



Natural England Advice Note – Local Plans

February 2024

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. This advice note sets out the natural environment issues that Natural England consider should be incorporated in Local Plans to take forward relevant policies of the National Planning Policy Framework.

Information on consulting Natural England on plans and development proposals is set out in [Planning and transport authorities: get environmental advice on planning - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/planning-and-transport-authorities-get-environmental-advice-on-planning)

		<u>NPPF paragraph</u>
The Spatial Development Strategy		
Vision and Objectives	The Plan should include the natural environment in its long-term vision and objectives for the plan area. These should be based on local characteristics and circumstances and include locally specific goals for nature recovery and enhancement, supported by policies and proposals in the plan.	8(c), 20(d), 123, 181
The spatial strategy and allocating land for development	<p>In setting an overall strategy to guide development and allocate land the Plan should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conserve and enhance the natural environment, including landscapes and green infrastructure (GI) • make as much use as possible of previously developed or 'brownfield' land • allocate land with the least environmental or amenity value. <p>It should be recognised that some previously developed land is important for biodiversity as it can contain the open mosaic habitats (<u>dataset</u>), a priority habitat.</p>	11, 32, 89, 123, 124(b)(c), 181, 181, 172, 186(a), 187, 188, 191
Biodiversity and Geodiversity		
Designated sites	The Plan should include policies and proposals to protect and enhance biodiversity, including designated nature conservation sites (internationally, nationally and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity). The direct and indirect impacts of	181, 186(a)(b)(c), 187, 188

	<p>proposed development on designated should be considered, including impacts on water quality and the impacts on air quality from increased traffic, intensive agriculture or industrial developments.</p> <p>The Plan should identify and map local wildlife sites and include appropriate policy for their protection and enhancement, reflecting their role in the wider ecological network and for nature recovery.</p> <p>Criteria-based policies to guide development should include application of the mitigation hierarchy and how the direct, indirect and cumulative impacts of development on designated sites will be addressed.</p> <p>Further information on designated sites is at Designated Sites View (https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/). Natural England's Impact Risk Zones (IRZ) on MAGIC maps (www.magic.defra.gov.uk) identify potential development impacts.</p> <p>In some Plan areas strategic mitigation solutions may exist or be desirable to address the cumulative impacts of development on designated sites e.g. recreational pressures or nutrient impacts. Where this is the case further advice should be sought from Natural England and robust evidence will be needed to support any strategic approach.</p>	and Glossary
Irreplaceable Habitats including ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees	<p>The Plan should protect irreplaceable habitats (including ancient woodland and ancient and veteran trees) from loss or deterioration and seek their enhancement wherever possible. Further advice can be found in Natural England's standing advice- Ancient woodland and veteran trees: protecting them from development.</p>	186(c), Glossary
Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG)	<p>The Plan should identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity. This should include setting a percentage target level of provision of at least 10% net gain, higher targets should be supported by evidence. The Plan should also set out the BNG strategy including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • requirements for on-site and off-site provision • identifying priority opportunities of strategic significance (habitats and areas) for BNG, for instance through mapping ecological networks 	180(d), 185(b), 186(d)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> advising on the metric to use to calculate gains, for example the most up to date version of Defra's Biodiversity Metric. <p>The Plan should also aim to achieve wider environmental gains, going beyond BNG, to include wider natural capital benefits such as improved water and air quality and recreation. Natural England's Environment Benefits from Nature tool can help identify opportunities.</p>	
Nature recovery	<p>The Plan should include policies and proposals for nature recovery. It should recognise the potential of a connected network of wildlife-rich habitats to improve biodiversity. For instance the protection and recovery of priority species and habitats and supporting habitats outside designated sites for protected species. Consideration should be given to wider benefits such as carbon capture, flood risk management and enhanced access to nature.</p> <p>The Plan should map local ecological networks, including buffers and wildlife corridors and set out policies and proposals to safeguard and enhance the network, including contributions through development where appropriate. These could draw on Local Nature Recovery Strategies where available.</p>	8(c), 185(a)(b), Glossary
Priority species and habitats	<p>The Plan should protect and enhance priority habitats and species. This should include appropriate protection and restoration of deep and shallow peatlands, found in fen and bog priority habitats that are valuable for biodiversity and as a carbon store. Other priority habitats include upland and lowland heathland, traditional orchards, meadows, woodlands and coastal habitats.</p> <p>Details can be found on the Joint Nature Conservation Committee website and on MAGIC maps (www.magic.defra.gov.uk)</p>	185(b), Glossary
Geodiversity	<p>The Plan should make explicit reference to geological conservation (including protection for geological SSSIs and local geological sites) and the need to conserve, interpret and manage geological sites and features in the wider environment.</p>	180, 175
Landscape		
Designated landscapes	<p>The Plan, including site allocations, should give great weight to conserving and enhancing designated landscapes (National Parks, The Broads and National Landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty). This should reflect their natural beauty and special qualities (as identified in their Management</p>	20(d), 180, 182,183

