



Peripheral landscape study – Somerton

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1) Background to the study:

1.1. The forthcoming South Somerset Local Development Framework (LDF) will be required to allocate new development sites for both housing and employment for the period 2006-2026, with the focus of major growth placed upon Yeovil, thereafter the district's major towns and rural centres. As part of the process of finding suitable sites for development, a landscape study to assess the capacity of the settlement fringe to accommodate new development in a landscape-sympathetic manner, is commissioned. This will complement other evidence-based work that will contribute to the LDF process.

1.2 PPS 7 commends the approach to the identification of countryside character developed by the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) and suggests that it can assist in accommodating necessary change due to development without sacrifice of local character and distinctiveness. National landscape guidelines similarly advise that visual impact can be determined as being significant when judged against the context and sensitivity of the landscape, and where there is an incompatibility of scale and character between a proposal and the attributes of the receiving landscape: Consequently this landscape study seeks to evaluate both the landscape character and visual sensitivity of each of 13 selected settlements, to enable an assessment of their capacity to absorb additional development, and an indication of potential growth areas (areas of highest capacity).

1.3 Each assessment will establish and refine a study area for each settlement in 3-stages;

i) Using the settlement centre as fulcrum, a circle is drawn to include and contain the furthestmost spread of development, to thus define an area within a radius encompassing all growth associated with that settlement. This central focus is for the purpose of seeking settlement growth in close proximity to the town's commercial centre.

ii) Where pertinent, a second line is drawn beyond the town boundary, at a set distance from the current edge (the distance proportional to settlement size) to allow potential for a coherent urban extension alongside the town's current extent.

iii) Finally, these lines are adjusted to coincide with established and credible landscape boundaries to thus establish the study area. Adjacent villages in close proximity may be included within the study, to enable their separate identity to be considered in relationship to the main settlement.

Structure of the report.

1.4 A general description of the settlement acts as a preface to a character study of both the settlement and its surround. The sensitivity of the local landscape's character is then assessed, particularly in relationship to development form, alongside an appraisal of the visibility of each site, and its visual sensitivity. The potential of each study area's capacity to absorb an impact of built form and associated development is then evaluated using these character and visual profiles, with constraints factored into a capacity matrix, to arrive at an indication of potential development sites.

1.5 This study considers Somerton.

2) The settlement

2.1 Somerton lays to the north west of the district, by the point at which the River Cary issues from its passage through the Mid Somerset Hills, toward the open moors to the northwest. The town centre lays circa 1 mile to the southwest of the course of the Cary, and due west of the B3151 which links Street and Glastonbury in the north, with Yeovil and the A303 /A37 regional road network to the south. It is a historic market town of Romano-British origin, passing to the West Saxon kings to become the centre of a major royal estate by the tenth century. The old town was located to the northwest of the parish church, with the focus shifting in the late 13th century to the market place south of St. Michael's. The town has long prospered as an agricultural centre, and an attachment to local estates, reflected by the many fine 17th and 18th century houses in the centre of town. Somerton has undergone moderate growth in recent times, and now has a population circa 4600 residents.

2.2 The town is a relatively compact settlement, set above the Cary valley with the core of the town concentrated upon the market place and church. Nineteenth century maps indicate settlement growth around and adjacent to this core, and extending out along the main E-W road axes. Recent residential growth has spread to the west of the town centre, infilling the land between these roads in the form of large housing estates, whilst an employment area has been established outside this expanding west edge of the town, toward Bancombe Hill.

2.3 The immediate landscape setting of the town is defined by the steep hillsides of the Cary valley falling from its north edge, which links with a tributary millstream to the east, whose course currently contains the town's southward extent. To the west, Somerton's setting is less defined, with the town extending across open land toward the Bancombe and Somerton Hills.

Identification of the study area

2.4 Based upon the methodology outlined in para 1.3, the extent of the Somerton study area is broadly defined by a line that runs west from Bancombe Hill, crossing the Cary valley to link with Littleton Hill prior to turning south to skirt the park associated with Somerton Randle, toward Midney to the east of the town. The southern boundary then follows the road linking Ashen Cross with Badgers Cross, prior to turning north to return along Little Moors Furlong lane, to Bancombe Hill, to thus complete the limit of the study area, which is indicated on figure 1 – context.

3) Landscape Character

The national context:

3.1 Landscape character assessment is an approach that aids recognition and understanding of the differences between landscapes, and states what constitutes local distinctiveness. In 1996, the Countryside Agency (now Natural England) undertook a national study of the character of England's landscape, to enable definition and description of the range and diversity of the English landscape, and its categorisation into 'character areas'. This study was published as a national map, with accompanying regional volumes that describe the resultant areas in detail. Volume 8: South West England, places Somerton within character area 143 – *Mid Somerset Hills*. The key characteristics of these areas as noted by the assessment are:

- *Absence of dispersed farmsteads or any buildings on levels and moors. Nucleated settlements on ridges/islands.*
- *Moors surrounded, and divided up, by low hills, ridges and islands which form distinctive skylines.*
- *Dramatic and prominent hills such as Brent Knoll, the Isle of Avalon and Barrow Mump, rising above the Levels and Moors.*
- *Sparse tree cover on Levels and Moors contrasting with woodland, hedges and orchards of surrounding hills.*
- *Sparsely populated Moors but settlements common on hills, ridges and islands.*
- *Historic landscape strongly evident in features ranging from prehistoric trackways and lake villages to postmedieval enclosures and peat working.*
- *International nature-conservation significance for wetland, waders and waterfowl. Flooding in winter over large areas.*

3.2 The full descriptive text of the Mid Somerset Hills character areas is available on the Natural England website, http://www.countryside.gov.uk/LAR/Landscape/CC/south_west/somerset_levels_and_moors_mid_somerset_hills.asp The following extracts are typical of the Somerton area and its surrounding landscape:

Small towns and villages like Somerton and Street lie within the Mid Somerset Hills in sheltered sites. Many settlements retain a uniformity of building style and materials, perhaps most noticeable in the Lias Limestone buildings of Somerton.

By the time the Saxons arrived, the higher land had a settled landscape: there were quite intensively populated hills from which the marshlands were exploited. Somerton may have become the centre of the Sumorsaete, the Saxon people after whom Somerset is named and the numerous ton and ley settlements are evidence of this Saxon occupation.

The low ridges, hills and islands within the Moors have dense networks of lanes and footpaths connecting numerous villages and hamlets: trackways lead to farms and run down to the edge of the Levels. Although Blue Lias is quite frequently used, a variety of other materials have been used in older buildings including oolite, sandstone and

conglomerate, whilst many 19th century buildings are in brick and pantile produced by the local industry centred on Bridgwater or imported from Flanders.

Along the higher ground, pasture tends to be the main land cover but the fields are small and irregular except where there are planned settlements. Orchards are a particular feature of the land at the edge of the levels, such as the Polden Hills. Hedgerows typically contain a wide range of species and hedgerow trees are common. Woodlands are common on the ridge tops and steeper side slopes.

The local context:

3.3 A historic landscape characterisation study was undertaken by Somerset County Council Heritage team, completed in 2001. This study differentiates between unenclosed, anciently enclosed, and recently enclosed land, and notes ancient woodland sites and historic parkland. The character plan for the Somerton area indicates much of the town's periphery to be recently enclosed land (18th-20th centuries) and is included at appendix 2, and where pertinent, informs the landscape sensitivity appraisal, section 4.0.

