

Cotswold Garden Village: A Case of Mistaken Identity

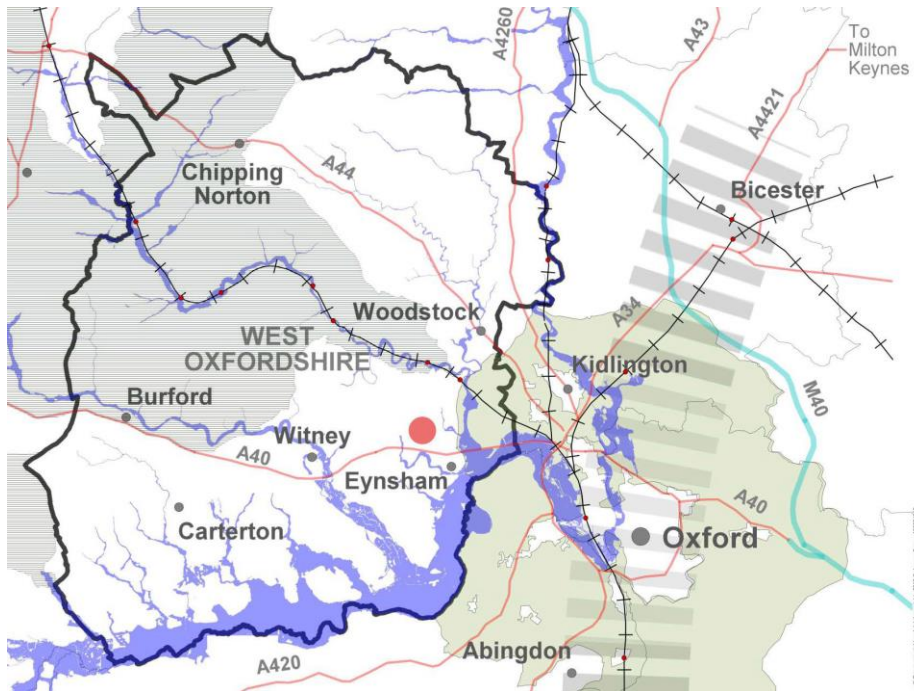
Summary of main points

- This document explains why the proposal for the Cotswold Garden Village is deeply flawed and seriously misleading.
- It uses maps to show how, mistakenly, the location of the Garden Village was misrepresented.
- It explains how the most sensitive areas of the proposed site were not assessed before the proposal was submitted to central government.
- It details how the proposal therefore ignores the existence of (a) flood risk in the north and east of the site, (b) a Site of European Importance for Arable Plants (and its associated wildlife), (c) a large industrial (aggregate recycling) enterprise in the middle of the site, and (d) a group of Grade II listed buildings in a rural setting.
- It calls into question whether the proposal meets the government's stated criteria for a Garden Village.
- It also questions how far West Oxfordshire District Council needs to go in order to fulfil its 'duty to cooperate', and offers alternatives to the Cotswold Garden Village.
- And it raises some planning queries relating to the Garden Village's proximity to the Cotswolds.

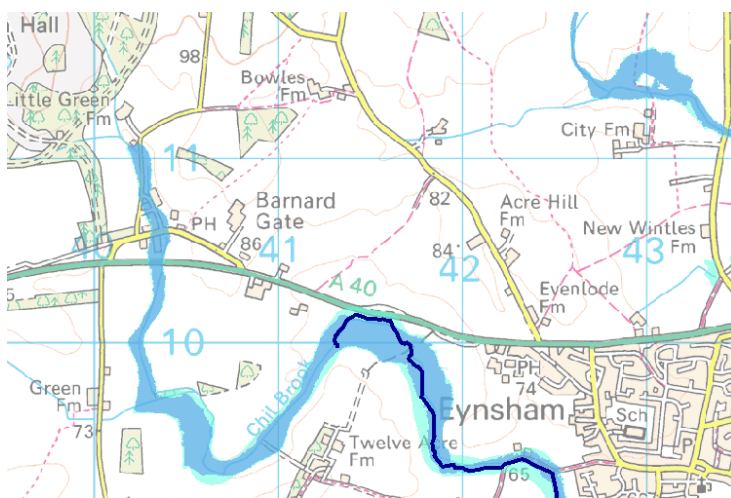
Cotswold Garden Village: A Case of Mistaken Identity

1. Where is the Cotswold Garden Village supposed to be?

In the Expression of Interest (EoI) submitted by West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) to the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), the 'broad location' of what is now known as the Cotswold Garden Village is indicated in the first map in the EoI, on page 6. This is reproduced as Map 1 below. Note how the red dot is equidistant from, and apparently lies safely between, two flood-prone brooks – one to the south-west and the other to the north-east.



