

SOUTH WEST FORESTRY AND WOODLANDS ADVISORY COMMITTEE REPORT ON BONHAM DISPUTED CASE

1 Purpose

This report summarises the position of the South West Forestry and Woodlands Advisory Committee (FWAC) on the Bonham disputed case which it was asked to consider after a sustained objection to the woodland creation proposal by the Cranbourne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)

2 Background and Process

Forest Services consider the woodland creation proposal at Bonham in the form considered by the FWAC (which is a revision of the original proposal) to be UKFS compliant and approvable. However, the AONB has a sustained objection, making this a 'disputed case'; the FWAC being tasked with seeking a compromise or, if not possible, providing a report to Commissioners.

The main basis for the sustained objection is landscape impact and the FWAC appointed as sub committee of members with skills and expertise in protected landscapes, chaired by the FWAC Chair.

The sub committee comprised:

- John Wilding (FWAC Chair) Head of Forestry and Energy, Clinton Devon Estates and a very experienced forestry manager.
- Andy Bell, CEO North Devon Biosphere with a good knowledge of sustainable development and previous roles linked to AONBs and protected landscapes.
- Ross Kennerley, Regional Director South West England, Woodland Trust and previous local authority roles in landscape, planning and the natural environment.
- Graeme McVittie, Senior Conservation Officer – Woodlands, Exmoor National Park Authority, and experienced in forestry and landscape management.

The sub committee received a comprehensive briefing (Paper BPW 01) with links to extensive background information and case history before undertaking a site visit and meeting on 18 January 2023. A representative of the AONB, Richard Burden, Principal Landscape and Planning Officer presented details of the objection and the landowner, Nick Hoare, and his forestry consultant Andy Poore explained the details of the proposal.

The notes of the site visit, including a list of Forestry Commission/Forest Services attendees is at Annex B.

The sub committee was unable to find any grounds for compromise, which means that it then moved on to consider the acceptability of the proposal that was considered to be approvable as UKFS compliant by Forest Services.

The sub committee concluded on the basis of the evidence presented before the meeting and what they had seen and heard on the day that the proposal was acceptable and that this should be the reserve position put to the full FWAC.

3 Consideration by the FWAC

All the available FWAC members met via MS Teams 9 February, the key information previously made available to the sub committee also being made available to the full FWAC. It should be noted that David Pengelly has an interest in the case and excluded himself from the process.

The full FWAC (meeting notes attached at Annex A) having had the opportunity to question the sub committee and having received reassurances on what had been taken into account by the sub committee, (mindful of the obligation on Commissioners under the CRoW Act), the FWAC Members present endorsed the sub committee's position that the proposal should be approved.

It was recognised by the FWAC that the proposal would have an impact on the landscape, both externally, and internally, including the setting of Bonham Farm/Bonham Manor but that it was, on balance an acceptable impact. Especially when taking into account government policy and the importance of tree planting in response to the climate emergency. The members not present subsequently confirmed their agreement to the conclusions reached at the meeting.

4 Summary

The FWACs final conclusion is that the proposal, as considered by the FWAC, will have an impact on the landscape but this will be an acceptable impact, the overall benefits of the scheme far outweighing any potential negative impacts.

The FWAC would therefore recommend the approval of the proposal.

John Wilding FWAC Chair

James Fry Area Director

7 March 2023

SW FWAC Extraordinary Meeting - Bonham Plain Disputed Case (NP-EWCO - 32 21_22 Bonham Plain Wood)

Meeting Notes

Date of Meeting: 9th February 2023

MS Teams - 10:30 – 11:30

Present

John Wilding (JW), Helen Bentley-Fox (HBF), Sam Whatmore (SW), Graeme McVittie (GM), Andy Bell (AB), Alex Stone (AS), Julian Ohlsen (JO), Caroline Ayre (CA), Jamie Taylor (JT), Ian Briscoe (IB), Zac Sibthorpe (ZS), Richard Barker (RB), James Fry (JF), Anna Brown (Observer)

Apologies

Mel Sealey (MS), Geraint Richards (GR), Ross Kennerley (RK), David Pengelly (DP).

Meeting Notes

JW welcomed those present to the meeting and asked JF for apologies received.

JF – Apologies from MS, DP, GR, RK. DP has excluded himself because of his interest in the case and will take no part in the meeting and will not comment.

