

Proposed Residential Development on  
Land between Houghton Grange and The How  
Houghton Road, Houghton  
Application Ref: 23/00627/OUT



## **IMPLICATIONS FOR SEPARATION BETWEEN HOUGHTON AND ST. IVES**

prepared by

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on behalf of

Houghton and Wyton Parish Council

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# 1. Introduction

1.1 Peter Radmall Associates have been commissioned by Houghton and Wyton Parish Council to review the implications of the proposed residential development on land between Houghton Grange and The How, Houghton Road, Houghton (ref 23/00627/OUT) for maintaining separation between Houghton village and the built-up area of St. Ives.

1.2 The description of development is as follows:

*Outline planning permission with all matters reserved for the construction of up to 120 homes (Use Class C3) with associated public open space, landscaping, play areas, surface water attenuation, roads, car parking, pedestrian and cycle routes, utility infrastructure and associated works*

1.3 A landscape and visual appraisal (LVA, AECOM, March 2023) has been submitted in support of the application. A review of the LVA has been presented as a separate document.

1.4 This note is organised as follows:

- Section 2 summarizes the relevant policy context;
- Section 3 describes the current relationship between Houghton and St. Ives and the contribution made by the site;
- Section 4 assesses the impact of the proposed development on spatial and visual separation; and
- Section 5 provides a summary and conclusion, including the implications for relevant policy.

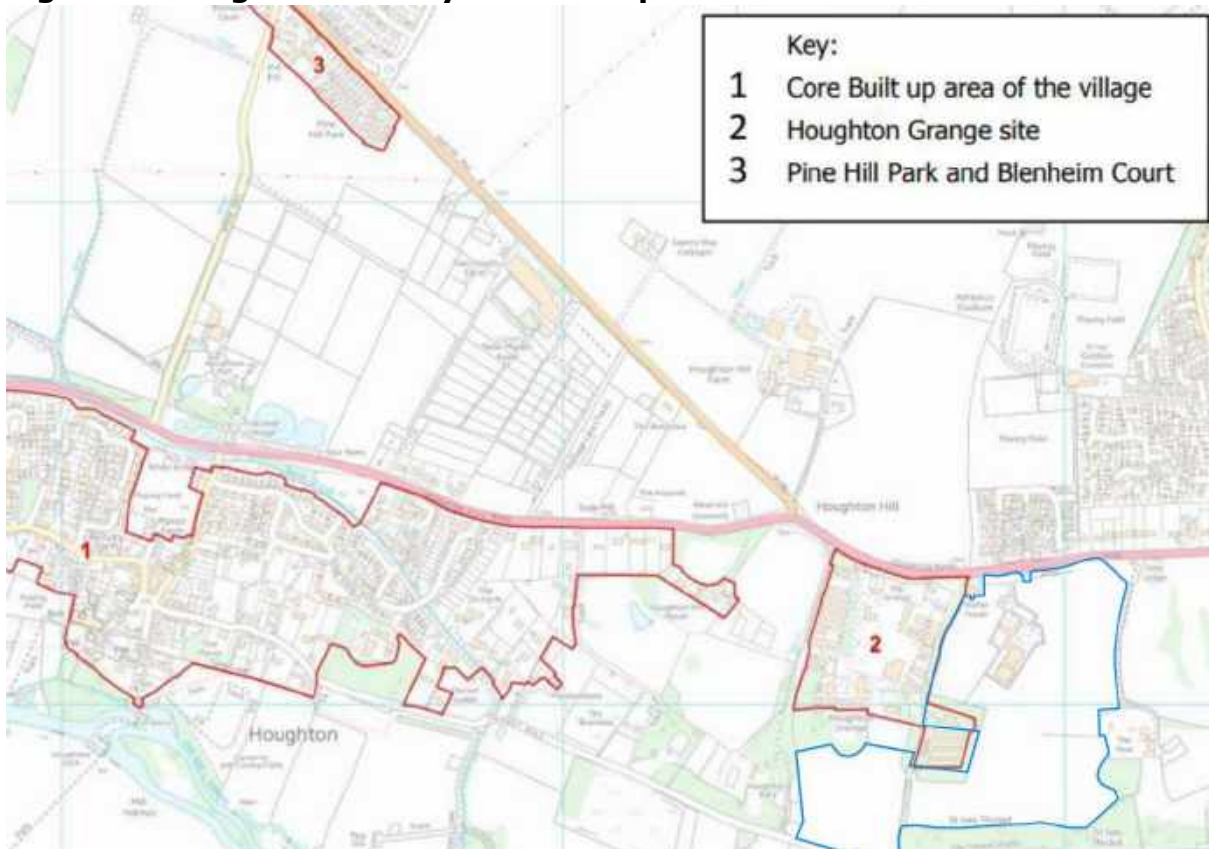
1.5 This exercise has been based on a site visit, discussions with Parish Council members and review of relevant documentation, notably the Neighbourhood Plan, the LVA, the NPPF and the applicant's Planning Statement.

