

**Wootton and St Helen Without
Neighbourhood Plan
2018-2031**

**Screening Opinion for:
Strategic Environmental Assessment
Sustainability Appraisal
Habitats Regulations**

July 2018

Prepared by Wootton and St Helen Without Parish Councils

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Background to the Regulations

To ensure the sustainability of development plans and policies, emerging plans and policies are required to undergo screening and where necessary mitigation in relation to their environmental impacts. In summary, the requirements are as follows:

Strategic Environmental Assessment

If a NP allocates sites for housing, employment or retail development, it must conduct a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). If it does not allocate sites for development, it might still be required to undertake a SEA if:

- Any policies are likely to affect designated wildlife or conservation areas
- Any policies are likely to impact adversely on known environmental issues in the area
- The plan is likely to have any significant environmental effects on an area

The process involves four steps:

1. Identify key messages for the plan (policies, proposals)
2. Collect baseline information in relation to the current situation in the area
3. Identify any sustainability issues and problems
4. Identify sustainability objectives (deliverable actions) to resolve these issues/problems.

If a SEA is required, statutory consultees include Heritage England, Natural England and the Environment Agency.

The Government's '*Practical Guide to the SEA Directive*' (European Directive 2001/42/EC) makes it clear that the key criterion for whether a SEA is needed is whether there is likely to be significant environmental effects arising from a plan or programme. The NP does not allocate any sites for development or make any provision for housing, employment or retail development that is not already specified in LPP2. For the same reason, it is highly unlikely that the policies in the NP would impact adversely on designated wildlife or conservation areas, impact adversely to known environmental issues in the area, or generate significant environmental effects on an area. As a result, it is not considered necessary to undertake a SEA.

Sustainability Appraisal

A Sustainability Appraisal (SA) identifies likely significant effects on the environment arising from a plan or policy and reasonable alternatives. There is no legal requirement for a NP to undergo a SA, but the NP must demonstrate how it contributes to sustainable development, for which a SA can be a helpful tool. A SA should provide:

- An outline of the objectives of the plan
- Information on the environmental characteristics of the area
- Identification of any existing environmental pressures and priorities
- An outline of how the plan incorporates environmental objectives from national and international frameworks
- Mitigation measures identified and the reasons for the alternatives selected
- Information on the monitoring of any likely significant effects

Where the sustainability appraisal gives rise to necessary mitigation measures and the selection of alternatives, consultation should be undertaken with the public and authorities with environmental responsibility.

The WSHWNP specifies how it will contribute to sustainable development. The alignment of the NP policies with not only the strategic objectives of LPP2 but also the sustainability objectives identified for LPP2 through its own sustainability appraisal is presented on p22-24 and in the Schedule of Policies on p29-33. The NP therefore meets its legal requirements and does not require a formal Sustainability Appraisal. Information on environmental characteristics, pressures and priorities of the Designated Area, the incorporation of environmental objectives from national and international frameworks – as articulated through the National Planning Policy Framework and the VWHDC Local Plan – and monitoring arrangements for the policies presented and their impacts are also outlined in the NP document. To this extent, the NP itself can be considered a form of SA even though a formal process of SA has not been conducted.

Habitats Regulations Assessment

The Habitats Regulations relate to Special Protection Areas (SPA) and Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) and are specified in the *Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations* as amended in 2010, 2012, and 2017 to include Ramsar and potential/candidate sites as well as those formally designated as SPA and SAC. The purpose of a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) is to conclude whether or not a proposal/policy or plan as a whole will adversely affect the integrity of the site/s in question.

The Habitats Regulations apply two tests to emerging plans and policies:

1. The significance test, to establish the likelihood of a plan or policy having a significant effect on the site.
2. If significant effects are likely, the integrity test is then applied, to assess the implications of the plan or policy for the conservation objectives for the site/s in question.

If the integrity test is required, it is mandatory to consult Natural England on the likely effects and mitigation proposed.