JW – Welcomed Anna Brown, Director Forest Services, who joins as an observer. JW also welcomed RB, Secretary to the Commissioners who will be providing policy and procedural advice throughout the process.

JW – Explained the purpose of the meeting. The full FWAC will be considering the sub-Committee recommendation on the case, which will then go forward as the reserve position advice to the Commissioners. Those FWAC members unable to attend will be asked to respond with their view in one week's time. JW to contact members unable to attend and request the response.

JW – The sub-Committee comprised himself, AB, GM and RK. All have had extensive experience of landscape matters and protected landscapes. The primary aim of the FWAC sub-Committee was to seek compromise between the applicant and objector

(AONB). If this is not possible then the sub-Committee, via the full FWAC, make a recommendation to the Commissioners.

JW – The sub-Committee’s view is that the scheme, as presented, should be accepted without further modification.

JW – Asked JF to provide background to the case and the Disputed case process.

JF – Thanked JW and the members of the sub-Committee for all the work they had put in on this matter. JF explained that all background documentation available to the sub-Committee is available to the full FWAC via the MS Teams Group set up for the case. JF presented the background to the Disputed Case at Bonham Plan using a refreshed PowerPoint given to the full FWAC in October 2022. JF explained the stages that the scheme has gone through and explained the final England Woodland Grant Scheme (EWCO) under consideration.

JW – Thanked JF and asked members of the sub-Committee for comment.

GM – Reported that it was an incredibly interesting process. The entire process was managed very well, and the site visit allowed plenty of opportunity to explore all the issues for applicant, AONB and other representatives to put their views forward. The conclusions reached were based on a very good understanding of the issues and the site. The aim was to try to find any areas for compromise. This wasn’t possible. There were one or two things that could have improved the process but ultimately our view was that the impact of the proposals was not significant. It represents a good project that we would be content to support.

AB – Explained the CROW legislation and requirement for the FC to have due regard to the purposes of the AONB. The sub-Committee undertook additional analysis beyond that presented by the applicant and AONB. Due regard has been given throughout the process. Our recommendation takes this into account and AB assured the FWAC that the sub-Committee executed their duties fully and to the best of their abilities.

RK – (via email) – ‘.... can you give my apologies and let FWAC members know I fully support the report and recommendation.’

JW – Thanked the sub-Committee and opened the floor for discussion.

Discussion followed, exploring the following main points:

- Woodland creation proposals with Kilmington Terrace landscape character area of the Greensand Terrace landscape.
- Landscape assessment and the degree to which this had been considered.

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- Whether planting of this scale has a precedent in the AONB
 - Scheme design in the context of landscape and surrounding woodland.
 - Loss of wide-ranging views and expansive sky
 - The setting of Bonham Manor (listed building) and enclosure of heritage assets
 - Planting trees on best and most versatile agricultural land
 - Tree species – conifer mix and continuous cover forestry.
 - Carbon sequestration and the significance of climate change
 - The acceptability of impact – there will be an impact but is that impact acceptable?

JO – Question – During the Woodland Creation Planning Grant was any landscape impact assessment requested? Also, what is the history of cases greater than 50 ha being approved?

JF – Replied – the Woodland Creation Design Plan process includes landscape assessment and impact. Support was given at this stage by FC Landscape Adviser. Integration with the adjacent Stourhead registered landscape was an important consideration. Landscape has been addressed throughout the woodland creation process. The AONB object in principle and practice, however, focussed on landscape character area.

Regarding planting greater than 50 ha, I don't think we have ever had anything on this scale within the AONB.

RB – I have reviewed the AONB policies and do not think they have envisaged woodland creation on this scale. Looking at the site in context is what we have had to do.

JW – The woodland creation design process (FC Woodland Creation Planning Grant) has improved in recent years. The new approach to woodland design may have diffused things at an earlier stage (with the AONB).

It is a well-designed scheme – it follows field boundaries. It will effectively move the existing woodland a few hundred metres onto a flat plain.

JF – Clarified that this was one of the early woodland creation design plans and that the process as a whole, including landscape assessment, has improved. That does not mean though that the FC has not gone to significant lengths to consider landscape. Landscape was a key element of the EIA process. Landscape is one of the key elements of UKFS. Our view is that the scheme fits very well in the landscape.

SW – Could someone summarise the main points of objection from the AONB?

