

Date: 06 January 2016
Our ref: 172879
Your ref: None given



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BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Ms Russell

**Stonehouse Neighbourhood Plan Vision and Objectives, Overview, & Emerging Policies
November 2015**

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 26 November 2015 which was received by Natural England on the same date.

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 covering letter sent with this consultation is actually for Historic England. We therefore assume that this is a general, 'open' consultation, without specific questions for Natural England.

Stonehouse Neighbourhood Plan - Vision and Objectives

We welcome the inclusion of a section on the environment and the objectives included within this.

Stonehouse Neighbourhood Plan - Emerging Policies

We welcome the inclusion of a section on the environment. We particularly welcome the proposed protection of greenspaces and improvement of paths, cycleways and wildlife corridors.

You may wish to consider identifying within the plan potential areas to be targeted for creation of wildlife corridors, to improve connectivity between habitats, and could link this with this policy. The [MAGIC](#) website can help you identify areas of priority habitat and ancient woodland. We note the map supplied. We advise including policy to protect specifically [priority habitat](#) (for example the traditional orchards, deciduous woodland and floodplain) and other environmental assets in the area to preserve the existing eco-system network.

Whilst we welcome the use of protected species records to inform the development of the Neighbourhood Plan, we would generally advise against including this data in the plan. Whilst this information is made available on request, it is not usually in the wider public domain. This helps to keep species safe. Also as this data is only as good as the records that have been submitted, there can be misconceptions due to 'gaps on the map'.

Taking into consideration the policies that have been put forward, we suggest that you may want to consider having a specific policy on [green infrastructure](#). A green infrastructure policy might for



example protect existing green infrastructure within the boundary of the plan area and to promote creation of new green infrastructure if new development proposals come forward. A green infrastructure policy would promote the holistic and joined-up consideration of lots of the assets the plan intends to protect and enhance, including open space, recreational space, footpaths and cycle routes, wildlife corridors, wildlife conservation areas and the canal and riverside.

Multi-functional green infrastructure is important to underpin the overall sustainability of a development by performing a range of functions including flood risk management, the provision of accessible green space, climate change adaptation and supporting biodiversity. An example of a green infrastructure provision is sustainable drainage systems. These can deliver benefits for people and for wildlife and make a valuable contribution to the local green infrastructure network.

Habitat Regulations Assessment

There are no internationally or nationally designated sites within Stonehouse Parish. However, the parish is within close proximity to Rodborough Common Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Cotswold Beechwoods SAC and the Severn Estuary SAC/Special Protection Area (SPA)/Ramsar site. These sites are protected under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (the Habitat Regulations).

Where a neighbourhood plan could potentially affect a European protected site, it will be necessary to screen the plan in relation to the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations (2010), as amended (the 'Habitats Regulations'). One of the basic conditions that will be tested at Examination is whether the making of the plan is compatible with European obligations and this includes requirements relating to the Habitats Directive, which is transposed into the Habitats Regulations.

In accordance with Schedule 2 of The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012, a neighbourhood plan cannot be made if the likelihood of significant effects on any European Site, either alone (or in combination with other plans and projects) cannot be ruled out. Therefore, measures may need to be incorporated into the neighbourhood plan to ensure that any likely significant effects are avoided in order to secure compliance with the Regulations. A screening exercise should be undertaken if there is any doubt about the possible effects of the plan on European protected sites. This will be particularly important if a neighbourhood plan is to progress before a local plan has been adopted and/or the neighbourhood plan proposes development which has not been assessed and/or included in the Habitats Regulations Assessment for the local plan.

We recommend that Stroud District Council (as the Competent Authority) undertakes a Habitat Regulations screening assessment to determine whether there are any likely significant effects on these (or other) European sites.

If this Neighbourhood Plan is in conformity with the recently adopted Stroud Local Plan, then this may be a relatively straightforward exercise. However, we advise that particular attention should be given to any plan policies which could give rise to recreational impacts on European sites.

