

# Cheltenham Borough Council

## Cabinet – 24 September 2024

### Declaration of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve

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**Accountable member:**

Councillor Izaak Tailford - Cabinet Member for Waste, Recycling and Public Realm

**Accountable officer:**

Adam Reynolds - Green Space Manager

**Ward(s) affected:**

N/A

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**Key Decision:** ~~Yes~~/No

**Executive summary:**

Natural England have identified Leckhampton Hill as a potential site for declaration as a National Nature Reserve (NNR). They would like to work with the Council to achieve this and request our approval to undertake the declaration process.

NNRs include some of the best examples of England's wildlife and geology. England's NNRs are considered among the most important places for nature, managed an exemplary way and are places to inspire people, promote learning and encourage actions in the wider landscape.

Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common are already designated a *Site of Special Scientific Interest* due to the importance its Jurassic limestone grassland on the escarpment slopes and the diversity of the associated flora and fauna.

The NNR status would recognise the national importance of its geology and associated habitats and species and acknowledge the exemplary standard in which

the site has been and continues to be managed. It would join a wider England-wide network of 221 NNRs. at the time of writing this report.

**Recommendations: That Cabinet:**

- 1. authorises the council's application to Natural England to become an Approved Body pursuant to section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981;**
  - 2. consents to the designation of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve;**
  - 3. authorises all necessary actions to facilitate the designation process in collaboration with Natural England for Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common as a National Nature Reserve**
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## **1. Implications**

### **1.1 Financial, Property and Asset implications**

The site is already managed in a manner commensurate with NNR status. A walk over of the site's geological features with representatives of Natural England revealed only minor work required in connection with the declaration. This consisted of minor selective vegetation removal at the exposure sites, and the potential for interpreting the site (for example through information panels) to allow the public to better understand the geological importance of the site. Grants are widely available that would fund the installation of interpretation panels.

The Council will continue to own and manage the site as it does now through a combination of government land grants, conservation grazing, and volunteer support from the Friends of Leckhampton Hill.

**Signed off by:** Ela Jankowska, [ela.jankowska@cheltenham.gov.uk](mailto:ela.jankowska@cheltenham.gov.uk)

**Date:** 22/08/2024



### **1.2 Legal implications**

"The declaration of a National Nature Reserve is a statutory process undertaken by Natural England under Section 35 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and section 19 of the Countryside Act 1949 (as amended). The declaration does not confer additional legal protection beyond existing designations but recognises the site's national importance. The Council will retain ownership and the main implications are that the Council would need to be approved by Natural England as an Approved Body, commit to managing the land as a nature reserve long-term, and (upon application from the Council) Natural England could make byelaws for the protection of the

reserve. The Council would need to continue managing the land as a nature reserve to maintain the National Nature Reserve status. If it ceased to do so, Natural England would need to make a declaration to that effect causing the loss of its status.

**Signed off by:** Michael Ronan, Locum Planning Lawyer, One Legal

### **1.3 Environmental and climate change implications**

Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common provide local people with an opportunity to connect with nature and the relationship between geodiversity, biodiversity and our own interaction with the natural world. This reinforces the connection between human behaviour and biodiversity loss, intrinsically linked to climate change. The management of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common maintains and enhances a diverse mosaic of habitat creating a landscape more resilient to environmental and climate change.

**Signed off by:** Maizey McCann [maizey.mccann@cheltenham.gov.uk](mailto:maizey.mccann@cheltenham.gov.uk)

### **1.4 Corporate Plan Priorities**

Whilst not directly related to the Council's corporate priorities, the declaration will only serve to heighten the importance of Leckhampton Hill in both biological and geological terms. The site serves as an educational resource of the highest quality for scientists and students of palaeontology, carbonate sedimentology and ancient environments, the understanding of which underpins current thinking around climate change.

### **1.5 Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Implications**

The designation will have no direct impact on residents.

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## **2 Background**

2.5 National Nature Reserves (NNRs) are exemplary, nationally important nature reserves, where nature conservation is the primary land use and significant other benefits may be provided for people and the environment. They are designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, as amended by Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2006. These principles are used by Natural England to select all new and extended sites and were developed in partnership with other organisations that manage NNRs.

2.6 The core purpose of an NNR is nature conservation, science and people, and its status is intended to secure the nature reserve for the long-term (>30 years or in perpetuity).