There is one European site in the NP area: Cothill Fen, which is designated as an SAC for its calcium-rich fens fed by spring water and its alder woodlands located on floodplains. The conservation objective for the site is to maintain in favourable condition the habitats of European importance. The HRA for LPP1 and LPP2 identified air quality as an existing pressure on the site, and the reliance of the site's ecology on water levels and quality was noted. It also identified recreation pressure as a potential risk to the SAC, especially given the allocation of 1,200 dwellings to a strategic development site at Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield in LPP2. Likely impacts and proposed mitigation measures have been developed by VWHDC in conjunction with Natural England.

The NP contains no policies that relate directly to or directly impact upon Cothill Fen, so it is highly unlikely that the plan will have any significant effects on the site.

The recent European Court of Justice (ECJ) ruling on 12 April 2018 – the *People over Wind and Sweetman* ruling – introduced changes to the way in which screening is conducted under the HRA. Previously, mitigation measures identified and designed into plans and proposals could be considered when determining if there are any significant impacts likely to arise from the plan or proposal. Following the ECJ ruling, such mitigation measures can no longer be considered when

screening for significant impacts. The outcome of this ruling is that proposals and plans that were previously deemed not to bring significant likely impacts because they had considered the in-built mitigation measures might now be deemed to require a full HRA because those mitigation measures are discounted or excluded from the screening process.

As the NP makes no provision or allocation for development of any sort beyond that which is already specified in LPP2, there are no NP policies that would require mitigation. The initial screening exercise did not consider mitigation measures because none were necessary due to the lack of allocation or provision beyond that already specified in LPP2. There are therefore no NP policies that would previously have been screened out on the basis of mitigation but now could not be. Consequently, the NP still does not require any further consideration or assessment under the HRA beyond that covered by the HRA process for LPP2. The ECJ ruling changes nothing with regard to the NP's compliance with the HRA: there are no significant impacts that are likely to affect Cothill Fen, and no proposals or policies involving mitigation which now would compel a fuller assessment. Consequently, with regard to the HRA, this Screening Opinion remains a 'no significant effects report' and no further action is required.

Approach to the Screening Opinion

Given the similarities and overlaps between these assessment frameworks, all three are addressed in this document, which should be read in conjunction with the Neighbourhood Plan. As the authorities sponsoring the WSHWNP, and consistent with both the Government's 'Practical Guide to the SEA Directive' and Regulation 7 (3) e (i) of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017, this document has been produced by Wootton and St Helen Without Parish Councils.

The background to the regulations already indicates that these formal assessment frameworks are not necessary for the WSHWNP, as there are unlikely to be significant environmental impacts arising from the policies in the NP.

However, while the Parish Councils are firm in the belief that neither a SEA nor a HRA is required for the joint NP, and that the legal requirements regarding the demonstration of its contribution to sustainable development are met, the councils have, nonetheless, reviewed each policy in the draft NP to ascertain that this is indeed the case.

Wootton and St Helen Without Neighbourhood Plan

The vision for our area is:

A vibrant, inclusive community that preserves the best from our historic, rural area. Appropriate growth should bring enhanced quality of life benefits to all those living, working and playing in the area now and in the future. Any future developments, such as the Garden Village site on Dalton Barracks/Airfield, should bring positive opportunities.

Flowing from this vision, and reflecting our evidence base, we have developed the following objectives for our Neighbourhood Plan:

1. To ensure that housing developments in an area take account of local needs in terms of dwelling mix and affordability across all groups
2. To protect and enhance the openness and rural character of the area in terms of Green Belt protection, access to countryside, and rural setting
3. To protect and enhance the discrete nature and unique character of our villages
4. To protect and enhance the heritage assets of our Designated Area
5. To encourage standards of sustainable design that are above the minimum requirements to minimise impacts on the environment
6. To ensure that development in our area maximises benefits for and minimises impacts upon residents and landowners, businesses and communities, and the environment
7. To provide a sustainable environment for local businesses to thrive, enhancing existing facilities and providing new facilities where possible
8. To provide facilities, services and opportunities that promote health and wellbeing to enable local people to thrive and our communities to flourish
9. To ensure that communities within and beyond our area are well-connected through providing new and improved pedestrian, cycle and public transport links