## 2. Policy Context

### Neighbourhood Plan

- 2.1 Objective 3 of the NP is “*To retain the separate identity of Houghton and Wyton as a small rural village and avoid any further merging with neighbouring towns and villages.*”
- 2.2 This objective is directly reflected in two NP policies:
- HWNP1: Houghton and Wyton built up area; and
  - HWNP3: Anti-coalescence.
- 2.3 Policy HWNP1 defines the built-up area boundary for the village and confirms that areas outside this boundary form part of the open countryside. Proposals within this area are considered to “*be acceptable where they comply with relevant policies for building in the countryside.*” The site’s relationship to the built-up area boundary (shown as a red line) is shown in **Figure 1** (extracted from NP Figure 3, with the site boundary added as a blue line).

**Figure 1: Houghton and Wyton Built-Up Area**



- 2.4 As can be seen, the site lies immediately to the east and south of the Houghton Grange part of the built-up area. This forms an outlier of recent development within the greater part of the former poultry research station that occupied the

site from 1948-1992. This development, known as Houghton Grange Phase 1, is partly (c20%) complete and is accessed through the application site from the signalised junction on Houghton Road opposite Garner Drive. In the context of NP policy, the site is therefore located within open countryside.

2.5 Policy HWNP3 states the following: *“Development proposals should respect the individual and distinct identities of the village of Houghton and Wyton and the town of St Ives. Development will not be permitted if, individually or cumulatively, it would result in the loss of the visual and physical separation between these two settlements, or would lead to their coalescence.”*

2.6 The following main themes emerge from this:

- i. The policy explicitly applies to separation between the village and St. Ives;
- ii. Separation implies the maintenance of sufficient undeveloped (and ideally greenfield) land between the settlements to be perceived as an open gap. Openness can be interpreted both spatially (i.e. in terms of the absence of built development) and/or visually (i.e. so as to maintain a degree of visibility across the gap).
- iii. The policy test refers to loss of separation, which can reasonably be interpreted to mean a “material reduction” as well as its elimination, as would result from coalescence (i.e. merging); and
- iv. This can apply both to an individual development and to its cumulative effect, taking account of existing and/or other consented developments.