3.4 SSDC undertook a detailed assessment of district-wide character; 'The Landscape of South Somerset' in 1993. This study places Somerton and its wider surrounds within the 'Fivehead and High Ham Escarpments, Valleys and Moors' visual character region (VCR). Each VCR is sub-divided into landscape character areas (LCAs) and the following LCAs cover the Somerton study area;

- i) **Lias clay dipslope, and;**
- ii) **River Corridor.**

3.5 The 'Lias clay dipslope' LCA broadly covers the town and the great majority of the study area to the south of the river Cary, plus the rising hills to the north. The assessment identifies and describes the area thus;

Viewed from the Blackdown Hills near Neroche Castle the scale of this immense geological feature is immediately apparent. Extending some ten miles from Curry Mallet/Fivehead to east of Somerton, the angle of the slope is emphasised by the north-south direction of the cross slope hedges and lanes.

The contrast between the character of the area and the northern moors and wooded escarpment is marked. There is less homogeneity in this landscape and the impression is of pockets of high quality 'designed' landscape often closely associated with the numerous settlements in the area. Kingsdon and Kingweston have parkland settings and east Somerton is well-wooded at Millands, Lower Somerton and Somerton Erleigh. Between these high spots there are some quite mundane arable landscapes, though there are areas where traditional mixed farms or small hedged fields remain.

Many hedges have been removed and those that remain are low, gappy and in a state of decay. Hedge trees, predominantly ash, are infrequent and suffer from die-back. Other trees are only associated with settlements.. There are, however, some well managed and distinctive hedge patterns to be found for instance at Kingsdon Hill, south of Somerton in the vicinity of the telecommunication masts, and in the Drayton area. Here the elm is making a dramatic comeback.

Woodland, so dominating on the scarp to the north makes less impression to the south except at High Ham and Kingweston. Small woods, mainly isolated, often unmanaged plantations are at Highbrooks, Somerton and at Long Sutton and Drayton.

Throughout the area there is a network of country lanes these often intersecting at cross-roads. Hedges are species-rich, particularly with viburnum, spindle and wild privet. Verges contain remnant herb-rich swards of agrimony, cowslip, knapweed and stinking iris.

The area is sub-divided to reflect local variation in landscape character, to better facilitate the subsequent sensitivity evaluation, as follows;

- i) **Somerton plateau**, which describes the gently undulating land over which the town has grown, along with open farmland to the south and west of the town;
- ii) **Internal valley**, which identifies the Mill stream valley that defines Somerton's southern edge, and;
- iii) **Littleton Hill**, a single hill detached from the Polden Hills escarpment, that lays to the north of the Cary valley, opposite the town.

3.6 The 'River corridor' LCA refers to the floor and sides of the river Cary valley, which for the purposes of this assessment is simply re-titled '**Cary valley**.' The valley runs to the north of the town, and its head provides a distinct edge to its northward extent. It is the fourth local landscape area, broadly described as thus;

The Lower Lias escarpment is breached by the River Parrett at Langport and the Cary at Somerton. There is also a narrow valley between High Ham and Pitney.

The Cary flows across the eastern clay vale from its source in the Inferior Oolite limestone hills at Castle Cary. Not a particularly beautiful river it is relatively tree-less and it has been "tamed", straightened and deepened. Cultivation takes place right up to its flood bank. The Cary valley from Kingsdon past Somerton is mainly arable with some enclaves of pasture. The landscape of the valley floor is virtually treeless. Hedges have been removed or flailed low in stark contrast to the wilder texture of the wooded scarps and the valley.

North of Somerton there is a dramatic view across the Cary Valley to Compton Beacon. Here there are distinct hints of domesticated peat moor scenery with rectangular field-patterns and rows of pollarded willows. Railway engineering dominates the Cary valley at Somerton and the short viaduct is a particular landmark.

3.8 The resultant 4 local landscape character areas noted above are indicated on figure 2 – landscape sensitivity.

4) Landscape sensitivity

4.1 Landscape sensitivity can be gauged from an assessment of landscape character in respect of how intact and well expressed its character is, along with its condition and time-depth. Negative factors to influence a sensitivity assessment will include detractors to local character. As this project is reviewing the likely impact of urban development upon its rural fringe, the prospect of new build relative to its context will be the prime consideration in this sensitivity appraisal, as will the extent of remoteness from urban form. Looking at each local landscape area in turn, the outcome of this stage of the study will be to grade areas of Somerton's periphery as possessing either high, moderate or low landscape sensitivity to development. The resultant areas are indicated on figure 2 – landscape sensitivity.

4.2 The previous chapter identified two landscape character areas falling within the study area, with the major of these being the 'lias clay dipslope', which is subdivided according to local variation in landscape type (as identified para 3.5). Taking these sub-divisions in turn, the first local character area to be considered is that of the '*Somerton plateau*'.

The Somerton plateau (character area A)

4.3 This local landscape character area covers the greater part of the study area and includes the main concentration of the town. Somerton is seen to be typical of many of the small towns within the mid-Somerset hills, in retaining a nucleated form, set above the river valleys and their associated moor land, yet benefiting from a relatively sheltered position. By being bounded by the River Cary and its associated flood plain to the north of the town, the former parkland and estates of Somerton Randle, Erleigh & Court to the east and the Mill Stream valley to the south, the town's landscape context is well contained and clearly defined and is thus a major factor in the town's retaining its compact plan form. Hence within this character area, it is only land that lays to the west of the town that is immediately peripheral, i.e.

- a) West of Northfield, and north of the Langport road; and
- b) West of St Cleers, and laying between the Langport road and the rail line.

4.4 It is to the west side of the town that development has strayed beyond a clearly defined edge-line, primarily in the form of residential areas between the Langport and Bancombe roads, whilst the trading estate is already detached from the residential edge, laying between Bancombe Road and Bradley Hill Lane, and separated from Northfield by a series of narrow, small-scale fields. In both instances, the landscape context is relatively consistent, comprising a series of rectilinear fields dating from 18th and 19th century enclosure, defined by trimmed hedgerows with few specimen trees, and primarily in pasture use. The general uniformity of topography, combined with the treeless hedge lines, imparts a sense of openness to the area, which allows urban character to intrude beyond its bounds. Thus the fields that lay between Northfield and the Bancombe trading estate, and as contained within the Langport and Bancombe roads and their linking road, are graded 'low' sensitivity, due to the predominance of urban form to three sides, and

low-grade landscape. This same broad landscape character extends both north and west beyond the Bancombe Trading Estate and Northfields, as expressed by its rectilinear hedgerow pattern and general lack of landscape features, yet the obtrusive built character that pervades at the urban edge is here diminished when set against the scale of the wider countryside, thus these surrounding fields are graded 'moderate' sensitivity. Toward Bancombe and Bradley Hills, the field pattern becomes less regular as it juxtaposes with the escarpment head, and there is a stronger tree presence. At greater distance from the town's edge, and thus removed from any strong impression of urban character, these fields are graded 'high' sensitivity.

4.5 In the area to the west and southwest of St Cleers, the character of the landscape is expressed similarly to that described above. However, with the scale of the urban edge diminished (by distance from the large employment structures of Bancombe TE) and a degree of containing form provided by roadside hedges, it is only by St Cleers Orchard, where hedge removal has taken place and the field pattern is disrupted by recent housing development, that land is graded 'low' sensitivity. The remaining fields, separated from the urban edge by recreational land and the road network, but otherwise consistent with the pattern and expression of those by Bancombe Lane, are graded 'medium' sensitivity.

