

Wiltshire Council Planning Consultation Response

Landscape (Additional consultation response)

Officer name: Mark Goodwin CMLI (Senior Landscape Officer)

Date: 18.04.2024

Application No: **PL/2023/03359**

Proposal: Construction and operation of anaerobic digestion facility, ancillary infrastructure and construction of new access from Ashton Road.

Site Address: Land west of Ashton Road (B4696) Ashton Keynes, Wiltshire, SN6 6QT.

Case Officer: Olivia Tresise

Background:

This landscape consultation response follows on from the previous published landscape officer consultation response provided by my colleague, Paul Robertson CMLI (Senior Landscape Officer, Wiltshire Council) dated 11/09/2023 and further to receipt of comments received from the applicant's appointed landscape consultant (SLR), dated September 2023 and additional information seeking to address the officer's objection to this application for landscape and visual amenity reasons.

Recommendation: Objection (Maintained)

The previous landscape officer's original objection to this proposed development is justified in my opinion and is further strengthened by this additional consultation response, following my own review of all submitted application information to date, including SLR's response to Paul Robertsons original comments, I consider the landscape objection should be maintained and strengthened due to unacceptable resulting landscape and visual effects likely to arise from the scale and nature of this proposed industrialising development at this location within this unique, sensitive and locally valued landscape context.

Matters Considered:

Landscape & Visual Matters: Landscape Designations; Landscape Character; Landscape Features; Public Amenity.

Relevant Policy & Guidance:

National Planning Policy Framework – 2023 (NPPF) & National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG)

NPPF, Para. 8, Achieving sustainable development.

NPPF, Section 12, Achieving well-designed places.

NPPF Section 14, Meeting the challenge of climate change, flooding, and coastal change.

NPPF Section 15, Conserving and enhancing the natural environment.

180. Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

a) protecting and enhancing valued landscapes, sites of biodiversity or geological value and soils (in a manner commensurate with their statutory status or identified quality in the development plan);

b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;

NPPF Section 16, Conserving and enhancing the historic environment.

NPPG – Natural Environment - Landscape

- *'The National Planning Policy Framework is clear that plans should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and that strategic policies should provide for the conservation and enhancement of landscapes. This can include nationally and locally designated landscapes but also the wider countryside.'*
- *'Where landscapes have a particular local value, it is important for policies to identify their special characteristics and be supported by proportionate evidence. Policies may set out criteria against which proposals for development affecting these areas will be assessed. Plans can also include policies to avoid adverse impacts on landscapes and to set out necessary mitigation measures, such as appropriate design principles and visual screening, where necessary. The cumulative impacts of development on the landscape need to be considered carefully.'*

NPPG, Paragraph: 036 Reference ID: 8-036-20190721 - Revision date: 21 07 2019.

- *'in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land' in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, relevant authorities 'shall have regard' to their purposes for which these areas are designated.*
- *This duty is particularly important to the delivery of the statutory purposes of protected areas. It applies to all local planning authorities, not just National Park authorities, and is relevant in considering development proposals that are situated outside a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty boundaries, but which might have an impact on their setting or protection.*

(Planning Practice Guidance - Paragraph: 039 Reference ID: 8-039-20190721 - Revision date: 21 07 2019)

NPPG - Renewable and low carbon energy:

- *'The National Planning Policy Framework explains that all communities have a responsibility to help increase the use and supply of green energy, but this does not mean that the need for renewable energy automatically overrides environmental protections and the planning concerns of local communities. As with other types of development, it is important that the planning concerns of local communities are properly heard in matters that directly affect them.'*

NPPG, Paragraph: 003 Reference ID: 5-003-20140306 - Revision date: 06 03 2014

Wiltshire Core Strategy (2015)

- Core policy 42: Standalone renewable energy installations
- Core Policy 51: Landscape
- Core Policy 52: Green Infrastructure
- Core Policy 54: Cotswold Water Park
- Core Policy 57: Ensuring high quality design and place shaping.

North Wiltshire District Plan (2011) – (saved policies)

Core Policy NE14: Trees, Site Features and Control of new development.

Ashton Keynes Neighbourhood Plan (2015-2026) Made May 2017

- Policy ENP3: Enhancing the landscape character of the Parish and retaining the character of the village including the tranquillity of its setting.

a. Developments in the Parish should protect, conserve and where possible enhance landscape character. Developments should also retain the character of the settlement including the tranquillity of its setting and its sense of place.

Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 (CRoW Act 2000) - Section 85, Duty of Regard.

- 'in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land' in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty, relevant authorities 'shall have regard' to their purposes for which these areas are designated.
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(Planning Practice Guidance - Paragraph: 039 Reference ID: 8-039-20190721 - Revision date: 21 07 2019)

Designations

The Cotswolds National Landscape (formerly Cotswolds AONB) lies approximately 5.6km to the northwest of the site at its closest point. I do not consider the site itself shares any potential to contribute to the visual setting of this National Landscape due to the intervening topography, separating distance in combination with the layers of tree cover included within areas of woodland and intervening mature field boundary vegetation.

I am not aware of any existing trees within or bordering the site, that are currently protected by means of any Tree Preservation Order (TPO).

The land is understood to comprise grade 3 land in the BMV agricultural land classification scale.

The site itself does not lie within any national or local landscape designation/s but does lie within the heart of the 'Cotswolds Water Park' which now comprises 177 lakes that are all designated SSSI status by Natural England (2021).

"The Cotswold Water Park was created and continues to expand as a result of mineral mining activity across Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Oxfordshire. It comprises of over 170 lakes, and is an incredibly important place for biodiversity, recreation, continued mineral operations and education. The mixture of all these activities side by side really does make Cotswold Water Park a very special and unique place.

*Just 10 out of more than 150 lakes were designated as a Site of Scientific Special Interest (SSSI) back in 1984, but since then, and with more lakes being created, the bird and aquatic plant populations have continued to grow. It now holds over 35,000 wintering waterbirds and significant numbers of breeding birds including little ringed plover, little egret and nightingale. The scrub and reedbed are full of breeding warblers including reed, sedge and Cetti's warblers, blackcaps and willow warblers. The Park is also nationally important for four species of stonewort including the lovely pointed stonewort. This makes it nationally significant and therefore Natural England have expanded the designation to include 177 lakes."*¹

Landscape Character

National Character

The site and surrounding area are located within Countryside Character Area and National Character Area Profile (NCAP) - **108: Upper Thames Clay Vales**).

¹ 'The story of the Cotswold Water Park SSSI'- 30/09/2021 Blog by Claire Minett, Natural England, Gov.uk

Wiltshire County Landscape Character Assessment²

The site lies within Landscape Character **Type 12: Open Clay Vale** within Landscape Character **Area 12a: Thames open clay vale**.

North Wiltshire District Landscape Character Assessment³

The site lies within Landscape Character Type **Alluvium River Terrace Farmland** within Landscape Character Area **01: Thames Valley Floor**.

