



Screening Assessment of the Pre-submission Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan

Strategic Environmental Assessment &
Habitats Regulations Assessment

Stafford Borough Council

February 2015

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Eccleshall Parish Council has prepared a draft Neighbourhood Plan (NP) proposing new development that reflects the needs of the community. The draft Plan has undergone extensive community consultation, which has helped the development of planning policies which will shape future growth and development within the Neighbourhood Plan area. The Neighbourhood Plan is currently undergoing a pre-submission consultation which ends on the 28 February 2015. Following this public consultation, the Parish Council will be preparing to submit the draft Neighbourhood Plan to the Borough Council to proceed to independent Examination and subsequent Referendum.
- 1.2. In order for Neighbourhood Plans to proceed to referendum, they must meet the Basic Conditions set out in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 Act¹, which was inserted by the Localism Act 2011. The Borough Council needs to be satisfied that the Basic Conditions have been met. The neighbourhood plan must:
- have regard to national policy
 - have special regard to listed buildings (where relevant)
 - have special regard to conservation areas (where relevant)
 - contribute to sustainable development
 - be in general conformity with strategic policies in the Local Plan
 - not breach EU obligations
- 1.3. Eccleshall Parish Council who is the responsible body for preparing the Neighbourhood Plan will produce an appraisal on the Neighbourhood Plan to ensure the proposals and policies contained within the Neighbourhood Plan meet the basic conditions. A Basic Conditions Statement will be submitted to the Borough Council alongside the final Neighbourhood Plan.
- 1.4. A reform in Neighbourhood Planning Regulations takes place with effect from February 2015, which requires Neighbourhood Plan areas to submit either: a statement of reasons; environmental report; or an explanation of why the plan is not subject to the requirements of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive to accompany a Neighbourhood Plan when it is submitted to a local planning authority. The screening assessment undertaken by Stafford Borough Council fulfils this statutory requirement and will accompany the final submission of the Neighbourhood Plan.

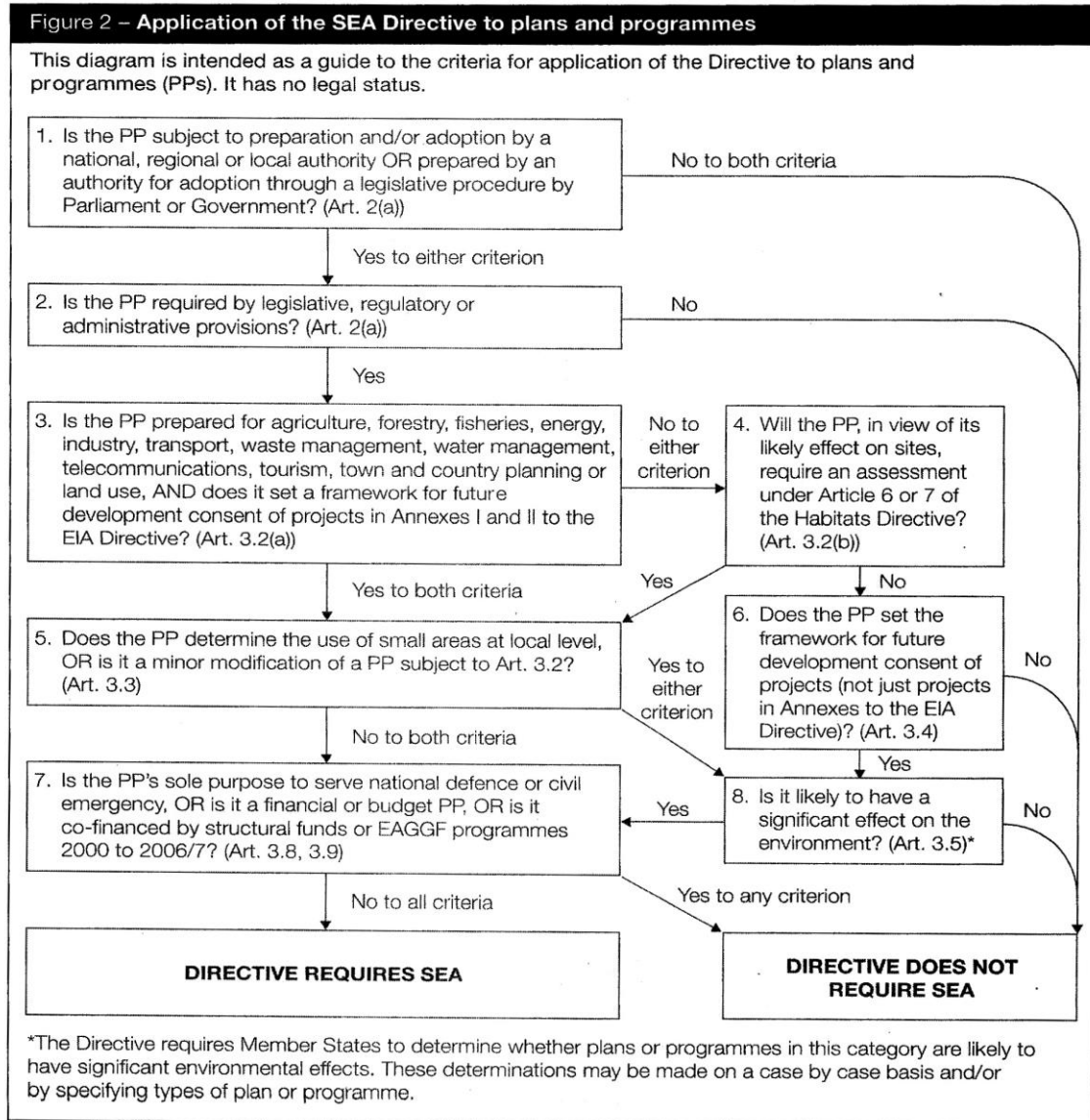
¹ Paragraph 8 of Schedule 4B.