4.6 The remaining plateau area lays to the south of the town, separated from its compact urban form by a combination of the rail line and the Mill Stream valley. Much of this area is open, for again, many of the field hedgerows are cut low, there are few specimen trees, and the gradient is relatively gentle. The field pattern is primarily rectilinear and in places hedgerow removal has occurred, leading to what the SSDC landscape assessment describes as 'quite mundane arable landscapes'. The use of land for equestrian purposes, with its introduction of training track and post and rail – as has happened to the south of Somerton Court – has also denuded the area of traditional landscape features. To counter these negative elements, the open landscape and separation from the town, ensures that the character of built form does not pervade beyond its edge when set against the scale of the rural countryside where simply expressed by its openness and regular hedgerow pattern, thus the majority of this area is graded 'moderate' sensitivity. Exceptions occur by Melbury, where traditional mixed farm holdings, and small hedged fields remain; north of Mill Lane to either side of Perry Hill Road, where remoteness from urban presence, and robust species-rich hedgerows infer an older, intact landscape pattern; and in the vicinity of the manor estates of Somerton Court and Erleigh, where the historic arrangement of estate buildings, small paddocks and gardens continue to express their early origins. These three areas are all graded 'high' sensitivity.

Internal Valley (Character Area B)

4.7 The Mill Stream valley is a short tributary of the River Cary and its course wraps around the town's southern edge to both define and constrain its southward extent. Throughout its length, the valley is narrow and within its base there is a strong sense of enclosure that is primarily topographical, but reinforced in places by building form on the valley's head and sides. Below Pestors Lane, Lower Somerton is characterised by an intricate pattern of relic orchards, small paddocks and

traditional buildings, the grander of which are denoted by roadside walls defining the estate. There are also numerous specimen trees, particularly toward Somerton Randle and Mill Farm, which in tandem with the woodland belts to the southeast impart a strong sense of enclosure. A general lack of modern development, and the narrow traditionally-scaled lanes reinforce the historic interest of the area, which is graded 'high' sensitivity. Above Pestors Lane, the small-scale pasture remains intact and there is a strong presence of specimen trees. However, some domestication of the pasture has occurred and the presence of ill-scaled housing development on the valley sides informs a 'moderate' grading.

Littleton Hill (Character Area C)

4.8 Littleton Hill stands on the opposite side of the Cary valley to that of the low plateau on which Somerton is sited. Whilst clearly set apart from the urban area, with this separation assisting the strong expression of rural land-use, the hill has seen both hedgerow removal, and the conversion of adjacent woodland to plantation, and is thus graded 'moderate' sensitivity.

Cary Valley (Character Area D)

4.9 To the east of the B3151 (Street road) crossing of the River Cary, and to the south of the river's course, lays an area of relic parkland that is associated with the Somerton Randle Estate. The river's course is delineated by a mix of alder, ash, poplar and willow along its banks, bringing a sylvan characteristic to the area that is furthered by the adjacent parkland's specimen oaks and tree groups to the south. With its estate origins still in evidence, its separation from urban influence, and as a contrast to the otherwise open, featureless farmed character of the upper valley, this area is accordingly graded 'high' sensitivity. Elsewhere, the sinuous line of the river's banks are the only indicator of the river's course, for there is little hedgerow cover other than by the roadside, and no riverside trees between the B3151 and the viaduct. Conversely, there is no strong presence of urban form in the valley, hence the area between the viaduct and the B3151, and to either side of the B3153 (Castle Cary road) is graded 'moderate' sensitivity. To the west of the viaduct, a series of fishing ponds add to the wetland character of the valley floor, which intersperse with bands of willow lines and blend with wooded areas to either side of the viaduct, to create a diverse landscape pattern over the valley floor. This mosaic of differing elements in a predominantly featureless stretch of the valley is thus graded 'high' sensitivity, as are the small pastures drained by rhynes, which typify the moorland landscape; and the rough pasture of the hillside to their north, which retains a hedgerow edge, some presence of scrub, and species rich grassland in what is otherwise a predominantly arable area. The remainder of the valley and its sides has witnessed some conversion of valley-base pasture to arable land, and hedgerow removal, to form large fields over the hillsides, with a lack of tree presence common to both. Whilst this has changed the grain of the rural landscape, the resultant field pattern also forms a strong contrast and edge to Somerton's built form along Beech Drove on the town's north edge and is thus graded 'moderate' sensitivity.

5) Visual sensitivity

5.1 This section identifies the location and extent of the visual envelope that contains Somerton, and the nature of those landscape elements that visually buffer the town from an external perception. It then reviews first the intervening land between the town's edge and its immediate envelope; and second the land outside this envelope; to assess its visual relationship with Somerton and prime sensitive receptors, along with identifying valued views and vantage points, and visual detractors. From this a measure of visual sensitivity to development will be graded low, moderate or high. The resultant sensitivity areas are indicated on figure 3 – visual sensitivity.

Visual envelope and containment

5.2 The character area assessment identifies that Somerton is sited on a low plateau above the River Cary, within a landscape that is relatively open to most sides, hence there is a strong degree of intervisibility between outward vantage points, and the town's edge. Somerton's prime visual envelope can be drawn in relatively close proximity to the town, as higher ground to all sides 'cradles' the town, whilst obscuring most long views toward it. The envelope's line can be drawn running anti-clockwise from Bradley Hill to the northwest of the town, linking with the heads of Bancombe, Whiscombe and Somerton hills to the west, then swinging east through South Hill and the head of Blacks Moor, to merge with the wooded sides of Kingsdon Hill to the south east. From within this envelope, lines of view toward Somerton are relatively consistent in being low trajectory and relatively open - particularly to the south of the town (for example see photo 1 from Mill Lane). Where not obscured by intervening vegetation, little more than the town's built edge spread across the plateau is seen, with only the church tower and taller employment buildings of the trading estate rising marginally above the packed roofscape. The Cary valley briefly cuts through this high ground containment, before the envelope continues over Castley Hill to the north, linking with the wooded slopes of the Poldens which run north by Compton Dundon and east to Hurcot and Kings Weston Hills, to provide enclosure whilst blocking views from wider vantage points to the northeast. A few longer views toward the town can be gained from the north, looking south down the Cary valley from the ridge of the Polden Hills, but these are low trajectory, partial only, some 4-5 km distant and broken by the Dundon Hills. Again, it is only the linear elevation of the town's edge that is visible, with the same focal buildings drawing the eye, as from the south.

5.3 With the town's prime visual envelope drawn in most part within 2 km of the town's built edge, and coinciding with higher ground that looks across a relatively open landscape, there is potentially little intervening ground that does not directly view the town within its wider landscape context. It is thus noted that the majority of the study area falls within the town's immediate visual envelope. However, a combination of topography and woodland belts in the vicinity of Somerton Randle and Somerton Erleigh, provides a buffer to local views from the east. This buffer links with the southern hillsides of the Cary valley, which whilst not visually buffering the town, does provide containment of the town's spread. Both features are thus valued in their contribution to the town's immediate setting.

Visual sensitivity of Somerton's Immediate Edge

5.4 Within Somerton's prime visual envelope, the main open areas of the town's periphery can be broken into three broad areas:

- (i) Land to the west of town, between Etsome Road and Melbury;
- (ii) The open fields to the south of the town, and;
- (iii) The Cary Valley to the north.

Area (i)

5.5 Land to the west of town rises at a gentle and even gradient toward a low continuous ridgeline some 1.5 km distant that provides visual containment of Somerton in this quarter. There is throughout this area a degree of intervisibility between town and outward vantage points, but this becomes increasingly disrupted at greater distance by the intervening lines of field hedgerows, and their specimen trees. Where hedgerow presence distinctly obscures sight of the urban edge and distance reduces urban scale, land in that vicinity is graded 'high' sensitivity which reduces to 'moderate' as both the woody buffering reduces and urban scale is perceived to have a pervasive yet not overbearing presence. By the urban edge, land is graded as having 'low' visual sensitivity where urban form is dominant and is primarily perceived from a low number of local receptors: This grading is thus applied to land between Northfields and the Bancombe Trading Estate (photo 6) which is surrounded by built form on 3 sides and land west of St Cleers orchard (photo 3) which intrudes into open land, has no immediate containment, and limited local visibility.

