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BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Sara

Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan: Sustainability Appraisal / Strategic Environmental Assessment / Draft Plan consultation

Thank you for consulting Natural England Blandford, Blandford St Mary and Bryanston Draft Neighbourhood Plan and apologies for the delay in our response.

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

The plan area lies partly within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and Cranborne Chase AONB and includes the Bryanston Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

Neighbourhood Plan Strategic Environmental Assessment / Sustainability Appraisal

It is our advice, on the basis of the material supplied with the consultation, that, in so far as our strategic environmental interests are concerned (including but not limited to statutory designated sites, landscapes and protected species, geology and soils), that there are likely to be significant environmental effects from the proposed plan.

Guidance on the assessment of Neighbourhood Plans in light of the SEA Directive is contained within the National Planning Practice Guidanceⁱ. The guidance highlights three triggers that may require the production of an SEA, for instance where:

- a neighbourhood plan allocates sites for development
- the neighbourhood area contains sensitive natural or heritage assets that may be affected by the proposals in the plan
- the neighbourhood plan may have significant environmental effects that have not already been considered and dealt with through a sustainability appraisal of the Local Plan.

We have checked our records and based on the information provided, we can confirm that in our view the allocations contained within the draft plan will have significant effects on the Cranborne Chase AONB, which Natural England has a statutory duty to protect. As we have no evidence of these effects having been previously assessed within a Local Plan, we consider that there should now be an assessment in order to determine the potential impact on the AONB and what possibilities exist for the avoidance / mitigation of the effects.

Comments on Draft Neighbourhood Plan

Nationally Designated Landscapes – Cranborne Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

The draft Neighbourhood Plan includes significant urban extensions beyond the bypass within and within the setting of the Cranborne Chase AONB, a designation of national importance with the highest status of protection in relation to landscape and scenic beauty. In exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an AONB, all public bodies, local planning authorities and Natural England, have a duty to have regard to the statutory purpose of AONBs, which is the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty of the area (Section 85 Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000). Local planning authorities are required to take such action as appears to them to be expedient for the accomplishment of the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty and amenity of an AONB to the extent that it lies within their area (Section 84(4) Countryside and Rights of Way Act, 2000). It is against this duty, and with regard to national and local planning policy, that the proposals must be measured.

In weighing up the benefits of any policy against the impact to the AONB your authority should have particular regard to the provisions of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). In particular, Paragraph 115 which states that, “Great weight should be given to conserving 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 landscape and scenic beauty. The conservation of wildlife and cultural heritage are important considerations in all these areas, and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads.”

Paragraph 116 further states that planning permission should be refused for major developments in these designated areas except in exceptional circumstances and where it can be demonstrated they are in the public interest. Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- the need for the development, including in terms of any national considerations, and the impact of permitting it, or refusing it, upon the local economy;
- the cost of, and scope for, developing elsewhere outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and
- any detrimental effect on the environment, the landscape and recreational opportunities, and the extent to which that could be moderated.

The Planning Practice Guidance provides further guidance on impacts on the protection of nationally designated landscapes:

<http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/natural-environment/landscape/>

Comments on draft Policy 2. Land to the East of Blandford Forum

The policy provides for a significant urban extension within the setting of the Cranborne Chase AONB which will extend development beyond the A354 Blandford bypass into rural locality that is surrounded by land within the AONB. In particular, the policy has the potential to impact on long views from high ground in the designated area and may have further in combination impacts with the draft Neighbourhood Policy 3. Furthermore, based on the information provided Natural England has no confidence that any impacts on the special quality of the AONB can be successfully moderated. Natural England also notes that the emerging Local Plan Policy provides for development elsewhere within the locality that would have considerably less potential to harm nationally designated landscapes. On this basis Natural England objects to the draft policy.

Comments on draft Policy 3. Land to the North of Blandford Forum

The policy provides for a significant urban extension beyond the Blandford bypass into a rural locality within the Cranborne Chase AONB.

Natural England advises that the current proposals should be considered as “major” in the context of NPPF paragraph 116 and so any development proposals should be required to meet the policy’s “exceptional circumstances” test. Exceptional circumstances will not exist unless all three criteria (i.e. the national and local need, cost and scope for developing elsewhere, and the environmental effect and scope for moderating it) can be satisfied.

In our view the alternative development allocations set out in the emerging Local Plan demonstrate that there are opportunities for delivering the current housing needs without necessitating further development within the protected landscape. We would therefore consider that the information provided to date has not been able to demonstrate that the ‘no alternatives’ criteria has been met.