	<p>Plans). Policies should help in furthering the statutory purposes of designated landscapes. Policies can be informed by landscape character and sensitivity assessments.</p> <p>The scale and extent of development should be limited in these areas. The Plan should consider both the direct and indirect impacts of development on the designated landscape and its setting.</p> <p>Policy should guide any development in these areas to meet the highest standards of design and environmental quality and seek opportunities to enhance the landscape and improve access to nature.</p> <p>The Plan should set out a definition of major development to guide the determination of planning applications against the 'major developments test.'</p> <p>Policy should also consider how development will be managed in the setting of a designated landscape, with development being sensitively located and designed to avoid or minimise adverse impacts.</p>	
Wider landscapes	<p>The Plan should include policies and proposals for conserving and enhancing the landscape.</p> <p>The Plan should identify, protect and enhance locally valued landscapes, informed by landscape character assessments.,</p> <p>Policies for development in or adjacent to rural areas and urban fringe should ensure they reflect the character of the countryside, as well as seeking opportunities for enhancement and improved access to nature.</p> <p>Local design codes and guides can set out how development can respond to and enhance landscape character.</p>	129, 135(c), 180(a)(b)
Heritage Coasts	<p>Where relevant, the Plan should identify and include policy protection for defined Heritage Coasts, to retain and enhance their special character</p>	184
Light Pollution and Tranquillity	<p>The Plan should include a policy to reduce light pollution. Lighting can be harmful to wildlife and undermine enjoyment of the countryside or night sky, especially in intrinsically dark landscapes, such as protected landscapes and nature reserves.</p> <p>Where appropriate the Plan should identify areas of tranquillity and include policies to protect them.</p>	191 (b)(c)

Green infrastructure, open space, access and design		
Green Infrastructure (GI)	<p>GI is a network of multi-functional green and blue spaces and other natural features that can deliver a wide range of benefits for people, places and nature. Plans should consider the role of GI strategically throughout the plan area as well as links to adjoining areas. The Plan should address unequal access to natural green space and the needs of different user, age, and socio-economic groups.</p> <p>The Plan should set out a clear vision for delivering GI, including identification of deficiencies in provision and opportunities for new and enhanced GI. Plans can be supported by a GI strategy.</p> <p>GI policy should support and align with other natural environment policies, such as those on sustainable drainage systems, biodiversity, access, active travel and open space protection and enhancement.</p> <p>Plans can make use of the Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework (GIF) to help prepare a GI evidence base that can support policies, site allocations and local design codes. Specific guidance for plan-makers is provided in the GI Process Journeys.</p> <p>The Green Infrastructure Map can be used to identify inequalities in access to greenspace and plan for new GI. The GI standards can be applied locally in policies and design codes.</p>	20(d), 96,167(c)
Open Space and Local Green Space	<p>The Plan evidence base should include a robust and up-to-date assessment of open space requirements and opportunities, with policies and proposals to remedy deficiencies in greenspace provision, including through land allocation.</p> <p>In assessing greenspace provision, consideration should be given to the quality and accessibility of space, as well as the various uses that may need separate provision such as children's play space, opportunities for connecting with nature, formal sports areas and facilities for groups with a variety of needs.</p> <p>Open space provision can use Natural England's Accessible Greenspace Standards to determine needs based on size, proximity capacity and quality.</p> <p>The Plan should identify, designate and have policies to protect and enhance areas of Local Green Space that are of particular importance to local communities.</p>	88(d), 97(a), 102, 103, 105-107

Public Rights of Way and access	<p>The Plan should have policies to maintain and improve access to nature and enjoyment of the countryside. Policies should be in place to protect and enhance public rights of way, access land and national trails, including the England Coast Path.</p> <p>Policies should provide for better connections and address unequal access to nature to support health and well-being outcomes. The design of new or improved routes should consider a range of modes of access including walking, cycling and horse riding, as well as a range of users including children and older people, different socio-economic groups and people with disabilities.</p>	104
Design	<p>L</p> <p>Natural England's GI Design Guide provides details of what good GI design looks like. The guide is linked to the ten characteristics of well-designed places set out in the National Model Design Code and the National design guide. Landscape and townscape character assessments can also inform good design.</p>	132, 133
Green Belt	<p>Plan policies and proposals should positively enhance land within the Green Belt. This should include compensatory improvements to environmental quality and accessibility of remaining Green Belt where land is removed from the Green Belt.</p> <p>Green Belt land can often be degraded 'urban fringe' landscapes. Therefore, there will be opportunities to 'green' the Green Belt and deliver environmental benefits such as landscape enhancement, habitat creation and enhancement and improved access to nature.</p>	147, 150, 151
Agricultural Land and Soils		
Best and Most Versatile agricultural land	<p>The Plan should contain policies to protect Best and Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land (Grades 1, 2, 3a). Policies should avoid the loss of BMV land. The Plan should recognise that development has an irreversible adverse impact on the finite national stock of BMV land.</p> <p>Any development proposed on BMV land should be informed by a detailed soil survey. .</p>	180(b)
Sustainable management of soils	<p>The Plan should have a policy for the protection of and sustainable management of soils on development sites. This should set out mitigation measures to minimise soil disturbance and retain as many ecosystem services as possible through</p>	180(a)