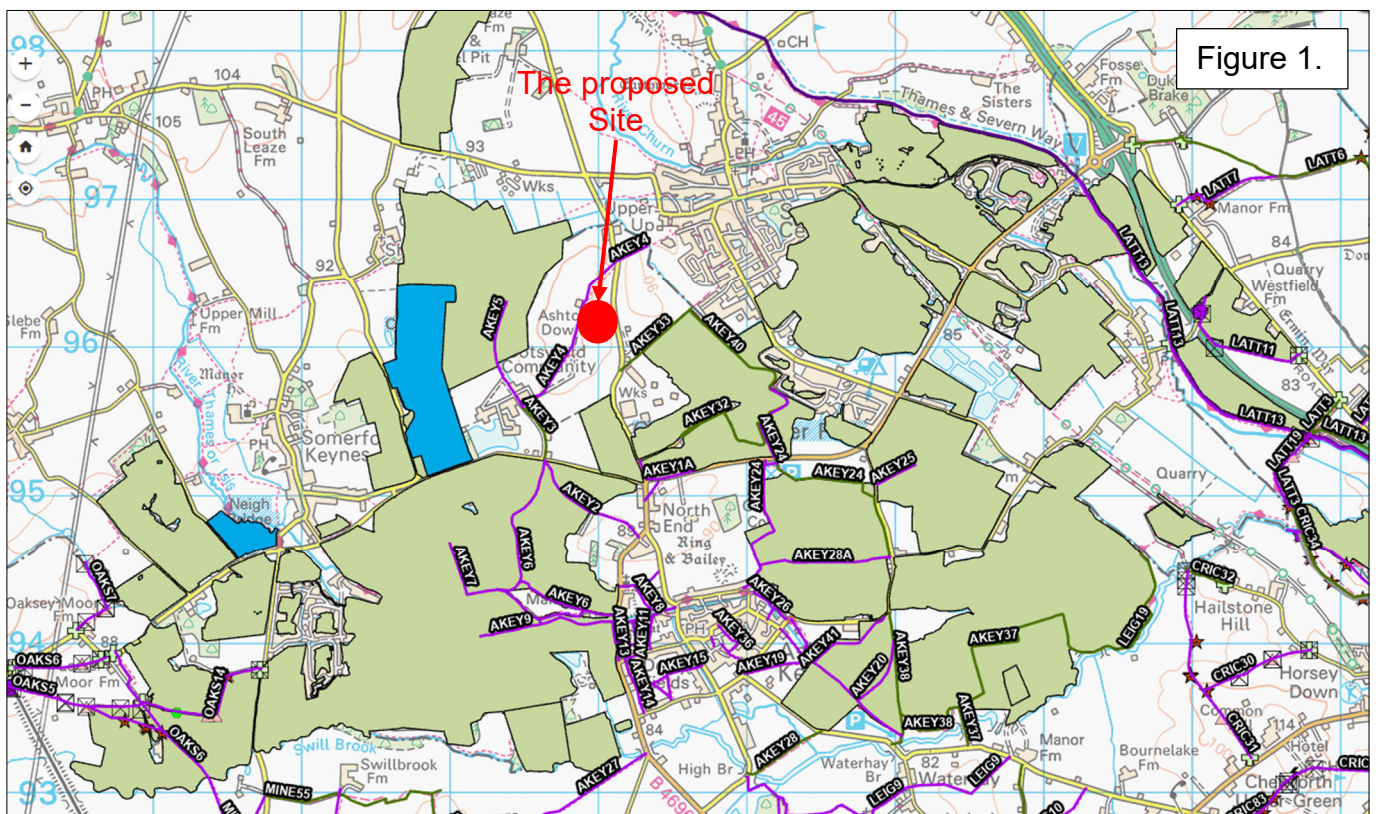
Cotswold Water Park Integrated Landscape Character Assessment⁴

The site lies within Landscape Character Type **03: River Basin Clay Vale** within Landscape Character Area **3A: South Cerney and Ashton Keynes Settled Wetland**. (see extract below)

Site and local context

The site and its local context are consistent with the descriptions contained within the hierarchy of published landscape character assessments. Although it should be noted that the importance of the Cotswold Water Park for wildlife / nature recovery has increased in area and value from when just 10 lakes were originally designated as SSSI's in 1984 to include all 177 lakes designated with SSSI status today.

See below extract from this Councils GiS mapping (Figure 1.) illustrating the SSSI designations (green areas) and Country Park (blue areas), Public Rights of Way (purple lines-footpaths / green lines-bridleways) in this local area in proximity to the location of the site.



