Determination Statement

on the need for a

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

and

Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA)

Sonning Neighbourhood Plan
version draft November 2024

January 2025

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Summary

Following consultation with statutory bodies, Wokingham Borough Council ('the Council') determines that the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not require a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) or appropriate assessment (HRA).

1. Introduction & Background

1.1. This Determination Statement relates to the Draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan. It should be read in conjunction with the working draft version of the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan (dated November 2024).

1.2. A provisional Screening Statement (November 2024) was used to consider whether or not the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is likely to give rise to significant environmental effects[1], and therefore require Strategic Environmental Assessment. The Screening Statement also considered whether or not the plan is likely to have a significant effect on sites designated for their international importance to nature conservation, in line with an assessment through the Habitats Regulations process[2] and thereby require an appropriate assessment.

1.3. The Screening Statement used the Habitats Regulations Assessment for the adopted Core Strategy (2010) and Managing Development Delivery (2014) local plans as its basis for assessment.

1.4. The Screening Statement used the set of criteria from Schedule 1 of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (the SEA Regulations); this is set out in **Section 3** of this Determination Statement. The potential for significant impacts on nature conservation sites that are of European importance, was also assessed as set out in **Section 4**.

1.5. The initial screening opinion contained within the Screening Statement was subject to consultation with the Environment Agency, Historic England and Natural England. The results of the screening process are detailed in **Section 5** of this Determination Statement.

Sonning Neighbourhood Plan

1.6. Neighbourhood planning gives communities the power to develop a shared vision for their area. Neighbourhood plans can shape, direct and help to deliver sustainable development, by influencing local planning decisions. This is because, if successful at an independent examination and subsequent referendum, a neighbourhood plan will form part of the statutory development plan[3].

[1] Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004.
[2] The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.
[3] section 3 of the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017

1.7. A Neighbourhood Plan is prepared by a town/parish council or neighbourhood forum for a designated neighbourhood area.

1.8. Sonning Parish Council has taken the decision to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan for the whole of their parish. Sonning Parish was designated as a neighbourhood area on 24 October 2019. Work is at a relatively early stage, with the version subject to this screening statement being a working draft. Now that this screening process has been concluded, it is the intention for the plan to be subject to Regulation 14[4] consultation in early 2025.

1.9. Whilst Wokingham Borough Council has undertaken a screening opinion at this time, it is recognised that further screening opinions may be required as the project moves forward.

1.10. Further details of the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is provided in Section 2.

[4] Of The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012

2. Sonning Neighbourhood Plan

2.1. The Neighbourhood Plan will supplement the policies contained within Wokingham Borough Council's Core Strategy Local Plan (adopted 29 January 2010), the Managing Development Delivery (MDD) Local Plan (adopted 21 February 2014) and the emerging Local Plan Update[5], with regard to the parish of Sonning. The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is proposed to cover the period to 2040.

2.2. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan proposes the overall vision being:

> *"Sonning will continue be known by people at all stages of their lives as one of Berkshire's best Parish communities in which to live; for its semi-rural historic village character and countryside landscapes; and for its attractive green lanes, green spaces and thriving natural environment. The neighbourhood will be safe, clean, and well connected to the neighbouring parishes by unpolluted roads and pathways. New development will protect or enhance Sonning's rural settlements and provide good quality housing that is in keeping with the distinct character areas across the Parish, and is appropriate for the needs of the community."* (Section 4.3 of the working Draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan)

2.3. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan contains a supplemental vision for specific sections (or topics) of the plan, as follows:

> Section 3 – Conservation Area
> *"The unique historical centre of Sonning will be maintained and enhanced for future generations whilst ensuring that the buildings remain suitable for modern living, are fit for purpose, pleasant and convenient for all users, and easy to maintain and manage."*
>
> Section 5 – Housing
> *"The new housing development that is already approved or which is expected to take place in Sonning over the Plan period up to 2040 will provide good quality housing that is in keeping with the distinct character areas across the Parish and is appropriate for the needs of the community."*

2.4. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out draft objectives as follows:

- ***Meeting Sonning's Housing Need***
  The housing needs over the period of the Plan up to 2040 will be satisfied by extant planning approvals plus a small allowance for windfall and flexibility. A total of 167 new dwellings are forecast to be built over the Plan period. They will be designed and built in such a way as to maintain the character of the village and protect its rich natural environment.

[5] Most recently subject to Regulation 19 Publication. The Local Development Scheme (2024) states adoption is anticipated in May 2026

- ***Maintain and develop pedestrian access paths across the parish including those to, and along, the River Thames.***
  Developments should preserve and enhance current access to the River Thames and its associated pathways in the parish. Improvements to access for wheelchair and pushchair users is encouraged. All existing pathways and access to and across public spaces should not be negatively affected by any new development. Improvements to the pedestrian pathways and cycleways infrastructure is to be supported and encouraged. New development should not harm existing footpaths and should maximise opportunities to improve and add to existing footpath networks, wherever possible.