2.7 NNRs can be held by Natural England (NE) or by bodies approved by NE (“Approved Bodies”) to hold and manage NNRs, which may include NGOs large and small, local authorities, other government bodies, private estates, companies. The Council would need to apply to Natural England to become an Approved Body but this, in the case of a local authority, would just be a formality.

2.8 NNR is a statutory designation with Natural England being the approving authority. The designation is voluntary, and declared wholly, or in part, through a legal process undertaken by Natural England. The status does not confer any further new protection on the site than already exists.

2.9 It does not entitle additional funding, though doesn’t prevent managing organisations being funded from their existing or future sources. Leckhampton Hill is currently under the Government’s Higher Level Stewardship Scheme (to be replaced by the Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship Scheme) and has received payments from National Grid for the “Restoring Cheltenham’s Escarpment Grassland” project.

### **3 Process**

3.5 The declaration process is relatively simple and is carried out by NE (although Approved Bodies provide site information, maps etc). NNR proposals are made by NE Area Team with support from the approved body (CBC). Proposals are assessed against the NE selection principles, and successful cases are taken through a formal approval process. New NNRs and major extensions are approved by NE Board, other extensions can be approved at Director Level. Documentation is then prepared by NE (map and covering paper) then declaration made by NE Head of Legal (under seal).

3.6 The extent of the designation is largely a matter for the Council to lead on in conjunction with NE. It would not extend beyond the boundary of the existing Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) Boundary (Appendix 2), which covers all of the areas of geological note, (appendix 3). It does not cover any of the Council’s agricultural land, or barns on Hill Farm.

3.7 Following declaration, the designation must be publicised, and it is usual to celebrate the designation.

3.8 An indicative time frame for designation is that simple NNR proposals can be completed in around 6 months, and complex, multi-partner NNRs typically take 2-3 years to develop and complete. It is anticipated that Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common could be completed in Spring 2025, however this is in the control of NE.

### **4 Site Significance**

4.5 Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common has long been known by geologists for its unique exposures. The site exposes a 60-metre section of Jurassic sediments known as the Inferior Oolite. These rocks were laid down in a shallow marine environment some 165 - 170 million years ago and are exposed in the quarries on and under Leckhampton Hill and characterise the Cotswold Hills and escarpment. They are important for the fossils they contain and the evidence of past conditions and processes they represent.

4.6 Leckhampton Hill exposes the thickest sequence of the Inferior Oolite Group in the Cotswolds. It has a long history of geological research going back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century and was central to developing our understanding of Jurassic Period. It is a key site for understanding the sedimentology and changing environment of the shallow tropical Jurassic Sea and for comparison to rocks of a similar age in different depositional environments to the north and south. The key value of the geology of the Special Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) is the potentially complete exposure of the whole of the Lower Inferior Oolite formation in one outcrop area - a feature almost unique in the Cotswolds. The rock exposures are all classified as ED1 (nationally important disused quarry /Exposure site) in the Earth Science Classification Code and the landslip and gravel sites as IS2 (Regionally important, static geomorphological /integrity site)

4.7 It comprises a network of disused quarries operated during the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries supplying building stone to Cheltenham, Gloucester and the surrounding villages, creating the characteristic limestone buildings of the Cotswolds.

4.8 There is an intimate and mutually beneficial relationship between this underlying geodiversity and the site's nationally important biodiversity. Former quarried faces and vegetated quarry spoil provide extensive areas of unimproved calcareous grassland supporting nationally scarce plants such as fly orchid and purple milk vetch, and butterflies such as the Chalk Hill Blue and the rare Duke of Burgundy fritillary. Managed scrub and woodland extend the diversity of habitat, flora and fauna across the site providing cover and a source of food for nesting birds such as meadow pipit and grasshopper warbler, as well as shelter for invertebrates and small mammals.

## **5 Future Maintenance / Investment**

5.5 Although the designation itself does not come with additional funding, as part of the NNR series the status that comes with it will only serve to enhance future funding applications to external bodies, and the potential to collaborate across the NNR network.

5.6 Very little additional maintenance is required to the quarries themselves other than sensitive management of vegetation to allow access and enjoyment of the exposed geology, and to prevent vegetation causing damage to the rock faces. This also

maintains habitat mosaics across the site, benefitting both biodiversity and geodiversity. Any such additional work can be picked up in routine operations undertaken by contractors or volunteer work parties.

