

Mary Hudson
Principal Planning Officer
Oxfordshire County Council

Cllr Katherine Foxhall
Cllr Viral Patel
Watchfield and Shrivenham ward
Vale of White Horse District Council

Dear Ms Hudson,

Re: MW.0151/23, Outline Flexible Planning Application at Former Wicklesham Quarry, Faringdon, Oxfordshire, SN7 7PH.

As ward councillors for Watchfield and Shrivenham ward, we write to highlight our concerns relating to a number of matters material to the proposed outline planning application on the former quarry site at Wicklesham and Coxwell Pitts. An application of this scale and proximity to the rural Vale will have a very large impact on the residents; specifically in Little Coxwell, but also in Great Coxwell, Fernham and Longcot. These rural villages have already seen significant impact from the sizable increase of Faringdon and nearby market towns, with the additional traffic that has brought to the rural roads, either off the A420 or through the villages to by-pass sections of the A420.

The proposed site is within a few hundred meters of the ward boundary of Watchfield and Shrivenham District Council ward. We respond in our capacity as ward members and after receiving considerable correspondence and representations; from both residents and parish councils.

Development Plan

The local development plan consists of the Vale of White Horse Local Plan and the Faringdon Neighbourhood Plan, both adopted in December 2016, and which are in conflict regarding this site.¹ Faringdon Neighbourhood Plan Policy 4.51B provides specifically for the development of Wicklesham Quarry, but with very clear and substantial conditions. These include that employment development on this site will be supported if no other suitable sites are available nearer the town centre and to expand the provision of local jobs. This is not what this application is offering; rather it claims to be “designed to meet the urgent needs of the science and technology sector”. It is therefore highly likely to increase, rather than decrease, the amount of commuter traffic, particularly given the distance from the employment and residential developments in Science Vale, which is where the Local Plan Spatial Strategy states that developments of this type should be concentrated.

The Vale LP 2031 does not allocate Wicklesham Quarry as a site for development. Moreover, the whole site is a SSSI, and in a VWH Conservation Target Area. The development of this site as an industrial development is clearly in conflict of the Vale LP 2031 Core Policy 46.² The scale of this development, and particularly the distance from Faringdon’s built up area, the height of the buildings in relation to the landscape character, its effect on the amenity of Little Coxwell is in conflict with CP 28.

We are aware that OCC are looking into whether the Localism Act excludes county matters from neighbourhood plan provisions. However, the Faringdon Neighbourhood Plan sets out clear requirements to protect landscape, wildlife, geology and ensure safe access in the event of a development at Wicklesham Quarry, and we believe it should be given significant weight.

Precedent

Granting permission here would set a very significant precedent for allowing industrial development in the rural Vale to depart from the Local Plan. The site is substantially outside the Faringdon

¹ <https://faringdowntowncouncil.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Faringdon-Neighbourhood-Plan.pdf>

² <https://www.whitehorsedc.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2020/10/Local-Plan-2031-Part-1.pdf>

development area. Most notably it is south of the A420 while the whole of Faringdon is to the north. No other village or town along the A420 between Oxford and Swindon has been allowed to expand to straddle the A420 in such a way. This development would have a significant impact on the amenity of the small rural villages and landscape character of the surrounding parishes that contradicts LP Core Policies 37, 38, 44.

Not a Brownfield Site

The applicants' previous application for an EIA Screening Opinion described the site as brownfield, and it is very important that any decision does not give this inaccurate representation weight. The definition of brownfield land "includes land used for mineral extraction and waste disposal where provision for restoration has *not* been made through development control procedures... All other such sites will be restored to 'greenfield' status, by virtue of the planning condition".³ The Institute for Materials, Mining and Minerals similarly emphasises that "Mineral working is not allowed to be a 'Trojan horse' that might create 'brownfield land' that is eligible for further development."⁴

We would further note that the earlier mineral extraction license on the site made provision for a 5-year aftercare scheme, requiring restoration of the site back to agriculture (Condition 4 & 20 of permission MW.0107/12 and Condition 4 of permission MW.0106/12) and this aftercare provision is not due to expire until June 2024.