- ***Improve the parish access for vehicle free movement.***
  Development as appropriate to its scale and location will include proposals which enhance the attractiveness of walking, cycling and other non- motorised vehicle-based routes and access. Improvements and enhancements to the existing footpaths is encouraged and new footpaths and cycle paths will wherever possible connect with existing networks.

- ***Generate a sustainable reduction of the impact of traffic pollution, including air quality, and noise, within the Parish***
  Development that creates a positive reduction in poor air quality and noise pollution is encouraged.

- ***Retain and conserve the historic environment within the parish wherever possible.***
  New developments that demonstrate both recognition and preservation of sites of historic interest and historic monuments, will be supported.

2.5. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan contains 7 policies:

- **Policy SNP/HOU1 – Delivering Genuinely Affordable Homes** seeks to encourage 100% affordable homes to be delivered on a site at Bull Close (an existing allocation in the MDD 2014) along with an appropriate mix to include almshouses, as well as encouraging the delivery of almshouses elsewhere in the parish where development comes forward.

- **Policy SNP/HOU2 – Housing Mix** seeks to define the tenure split of affordable housing, to require developments to provide an appropriate mix of dwelling types and sizes, and set requirements for replacement buildings to enhance local character.

- **Policy SNP/DES1 – Design Codes** seeks that developments should respond positively to the design considerations and character area typologies within supporting Sonning Design Guidelines and Codes Report; requires specific regard to be had to the historic environment; and seeks robust justification for departing from the design code.

- **Policy SNP/ENV1 – Local Gaps** seeks to define sensitive local gaps to prevent visual or perceived coalescence of settlements. [*NB a green gap study is being commissioned to support this policy, but is not available at the time of writing]*

- **Policy SNP/ENV2 – Local Green Spaces** seeks to designate three areas as Local Green Space where development will only be supported in very special circumstances.

- **Policy SNP/TRA1 – Traffic Calming** seeks to alleviate congestion and enhance road safety for all users, especially in relation to specific identified Traffic Calming Key Locations.

- **Policy SNP/TRA2 – Active Travel** seeks to support active travel in the parish by identifying an Active Travel Network and promote active travel in new development proposals through key design principles, in particular development proposals close to the River Thames should enhance pedestrian accessibility to the riverside.

2.6. The current working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not propose the allocation of any land for housing or other development types. The only reference to the development of a specific site is Policy SNP/HOU1 and the land at Bull Close. The focus of the policy is the type and mix of housing to be delivered. The site is an adopted allocation within the development plan.

2.7. In September 2023, the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan group formally requested an indicative housing requirement figure from Wokingham Borough Council to cover the period to 2040. An indicative requirement of 97 dwellings was provided, comprising the following:

- 75 dwellings proposed in Sonning through LPU / commitments
- 18 dwellings windfall
- 4.3 dwellings flexibility allowance
- Total = 97 dwellings (rounded)

2.8. The majority of the above figure comprises development that is either already committed or is proposed for allocation in the emerging Local Plan Update. The remainder reflects a proportionate allowance for windfall, as a subset of the windfall allowance contained within the emerging Local Plan Update. The Local Plan Update has been subject to extensive SEA and HRA at all stages of plan making, most recently the 'Wokingham Local Plan Update Reg. 19 HRA' (September 2024)[6] and the 'Sustainability Appraisal (SA) of the Wokingham Local Plan Update (LPU)' (September 2024)[7].

[6] Available here: https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/sites/wokingham/files/2024-09/Habitats%20Regulations%20Assessment%20report%20September%202024.pdf
[7] Available here: https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/sites/wokingham/files/2024-09/LPU%20Sustainability%20Appraisal%20September%202024_0.pdf

2.9. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan (section 5.4) acknowledges this figure, plus an additional 70 dwellings with extant permission at 31 March 2023 (which are excluded from the above) for a total expected delivery of 167 dwellings over the plan period. Notwithstanding, the plan doesn't include allocations for development.

2.10. Regarding the natural environment, there are no designated international sites within the neighbourhood plan area. Looking beyond the neighbourhood plan area, the nearest Special Protection Area (SPA) is the Thames Basin Heaths SPA, located in excess of 10km south of the parish from its nearest point. The nearest sites of Special Area of Conservation (SAC) are: Chiltern Beechwoods SAC located in excess of 11km north-east from its nearest point; the Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC located approximately 14km to the east of the parish; and the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC located around 18km to the south-east of the parish. There are no Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the neighbourhood plan area. There are a number of SSSIs located in proximity to the parish of Sonning, notably, Lodge Wood and Sandford Mill SSSI which is approximately 1.6km south-east of the parish from its nearest point. Harpsden Wood SSSI is situated in South Oxfordshire, approximately 3km north of the parish from its nearest point.

2.11. Sonning Parish contains one Conservation Area: Sonning Conservation Area, which was designated in September 1971 and extended in 1980 and again in 1996.

2.12. The Sonning Conservation Area is situated in the northern part of Sonning Parish, located within the built-up area of Sonning[8]. It is centred on the 'A' shaped layout comprising Thames Street, Pearson Road and the High Street. The boundaries of the Conservation Area are the River Thames to the north and west; farmland to the north and east; residential development to the south east; and King George's Field and Reading Blue Coat School to the south.