5.7 Initially it will be beneficial to introduce signage interpreting the geology for visitors to the hill, and to encourage safe behaviour in, and around, the quarry sites. The cost of such signage is not considered to be prohibitive, and like many other similar examples in parks and gardens, will more than likely be eligible for external grant funding.

## **6.0 Reasons for recommendations**

6.1 To recognise the national importance of the site in both geological and biological terms and to support Natural England in securing and protecting such sites for future generations.

6.2 To support achieving the [National Nature Reserve Strategy](#) which has the ambition that England's National Nature Reserves are the most important places for nature, managed in an exemplary way, inspiring people and promoting learning and through working in partnership NNRs will be a core part of achieving successful nature recovery. Contribution to a wider ambition to tell England's geological history, through existing NNRs, or where there are gaps in the story extending or creating new NNRs such as Leckhampton Hill.

## **7. Alternative options considered**

7.1 Not approve the designation. Cheltenham would not benefit from having a site nationally recognised in this way. Other LA's have promoted similar designations as selling points for visitors and tourists.

## **8. Consultation and feedback**

8.1 Engagement with Natural England on the practicalities of implementation and any risks linked to this.

## **9. Key risks**

9.1 Increased publicity brought about by the designation could lead to increased footfall, and erosion of the rock exposure from fossil hunters. This, however, is not anticipated beyond current levels and can be carefully managed through local publicity and collaboration, and sensitive site related information.

## **Report author:**

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**Appendices:**

1. Risk Assessment
2. Site of Special Scientific Interest Boundary
3. Areas of Geological Interest
4. Climate Change Assessment Tool Summary

**Background information:**

National Nature Reserves Joint Strategy:

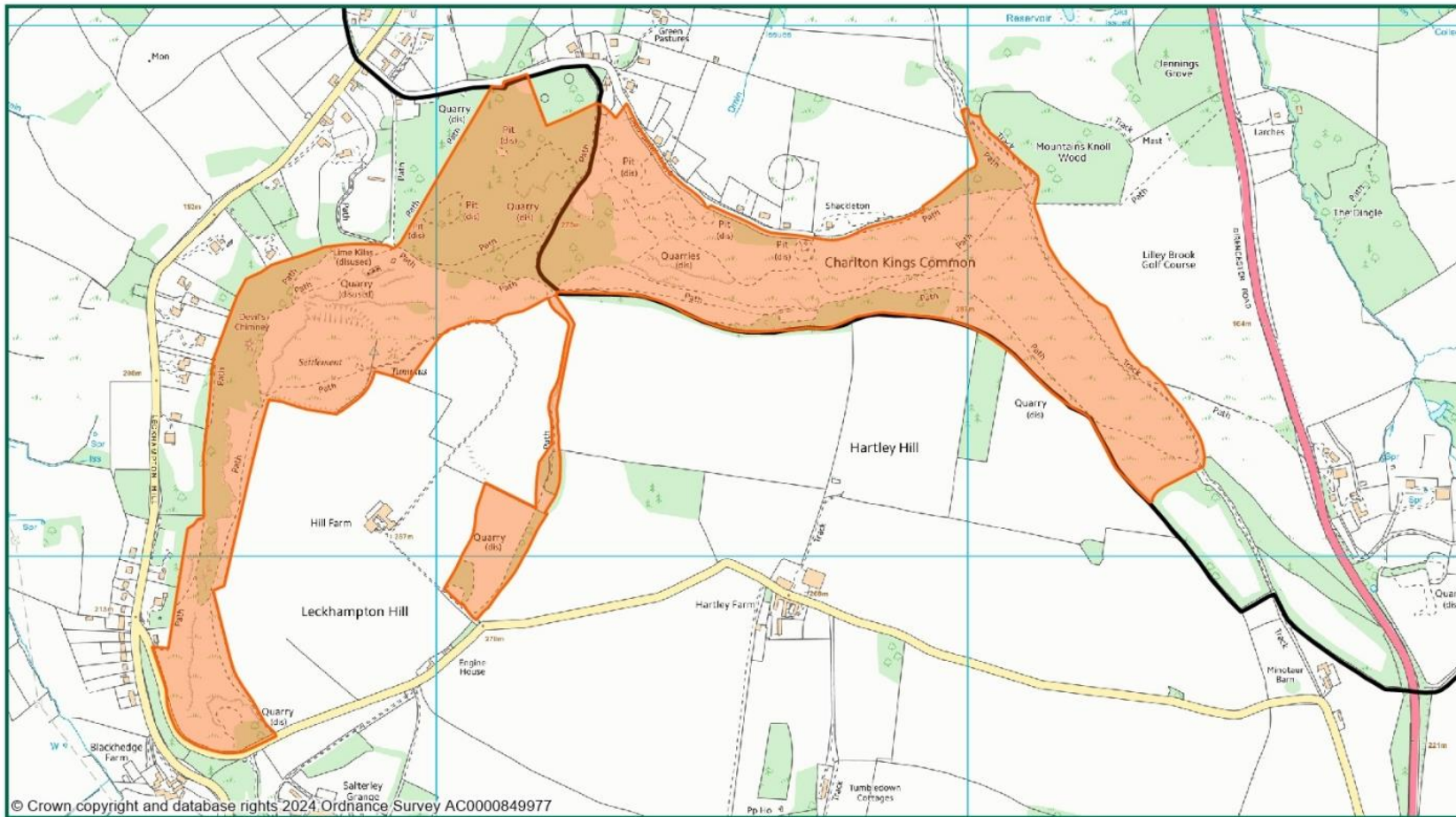
[The Strategy for England's National Nature Reserves - NE807 \(naturalengland.org.uk\)](https://naturalengland.org.uk/nature-reserves/strategy)