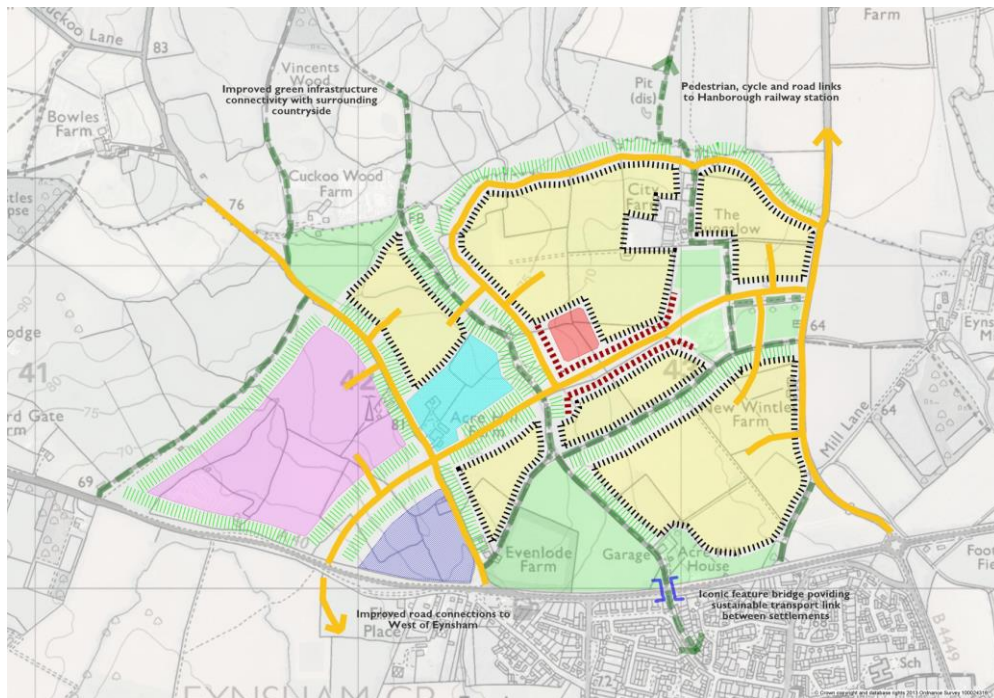
Map 1: 'Garden Village Broad Location', according to the map on page 6 of WODC's EoI. Note how it lies to the north-west of Eynsham, and to the north of a kink in the Chil Brook, just below the A40.



Map 2: An enlarged section from the same Environment Agency flood risk map, showing the Chil Brook kink to the west of Eynsham. The red dot in Map 1 is thus to the west and south-west of the City Farm complex and the area of Flood Zone 3 just north of City Farm.

WODC would say that the location is 'indicative' only. Nevertheless, this is the map that the HCA will have seen first as they studied the document. Unfortunately, the maps that appear subsequently in the Eol, on pages 8 (Map 4 below), 11 (Map 3 below) and 27 (Map 6 below), all show a site for the Garden Village to the east of the red dot, and therefore running up to and including, or, in the map on page 8 going far beyond, the area of Flood Zone 3 (high risk) to the north of City Farm. The red dot also extends into the neighbouring Barnard Gate area.

So when the Eol says in paragraph 3.4 that the 'development can be contained within Flood Zone 1 (low risk)', it must refer to the 'red dot' map on page 6 (Map 1 above), and not to the maps on pages 8, 11 and 27, the second of which gives a more detailed impression of where the Garden Village will be and how it may be laid out (Map 3 below). **The Eol is therefore highly misleading about location.**