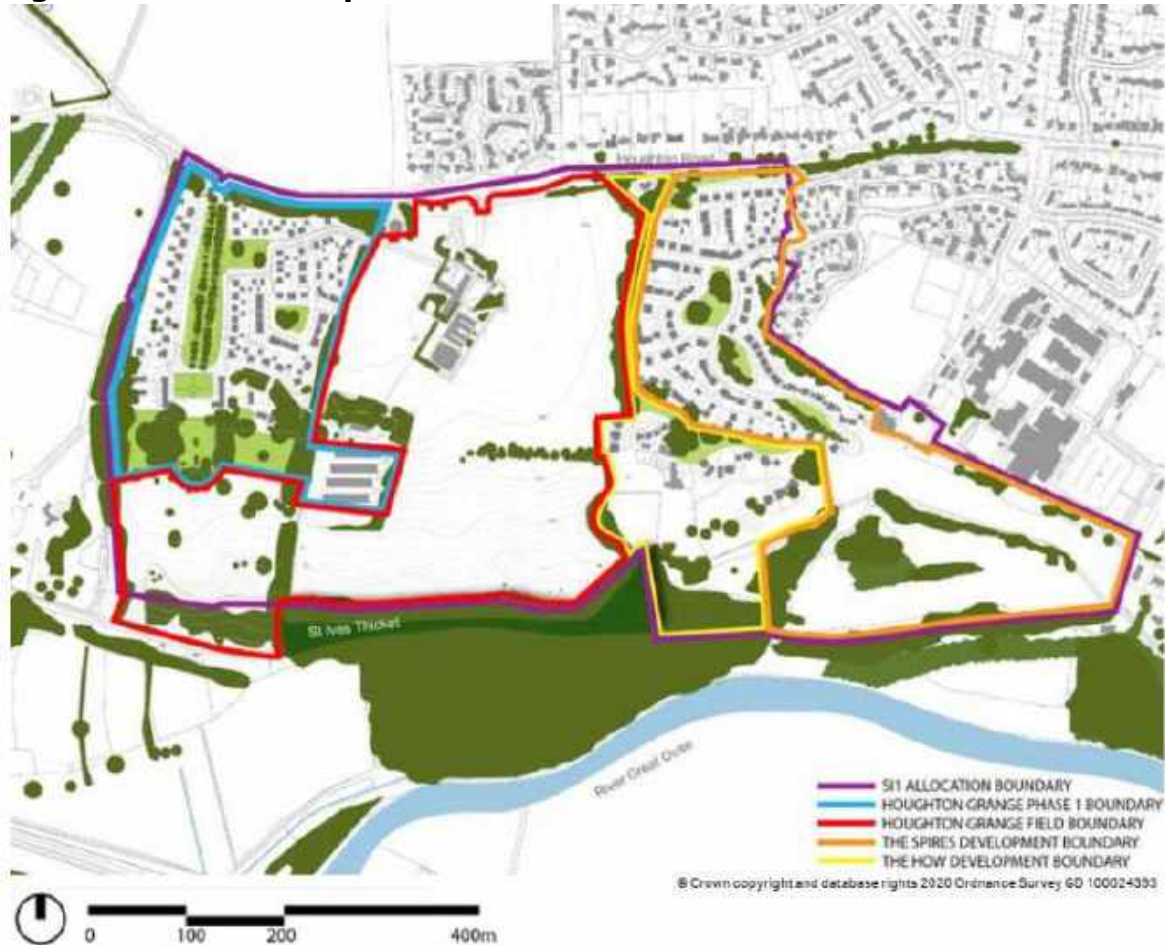
2.7 The last point above is specifically relevant in view of the allocated status of the application site, and recent extension of the settlement edge of St. Ives up to the parish boundary (see below).

#### Local Plan Allocation

2.8 The application site, together with Houghton Grange Phase 1 (to the west) and a triangular area to the east (most of which was formerly the St. Ives Golf Course), fall within Strategic Allocation S11: St. Ives West, as identified in the Local Plan (May 2019). The site’s relationship to this area is shown on **Figure 2**.

2.9 The northern parcel of land to the east has now been built out (The Spires), whilst development of the land to the south of this (The How) is underway. With completion of these developments, the application site (known as the BBSRC field) represents the last remaining parcel of open land separating the settlement edges of Houghton/Wyton and St. Ives.

**Figure 2: Relationship to St. Ives West Allocation**



- 2.10 This is acknowledged in Policy S11, which states that: *“Once developed, parts of this site that comply with the 'Built-up Areas definition' will form part of the built-up areas of St Ives or Houghton and Wyton as appropriate and considered as part of such for the purposes of determining planning applications.”* Until that time, however, the site is to continue to be regarded as open countryside.
- 2.11 The need to retain a degree of separation is also acknowledged in the policy, which states that *“Successful development of the site will require... a landscape scheme design recognising vistas, boundaries and the surrounding green infrastructure network, to be particularly focused on restoring the tree lined approach on the south side of the A1123 and maintaining a sense of separation between developments at Houghton Grange and The Spires.”*
- 2.12 Para 11.9 of the explanatory text states that: *“Housing development should be predominantly situated in the northern part of the site and arranged in a series of clusters separated by green corridors running north-south through the site both to screen and separate areas of development and to connect through to the greenspace in the south of the site. A substantial band of greenspace should be retained through the portion of the BBSRC field to the east of the derelict buildings and up to the western edge of residential development at 'The Spires'. Management plans should be prepared for the greenspaces within the site which should encourage ecological diversity”.*