In developing this plan, we have organised our policies under three headings:

- *Spatial strategy.* We have devised a spatial strategy for the whole Designated Area, which recognises and protects the historic rural and open character of the area that is exemplified and enshrined in the Green Belt designation, and reinforces the significance and protection of our locally important environmental assets.
- *Infrastructure Needs.* We have developed a set of policies to address the provision of adequate and appropriate built form, in terms of housing needs, community and economic facilities, communications and transport infrastructure, and adaptability to meet future unanticipated need.
- *Design guide.* We have drawn up a number of policies to influence the design of future development in our area, so that any new development ‘fits in’ or is ‘in keeping’ with the existing built form, community character, and landscape, wildlife and heritage value of its surrounding context, while encouraging the highest possible standards of resource efficiency and renewable and low emissions technologies.

This organisation of policies is illustrated overleaf, in Box 4 adapted from page 27 of the NP.

**Box 4: Thematic Organisation
of NP Policies**

Spatial Strategy

Policy SS1 Green Belt
SS1.1 Green Belt

Policy SS2 Separation of settlements
SS2.1 Separation of settlements

Policy SS3 Local Green Space
SS3.1 Local Green Space

Policy SS4 Strategic vistas
SS4.1 Strategic vistas

Policy SS5 Barracks and Airfield
SS5.1 Previously developed land
SS5.2 Garden Village Principles
SS5.3 Separation of Garden Village

Infrastructure Needs

Policy IN1 Housing
SS1.1 Housing for younger people
SS1.2 Housing for older people and those with additional needs

Policy IN2 Timing of infrastructure
IN2.1 Timing of infrastructure

Policy IN3 Transport mitigation
IN3.1 Barrow Road
IN3.2 B4017
IN3.3 Waterworks Crossing and Bystander junction
IN3.4 Bus service
IN3.5 Public Rights of Way

Policy IN4 Transport opportunities
IN4.1 Transport opportunities review
IN4.2 Reopening connections between settlements
IN4.3 Improving provisions for sustainable transport
IN4.4 Convenient access for existing residents

Policy IN5 Business infrastructure
IN5.1 New facilities within the proposed Garden Village
IN5.2 Targeted improvements
IN5.3 Business maintenance and growth
IN5.4 Rural diversification
IN5.4 Broadband

Policy IN6 Community infrastructure
IN6.1 ~~Shippon~~ community centre
IN6.2 Medical facilities
IN6.3 Provision for younger people
IN6.4 Provision for older people and those with additional needs

Design Guide

Policy DG1 Design for the Area
DG1.1 Spatial context
DG1.2 Temporal context

Policy DG2 Heritage Assets
DG2.1 Heritage Assets
DG2.2 Heritage Assets in Context

Policy DG3 Design Requirements
DG3.1 Site suitability
DG3.2 Resource efficiency
DG3.3 Access
DG3.4 Security
DG3.5 Public Spaces
DG3.6 Future proofing
DG3.7 Design in Context
DG3.8 Design for wildlife

Screening Methods

Consistent with the principles outlined by VWHDC in the Habitats Regulations Assessment for the Local Plan Part 1, the HRA for our NP seeks to:

- Use existing information, from our own NP, the emerging Local Plan, and the supporting documentation for both.
- Consult with stakeholders as appropriate.
- Ensure a proportionate assessment, by prioritising the early stage of the screening process in order to direct attention most appropriately for the later stages.
- Keep the process as simple as possible while also considering the potential impacts of the NP both in isolation and in combination with other plans.
- Ensure a clear audit trail, by signposting the information that we have used and clearly indicating the decisions made during the screening process.