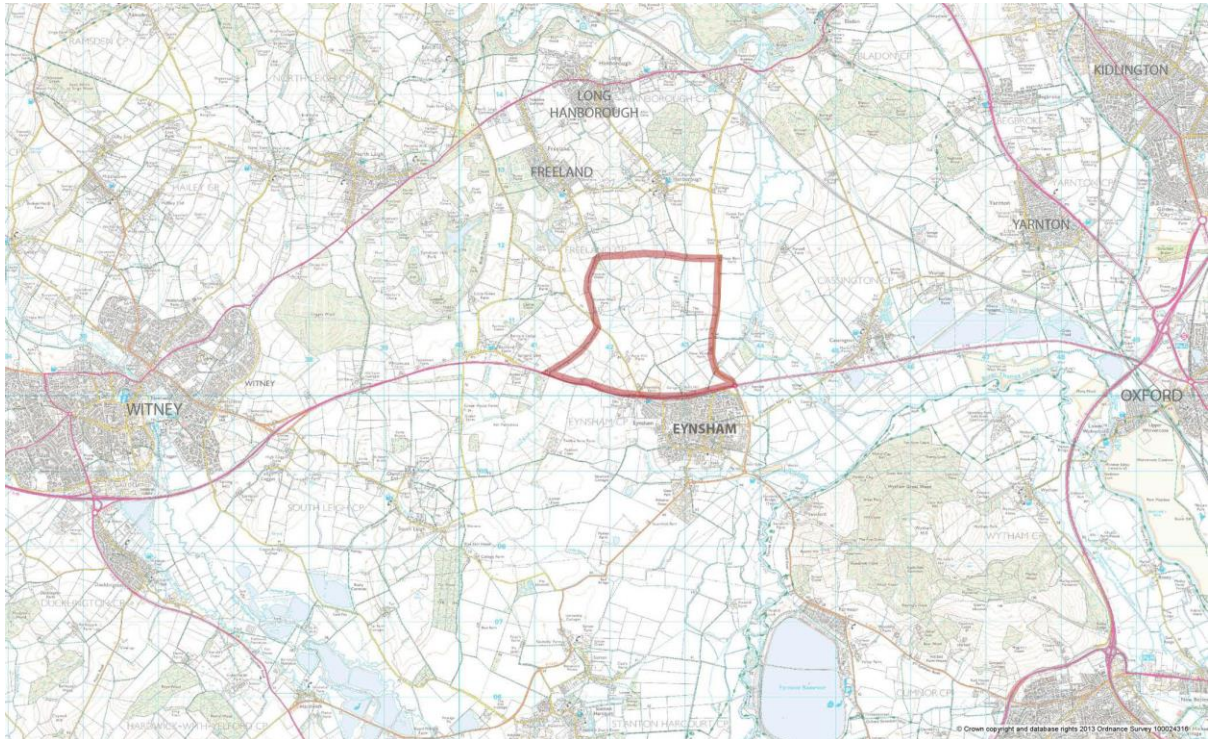


Map 3: WODC's 'vision for the site' on page 8 of its Eol. Note how it runs up to and includes the brook to the north of City Farm. The brook floods regularly and is classed by the Environment Agency as an area of Flood Zone 3. (Barnard Gate is to the west, below the figure 41.)

2. Not all of the proposed Garden Village site was assessed by WODC

Another misleading aspect of the Eol relates to a report that Land Use Consultants (LUC) prepared for WODC: 'Oxford Spatial Options Assessment'. LUC delivered their final 452-page report to the Council in September 2016, but it must have been commissioned well before that, and presumably long before the whole Garden Villages project was announced. It is clear that WODC, in commissioning this report, was properly carrying out its duties to explore potential sites for development, particularly housing, throughout West Oxfordshire.

One of these sites was the area around Barnard Gate, which WODC rejected in its Local Plan (paragraph 9.5.41d) because of various 'sensitivities'. Another site was the area immediately to the east: i.e., roughly **the southern half of what became the Cotswold Garden Village site**. The far more sensitive areas in the northern half of the site, including City Farm, were not assessed by LUC. This has been confirmed by a WODC official. Map 5 (below) shows clearly that both City Farm and what is now the site of the aggregate recycling operation of David Einig Contracting (DEC) **were not assessed**.



Map 4: Taken from page 8 of the EoI, this map shows an even larger 'indicative location' for the Garden Village ('around 320 hectares'), stretching even further north, and well beyond City Farm.



Map 5: This map, from page 428 of the LUC's 'Oxford Spatial Options Assessment' report, shows the actual area that LUC assessed. Note how it does not include City Farm, or the sensitive areas in the northern half of the proposed Garden Village, not least the Flood Zone 3 area around the brook, the presence of Grade II listed buildings at City Farm, and the existence around City Farm of a Site of European Importance for Arable Plants. Nor does it include all or most of the DEC site (aggregate recycling).