2.13. As detailed in the Sonning Conservation Area Appraisal (2017) there are 47 listed buildings in total within the Conservation Area dating from the 15th to 20th centuries. The Deanery by Edwin Lutyens is Grade I listed and the garden at the Deanery by Lutyens and Gertrude Jekyll is a Grade II* listed Historic Park and Garden, and St Andrew's Church and The Bull are also listed at Grade II*. The remaining 43 buildings are all Grade II Listed and, whilst of lesser significance individually, do exhibit in several circumstances a high 'group value' due to their proximity to each other and the character that they add to the Conservation Area.

3. Strategic Environmental Assessment

3.1. The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (the SEA Regulations) require the undertaking of an environmental assessment for all plans and programmes that are likely to give rise to significant environmental effects.

[8] Sonning Conservation Area Appraisal (2017), available at: https://www.wokingham.gov.uk/planning/how-to-apply-for-planning-permission/listed-buildings-heritage-and-conservation-areas/

3.2. A Neighbourhood Plan falls under criterion (a) of Regulation 5(2), being a plan that is prepared for town and country planning or land use purposes. However, for a plan or programme to be deemed relevant under SEA Regulation 5(2), it must also be consistent with sub-paragraph (b).

3.3. In respect of sub-paragraph (b) the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is intended to supplement existing planning policy within the Core Strategy Local Plan and the MDD Local Plan, providing further policy on development in Sonning Parish. The Neighbourhood Plan is expected to be made prior to the emerging Local Plan Update – the plan that will replace the Core Strategy and MDD Local Plan – which is anticipated to be adopted in May 2026[9]. Based on the scope of the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan, it is unlikely to relate to any of the uses listed under Annex I or II of EC Directive 85/337/EEC as amended by Directive 97/11/EC.

3.4. Further to the above, Regulation 5(6) of the SEA Regulations indicates that an environmental assessment need not be carried out –

a) for a plan or programme of the description set out in paragraph (2) or (3) which determines the use of a small area at local level; or
b) for a minor modification to a plan or programme of the description set out in either of those paragraphs, unless it has been determined under regulation 9(1) that the plan, programme or modification, as the case may be, is likely to have significant environmental effects, or it is the subject of a direction under Regulation 10(3).

3.5. Before making a determination on whether a plan is likely or unlikely to have significant environmental effects, it is a requirement to take into account the criteria specified in Schedule 1 and Regulation 9 of the Regulations. Schedule 1 sets out the criteria for determining the likely significance of effects on the environment and Regulation 9 requires the council to consult the three environmental bodies: Natural England, Historic England and the Environment Agency on the assessment to determine the need for an SEA.

3.6. The National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (NPPF), at paragraph 33, advises that local plans and spatial development strategies should be informed throughout their preparation by a sustainability appraisal that meets the relevant legal requirements. Footnote 18 expands on this by advising that a neighbourhood plan may require SEA, but only where there are potentially significant environmental effects. It is worth noting that since the screening consultation commenced the NPPF 2024 was published. The pertinent paragraphs remain unchanged, albeit with revised paragraph numbering.

[9] The Local Plan Update will be submitted for examination under the transitional arrangements set out in the 2024 version of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), meaning it will be examined against the requirements of the December 2023 NPPF.

SEA Screening of the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan

3.7. The screening process set out in Regulation 9 and Schedule 1 to the SEA Regulations includes two sets of characteristics for determining the likely significance of effects on the environment, as follows:

1) The characteristics of the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan; and
2) The characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected.

3.8. Under each characteristic are a number of criteria against which to assess the plan. These criteria are assessed individually for the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan in Table 1 below.

3.9. Consultation was carried out on the Council's provisional view with the three environmental bodies as detailed in **Section 5** of this statement. This Determination Statement has therefore been prepared to take into account responses to the screening consultation from the relevant bodies. The content of the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan includes draft planning policies, some of which will require further work and technical evidence. As a result, a further screening may be required to reassess likely effects of future versions of the Plan.

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
1. The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to –		
(a) the degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources;	The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is intended to form part of the statutory development plan which guides decisions on planning applications. The Neighbourhood Plan sits within the wider planning framework set by the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), Wokingham Borough Council's adopted Core Strategy Local Plan and MDD Local Plan and the emerging Local Plan Update. The policies within the Neighbourhood Plan are local in nature and have limited resource implications, with no land proposed to be allocated for development. The policies within the emerging draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan primarily seek to protect valued characteristics and influence the design and character of development proposals. They do not guide where development should take place in principle through the allocation of land for specific developments.	No
(b) the degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes, include those in a hierarchy;	The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is required to have regard to national policies and advice contained in guidance through the governing	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	regulations. This will be tested through the examination process. The policies within the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan are required to be in general conformity to the strategic policies as set out in the adopted development plan through the governing regulations. This will be tested through the examination process. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out a spatial vision and objectives solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes (with the exception of Local Green Space). The document does not set a framework for other plans and has a low level of influence on other plans or programmes within the Council's statutory development plan. It does, however, help to inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies which requires regard to local character of the area in decisions.	