Natural England also considers that the draft policy will have harmful impacts on the designated landscape and may have additional harmful impacts on the long views from high ground elsewhere in the AONB. The proposed allocation may also have additional in combination impacts with draft Policy 2. Furthermore, based on the information provided Natural England has no confidence that any impacts on the special quality of the AONB can be successfully moderated. On this basis we consider that exceptional circumstances have not been demonstrated and Natural England therefore objects to the draft policy.

Natural England strongly recommends that the Cranborne Chase AONB team are fully consulted on any implications of the proposed Policies 2 and 3 on the AONB. Their knowledge of the location and wider landscape setting of the proposed allocation should help to confirm whether or not it would impact significantly on the purposes of the designation. They will also be able to advise whether the development accords with the aims and policies set out in the AONB management plan. Natural England will reconsider our advice in the light of the Cranborne Chase AONB Team’s response to the draft policies 2 & 3.

Comments on draft Policy 4 - Land at Shaftesbury Lane, Blandford Forum

The policy provides for a significant urban development within the Cranborne Chase AONB but is contained within the A354 Blandford bypass. Natural England advises that the current proposals should be considered as “major” in the context of NPPF paragraph 116 and so any development proposals should be required to meet policy’s “exceptional circumstances” test. Exceptional circumstances will not exist unless all three criteria (i.e. the national and local need, cost and scope for developing elsewhere, and the environmental effect and scope for moderating it) can be satisfied.

In this case, however, the principle of development in this locality has previously been considered by the adopted local plan and is currently being reconsidered by the emerging local plan process. Given the locality within the bypass and its close association with existing developed areas Natural England considers that the allocation with appropriate biodiversity and landscape mitigation measures are unlikely to have a detrimental effect on the environment, landscape or recreational opportunities. Indeed with appropriate landscape mitigation measures the allocation is likely to have the potential to help improve the appearance of the existing development from the wider views within the AONB. On this basis Natural England has no objection to the draft policy.

Comments on draft Policy 9. Green Infrastructure Network

Natural England supports the principle of draft Policy 9. You may wish to consider using the policy to encourage development to make additional provision for new green infrastructure, including new allotments and or community orchards.

Comments on draft Policy 10. Local Green Spaces

Natural England supports the principle of draft Policy 10.

Other Comments

Internationally and Nationally Designated Wildlife Sites

Based on the information provided, we can confirm that the plan is unlikely to harm any Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), or Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), or Ramsar Site and is not likely to significantly affect the interest features for which they are notified. I can therefore confirm that Natural England has no concerns regarding this aspect of the proposals.

Protected Species - Species protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (as amended) and by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010

We are not aware of significant populations of protected species which are likely to be affected by the policies / proposals within the plan. It remains the case, however, that the responsible authority should provide information supporting this screening decision, sufficient to assess whether protected species are likely to be affected. Natural England does not hold comprehensive information regarding the locations of species protected by law, but advises on the procedures and legislation relevant to such species. Records of protected species should therefore be sought from the Dorset Environmental Records Centre.

Habitats and Species of Principal Importance

The SEA should thoroughly assess the potential impact of the proposals on habitats and/or species listed as 'Habitats and Species of Principal Importance' within the England Biodiversity List, published under the requirements of S41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities (NERC) Act 2006. Section 40 of the NERC Act 2006 places a general duty on all public authorities, including local planning authorities, to conserve and enhance biodiversity. Further information on this duty is available in the Defra publication 'Guidance for Local Authorities on Implementing the Biodiversity Duty'.

In order to identify any important habitats present Natural England advises that a habitat survey (equivalent to Phase 1) is carried out on all greenfield (non arable) sites short listed for potential development. Development on sites found to be supporting priority habitat should be avoided. All development should also seek to minimise harm to wildlife interests within the site, and seek to provide opportunities for achieving biodiversity gains.

Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

In order to help enhance local biodiversity you may wish to consider an additional policy within the Neighbourhood Plan to promote the incorporation of biodiversity enhancements within developments. These might include the provision of bat and bird nesting / roosting opportunities within new builds, the planting of fruit trees in gardens, provision of wildlife ponds etc.

In line with the Dorset Biodiversity Protocol Natural England also recommend that all new development on greenfield sites greater than 0.1 ha are supported by a Biodiversity Mitigation and Enhancement Plan, that has been approved by the Dorset County Council Natural Environment Team (NET). The Biodiversity Mitigation Plan should be prepared by a suitably qualified individual and follow the standard format available on the Dorset For You website.

Please note that Natural England reserves the right to provide further comments on this proposal beyond this SEA scoping opinion, should your authority seek our views on the planning application. This includes any third party appeal against any screening decision your authority may make.

For any queries relating to the specific advice in this letter please contact John Stobart on 07825 844475. For any new consultations or issues, please contact consultations@naturalengland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

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