	<p>careful soil management during the construction process and appropriate soil re-use. The Plan should recognise that development (soil sealing) has a major and usually irreversible adverse impact on soils. The impact of all types of development on soils should be considered.</p> <p>Healthy soils are not only important for agriculture, but soils with high environmental value (e.g. wetland carbon stores such as peatland and low nutrient soils) are also important to ecological connectivity. Development should be supported by soils surveys and management plans - see Defra's Code of Practice for the sustainable use of soils on construction sites.</p>	
Coast		
Coastal Change	<p>Where relevant, the Plan should consider the implications of coastal change and opportunities for nature and improved access. The Shoreline Management Plan should be used to inform the evidence base for the Plan.</p> <p>Coastal Change Management Areas should be identified with appropriate policies set out for development and to manage the change. Policies should reflect and enhance the character of the coast and maintain the route of the England Coast Path. Opportunities for enhancing biodiversity, landscapes and access to nature should also be secured.</p>	14, 20(b), 176, 177, 178, Glossary
Marine environment	Where relevant, the Plan should have policies in place to ensure effective alignment of the terrestrial and marine planning regimes, for instance in plan areas on estuaries or areas with tidal rivers. This should include reference to the relevant marine plan.	176
Climate Change		
Climate Change	<p>The Plan should contain policies to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts on the natural environment.</p> <p>The Plan should recognise that climate change mitigation and adaptation and biodiversity loss are interlinked. Many habitats provide essential ecosystem services to allow adaptation to climate change e.g. natural flood management, as well as mitigation e.g. through tree planting and retaining peat as a carbon store. Policies should set out appropriate nature-based solutions for climate mitigation and adaptation such as woodland or wetland creation or peatland restoration.</p> <p>Policies should address water use, promoting the use of sustainable drainage systems (SuDS) and water sensitive</p>	11(a), 20(d), 158 and Glossary

	<p>design as part of a wider green infrastructure approach. In areas of known water constraint, plans should include policies to manage available resources, such as water efficiency or water reuse measures.</p> <p>Consideration also needs to be given to the likely impacts of climate change on protected sites, habitats and species.</p> <p>See the Climate Change Adaptation Manual, Carbon Storage and Sequestration by Habitat and National biodiversity climate change vulnerability model.</p>	
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Site Allocations

The strategy for allocating land for development should:

- avoid protected sites and apply the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy (NPPF 180a)
- give great weight to conserving and enhancing designated landscapes
- avoid the loss of best and most versatile agricultural land.

Selecting sites and setting design principles for their delivery should conserve and enhance the natural environment. This includes considering potential impacts and opportunities set out in the table above, as well as the issues set out in the table below secured through planning policy.

Evidence	<p>An appropriate evidence base should be used to support the selection of sites and inform the policies for their delivery. This should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Landscape and Visual Impact Assessments, Landscape Sensitivity Assessments and Landscape Character Assessments. • Soil surveys and mapping (Agricultural Land Classification available on Magic maps) • ecological surveys, green infrastructure and biodiversity opportunity mapping.
Assessments	<p>Site selection must also be informed by the relevant environmental assessments. These are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustainability Appraisal incorporating Strategic Environmental Assessment: it should be clear how this has informed and provided justification for the sites selected for allocation assessed against reasonable alternatives. Recommendations and findings from the assessments should also be used to inform mitigation measures and design principles for the allocated sites. • Habitats Regulations Assessment: mitigation and avoidance measures identified through the HRA should be secured through policies in the Plan. Where mitigation or avoidance is not possible the site should not be allocated.

Environmental requirements	<p>Plans should set requirements, opportunities and detailed design guidance for site allocations to conserve and enhance the natural environment. This should include measures secured through policy covering:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BNG: This could include specifying whether and what BNG should be delivered on-site given the scale of development anticipated, or if off-site provision will be required. Site allocations should be supported by a baseline assessment of biodiversity value for example using the latest version of Defra's Biodiversity Metric. • GI strategy: Allocations should set out measures to protect, enhance and improved connectivity of GI within and beyond allocation sites. Consideration should also be given to setting appropriate GI standards for allocation sites. • Landscape features: Allocation policy should incorporate and enhance existing landscape features within the development This could include hedgerows, walls, ancient and veteran trees, woodland and wildlife corridors. • Agricultural land and soils: Allocations should be based on a detailed soils survey and have policies should secure a soil management plan. • Access: Policies for allocations should incorporate and enhance public access to the natural environment. This includes Public Rights of Way that run through or adjacent to allocated sites, as well as linking from the site to the wider route network.
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