## Other Policy

- 2.13 As noted above, the status of the site remains that of open countryside (until such time as it has been developed). This means that the following policies and guidance also remain engaged:
- i. Local Plan 10: The Countryside;
  - ii. Local Plan 31: Trees, Woodland, Hedges and Hedgerows;
  - iii. Huntingdonshire's Landscape and Townscape Assessment SPD (2007);  
and
  - iv. NPPF 174 re the need for "*planning...decisions [to] contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment [my emphasis] by...(b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside...*"
- 2.14 It should be noted that it is arguable whether NPPF 174(a) re valued landscape may also be engaged. Whilst the value of the site and its setting has not been assessed in the LVA with a view to confirming this, it is clear that parts of it are of value (e.g. within the conservation areas and their setting). In addition, the "host" character area in which the site is located (LCA 4: Ouse Valley) is, according to the Neighbourhood Plan, "*what makes this such a special place to live or visit*" [NP 3.4]. It is also noted that this part of the Great Ouse Valley is a candidate for designation as an AONB, and that the application site falls within the defined area (ref separate LVA review).

### 3. Role of the Site in Maintaining Separation

#### Physical Separation

- 3.1 The character of the site and its relationship to the surrounding areas is shown in **Figure 3**. This aerial photo (from Google Earth) is now somewhat outdated, in that the poultry sheds that formerly occupied the central/northern part of the site have been demolished, and the junction/access road serving Houghton Grange Phase 1 has been completed. In addition, development within Houghton Grange and The How is well advanced.

**Figure 3: Overview of Site and Immediate Context**



- 3.2 The main part of the site clearly remains as the last “gap” of open land to the south of Houghton Road, separating the settlement edge of St. Ives from that of Houghton (as represented by the eastern edge of Houghton Grange Phase 1). This separating function is reinforced by the open and/or greenfield condition of most of the site, and the buffers of established vegetation that form its western and eastern boundaries. These features also reinforce its role as part of the open countryside.
- 3.3 The relatively recent completion of the Garner Drive development, to the north of Houghton Road, has extended the settlement edge of St. Ives the equivalent distance along the site frontage. As a result, this separating function is essentially interrupted by a pinch-point at the water-tower, before it is resumed



by the arable land to the north of Houghton Grange. This has become a “gateway” location in terms of how the transition between Houghton and St. Ives is perceived on the ground (see below).

### Visual Separation

3.4 The separating function of the site is best appreciated from the sequence of views experienced along Houghton Road. **Figures 4-10** below show the views travelling eastwards from Houghton, the key features of which are as follows:

- Fig 4: Just east of the Sawtreay Way junction, the vegetated frontage to Houghton Grange frames the view to the right, whilst open views are gained across arable land towards the settlement edge of St. Ives to the left.
- Fig 5: Approaching the historic entrance to Houghton Grange, the lodges interrupt the vegetated frontage to the right, whilst a sense of openness is retained beyond the hedgerow to the left.
- Fig 6: Approaching the water-tower, new dwellings are seen through the vegetated frontage of Houghton Grange to the right, whilst a view opens up to the left towards the settlement edge of St. Ives. The water-tower is behind the group of conifers in the middle ground.
- Fig 7: At the “pinch-point” approaching the St. Ives welcome sign, the settlement edge of St. Ives approaches the road corridor from the left, whilst the site frontage opens up beyond the trees to the right.
- Fig 8: At the Garner Drive/Houghton Road junction, the proximity of the settlement edge to the left, and the urbanizing influence of the junction, are evident. However, the site reintroduces a sense of openness to the right, providing views towards the vegetated frontage to The Spires.
- Fig 9: Despite the paraphernalia associated with the access road (temporary screen fencing, flagpoles etc), the site clearly retains a greenfield condition, providing views towards the vegetated frontage of The How.
- Fig 10: The road corridor begins to close in as it approaches the settlement edge, although the site retains a sense of openness to the right, with development in The Spires visible beyond.

