not a valued landscape in relation to paragraph 170a of the NPPF and I note that the Council do not allege that it is.

- 7.11 The proposals, which are in outline, are for residential development of up to 200 new dwellings, with associated infrastructure and open space. The key development principles are shown on the Development Framework Plan and described in the Design and Access Statement.
- 7.12 The Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer in her response to the consultation on the Application, raised no objections, and supported the findings of the Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment produced by CSA Environmental as part of the Application, concluding that the '*new development would be well related to the existing settlement edge of Creech St Michael*' (my underlining).
- 7.13 The Appeal Site is well related to the existing settlement edge of Creech St Michael, a fact noted and agreed by the Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer. It is bordered by existing residential development to the south and south east and lies in close proximity to recent development at the northern edge of the settlement. The Appeal Scheme also benefits from strong, defensible boundaries, forming robust separations between the proposed development at the Appeal Site and the wider countryside and adjoining settlements.
- 7.14 The majority of the trees and hedgerows along the Appeal Site boundaries will be retained and strengthened, with new planting incorporated within the development to filter views of the new homes, enhance the Appeal Site's landscape structure and diversity, and increase biodiversity. The Council's Landscape and Biodiversity Officer agreed that there are no landscape features of note contained within the Appeal Site. New areas of public open space will be created within the development, and will allow space for species-rich grassland and habitat creation. Overall, the proposals can deliver a significant net increase in tree cover and species diversity.
- 7.15 The existing public footpath across the Appeal Site can be retained along its current alignment within a green corridor. There will be no direct effects on the route of the footpath, although it is likely that it will require surfacing in anticipation of its increased use. The proposals make provision for new footpath connections to the existing rights of way, and will provide new areas of publicly accessible open space and a new play area, which will be accessible to both the new and existing community.
- 7.16 The visual appraisal identified that there are a number of localised views of the Appeal Site from neighbouring dwellings and public vantage points. In addition, there are some long distance views over the low lying

Vale landscape from the surrounding higher ground. In the vast majority of cases, the proposed development will be seen within the context of the existing built form in the north of Creech St Michael, and will not appear out of character within the receiving landscape. The new homes will be visible from the public footpath which crosses it, however, the Development Framework Plan shows how the views of the new homes can be softened and limited, by retaining a 38m deep green area of landscaped open space between the path and the new homes.

- 7.17 The M5 motorway, along with the designated Green Wedge between it and Monkton Heathfield, and the proposed open space at the north western part of the Appeal Scheme, form a robust physical separation between the development at Monkton Heathfield and that within Creech St Michael. The new development will be no closer to the M5 motorway or the proposed development at Monkton Heathfield, than the current built extent of Creech St Michael to the south west of the Appeal Site, and the gap between the settlements will be no narrower than currently. Development at the Appeal Site will clearly not result in physical coalescence between the settlements.
- 7.18 There is no intervisibility between the built development at Monkton Heathfield and Creech St Michael, and even winter views are expected to be heavily filtered. There will therefore be no unacceptable visual coalescence between Monkton Heathfield and the Appeal Scheme, in terms of intervisibility. The intervening vegetation will ensure a clear visual distinction between the settlements, when viewed from within each of them. Similarly, I have explained why there will be no visual coalescence in views from the M5 motorway or Langaller Road.
- 7.19 The emerging Creech St Michael Neighbourhood Development Plan designates the Appeal Site and land to the north and south, as a Green Wedge. I have set out in my evidence how the Appeal Site can be developed in line with the proposals, while respecting the purposes of the Green Wedge (whilst noting that the Plan has yet to be made).
- 7.20 Although the character of the Appeal Site will change from an open field to residential development and associated infrastructure and open space, the new homes will not be out of character within the receiving landscape, which already contains 20th Century housing development, as well as main roads. The Appeal Site benefits from clear, defensible boundaries which will form a firm settlement edge, marking the separation between the built development and the countryside, and adjoining settlements, beyond. Where the new homes are visible from

the wider surroundings, they will most often be seen within the context of the existing settlement at Creech St Michael and the M5, and will not introduce an uncharacteristic element into these views. Development at the Appeal Site will therefore not have a significant effect on the wider landscape character.

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