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Our ref: 454375  
Your ref: Colchester Local Plan - Strategic Housing Land Availability & draft Methodology



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Dear Sir or Madam

## **Colchester Local Plan Review - Strategic Land Availability Assessment and Draft Methodology**

Thank you for your consultation request dated and received by Natural England on 20<sup>th</sup> October 2023.

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.

We recognise that SHLAAs form a critical component of the evidence base for Local and Neighbourhood Plans. In order to allocate the most appropriate sites to deliver high quality, sustainable development, environmental issues and opportunities should be considered as an integral part of the assessment process.

Natural England does not have available staff resources to provide bespoke advice on SHLAAs or attend meetings in connection with them. In line with the National Planning Policy Framework, we offer the following generic advice on key natural environment considerations for use in producing or revising SHLAAs, which we hope is of use.

### **1. Landscape**

#### **Avoiding harm to the character of nationally protected landscapes - National Parks, the Broads and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty - and locally valued landscapes.**

Impacts of new housing upon landscape may be positive or negative, direct or indirect, short or long term and reversible or irreversible. Cumulative impacts may also occur as a result of the combined effects of more than one housing development.

The assessment of potential housing sites should be informed by the landscape character approach. The National Character Area (NCA) profiles will provide useful information. These update the national framework of Joint Character Areas and Countryside Character Areas that are used to inform LCAs. Further information is available at [NCAs](#)

Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) identify the different landscape elements which give a place its unique character and can help inform the location and design of new development. Further information on LCAs is at [Landscape Character Assessment](#).

More detailed study (e.g. Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment) of the sensitivity of the landscape and capacity to accommodate change may be necessary to determine the suitability of potential housing sites, particularly those within or near protected landscapes.

## 2. Biodiversity

### **Avoiding harm to the international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity.**

International sites include: Special Protection Areas (SPAs); Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) and Ramsar sites<sup>1</sup>. National sites include biological Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and National Nature Reserves (NNRs) Local sites are Local Wildlife Sites (a variety of other terms are also in use).

The potential impacts of new housing upon such sites may be positive or negative, direct or indirect and short or long term. Cumulative impacts may also occur as a result of the combined effects of more than one housing development.

Indirect impacts may be experienced several kilometres distant from new housing e.g. water pollution. The key to assessing these is to understand the potential impact pathways that may exist between the development and sensitive sites.

Impact Risk Zones (IRZs) are a GIS tool that can be used by LPAs to consider whether a proposed development (or allocation) is likely to affect a SSSI. They define zones around each SSSI which reflect the particular sensitivities of the features for which it is notified and indicate the types of development proposal which could potentially have adverse impacts. Information about using this data can be found [here](#).

The [Magic](#) website is a useful source of information on the location and qualifying features of the international and national designations. Local Environmental Records Centres should also be of assistance and often hold information on Local Wildlife Sites.

### **Avoiding harm to priority habitats, ecological networks and priority and/or legally protected species populations**

Priority habitats and species are those listed under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act, 2006 and UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). Further information is available here [UK BAP priority species and habitats](#).

Protected species are those species protected under domestic or European law. Further information can be found here [Standing advice for protected species](#). Sites containing watercourses, old buildings, significant hedgerows and substantial trees are possible habitats for protected species.

Ecological networks are coherent systems of natural habitats organised across whole landscapes so as to maintain ecological functions. A key principle is to maintain connectivity - to enable free movement and dispersal of wildlife e.g. badger routes, river corridors for the migration of fish and staging posts for migratory birds.

Priority habitats can be found on the Nature on the Map website referred to above. Natural England does not hold records of priority or legally protected species but Local Records Centres may be able provide these.

It may also be necessary to undertake a basic ecological survey in order to appraise the biodiversity value of any potential development site. A Phase 1 Habitat Survey is the commonly used standard for habitat audit and provides a starting point for determining the likely presence of important species. More information is available here [Phase 1 Habitat Survey](#).

### **Seeking opportunities to contribute to the restoration and re-creation of habitats, the recovery of priority species populations and biodiversity enhancement**

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<sup>1</sup> The following wildlife sites should also be given the same protection as European sites: potential SPAs, possible SACs, listed or proposed Ramsar sites and sites identified, or required, as compensatory measures for adverse effects on European sites

Where Nature Improvement Areas (NIAs) are identified they can provide a focal point for creating more and better-connected habitats.

Where housing allocations are proposed in the environs of NIAs the potential to contribute to habitat enhancement should be considered. Further information on NIAs is available here [NIAs](#).

Local Biodiversity Action Plans (LBAPs) identify the local action needed to deliver UK targets for habitats and species. They also identify targets for other habitats and species of local importance and can provide a useful blueprint for biodiversity enhancement in any particular area. Further information through the UK BAP link above.

### **Seeking opportunities to enhance and create Green Infrastructure**

Green infrastructure is a term used to refer to the living network of green spaces, water and other environmental features in both urban and rural areas. It is often used in an urban context to provide multiple benefits including space for recreation, access to nature, flood storage and urban cooling to support climate change mitigation, food production, wildlife habitats and health & well-being improvements provided by trees, rights of way, parks, gardens, road verges, allotments, cemeteries, woodlands, rivers and wetlands.

Green infrastructure is also relevant in a rural context, where it might additionally refer to the use of farmland, woodland, wetlands or other natural features to provide services such as flood protection, carbon storage or water purification. Green infrastructure maintains critical ecological links between town and country.

The SHLAA should consider the availability of GI and opportunities to enhance GI networks when considering sites for development.

### **3. Geological conservation**

#### **Avoid harm to nationally and locally designated sites of importance for geological conservation - geological SSSIs and Local Geological Sites (also known as RIGS - Regionally Important Geological Sites).**

The Nature on the Map website referred to above is a useful source of information on the location and qualifying features of geological SSSIs. Local Environmental Records Centres should also be of assistance and often hold information on Local Geological Sites.

Housing development may present opportunities for the enhancement of geological sites e.g. exposure sites in road cuttings. Further information on geological conservation is available on the Natural England website here [Geodiversity](#).

#### **Seeking opportunities to contribute to landscape restoration and enhancement.**

The NCAs profiles identify potential opportunities for positive environmental change. LCAs also identify opportunities for landscape restoration and enhancement. These can help identify potential opportunities for housing developments to contribute to landscape enhancement in an area.

### **4. Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land**

#### **Avoiding Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land**

Land quality varies from place to place. Information on Best and Most Versatile Agricultural land (grades 1,2 and 3 a) is available from the Agricultural Land Classification (ALC). ALC maps are available on the [MAGIC](#) website.

Not all land has been surveyed in detail and more detailed field survey may be required to inform decisions about specific sites. Further information is available here [ALC](#).

## **5. Public rights of way and access**

### **Seeking opportunities to enhance public rights of way and accessible natural green space.**

Housing allocations should avoid adverse impacts on National Trails and networks of public rights of way and opportunities should be considered to maintain and enhance networks and to add links to existing rights of way networks including National Trails. More information is available here [National Trails](#).

Accessible natural greenspace should be provided as an integral part of development. Housing should make provision for appropriate quantity and quality of green space to meet identified local needs as outlined in paragraph 96 of the NPPF. Natural England's work on [Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard \(ANGSt\)](#) may be of use in assessing current level of accessible natural greenspace and planning improved provision.

Existing open space should not be built on unless the tests of NPPF para 97 have been met. Open space is construed in the NPPF as all open space of public value which offer important opportunities for sport and recreation and can act as a visual amenity.

**Natural England does not have any specific comments on the draft Methodology.**

Yours faithfully

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