

Date: 22 April 2024
Our ref: 468252
Your ref: None



Local Plan Team
South Kesteven District Council
Email: Planningpolicy@southkesteven.gov.uk

BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Sir/Madam,

South Kesteven Local Plan Review – Regulation 18 Consultation

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 28 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.

Natural England welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Regulation 18 consultation and has the following comments:

Climate change – we note policies on Climate Change are not included within this Regulation 18 Draft Local Plan. Natural England would wish to ensure that nature-based solutions are included within the Regulation 19 Draft.

Vision and objectives

We welcome the inclusion of climate change within the Vision. We suggest however that the Vision should include greater aspiration to enhance the natural environment by enhancing biodiversity and contributing to the Nature Recovery Network which is a commitment in the government's Environmental Improvement Plan.

Natural England generally welcomes the objectives, particularly Objective 13 with the inclusion of climate change and the link to Green Infrastructure (GI) and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). We would suggest that Objective 12 should make reference to the Nature Recovery Network which will help to address biodiversity loss, climate resilience and access to nature.

NEW POLICY 2: Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land

Natural England welcomes the inclusion of this policy and the recognition that development has an irreversible adverse impact on the finite national stock of Best & Most Versatile (BMV) agricultural land. Any development on BMV should have a soil handling plan and sustainable soil management strategy based on detailed soils surveys. The following guidance "[Guide to assessing development proposals on agricultural land](#)" provides information on soil management and soil survey on development sites.

EN1: Landscape Character

Natural England welcomes this policy.

Protecting Biodiversity and Geodiversity (explanatory text)

Within the explanatory text of this policy we suggest that there should be greater reference to the Nature Recovery Network (NRN). This is a major commitment in the UK Government's 25-Year Environment Plan and intends to improve, expand and connect habitats to address wildlife decline and provide wider environmental benefits for people. By creating more wildlife-rich places that are bigger, better and joined-up the three challenges of biodiversity loss, climate change, and public health and well-being can be addressed. As part of this work Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) will agree priorities and work with partners and stakeholders to map actions for nature recovery where they will have the greatest environmental benefit. [The Nature Recovery Network - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/nature-recovery-network)

10.8 – Natural England is pleased to note that the Lincolnshire Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) has been mentioned but we suggest that further explanation should be included (please note comments at above and at 10.13).

EN2: Protecting Biodiversity and Geodiversity

Natural England welcomes this policy but suggests the following:

In point (a) it would be helpful to give an example of an international site that occurs in the District i.e. Special Area of Conservation.

In point (b) it would be helpful to give an example of a national site e.g. Sites of Special Scientific Interests or National Nature Reserves.

10.9 This paragraph could include an update that BNG has been mandatory since February 2024.

10.13 We are pleased to note that this paragraph seeks opportunities for wider net environmental gains wherever possible. This can be achieved by considering how policies and proposed allocations can contribute to broader environmental enhancement, help adapt to the impacts of climate change and/or take forward elements of existing green infrastructure, open space or biodiversity strategies. Natural England's Environmental Benefits from Nature tool can be used to help identify wider environmental gains. The beta version has been [published](#).

Up until the Lincolnshire Nature Recovery Strategy is in place, the South Kesteven Biodiversity Opportunity and GI Mapping would be used to assign strategic significance within the statutory biodiversity metric for calculating biodiversity net gain. The information in this mapping will be incorporated within the LNRS.

Natural England welcomes the reference to the LNRS however we suggest that in the accompanying text that there should be further explanation included as the LNRS develops, for example:

The Nature Recovery Network (LNRS) is a major commitment in the UK Government's 25-Year Environment Plan and intends to improve, expand and connect habitats to address wildlife decline and provide wider environmental benefits for people. LNRS is required under the Environment Act and will inform future Local Plans. Statutory guidance on alignment between Local Plans and LNRS is anticipated as part of the Government's work on planning reform.

New policy 4: Biodiversity Opportunity and Delivering Measurable Net Gains

Natural England welcomes this policy however we advise that some amendments may be necessary following the secondary legislation and recently published guidance <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain>:

In the third paragraph please note that now that BNG has become mandatory the metric will be known as the Statutory Biodiversity Metric.

It may be useful to explain that registered offsite biodiversity gains should be sited locally to the development impact (i.e. within the District or National Character Area).

Bullet point (e) i.e. statutory biodiversity credits.

We note that in the penultimate paragraph of the policy wording that the following sentence has been included “*Proposals which do not demonstrate that the post development biodiversity value will exceed the predevelopment value of the onsite habitat by a 10% net gain will be refused.*” We advise that you may need to rephrase this because the guidance ([Biodiversity net gain - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](https://www.gov.uk/guidance/biodiversity-net-gain)) now recommends as follows:

“ ... it would generally be inappropriate for decision makers, when determining a planning application for a development subject to biodiversity net gain, to refuse an application on the grounds that the biodiversity gain objective will not be met.”

EN3: Green Infrastructure

Natural England welcomes this policy and the explanatory text, we are also pleased to note that Green Infrastructure (GI) features throughout the Plan which will ensure that the multi-functional benefits of the provision of good quality GI can be fully realised. We welcome the cross reference in paragraph 10.16 to Policy OS1: Open Space and Recreation.

We are pleased to note that Natural England’s Green Infrastructure Framework: Principles & Standards has been referenced within the policy text. We suggest the policy or explanatory text could be expanded to reflect in more detail the advice included within this Framework.