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
(c) the relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations, in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development;	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan contains policies that ensure development is suitable and appropriate for the parish of Sonning. It sets out a spatial vision and objectives solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes. The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan will, however, help inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which require the local character of the area to be considered as part of decisions.	No
(d) environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme; and	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out a spatial vision and objectives solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes. The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan will, however, help inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which require the local character of the area to be considered as part of decisions. This is	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	reflected in the neighbourhood plan's objectives and draft planning policies and intentions.	
(e) the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of Community Legislation on the environment (for example, plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection).	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan seeks to ensure that, where development is acceptable in principle (in the neighbourhood plan area) under development plan policy, consideration is had to the character of an area. It does not directly address other environmental issues such as waste or traffic, but seeks to minimise such issues through planning policy, e.g. through the promotion of active travel and improvements to the footpath network. A provisional Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) Screening has been undertaken by Wokingham Borough Council. The provisional screening opinion (Section 4) has concluded that the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is unlikely to give rise to 'likely significant effects' and that the initial opinion of Wokingham Borough Council is that an appropriate assessment is not required. The provisional HRA screening opinion is subject to consultation with the environmental bodies in accordance with	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	Regulation 105(2) of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017. A determination statement with the outcome, following consultation with the environmental bodies, will be issued in due course to inform future stages of consultation on the Plan.	
2. Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to –		
(a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects;	The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is intended to form part of the statutory development plan which guides decisions on planning applications. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate any sites for housing/commercial development within the parish. It is extremely unlikely that the plan's implementation will generate likely significant effects. This is because any sites where a planning application is submitted, which falls within the Neighbourhood Plan area, and where the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is applied, will only be acceptable to the Council where environmental effects do not arise or can be appropriately mitigated. The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan will, however, help inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which requires	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	regard to the local character of the area in decisions.	
(b) the cumulative nature of the effects;	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan adds local nuance to adopted development plan policies and national policy and guidance. It does not seek to facilitate a level of development materially above that established in the development plan or known planning commitments. The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan will support sustainable development, though Wokingham Borough Council's initial opinion is that the Neighbourhood Plan would not result in significant effects, whether in isolation or cumulatively.	No
(c) the trans-boundary nature of the effects;	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out a spatial vision and objectives solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan makes reference to potential projects, primarily the principle of a Third Thames Crossing. This is a project that has been explored, and would be delivered by, other bodies outside of the Sonning Neighbourhood	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	Plan process, and for which there are currently no firm commitments. It is considered that the working draft Plan itself does not therefore promote or support development that might have an effect on other Member States and is therefore unlikely to have trans-boundary effects. The approach within the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not affect how the Council would consider applications with respect of these issues. Any future delivery of a Third Thames Crossing, would be subject to its own assessment under the SEA regulations.	
(d) the risks to human health or the environment (for example, due to accidents);	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out a spatial vision and objectives solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes. The policies in the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan seek to inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which requires regard to the local character of the area in decisions and are not	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	likely to lead to increased risks to human health or the environment.	
(e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out planning policies solely for the neighbourhood plan area (Sonning Parish). The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate any sites for development. Its policies will, however, help inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which requires regard to the local character of the area in decisions.	No
(f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to – (i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage; (ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or (iii) intensive land-use; and	Sonning Parish has a number of characteristics, notably: • Agricultural land • A Conservation Area (Sonning Conservation Area) • Listed buildings, notably the Grade I listed building The Deanery St Mary's Church as well as two Grade II* listed buildings and a Grade II* Historic Park and Garden. • Local Wildlife Sites and a Local Nature Reserve • The River Thames The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out a spatial vision and objectives	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not therefore promote or support development that might affect areas of recognised national or international importance. Its policies will, however, inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which requires regard to the local character of the area in decisions. A key objective of the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is to conserve and enhance features of historical and cultural interest through design and character and preserve the natural environment. Policies within the neighbourhood plan will be supported by evidence, such as design guidance for the neighbourhood area. Chiltern Beechwoods SAC is located approx. 11km north-east from its nearest point. The Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC located approximately 14km to the east of the and the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC	

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	are located around 14km and 18km away respectively. There are no Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the plan area, although there are some SSSIs located in proximity to the parish of Sonning, notably the Lodge Wood and Sandford Mill SSSI, which is approximately 1.6km south from its nearest point. Harpsden Wood SSSI is in South Oxfordshire District, around 3km north from its nearest point. Great Thrift Wood, another SSSI, is within the Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead and is approximately 7km east from its nearest point. The Loddon Valley Gravel Pits Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP) habitat extends modestly into the plan area. Whilst these are not referred to in the SEA directive, they should be a consideration in plan-making. BAP priority habitats are those that were identified as being the most threatened and requiring conservation action under the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (UK BAP). The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is required to have regard to national policies and the	