Area (ii)

5.6 This area to the south of the town is Somerton's most open aspect. As with land to the west, the open fields to the south rise at a gentle and relatively even gradient toward Blackmoors Hill. With the majority of the hedge pattern managed, and having a N-S axis, there are few intervening features to obscure sight of the town, which is viewed as a flat elevation, spreading E-W across the plateau, with few built features catching the eye, the church tower and Bancombe TE's buildings being the most notable. At 1 km distance, as with vantage points between Ashen and Badgers Cross (photo 1), the scale of the agricultural landscape remains the dominant visual element, and with distance creating sufficient separation to reduce the scale of urban form, and the context clearly rural, land in this vicinity, from Melbury, spreading east to Somerton Erleigh, is graded 'high' sensitivity. Conversely, the Mill brook valley at the town's edge has no visual profile as viewed from external vantage points (photo 2) and is dominated by urban form that in places disrupts its continuity. The valley is thus graded 'low' sensitivity, other than at its eastern end, where crossed by the B3151, it is perceived to have little relationship with urban Somerton and whilst of limited visibility, demonstrates a diverse visual character which has clear historic context (photo 10) and is thus graded 'moderate' sensitivity. The remaining land, which spreads west to east, between Melbury House and Somerton Court, is graded 'moderate' sensitivity: Whilst part of the rural setting of the town, and clearly expressing agricultural use as viewed from public vantage points to south and southeast, the lack of intervening landscape features in this area, and its consequent openness, allows a potential for visual intrusion (photo 2). However, because this landscape unit has a distinct and

relatively regular urban edge, and is perceived to contrast with, and counter, the scale of the town, it is thus graded 'moderate'. Finally, the open pasture of the Millands shares the same part of the plateau as the town, which is defined by a less than sympathetic residential edge to the west. However, its mature tree edge to north and east ties the area with the manor estates to the east and it visually links with the millstream to the south, which has minimal visual association with the town. With the weight of association and predominant visual character being non-urban, this area too is graded 'moderate' sensitivity.

Area (iii)

5.7 The value of the Cary valley's hillsides, whether expressed as open fields or covered with woodland, are noted as being particularly valuable (para 5.3) in both contrasting with, and containing, the town's northward spread at their head. With their forward elevation being of a greater scale than the skyline of built form that indicates Somerton's presence, thus reducing its visual impact above the valley (photos 8 and 9) as seen from public vantage points to the north, the Cary's southern hillsides are graded 'high' sensitivity. The rising hillsides to the north of the Cary are similarly graded 'high', due to their possessing a degree of visual prominence locally; expressing a clear agricultural use; and having no association with the town. The floor and lower hillsides of the Cary valley, however, whilst expressing a clear wetland character independent of the town, is perceived in only local view and does not contribute to the town's visual buffer. These areas are thus graded 'moderate' sensitivity.

Visual sensitivity of land outside Somerton's visual envelope

5.8 A small area of woodland and relic parkland lays outside Somerton's local visual envelope to the east of the town, associated with the estates of the local manors of Somerton Erleigh and Randle. Both parkland and the specimen trees are associated historically and visually with the tree belts around Somerton Mill and open to the wider Cary valley upstream. Having no association with the concentrated form of the town, and laying in clear correspondence with the open fields and wooded hillsides of rural land to the east of Somerton, this area is graded 'high' sensitivity.

6) Value and Constraints

6.1 The study to date has already noted a number of landscape and historic features of interest, and their intrinsic value will have already been weighted in the report. However, areas of wildlife value (and their margins) plus sites with specific cultural association or high recreational and amenity value are also considered, as are the topographical constraints of floodplain and slope, as factors that may limit potential - and thus a capacity - for development. These elements are indicated on figure 4; values and constraints.

6.2 Whilst a number of woodlands and pastures with nature conservation interest lay to either side of the town, there are no designated wildlife sites in close proximity to Somerton, other than the River Cary, which is designated as a county wildlife site for its aquatic habitat, as it hosts a number of rare floristic, bird and invertebrate species. To the north of the Cary valley, the steep southwest slopes of Littleton Hill are similarly designated for its grassland interest, with notable species present.

6.3 The town's conservation area extends east from the centre, to include the open land of the Millands, toward the former manor estates in the vicinity of Lower Somerton, and the landscaped grounds of Somerton Randle. The Millands is an area of high (Saxon) archaeological potential, and its open space is crossed by a number of rights of way central to the conservation area. To the south of the town, paths acting as links to the local lane network are also intensively walked.

6.4 The River Cary and its tributary streams have associated areas prone to flooding in immediate proximity (identified as flood zone 3 by the EA) particularly below (to the north of) the town, and throughout the length of the main river. Whilst only a partial constraint to development in the past, it is recognised that floodplain is regarded as an undesirable area for development, and without associated attenuation and balancing features being built into any development, its form, extent and type will be constrained by flood risk.

6.5 In most part residential Somerton has avoided development over rising ground, for in areas of marked slope, an adverse visual impact of building mass can occur. It is also accepted that building over steep slopes is contrary to sustainability objectives, for the increased energy and resources expended in detailed cut and fill works; additional import and use of construction materials; and the difficulty of achieving appropriate urban densities, are all negative factors. Visually, building mass over rising ground is difficult to mitigate, and can be an adverse and dominant element in the townscape. Hence slopes in excess of 15° are indicated as placing a constraint on development form, and will be factored into the capacity equation – such areas will primarily include steeper land on the hillsides to the north of the town.

7) Landscape Capacity of Urban Periphery

7.1 In sections 4 and 5 of this report, both landscape character and visual sensitivities have been assessed, graded and mapped (figures 2 and 3). A landscape's capacity to accommodate built development will be the direct converse of the overall sensitivity judgement (a matrix representation of both character and visual sensitivities, see appendix 1) unless specific landscape values or development constraints are significant enough to reduce capacity one grade lower. The capacity plan for Somerton resulting from application of the matrix is indicated on figure 5 – landscape capacity.

7.2 The resultant plan indicates the study area divided into 5 broad categorisations of landscape capacity to accommodate built development, graded high; moderate-high; medium; moderate-low; and low, coloured red; orange; yellow; green and blue respectively. As the aim of this study is to identify land that has the capacity to be developed without too adverse an impact upon the landscape resource, it follows that those areas categorised as high and moderate-high capacity, and in a credible relationship with the town, should be investigated as potential development sites.

7.3 Three potential areas for development can thus be identified from the landscape capacity plan, being;

- (i) Land between Northfields and the Bancombe Trading Estate;
- (ii) Land to the west of Parklands Way; and
- (iii) Land between St Cleers and Ricksey Lane.

7.4 Area (i) indicates 4 fields that are contained between Bancombe Road and Bradley Hill Lane, and lay between the current residential edge of Northfields and the Bancombe Trading Estate to the west. With urban containment on 3 sides and a limited visual profile, this land offers scope for both residential and employment expansion.

7.5 Three pasture fields (area ii) contained between the Bancombe TE southern access road, and the residential edge by Parklands Way, are similarly well contained by urban form and have a low visual profile. Immediately abutting residential form along 50% of its boundary, this parcel of land would appear best suited for further residential growth.