2. Compatibility with EU obligations

- 2.1. To meet the basic conditions the draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan must not breach EU obligations.
- 2.2. The Borough Council has prepared this screening assessment to determine whether the content of the Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan requires a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) in accordance with the European Directive 2001/42/EC and associated Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004; and / or a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) in accordance with Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive and with Regulation 61 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010 (as amended).
- 2.3. [The National Planning Practice Guidance](#) offers guidance on when a SEA may be required.
- 2.4. A recent reform in Neighbourhood Planning regulations take place with effect from February 2015 and requires Neighbourhood Plan areas to submit either a statement of reasons; environmental report; or an explanation of why the plan is not subject to the requirements of the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive to accompany a Neighbourhood Plan when it is submitted to a local planning authority.
- 2.5. This screening assessment undertaken by Stafford Borough Council fulfils this statutory requirement and will accompany the final submission of the Neighbourhood Plan.
- 2.6. In the context of neighbourhood planning, a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) is required where a Neighbourhood Plan is deemed likely to result in negative significant effects occurring on protected European Sites (Natura 2000 sites), as a result of the Plan's implementation.

3. SEA Screening

3.1. The diagram below illustrates the process for screening a planning document to ascertain whether a full SEA is required.



3.2. The questions below in table 1 are drawn from the diagram above which sets out how the SEA Directive should be applied when considering a draft plan.