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Where Neighbourhood Plans could have significant environmental effects, they may require a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) under the Environment Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004. Further guidance on deciding whether the proposals are likely to have significant environmental effects and the requirements for consulting Natural England on SEA are set out in the National Planning Practice Guidance at:

<http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/strategic-environmental-assessment-and-sustainability-appraisal/does-a-neighbourhood-plan-require-a-sustainability-appraisal/>

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.

Additional guidance

Please see Annex 1 appended to this letter for additional 'standard' guidance.

You may also find the following guidance useful:

- [Deconstructed planning policies- putting the pieces together](#)
- [Planning for the environment at the neighbourhood level](#)
- [A guide to writing planning policies which address the issues that matter to your neighbourhood plan.](#)

We would be happy to comment further should the need arise but if in the meantime you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact us.

For any queries relating to the specific advice in this letter only please contact Hayley Fleming on 0300 060 1594. For any new consultations, or to provide further information on this consultation please send your correspondences to consultations@naturalengland.org.uk.

We really value your feedback to help us improve the service we offer. We have attached a feedback form to this letter and welcome any comments you might have about our service.

Yours sincerely

Hayley Fleming
Lead adviser (Planning)
South Mercia Area Team

Annex 1 - Neighbourhood planning and the natural environment: information, issues and opportunities

Natural environment information sources

The [Magic](#)¹ website will provide you with much of the nationally held natural environment data for your plan area. The most relevant layers for you to consider are: **Agricultural Land Classification**, **Ancient Woodland**, **Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty**, **Local Nature Reserves**, [National Parks \(England\)](#), **National Trails**, **Priority Habitat Inventory**, **public rights of way (on the Ordnance Survey base map)** and **Sites of Special Scientific Interest (including their impact risk zones)**. Local environmental record centres may hold a range of additional information on the natural environment. A list of local record centres is available [here](#)².

Priority habitats are those habitats of particular importance for nature conservation, and the list of them can be found [here](#)³. Most of these will be mapped either as **Sites of Special Scientific Interest**, on the Magic website or as **Local Wildlife Sites**. Your local planning authority should be able to supply you with the locations of Local Wildlife Sites.

National Character Areas (NCAs) divide England into 159 distinct natural areas. Each character area is defined by a unique combination of landscape, biodiversity, geodiversity and cultural and economic activity. NCA profiles contain descriptions of the area and statements of environmental opportunity, which may be useful to inform proposals in your plan. NCA information can be found [here](#)⁴.

There may also be a local **landscape character assessment** covering your area. This is a tool to help understand the character and local distinctiveness of the landscape and identify the features that give it a sense of place. It can help to inform, plan and manage change in the area. Your local planning authority should be able to help you access these if you can't find them online.

If your neighbourhood planning area is within or adjacent to a **National Park** or **Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty** (AONB), the relevant National Park/AONB Management Plan for the area will set out useful information about the protected landscape. You can access the plans on from the relevant National Park Authority or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty website.

General mapped information on **soil types** and **Agricultural Land Classification** is available (under 'landscape') on the [Magic](#)⁵ website and also from the [LandIS website](#)⁶, which contains more information about obtaining soil data.

Natural environment issues to consider

The [National Planning Policy Framework](#)⁷ sets out national planning policy on protecting and enhancing the natural environment. [Planning Practice Guidance](#)⁸ sets out supporting guidance. Your local planning authority should be able to provide you with further advice on the potential impacts of your plan or order on the natural environment and the need for any environmental assessments.