3.5 **Figures 11-16** below show the views travelling westwards out of St. Ives, the key features of which are as follows:

- Fig 11: At the entrance to The How, whilst the road corridor is well vegetated, it is clearly embedded within the built-up area (note the driveways accessing it to the right).

**Figure 4: Eastward View along Houghton Road (a)**



**Figure 5: Eastward View along Houghton Road (b)**



**Figure 6: Eastward View along Houghton Road (c)**



**Figure 7: Eastward View along Houghton Road (d)**



**Figure 8: Eastward View along Houghton Road (e)**



**Figure 9: View into Site from Garner Drive**



**Figure 10: Eastward View along Houghton Road (f)**



- Fig 12: Beyond The How, the site begins to open up to the left, with the Houghton and Wyton welcome sign visible in the middle ground, whilst the road corridor also widens on the approach to Garner Drive.
- Fig 13: Approaching the junction, the openness of the site is very evident to the left (even though the roadside hedgerow screens its greenfield cover). Medium-distance views are gained towards the vegetated frontage of Houghton Grange, with the settlement edge of St. Ives visible to the right.

- Fig 14: View north-westwards, looking towards the “pinch-point” at the water-tower. The openness of the arable land beyond the settlement edge is apparent, with the vegetated character of Houghton Grange to the left.
- Fig 15: View from the pinch-point, with the water-tower visible to the left, the vegetated frontage of Houghton Grange beyond, and the openness maintained by the arable fields north of the road to the right.
- Fig 16: New dwellings within Houghton Grange are visible to the left, within an otherwise vegetated frontage, whilst the arable land maintains openness to the right.

**Figure 11: Westward View along Houghton Road (a)**



**Figure 12: Westward View along Houghton Road (b)**



**Figure 13: Westward View along Houghton Road (c)**



**Figure 14: View from Site Access Road**



**Figure 15: Westward View along Houghton Road (d)**



**Figure 16: Westward View along Houghton Road (e)**



### Other Views

3.6 The openness of the site can also be appreciated from LVA VP5, which is taken from a PRoW on its southern boundary – ref **Figure 17** below (and **Figure 19** for the VP location). Three key points should be noted from this view:

- Apart from the poultry sheds seen on the skyline in the centre of the view, the character of the site is dominated by its grassland cover and its established tree belts, which give it a semi-parkland appearance.

- These sheds have since been demolished, and at the time of my own site visit (in May 2022) had been reduced to a mound of rubble (ref **Figure 18**); and
- Neither the settlement edge of St Ives nor buildings within the Houghton Grange Phase 1 site are visible in the LVA view.

3.7 The perception of the site from LVA VP5 reinforces both its role as part of the open countryside and its contribution to maintaining visual openness as a foil to both the vegetated character of Houghton Grange and the built-up character of St. Ives beyond the skyline.

**Figure 17: LVA View from VP5**



**Figure 18: May 2022 View from Further North within Site**



## 4. Impact of the Development

### Spatial Openness

- 4.1 The proposed built development would occupy c22.5% of the site, concentrated in its north-western corner, on either side of the existing access road. The remainder of the site would be retained as green infrastructure for a range of uses, including informal recreation, biodiversity enhancement, structural landscaping, a SuDs pond and children's play.
- 4.2 Whilst the majority of the site would technically remain open, the concentration of development adjacent to Houghton Road would reduce the existing width of the east/west green gap between Houghton Grange and The Spires (i.e. the settlement edges of Houghton and St. Ives respectively) by an average of c66%.
- 4.3 As a result, the functional gap would be reduced to a corridor of green space c100-150m wide occupying the eastern third of the site, beyond the developed area. In addition, the location of the development would "plug" the pinch-point between Houghton and St. Ives close to the water-tower, such that any residual separation between the settlements would be confined to the width of the road corridor along a 150m long section of Houghton Road. Since this section of road is inherently urban in character (with traffic lights, street lights, signage etc), its separating function is unlikely to be meaningful.

