

Landscape and Visual Consultation Response

Oakley Farm Slopes 20/01069/OUT

Stuart Ryder provides a summary of the landscape issues as he sees them on page 1 and 2 of his consultation response. He lists 8 landscape issues and 6 visual issues. In many respects these set out the key matters that I respond to in summary below:

Landscape Issues

- Fundamental change in character of a section of the Cotswolds AONB which is a nationally designated landscape asset;*
Response: The development would create a fundamental change to the character of part of the site. The open elevated area of the site adjoining Harp Hill will remain its present character other than where the access and road are created.
- Change to a section of the Cotswold escarpment as both an important landscape character type and landscape character area;*
Response: This section of the Cotswolds escarpment does not reflect the published characteristics of the wider escarpment due to the nature of its urban context. That is, existing settlement features which inform the character of the landscape on three sides of the site have a strong influence on the character of the site. The fourth side of the site comprises the long established reservoir structures which isolate the site from the wider escarpment landscape.
- Major scale development apparently extending into the open countryside;*
Response: Development extends into part of the site.
- Potentially largescale change to the landscape setting to this part of Cheltenham;*
Response: It is accepted that the development proposals would introduce a change to part of the site which has a stronger relationship with the existing Oakley settlement area. As the upper part of the site remains free of development and is retained as natural and informal open space, the extent of large scale change is limited to a less visually prominent lower lying part of the site which plays a lesser role in the immediate setting of this part of Cheltenham.
- Loss of distinctive landscape features within the development site including mature trees, sections of hedgerow and ridge and furrow agrarian features;*
Response: Loss of site features has been kept to a very limited level with the majority of trees meaningfully retained along with key hedgerows. The ridge and furrow is predominately found at the more elevated areas of the site adjoining Harp Hill and as such are almost fully retained other than where the access and road are created. This has been a deliberate design intention to minimise effects of development.
- Change to retained landscape features due to an altered context*
Response: Retained trees are kept within open areas to ensure their conservation. These areas of open space have been deliberately connected into the main natural open space area which adjoins Harp Hill. As such this natural context is retained for the majority of the site features other than along the immediate northern margin of the site which it should be noted has settlement features immediately adjoining.

7. *Change to the existing road corridor character of Harp Hill where the site access is proposed;*
Response: Other than the creation of an attractive, long distance view where none are presently available to the public, the character of the highway corridor will remain semi rural due to the retention of natural open space within the site areas adjoining Harp Hill.
8. *Change to the setting of the Listed reservoir and pavilion structure at Hewlett's Reservoir Site*
Response: The development maintains a natural open space adjoining the reservoir which conserves its setting. At present there is no public access to experience the reservoir features in this setting but the development will change this and allow the public to appreciate features such as the pavilion where they presently can only do so from the road on Harp Hill.

Visual Issues

1. *Change to views out from the edge of Cheltenham particularly from the B4075 Priors Road;*
Response: Changes to views from the active area of Priors Road are limited as views are generally quite indirect and are seen across the supermarket and petrol station forecourt. Existing residential areas are also seen ascending the topography in these views. The photomontage prepared to represent views from this location confirm that the effect of development is limited and not seen out of the context of the existing settlement. Refer to figures 1 to 5 of the photomontage images.
2. *Change to views for users of the local footpath network*
Response: Changes to views from the local footpath network is limited to the footpath that links Harp Hill with Priors Road via the western edge of the site. It is accepted that changes to views will be experienced where footpath users adjoin proposed areas of new built development. These views are lower and already have settlement features influence their quality. Views from more elevated locations of the footpath will remain open where hedgerow management permits and these views will remain long distance and natural in character. It is an important element of the development that access to new views will be provided from elevated areas within the proposed open space where presently no views are available to the public.
3. *Change to views from Harp Hill*
Response: Changes to views from Harp Hill will be limited to new views which will be created through the new access. These will not be a detrimental experience but provide attractive long distance views into the Cotswolds where presently they are not available. This new view is shown in the photomontage representative of this view into the access. At present other views are limited to the public whilst walking on Harp Hill. As the development proposals will allow pedestrians to walk safely off the road within the proposed natural open space, there is notable opportunity for public views to be increased and improved in their quality. Refer to figures 16 to 20 of the photomontage images.
4. *Change to views from the residential streets of Oakley Grange*
Response: Changes to views from Oakley will generally be limited to public areas and residential properties immediately adjoining the northern boundary of the site. Presently many of these views are limited by effects of screening and topography. It is accepted that some loss of views into the site will arise from the development and that mitigation will be required to maintain the semi rural character of existing views from this location.
5. *Change to views from other parts of the Cotswolds AONB;*

Response: Changes to long distance views into the site from the wider Cotswolds AONB are limited by the retention of the openness to the most elevated part of the site adjoining Harp Hill. This part of the site is most visible from elevated views into the site from the escarpment. Photomontages representative of these views illustrate how limited the effect of development of the lower slope area would be on these views. Refer to figures 6 to 15 of the photomontage images.

6. *The cumulative effect on views when combined with other recent development in the area*

Response: The cumulative effect on views when considered in the context of Oakley development is also limited. From long distance views into the site, built form will be seen to be a seamless part of the existing Oakley settlement. From local views from footpaths and Harp Hill, the proposed nature and extent of mitigation is intended to improve views by screening the existing harsh settlement edge in future views.

