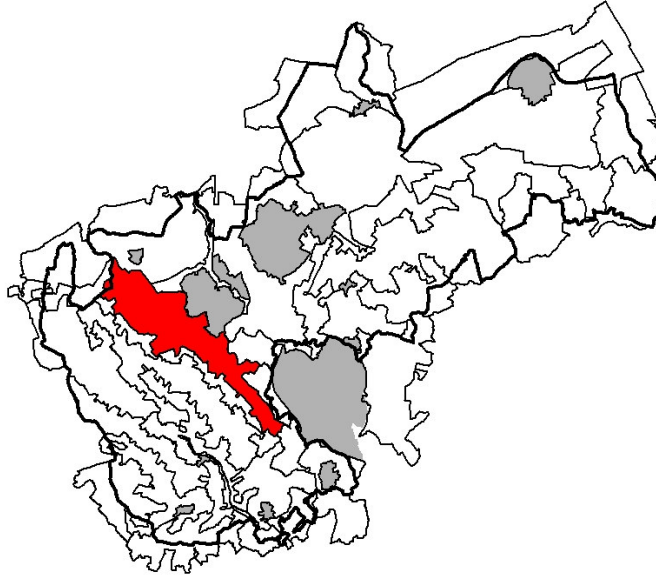


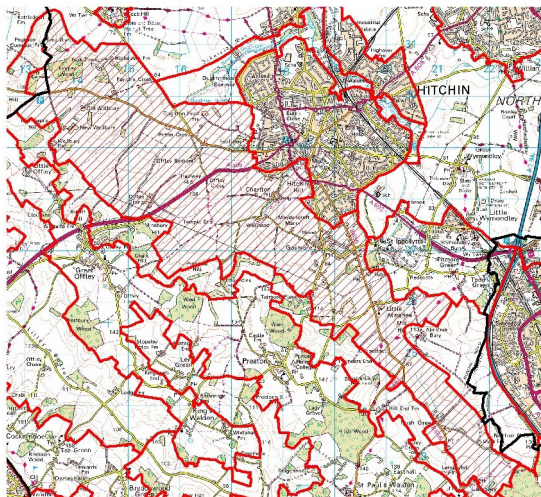
EVALUATION



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER AREA

The Character Area runs in a broad band from Wellbury in the north to Langley Bottom where it stops at the boundary to Knebworth woods/parkland.



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LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

Large scale rolling landform. Predominantly in arable land use but with pockets of grazing on the

steeper slopes in the north and adjacent to settlements at St Ippolyts and Langley. Field sizes vary with extensive arable land to the southwest of Hitchin and smaller fields associated with grazing land. Hedges generally well trimmed with remnant mature trees. High proportion of stag-headed trees to the north. Scattered settlements and farmsteads. Parkland as a notable feature widely spread over the Character Area. Discrete areas of commercial land-use (Isaacs Foundary, Royal Oak, Airfield, Rush Green recycling, pigeonswick sawmill)

KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Rolling chalk landform
- Dominant large scale arable farming
- Smaller areas of grazing on steeper chalk slopes to the south of Hitchin
- Woodland plantations concentrated in the north on most pronounced chalk landscape. Relatively little woodland cover elsewhere.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- Small areas of parkland at Gosmore
- A505 dual carriageway cuts across the area
- Langley Valley airfield and scrapyard

ASSESSMENT**PHYSICAL INFLUENCES****Geology & soils**

In the north there are thin rendzina soils over Chalk which merge into brown soils over Chalk. South of Hitchin there is a transition to sandy brown soils over glacial till which continue down the Langley valley. Tingley Down is a Chalk outlier capped with gravel and Clay-with-Flints giving locally acidic soils at Tingley Wood.

Topography

An undulating landform in the north gradually gives way to the valley landscape at Langley.

Degree of slope

Varies, 1:20 in steeper areas, 1:250 in the Langley valley.

Altitude range

95m (Langley) to 140m (Wellbury).

Hydrology

The Langley valley runs north west to the Hiz and Oughton which in turn run northwards to the catchment of the river Ouse. A stream from the south disappears at Almshoe Bury swallowhole to re-appear further north on a tributary to the River Purwell. At times of high groundwater levels a lake may form at the swallowhole.

Land cover and land use

Dominant arable land use with grazing on steeper chalk slopes and around Gosmore. High proportion of woodland cover north of Wellbury on the steeper chalk slopes.

