

EMAIL ONLY

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Dear Mr Anderson

Planning Application WSCC/007/24 - Installation of Integrated Constructed Wetland (ICW) and associated infrastructure at land adjacent to Staplefield Wastewater Treatment Works, Cuckfield Road, Staplefield, West Sussex, RH17 6ES

I write in respect of the above application currently pending a decision with the Local Planning Authority (LPA), on behalf of my client, Dr Martin Ireland of Little Ashfold Farm, Cuckfield Road, Staplefield.

Whilst my client is wholly supportive of Southern Water's intentions to improve wastewater treatment at their facility, they have a number of concerns in respect of the submitted scheme. On behalf of my clients I therefore write to make the following comments on/objections to the application submissions:

Impact on the setting of a Grade II Listed Building

My client's property, Little Ashfold Farm, lies approximately 270 metres to the north west of the application site. It is a Grade II listed building, the earliest part of which dates back to early/mid 15th century, if not earlier. The dwelling is one of a number of listed buildings in the vicinity of the application site, but is the closest and most directly affected by the application proposals.

Section 66 of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 places the following general duty on all Local Planning Authorities in the exercise of their planning functions:

"In considering whether to grant planning permission (or permission in principle) for development which affects a listed building or its setting, the local planning authority [or, as the case may be, the Secretary of State] shall have special regard to the desirability of preserving the building or its setting or any features of special architectural or historic interest which it possesses." (Emphasis added)

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how these should be applied. Chapter 16 deals with "Conserving and enhancing the historic environment" noting at paragraph 195 that [heritage] *"assets are an irreplaceable resource, and should be conserved in a manner appropriate to their significance, so that they can be enjoyed for their contribution to the quality of life of existing and future generations."*

It goes on to note at paragraph 201:

"Local planning authorities should identify and assess the particular significance of any heritage asset that may be affected by a proposal (including by development affecting the setting of a

heritage asset) taking account of the available evidence and any necessary expertise. They should take this into account when considering the impact of a proposal on a heritage asset, to avoid or minimise any conflict between the heritage asset's conservation and any aspect of the proposal."

Paragraph 205 states that:

"When considering the impact of a proposed development on the significance of a designated heritage asset, great weight should be given to the asset's conservation (and the more important the asset, the greater the weight should be). This is irrespective of whether any potential harm amounts to substantial harm, total loss or less than substantial harm to its significance."

Paragraph 208 states:

"Where a development proposal will lead to less than substantial harm to the significance of a designated heritage asset, this harm should be weighed against the public benefits of the proposal including, where appropriate, securing its optimum viable use."

These requirements are reflected in Policy W15 of the West Sussex Waste Local Plan which states:

"Proposals for waste development will be permitted provided that... known features of historic or archaeological importance are conserved and where possible enhanced, unless there are no alternative solutions and there are overriding reasons which outweighs the need to safeguard the value of sites or features."

The application has been submitted with a Historic Environment Desk Based Assessment which acknowledges that the current agricultural setting of Little Ashfold contributes to its heritage significance. The assessment goes on to acknowledge that the proposed new wetland environment will alter the agricultural setting of Little Ashfold (as well as other designated and non-designated heritage assets), however the assessment concludes:

"the Scheme will not diminish the ability to understand or appreciate these assets, as the setting will remain open, with ponds and reeds ensuring the retention of the countryside character of the area. There will be new features, such as a carpark introduced into the field for the maintenance and operation of the Scheme."

Under the section "Impact Assessment" (Section 7) the agricultural setting of the dwelling is noted to make a significant contribution to the significance of Little Ashfold but it is concluded that the scheme will not affect the significance as the proposed plans *"will not sever the way Little Ashfold is enjoyed and appreciated"*.

The assessment throughout refers to the proposals maintaining open views, changing from an agricultural field to a wetland, and retaining a green and rural character. The proposals in fact will significantly alter the land profile of the site, giving it an artificial and overly man-made character, overly engineered with significant lengths of hard surface tracks and a new area of hard surfaced car parking. The submitted assessment seemingly glosses over these elements and fails to provide an assessment of their impact on the significance of this (and other) heritage assets.

It is submitted that the proposals will cause harm to the setting of the listed building through the introduction of a heavily engineered landscape that is not characteristic of its historic setting. Whilst this harm falls at the "less than substantial" end of the scale of harm, as required by the

NPPF this harm should still be weighed against the public benefits of the proposals with "great weight" afforded to the conservation of the heritage asset. This is not a balancing exercise that the applicants appear to have carried out and the LPA is urged to ensure appropriate consideration of this issue is given in their determination of the application.

Impact on landscape

It is understood that the proposed Integrated Constructed Wetland (ICW) has been designed to treat the incoming phosphorous load at the WWTW to meet new permit requirements issued by the Environment Agency in a sustainable and natural way. Whilst these intentions are laudable (if they are genuinely effective) the application submissions seek to suggest that the proposal will also provide wider environmental benefits in terms of biodiversity, carbon sequestration and landscape design.

Whilst there may well be benefits in terms of biodiversity and carbon sequestration, my clients do not agree that the heavily engineered and overly man-made appearance of the resulting wetland area will be of any benefit to the landscape, and will in fact, actually detract from it.

The supporting information submitted with the application very much downplays the physical works required at the site, suggesting that the proposals will not have any significant visual impact.