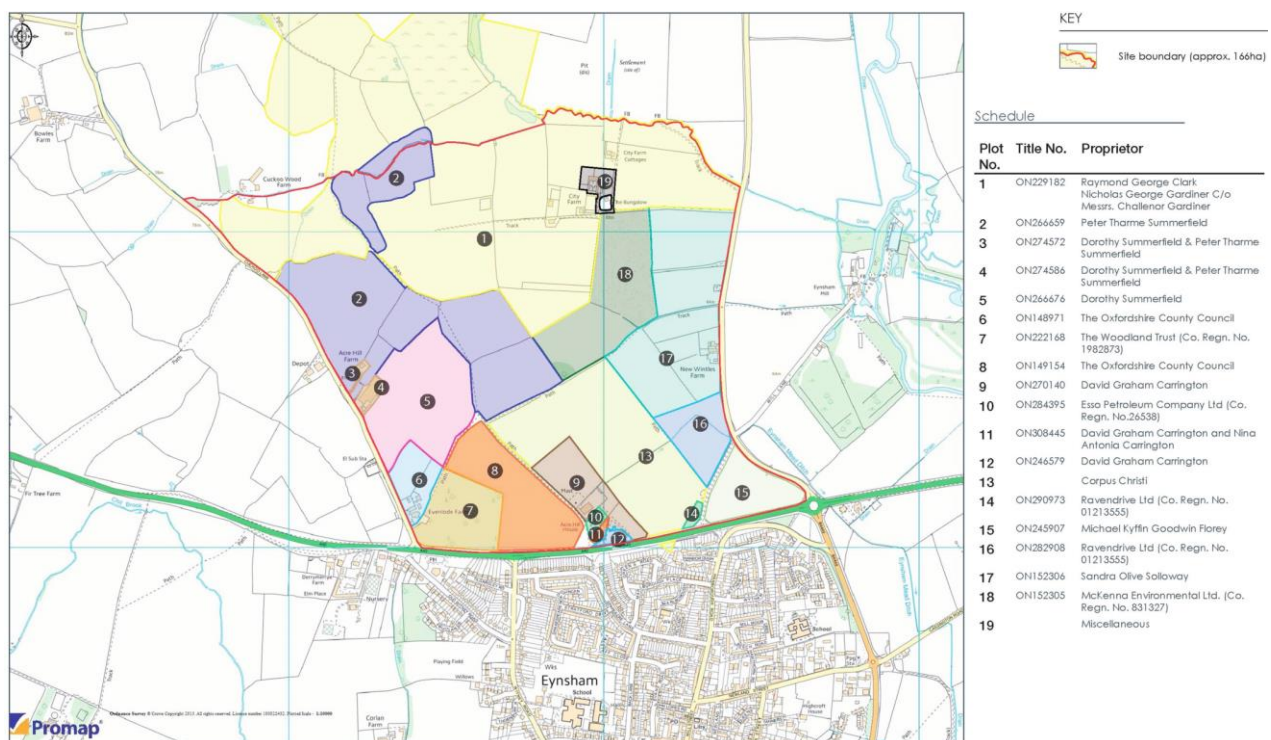
It was a mystery why both WODC's Local Plan and its Garden Village proposal completely ignored the existence of:

- The flood risk in northern and eastern areas of City Farm;
- The rich wildlife in and around City Farm, now a Site of European Importance for Arable Plants, the result of non-intensive farming practices over several decades;
- David Einig Contracting's (DEC's) large aggregate recycling operation; and
- City Farm and its Grade II listed buildings.

It was a mystery why WODC's Eol claimed in paragraph 3.4 that, 'Importantly the site has no major constraints to development . . . development can be contained within Flood Zone 1 (low risk), and it has no significant ecological or heritage interest.'

It was a mystery why WODC's Eol, talking about existing businesses on the Garden Village site, mentioned 'a small number of other existing uses along the A40 corridor' (paragraph 9.2), but not the substantial DEC operation further north.

Finally, it clicked. **WODC was relying for its assertions about the Garden Village on a map and report relating to separate research, and therefore seriously incomplete. These misleading assumptions were what the HCA had to rely on for evidence in making its recommendation to the Department for Communities and Local Government.**



Map 6: Taken from page 27 of WODC's Eol, this **out-of-date** 'landownership' map erroneously claims that the dogleg area below City Farm (no. 18) is owned by McKenna Environmental Ltd. DEC owns it.