7.6 To the west of St Cleers, two fields are indicated (area iii) as having a potential for development. Bounded by the rail line to the south and with housing form along their east edge, these fields lend themselves to residential development. A pond and associated tree group in the smaller field offers both amenity potential and scope for sustainable drainage. Should these fields be developed, a further field of moderate capacity toward the Langport road, currently adjoining the town's main sports pitches, could also logically contribute to the development parcel, with scope to provide residential development and further recreational space, sufficient to allow for any current shortfall within the town and the growth potential indicated by the above areas.

7.7 Finally, four small fields laying to the south of the main rail line to either side of Perry Hill road are indicated as having moderate-high capacity for development. However all four plots lack a credible relationship with the town and offer no potential for strategic development. The areas are thus acknowledged as having limited potential, and discounted from further investigation by this study.

8) Outline Proposals

8.1 Four potential areas of development have been identified by the landscape capacity plan, and their potential uses outlined in the previous section, paras 7.4 - 7.6. This final section of the report provides further guidance on the form of development acceptable in landscape terms, any necessary mitigation, and an indication of the potential extent of development.

8.2 Between Northfields and the Bancombe Trading Estate, an area circa 11 ha is indicated as appropriate for a mixture of residential and employment use. Whilst the site is well contained, development throughout its area would lead to an extensive coalescence of built form running east-west as viewed from vantage points to north and south. Hence an intermediary open-space buffer, inclusive of structural landscape provision, is anticipated as necessary, both to separate the employment areas from the residential extension, and to break up development mass. Utilising existing field boundaries on a N-S axis to demarcate the proposed land uses, approximately 5 ha each would appear to be readily available for both employment, and for residential development, whilst an open space and structural landscape buffer circa 1 ha in linear form would lay between. As the grain of Somerton's housing to the east is relatively tight and the site is visually contained, densities approaching 50 dph can be achieved in this location.

8.3 West of Parklands Way's housing, approximately 6 ha is suggested as having scope for a further westward extension of the town. As this area has a low visual profile, it is considered that 0.75 ha of structural landscape provision and informal open space would be sufficient to break up development mass throughout the remainder of the site, pertinently sited in the vicinity of the double line of hedgerows that currently assist in visually buffering the employment structures to the north. The remaining 5.25 ha can realistically accommodate residential growth, with densities ranging from 35-50 dph to comfortably juxtapose with the existing housing edge.

8.4 Between Ricksey Lane and St Cleers Orchard, and laying to the north of the main London-Taunton rail line, an area circa 9.5 ha is noted as having a capacity for built development, whilst a further 6 ha is mooted for recreational development. This latter area lays immediately alongside the town's current playing fields, and its close proximity to the current facilities, and level ground trajectory, gives a clear logic to a sports development use. Of the remaining area, the larger field (of circa 8 ha) to the south lays immediately adjacent a recently established housing area, and could comfortably accommodate a further extension of residential form, at similar densities as (8.3) above. The remaining 1.5 ha which is currently well used for informal amenity by local residents, and contains one of the few tree groups in this quarter of the towns, plus a pond a mature hedgerows, offers potential as informal open space alongside the residential extension's northern face.

8.5 In summary, the following areas are put forward as having potential for development:

- (i) East of Bancombe TE - 5 ha residential (>50 dph)
 - 5 ha employment

- 1 ha structural landscape provision and open space
- (ii) West of Parklands Way -
 - 5.25 ha residential (35-50 dph)
 - 0.75 ha structural landscape provision and open space
- (iii) SW of St Cleers -
 - 8 ha residential (35-50 dph)
 - 6 ha formal recreation
 - 1.5 ha structural landscape provision and open space

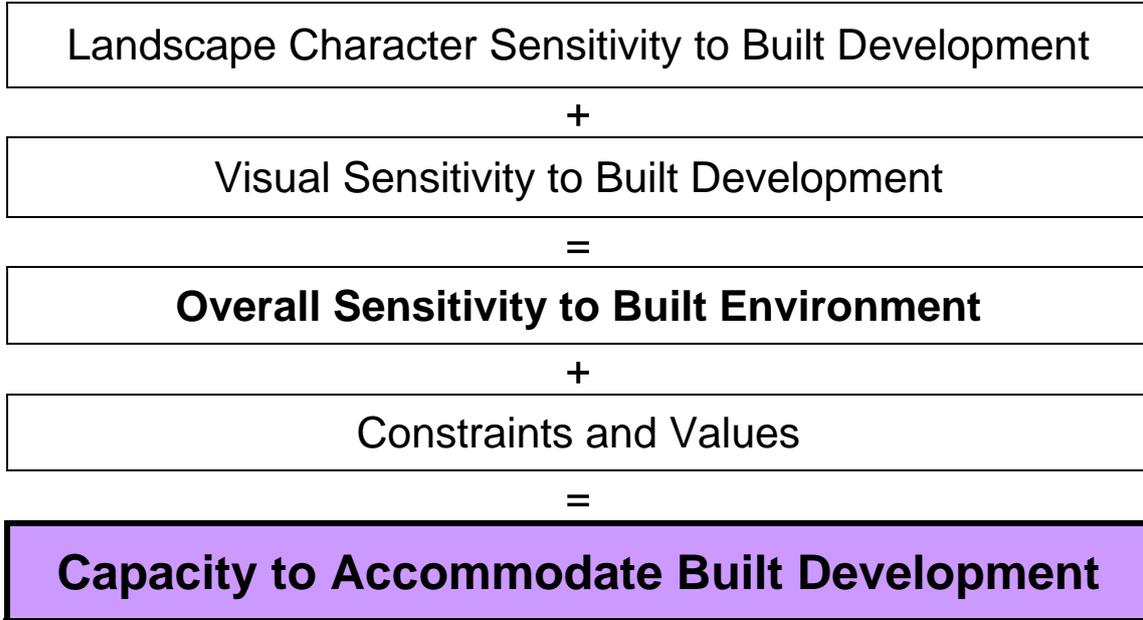
8.6 The above sites offer a potential development total rising to 18.25 ha residential land which - if built out at an average of 45 dwellings per hectare, net densities - broadly equates to a maximum of 820 houses. There is also potential for 5 ha employment land, with scope to raise this employment provision up to 10 ha by the Bancombe TE, whilst reducing the area suggested for residential development accordingly. Whilst the aggregated totals are a substantial land-take for a town of Somerton's size, the potential development areas relate well to the town's compact and concentrated layout, and are not visually intrusive. Thus it is considered that the extent of development indicated as feasible by this study, has the potential to be planned without undue impact upon Somerton's immediate setting, and its wider landscape context.

Robert Archer
25 April 2008

Peripheral landscape study – Somerton
Appendix 1 - landscape capacity matrix

Landscape Capacity Matrix:

A landscape's capacity to accommodate built development will be the direct converse of the overall sensitivity judgement (a matrix representation of both character and visual sensitivities) unless specific landscape values or development constraints are significant enough to reduce capacity one grade lower.