## Appendix 1: Risk Assessment

Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
1	Erosion brought about by initial increased footfall following publicity of the designation, and erosion of the rock exposure from fossil hunters.	Green Space Team	2	3	6	Lower the risk	Develop interpretation and responsible use signage, outlining good / safe practice	Green Spaces Manager	Ready for official dedication /public announcement
2	Potential future cost implications arising from NNR designation	Green Space Team	2	3	6	Accept	There has been engagement with Natural England in respect of the risk of any future funding obligations that may arise from NNR designation. It should be noted that this designation is not the same as other designations (for example strategic and accessible green space SANG) that is purposefully designed at mitigating the human	Green Spaces Manager	Ongoing overview of NNRs and regular engagement with Natural England



Risk ref	Risk description	Risk owner	Impact score (1-5)	Likelihood score (1-5)	Initial raw risk score (1 - 25)	Risk response	Controls / Mitigating actions	Control / Action owner	Deadline for controls/ actions
							impact on key sites. As set out in this report, the focus on the NNR in this location is exposing the geology of the site.		



**Leckampton and Charlton Kings Common SSSI designation**

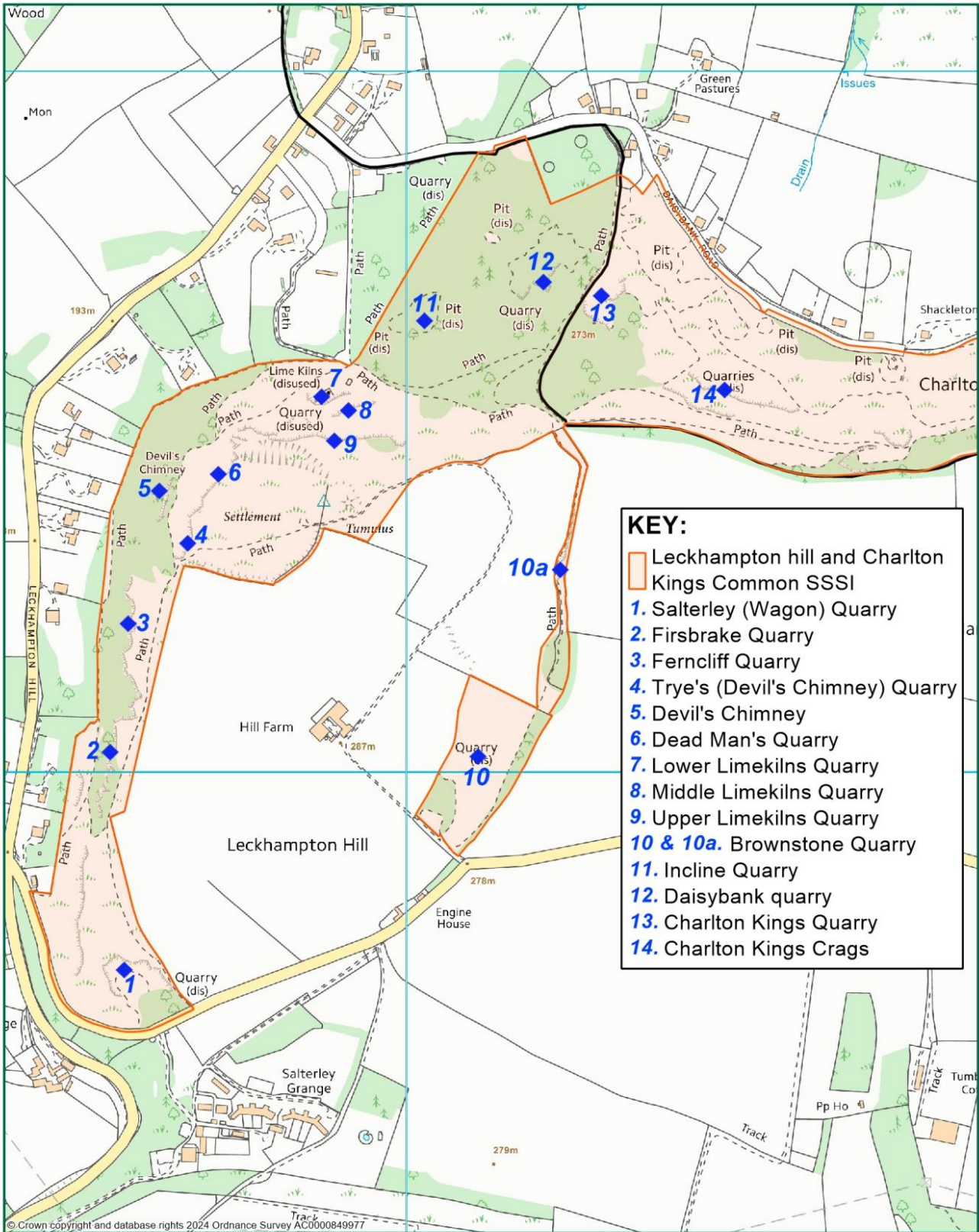
0 100 200 300 metres

1:10000

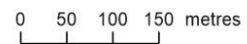
18 July 2024



# Appendix 3 – Areas of Geological Interest



## Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common Key Geological Exposures.



1:5000

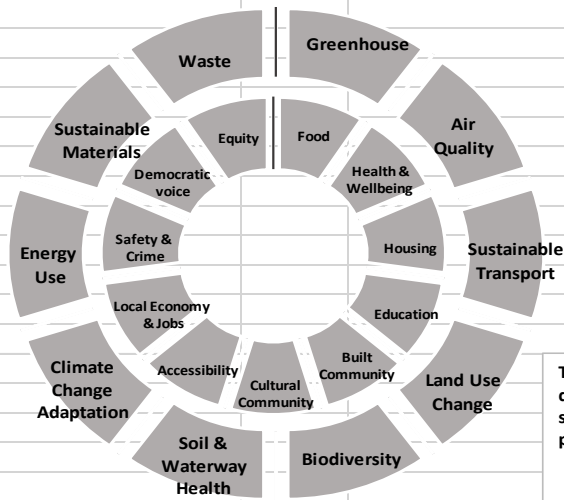
22 July 2024



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## Appendix 4 - Climate Change Assessment Tool Summary

### Designation of Leckhampton Hill and Charlton Kings Common



Key	
	Significant and/or long-term positive impact identified. No changes needed.
	Slight or short-term positive impact identified. No changes needed but could be reviewed to improve.
	Not applicable or no cause for concern.
	Slight or short-term negative impact identified. Review to identify possible improvements.
	Significant and/or long-term negative impact identified. Changes needed before proceeding.

This summary of the CIAT should be used to aid your decision making. Please note that red/amber segments simply mean that mitigations and changes should take place not that the project cannot go ahead.

Environmental	Scores	Justification	Recommendation
GHGs	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Air quality	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Sustainable Transport	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Land use change	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Biodiversity	0	The designation relatesd to geological elements	0
Soil and waterway health	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Climate Change Adaptation	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Energy Use	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Sustainable Materials	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Waste	0	This is a site designation only. There will be no physical change to the site	0
Social	Scores	Justification	Recommendation
Food	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Health	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Housing	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Education	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Community	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Culture	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Accessibility	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Local Economy and Jobs	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Safety	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Equity	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0
Democratic Voice	0	The designation recognises the geological quality of the site	0