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BY EMAIL ONLY

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Dear Edward

Town and Country Planning, England: The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan 2011 - 2033

Thank you for consulting Natural England on the Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan.

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).

Habitats Regulation Assessment – No Objection

Natural England welcomes the submission of the Habitats Regulation Assessment for the Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan completed by AECOM on the behalf of Blandford Town Council.

The AECOM assessment concludes that the Neighbourhood Plan is unlikely to have significant effects, either alone or in combination, on international sites. On the basis of information provided, Natural England concurs with this view.

**Policy B1 – Settlement Boundaries and Policy B2 – Land North & East of Blandford Forum
Objection – Impacts relating to permanent adverse impacts on the Cranborne Chase AONB.**

The submitted Neighbourhood Plan includes a significant urban extension comprising 400 new homes located beyond the A354 Blandford bypass in a rural locality 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.

Natural England strongly recommends that the Cranborne Chase AONB team are fully consulted on any implications of the proposed Policy B1 and B2 on the AONB. Their knowledge of the location and wider landscape setting of the proposed allocation should help to confirm its significance in terms of impacts on the purposes of the AONB designation. They will also be able to advise on the implications of the proposed development in relation to the aims and policies set out in the AONB management plan.

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 2019 (NPPF). In particular, Paragraph 172 which states that,

“Great weight should be given to conserving and enhancing 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 these issues. The conservation and enhancement of wildlife and cultural heritage are also important considerations in these areas, and should be given great weight in National Parks and the Broads. The scale and extent of development within these designated areas should be limited. Planning permission should be refused for major development other than in exceptional circumstances, and where it can be demonstrated that the development is in the public interest.

Consideration of such applications should include an assessment of:

- a) 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;*
- b) the cost of, and scope for, developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way; and*
- c) 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/>

Natural England advises that Policy B2 provides for a development that should be considered as “major” in the context of NPPF paragraph 172 and so any 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.

Natural England considers that Policy B2 (and enabling Policy B1) will inevitably lead to a significant and permanent detrimental effect on the protected landscape of the Cranborne Chase AONB. This assessment is shared by both Cranborne Chase AONB Team and the submitted Sustainability Assessment (SA) acknowledges that the landscape impacts of the proposed allocations (including Policy B2) has the “potential to be significant”. Further, we consider Policy B2 clause vii) to be unattainable as it will not be possible to bring forward a design and landscape scheme that will “satisfactorily mitigate any adverse impacts upon the AONB”, rather such mitigation may help to moderate some impacts but will not remove harm to the AONB. Indeed, the Policy B2 limits the potential for further moderating landscape impacts by only providing for a relatively modest level of landscape mitigation. In our view a development of this scale within a rural locality on land designated as AONB should be seeking to enhance and strengthen local landscape character, while providing substantive biodiversity and public access benefits. This would need to include measures designed to improve the screening and setting of the planned and existing development located to the north of the bypass, along with measures to protect and enhance the Pimperne Brook corridor. Further, Natural

England recommends that given the policy would lead to unavoidable harm to the Cranborne Chase AONB consideration should also be given to providing for a landscape compensation fund for strengthening landscape character within the Cranborne Chase AONB and the Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase National Character Area.

In respect to the exceptional circumstance tests as set out in NPPF (2019) paragraph 172 consideration should also be given to ensuring the total quantum of development within and within the setting of the AONB is kept to an absolute minimum, whilst also ensuring that any allocations are located in the least damaging locations with respect to the AONB designation. For example, development on AONB land within the bypass may be relatively less harmful to landscape interests than the proposed B2 allocations located outside the bypass. Such assessments should include landscape and visual impact assessment undertaken in close consultation with the Cranborne Chase AONB Team.

Natural England, however, welcomes the requirement to provide a biodiversity strategy as set out at Policy B2 clause ix). Since the drafting of the current iteration of the neighbourhood plan the NPPF (2019) Paragraph 170 has been amended so that new development is now required to provide for biodiversity net gains, without the caveat “where possible”. We would therefore recommend Policy B2 clause ix) is amended to bring it in line with current national policy. It is worth noting here that while the provision of net gain may not always be possible on site it is always possible to provide additional net gain benefits off site, either directly, or through the provision of funding for biodiversity measures elsewhere.

