

Draft - Letter to the National Trust

From Colin Ratcliff
Clerk to Goring-on-Thames Parish Council

Recipient to be Determined
The National Trust

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Goring -on-Thames Parish Council has noted with interest the National Trust Report: “*AONBs and Development*” concerning damage to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The NT may be interested in our recent experiences.

Goring-on-Thames is part of the Chilterns AONB, and with its sister village Streatley on the other side of the Thames, also has a large Conservation Area. Significant areas of Streatley are NT property. The community is vigorous in its defence of damage to the local environment, and supports the work of the Parish Council in this respect.

Unfortunately, the planners of South Oxfordshire District Council appear limited in both legal knowledge about, and enthusiasm for, protection of the environment. At a Planning Committee meeting in March, one District Councillor commented: “Goring want to preserve their village in aspic”.

Recent conflicts between Goring PC and SODC planners started with their approval of an application for Network Rail to erect gantries for electrification on the Brunel railway bridge over the Thames near Gatehampton, regardless of its historic importance and “listed building” status. Further environmental damage was caused by the design of the electrification structures through the Chiltern’s and North Wessex Downs AONBs. Following the formation of a protest group, it was found that SODC had allowed the project as “permitted development”, whereas Network Rail was legally required to consult with local government and other interested parties about their design. NR had failed to do so, and SODC had failed to prevent this. NR subsequently admitted responsibility, and promised to redesign and rebuild the system, despite it being already partially installed. SODC have yet to acknowledge or apologise for their negligence.

Some years ago, a local group of green energy enthusiasts proposed the installation of a hydro-electric generator on the Thames weir between Goring and Streatley. The planning application was designated by SODC as a “major” development, but following local opposition, the proposal was withdrawn. When it was re-submitted in 2015, the local opposition had grown. Reactions to the most recent version of the proposal on the SODC website were 4 in favour and 58 against. Among the many objections, the most frequent were: damage to the iconic visual appearance of the Goring weir (in the Conservation Area as well as the AONB) as well as the noise that will impact the serenity of the AONB; increased risks of flooding; damage to the river ecology; and the use of a Conservation Area for industrial development. The high capital cost (at least £1.5 million) and the low output of predicted electricity generated

(“enough for 300 homes”, probably 100kW) indicated that the project was not economically viable, even before the Government withdrew subsidies for such projects, and halved the feed-in payments for the electricity produced.

Despite their earlier designation, SODC now listed the proposal as a “minor” development, and used this as a justification for disregarding the legal requirements for developments in AONBs and for the settings of Listed Buildings in the Conservation Area. The proposal was approved, and a group of outraged locals immediately set-up a protest group: “Stop the Goring Hydro”. Goring PC was concerned by this example of failure to protect the AONB and the Conservation Area, but even more concerned that SODC was consistently failing to properly determine planning decisions. Despite the costs, and the risks involved, Goring PC decided to take legal action by making a Claim to the High Court (ref: [CO/2122/2016](#)). When raising the issue with a Pre-Action Protocol letter, SODC did not admit their errors, and as a result the legal action is proceeding. The protest group is raising funds to support the legal action.

Goring PC noted that your report included amongst its case studies, SODC’s handling of the redevelopment of the CABI site at Crowmarsh, and commented critically upon it. It was felt that our experiences might be helpful to your compilation of evidence of planning decisions which endanger our environment.

We would be grateful for any advice and support that the National Trust might be able to give us to help preserve our patch of rural England.