Vegetation and wildlife

Mixed deciduous/conifer plantations in the north. Small pockets of woodland adjacent to Gosmore. Belts of willow following the watercourse in Langley valley. Hedge species include oak, ash, hawthorn and sycamore with beech and hornbeam in Langley valley.

Green lanes like Wood Lane with its chalk grassland and scrub habitats are ecologically valuable strips within this Character Area. Some arable field margins support rare 'arable weeds'.

Unimproved chalk grassland and traditionally managed neutral and acid grassland are present within this Character Area and are typically species-rich. Some of these unimproved grasslands have been designated as SSSIs, such as Burleigh Meadow and Langley Meadow. Tingley Down falls

within core chalk grassland described as an area of high biodiversity within the Hertfordshire Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

Tingley Wood is an ancient semi-natural woodland, partly acidic oak woodland partly calcareous ash/beechness with hybrid elm and associated maple and hazel coppicing. Ancient woodlands comprised primarily of hornbeam coppice also occur infrequently within the Character Area, and have an assortment of associated ancient woodland indicator species.

Areas of ecologically interesting marshy grassland, wet willow and alder woodland are associated with the River Hiz, for example 'The Willows'. Folly Alder Swamp is located in the area of St Ippollitts Common, and is of interest for its ancient alder woodland. The Hertfordshire BAP describes this alder/tussock sedge carr as one of the richest and most valuable examples in the county. Woodlands adjacent to the river may completely flood at certain times of year. Almshoebury Swallowhole is a unique example in north Hertfordshire of a specialised hydrological feature with associated unimproved grassland and wet woodland habitats.

Priory Park in Hitchin is important for bats and existing grazing land holds breeding barn owls.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL INFLUENCES

South of Pirton lie two areas of prehistoric ring ditches and a Scheduled bowl barrow at Knocking Knoll. On the margins of Hitchin Romano-British burials are documented to the west and a ring ditch, medieval moated site and deserted medieval village Gosmore to the southwest. Another ring ditch is located to the east of Preston.

Field pattern

The historic agricultural landscape generally comprises a mixture of prairie fields with post-1950s boundary loss and 18th century and later enclosure to the northwest. An area of ancient woodland occupies an area southwest of Pirton. There are small areas of pre-18th century enclosure and informal medieval parkland on the southwest perimeter of Hitchin. The southeast section of the Character Area comprises of a mixture of prairie fields with post-1950s boundary loss, prairie fields with relict elements within, 18th century and later enclosure, pre-18th century irregular enclosure

ASSESSMENT

and pre-18th century unenclosed common arable. A small area of ancient woodland remains on the northern edge of a mineral extraction pit south of Gosmore. Today there are varied irregular sizes with many removed hedges where in arable production. Smaller field parcels where land in grazing use.

Transport pattern

The A505 dual carriageway connecting Hitchin to Luton cuts across the Character Area. The B656 follows the Langley Valley south. Minor network of local lanes at Gosmore.

Settlements and built form

The historic settlement pattern is of a sparse nature characterised by farms and estates. There are mainly farmsteads in the north and south. Sub-urban fringe at Hitchin and Gosmore. Older settlement at Gosmore dating from 1283.

Dwellings in the hamlet of St Ibbs, date from 18th century St Ibbs and St Ibbs Bush and 19th century St Ibbs Lodge. Traditional buildings include The Wyck, a timber framed structure near Little Almshoe.

EVALUATION**VISUAL AND SENSORY PERCEPTION**

The valley is a combination of mature, well wooded valley sides in the upper reaches with a wider shallow sided valley washing up against a sub-urban fringe in the northeast. The valley is well defined along its boundary with the Langley scarp to the west.

Rarity & distinctiveness

This landscape is relatively common to this locality. The rolling chalk landscape to the north is the most distinctive feature of the Character Area

VISUAL IMPACT

The scrapyard at the Langley Valley has a negative impact. The urban edge of Hitchin is a prominent feature to the west. The A505 dual carriageway cuts across the landscape and is visible from the surrounding landscape.

ACCESSIBILITY

The area is well covered by a network of public rights of way.

COMMUNITY VIEWS

Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) have undertaken Tier B (Community of Place) consultations. Views of the local community have been sought and contributor's responses to each of the Character Areas will be analysed and a summary of the responses provided by HCC.