RB – Offered to answer the question. Informed the meeting that he was preparing a paper for the Commissioners and took the opportunity to thank the FWAC for their contribution to the case. Fundamentally there are two issues – landscape and that the AONB object to any planting on the Greensand Terrace. There will be an impact, but the question is, is that impact acceptable? There is another issue, the setting of Bonham Manor and overshadowing from woodland creation. This has been addressed by moving the planting

boundaries back. There is some concern from the AONB on converting agricultural land to forestry. This is a peripheral issue and the landowner's choice.

AB – Offered some additional context on landscape character assessment (LCA) and the process for identifying these within an AONB. The planting proposal sits on the edge of one landscape type, where it becomes level and goes across a plain. Loss of wide-ranging views and expansive sky. The AONB maintain that the plain should remain open as it's what the LCA says. The planting is also right on the edge of the adjacent wooded valley landscape LCA. The planting proposal is not in the middle of the plain, it's sympathetic to the adjacent woodland land cover.

GM – Added that this was a good summary and that the AONB's objection was on the impact on this landscape character. We felt, however, that the impact and significance was acceptable. The FC's guidelines on landscape assessment and analysis have moved on since the WCPG for Bonham. Richard Hellier (FC Landscape Adviser) gave a good outline of this at the meeting. Had this been done in the case of Bonham originally it would have been better and would have gone some way to ease concerns.

JW – Informed the meeting of one of the scheme's aims – reducing nitrogen impact from farmland on the river Stour. Environment Agency and National Trust strongly support.

SW – Raised the point about carbon and carbon sequestration. This is important and should be supported in a climate emergency.

RB – confirmed that carbon capture will be an element that the Commissioners are keen to look at when they make their decision.

CA – Highlighted the importance of fibre security as well as food security.

JW – Continued, highlighting the biodiversity benefits alongside fibre and carbon.

JO – Asked whether the objection was based on the predominantly conifer planting. Would there have been the same objection to 100% broadleaf? Is the objection anti-conifer?

AB – Responded that the principal objection was the creation of woodland on the plain rather than what species of tree.

GM – Agreed. In exploring scope for compromise that question was posed but the main issue was woodland creation on the plain.

JW – Asked RB to summarise what the FWAC must now do.

RB – The proposal will have an impact. The FWAC is being asked to decide whether this impact is acceptable. Ideally there will be a consensus view. If, however, anyone has an alternative view this is completely acceptable and valid.

JW – Thanked everyone for their contributions and comments and invited members present to register their opinion. The reserve position of the sub-Committee is that the application, as presented, should be accepted (without further modification).

JF – Informed the meeting that he would be contacting those not present and invite them to respond with their view via email, other than DP who had removed himself from the process.

FWAC Members’ opinions were as follows:

Name		Response
John Wilding	Present	sub-Committee member
Helen Bentley-Fox	Present	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position
Sam Whatmore	Present	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position
Graeme McVittie	Present	sub-Committee member
Andy Bell	Present	sub-Committee member
Melanie Sealey	Absent	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position (via email – 10/02/2023)
Alex Stone	Present	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position
David Pengelly	Absent	Abstained – No comment
Geraint Richards	Absent	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position (via email – 24/02/2023)
Julian Ohlsen	Present	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position
Ross Kennerley	Absent	sub-Committee member
Caroline Ayre	Present	Supported sub-Committee’s reserve position

The full FWAC unanimously supported the reserve position of the sub-Committee – that the application, as presented, should be accepted (without further modification).

RB – Thanked the SW FWAC on behalf of himself and of the Commissions for the vital role they have played in the disputed case process.

JW – Thanked all present for their attendance and contribution and closed the meeting.

MEETING CLOSE – 11:30

SW FWAC sub-Committee Meeting

Disputed Case - NP-EWCO - 32 21_22 Bonham Plain Wood

Meeting Notes

Date of Meeting: 18th January 2023

Present

John Wilding (JW)	SW FWAC Chair Head of Forestry & Energy, Clinton Devon Estates
Andy Bell (AB)	SW FWAC Member CEO North Devon Biosphere
Ross Kennerley (RK)	SW FWAC Member Regional Director South West England, Woodland Trust
Graeme McVittie (GM)	SW FWAC Member Senior Conservation Officer – Woodlands, Exmoor NP Authority
Richard Burden (RB)	Principal Landscape & Planning Officer, Cranborne Chase AONB
Nick Hoare (NH)	Stourhead (Western) Estate Applicant
Andy Poore (AP)	Forestry Consultant Selectfor
Richard Barker (RB FC)	Secretary to the Commissioners and Data Protection Officer, Forestry Commission
Ian Briscoe (IB)	Field Manager, Forestry Commission
Anna Brown (AB)	Director of Forest Services, Forestry Commission (present as an observer)
James Fry (JF)	SW Area Director, Forestry Commission
Richard Hellier (RH)	Landscape and Woodland Design Advisor, Forestry Commission
Zac Sibthorpe (ZS)	Woodland Officer, Forestry Commission
Jamie Taylor (JT)	SW Area Admin Officer, Forestry Commission