LANDSCAPE CHARACTER SENSITIVITY	Low	Moderate	Moderate High	High Capacity
	Moderate	Moderate Low	Moderate Capacity	Moderate High
	High	Low Capacity	Moderate Low	Moderate
		High	Moderate	Low
		VISUAL SENSITIVITY		

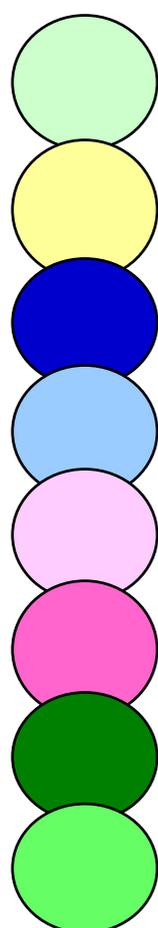
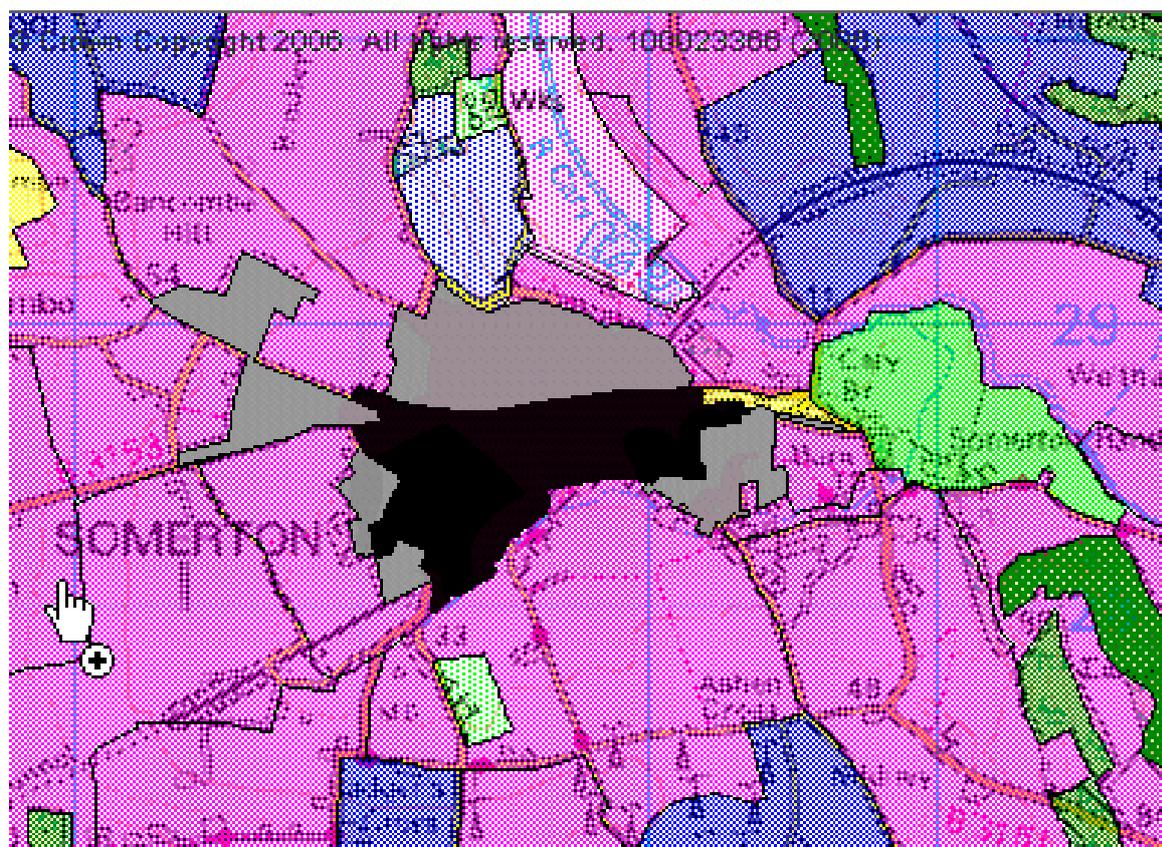
Landscape Capacity Matrix

Peripheral landscape study – Somerton

Appendix 2 - historic landscape character

Historic landscape characterisation – Somerton

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key:

Unenclosed pasture

Anciently Enclosed Land pre-17th century. General field size, 6-12ha. Between 25% and 50% boundary loss since 1905.

Anciently Enclosed Land modified 17th to 19th century. General field size, 6-12ha. Less than 25% boundary loss since 1905.

Anciently Enclosed Land modified 19th to 21st century. General field size, 6-12ha. More than 50% boundary loss since 1905.

Recently Enclosed Land 17th to 18th century. General field size 6-12ha. Between 25% and 50% boundary loss since 1905.

Recently Enclosed Land 18th to 21st century. General field size, 3-6ha. Less than 25% boundary loss since 1905.

Replanted ancient woodland (as defined by English Nature).

Historic Parkland

Peripheral landscape study – Somerton

Appendix 3 - photos



Photo 1: Looking north across the open plateau from Mill Lane, toward the town's southern edge circa 1 km. distant.



Photo 2: The same view in closer proximity to Somerton, with the church tower prominent – the Mill Stream valley that provides separation of town from countryside is not apparent.



Photo 3: From the southern end of Ricksey Lane, southwest of the town, looking across featureless open fields, toward recent housing by St. Cleers where there is no visual containment.



Photo 4: Looking east toward the town's west edge. The field appears to be used as informal amenity space, whilst trees scale-down housing form.



Photo 5: From Freshfields Road, looking northeast toward the edge of Bancombe road's housing adjacent the Trading estate.



Photo 6: Looking south from Bradley Hill Lane, across the west edge of Northfield's housing toward Bancombe road. A Local Plan housing allocation is sited in the further field.



Photo 7: From Etsome Road, looking east across the face of Somerton's north edge. The viaduct crossing the Cary Valley carries the main rail-line.



Photo 8: Looking south across the Cary valley from the B3151 below Littleton Hill, toward the same housing edge illustrated above, which is restricted to the head of the valley,.



Photo 9: Looking across the Cary valley from the northwest, toward the town's edge at the head of the scarp, with the church tower central.



Photo 10: Looking along the Mill stream valley from the east, from which little of the town can be perceived other than scattered holdings by Lower Somerton road.