Landscape

Your plans or orders may present opportunities to protect and enhance locally valued landscapes. You may want to consider identifying distinctive local landscape features or characteristics such as ponds, woodland or dry stone walls and think about how any new development proposals can

¹ <http://magic.defra.gov.uk/>

² <http://www.nbn-nfbr.org.uk/nfbr.php>

³ <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140711133551/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/protectandmanage/habsandspeciesimportance.aspx>

⁴ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-character-area-profiles-data-for-local-decision-making>

⁵ <http://magic.defra.gov.uk/>

⁶ <http://www.landis.org.uk/index.cfm>

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-planning-policy-framework--2>

⁸ <http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/natural-environment/>

respect and enhance local landscape character and distinctiveness.

If you are proposing development within or close to a protected landscape (National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) or other sensitive location, we recommend that you carry out a landscape assessment of the proposal. Landscape assessments can help you to choose the most appropriate sites for development and help to avoid or minimise impacts of development on the landscape through careful siting, design and landscaping.

Wildlife habitats

Some proposals can have adverse impacts on designated wildlife sites or other priority habitats (listed [here](#)⁹), such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest or [Ancient woodland](#)¹⁰. If there are likely to be any adverse impacts you'll need to think about how such impacts can be avoided, mitigated or, as a last resort, compensated for.

Priority and protected species

You'll also want to consider whether any proposals might affect priority species (listed [here](#)¹¹) or protected species. To help you do this, Natural England has produced advice [here](#)¹² to help understand the impact of particular developments on protected species.

Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

Soil is a finite resource that fulfils many important functions and services for society. It is a growing medium for food, timber and other crops, a store for carbon and water, a reservoir of biodiversity and a buffer against pollution. If you are proposing development, you should seek to use areas of poorer quality agricultural land in preference to that of a higher quality in line with National Planning Policy Framework para 112. For more information, see our publication [Agricultural Land Classification: protecting the best and most versatile agricultural land](#)¹³.

Improving your natural environment

Your plan or order can offer exciting opportunities to enhance your local environment. If you are setting out policies on new development or proposing sites for development, you may wish to consider identifying what environmental features you want to be retained or enhanced or new features you would like to see created as part of any new development. Examples might include:

- Providing a new footpath through the new development to link into existing rights of way.
- Restoring a neglected hedgerow.
- Creating a new pond as an attractive feature on the site.
- Planting trees characteristic to the local area to make a positive contribution to the local landscape.
- Using native plants in landscaping schemes for better nectar and seed sources for bees and birds.
- Incorporating swift boxes or bat boxes into the design of new buildings.
- Think about how lighting can be best managed to encourage wildlife.
- Adding a green roof to new buildings.

You may also want to consider enhancing your local area in other ways, for example by:

- Setting out in your plan how you would like to implement elements of a wider Green Infrastructure Strategy (if one exists) in your community.
- Assessing needs for accessible greenspace and setting out proposals to address any deficiencies or enhance provision.

⁹<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140711133551/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/protectandmanage/habsandspeciesimportance.aspx>

¹⁰<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/ancient-woodland-and-veteran-trees-protection-surveys-licences>

¹¹<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140711133551/http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/ourwork/conservation/biodiversity/protectandmanage/habsandspeciesimportance.aspx>

¹²<https://www.gov.uk/protected-species-and-sites-how-to-review-planning-proposals>

¹³<http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/35012>

- Identifying green areas of particular importance for special protection through Local Green Space designation (see [Planning Practice Guidance on this](#) ¹⁴).
 - Managing existing (and new) public spaces to be more wildlife friendly (e.g. by sowing wild flower strips in less used parts of parks, changing hedge cutting timings and frequency).
 - Planting additional street trees.
 - Identifying any improvements to the existing public right of way network, e.g. cutting back hedges, improving the surface, clearing litter or installing kissing gates) or extending the network to create missing links.
 - Restoring neglected environmental features (e.g. coppicing a prominent hedge that is in poor condition, or clearing away an eyesore).
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¹⁴ <http://planningguidance.planningportal.gov.uk/blog/guidance/open-space-sports-and-recreation-facilities-public-rights-of-way-and-local-green-space/local-green-space-designation/>