Table 1 SEA Screening Process

Stage	Yes or No	Reason
<p>1. Is the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) subject to preparation and/or adoption by a national, regional or local authority, OR prepared by an authority for adoption through a legislative procedure by Parliament or Government? (Art. 2(a))</p>	<p>Yes (go to question 2).</p>	<p>The preparation and adoption of the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) is regulated under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as amended by the Localism Act 2011. The draft NP is prepared by Eccleshall Parish Council (as the 'relevant body') and will be 'made' by Stafford Borough Council as the local authority.</p> <p>The preparation of NPs is subject to the following regulations: The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 and the Neighbourhood Planning (referendums) Regulations 2012.</p>
<p>2. Is the NP required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions? (Art. 2(a))</p>	<p>No (go to question 3).</p>	<p>Whilst the NP is not a requirement and is optional under the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act as amended by the Localism Act 2011, it will, if 'made', form part of the Development Plan. It is therefore important and necessary to answer the following questions to determine whether the policies of the draft NP are likely to have significant environmental effects and if further environmental assessments will be required under the EU Directive.</p>
<p>3. Is the NP prepared for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, industry, transport, waste management, telecommunications, tourism, town and country planning or land use, AND does it set a framework for future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive? (Art. 3.2(a))</p>	<p>Yes (go to question 5).</p>	<p>The draft NP is being prepared for town and country planning and land use purposes. The Plan seeks to encourage a broad mix of new housing development within a defined settlement boundary, promote economic uses, encourage new access and pedestrian connectivity, conserve local heritage and encourage new green space and play facilities.</p> <p>As such, the draft NP contains a framework for future development consent of development projects, which may fall under section 10 of the Annex II of the EIA Directive.</p>

<p>4. Will the NP, in view of its likely effect on sites, require an assessment for future development under Article 6 or 7 of the Habitats Directive? (Art. 3.2(b))</p>		<p>See HRA screening below.</p>
<p>5. Does the NP determine the use of small areas at local level OR is it a minor modification of a plan or programme subject to Art. 3.2? (Art. 3.3)</p>	<p>Yes (go to question 8).</p>	<p>Yes. The draft NP identifies sites for new housing development with planning permission and further sites for potential development within a new defined settlement boundary.</p>
<p>6. Does the NP set the framework for future development consent of projects (not just projects in annexes to the EIA Directive)? (Art. 3.4)</p>		<p>Not applicable.</p>
<p>7. Is the NP's sole purpose to serve the national defence or civil emergency, OR is it a financial or budget plan or programme, OR is it co-financed by structural funds or EAGGF programmes 2000 to 2006/7? (Art. 3.8, 3.9)</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Not applicable.</p>
<p>8. Is it likely to have a significant effect on the environment? (Art 3.5)</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>The draft NP is unlikely to have any significant effect on the environment. Please see Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 which provide a detailed assessment to support this conclusion.</p>

3.3. To decide whether the Plan might have significant environmental effects (stage 8), its potential scope should be assessed against the criteria set out in Schedule 1 of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004. The criteria from Schedule 1 of the Regulations are set out below.

1. The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to

- the degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources,
- the degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy,
- the relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development,
- environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme,
- the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste-management or water protection).

2. Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to

- the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects,
- the cumulative nature of the effects,
- the transboundary nature of the effects,
- the risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents),
- the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected),
- the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to:
- special natural characteristics or cultural heritage,
- exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values,
- intensive land-use,
- the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international protection status.

3.4. Appendix 1 and 2 apply the above criteria to measure any likely significance effects on the environment arising from the Draft Eccleshall NP.

3.5. SEA Screening Outcome

3.6. As a result of the assessment above, it is considered unlikely that any significant environmental effects will occur from the implementation of the Eccleshall NP that were not considered and dealt with by the Sustainability Appraisal of the Plan for Stafford Borough. As such the Eccleshall NP does not require a full SEA to be undertaken.

4. HRA Screening

4.1. The box below illustrates the stages of HRA related to assessing potential impacts from planning policy documents.

Stage 1 Screening

- Identify international sites in and around the plan/ strategy area
- Examine conservation objectives
- Identify potential effects on Natura 2000 sites
- Examine other plans and programmes that could contribute to 'in combination' effects
- If no effects are likely - report that there is no significant effect. If effects are judged likely or uncertainty exists - the precautionary principle applies, proceed to stage 2.

Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment

- Collate information on sites and evaluate impact in light of conservation objectives
- Consider how plan 'in combination' with other plans and programmes will interact when implemented (the Appropriate Assessment)
- Consider how the effect on integrity of sites could be avoided by changes to the plan and the consideration of alternatives
- Develop mitigation measures (including timescale and mechanisms)
- Report outcomes of AA and develop monitoring strategies. If effects remain, following the consideration of alternatives and development of mitigation measures, proceed to stage 3.