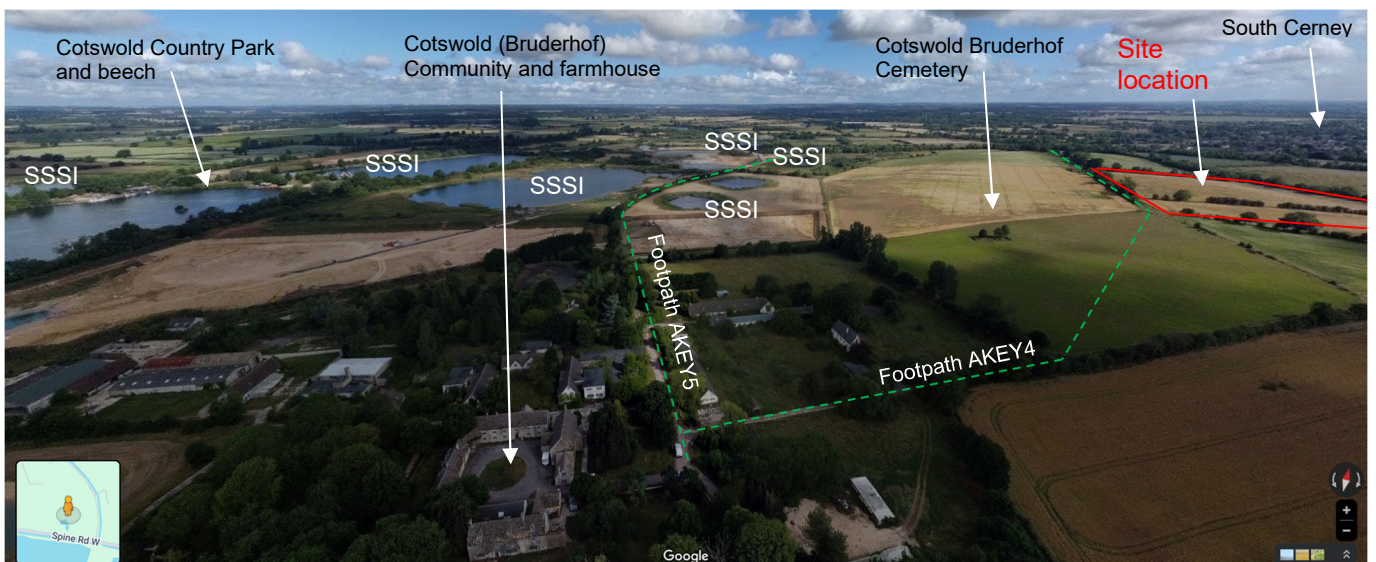
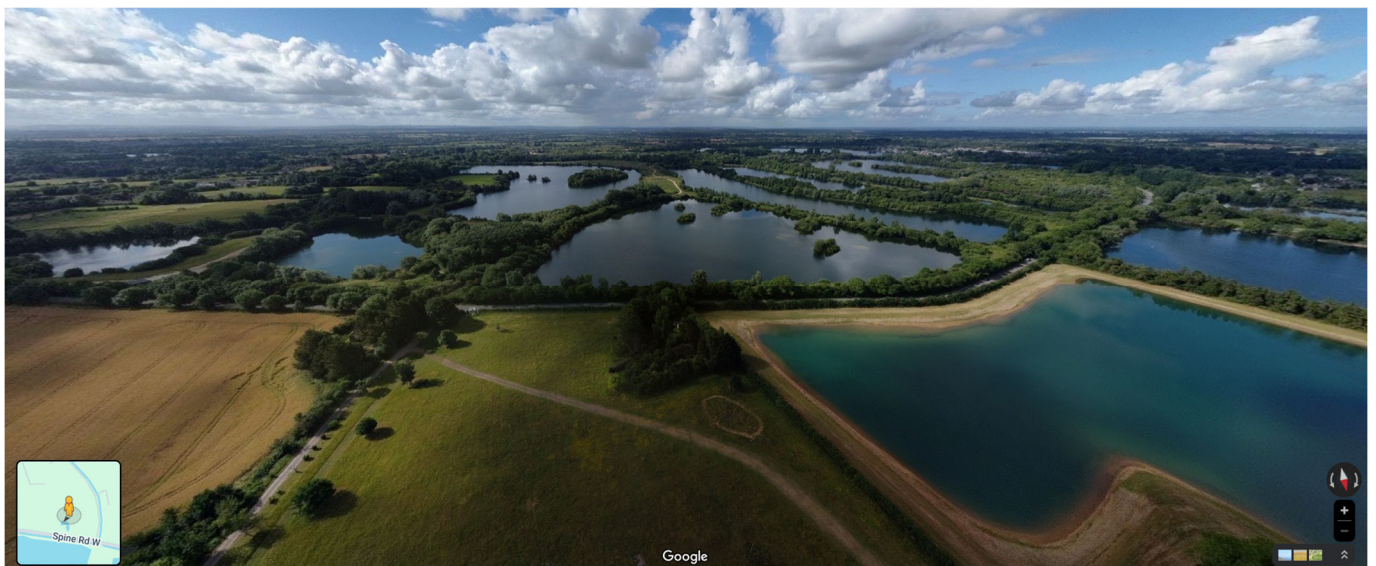
² Wiltshire Landscape Character Assessment (scale 1:50,000) - Land Use Consultants (2005)

³ North Wiltshire Landscape Character Assessment (scale 1:25,000) – White Consultants (2004)

⁴ Cotswold Water Park Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (scale 1:25,000 – LDA (2009)

This is a unique part of Wiltshire extending into neighbouring Cotswold District in Gloucestershire to the north and adjoining Swindon to the west. This dynamic local landscape has been evolving and continually changing from the 1960's up to the present day and will continue into the future resulting from extensive sand and gravel mineral working, leaving a permanent and unique landscape legacy which is being positively steered and managed in terms of mineral restoration plans to focus economic growth and activity that aligns with tourism, leisure and recreation, education, habitat restoration/ nature recovery, green infrastructure and farmland restoration following cessation of phased mineral workings.