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	NPPF through the governing regulations. This will be tested through the examination process.	
(g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, European Community or international protection status.	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan sets out a spatial vision and objectives solely for the neighbourhood area (Sonning Parish), but does not guide where development should take place, in principle, or designate land for particular purposes. The emerging Plan does not therefore promote or support development that might affect areas of recognised national or international importance. Its policies will, however, inform the interpretation of adopted development plan policies, which requires regard to the local character of the area in decisions. Regarding natural heritage, the nearest Special Protection Area (SPA) is the Thames Basin Heath SPA, located approx. 10km south at its nearest point, outside of the neighbourhood plan area. The plan area is also beyond the outermost 7km Linear Mitigation Zone for the Thames Basin Heaths SPA, as specified in Policy CP8 of the Core	No

Table 1: Assessment of likely significance of effects on the environment		
Criteria	**Details**	**Likely significant effects?**
	Strategy. There are no other SACs within the plan area, albeit there are some sites in relative proximity, notably Chiltern Beechwoods SAC, Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC and Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC. There are no Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the plan area, although there are some SSSIs located in proximity to the parish of Sonning, notably the Lodge Wood and Sandford Mill SSSI, which is approximately 1.6km south-east from its nearest point. Harpsden Wood SSSI is also around 3km north from its nearest point within South Oxfordshire District.	

4. Habitats Regulations Assessment

4.1. The European Community (EC) Directive on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora (92/43/ECC) (commonly known as the Habitats Directive) provides legal protection for habitats and species of European importance. The Directive is implemented in the UK by the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017.

4.2. Articles 3-9 provide the legal means to protect habitats and species of EC interest through the establishment and conservation of a European-wide network of sites, known as The National Site Network (formerly Natura 2000 sites). The National Site Network includes Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) designated under the Habitats Directive, and Special Protection Areas (SPA) designated under the conservation of wild birds (79/409/EEC) (commonly known as the Birds Directive).

4.3. Article 6(3) and 6(4) of the Habitats Directive sets out the decision-making tests for plans and projects affecting The National Site Network. Article 6(3) establishes a requirement for an assessment as outlined below:

> *"Any plan or project not directly connected with or necessary to the management of the site but likely to have a significant effect thereon, either individually or in combination with other plans and projects, shall be subject to assessment of its implications for the site in view of the site's conservation objectives. In 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 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."*

4.4. While not European sites as a matter of law, it is national planning policy that the following sites are given the same protection as a European site:

- potential Special Protection Areas and possible Special Areas of Conservation
- listed or proposed Ramsar sites
- sites identified, or required, as compensatory measures for adverse effects on European sites, potential Special Protections Areas, possible Special Areas of Conservation, and listed or proposed Ramsar sites.

4.5. The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (commonly known as the Habitat Regulations) requires the assessment of land use plans. The neighbourhood plan will constitute a land use plan for the purpose of the Habitats Regulations.

4.6. Regulation 105(1) provides an opportunity to determine that significant environmental effects are unlikely and thus not requiring the undertaking of an appropriate assessment.

4.7. Under Regulation 105(2), before making a determination under Regulation 105(1), the Council is required to consult Natural England as the appropriate environmental body and have regard to any representations made.

4.8. Additionally, Regulation 5(3) of the SEA Regulations indicates that an SEA could be required where:

> *"The description is a plan or programme which, in view of the likely effect on sites, has been determined to require an assessment pursuant to Article 6 or 7 of the Habitats Directive."*

4.9. This statement examines the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan and:

- Identifies, through a screening process, any European site that could potentially be affected by policies in the neighbourhood plan;
- Outlines details of the nature conservation importance of any European sites 'screened in' to the process;
- Identifies the possible impacts that the neighbourhood plan may have on features of nature conservation importance within European sites; and
- Identifies any controls within the neighbourhood plan, and other development plan documents, strategies, policies and plans that could act to avoid or mitigate these effects.

Identification of relevant international sites

4.10. The parish of Sonning does not contain any designated international sites. The following sites are in relative proximity to the neighbourhood plan area:

- Thames Basin Heaths SPA – in excess of 10km
- Chiltern Beechwoods SAC – in excess of 3km
- Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC – approximately 14km
- Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC – in excess of 18km

4.11. Information on these sites is provided below:

Chiltern Beechwoods SAC	
Conservation Objective:	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features. To maintain or restore: • The extent and distribution of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying natural habitats • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which qualifying natural habitats and the habitats of qualifying species rely • The populations of qualifying species, and • The distribution of qualifying species within the site
Qualifying Features:	• Semi-natural dry grasslands and scrubland facies: on calcareous substrates *(Festuco-Brometalia)*; Dry grasslands and scrublands on chalk or limestone • *Asperulo-Fagetum* beech forests; Beech forests on neutral to rich soils • *Lucanus cervus*; Stag beetle

Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC	
Conservation Objective:	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features. To maintain or restore: • The extent and distribution of qualifying natural habitats and habitats of qualifying species • The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying natural habitats • The structure and function of the habitats of qualifying species • The supporting processes on which qualifying natural habitats and the habitats of qualifying species rely, and • The distribution of qualifying species within the site