Natural England notes that following examination in 2017 of the then Blandford + Neighbourhood Plan Policy 1 was recommended for deletion by the Independent Examiner's Report on the grounds they were not in line with National Policy and Guidance, or in general conformity with the Strategic Policies of the Development Plan. Natural England considers that the new Policy B2 is substantively the same as the previous policy recommended for deletion. Further Policy B2 remains neither consistent with local, or national policy, and therefore fails the basic conditions required of a Neighbourhood Plan as set out in paragraph 8(2) of Schedule 4B to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990.

The merger of local councils in Dorset and the forthcoming review of the local plan policies will provide an important opportunity to more fully access the new wider Dorset Council's housing needs and will afford greater opportunities for delivering the quantum of housing required while avoiding, or further minimising significant harm to nationally protected landscapes. A review of housing needs across the new Dorset Council's area would also help ensure the requirement, as set out in NPPF Paragraph 172, to further consider the scope for developing outside the designated area, or meeting the need for it in some other way is fully explored prior to allowing any further significant allocations within Dorset's nationally protected landscapes.

Policy B2 - Soil and Agricultural Land Quality

Natural England is concerned that the proposed Neighbourhood Plan Policy B2 will harm over 20 ha of land with soils classified as 'best and most versatile' (Grades 1, 2 and 3a land in the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) system). The conservation and sustainable management of soils is reflected in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF 2019) Paragraph 170. The Neighbourhood Plan Sustainability Appraisal states that Policy B2 is predicted to have “*a long term significant negative effect in relation to this SA theme due to the permanent loss of best and most versatile agricultural land*”.

Policy B3 – Employment (b) Land off Shaftesbury Lane

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 (2019) paragraph 172 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. 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 allocation.

The final scheme for the site should also be supported by a DCC NET approved Biodiversity Mitigation and Enhancement Plan.

Policy B3 – Employment (c) Land adjacent to Sunrise Business Park

The policy provides for an extension to the Sunrise Business Park on land within the Cranborne Chase AONB. Consideration of the proposals should include an in combination assessment of landscape impacts with the existing waste transfer allocation and additional allocations set out in Policy B1 and B2.

Natural England strongly recommends that the Cranborne Chase AONB team are fully consulted on any implications of the proposed Policy B3 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.

While some extension of the Sunrise Business Park might be acceptable this should only be where the authority is satisfied that there are no alternative less harmful locations available. In our view any allocation that further extends the facility should also provide opportunities for substantive landscape buffering for the extension, the existing Sunrise Business Park and allocated Waste Transfer Site, with the clear aim of further moderating the landscape impacts of the existing employment uses within the locality.

Policy B9 – Green Infrastructure Network

Natural England supports the principle of the policy.

Policy 10 – Local Green Spaces

Similarly, Natural England supports the principle of Policy 10, but would recommend that the existing areas of valued green infrastructure (such as the Milldown LNR, etc) even if already identified and protected through the adopted local plan, are also included within the proposals map. In line with the basic conditions required of Neighbourhood Plan all new areas of proposed Local Green Space should be in conformity with the adopted local plan.

Other comments

Natural England recommends that the plan includes an additional policy to promote the inclusion of biodiversity enhancements within built development. This might include the provision of bat and bird boxes of a design that is built into the fabric of the new builds, planting of native trees and hedgerows, the provision of fruit trees etc. In Blandford the provision of swift nesting bricks would be particularly valuable. In order to secure such measures the policy should require new development on greenfield

sites greater than 0.1 ha to be supported by a Biodiversity Mitigation Plan, that has been approved by the Dorset County Council Natural Environment Team. The Biodiversity Mitigation Plan should be prepared by a suitably qualified individual and follow the standard format available on the Dorset For You website.

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

Yours sincerely

John Stobart
Planning and Conservation Senior Advisor

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