

Planning Application Response

Landscape

To: Emma Bolster

From: Haidrun Breith, Landscape Specialist, Oxfordshire County Council

Site: Sonning Quarry, Playhatch Road, Sonning Eye Reading RG4 6TX

Detail: Planning application for the winning and working of mineral as a southern and eastern extension to Sonning Quarry using existing consented ancillary facilities, office, weighbridge, welfare, wheelwash facilities and internal access roads within Phase C, existing site access points onto Playhatch Road, and the A4155; together with retention and operation of plant site and ancillary facilities, to include the concrete block making operations and ready mixed concrete plant situated south of Playhatch Road along with retention and use of field conveyor including bridges over Playhatch Road and Spring Lane and an unnamed watercourse parallel to Spring Lane; together with retention of existing crossing points over Berry Brook and other watercourses; with progressive restoration using indigenous and imported materials to agricultural land and nature conservation habitat

Reference: MW.0036/24

Date sent: 20th June 2024

Recommendation Additional information required

Documents reviewed:

- Location Plan
- Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)
- Restoration concept plan
- Overall working plan

Landscape policy context:

Policy C8 (Landscape) reiterates the requirements of the NPPF that major development within the AONB will not be permitted except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest, in accordance with the 'major developments test' in the NPPF. It also requires development within AONBs to be small-scale, to meet local needs and should be sensitively located and designed.

Policy M10 (Restoration of Mineral Workings) requires mineral workings to be restored to a high standard and in a timely and phased manner and to take account of the character of the surrounding landscape and the enhancement of local landscape character.

Landscape Character context:

The site is not located within a designated landscape, but the site is approximately 1.6km from the Chilterns National Landscape.

The Thames Path National Trail runs in close proximity to the proposed extension areas. The county-wide Oxfordshire Wildlife and Landscape Study (OWLS) shows the site to be located within the Landscape Type '*Alluvial Lowlands*' and the character area '*Caversham*' CH/18. Key characteristics for the landscape type include broad sparsely settled alluvial plains, mixed farming patterns with regular fields, densely scattered hedgerow trees, and dense willow corridors bordering a large number of ditches.

The landscape strategy guidelines include strengthening of the field pattern by planting up gappy hedges with characteristic species and hedgerow trees, environmentally-sensitive maintenance of hedgerows, enhancement and strengthening of the character of tree-lined watercourses and minimising the visual impact of intrusive land uses such as mineral extraction through the judicious planting of tree and shrub species characteristic of the area.

The South Oxfordshire Landscape Character Assessment shows the site to be located within Landscape Type '*Flat Floodplain Pasture (5)*' and landscape character area '*Thames Valley Fringes*' (LCA 11).

Key characteristics for this LCA and landscape type include flat low-lying farmland with a distinctively 'wet' riparian character, strong influence of the River Thames and associated floodplain, Hartslock Wood SAC, a comparatively strong landscape structure with willows conspicuous along the riverside and a tranquil character with 'arcadian qualities' along the Thames near settlements. The LCA also identifies generally low intervisibility with views along the river being possible in places.

Its guidelines require mineral extraction sites to be screened with species characteristic for the area and sites restored to a high standard and to a range of after-uses that integrate successfully with the character of the surrounding landscape.

Landscape comments:

These comments should be read in conjunction with the comments of the county ecologist, the arboricultural officer and the public rights of way officer.

Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment (LVIA)

An LVIA has been submitted with the application. This assesses effects on landscape characteristics to be of *moderate-slight adverse* significance during operation, changing to *minor beneficial* with restoration in the long-term.

With regard to effects on visual amenity it assesses effects not to be greater than *moderate-minor adverse* on selected receptors for initial working of Phase D. Similarly, effects of workings of Phase E are also not considered to be greater than *moderate-minor adverse*.

Overall it concludes (paras 10.1 & 10.2):

"...that the proposed Development would not result in undue adverse effects on the local landscape character and visual amenity and that the Extension Site therefore represents an acceptable location in which to extend the established sand and gravel extraction operations. It is considered that the highly localised temporary adverse landscape and visual effects associated with the operational period of the Development would be balanced by the long-term beneficial landscape effects associated with the Site's restoration."

I am concerned that some of the effects might have been underestimated due an underestimation of the magnitude of impact and an overreliance of the effectiveness of existing vegetation and mitigation planting.

I have the following observations on the LVIA and related information:

- The LVIA includes no detailed description of the development, and it is not clear whether or how relevant elements (eg bunding, planting) have been considered in the assessment, making it difficult to judge the accuracy of the assessment. Clarification and further detail should be provided.
- The LVIA relies on the effectiveness of advanced planting along some of the boundaries, but no information on the exact location, species, appearance and long-term management have been provided. This information is required to understand the effectiveness of the proposed screening.
- The LVIA only considers the impacts of the extension and gives limited consideration to the ongoing impact of the existing mineral infrastructure such as the conveyor belt, the processing plant, HGV movements, lighting etc. Whilst these elements are already in place and an intensification of workings is not proposed, I consider it important that the continuation of the existing effects, eg on tranquillity, HGV movements and views, for another 17 years are sufficiently considered in the assessment. Clarification sought.
- No information on lighting has been provided on the basis that no significant levels of artificial lighting beyond those already permitted are proposed. However, the development seeks to extend into rural areas that are currently not lit as well as coming close to Sonning Eye. It is important to understand existing and proposed lighting (locations, levels, timing, etc) and how it might impact on landscape character and views. Additional information required.
- 14 viewpoints are indicated on the Viewpoint Location Plan, but they are not clearly referenced in the LVIA assessment. It is therefore not always clear what receptors they represent and how they are impacted. Clear referencing of viewpoints and impacts are required.
- Viewpoints 5 & 6 represent views from the Thames Path at either end of the development, but no assessment is provided from locations where the development comes closest to the Thames Path. Additional information and detail are required on the impact of the Thames Path.
- The LVIA does not include any photomontages e.g. the Thames Path, the PRow next to Spring Lane and from vp3. Photomontages or wireframe images for selected views should be provided.

Vegetation / Planting

The LVIA heavily relies on the retention of existing vegetation as well as advanced planting. As already mentioned above insufficient information has been provided with regard to the advanced planting and any other enhancement planting. It is also essential that existing trees and hedgerows are adequately protected from the development, e.g. by providing adequate buffers. It is therefore important that the comments of the Council's arboricultural officer are taken into account.

Chilterns National Landscape

The extension is approximately 1.6km from the boundary of the Chilterns National Landscape. I accept that there is limited visibility between the CNL and the site, but it should be noted that Natural England is currently undertaking a review of the CNL boundary, which might result in the boundary coming closer to the development area as is currently the case.

It should also be noted, that the recently passed Levelling Up and Regeneration Act 2023 (Section 245) has placed a strengthened 'duty to further' the statutory purposes of the National Landscapes on local authorities. This replaces the previous 'duty of regard' local authorities had under Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000.

It is anticipated that the government will provide further guidance on how this duty should be applied, however, interim advice from Natural England is that the duty has been strengthened, and that it is an active duty rather than a passive one. This means that developments are not only required to avoid and mitigate effects but to explore what can be done in addition, to further the purposes and qualities of the National Landscape.

The comments of the Chilterns National Landscape should be taken into account when determining the proposal.

Restoration

The restoration is back to agriculture and biodiversity offers only a limited uplift in landscape character and green infrastructure terms. Consideration should be given whether restoration could deliver greater benefits eg with regard to biodiversity or public access.