Apologies:

Linda Nunn (LN)	Director, Cranborne Chase AONB
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Welcome, apologies and introductions

JW welcomed and thanked all present for coming to the meeting.

JW introduced the SW FWAC sub-Committee members (AB, RK & GM). He and the sub-Committee members gave a summary of their experience and background.

All present briefly introduced themselves.

NH gave provided background on the Stourhead (Western) Estate, the current farming use of the planting site and background on his motives and aims for woodland creation on the site.

RB (FC) gave an overview of the disputed case process, purpose of the meeting, aims and objectives for the day.

JW explained that the primary role of the FWAC is to explore the scope for a compromise between the applicant and the objector.

JW invited the applicant to briefly summarise their woodland creation proposals and the AONB to summarise their objections. Accordingly, AP summarized the rationale for the planting proposals (as covered in detail in the Woodland Creation design Plan and EWCO application) and RB summarised the position and objections of the AONB Partnership to the planting proposal (as covered in detail in AONB communications and documents sustaining the objection).

A discussion followed and FWAC sub-Committee members had the opportunity to question and clarify points and positions made by AP and RB.

JF reminded the group that the primary aim of the meeting was to seek compromise. Different views are strongly held, but we should seek to discuss the scheme respectfully and as informally as possible.

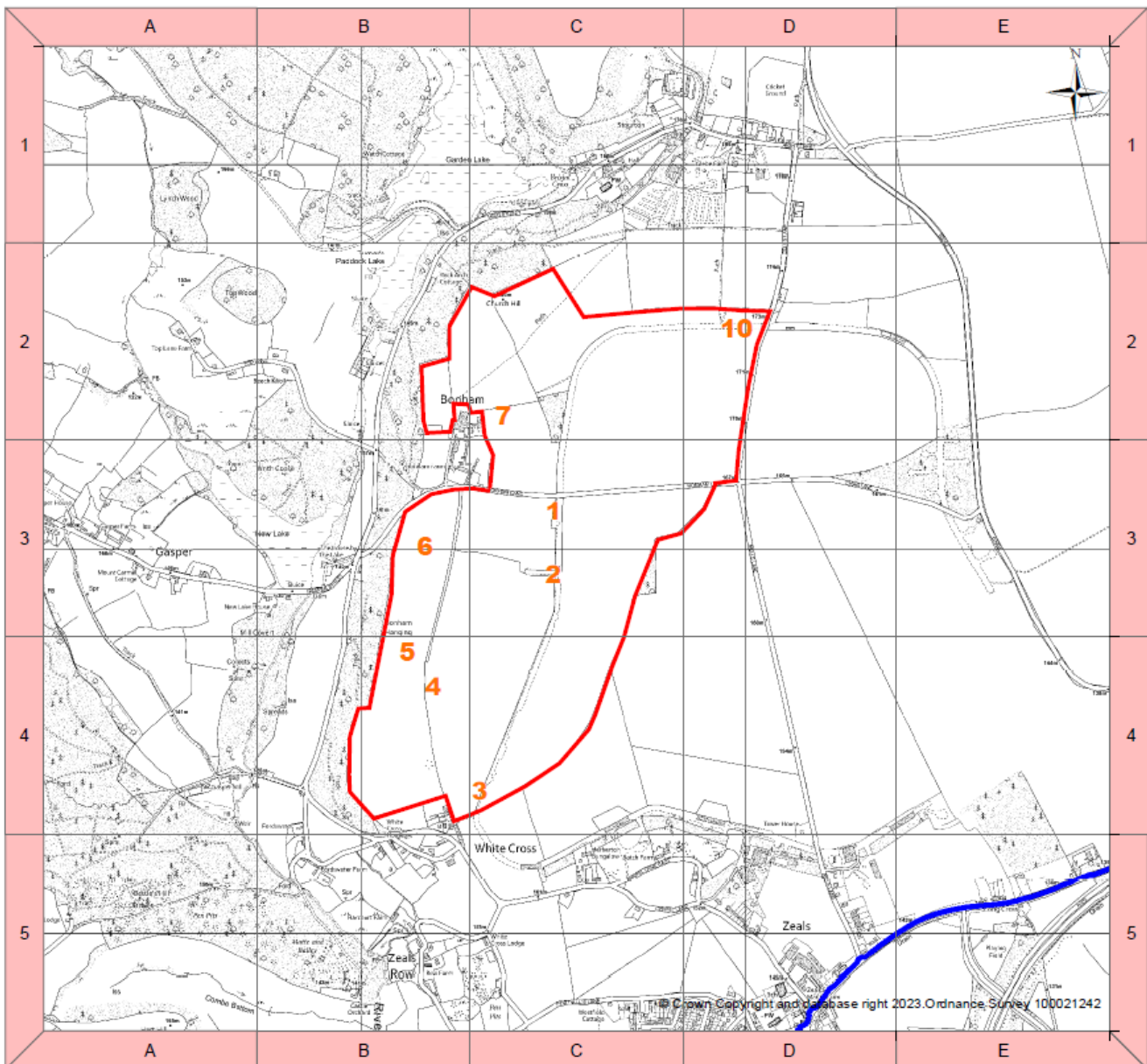
JF outlined the suggested itinerary – morning field visit, lunch and afternoon 1to1s at the village hall.