Stage 3 Assessment where no Alternatives and impacts remain

- Identify 'imperative reasons of overriding public interest' (IROPI)
- Identify/ develop potential compensatory measures

4.2. Stafford Borough Council has carried out Stage 1 Screening on the Eccleshall NP.

4.3. There are 6 European sites in Stafford borough which may be affected by policies in the Eccleshall NP:

- Cope Mere RAMSAR
- Aqualate Mere RAMSAR
- Motte Meadows SAC
- Cannock Chase SAC
- Chartley Moss SAC
- Pasture fields Salt Marsh SAC

4.4. Possible effects include: water quality deterioration, eutrophication, air pollution, surface water run-off, nitrogen deposition, and increased visitor pressure.

- 4.5. Cop Mere (under Midland Meres and Mosses Phase II designation) is located within the Eccleshall Parish Boundary and is approximately 1.5 miles away from the settlement boundary.
- 4.6. The conservation objectives for this site are subject to natural change to maintain habitats, vegetation types, species, species assemblages etc. and geological features for which the land is designated. These are Broadleaved, Mixed and Yew Woodland, Neutral Grassland and standing open water.
- 4.7. Potential effects include eutrophication, which continues to be a threat leading to an increase in algae growth and loss of water plants. Other impacts include introduction or invasion of non-native plant species and increased visitor use.
- 4.8. The Eccleshall NP includes; a clear Vision, based on local opinions expressed in the community survey, a set of five objectives supporting the five key issue categories which flowed from the survey findings, a new Settlement Boundary for which sustainable development will be supported.
- 4.9. In combination with the Plan for Stafford Borough (PFSB) the Eccleshall NP may affect Natura 2000 sites.
- 4.10. The PFSB was subject to a full Habitats Regulations Assessment including appropriate assessment and identification of mitigation measures. The Eccleshall NP is in accordance with the PFSB and does not propose anything which departs from the strategy set out in the Plan.
- 4.11. The PFSB contains a number of policies which aim to address many of the possible impacts including water quality issues in future planning applications which offer protection of water features of and to Cop Mere. These policies are; Policy N2: Climate Change, Policy N4: The Natural Environment and Green Infrastructure and Policy N5: Sites of European, National and Local Nature Conservation Importance.
- 4.12. The HRA carried out on the PFSB concluded that implementation of the Plan would not result in likely significant or in combination effects. As a result the Council does not consider that implementation of the Eccleshall NP would result in likely significant or in combination effects on Natura 2000 sites.

4.13. HRA Stage 1 Screening Outcome

- 4.14. As a result of the assessment above, it is considered unlikely that any significant environmental effects will occur from the implementation of the Eccleshall NP that were not considered and dealt with by the Habitats Regulation Assessment carried out on the PFSB. As such the Eccleshall NP does not require a further HRA work to be undertaken.

5. Consultation

- 5.1. The National Planning Practice Guidance advises that the local planning authority should consult with the relevant statutory consultation bodies. These are Environment Agency, Natural England and English whose responsibilities cover the environmental considerations of the Regulations to ensure all key environmental issues have been considered.
- 5.2. This assessment has been circulated to the above agencies. Their response to the Screening Assessment can be found in Appendix 3.

Appendix 1: The Characteristics of the Neighbourhood Plan, having regard to:

	Likely significant environmental effect?	Stafford Borough Council Assessment
a) The degree to which the Neighbourhood Plan sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources.	No	<p>The NP sets out a vision and 5 key objectives to help deliver socio-economic growth and development within Eccleshall and its surrounding rural area. In total 336 new houses are being allocated (212 outline planning permission) on sites within the settlement boundary. A number of planning policies have been formulated to help deliver the vision. These policies will help:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide new and affordable housing developments within a new defined settlement boundary. • Sustain local businesses and encourage new local economic activity within an industrial area. • encourage new access and pedestrian connectivity, • conserve local heritage and encourage new green space and play facilities <p>It is not considered that the policies and proposals in the NP will have a significant environmental effect.</p>
b) The degree to which the Neighbourhood Plan influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy.	Yes	<p>The draft NP is required to conform to national policy (NPPF) and strategic policies stipulated in the PFSB. The draft NP, if made, will form part of the Development Plan for Stafford Borough and will be used to determine planning applications within the Parish.</p>
c) The relevance of the Neighbourhood Plan for the integration of environmental considerations in particular	Yes	<p>The NP seeks to provide a balance of market and affordable housing within a defined settlement boundary with a view to enable local people to remain in the village over the plan period and retain existing services. The plan encourages new development to maximise opportunities to link</p>

