



Shinfield Studios Phase 3

Landscape and Visual Technical Note

On behalf of **Shinfield Studios Ltd.**

Introduction

- 1.1 Stantec was commissioned by Shinfield Studios Ltd. to undertake a landscape and visual appraisal regarding the Shinfield Studios Phase 3 proposals on land at and near Oldhouse Farm ('the Site'), in order to inform the rationale for the design of additional workshops, backlot and parking ('the Proposed Development').
- 1.2 The objective of this document is to summarise the context of the Site, key landscape planning policies, guidance and character evidence, the features and character of the Site and its visual amenity, as well as general recommendations with regard to the Proposed Development. This document is not intended to comprise a full Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment.
- 1.3 It should be noted that an existing permission (ID 222906) covers the south-eastern 3.53 hectares of the Site, for proposed backlot development (for a period of five years) for external filming including temporary film sets, with development potential up to 15m in height across the majority of the area.

Site Context

- 1.4 The Site comprises agricultural land and previously developed land (the buildings that form Oldhouse Farm, i.e., the farmstead) to the north-east of the village of Shinfield. It sits within a gently undulating landscape formed of the River Loddon valley surrounded by rising land to the north-west and south-east. The topography of the study area varies only moderately, from 35m to 85m Above Ordnance Datum (AOD). The River Loddon Valued Landscape covers the river corridor and wider river valley, including the Site.
- 1.5 Large scale commercial and industrial built form is present to the north of the Site, including the Shinfield Studios site and the British Museum Archaeological Research Collection facility. To the east, south and west the Site is bounded by agricultural land and woodland. The wider context of the Site is characterised by settlement at Shinfield to the west and Reading to the north, and agricultural land to the south and east with smaller scattered settlements and isolated residences. The M4 bisects the study area 280m to the north of the Site, and pylons cross the agricultural land along the river corridor immediately to the east of the Site.
- 1.6 The agricultural context of the Site is generally well wooded, with tree belts and treed hedgerows lining the river corridor, forming the majority of field boundaries and linking woodland blocks interspersed throughout the landscape. Some of the woodland is ancient, including St John's Copse immediately to the north-east of the Site.
- 1.7 A network of Public Rights of Way (PRoW) is present throughout the rural portion of the study area, and two footpaths, PRoW SHIN3 and SHIN4, extend along the western Site boundary. Proposed Greenway routes (the Loddon Long Distance Path) follow the north-western and south-western Site boundaries, although these have not yet been implemented.

Landscape Policy and Guidance

- 1.8 The National Planning Policy Framework was most recently revised in December 2024, and requires planning policies and decisions to protect and enhance valued landscapes and recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside (Paragraph 187).
- 1.9 Between 2023 and 2026, Wokingham Borough Council expects to complete and adopt the Local Plan Update, which will become part of the development plan to 2040 upon its adoption, replacing the Core Strategy. The Local Plan Update Regulation 19 consultation has now closed, and the council is currently in the process of collating and analysing all comments received, before undertaking any further work required and submitting the Local Plan Update and all supporting documents to the Secretary of State. Policies SS5, C4 and NE1-6 are likely to be of most relevance to the Proposed Development in respect of landscape and visual matters.

- 1.10** The adopted Wokingham Borough Core Strategy (2010) states that sites designated as of importance for nature conservation should be conserved and enhanced, and that the degree of protection given will be appropriate to the status of the site in terms of its international or national importance (Policy CP7 – Biodiversity).
- 1.11** The Wokingham Borough Managing Development Delivery Plan SPD (2014) states that proposals should protect and enhance the Borough's green infrastructure networks, and mitigate new development by protecting existing trees, hedges and other landscape features and incorporating native planting and landscaping as an integral part of the scheme (Policy CC03 – Green Infrastructure, Trees and Landscaping). It requires that appropriate buffer zones be provided between development proposals and designated sites, including through the protection and provision of continuous wildlife corridors (Policy TB23 – Biodiversity and Development).
- 1.12** The Wokingham Borough Design Guide SPD (2012) requires development to respond positively to its site and local context, including existing natural features of value, including the countryside, mature trees, hedges and field patterns, rivers and wetlands (paragraph G1 – General Principles).
- 1.13** The Shinfield Neighbourhood Plan (2017) requires the provision of high quality landscape works and tree planting along designated green routes and green route enhancement areas, (Policy 2 – General Design Principles), and states that commercial proposals must not result in an unacceptable loss of amenity for neighbouring land uses (Policy 11: Commercial Development).