Despite the lack of any requirement for the WSHWNP to undergo any formal screening or assessment of environmental impacts given that it does not allocate or provide for any development within its area, the importance of sustainability to our communities, the desire stated in feedback on the presubmission consultation draft for the plan to be stronger in relation to environmental objectives, and the presence of a Special Area of Conservation within our NP area all indicate that informal screening of NP policies would be helpful even though it is not an explicit requirement.

On the following pages, we summarise the policies presented in the WSHWNP and the NP objectives to which they relate. Each policy is screened for likely significant effects in relation to Strategic Environmental Assessments, Sustainability Appraisals and the Habitats Regulations. For ease of interpretation, the results are colour-coded:

- Those in **light green** are indicative of policies that are generally supportive of the environment or sustainability.
- Those in **dark green** are indicative of policies that seek to enhance provision for the environment or sustainability beyond that within LPP2.
- Those in **grey** make no net impact as no direct provision is made and the matter is therefore covered by the sustainability appraisal and HRA of LPP2.
- Those in **red** are indicative of potential harmful impacts on the environment, sustainability or the SAC. There are no policies highlighted in red for SEA, SA or HRA.

Screening Results

NP	NP		Screening		
Objective	Sub-Policies	Summary of Policy	SEA	SA	HRA
To ensure that housing developments in an area take account of local needs in terms of dwelling mix and affordability across all groups	IN1.1 Housing for younger people	Encourages provision of housing that meets the needs of younger people, e.g. shared accommodation	Makes no allocation beyond that in LPP2 and has no direct environmental effects.	Extends social sustainability locally, beyond that in LPP2.	Makes no extra provision and has no direct effects on the SAC.
	IN1.2 Housing for older people and those with additional needs	Encourages provision of housing that meets the needs of older people and those with additional needs, e.g. single storey dwellings			
To protect and enhance the openness and rural character of the area in terms of Green Belt protection, access to countryside, and rural setting	SS1.1 Green Belt	Supports only development that is Green Belt compliant	Reinforces existing protection	Has no direct environmental impacts; reinforces or enhances existing protections.	Although the allocation of development to Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield could impact on the SAC, this is a matter for LPP2.
	SS5.1 Previously Developed Land	Supports development of Previously Developed Land at Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield	Makes no additional allocation		
	SS3.1 Local Green Space	Designates Local Green Spaces where development is ruled out except in very special circumstances	Enhances environmental protection.		No effects.
	SS4.1 Strategic vistas	Protects Strategic Vistas, especially where these are important to settlement character and that character is already under threat	No direct environmental impacts.		No effects.
To protect and enhance the discrete nature and unique character of our villages	SS2.1 Separation of settlements	Protects against loss of separation between settlements, loss of settlement identity and encroachment into Strategic Green Gaps	Generally protective of the environment; no direct effects.	Generally protective of the environment; no direct effects.	No effects.
	SS4.1 Strategic Vistas	Protects Strategic Vistas, especially where these are important to settlement character and that character is already under threat			No effects.