### Visual Openness

- 4.4 The ZTV presented in the LVA shows that the immediate visual influence of the built development would extend east/west along Houghton Road, north-westwards across the arable land to the north, and across the remainder of the site eastwards to the settlement edge of St. Ives and south/south-westwards as far as The Thicket (ref **Figure 19**). As shown in the visual analysis in Section 3, these open areas currently contribute to the perception of separation between Houghton and St. Ives.
- 4.5 The Year 1 visualizations for Views 6 and 5, extracted from the LVA, confirm the loss of openness that would result (ref Figures 20 and 21). In View 6, built development would entirely obstruct the sense of openness that is currently gained from looking along the access road. In View 5, the development would infill the gap in the vegetated skyline that remains following demolition of the poultry sheds, introducing buildings into a view where none currently occur.
- 4.6 In addition, the proposed tree planting within the undeveloped parts of the site would over time further reduce visual openness (as well as screening views of

the development). This will particularly apply to views from Houghton Road, as planting along the road frontage becomes established.

**Figure 19: Extract from ZTV with Viewpoint Locations**



#### Intrusion into Countryside

- 4.7 As noted previously, the majority of the site qualifies as open countryside and its appearance contributes to that role (even though its recent use and management may not have been positive). In physical terms, the development would result in the urbanization of less than a quarter of the site, which is envisaged would be perceived as an extension to Houghton.



**Figure 20: Year 1 Visualization for VP6**



**Figure 21: Year 1 Visualization for VP5**



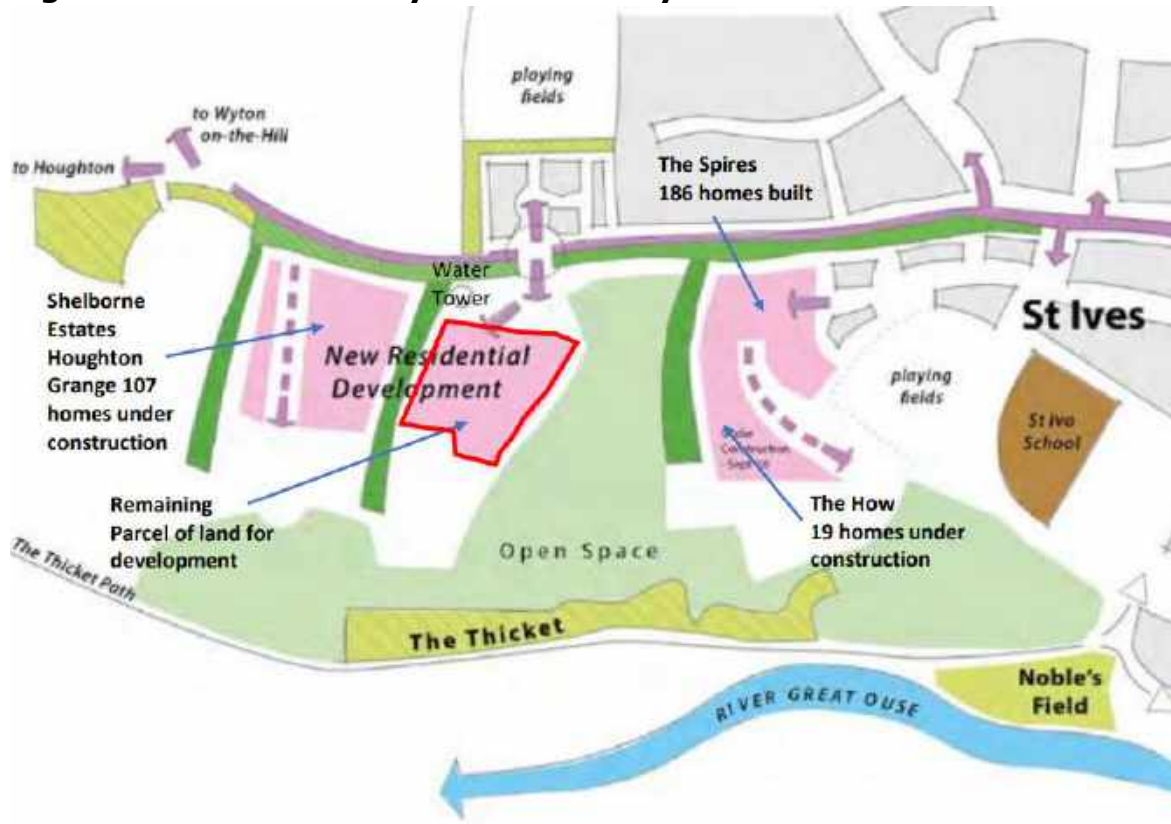
- 4.8 The proposed treatment of the remainder would include a range of initiatives that could enhance some of its attributes as countryside, notably its biodiversity, appearance and accessibility. At the same time, however, the urbanizing influence of the development would extend across much of the site, through its visual impact (ref **Figure 19**), its implications for tranquillity, and the introduction of recreational uses that are typical of urban fringe locations. The degree to which these parts of the site would continue to be perceived as open countryside may therefore be arguable.

