

**Wycombe District Council**

## **Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA)**

### **Screening opinion for the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan**

**August 2016**



place people pounds



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## Introduction

1. The Local Authority is the “competent authority” under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2010, and needs to ensure that Neighbourhood Plans have been assessed through the Habitat Regulations process. This looks at the potential for significant impacts on nature conservation sites that are of European importance, also referred to as Natura 2000.

2. This Screening Assessment relates to a Neighbourhood Development Plan that will be in general conformity with the higher level strategic plan (the adopted Local Plan 2004, Core Strategy 2008 and Delivery and Site Allocations Plan for town centres and managing development 2013, and the emerging Wycombe District Local Plan). A proportionate approach to this Screening Assessment is taken here: the HRA for the Neighbourhood Development Plan uses work undertaken for the Wycombe District Council Local Plan HRA screening as its basis for assessment. From this, the Local Authority will determine whether the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan is likely to result in significant impacts on Natura 2000 sites and therefore whether an ‘Appropriate Assessment’ is required.

## Legislative Basis

3. Article 6(3) of the EU Habitats Directive provides that:

*“Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the [European] site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans or projects, shall be subject to appropriate assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In the light of the conclusions of the assessment of the implications for the site and subject to the provisions of paragraph 4, the competent national authorities shall agree to the plan or project only after having ascertained that it will not adversely affect the integrity of the site concerned and, if appropriate, after having obtained the opinion of the general public.”*

## Assessment

4. No SAC falls within the plan area. Within a 5 km buffer of the NDP area boundary there are two Special Areas of Conservation; it is deemed reasonable to assess whether there will be likely significant effects as a result of the proposals in the Neighbourhood Development Plan. These are:

- Chilterns Beechwoods SAC:
  - Aston Rowant Woods SSSI
  - Bradenham Woods, Park Wood and the Coppice SSSI
  - Ellesborough and Kimble Warrens SSSI
  - Naphill Common SSSI
  - Windsor Hill SSSI
- Aston Rowant SAC
  - Aston Rowant SSSI

5. A Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) has been prepared for the draft Wycombe Local Plan. This finds that, pending consultation with Natural England, the development set out in the Wycombe District Local Plan will not lead to likely significant effects on any European sites, either alone or in combination with other projects or plans.

6. The Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan will not allocate sites for housing apart from the former Molins site, a Previously Developed Site in the Green Belt and AONB, at Saunderton south. Other development within the parish will indeed be very limited in the form of infill in villages.

7. The Molins site falls within the buffer of Bradenham Woods, Park Wood and the Coppice SSSI and Naphill Common SSSI (Chilterns Beechwoods SAC). We therefore consider that only those sites should be looked at in terms of screening likely significant effects.

8. The main potential likely significant effect of any redevelopment of the Molins site for housing is the impact of recreational pressure on the nearby SAC. However, and similarly to other proposals being screened as part of the main Local Plan HRA, we do not believe that this will result in likely significant effect for the following reasons:

- a) The presence of the Birmingham to London mainline and of the A4010 (main road) between the development area and the SAC is likely to act as a deterrent for people to access that area for recreational purposes.
- b) In their response to consultation on this screening opinion, Natural England have said that, with regard to recreational pressure issues, they were of the opinion that “this wouldn’t likely be an issue in this instance given the area is well sign posted which means people do tend to stick to designated routes. The National Trust, which owns the SSSI land is also very active in managing visitors on site through wardening”.
- a) The District as a whole is a very green area and many green spaces are available for the public to enjoy. The access to existing green spaces and to the wider Chilterns AONB all around the Parish means that any increased pressure for recreation (walks etc.) would be dispersed.
- b) It is expected that public enjoyment of the Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty will continue, under the careful management of the Chilterns Conservation Board<sup>1</sup>. This will contribute to spreading any increased footfall in the wider area, thus potentially relieving pressure on the Chilterns Beechwoods SAC sites within the AONB.
- c) The policy wording in the draft Neighbourhood Plan proposes two levels of development, which would either see little redevelopment of the site (no greater than the existing development, which is estimated at around 25 dwellings) or a comprehensive mixed use development which would then need to include strategic and local open space provision as per the development plan policies (see below).
- d) In terms of local planning policies already in place, the Delivery and Site Allocations Plan for Town Centres and Managing Development (the DSA), adopted in July 2013, requires new development to contribute to strategic and local open space provision (DM16 Open Space in New Development), either on site or through CIL/S106 monies. A key development principle for all strategic sites aims at providing a substantial amount of strategic and local open space as part of the development which will serve recreational / general

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<sup>1</sup> see *The Chilterns AONB Management Plan 2014 – 2019: A Framework for Action*

enjoyment purposes. This will ensure there is enough high quality open space for any increase in population.<sup>2</sup>

- e) The DSA also contains district-wide policies for the conservation and enhancement of green spaces, rivers, green infrastructure, all of which contributes to biodiversity improvements:
  - a. DM11 Green Networks and Infrastructure
  - b. DM12 Green Spaces
  - c. DM13 Conservation and Enhancement of Sites, Habitats and Species of Biodiversity and Geodiversity Importance<sup>3</sup>
  - d. DM14 Biodiversity In Development
  - e. DM15 Protection and Enhancement of River and Stream Corridors
- f) The new local plan is also proposing several policies which will increase the quantity, quality and accessibility of green areas across the District:
  - a. DM31 The Chilterns Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
  - b. DM32 Accessible locations, sustainable transport and parking
  - c. DM33 Delivering Green Infrastructure in new development
- g) In addition site-specific indicative diagrams for major sites provide an indication of future on-site open space provision.
- h) At county level, the BCC and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership (NEP) is working alongside the Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and the health and wellbeing boards to embed natural environment in growth, economic & health strategies, and develop interventions and programs for delivery. The Buckinghamshire Green Infrastructure Strategy being implemented across the District which will ensure that communities have access to high quality green spaces and green infrastructure (GI).

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.wycombe.gov.uk/pages/Planning-and-building-control/Adopted-Wycombe-planning-policy-and-guidance/Delivery-and-site-allocations.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> This includes the protection of sites of international importance such as SACs.

## Conclusion

9. The Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan is unlikely to have significant environmental effects on any Natura 2000 sites alone or in combination with other plans and projects, and an Appropriate Assessment for the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan is not required.

## Consultation arrangements

10. This draft screening opinion has been shared with Natural England for consultation, and they have agreed:

- that the scope and extent of this assessment is appropriate in this occasion and
- that in the case of this particular Neighbourhood plan there would be **no requirement for a full Appropriate Assessment** under the Habitats Regulations.

## Appendix 1 – Natural England’s response to consultation on the draft Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) Screening opinion for the Bledlow-cum-Saunderton Neighbourhood Plan.