JW suggested that the group start with a walk over of the site and then view the area from White Sheet Hill. AP suggested a brief stop at Heath Hill Farm and drive through the woodland at Dropping Gutter en-route to White Sheet Hill.

Site Visit

The group walked the planting site, stopping at various points to allow applicant and objector to put forward their views and / or objections to the proposals. SW FWAC Chair and Sub-Committee members led discussions, seeking clarification from applicant, objector and FC staff as required.

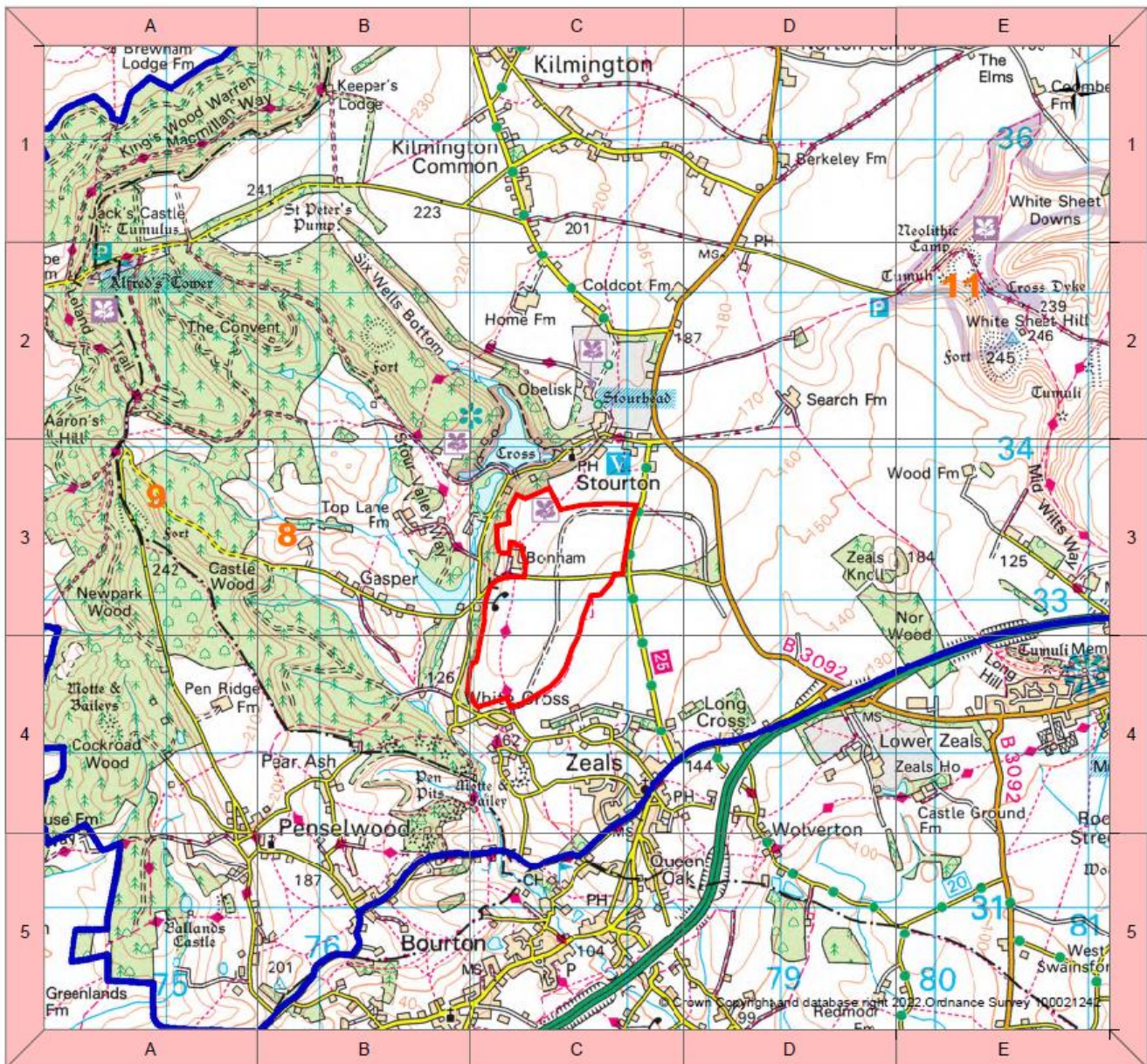
The Site visit followed the order below (1 being the meet point)