The proposals seek to artificially re-form the currently predominantly flat landscape of the site with bunding up to 2 metre in height in places. In addition to the re-profiling of the land new parking and turning facilities are proposed adjacent Cuckfield Road to the east of the site. A series of hard surfaced trackways, up to 5 metres in width in places, are also proposed around the perimeter of each "cell" significantly increasing the extent of hardsurfacing at the site.

Policy W6 of the West Sussex Waste Local Plan states that *"Proposals for the management of wastewater and sewage sludge will be permitted provided that:*

- i) Where possible, new facilities are accommodated within existing wastewater treatment sites; or*
- ii) Where new facilities cannot be accommodated within existing sites, they are located on suitable previously developed land or on existing, permitted, or allocated sites for built waste management facilities or general industrial uses."*

Nowhere in the submissions is there any explanation as to what the alternative traditional hard infrastructure solution to reduce total phosphorous (TP) might be; why this cannot be accommodated within the existing site, and if this might be a less visually intrusive solution to meet the new permit requirements. The applicants have therefore failed to explain how the proposal complies with Policy W6.

Despite the suggestion in the Planning Statement that there are no protected landscapes affected by the Scheme, the application site falls within the High Weald National Landscape (formerly known as the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)). Paragraph 182 of the NPPF states that *"great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing landscape and scenic beauty in National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty which have the highest status of protection in relation to these issues."*

This is reflected in Strategic Objective 9 of the West Sussex Waste Local Plan which seeks to “to protect the SDNP and the two AONB from unnecessary and inappropriate development.”

Policy W11 of the Waste Local Plan relates to character and states:

“Proposals for waste development will be permitted provided that they would not have an unacceptable impact on:

- (a) the character, distinctiveness, and sense of place of the different areas of the County and that they reflect and, where possible, reinforce the character of the main natural character areas (including the retention of important features or characteristics); and*
- (b) the separate identity of settlements and distinctive character of towns and villages (including specific areas or neighbourhoods) and development would not lead to their actual or perceived coalescence.”*

Policy W12 relates to High Quality Developments and requires all new proposals for waste development to, inter alia:

- *integrate with and, where possible, enhance adjoining land-uses; and*
- *Have regard to the local context including the characteristics of the site in terms of topography, natural and man-made features and the use of materials.*

The supporting text of this policy notes that “the quality of development is not just about what it looks like, it is about a whole range of aspects which in combination make a development fit for its current or future purpose as well as fitting with its surroundings.”

Policy W13 relates to Protected Landscapes and states that proposals for small-scale waste facilities within protected landscapes will not be permitted unless it is to meet local needs that can be accommodated without undermining the objectives of the designation.

The Landscape and Visual Appraisal (LVA) submitted with the application recognises the location of the site in a low lying valley, with gently rising topography, its high susceptibility to change and the high sensitivity of its character. The LVA goes on to note that the proposals will result in (minor) adverse changes to the key characteristics of the Landscape Character Area and that there will be an urbanising effect from the scheme. The conclusions appear to be predicated on the suggestion that the site is well enclosed by existing hedging and that any views of the site will only be passing/fleeting and/or at distance.

The most public views of the site are from the north and the east. The Arboricultural Report submitted with the application notes that the hedgerow along these boundaries is mixed broadleaf at a height of between 1 and 2 metres. The LVA also notes that there are a number of gaps in this existing hedge. With the bunding proposed to be up to two metres in places across the site, this is going to be visible above the existing hedgeline. With no additional landscaping proposed along these boundaries, other than grasses and selective areas of shrub planting, the man-made and artificial appearance of the proposal will be visible beyond the site and will appear as an alien feature in the existing natural landscape.

It is noted that the LVA makes recommendations to strengthen the planting along Cuckfield Road and along the northern boundary, yet these do not appear to have been included in the submitted

landscaping proposals. Similarly it is recommended that the access roads be finished in hoggin and yet this is not specified on the submitted landscaping scheme.

It is unclear from the submissions the purpose of the extensive trackways around the site or why there is a need for additional car parking at the site. Are these an essential component of the proposals? Whilst it is appreciated that there will be a need to access the wetland for maintenance is there a need for such permanent and substantial infrastructure across the entirety of the site and such a large car park? Certainly the submitted information suggests that on completion of the works traffic movements to and from the site will remain as existing. The addition of the car park seems therefore unnecessary.

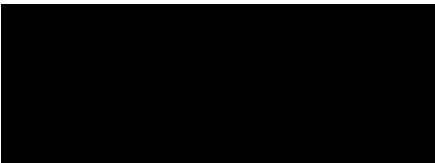
As set out above, my client is not opposed in principle to further purification of effluent streams before they are discharged into the river, however the scheme submitted currently appears overly engineered and will therefore have a detrimental impact on the character of the rural High Weald landscape and the setting of nearby heritage assets (noting that conservation of both should be given "great weight") in conflict with the intentions of Policies W11, W12, W13 and W15 of the Waste Local Plan.

Health and safety considerations

Whilst my clients have no objection in principle to a more sustainable and natural approach to the treatment of waste water at the WWTW, given Southern Water's poor reputation of late and known incidents of un-permitted sewage discharges into watercourses across the network they do question the efficacy of the proposals and potential impact on their health and safety. To this end, they request that the LPA satisfy themselves that the proposals will not cause health and safety concerns as a result of potential sewage spills into the wetland area and any risks associated with having four static lakes containing potentially partially treated sewerage in such close proximity to their residential property can be appropriately monitored/controlled.

I would be very grateful if these matters can be taken into consideration in the determination of the application.

Yours sincerely



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