The site context (Illustrated in Stuart Ryders Figure 1) is a useful description and clearly identifies the site as being separated from the wider AONB other than the visual/physical connection across the reservoir site.

Stuart Ryder (SR) makes much of the site being within the Escarpment Landscape Character Area but his description of the local character type (Oakley Farm Pasture Slope Landscape Character Type) acknowledges that it is not like other wider areas of the escarpment. SR states that the land parcel as identified in the Landscape Character, Sensitivity and Capacity Assessment of the Cotswolds AONB within the Cheltenham Borough Administrative Area was identified to have high landscape and visual sensitivity and as a result Major constraints to development with Low overall capacity for development. However, this outcome was recorded for all areas within the AONB adjoining Cheltenham so provides little in the way of objective comparison between sites assessed.

On page 6 of the SR consultation, he sets out his assessment of the effects of proposals. To these I provide my initial response as follows:

- It would effectively remove the overall rural character from the site and effectively change it to an urban character.
Response: The development proposals would only change the character of the lower part of the site which is already notably influenced by the Oakley settlement area. The retention of the natural open space along the upper slope will retain its existing character
- The public open space to the south of the site will act as a recreational resource for local people but would again lose its rural characteristics with the access roads running through it and its main land use changed.
Response: There is no reason why the proposed natural open space should have an urban character other than from the influences already found adjoining the site boundaries on Harp Hill and to the west. The introduction of the notable belt of mitigation tree planting across the site that separates the proposed built form from this natural open space will also screen existing settlement features so potentially increasing the rural character of the upper open slope area in the longer term.
- There would be official public access to the upper slopes of Fields 1, 2 & 3 where none exists at the moment, this access would not only be for the new residents but also other local people from the surrounding area
Response: This is seen as a notable benefit of the development for local people who do not even have the enjoyment of a pedestrian footpath on Harp Hill at present.

- The usefulness of the steep sloping ground as public open space needs to be questioned with activity on it likely to be limited to walking
Response: No other activities than walking and informal recreation would be envisaged in this open space to ensure that its rural character and potential for new ecological habitat is maximised.
- The presence of the main access road through the public open space will curtail some recreational activities and reduce the areas sense of remoteness
Response: See response to above comment. The area already has limited sense of remoteness due to contextual settlement features and isolation from the wider agricultural landscape.
- It is welcomed that the mature trees on site have been largely retained but their visual qualities set within fields will be lost as their new context is one of built form.
Response: Only from a limited number of views. From Harp Hill, long distance views from the Cotswolds and from within the future natural public open space the trees will be seen in an open grassland setting
- The loss of internal hedgerow, albeit not total, will also partly remove a positive landscape asset and the pattern it sets across the fields
Response: As identified not all hedgerow will be lost and the extensive belt of new tree planting will provide a new natural feature that forms both a setting for the development and for the natural open space adjoining Harp Hill
- The SuDS basin unless skilfully designed and shaped to work as best as possible with the sites grounds levels could appear as a highly artificial feature on the sloped ground
Response: This is not a matter for an outline scheme as future details can be approved by the council. It is however notable that the location of the proposed basin is well contained and hidden from general views.
- The opportunity to see open sloping ground and understand how the sloped pasture is part of the Cotswold escarpment will be lost, or at the very least shrouded with development.
Response: Disagree. Views out of the site at lower site levels are very limited so the contextual setting of the present pasture is not clear. At higher level the open ground is to be retained with new accessible views made available to the public. This should increase the ability of the public to understand this element of the escarpment and its interface with the existing settlement.
- The proposals have followed the easterly development line set by Oakley Grange that butts up against the Hewlett's covered reservoir but the quantum and density of the development is such that this would be seen as a major urban extension up the escarpment.
Response: Disagree. Photomontage representation from long distance views illustrate very limited visual effects as much of the lower site is already screened in views. Refer to figures 6 to 15 of the photomontage images. Views from Harp Hill will be improved by future screening provided by new mitigation planting.
- The level change between the bottom north west corner of the site (78m AOD) is 39m. This will make the houses appear to be running up the slopes in views from the north and north west.

Response: Disagree. Detail will not be seen in distance views and local views generally only see part of the site. Where seen such as Priors Road the effect will appear much the same as existing settlement on the hillside. Refer to figures 1 to 5 of the photomontage images.

- It would reduce the quality of the landscape setting of this part of Cheltenham.
Response: Disagree. It will change the character of the lower site area adjoining Oakley but the development will in the long term enhance the landscape quality and character along through the opening up and long term management of the future nature open space adjoining Harp Hill. The establishment of the mitigation tree belt that separates the development from the open space will achieve improvement to the visual amenity of the upper slope areas of the site, the setting of the reservoir and the visual amenity of residents on Harp Hill.
- It would remove the sites 14.5 hectares from the AONB by effectively removing the special qualities of the site that justify its designation as part of the Cotswolds AONB
Response: Disagree. Although the area to be developed will lose its special qualities, the natural open space area will be enhanced and will provide a new area accessible to the public that will retain all of its special qualities that it presently has.