Particular attention was paid at stop 6 to the planting design and the setting of Bonham Manor. Stops 7 and 10 provided the opportunity to view the planting adjacent to Stourhead Estate.

From stop 7, the group returned to the meet point to share vehicles, stopping at stop 8 to view the site context, landscape character area and surrounding Stourhead Woodlands (Estate and Western) from Heath Hill Farm. The woodland at Dropping Gutter (9) was viewed from vehicles only. The final stop at White Sheet Hill (11) provided an opportunity to view the project area in the wider landscape and gain an appreciation of the landscape character areas.

The morning site visit concluded at approx. 13:30.





Stop 1 – Meet point. Welcome & Introductions



Stop 2 – looking NW to Bonham Manor



Stop 4 – looking NE to White Sheet Hill



Stop 5 – looking NNW



Stop 5 – looking SW



Stop 6 – looking north to Bonham Manor



Stop 11 – from White Sheet Hill, looking WSW

Afternoon 1 to 1 Sessions

The sub-committee asked for a discussion with the objector Richard Burden on his own, and asked him what are of planting would be acceptable to the AONB.

Richard explained that he would need to refer back to the AONB Board, but as a starting point the AONB would be willing to consider the area between the existing woodland and the public footpath (Stour Valley Way) to the south of Bonham Manor and the field adjoining the National Trust Woodland to the north of the existing area of mixed woodland. The layout and species mix would need to be subject to more detailed discussions, but would need to include a higher proportion of broadleaves that currently proposed.

Richard also continued to express considerable concern over the process and the failure to carry out an appropriate landscape assessment and engage with the AONB. He also reminded the sub-committee of his level of professional expertise and qualification and experience which enable him to make the appropriate assessment of the proposal. The sub-committee thanked him for his contribution.