Qualifying Features:	• Old acidophilous oak woods with *Quercus robur* on sandy plains • Atlantic acidophilous beech forests with *Llex* and sometimes also *Taxus* in the shrub layer (Quercion robori-petraeae or Llici-Fegenion) Beech forests on acid soils • Violet click beetle *Limoniscus violaceus*
Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC	
Conservation Objective:	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the Favourable Conservation Status of its Qualifying Features. To maintain and restore: • The extent and distribution of qualifying natural habitats • The structure and function (including typical species) of qualifying natural habitats, and • The supporting processes on which qualifying natural habitats rely
Qualifying Features:	• North Atlantic wet heaths with *Erica tetralix*; Wet heathland with cross-leaved heath • European dry heaths • Depressions on peat substrates on the *Rhynchosporion*

Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area	
Conservation Objective:	Ensure that the integrity of the site is maintained or restored as appropriate, and ensure that the site contributes to achieving the aims of the Wild Birds Directive, by maintaining or restoring: • The extent and distribution of the habitats of the qualifying features • The structure and function of the habitats of the qualifying features • The supporting processes on which the habitats of the qualifying features rely • The population of each of the qualifying features, and • The distribution of the qualifying features within the site.
Qualifying Features:	• *Caprimulgus europaeus;* European nightjar (Breeding) • *Lullula arborea;* Woodlark (Breeding) • *Sylvia undata*; Dartford warbler (Breeding)

Screening Criteria

4.12. In carrying out this screening process, regard has been had to the main possible sources of effects on the international sites, possible pathways to the international site and the effects on possible sensitive receptors in the international sites. Only if there is an identifiable source (a pathway and a receptor) is there likely to be a significant effect.

4.13. Possible sources and pathways for effects arising from development and used in this screening are considered to be:

- Water (water pollution and hydrology)
- Air (air pollution)
- Direct land-take
- Habitat / species disturbance
- Recreational pressure (increased population)

4.14. Operations that may damage the special interest of the Thames Basins Heaths SPA, Chiltern Beechwoods SAC, the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC or the Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC are considered to be:

- Damage or removal of any plant or plant remains (including recreational impacts)
- Changes to drainage arrangements or watercourses
- Pollution of watercourses
- Water abstraction
- Extraction of materials from the site
- Dumping of materials on the site
- Storage of materials on the site
- Erection of structures on the site

Screening of the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan

4.15. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan has been analysed to assess whether it would be likely to result in significant effects. The results are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Habitats Regulations Assessment Screening assessment for the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan

Operation	Potential impact from the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan	Mitigating factors and comments	Likelihood of significant effect
Damage or removal of any plant or plant remains (including recreational impacts)	None	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not steer development towards an international site, therefore it does not increase any potential for increased damaged to the site through either construction or recreational activities. Wokingham Borough Council, in consultation with Natural England, has formed the view that any net increase in residential development between 400m and 5km straight line distance from the Thames Basin Heath Special Protection Area (SPA) is likely to have a significant effect on the integrity of the SPA, either alone or in combination with other plan or projects. The HRA for the Core Strategy Local Plan and MDD Local Plan considered the overall level of development across the Borough. The HRA for the emerging LPU likewise considers the overall level of development expected to 2040 i.e. the proposed plan period for the Neighbourhood Plan. Therefore, it has already been determined (and impact avoidance and reduction measures established to allow) that there will be no likely significant effects on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA through both the adopted and emerging plans. The neighbourhood plan area is also located outside the Thames Basin Heaths SPA and linear mitigation zones as defined in Policy CP8 of the adopted Core Strategy Local Plan (2010) for this particular site. Furthermore, the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not propose development that would have an effect on existing features of habitat or	No

Operation	Potential impact from the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan	Mitigating factors and comments	Likelihood of significant effect
		conservation value, but solely defines the existing features of value in the neighbourhood plan area.	
Changes to drainage arrangements or watercourses	None	-	No
Pollution of watercourses	None	-	No
Water abstraction	None	-	No
Extraction of materials from the site	None	The working Draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not address the need or suitability of extraction operations. The Central and Eastern Berkshire Joint Minerals and Waste Plan was adopted by WBC in January 2023. It guides long term mineral extraction and waste management across the plan area.	No
Dumping of materials on the site	None	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not steer development towards an international site, therefore it does not increase any potential for the dumping of materials. The adopted Core Strategy Local Plan sets out the spatial vision for the borough. There are no Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) or Special Protection Areas (SPAs) within 5km of the Neighbourhood Plan Area.	No