The site lies in the heart of the 'Cotswold Water Park', a particularly dynamic and permanently changed landscape, which I believe demonstrates many qualities to justify this area as an important and locally valued landscape, which would be particularly sensitive to development of this scale and nature at this locality, see aerial photography (extracted from Google Maps) below;



Comments and observations:

Summary

Despite what the submitted LVIA / EIA chapter has concluded for landscape and visual matters, this development proposal will clearly represent a very large and uncharacteristic industrialising insertion into a locally sensitive open greenfield countryside location. The elevated industrial nature and scale of this proposed development will not sympathetically assimilate into this rural context and area of countryside, it does not associate with any existing farmstead buildings or built form, re-utilise any previously developed land (agricultural or other), and will require massive engineering and earth work operations to create the stepped level building platforms for its various built element components, while also removing a significant portion of a locally notable hillock/topographical feature, adjacent to a rural public road and Public Right of Way surrounded by numerous SSSI sites, the former Cotswold Community and associated Bruderhof Cemetery site. The resulting landscape and visual effects will not be appropriately or successfully mitigated by the LVIA/EIA's advised inherent design measures or by mitigating planting proposals.

- The proposed development will result in the loss of valued rural agricultural separation between characteristic village settlements and harms the existing rural character of Ashton Road, by the introduction of large-scale new dominating industrialising components, in particular but not limited to, the proposed 5 number 17m tall x 30m wide line of digester tanks which will tower over and dominate this section of Ashton Road.
- The proposed development will result in the harmful insertion of a visually discordant and detracting new landmark feature into the Cotswold Water Park, a short distance from the Cotswold Country Park and Beach, the Cotswold Community school and old Farmhouse (recently approved for new residential development by applications PL/1602609/OUT and PL/21/02520/REM) the small Cotswold Bruderhof Cemetery, numerous SSSI lakes and their connecting public footpaths linking these places of interest to nearby settlements of Ashton Keynes (south), South Cerney (northeast), Somerford Keyes (west) and Cotswold Community (southwest).
- The proposed development layout and its proposed access and highway visibility splays will require the removal of established trees and hedgerows and the established agricultural field pattern.
- The development will permanently alter the topography of this part of 'Ashton Down' by cutting into this local 'Hillock' feature to create the required building slabs/development platforms, covered lagoons and arc clamps and yard/handling areas across the whole site in order to facilitate the development. The existing 'Hillock' topography and farmland use included within the site area will be substantially and permanently changed to accommodate the form and scale of proposed development.
- Impacts upon the perceptual experience of countryside within the Cotswolds Water Park for adjacent road and footpath users will not be mitigated by the stated sensitive inherent design measures or planting proposals. The larger, taller structures and boundary treatments included within the development will remain a significant locally detracting feature viewed in the landscape in perpetuity.
- The proposed development will generate HGV traffic movement, noise, odours and new artificial lighting into an area focussed on nature recovery, green infrastructure, recreation and tourism and agriculture.

- The proposed landscaping of the site will not provide appropriate or effective mitigation or character enhancement and will result in urbanising contamination and /or loss of rural views towards and across the site area from the adjacent rural road and public right of way.

Conclusion

The development of this greenfield sloping site at this location in the manner proposed is considered particularly insensitive and harmful to the local amenity and character of the area. The proposed development will introduce permanent large new discordant industrialising landmark features and land use into the heart of this unique and locally valued landscape resource.

Developments of this proposed scale and nature need to be located in more suitable locations. In this regard I don't understand the logic for the selection of the site, which is surrounded by SSSI's in the heart of this unique Cotswold Water Park landscape, which is clearly being steered and managed for nature, recreation, leisure & tourism alongside agricultural land restoration following cessation of large-scale mineral working over the longer term. There is no reason why a less sensitive location couldn't be alternatively secured for a development of this scale and nature. The development will require significant excavation of a shallow hill feature to achieve the required level areas for construction slabs, introduces artificial terraces and retaining walls, and is of a scale, height and form of development which is at odds with the surrounding context of the site.

The development proposal is considered to be completely unsuitable at this site and contextual location resulting in unacceptable landscape and visual harm, contrary to national and local planning policy. The development proposal is considered to conflict with Section 15, Para 180 (a & b) of the NPPF, Core Policies-CP42 (i); CP51 (i,ii, iii, iv, v, vi, vii, viii); and CP57 (i, ii, iii, iv, vi) of the Wiltshire Core Strategy; Saved Policy NE14 of the North Wiltshire District Local Plan; and Policy ENP3 of the Ashton Keynes Neighbourhood Plan.

End.