	SS5.2 Garden Village Principles	Supports the application of full Garden Village principles to the development at Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield		Seeks to ensure full GV principles are applied to bolster sustainability compared to LPP2.	No effects.
	SS5.3 Separation of Garden Village	Encourages development in the centre of the development site and establishes buffers between the new development and existing settlements (Shippon, Whitecross)	No direct effects.		No effects.
	DG1.1 Spatial context	Protects the rural setting and landscape context of our settlements	Generally protective of local environment.	Generally supportive of sustainability.	Generally protective of local environment; no direct effects.
	DG1.2 Temporal context	Protects local heritage and the historic distinctiveness of our settlements			
	DG3.1 Site suitability	Encourages landscaping in keeping with the surrounding environment, including retaining natural features where possible			
	DG3.7 Design in context	Protects the character of our settlements by requiring development to be designed in keeping with its local context.			
To protect and enhance the heritage assets of our Designated Area	DG2.1 Heritage Assets	Designates local Heritage Assets for protection	No direct effects.	No direct effects.	No effects.
	DG2.2 Heritage Assets in Context	Protects the setting of Heritage Assets and supports public access to Heritage Assets			
To encourage standards of sustainable design that are above the minimum requirements to minimise impacts on the environment	SS5.1 Previously developed land	Supports development of Previously Developed Land at Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield	Makes no additional allocation.	Generally supportive of sustainability.	No effects.
	DG3.2 Resource efficiency	Encourages higher than minimum standards for sustainable design, e.g. renewable energy, resource efficiency and zero carbon design	Generally protective of the environment.	Generally protective of the environment.	Generally protective of the environment; no direct effects.
	DG3.6 Future proofing	Encourages anticipatory provision of appropriate infrastructure for future technological advances, e.g. autonomous vehicles, electric vehicles	No direct effects.	No direct effects.	No effects.
	DG3.8 Design for wildlife	Encourages eco-design through permeable boundaries, green infrastructure and measures for priority habitats and species.	Generally protective of the environment.	Generally protective of the environment.	Generally protective of the environment.

To ensure that development in our area maximises benefits for and minimises impacts upon residents and landowners, businesses and communities, and the environment	IN2.1 Timing of Infrastructure	Encourages timely provision of key infrastructure for large scale developments (e.g. over 100 dwellings)	No additional allocation and no direct effects.	Protective of social sustainability.	No specific provision and no direct effects.
	IN3.1 Barrow Road	Supports development that would reduce traffic pressure on Barrow Road	No direct effects.	Protective of local sustainability.	No effects.
	IN3.2 B4017	Encourages minimisation of traffic impacts on the B4017 and provision of sustainable transport access from Whitecross to the new development at Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield	Generally protective of the environment.	Generally protective of the environment and supportive of sustainability.	No effects.
	IN3.3 Waterworks Crossing and Bystander junction	Encourages provision for safe use of the staggered junctions on the B4017 by cyclists and pedestrians and protection of their heritage settings	No effects.	No effects.	No effects.
	IN3.4 Bus service	Supports development that protects existing bus services for existing settlements	No effects.	Protects social sustainability locally, beyond the new settlement compared to LPP2.	No effects.
To provide a sustainable environment for local businesses to thrive, enhancing existing facilities and providing new facilities where possible	IN5.1 New facilities within the proposed Garden Village	Supports the delivery of safe and secure access to business and retail facilities at the new development for current and future residents of the Designated Area	No specific provision so no direct effects. A matter for LPP2.	Protects social sustainability locally, beyond the new settlement compared to LPP2.	No effects.
	IN5.2 Targeted improvements	Encourages enhancement of landscaping and green space at the Besselsleigh Road shops and Bystander junction	Generally protective of the environment.	Generally protective of the environment.	No effects.
	IN5.3 Business maintenance and growth	Supports expansion of existing businesses and provision of new business opportunities, e.g. social enterprise, independent public house	No specific provision so no direct effects.	No direct effects.	No effects.
	IN5.4 Rural diversification	Supports rural diversification where this would protect or enhance local employment opportunities			
	IN5.5 Broadband	Supports development that provides for enhanced broadband service across the Designated Area			