Local Planning Authorities can apply the National GI Standards locally that will help deliver good GI networks for people and nature and you may consider doing this within the local plan. These include - Accessible Greenspace Standard, Urban Nature Recovery Standard, Urban Greening Factor, Urban Tree Canopy Cover Standard. These standards can provide the output measures so that developers have certainty over what green infrastructure is needed on site. They can be included as site specific and area-based requirements in site allocation policies. To help the GI standards to be delivered local authorities could set green infrastructure targets. These should include delivery levels over time for instance, *the % of people having good quality publicly accessible greenspaces within 15 minutes’ walk from home by 2030*. We advise that your authority adopts the recommended standards where relevant and provides further detail to local standards where required.

We also suggest that the health benefits of GI should be emphasised either within this policy or within other relevant policies e.g. climate change, open space & recreation. Green and blue spaces can have a positive impact on preventing health issues through providing opportunities for more active and healthy lives. GI can also supply other health benefits by helping to address some of the environmental causes of poor health, such as poor air quality, by filtering particulates, and reducing urban summer temperatures by cooling the air. Green Infrastructure should:

- Maximise health and wellbeing outcomes particularly in deprived areas and for disadvantaged groups.
- Address issues of inequality in access to quality natural greenspace.
- Be managed to deliver indirect benefits such as urban cooling, noise reduction, flood risk management and air quality improvements which can improve health outcomes.
- Linkages should be made between urban areas and surrounding countryside to improve access to nature for all e.g. improved Public Rights of Way (PRoW), access by public transport and active travel routes.
- Enabling access to nature for the mental and physical health benefits by building in the green in 15 target: *everyone has access to a variety of good quality green and blue spaces within fifteen minutes’ walk of their home*. This aligns with the GI Standard S2: Accessible Greenspace Standard

and the Environment Improvement Plan (EIP) Goal 10: Enhancing beauty, heritage and engagement with the natural environment.

DE1: Promoting Good Quality Design

Natural England suggests that reference should be made within this policy of the [Natural England Green Infrastructure Planning and Design Guide 2023](#) which provides evidence based practical guidance on how to plan and design good green infrastructure. It complements the National Model Design Code and National Design Guide and can be used to help planners and designers develop local design guides and codes with multifunctional green infrastructure at the heart. This will help to inspire the creation of healthier, nature-rich, climate resilient and thriving places to live, learn, work and play. We suggest that the GI design guide should be included in the list of supporting evidence.

Policy OS1: Open Space and Recreation

Natural England welcomes this policy and acknowledge the link with the green infrastructure policy (EN3).

We suggest you may want to refer to [Natural England's Accessible Greenspace Standards](#) to determine open space needs based on size, proximity capacity and quality. The Environmental Improvement Plan has highlighted an initial focus on access to green and blue spaces within 15 minutes' walk from home.

Allocations

GR3: Grantham Allocations

SKPR-278 (GR3-H1): Spitalgate Heath - Garden Village (Mixed Use Allocation)

Natural England notes the amendments to reflect Garden Village status of the site and welcomes bullet points j, k, l and r which aim to protect and enhance the biodiversity interests within the site. We would emphasise the importance of taking the opportunity on this site to create a connected green infrastructure network throughout the site for maximum benefit for both people and nature using the information provided within the Biodiversity Opportunity Mapping. We advise that the principles and standards set out within Natural England's Green Infrastructure Framework should be incorporated within the design of this large development.

For the other proposed allocations within Grantham we would reiterate the importance of establishing a connected network of high quality green infrastructure at the earliest stage of the planning process.

STM1: Stamford Residential Allocations

For the proposed residential allocations within Stamford we would reiterate the importance of establishing a connected network of high quality green infrastructure at the earliest stage of the planning process.

We also advise that for residential developments surrounding Stamford may require an assessment of recreational pressure if it falls within the Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) for Cambridgeshire SSSIs. This may be relevant to the Barnack Hill & Holes SAC and measures to mitigate any adverse impacts e.g. alternative open space provision may be required.

SKPR-281 (STM1-H1): Stamford North

Natural England would wish to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the provision of Green Infrastructure across the District boundary to the Rutland Local Plan allocation at Quarry Farm (policy H2).

Other Allocations

Natural England has commented recently on potential allocations and we have no further comments to add.

Habitat Regulations Assessment

Natural England welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Habitats Regulations Assessment of the South Kesteven Local Plan, as a statutory consultee and specialist adviser on the application of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

We are satisfied that the Screening Report follows accepted methodology and is in line with appropriate legislation and guidance. We also acknowledge that policies that may have a Likely Significant Effect on a European Site have been identified.

When considering the potential for recreational disturbance on a European Site we note that a 5km distance has been used. We seek clarification from you as to the justification for using a 5km distance to screen out likely significant effects and what evidence has been used to support this distance. We would suggest that to make reference to 'average' distances is not appropriate, given the range of variable factors at play, and that bespoke surveys or evidence should be used to determine visitor 'zones of influence' for individual sites. We note that in the HRA for Peterborough City that a distance of 8km was used as a reasonable distance to measure disturbance to Habitat Sites which included the Barnack Hills & Holes SAC. We would be grateful if you could offer additional clarification on this matter.

Interim Sustainability Appraisal

Natural England has reviewed the Interim Sustainability Appraisal (SA) and considers that it provides a comprehensive assessment of this stage of the Local Plan.

If you have any queries relating to the advice in this letter please contact me [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

Roslyn Deeming
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East Midlands Area