Peripheral landscape study – Somerton

Appendix 4 - plans

Figure 1 -
Context
Somerton



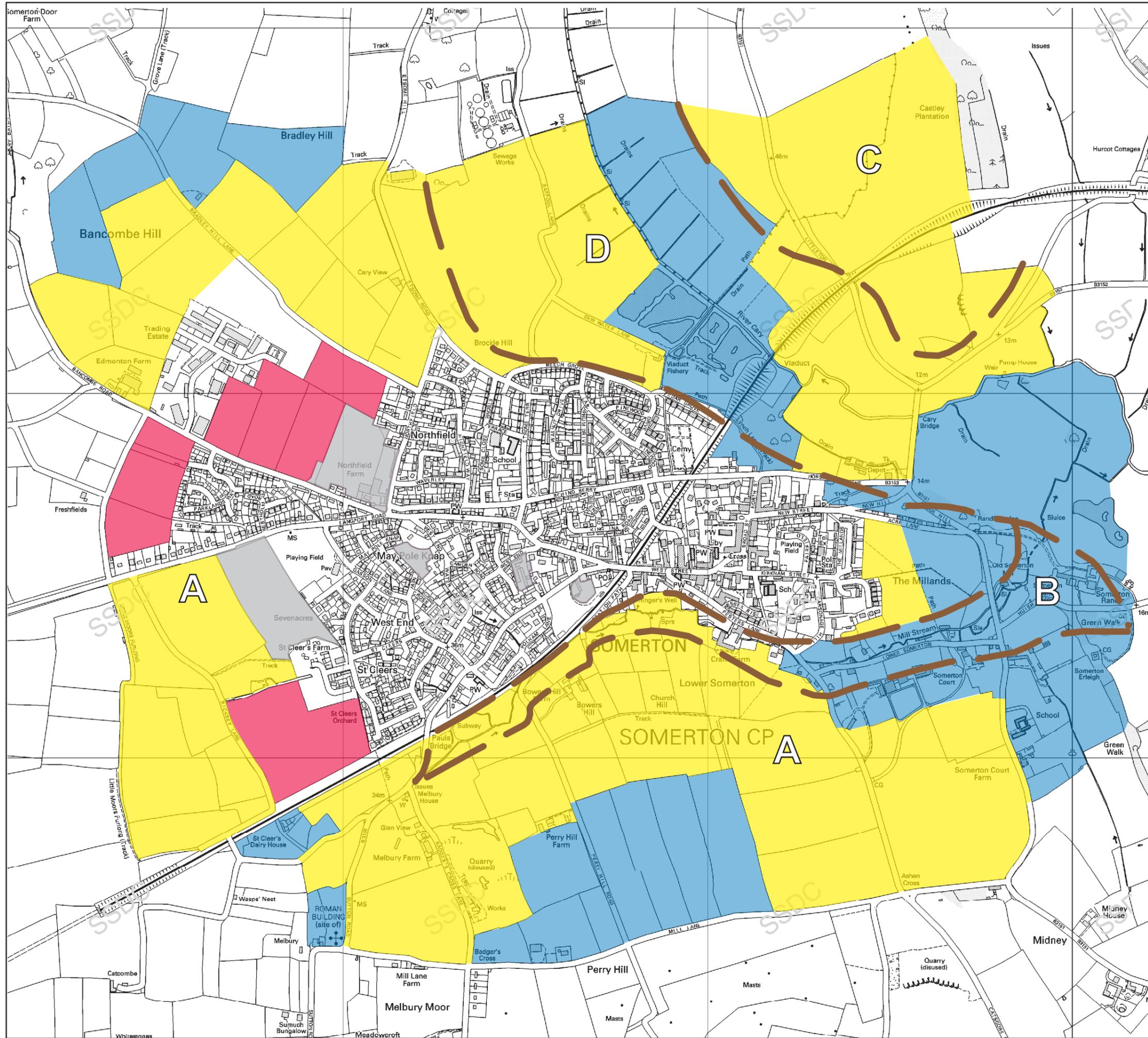
 Study Area

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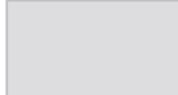
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Figure 2 - Landscape Sensitivity Somerton



 Local Landscape Character Areas

- A - Somerton plateau
- B - Internal valley
- C - Littleton Hill
- D - Cary Valley

 Local Plan allocations & development sites

 Area of low landscape sensitivity

 Area of moderate landscape sensitivity

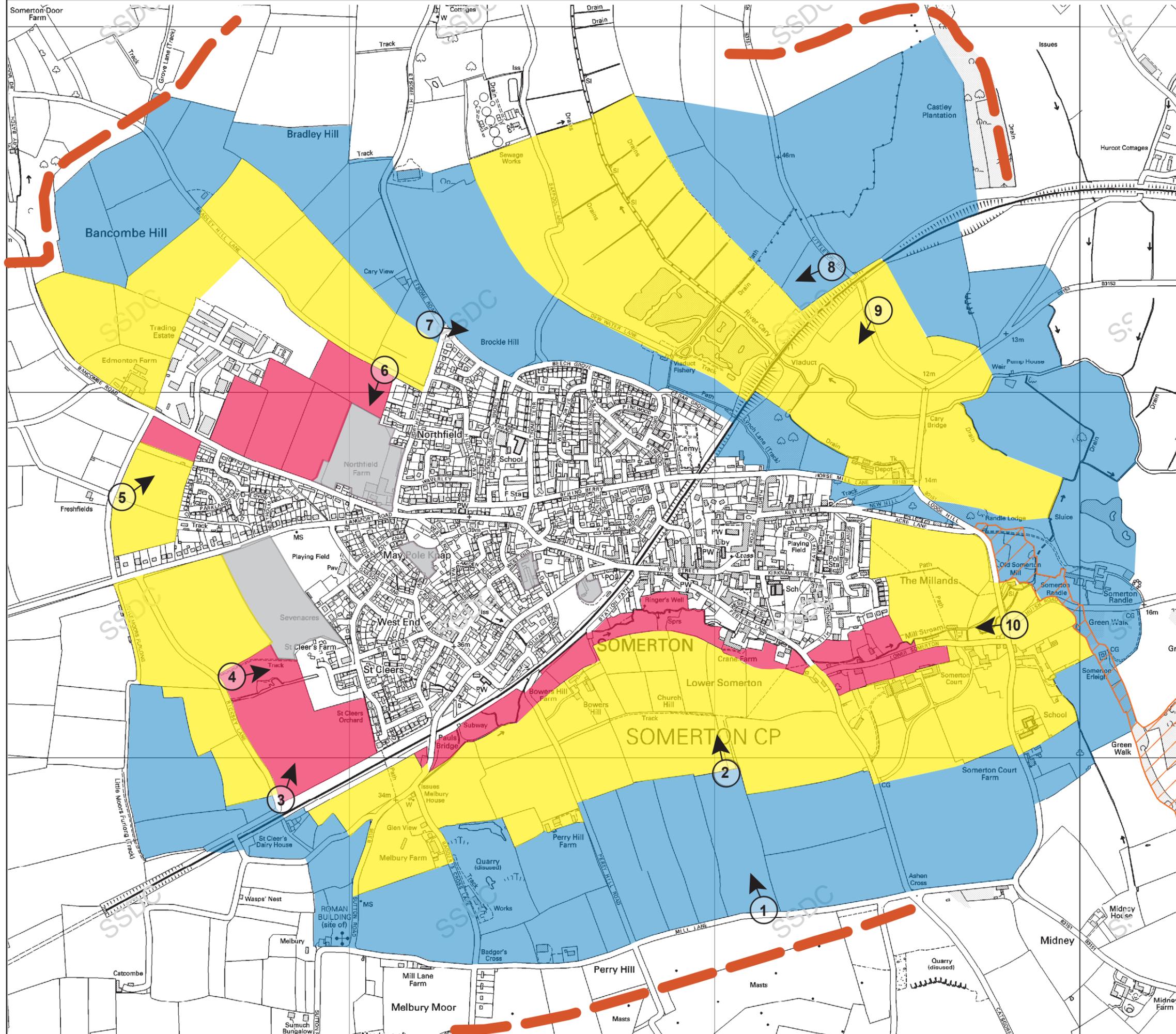
 Area of high landscape sensitivity

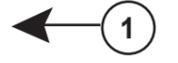
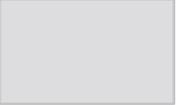


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Figure 3 - Visual Sensitivity Somerton