Published Landscape Character Evidence

- 1.14** National Character Area Profile 115: Thames Valley is described as flat and low-lying land, rising to low, river-terraced hills, densely populated and developed, with limited farming within a medium-scale and irregular field pattern. The Statements of Environmental Opportunity support the creation of green infrastructure including woodland to reduce the impact of development.
- 1.15** The Wokingham Borough Landscape Character Assessment (2019) identifies the area within which the Site is located as Landscape Character Area (LCA) A2 Loddon River Valley. The LCA is described as an agricultural landscape of irregular large scale arable fields and small scale wet meadows, largely peaceful but with disturbance from major roads including the M4. Guidelines for the LCA include the following: conserve the scenic quality and naturalistic character of the river corridor; increase the extent of native deciduous woodland; reinstate or repair hedgerows with native species; and conserve, enhance and manage wetland habitats.
- 1.16** Wokingham Borough Council published a Valued Landscapes Assessment in September 2024, building on a previous topic paper published in 2020 as well as on the Landscape Character Assessment published in 2019. It identifies 13 areas within the borough as Valued Landscapes, being of the highest quality and most value that merit designation as such. The Site falls within the River Loddon Valued Landscape. It is described as representing a significant green and blue infrastructure corridor running diagonally across the southern half of the borough. It is valued for its character and appearance, biodiversity, history, perceptual qualities, recreational value and associations.

Site Appraisal

- 1.17** The Site covers existing surfaced roads within its northern extents, including part of Cutbush Lane East and the access road connecting it to the farmstead in the centre of the Site, which includes two Grade II listed buildings, namely Oldhouse Farmhouse and Oldhouse Farm Barn to the south. The southernmost portion of the Shinfield Studios development (known as 'Phase 1') is present within the Site to the north of the farmstead (existing workshops and stages W1-W3D and S15-S18), and between the farmstead and Phase 1 runs an unnamed watercourse branching around pasture and discharging into the River Loddon to the east.

- 1.18** To the north of the watercourse, the Site covers part of an arable field, and to the south of the watercourse, the Site occupies part of another arable field surrounding a rectangular lot of unmetalled hardstanding enclosed by artificial banks (the temporary backlot). The branching watercourse is well wooded both within and external to the Site, as are the routes of PRoW SHIN3 and SHIN4 as they border the Site. Individual scattered trees are present along the southern Site boundary where this boundary is otherwise unvegetated. The Site is broadly level.
- 1.19** The Site has a moderate visual relationship with its agricultural context as, although it is well enclosed in many directions by both woodland and built form, parts of the Site boundary cross open portions of field parcels or follow denuded field boundaries, such as along the southern edge of the Site. The Site is moderately representative of its agricultural context, including the River Loddon Valued Landscape, although much of the northern and western Site extents are characterised by built form, whereas the undeveloped fields exhibit characteristics similar to those of the wider rural surroundings. There is some tranquillity and remoteness perceived within these parts of the Site, although this is limited by the audible intrusion of traffic on the M4 and the visual intrusion of existing built form within and adjacent to the Site as well as the pylons along the south-eastern boundary.

Visual Appraisal

- 1.20** The public accessibility of the Site is limited to the surfaced roads within the northern extents and a 100m section of PRoW SHIN4 that skirts the south-western corner of the Site. As such, views available to the public from within the Site are confined to these short sections of the routes. Where these routes continue adjacent to the boundary outside the Site, views into the Site range from partially filtered and screened to entirely truncated by intervening hedgerows and tree belts along the Site boundaries. Glimpsed to partial views are available, being more heavily screened by the predominantly deciduous vegetation in summer.
- 1.21** Further from the Site, the tree belts and woodland blocks obscure the majority of long distance views, especially since the gently undulating topography does not offer very elevated vantage points from which to obtain long distance panoramic views. In winter the layering effect of branches is likely to continue to prevent long distance views.
- 1.22** Near distance views from within the Site are available from private property, including the farmstead and the Phase 1 Shinfield Studios development. Views for receptors in these locations are partial, given the location and orientation of existing built form and the irregular shape of the Site in combination with structural vegetation both within it and along its boundaries.