<p>with a view to promoting sustainable development.</p>		<p>pedestrian and cycle links with local facilities to reduce car usage. The plan encourages a new vehicular link road between Stafford Road and Stone Road precluding large vehicles. It also seeks to provide green space and play provision.</p> <p>It is considered the draft NP will have a positive effect on the environment as it seeks to retain and protect the existing infrastructure while improving connectivity and accessibility through the village and deliver new development. It will positively increase recreational space for local people to use.</p> <p>Furthermore, the policies require new developments to respect the local architecture and the town's character.</p>
<p>d) Environmental problems relevant to the Neighbourhood Plan.</p>	<p>No</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The draft NP area is located within a sensitive landscape including a Site of Specific Scientific Interest (SSSI); Cop Mere and Sites of Biological Interest (SBI). • Eccleshall Parish is also within 15km of a European designated site; Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation and several other Natura 2000 sites. • Other environmental concerns found within the NP area include flood risks zones 2 and 3. This is concentrated around the north of the proposed settlement boundary. <p>The NP does not include policies to protect the environment and heritage assets as these are safeguarded through detailed policies within the PFSB policies – SP7, N4, N5 and N6.</p> <p>The NP will need to consider the inclusion of a proposed site allocation - Site 3 (Appendix 1). This site partially falls within flood risk zone 2. Development on this site will need to meet the requirements of Policy N2 of the PFSB, which includes conditions to reduce the risk of flooding.</p>

		<p>The proposed settlement boundary in which development is directed is located outside the 15km zone of the European designated; Cannock Chase therefore it is considered development will not affect the integrity of the site.</p> <p>There are no Air Quality Management Areas in Stafford Borough which includes the Parish of Eccleshall.</p>
<p>e) The relevance of the Plan for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (for example, plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection).</p>	N	<p>The NP is not proposing development specifically related to waste management or water management.</p>

Appendix 2 Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard in particular to:

	Likely significant environmental effect?	Stafford Borough Council Assessment
a) The probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects.	No	There will no doubt be changes in land use in the long term that is expected to carry positive socio-economic benefits for the local community and services within Eccleshall. It is considered unlikely that any detrimental environmental impacts will occur from the allocated sites of development and the policies contained in the NP.
b) The cumulative nature of the effects of the Plan.	No	It is not expected any other accumulative effects of the NP proposals and policies will lead to negative impacts, but result into positive impacts that will affect the Parish.
c) The trans-boundary nature of the effects of the Plan.	No	There are not expected to be any significant trans-boundary effects. New housing development will be designated within a settlement boundary over the plan period. Any significant impacts have already been assessed through a Sustainability Appraisal and Habitats Regulation Assessment to support the PFSB.
d) The risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents).	No	There are no significant effects to human health. The NP sets out to increase green space and recreational provision for local people to use. This would encourage healthier lifestyles.
e) The magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected) by the Plan.	No	The NP area relates to one of the largest Parishes in Stafford Borough and measures over 8000 hectares. The NP proposes to deliver a total of 336 new dwellings in Eccleshall. This is expected to increase the current population of 2800 people living in Eccleshall.

