

Cotswolds Conservation Board

Environmental Impact Assessment (Forestry) Regulations. Screening of Proposed Christmas tree plantation – land at Waterley Bottom

Background

Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2018 - 2023

The landscape and rural land management policies in the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2018 – 23¹ state that:

POLICY CE1: LANDSCAPE

- 1. Proposals that are likely to impact on, or create change in, the landscape of the Cotswolds AONB, should have regard to, be compatible with and reinforce the landscape character of the location, as described by the Cotswolds Conservation Board's Landscape Character Assessment and Landscape Strategy and Guidelines.*
- 2. Proposals that are likely to impact on, or create change in, the landscape of the Cotswolds AONB, should have regard to the scenic quality of the location and its setting and ensure that views - including those into and out of the AONB – and visual amenity are conserved and enhanced.*

POLICY CE8: RURAL LAND MANAGEMENT

- 1. Rural land management in the Cotswolds AONB and in the setting of the AONB should have regard to – and help deliver - the purposes of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the AONB and increasing the understanding and enjoyment of the AONB's special qualities.*
- 2. Rural land management in the Cotswolds AONB and in the setting of the AONB should have regard to – and, ideally, help to deliver – the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan. It should also be compatible with guidance produced by the Cotswolds Conservation Board, including the:*
 - (i) Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines;*
 - (ii) Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment;*
 - (iii) Cotswolds AONB Local Distinctiveness and Landscape Change;*
 - (iv) Cotswolds Conservation Board Position Statements.*

Landscape Character

Waterley Bottom lies within the Rolling Hills and Valleys Landscape Character Type (LCT)². Woodland is characteristic of this landscape type particularly on the steep upper slopes and around the valley rims. Grazing pasture predominates on steeper slopes and the valley bottoms are typically unimproved or semi-improved pasture. The key characteristics of this landscape type include:

- Steep sided concave valleys with steeper upper slopes often dominated by woodland

¹ The Cotswolds AONB Management Plan is a statutory plan setting out the policies for managing the AONB <https://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/planning/cotswolds-aonb-management-plan/>

² Cotswolds AONB Landscape Character Assessment 2004 <https://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/our-landscape/landscape-character-assessment/>

- Area principally under pastoral use, together with some scattered areas under arable cultivation, mainly within the valley slopes and bottom. Areas of rough scrubby pasture often evident on upper slopes.

The Landscape Strategy and Guidelines describes the sensitivity of the Rolling Hills and Valleys LCT as

The upper valley sections represent quiet rural landscapes with strong associations of peace, tranquillity and a sense of remoteness. Landscape character is strong, and these sections of the valleys are highly sensitive to developments that may compromise these characteristics

Waterley Bottom displays this character particularly strongly with woodland on the steep upper slopes and pasture on the lower slopes and valley bottom. The mid-slope boundary between the woodland and pasture is very distinct with only small exceptions of areas of scrub and scrubby grassland. See Appendix 1

To conserve and enhance this strong character, the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines³ for the Rolling Hills and Valleys LCT seeks to retain and conserve areas of unimproved grassland and permanent pasture. Woodland creation is limited to counteracting the impact of degraded urban edges and limited extensions to existing wet woodland (and riverine habitats) along the course of rivers and streams.

Proposed amendments

Amendments to the original proposal have been put forward and discussed. These include:

- Reducing the planting area to the lower slopes of the pasture, avoiding the areas unimproved/semi-improved grassland along the upper slopes of the pasture.
- Limiting the growing of Christmas trees to 30 years and returning the site to pasture/unimproved grassland
- Not planting the whole area in one year, but planting 2 acres per year working along the site
- Maintaining the remaining grassland

Whilst the proposed amendments are aimed at reducing the impacts of planting trees, the revised proposal will still have a negative impact on the landscape character of Waterley Bottom and contravene the Landscape Strategy and Guidelines and therefore the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan.

The planting along the lower slopes of pasture leaving a band of pasture between the existing woodland and Christmas tree plantation would be particularly disruptive of the landscape character, losing the clear mid-slope boundary between woodland and pasture. The management of the band of unimproved/semi-improved pasture would be also be challenging.

³ Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines 2006 <https://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/our-landscape/landscape-strategy-guidelines/>

Risk of alternative land use

Discussions have also taken place on the risk of alternative uses of the land if not used for growing trees. There is a risk that the land could be sub-divided and sold to individuals, principally for horses with associated shelters and other paraphernalia.

The risk of sub-division for horses can be mitigated by the planning system if it is deemed to be 'keeping of horses' usually defined by the need for supplementary feeding. The potential impact on the landscape and biodiversity by horses is covered by policies in the statutory Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2018 – 2023, with guidance and guidelines in the Cotswolds AONB Landscape Strategy and Guidelines and the Cotswolds Conservation Board's position statement on the Keeping of Horses and Ponies⁴ and subsequent guidance.

Conclusion

Whilst changes in approach, management and design have been proposed and discussed to reduce the impact of the proposal to plant Christmas trees, the proposal, even in its revised form would still have a negative impact on the landscape character of Waterley Bottom and the character area. The proposal therefore does not comply with the adopted Landscape Strategy and Guidelines and consequently policy CE1 and policy CE8 of the Cotswolds AONB Management Plan 2018 – 23 and cannot be supported by the Cotswolds Conservation Board

Mark Connelly

Land Management Officer

Cotswolds Conservation Board

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⁴ Cotswolds Conservation Board Position Statement on the Keeping of Horses and Ponies 2017
<http://www.cotswoldsaonb.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/keeping-of-horses-and-ponies-2017.pdf>

Appendix 1

Photomontage 1

Taken from the proposal site showing the site and the character of the wider locality



Photomontage 2

View of the proposal site from across the valley