LANDSCAPE RELATED DESIGNATIONS

AONB	The Chilterns
LC1	Landscape Conservation Area
SSSI	Knebworth

EVALUATION

CONDITION

Land cover change:	Widespread
Age structure of tree cover:	Mixed
Extent of semi-natural habitat survival:	Relic
Management of semi-natural habitat:	Not obvious
Survival of cultural pattern:	Declining/Relic
Impact of built development:	Low
Impact of land-use change:	High

Matrix Score: **Poor**

ROBUSTNESS

Impact of landform:	Apparent
Impact of land cover:	Prominent
Impact of historic pattern:	Insignificant
Visibility from outside:	Locally visible
Sense of enclosure:	Open
Visual unity:	Coherent
Distinctiveness/rarity:	Frequent

Matrix Score: **Weak**

CONDITION	GOOD	Strengthen and reinforce	Conserve and strengthen	Safeguard and manage
	MODERATE	Improve and reinforce	Improve and conserve	Conserve and restore
	POOR	Reconstruct	Improve and restore	Restore condition to maintain character
		WEAK	MODERATE	STRONG
ROBUSTNESS				

EVALUATION

INHERENT LANDSCAPE SENSITIVITY

Landscape Character Sensitivities

- The landform plays a significant role in the character of Langley Valley, consisting of a network of ridges and wet or dry valleys
- Vegetation is present within valley bottoms and along streams where they are present. This would be vulnerable to removal
- Areas of marshy grassland, wet willow and alder woodland associated with the River Hiz, are vulnerable to further loss
- Settlement is sparse within Langley Valley, consisting of small nucleated villages with historic cores, estates and scattered farmsteads. This would be sensitive to unsympathetic development not in scale with the villages
- Areas of parkland landscape around Gosmore and west of St Ippollytts would be sensitive to inappropriate management or conversion to arable farmland
- Hedgerows throughout the Character Area are variable. Some are tall and well managed, whilst others have been removed. Hedgerows would be sensitive to further removal
- Woodland is sparse within the Character Area and small copses, particularly on higher ground within the AONB, would be vulnerable to removal
- The pattern of narrow, winding lanes around Gosmore would be vulnerable to improvements to/ upgrading of the roads
- Areas of grazing on steeper slopes and adjacent to watercourses add variety to the landscape and are of a smaller scale than larger arable fields. These would be vulnerable to inconsistent management or conversion to arable farmland
- The A505 crosses the character area and is a detractor to the natural character of Langley Valley
- Good public access through rights of way, particularly around Hitchin, including the Chiltern Way and the Hertfordshire Way
- Part of the Character Area falls within the Chilterns AONB

Overall Langley Valley is considered to be of **moderate sensitivity**. The gently undulating network of ridges and valleys creates an enclosed landscape but with some urban influence.

Visual Sensitivities

- Expansive open views are possible from the tops of the valleys, often through gaps in vegetation
- Views within the valleys are generally more contained by landform
- Electricity pylons currently intrude on views within the centre of the Character Area
- The edge of Hitchin to the north east of the character area is visually intrusive some views
- Langley Valley has a strong visual relationship with the adjacent Langley Scarp

In visual terms, Langley Valley is considered to be of **moderate to high sensitivity**. Panoramic views from vantage points and views along the valleys are important features within the character area. These would be sensitive to the introduction of built features.

LANDSCAPE VALUE

Overall Langley Valley is considered to be of **moderate low landscape value**. Aspects of particular value within Langley Valley are the sense of openness, but there is also a less memorable landform, lack of remoteness and general human influence on the landscape that detracts from it.

EVALUATION

CAPACITY TO ACCOMMODATE DEVELOPMENT

Large urban extensions and new settlements (>5ha)

This type of development would not be appropriate within Langley Valley, due to its rural and undeveloped nature. It would introduce a scale of development that would be out of keeping with the Character Area. Large scale development could not be accommodated within Langley Valley without a significant visual impact on the landscape. The undulating landform would also make major development very difficult to accommodate.

The landscape capacity for large urban extensions or new settlements is considered to be low.

Smaller urban extensions (<5ha)

It may be possible to accommodate some small scale expansion of Hitchin within this Character Area, carefully designed and in keeping with the existing character. Mitigation planting and retention of existing woodland would also need to be given careful consideration, to ensure that there is not visual intrusion into the wider Character Area.