Proposed Development

- 1.23** A modular office is proposed within the north-western extents of the Site, to the north of Workshop 1 within the Phase 1 area. The office will be a standalone building three storeys in height, oriented perpendicular to Cutbush Lane East. It will be located in an area that is currently occupied by hardstanding (in use as car parking), offset from the Root Protection Area of the tree line to the north, and as such will have no adverse impacts on existing landscape features. Impacts on visual receptors using Cutbush Lane East and PRoW SHIN3 will be limited given the existing built form of a similar height and scale already visible adjacent to the proposed office.
- 1.24** The location and orientation of Workshop 3E will round off the development area of Phase 1, occupying an area surrounded on two sides by Workshop 3 to the north and Workshop 3D to the west. It will be attached to Workshop 3D and will be read as an extension of it, providing a rational collective footprint to this series of buildings. Workshop 3E is unlikely to be visible from publicly accessible locations, as views from Cutbush Lane East to the north will be curtailed by the existing built form of the Phase 1 development, and views from the majority of PRoW SHIN3 to the west will be almost entirely curtailed by Workshop 3D.

- 1.25** From PRoW SHIN3 and SHIN4, views of Workshops 3E, 4, 5 and 6 and the proposed backlot will be heavily filtered and partially screened by intervening hedgerow vegetation along the field boundary, except in a few places where gaps in the vegetation and field access openings allow glimpsed to partial views. The heights of these workshops will be limited to a maximum of 8m, such that the visual impact will be limited and they will be in keeping with the heights of the existing built form, which will form the backdrop against which the proposed workshops will be seen. The backlot (of which part of the area has temporary permission for such a use (ID 222906)) and parking will be at ground level and as such will have a minimal impact on visual amenity.
- 1.26** The proposed SSL office will occupy the footprint of an existing office to the west of the Oldhouse Farm Barn and Workshop 5 will occupy the footprint of an existing barn, and as such there will be little impact on landscape or visual receptors. Workshop 4 will be positioned immediately to the west of Workshop 5, aligned with it and in the same orientation. Both will be set back from the southern boundary.
- 1.27** Workshop 6 will be located to the east of Workshop 5. It will not be attached to Workshop 5, although it will be parallel to it in orientation and aligned with it. This will limit the perception of Workshops 4-6 as multiple separate buildings. All three will be oriented broadly parallel to the route of the watercourse to the north and will therefore also be aligned to the contours of their landscape context. Orienting Workshop 6 this way and aligning it with Workshop 5 will maximise the buffer between the proposed built form and the wider agricultural landscape context to the south. The area over which the proposed built form extends will be kept compact. Workshop 6 will be further away from receptors on PRoW SHIN4 than the other workshops, and will be seen in the context of Workshop 5 in its immediate foreground, which will replace existing built form on the same footprint. Where visible, it will be seen against the backdrop of the woodland canopy to its north. Orienting Workshop 6 this way and aligning it with Workshop 5 will avoid the obstruction of any longer distance views from PRoW SHIN 4 across the Site to the wider landscape to the east. These factors will further reduce any resulting visual impact.

Recommendations

- 1.28** The most appreciable potential impacts of the Proposed Development are likely to be on the character of the Site, the River Loddon Valued Landscape, and pedestrians on PRoW SHIN3 and SHIN4. There is good potential for mitigation of effects on these receptors through the considered location, orientation and heights of the proposed buildings, the selection of the materials palettes, and the introduction of hedgerow reinforcement planting.
- 1.29** Limiting the heights of the proposed buildings will help to ensure that they are in keeping with the character of built form within their surroundings, and that their visual envelope is kept to a minimum. Orienting the buildings broadly perpendicular to the nearest PRoW will help to retain the visual permeability and minimise near distance views of long elevations.
- 1.30** Hedgerow reinforcement planting along the southern boundary in particular will help to reduce adverse effects on pedestrians on PRoW SHIN4 and the wider River Loddon Valued Landscape. Other planting throughout the Site will also contribute to mitigation and enhance the character of the Site and the Valued Landscape both within and external to the Site.
- 1.31** Other receptors also have the potential to be subject to adverse effects, such as the trees within the Site and the ancient woodland immediately to the north-east, and the character of the watercourse corridor within and adjacent to the Site. There is a good potential for mitigation of adverse effects by setting back the footprint of the development away from these receptors beyond a protective buffer and the introduction of naturalistic SuDS features.
- 1.32** The set of receptors mentioned above is not exhaustive but covers some of the most sensitive receptors likely to be subject to the greatest magnitude of change. It is likely that there will be the potential to implement mitigation measures that will benefit most, if not all, of the receptors, and that the landscape will have the capacity to accommodate the Proposed Development without unacceptable impacts, and with some appreciable benefits.