To provide facilities, services and opportunities that promote health and wellbeing to enable local people to thrive and our communities to flourish.	IN6.1 Shippon Community Centre	Supports development of a community centre for Shippon	No specific provision so no direct effects.	Protects social sustainability locally and for key sectors of the community beyond that in LPP2.	No effects.
	IN6.2 Medical facilities	Supports delivery of new medical facilities at the new development for use by current and future residents of the Designated Area			
	IN6.3 Provision for younger people	Supports development that provides for the needs of young people, e.g. outdoor social spaces and shelters			
	IN6.4 Provision for older people and those with additional needs	Supports development that provides for the needs of older people and those with additional needs, e.g. tactile paving, all weather paths and outdoor seating			
	DG3.3 Access	Supports the delivery of transport routes and public spaces that provide for a range of mobility and access needs, prioritising sustainable transport over vehicle traffic			
	DG3.4 Security	Supports development that is designed to reduce real or perceived opportunities for criminal activity			
	DG3.5 Public Spaces	Encourages clear distinction between public and private spaces and the location of heritage assets in public spaces			
To ensure that communities within and beyond our area are well-connected through providing new and improved pedestrian, cycle and public transport links.	IN3.5 Public Rights of Way	Encourages the expansion and improvement of Public Rights of Way.	No specific provision so no direct effects.	No specific provision so no direct effects.	No specific provision so no direct effects.
	IN4.1 Transport Opportunities Review	Encourages consideration of opportunities to improve transport and accessibility when development proposals include 10 or more dwellings			
	IN4.2 Re-opening connections between settlements	Encourages the reopening of former foot/cycle paths and bridleways between settlements and the establishment of new sustainable transport connections between settlements	No specific provision so no direct effects.	Generally supportive of sustainability; seeks to extend provision of sustainable	No direct effects.
	IN4.3 Improving provision	Supports provision of sustainable transport			No effects.

	for sustainable transport	infrastructure on the existing highway network, e.g. foot paths, cycle paths, bridleways and bus routes		transport beyond the new development, compared to LPP2.	
	IN4.4 Convenient access for existing residents	Encourages optimum accessibility to facilities and amenities at the new development for residents of existing settlements	No specific provision so no direct effects.	Extends social sustainability beyond the new settlement compared to LPP2.	No effects.

Conclusions

The majority of policies in the WSHWNP are either neutral in environmental and sustainability terms because the plan makes no allocation for development beyond that already allocated in LPP2 or are supportive of environmental and sustainability objectives. The NP is clearly and strongly aligned with the strategic and sustainability objectives of LPP2, and in some cases the NP policies go beyond provisions and proposals laid out in LPP2, consistent with our approach to sustainability that considers the sustainability of existing settlements and communities as much as the proposed new settlement at Dalton Barracks and Abingdon Airfield. The insistence on the application of full Garden Village Principles to the new development, the desire to maximise accessibility to the services and facilities at the new development for existing and surrounding communities, and the policy to maintain or enhance sustainable transport options for existing as well as new settlements and communities are all evidence of the WSHWNP's contribution to sustainable consistent with but above and beyond those of LPP2.

None of the policies in the WSHWNP were identified as having a likely significant impact on the environment or sustainability generally, or on the SAC of Cothill Fen specifically. In the formal terms of the HRA, this document is therefore a 'finding of no significant effect report', which in this instance also applies to SEA and SA. Consequently, our informal screening exercise confirms that no further assessment is required in relation to Strategic Environmental Assessment, Sustainability Appraisal, or Habitats Regulations Assessment.

In addition, as the WSHWNP makes no allocations or specific provisions beyond that which is already specified in LPP2, and as none of the policies have been identified as having a likely environmental impact to any degree, it is highly unlikely that the policies in the NP will contribute to any significant impacts in combination with other plans and policies, such as LPP2 or neighbouring NPs. Indeed, the extra lengths that the NP goes to in supporting sustainability through – for example – the application of full Garden Village principles, brings the potential for the NP policies to enhance the sustainability of proposals outlined in LPP2, meaning that the NP policies could bring a net gain in sustainability compared to the situation if there was no NP in place. Finally, no consultation is required on this Screening Opinion as no need has been identified for mitigation measures and no significant impacts have been identified.

WSHWNP meets its legal requirements with regard to the need to demonstrate its contribution to sustainable development, which it now does in the NP (sustainability statement and Schedule of Policies) and in this Screening Opinion, and neither a SEA nor a HRA are necessary given the absence of likely significant environmental effects. Having addressed three potential means of considering, identifying and mitigating potential environmental impacts arising from our NP, it is therefore the opinion of Wootton and St Helen Without Parish Councils that no further action is required.