The landscape capacity for small urban extensions is considered to be moderate to low.

Major transport developments/improvements

This type of development would only be appropriate with improvements to the A505 within this Character Area. The majority of routes are rural in character. Upgrading of existing narrow, twisting lanes could erode the character of the landscape. Additional traffic would also affect the peace and tranquillity of the Character Area.

The landscape capacity for major transport developments/improvements is considered to be low.

Commercial/warehouse estates

This type of large scale development would not generally be appropriate in this character area, as there are not currently any large scale developments of this type within the area other than in the vicinity of Hitchin. Extensive development would also disrupt expansive views.

The landscape capacity for commercial/warehouse estates is considered to be low.

Individual large/bulky buildings

There may be some limited capacity for sympathetically located and designed individual large buildings, particularly if they were of an agricultural nature or vernacular in form and style and in keeping with the rural character. Large buildings, if not carefully located, could erode the rural and undeveloped character of Langley Valley particularly within the AONB.

The landscape capacity for individual large/bulky buildings is considered to be low to moderate.

Large scale open storage

The undulating landform within Langley Valley would make it difficult to accommodate large scale 'open' uses without ground modelling. This would not be in keeping with the rural character of the area and likely to be very open to view and introduce new elements that would conflict with the existing characteristics.

The landscape capacity for large scale 'open' uses is considered to be low.

EVALUATION

Mineral extraction/waste disposal

This Character Area is currently relatively undisturbed and rural in appearance. Whilst some small scale mineral extraction could be accommodated with careful design and mitigation measures, larger scale extraction or waste disposal would not be in keeping. Restoration proposals for any consented schemes should be mainly at grade and include for additional planting in character with existing patterns. The landscape capacity for mineral extraction is considered to be low. Waste disposal would be a problem in all character areas due to the presence of aquifers.

Incremental small scale development

There may be some capacity for carefully located and designed small scale developments within the Character Area, particularly if they were of an agricultural nature or vernacular in form and style and in keeping with the rural character. However, due to the existing open and undeveloped character any proposals would need clear justification to avoid the erosion of the rural character and avoid impacts on the AONB.

The landscape capacity for incremental small scale developments is considered to be low to moderate.

Utilities developments e.g. masts, pylons, wind turbines

There are existing detractors within this Character Area at present, including electricity pylons. New utilities developments would have a significant impact on the rural character and extensive views experienced in Langley Valley. Any proposals would need clear justification to avoid impacts on the AONB. Large scale developments and tall elements would be highly visible within the Character Area. The landscape capacity for utilities developments is considered to be low to moderate.

GUIDELINES	Nb. These guidelines apply only to land within North Hertfordshire
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STRATEGY AND GUIDELINES FOR MANAGING CHANGE

Strategy: Reconstruct

Landscape management guidelines

- Promote planting of new woodland to encourage a diverse woodland flora especially in relation to sub-urban fringe areas
- For existing woodlands, encourage diverse woodland management practice and replanting of conifer plantations with new deciduous woodlands
- Promote the creation of buffer-zones between intensive arable production and areas of semi-natural habitat and the creation of links between habitat areas
- Promote hedgerow restoration along the lines of historic field boundaries and for the creation of visual links between existing woodland areas
- Promote the use of traditional field hedges in place of post and wire enclosures to new grazing areas
- Promote the diversity of hedgerow species and the planting of standard hedgerow trees
- Maintain and extend the rights of way network
- Encourage the planting of trees and appropriate species along water course
- Encourage the management of arable weed field margins
- Promote and develop the chalk grassland and scrub habitats along Wood Lane
- Encourage management of hazel and hornbeam coppice woodlands

Built development guidelines

- Protect and preserve the pattern of narrow winding lanes and associated hedge banks, sunken lanes, verges and hedges
- Retain the rural character of Langley Valley, ensuring that any new development is appropriately sited and of a scale, form and style appropriate to Langley Valley
- Ensure that new development does not necessitate the removal of existing small woodland blocks
- Encourage the planting of appropriate broadleaved woodland and vegetation to screen new development that could intrude in long distance views
- Avoid the location of new development on visually exposed ridge areas
- Ensure that lighting necessitated by new development minimises the impact on the Character Area
- Use the opportunity of any new developments to create new accessible green infrastructure for local communities
- Ensure redundant agriculture buildings subject to applications for change of use are monitored to ensure that they reflect the local building style