		<p>The proposed housing developments will change the use of some land from agricultural.</p> <p>New housing provisions will be developed within the settlement boundary and adjacent to existing residential areas and existing transport networks part of the Eccleshall built up area. Therefore the impacts from proposed developments are not considered detrimental.</p>
<p>f) The value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected by the Plan due to: (i) Special natural characteristics or cultural heritage; (ii) Exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or (iii) Intensive land use and</p>	No	<p>The NP includes sites of environmental and heritage importance. These are: a SSSI – Cop Mere and Sites of Biological Importance (SBI), the NP area is also surrounded by other Natura 2000 sites.</p> <p>It is not expected that the NP will have an adverse effect on these sites. The NP does not include policies to protect the sites of nature conservation importance; however detailed policies already exist in the PFSB to protect these sites.</p> <p>The NP area includes 3 Conservation Areas. A policy within the NP seeks to conserve the existing heritage of the town in accordance with Eccleshall’s Design Statement, protecting the local architectural style. In the PFSB Policy N8 exists to ensure proposals are sympathetic to the landscape character and environment.</p> <p>Proposals and policies of the NP allocate sites for development that will meet the housing needs of the parish. It is not expected that this will result in a loss of locally important open space.</p>
<p>g) The effects of the Plan on areas or landscapes which have recognised national, community or international</p>	No	<p>Policy N4 and N5 of the PFSB protect sites of European importance, the natural environment and green infrastructure, of which include the SSSI Cope Mere and the various SBIs within the NP area.</p>

protection status.

It is not expected that the NP policies and proposals will have an adverse effect on the SSSI or SBIs.

Appendix 3: Responses from Statutory Consultees.

From: Dingley, John [mailto:john.dingley@environment-agency.gov.uk]
Sent: 19 February 2015 09:51
To: Raj Bains
Subject: RE: Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan - Screening Assessment

Hi Raj,

As requested we have reviewed the screening assessment prepared in support of the Draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan. We agree with the report's conclusions and do not consider further work on the SEA and HRA necessary for the plan to progress as it is unlikely to have any significant environmental impacts.

Our comments on the draft plan shall follow shortly.

Regards,

John Dingley

From: Raj Bains [mailto:Rbains@staffordbc.gov.uk]
Sent: 13 February 2015 16:27
To: Amanda Smith; Clarke, Becky; Consultations Natural England; Dingley, John; English Heritage; Kezia Taylor; Muller, Antony (NE)
Cc: Alex Yendole
Subject: Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan - Screening Assessment
Importance: High

Dear Consultees,

Eccleshall Parish Council have prepared a draft Neighbourhood Plan and is currently undergoing a pre-submission consultation.

As you are aware, a Neighbourhood Plan is required to meet the legal requirements and the basic conditions of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012, if it is to proceed for independent examination and a subsequent referendum.

As part of the Basic Conditions, Neighbourhood Plans are required to be compatible with EU obligations and in practical terms expected to be screened to determine if a Strategic Environmental Assessment is required and if any significant environmental effects are likely to occur as a result of the plan.

Stafford Borough Council have prepared a Screening Assessment of the draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan in accordance with the European Directive 2001/42/EC and associated Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004; and the Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) in accordance with Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive.

As a statutory consultee, please may I encourage you to take a look at the draft plan and the Screening Assessment and provide me with your comments as soon as possible. I will be most grateful if you could send me your valued feedback very soon, preferably before Wednesday 25 February, to allow me time to make any amendments if necessary.

I have attached a copy of the Screening Assessment for you to consider. To view a copy of the pre-submission draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan please visit www.eccleshallparishcouncil.org

Many Thanks in advance.

Kind Regards

Raj Bains
Neighbourhood Planning Officer
Forward Plans Team
01785 619591

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WEST MIDLANDS REGION

**Ms Raj Bains
Neighbourhood Planning Officer
Stafford Borough Council
Council House
Stafford
Staffordshire**

Our ref: 1348
Your ref:
Telephone 0121 625 6887
Fax

20 February 2015

Dear Ms Bains

ECCLESHALL NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN - STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT SCREENING OPINION & HRA SCREENING REPORT

Thank you for your consultation received on the 13th of February and the request for a Screening Opinion.

For the purposes of consultations on SEA Screening Opinions, English Heritage confines its advice to the question, "Is it likely to have a significant effect on the environment?" in respect of our area of concern, cultural heritage. Our comments are based on the information supplied with the screening request.