#### Comparison with Notional Allocated Scheme

- 4.9 Whilst Policy S11 does not specify the precise footprint of development, the explanatory text includes an illustration of how the allocation is envisaged to be laid out in general terms. This is shown in **Figure 22** below (which has been annotated to provide more information).
- 4.10 Comparison with the submitted Parameter Plan (ref **Figure 23**) shows that built development was originally envisaged:
- not to extend east of the access road junction, so as to occupy a smaller proportion (up to c55%) of the distance between the edges of Houghton Grange and The Spires/The How;
  - to be pulled southwards from Houghton Road, broadly corresponding to the alignment of the access road, rather than infilling between the access road and the main road; and

- to occupy a footprint demonstrably smaller than that of Houghton Grange.

**Figure 22: Schematic Layout from Policy S11**



**Figure 23: Parameter Plan**



- 4.11 By extending built development further to the east, and closer to the main road, the current proposal exacerbates the actual and perceived loss of separation and tightens the pinch-point between the settlements in the vicinity of the water tower. This is evidently contrary to the schematic principles proposed in the policy.

## 5. Summary and Conclusion

- 5.1 The application site lies outside the settlement boundary of Houghton & Wyton, and represents the last buffer of open land separating the village from St. Ives to the south of Houghton Road. The majority of the site retains a greenfield character that reinforces its role as part of the open countryside. Despite the presence of the access road into Houghton Grange, the site remains demonstrably open (and has become increasingly so with recent demolition of the poultry sheds).
- 5.2 The importance of the separating function performed by the site has been accentuated by completion of the Garner Drive development to the north of Houghton Road. This has created a "pinch-point" between the settlement edges of Houghton & Wyton and St. Ives in the vicinity of the water-tower, beyond which further separation is provided by the arable land to the north-west.
- 5.3 The openness of the site can be appreciated in the sequence of views along Houghton Road, in contrast to the built-up edge of St. Ives to the north and the vegetated frontages to Houghton Grange and The Spires. It is also seen in views from the southern part of the site, in which its countryside character and its contribution to the undeveloped skyline are evident.
- 5.4 Development would occupy only c22.5% of the site. However, it would be concentrated on its north-western corner, adjacent to Houghton Road. As a result, the width of the east/west green gap between Houghton & Wyton and St. Ives would be reduced by about two-thirds, to a corridor of open land c100-150m wide adjacent to The Spires.
- 5.5 The visual influence of the development would extend across the remaining open parts of the site, along the Houghton Road corridor, and across the arable land to the north-west. The visualizations in the LVA confirm that it would have a significantly obstructive and enclosing effect on views from Houghton Road, and would introduce a developed skyline into views from the southern part of the site.
- 5.6 The resulting loss of openness would increase the actual and perceived sense of coalescence between Houghton & Wyton and St. Ives, such that it would no longer be clear where one settlement ends and the other begins. This is clearly contrary to NP Policy 3.
- 5.7 It is also at variance with the schematic principles illustrated in Policy S11, which envisaged that development on this site would not extend as far to the east, or as close to the main road, and would occupy a smaller footprint.

- 5.8 The development would also encroach into open countryside and have a further urbanising influence on the locality, contrary to NP Policy 1, Local Plan policy 10 and NPPF 174(b).
- 5.9 The Parish Council's concerns about the implications for coalescence and further urbanization are therefore considered to be justified.

23<sup>rd</sup> June, 2023

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