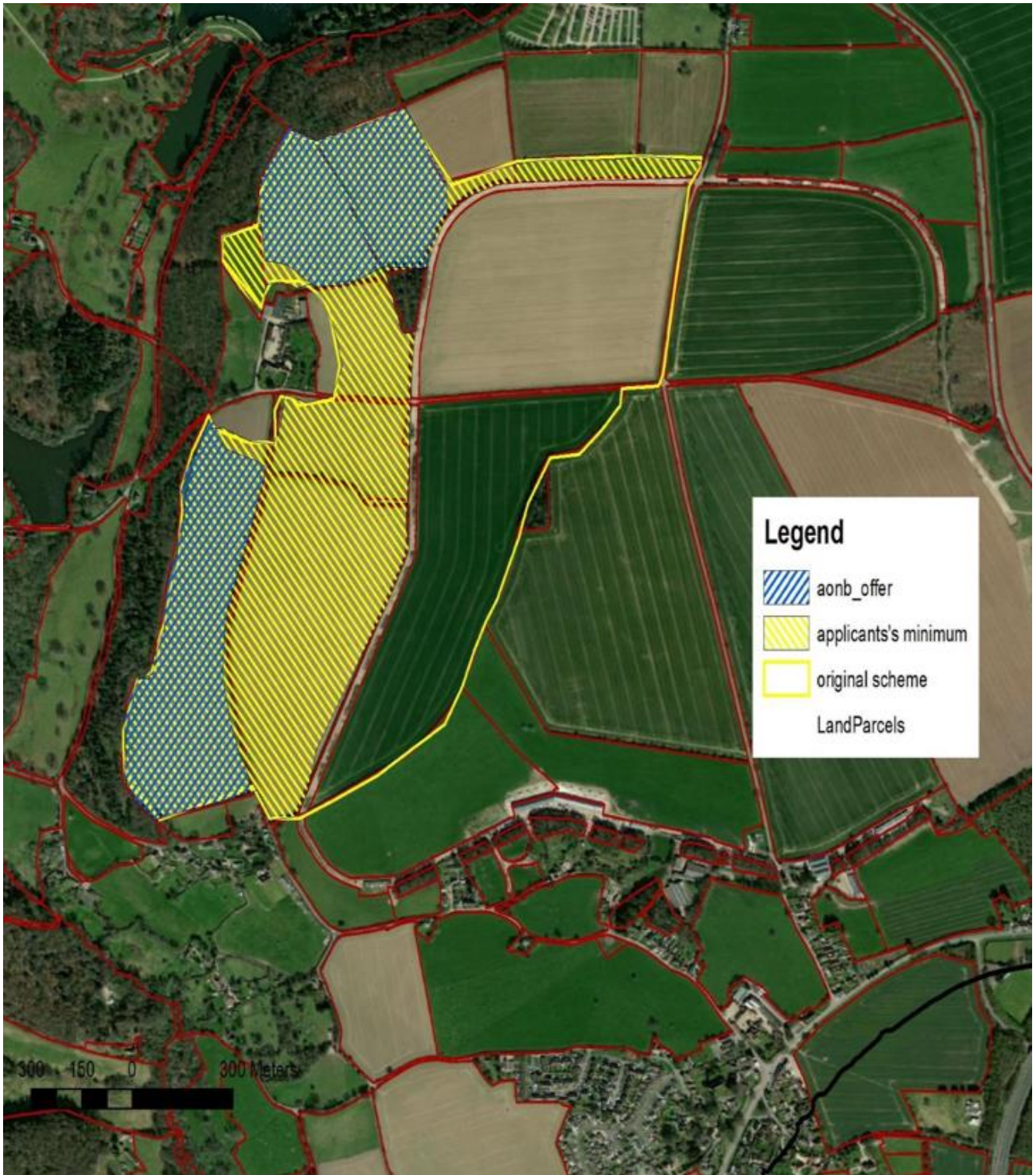
The sub-committee asked for a discussion with the applicant, Nick Hoare and Andy Poore.

The sub-committee put the AONB starting point to them, which they found unacceptable, adding that any reduction in planting area (which would need to be minimal) would require a higher proportion of conifers to be planted in the remaining area for the proposal to remain viable. The applicant again stressed their view that proposal was in keeping with the adjacent woodland areas, simply extending to the east and having minimal impact on the landscape character area which was being overplayed by the objector using hard lines.

The sub-committee thanked Nick Hoare and Andy Poore for their contribution.

The sub-committee went on to have a discussion with Forest Services on the landscape assessment process and they were reassured that it had been carried out in accordance with the requirements of the UK Forestry Standard and the process in use at the time.

In attempting to seek compromise between applicant and objector, the map below shows the AONB offer, applicant's offer and original scheme. The areas and boundaries on the map are indicative and are given to broadly illustrate the compromise positions and the clear and obvious differences between the two.



Compromise was not achieved – neither offer was acceptable to the other party.

In the event that it does not prove possible to achieve a compromise during the meeting, or where a compromise is identified but not subsequently agreed, then the sub-Committee should consider reaching a reserve position as the basis of its advice to the Commission.

The reserve position of the sub-Committee is that the application, as presented, should be accepted (without further modification).

The FWAC committee recognised that additional, and early, assessment of landscape character would have assisted in decision making. Notwithstanding this the sub committee was of the view that the conclusion drawn on the suitability of the overall scheme was acceptable.

APPENDIX 1 - EWCO Planting Design Proposals under consideration

- gross area = 84.33ha
- net planting area = 70.50ha (= 83.6% of 84.33ha)
- percentage and area of open ground = 16.4% of gross area = 13.84ha