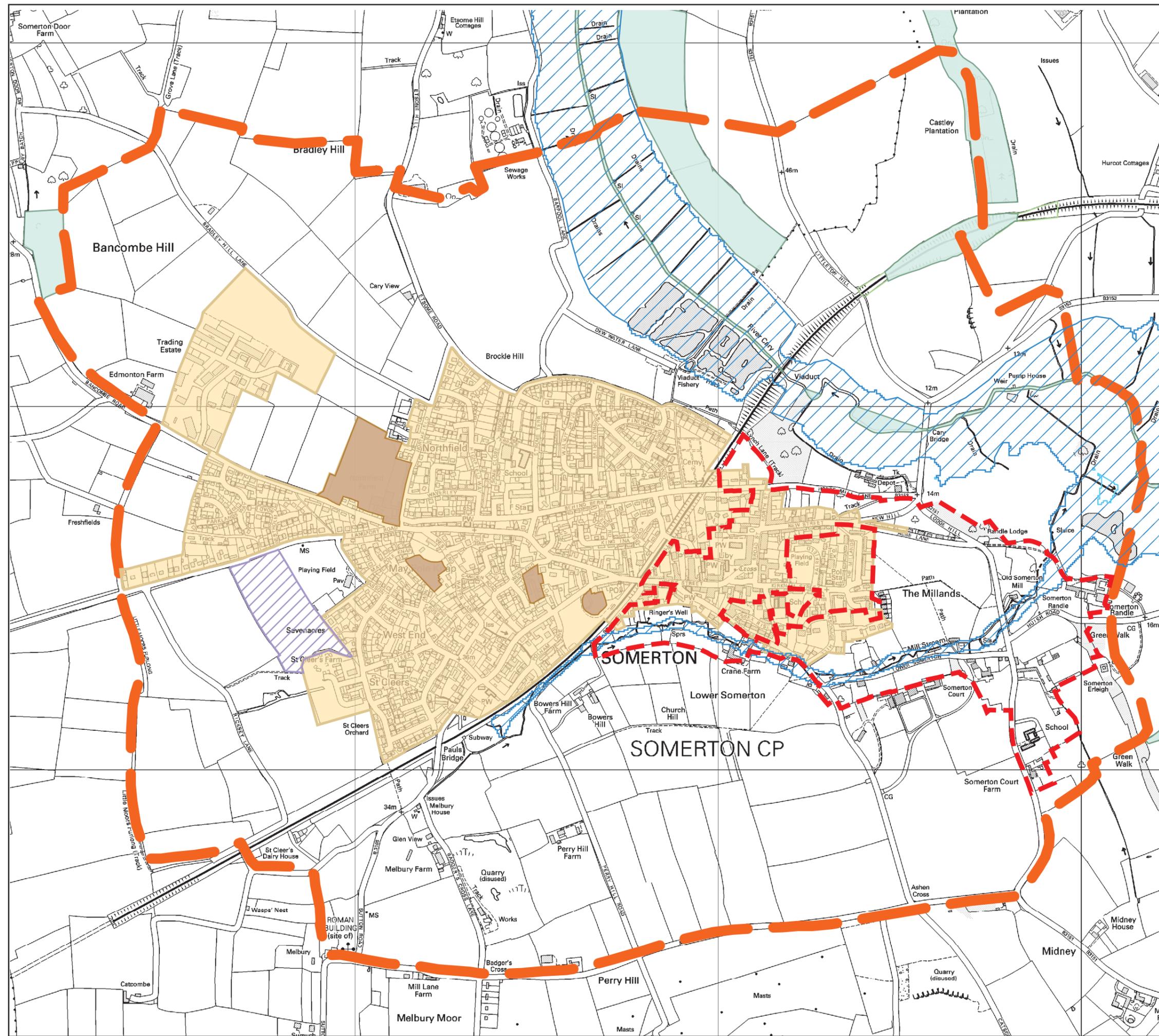
-  Prime line of Visual Containment
-  Diffuse Visual Containment
-  Photo Vantage Points (1 - 10)
-  Local Plan built allocation
-  Area of low visual sensitivity
-  Area of moderate visual sensitivity
-  Area of high visual sensitivity

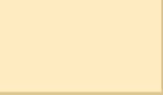
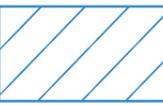
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Figure 4 - Value & Constraints Somerton



-  Study Area
-  Somerton Development Area
-  Local Wildlife Sites
-  Conservation Area
-  Development Allocation
-  Recreation Allocation
-  Flood Zone

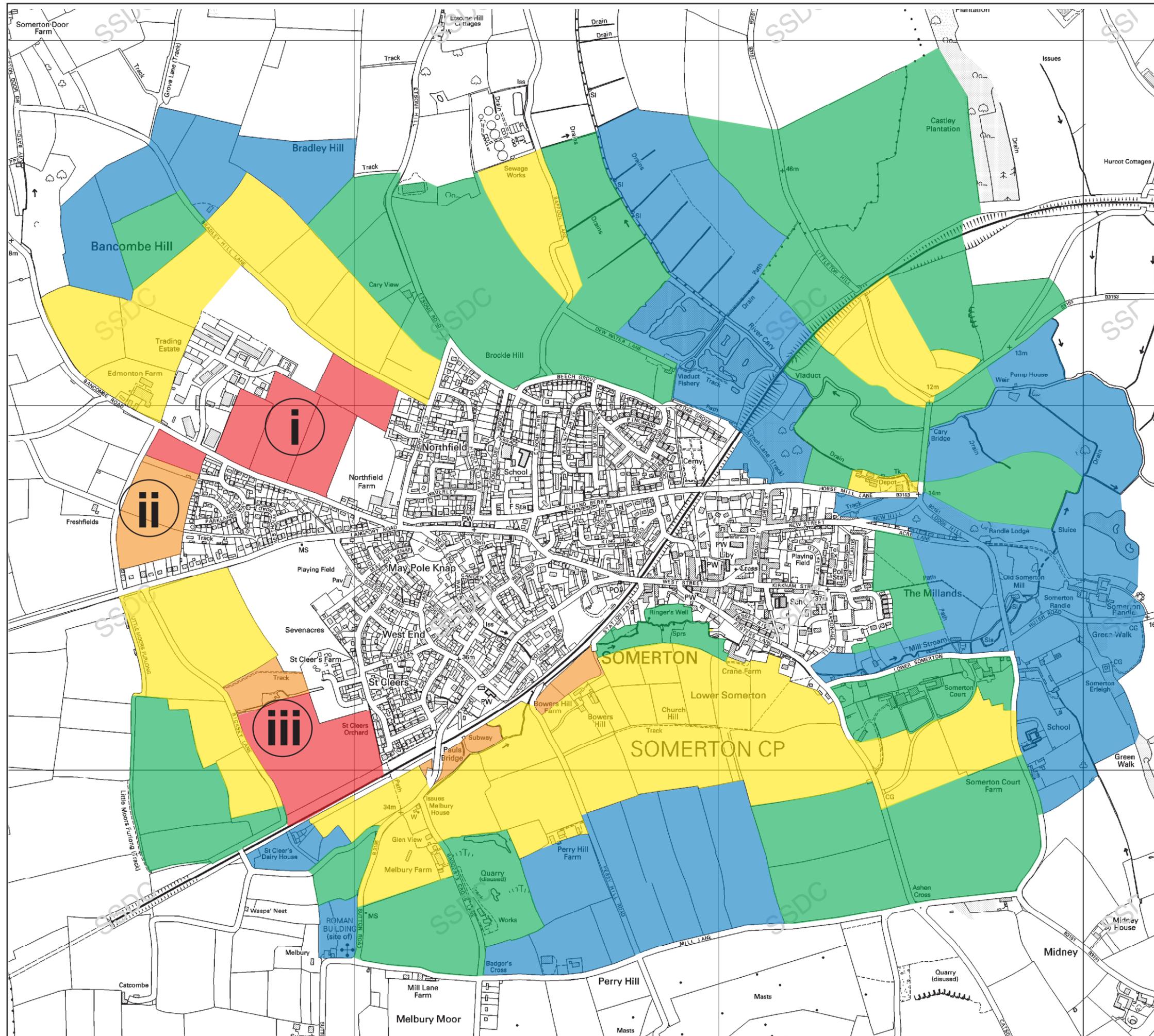
(The above categories as defined in the South Somerset Local Plan)

scale 1:10,000 @ A3



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Figure 5 - Landscape Capacity Somerton



- Landscape with a high capacity to accommodate built development
- Landscape with a moderate-high capacity to accommodate built development
- Landscape with a moderate capacity to accommodate built development
- Landscape with a moderate-low capacity to accommodate built development
- Landscape with a low capacity to accommodate built development
- i - ii - iii Potential development areas

scale 1:10,000 @ A3



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