3. Important omissions from WODC's Eol

a) Flood risk

The City Farm brook, classified in part as Flood Zone 3, regularly floods the fields immediately to the north of City Farm, where houses and a road are proposed for the

Garden Village. Local experience would suggest that the Environment Agency's flood risk map actually underestimates this risk. Local knowledge also takes precautions against the flooding of the lower part of the field to the east of City Farm (immediately to the west of Lower Road), by leaving it unploughed for crops because of its waterlogged soil.

Furthermore, the maps in the 'The West Oxfordshire Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment 2016' show (i) the high 'likelihood of surface water flooding' in parts of the north and east of the Garden Village site; (ii) a wide strip in the east of the site subject to 50%–75% susceptibility to groundwater flooding; and (iii) the large flood warning area at Eynsham Mill and below, immediately to the east of Lower Road.

b) Site of European Importance for Arable Plants

City Farm has not been farmed intensively for many years, and since 2010 much of it has been farmed organically under a Higher Level Stewardship agreement, inspired by '1950s-style' farming methods, with wildlife conservation as a high priority. As a result, wildlife of every kind – plants, birds, mammals, insects, amphibians – has flourished. Last year the farm was accorded the status of Site of European Importance for Arable Plants (the fastest declining group of plants in the UK) by Plantlife, with input from the Botanical Society of Britain and Ireland (BSBI) and the Oxfordshire Flora Group. Arable plants provide the foundation for much other farm wildlife, producing pollen and nectar for insects, which in turn are food for other species, and seeds for birds and mammals.

Furthermore, the combination of different habitats found within a relatively small area at City Farm, including arable land, grassland, scrub, large hedges, small streams and a range of ponds and damp areas, means that a wide variety of resident and migratory birds have been recorded making use of City Farm. Currently, the list of birds recorded since 2010 stands at 90 species, a remarkably high total for a single farm. The invertebrate fauna at City Farm is still severely under-recorded. For example, the moths have been surveyed by just a single evening of trapping, which yielded 177 different moth species.

City Farm's particularly rich biodiversity does not feature in the Eol.

c) David Einig Contracting (DEC)

As mentioned above (caption to Map 6) plot number 18 (the dogleg to the immediate south of City Farm) does not belong to McKenna Environmental Ltd; it is owned by DEC. This is significant because the Eol seems to be proposing to turn DEC's land into public open space, thereby erasing from the local area a thriving business and the people and subcontractors it employs, and precisely the kind of recycling concern (aggregates) that is badly needed. David Einig has spent huge sums on upgrading the plant and the environmental surroundings, and has recently applied for planning permission to increase the throughput of his operation by over 40%.

DEC has been granted a permanent licence to operate by Oxfordshire County Council.

d) Grade II listed buildings

The City Farmhouse and adjacent barns are Grade II listed. They were built over 200 years ago. The rural setting of these buildings is important to their listing. According to Historic England's 'Good Practice Advice in Planning': 'In particular, it would be helpful for local planning authorities to consider at an early stage whether development affecting the setting of a heritage asset can be broadly categorised as having the potential to enhance or harm the significance of the asset through . . . the scale, proximity or placement of development' (the Garden Village, as proposed, is large, very close and placed entirely around the listed buildings of City Farm).

The Grade II listed buildings at City Farm do not feature in the Eol.

4. Is it really a Garden Village?

The Department for Communities and Local Government's document of 16 March 2016, *Locally-Led Garden Villages, Towns and Cities*, sets out some specific criteria that Garden Villages must meet:

- 'They must work as self-sustaining places, not dormitory suburbs.' (Given that the Cotswold Garden Village is specifically earmarked to answer Oxford City's unmet housing need, it is hard to see how it will not turn out to be a commuter-belt dormitory suburb that adds significantly more traffic to an already highly congested road network – even with the proposed bus lanes on the A40.)
- It is 'important for the new community to establish a clear and distinct sense of identity'. (The Garden Village's close proximity to Eynsham and, if future plans in the Eol go ahead, to Freeland and Church Hanborough will make a separate identity hard to achieve.
- Garden Villages should not be 'an extension of an existing town or village'. (See the point above: there will be very little separation from Eynsham.)