Operation	Potential impact from the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan	Mitigating factors and comments	Likelihood of significant effect
		The designated neighbourhood plan area (i.e., Parish of Sonning) is also located outside of the Thames Basin Heath SPA Linear Mitigation Zones, as specified in Core Strategy Policy CP8 (Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area). The HRA for the Core Strategy Local Plan and MDD Local Plan considered the overall level of development across the borough pursuant to Article 6 of the Habitats Directive. Therefore, it has already been determined (and impact avoidance and reduction measures established to allow) that there will be no likely significant effects on the integrity of the Thames Basin Heaths SPA. Three sites of Special Area of Conservation (SAC): Chiltern Beechwoods SAC located in excess of 11km north-east from its nearest point; the Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC located approximately 14km to the east of the parish; and the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC located in excess of 18km to the south-east of the parish.	
Storage of materials on the site	None	The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not steer development towards an international site, therefore it does not increase any potential for increased damage to the site through the storage of materials. The adopted Core Strategy Local Plan (2010) sets out the spatial vision for the borough. The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) and Linear Mitigation Zones are located outside the neighbourhood plan area. Three sites of Special Area of Conservation (SAC): Chiltern Beechwoods SAC located in excess of 11km north-east from its nearest point; the Windsor Forest and Great	No

Operation	Potential impact from the Sonning Neighbourhood Plan	Mitigating factors and comments	Likelihood of significant effect
		Park SAC located approximately 14km to the east of the parish; and the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC located in excess of 18km to the south-east of the parish.	
Erection of structures on the site	None	The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not steer development towards an international site, therefore it does not increase any potential for the erection of structures on the site. The adopted Core Strategy Local Plan (2010) sets out the spatial vision for the borough. The Thames Basin Heaths Special Protection Area (SPA) and Linear Mitigation Zones are located outside the neighbourhood plan area. Three sites of Special Area of Conservation (SAC): Chiltern Beechwoods SAC located in excess of 11km north-east from its nearest point; the Windsor Forest and Great Park SAC located approximately 14km to the east of the parish; and the Thursley, Ash, Pirbright and Chobham SAC located in excess of 18km to the south-east of the parish.	No

4.16. This conclusion does not factor in any measures contained within the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of development, and is therefore consistent with the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) judgement *'People over Wind, Peter Sweetman v Coillte Teoranta'* (April 2018). This concerns a judgement by the Court, which held that Article 6(3) of the Habitats Directive requires that measures intended to avoid or reduce the harmful effects of a plan or project on a European Protected Site should not be taken into consideration at the screening stage.

In Combination Effects

4.17. The Habitat Regulations require the consideration of significant effects of a plan or programme arising from in combination effects with other plans or programmes. It can be considered that this will fall into two categories: those effects associated with regional strategic plans and proposals and those relating to more localised effects.

4.18. The South East Plan, the regional spatial strategy within which Wokingham Borough sites, was revoked in 2013 with the exception of Policy NRM6: Thames Basin Heaths SPA. The preparation of the South East Plan considered in-combination effects of the projects and plans across the region at a strategic level. As regards other plans within the borough, or in neighbouring authorities, these will have been individually assessed through the plan-making process for the adopted Core Strategy and MDD local plans respectively.

4.19. As detailed above, no likelihood of significant effects of the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan have been found following a screening opinion. The working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan does not propose development that would have an effect on existing features of habitats or conservation and solely defines what features are valuable in the neighbourhood plan area. Furthermore, given the narrow scope of the neighbourhood plan (the Parish of Sonning) and the controls in place in other plans, it is unlikely that in-combination effects would arise. A further HRA screening assessment may be required if significant changes are made to the emerging plan.

5. Consultation with Statutory Bodies

5.1. Under regulation 9(2) of the SEA Regulations, the Council has a duty to consult with specified environmental organisations (Natural England, Historic England and the Environment Agency) before determining whether or not a plan or programme is likely to have significant effects. It also has a duty to prepare a statement of its reasons for this determination.

5.2. Under Regulation 11(1), consultation on the provisional Screening Statement (November 2024) was undertaken with the following organisations for five weeks from 28 November 2024 to 9 January 2025 requesting their opinion.

- Historic England (The Historic Buildings and Monuments Commission for England);
- Natural England; and
- The Environment Agency.

5.3. The Council received responses from Historic England and Natural England.

5.4. Historic England concluded that, at this stage, the draft plan would be unlikely to have any likely significant effects that merit completion of an SEA, as the plan did not propose to allocate any sites for development.

5.5. Natural England concluded that the draft neighbourhood plan would be unlikely to have likely significant effects on statutorily designated nature conservation sites or landscapes. Natural England was not able to offer a view on whether the plan was likely to affect protected species, in the absence of a centralised data source, and advised engagement with the Council's ecology / landscape officers and local wildlife bodies.

5.6. No comments were provided by the Environment Agency.

5.7. Full responses from the provisional draft screening opinion with the relevant environmental bodies can be found in **Appendix 1**.

6. Conclusions

6.1. Following consultation with the specific environmental bodies on the Council's provisional view on the need for SEA and HRA (as set out in the Screening Statement November 2024) the Council considers that, having taken account of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004, the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is unlikely to have significant environmental effects and therefore a Strategic Environmental Assessment is not required.

6.2. The Council also considers that the working draft Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is unlikely to have significant effects on The National Site Network (formerly Natura 2000 sites), either alone or in-combination with other plans or projects, therefore an Appropriate Assessment is not required.

6.3. The Sonning Neighbourhood Plan is intended to supplement the policies within the adopted development plan with respect to the parish of Sonning.