Impact on Landscape

The FNP states that "any development on the [Wicklesham Quarry] site would need to be sensitively designed so as to be hidden within the landscape". This application proposes buildings up to 25m high. The proposed mitigation of a reduction of building height through a narrow corridor to maintain line of site through to the Folly tower is not satisfactory to alleviate the harm. This conflicts with the FNP Policy 4.5B that development at Wicklesham Quarry should not have a detrimental impact on the relationship between the site and the wider landscape in which it sits.

Highways and Access

Access to the site, and the pressure the development would add to the A420, are particularly concerning from the perspective of local residents who rely on being able to access the A420 from Little Coxwell and Longcot junctions. The submitted Transport Assessment (para 7.14) states that already committed nearby developments will put the Fernham Road over capacity: "to a point where it fails in the PM peak with no traffic able to emerge safely from the minor arm, Fernham Road." Para 7.15 states that "with the addition of the proposed development traffic this situation is expected to worsen, predominantly as a result of increased flows on the A420 and not through addition of turning traffic at the junction. The junction will have already failed in 2029 reference case under the addition of committed development traffic."

Faringdon Neighbourhood Plan clearly sets out that any development of this site would need to be accompanied by a signal-controlled safe crossing over the A420, requiring an S278 agreement to guarantee this work. Currently, the applicants have included highways and access provision within the Section 106 Draft Heads of Terms. Any permission granted needs to be on the basis of a S278 agreement under the Highways Act, and it should be made a condition that this work is undertaken before development commences.

³ <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2004-01-08/debates/02528dee-4428-4aa8-b0e3-1e4e3d023e9e/BrownfieldSites>

⁴ <https://www.iom3.org/resource/how-the-uk-planning-and-environmental-permitting-systems-work-for-minerals.html>

Biodiversity and Geological Significance

Both Vale and OCC have determined that an Environmental Impact Assessment is not technically necessary. However, given the status of the site as an SSSI for its geological significance, the history of great crested newt habitat, its location, the conflicts within the planning framework, and the status of the site as a restored mineral site (not a brownfield site) we ask OCC to pay particular attention to the environmental and ecological impacts of the application. The responses from BBOWT and OCC Biodiversity Officer should be read carefully, and a response by Natural England required before this application is determined.

The applicants' ecological assessment downplays the potential of this site as a newt habitat. However, under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 it is an offence to (among other things) "damage or destroy" the "breeding sites and resting places" of Great Crested Newts, "even if GCN are not present". The two newt ponds have clearly been previously identified in the approved restoration plan (OCC Planning Ref. MW.0038/19) as both existing and being seasonal. Any planning consent must provide for their continued and permanent protection on this site, and as the FNP specifies, development must include "appropriate ecological mitigation and enhancement measures".

NPPF paragraph 180b requires that the benefits of developing a SSSI should "clearly outweigh" the impact. Wicklesham is precisely the kind of site that should be utilised to deliver BNG for other developments; e.g. quarries have been identified by the RSPB as providing potential for high quality habitat for nature.⁵ It makes a mockery of new BNG goals that this application will be so destructive to habitat, in a rare setting, as to require 50 units of woodland and grassland to be delivered offsite, according to the applicants' own BNG assessment.

Sewage infrastructure

Thames Water's response to this application identifies the likelihood of the need for reinforcement to the sewerage network to accommodate additional flows. However, the Faringdon sewage treatment works also does not have the capacity to deal with the sewage produced by a development of this size. Between January and September 2023, Thames Water recorded 223 hours of discharge in 126 events. Any granting of permission should include a condition that development is not occupied until either the capacity of Faringdon sewage treatment works has been upgraded, or a phased plan is agreed with the local authority.

⁵ <https://community.rspb.org.uk/ourwork/b/actionfornature/posts/quarries-creating-unique-homes-for-nature>