In addition, there are three specific elements embedded in the Cotswold Garden Village proposal that seem at odds with the philosophy behind Garden Villages:

- I. Presumably DEC will not be erased; the compensation required would be huge. So in the middle of the Village there will be a large industrial site with constant HGV traffic.
- II. In paragraph 7.54 of West Oxfordshire's Local Plan, the proposed new Park & Ride of 1,000 spaces 'will form an integral part of the proposed garden village'. Not an attractive proposition for the new village residents.
- III. Policy T2 of the Local Plan refers to a 'Northern Link Road, West Oxfordshire Garden Village'. This is described in paragraph 7.43f: 'A new main road is also likely to be provided through the garden village site connecting the A40 with Cuckoo Lane and Lower Road to the east thereby allowing greater journey choice and facilitating easier access to Hanborough Railway Station.' In other words, this brand new Village will be built round a busy 'strategic link road' that cuts right through the heart of it.

These three elements do not make the Cotswold Garden Village sound very garden-villagey.

5. A duty to cooperate

One reason why WODC put forward its Garden Village proposal was its duty to respond to the abrupt and unexpected demand that the Oxfordshire District Councils should help Oxford City meet its unmet housing needs. But note that the wording here is 'duty to cooperate', not 'duty to agree' or 'duty to obey'. Furthermore, these unmet needs should be met 'where it is reasonable to do so and consistent with achieving sustainable development'. WODC has been labouring long and hard to solve its own housing problems, and could probably cooperate, reasonably and sustainably, in making a contribution to Oxford City housing; but that does not mean it has to do everything that Oxford City demands of it.

In the wider English context, it should be remembered that there are 14 new Garden Villages proposed, and 10 new Garden Towns (some of which are already under way). At present, Oxfordshire is hosting more Garden developments – two new towns and one village – than any other county in England (Essex is a close second). Why? Surely the two Garden Towns, at Didcot and Bicester, are enough of a contribution of this kind to the nation's housing shortage.

There are alternatives, even for the Garden Village: for example, the development at ‘Middle Leigh’ proposed by Gladman Developments Ltd on land to the south of the A40 near Barnard Gate (midway between Witney and Eynsham). This has the advantage of one landowner who is willing to sell and proximity to a solar farm. Or, as indicated by the red dot on Map 1 above, there is a potential site that straddles the southern half of the proposed Garden Village and extends into the Barnard Gate site – both areas already assessed by LUC.

There are also less-than-garden-village possibilities, for example, the imaginative proposal put forward by Savills in September 2015, which envisaged housing and a primary school north of the A40, but in a limited southern section of the Cotswold Garden Village site. This could dovetail nicely with an equally imaginative proposal in earlier drafts of the Eynsham Neighbourhood Plan for a well-lit underpass under the A40, linking north to south, which could in turn be constructed at the same time as the proposed A40 improvements.

But of course all of these alternatives, not least the current proposal, will add to the traffic congestion problems in West Oxfordshire.

6. What’s in a name?

The final point to be made about this seriously flawed proposal relates to its new name: *Cotswold Garden Village*.

Either: the Garden Village is *not* in the Cotswolds Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), in which case the name is a piece of inaccurate PR intended to make the Village seem more exclusive and valuable than it is.

Or: it *is* or should be part of the Cotswolds AONB, in which case it would have ‘the same planning status as National Parks’ (‘Cotswolds Conservation Board Position Statement: Development in the setting of the Cotswolds AONB’).

Incidentally, on the subject of the Cotswolds, the Statement just quoted notes that ‘the surroundings of the AONB are also important to its landscape character and quality’; that ‘a very large development may have an impact even if some considerable distance from the AONB boundary’; and that ‘The setting of the Cotswolds AONB *does not have a geographical border*’ (their italics). The nearest point of the Cotswolds AONB to the north of the *smaller* version of the proposed Garden Village site (Map 3) is less than two miles away as the crow flies, at Long Hanborough.

The Statement goes on to list examples of adverse impacts of development on the AONB. One of these is ‘loss of biodiversity, particularly if of species of importance in the AONB’. That is likely to be the case if the nearby and connected biodiversity of City Farm is diminished, as it will be by the Garden Village. The Statement also lists ten ‘Special qualities of the Cotswolds AONB’. One of these is ‘Arable and livestock farms managed with consideration for biodiversity’ – of which City Farm is a shining example.

In sum, the name of the Garden Village somehow epitomises the way in which this whole proposal has been inadequately thought through and misleadingly presented to central government.

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12 March 2017