Appendix 1: Statutory Body Responses

Historic England

Our ref: PL00797555

To: James McCabe
Principal Planning Policy Officer
Wokingham Borough Council

By email only: james.mccabe@wokingham.gov.uk
PolicyandPlans@wokingham.gov.uk

20 December 2024

Dear James

Sonning Neighbourhood Plan: Screening Statement for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Thank you for inviting Historic England to comment on this Screening Statement.

As the Government's adviser on the historic environment Historic England is keen to ensure that the protection of the historic environment is fully taken into account at all stages and levels of the planning process. For the purposes of this consultation, Historic England will confine its advice to the question, "Is it (the Neighbourhood Plan) likely to have a significant effect on the historic environment?".

The information supplied indicates that the plan will not have any significant effects on the historic environment. We note that Neighbourhood Plan does not intend to allocate land for housing or other development types. On the basis of the information supplied, Historic England concurs with the Council that the preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment is not required.

The views of the other statutory consultation bodies should be taken into account before the overall decision on the need for an SEA is made.

I should be pleased if you can send a copy of the determination (via e-seast@historicengland.org.uk) as required by Regulation 11 of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004.

Historic England is subject to both the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and Environmental Information Regulations (2004). Any Information held by the organisation can be requested for release under this legislation.

We should like to stress that this opinion is based on the information provided by you with your correspondence. To avoid any doubt, this does not reflect our obligation to provide further advice on later stages of the SEA process and, potentially, object to specific proposals which may subsequently arise (either as a result of this consultation or in later versions of the plan) where we consider that, despite the SEA, these would have an adverse effect upon the environment.

Historic England strongly advises that the Council's conservation team and archaeological advisers are closely involved throughout the preparation of the plan and its assessment. They are best placed to advise on; local historic environment issues and priorities, including access to data held in the Historic Environment Record (HER), how the policy or proposal can be tailored to minimise potential adverse impacts on the historic environment; the nature and design of any required mitigation measures; and opportunities for securing wider benefits for the future conservation and management of heritage assets.

Please do contact me, via email if you have any queries.

Yours sincerely

Guy Robinson, BSc, MRTPI
Historic Environment Planning Adviser
Development Advice – London and the South East Region
guy.robinson@historicengland.org.uk

Historic England is subject to both the Freedom of Information Act (2000) and Environmental Information Regulations (2004). Any Information held by the organisation can be requested for release under this legislation.

Date: 08 January 2025
Our ref: 495359
Your ref: Sonning Neighbourhood Plan

Mr James McCabe
Wokingham Borough Council

BY EMAIL ONLY
PolicyandPlans@wokingham.gov.uk

Hornbeam House
Crewe Business Park
Electra Way
Crewe
Cheshire
CW1 6GJ

T 0300 060 3900

Dear Mr McCable

Sonning Neighbourhood Plan - SEA/HRA Screening Opinion Consultation

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated and received by Natural England on 28 November 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.

Screening Request: Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

It is Natural England's advice, on the basis of the material supplied with the consultation, that significant effects on statutorily designated nature conservation sites or landscapes are unlikely.

The proposed neighbourhood plan is unlikely to significantly affect any Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Marine Conservation Zone (MCZ), Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection area (SPA), Ramsar wetland or sites in the process of becoming SACs or SPAs ('candidate SACs', 'possible SACs', 'potential SPAs') or a Ramsar wetland. The plan area is unlikely to have a significant effect on a National Park, Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty or Heritage Coast, and is unlikely to impact upon the purposes for which these areas are designated or defined.

Guidance on the assessment of Neighbourhood Plans, in line with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 is contained within the Planning Practice Guidance. This identifies three triggers that may require the production of an SEA:

- a neighbourhood plan allocates sites for development
- the neighbourhood area contains sensitive natural or heritage assets that may be affected by the proposals in the plan
- the neighbourhood plan may have significant environmental effects that have not already been considered and dealt with through a sustainability appraisal of the Local Plan.

Natural England does not hold information on the location of significant populations of protected species, so is unable to advise whether this plan is likely to affect protected species to such an extent as to require an SEA. Further information is included in Natural England's standing advice on protected species.

Furthermore, Natural England does not routinely maintain locally specific data on all environmental assets. The plan may have environmental impacts on priority species and/or habitats, local wildlife sites, soils and best and most versatile agricultural land, or on local landscape character that may be sufficient to warrant an SEA. Information on ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees is set out in

Natural England/Forestry Commission standing advice.

We therefore recommend that advice is sought from your ecological, landscape and soils advisers, local record centre, recording society or wildlife body on the local soils, best and most versatile agricultural land, landscape, geodiversity and biodiversity receptors that may be affected by the plan before determining whether a SEA is necessary.

Natural England reserves the right to provide further advice on the environmental assessment of the plan. This includes any third party appeal against any screening decision you may make. If a SEA is required, Natural England must be consulted at the scoping and environmental report stages.

Please send any new consultations, or further information on this consultation to consultations@naturalengland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Sally Wintle
Consultations Team