On the basis of the information supplied, including that set out in the draft plan, and in the context of the criteria set out in Schedule 1 of the Environmental Assessment Regulations [Annex II of 'SEA' Directive], English Heritage concurs with the Council that the preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment is currently unlikely to be required.

The views of the other statutory consultation bodies should be taken into account before the overall decision on the need for a SEA is made. If a decision is made to undertake a SEA, please note that English Heritage has published guidance on Sustainability Appraisal / Strategic Environmental Assessment and the Historic Environment that is relevant to both local and neighbourhood planning and available at: <http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/strategic-environ-assessment-sustainability-appraisal-historic-environment/>.

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www.english-heritage.org.uk

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As regards the HRA Screening Report English Heritage does not wish to comment in detail and would defer to Natural England and other statutory consultees, however, we have no adverse comments to make on the report.

I hope this is helpful.

Yours faithfully

Pete Boland
Historic Places Adviser
E-mail: peter.boland@english-heritage.org.uk



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Date: 19 February 2015
Our ref: 140581 Eccleshall NDP
Your ref: Eccleshall NP



Customer Services
Hornbeam House

FAO Christine Heelis (Clerk at Eccleshall Parish Council) via
eccleshallpc@btinternet.com

BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Christine

Planning consultation: Draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan

Location: Stafford Borough

Thank you for your consultation on the above was received by Natural England on 23 January 2015.

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.

Natural England (NE) has reviewed the Draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan (NP) and considers that in general terms it addresses the natural environment well. NE does, however, offer the following comments.

Draft Eccleshall Neighbourhood Plan 2014-2031 – January 2015

Neighbourhood Plan Vision and Strategy

NE supports the inclusion of the reference to the need to secure 'sustainable development' of the parish. We support also the specific references to the proposed protection of important green spaces and promotion of green wildlife corridors and a new country park along the River Sow. In recognising the importance of such, NE would also recommend the inclusion of text recognising the value and benefits of wider multi-functional green infrastructure (GI) to both people and wildlife. The need for the protection and enhancement of existing GI as well as the creation of new GI, where opportunities exist, should be clearly supported in the NP.

Multi-functional GI can involve habitats and green spaces resulting from a need to mitigate or compensate for unavoidable losses or impacts, in addition to spaces which may not be priority habitat but which provide a wide range of functions of benefit to the development and community. Such functions include improved flood risk management, provision of accessible green spaces, climate change adaptation, biodiversity and landscape enhancement (including better functionality of local ecological networks) as well as quality of life benefits for the local community (including health and economic well being and access to wildlife). The provision of GI is supported by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF, DCLG March 2012).

Evidence and advice on green infrastructure, including the economic benefits of GI can be found on the Natural England [Green Infrastructure web pages](#).

Specifically, NE understands that the new Stafford Borough Plan provides a clear understanding of the importance of GI delivery at a local level. This requires that, by 2031, the Borough's villages will have '*provided new green infrastructure / biodiversity enhancement schemes*' (page 16). Identified within the Borough Plan as a Key Service Village NE would expect Eccleshall to perform an important role in the delivery of such GI. We feel the NP policies (and aspirations) should clearly reflect this.

The new Stafford Borough Plan also recognises the Borough's role in ensuring that the Cannock Chase Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and its setting as well as the Cannock Chase Special Area of Conservation (SAC) will have benefited from a sustainable approach to strategic housing development. In supporting this, villages should be delivering accessible natural green-space for residents and workers (i.e. maintaining, enhancing and creating).

We also support the promotion of improved (i.e. both enhance existing and creation of new) walking and cycling connections to support new developments as appropriate.

The Neighbourhood Plan Policy Areas

We generally support the key priority areas identified for the Neighbourhood Plan (page 7). We would, however, recommend 'Green Space' be retitled 'Green Infrastructure' to reflect the wider scope and value this presents (as outlined above).

Policies

We recommend the clear numbering /naming of Policies to aid clarity and assist discussion.

