



# Natural Environment Evidence Report

February 2013

# 'The Natural Environment' Evidence Report

February 2013

## Contents

<b>Section</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Introduction and Policy Context	2
2. Fenland Context	2
3. Core Strategy Policy	3
4. Alternative Reasonable Options	4
5. Conclusion	4

## **1.0 Introduction and Policy Context**

### **Introduction**

- 1.1 Fenland District Council is producing the Fenland Core Strategy, which sets out the framework for how development will be considered across the District to 2031.
- 1.2 This Evidence Report (which is one of a collection) provides background information and justification for policy CS19, which deals with the Natural Environment.

### **National Policy**

- 1.3 The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published in March 2012.
- 1.4 Section 11 of the NPPF concerns “conserving and enhancing the natural environment” and there is a separate section on “Plan-making”. The following points are particularly relevant:
  - Paragraph 113 - Local planning authorities should set criteria based policies against which proposals for any development on or affecting protected wildlife or geodiversity sites or landscape areas will be judged. Distinctions should be made between the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites, so that protection is commensurate with their status and gives appropriate weight to their importance and the contribution that they make to wider ecological networks.
  - Paragraph 114 - Local planning authorities should set out a strategic approach in their local plans, planning positively for the creation, protection, enhancement and management of networks of biodiversity and green infrastructure.
  - Paragraph 117 – Planning policies should (amongst other things) plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries; identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and stepping stones that connect them; promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, ecological networks and the protection and recovery of priority species populations; and aim to prevent harm to geological conservation interests.
  - Paragraph 156 - The local plan should include strategic policies to deliver the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment.
- 1.5 The above NPPF guidance has been taken into account in preparing the Core Strategy as a whole, and policy CS19 in particular.

## **2. Fenland Context**

- 2.1 Fenland has a unique environmental character, with its flat, open landscapes, big skies and complex network of drainage channels and watercourses. Although much of the land outside settlements is intensively farmed, there are areas which remain important for their contribution to biodiversity and the quality of the natural environment.
- 2.2 The District is home to the Nene and Ouse Washes, both of which extend into adjoining local authority areas. Both are of national and international importance for their nature conservation value, being designated as Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Areas, Ramsar Sites and Sites of Special Scientific Interest.
- 2.3 In addition, the District contains Bassenhally Pit and Adventurers’ Land SSSIs and a number of local nature reserves and county wildlife sites.

- 2.4 The Council has worked with other District Councils and Cambridgeshire County Council in preparing Biodiversity Action Plans, and among the priority habitats which have been identified are fruit orchards and floodplain grazing marsh, both of which can be found in Fenland.
- 2.5 In addition, the Council has contributed to the Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Study, which has identified key issues and opportunities for Fenland.
- 2.6 Key issues facing the Council are the requirement to strike an appropriate balance between the need for growth and development and the protection of the natural environment; the need to protect and where possible, enhance biodiversity; the need to promote the preservation, restoration and re-creation of priority habitats, and the preservation and increase of priority species identified in Biodiversity Action Plans; and the need to develop a wider network of green infrastructure, with a particular emphasis on meeting deficiencies in open space and creating a network of ecological corridors.
- 2.7 The Council responds to these issues in a variety of ways, working with Natural England and the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust when appropriate. The main mechanism for this is through the normal operation of the development management and delivery function.

### **3. Core Strategy Policy**

- 3.1 In the Draft version of the Core Strategy (published for consultation in July 2011) and in the Further Consultation Draft (published for consultation in July 2012) there was no separate policy on the natural environment. Protection of the natural environment had been built into various development policies throughout the Plan and the Council took the view that there was sufficient policy and advice in PPS9 “Biodiversity and Geological Conservation” and its accompanying Practice Guide to enable it to carry out its responsibilities towards the natural environment in a satisfactory way.
- 3.2 However, with the publication of the NPPF in 2012 (deleting and replacing PPS9), it became clear that a positive strategy for the conservation of the natural environment would need to be incorporated into the Plan.
- 3.3 This was reinforced by the comments of Natural England, received in response to the Further Consultation Draft. They pointed out the need for considerable changes to policy CS14 (as it was numbered at that time) in respect of the natural environment and biodiversity, and commented on various places throughout the Plan where recognition of the need to conserve and enhance various aspects of the natural environment would be advisable.
- 3.4 The response of the Council was firstly, to make changes throughout the Core Strategy, so that there is now proper recognition of issues surrounding biodiversity, green infrastructure and ecological networks; and secondly, to include a separate policy (CS19) setting out our overall strategy. It was felt that the natural environment was of sufficient importance to warrant a policy in its own right, rather than seeking to modify the “Delivering and Protecting High Quality Environments across the District” policy. The new policy does not attempt to re-write national policy or impose any additional burdens, and, amongst other things, simply makes it clear that the Council will protect and enhance sites which have been designated for their international, national or local importance to an extent that is commensurate with their status, in accordance with national policy in the NPPF.
- 3.5 The policy is supported by an implementation and monitoring table in chapter 7.
- 3.6 Aside from the NPPF, the evidence to support the policy comprises all of the information from the descriptions of the international, national and local designations; the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough Biodiversity Action Plans; the Cambridgeshire Biodiversity Strategy; and the Cambridgeshire Green Infrastructure Strategy.

#### **4. Alternative Reasonable Options**

- 4.1 Option 1: No separate policy on the natural environment: This was the option that the Council pursued in earlier versions of the Core Strategy (as explained in paragraph 3.1 above). However, with the publication of the NPPF in 2012, this approach has since been rejected. It is clear that the NPPF expects Plans to include strategic policies to deliver the conservation and enhancement of the natural environment. The Council has responded to the NPPF by amending various policies (in particular, those relating to urban extensions and development around each of the market towns) and including one specific policy on the natural environment.
- 4.2 Option 2: A detailed policy to explain the circumstances in which planning permission would and would not be granted for development that would affect each of the different nature conservation designations. This was rejected as it would simply repeat (or worse, misinterpret) national policy in paragraphs 109 to 1191 of the NPPF.

#### **5. Conclusion**

- 5.1 This Evidence Report demonstrates that Fenland District Council's Core Strategy policy for the Natural Environment is an entirely reasonable and appropriate response to the requirement of the NPPF, and is supported by a genuine and comprehensive evidence base. Alternative options have been considered, but rejected.
- 5.2 Overall, the Council considers its Natural Environment policy to be sound.