Traffic and Parking Policy (p11)

- We support this policy in respect of its intention to '*maximise opportunities to walk and cycle....where possible linking new and existing routes to Green Spaces.*'

Green Space Policy (top of p12)

- Policy generally supported. However, this fails to recognise the importance of the natural green environment for people and wildlife. Recommend retitling 'Green Infrastructure' to ensure appropriate importance attached to delivery of wider GI and inclusion of text supporting the conservation, enhancement and creation of new GI as appropriate.

Green Space Policy supporting text (p11)

- We support the reference to the lack of multi-functional green space in the parish and the findings of the Borough's Open Space, Sport and Recreation Assessment update 2013. However, whilst this text provides a summary of the baseline situation in respect of open space for people, including the desire for a Country Park, yet does not provide us with any information with regard to wildlife / ecological assets or opportunities. NE recommends such be included.
- Recommend inclusion of reference to need for delivery of accessible natural green space (see above in respect of Cannock Chase SAC).

Aspirations

NE is unclear as to what 'weight' the 'Aspirations' carry in the NP if they do not have a delivery mechanism attached i.e. they are not supported by specific policy.

Plan Delivery and Other Factors

NE supports the Parish Council's commitment to '*work with interested parties, including Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, and ensure that wildlife and the countryside surrounding Eccleshall is*

protected and enhanced.

Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) – HRA not required

Where a Neighbourhood Plan could potentially lead to significant environmental effects it will be necessary to screen the Plan in relation to the 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.

In relation to the Habitats Regulations, a Neighbourhood Plan cannot progress if the likelihood of significant effects on any European Site, either alone (or in combination with other plans and projects) cannot be ruled out (see Schedule 2, The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012). 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. European sites which may be particularly relevant to the Eccleshall NP includes:

- Midland Meres and Mosses (Phase 2) – RAMSAR
- Cannock Chase SAC

Natural England does not consider the NDP need be accompanied by a HRA as proposals are unlikely to result in significant effects on this international site.

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) – SEA not required

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/HRA>

We note that the proposed policies of the Eccleshall NP are not allocating any housing for development above that number put forward in the adopted Stafford Borough Local Plan 2014. Neither is the location of the proposed housing in the NP likely to have significant environmental effects that have not already been considered and dealt with through a sustainability appraisal of the Local Plan. Furthermore, the plan area does not contain sensitive natural assets that may be affected by the proposed plan policies. Therefore, Natural England does not consider that this NP need be accompanied by a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

Other Advice

The following is offered as general advice to assist Eccleshall Parish Council:

We would like to draw your attention to the joint guidance issued by Environment Agency, English Heritage, Forestry Commission and Natural England which can be found at

http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20140328084622/http://cdn.environment-agency.gov.uk/LIT_6524_7da381.pdf

Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs)

We note that there are no SSSI's within the Eccleshall NP plan area boundary. However, one lies in relative close proximity. This is:

- Cop Mere SSSI

The neighbourhood plan as it progresses should avoid any proposal or activity that would be likely to damage or destroy the interest features of this nationally designated site.

Protected species

We recommend that reference is made to the Natural England Standing Advice for Protected Species which is available on the gov.uk website. It helps local planning authorities better understand the impact of development on protected or priority species should they be identified as an issue at particular developments. This also sets out when, following receipt of survey information, the authority should undertake further consultation with Natural England.

Local Sites

From our understanding of the plan area, there are no Local Site's of ecological importance designated within your area. However, there are a small number within the immediate locality (i.e. within 1km). You will be able to obtain information on non-statutory sites and species records from the Staffordshire Wildlife Trust and/or the Local Biological Records Centre. Such information should be considered when assessing sites for development.

Opportunities for enhancing the natural environment

Neighbourhood plans may provide opportunities to enhance the character and local distinctiveness of the surrounding natural and built environment; use natural resources more sustainably; and bring benefits for the local community, for example through green space provision and access to and contact with nature. Opportunities to incorporate features into new build or retro fitted buildings which are beneficial to wildlife, such as the incorporation of roosting opportunities for bats or the installation of bird nest boxes should also be considered as part of any new development proposal, and this could be written into policy in the 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 Susan Murray on 0300 060 2967. 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

Susan Murray
Lead Adviser – Sustainable Development