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# **Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening Determination Statement**

## **Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan 2022 – 2035**

### **March 2023**

# Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening Determination

## Contents

1. Introduction to Strategic Environmental Assessments? .....	3
2. Screening the neighbourhood plan .....	5
3. Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan.....	7
4. Screening assessment .....	10
5. Consultation Responses.....	13
6. Screening Determination .....	13

## 1. Introduction to Strategic Environmental Assessments?

- 1.1. Strategic Environmental Assessment or SEA is commonly used to mean an environmental assessment required by the European Directive “on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment”. The Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive is implemented through the [Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004](#)<sup>1</sup> (“the Regulations”).
- 1.2. In summary the Regulations define “environmental assessment” as a procedure comprising:
  - preparing an Environmental Report on the likely significant environmental effects of the draft plan or programme;
  - carrying out consultation on the draft plan or programme and the accompanying Environmental Report;
  - taking into account the Environmental Report and the results of consultation in decision making; and
  - providing information when the plan or programme is adopted and showing how the results of the environmental assessment have been taken into account.
- 1.3. The Regulations define the environment to include such issues as: ‘biodiversity, population, human health, fauna, flora, soil, water, air, climatic factors, material assets, cultural heritage including architectural and archaeological heritage, landscape and the interrelationship between the above factors’<sup>2</sup>.

### ***What is the difference between Strategic Environmental Assessment and Sustainability Appraisal?***

- 1.4. Broadly, the difference between SEA and Sustainability Appraisal (SA) is that the latter also considers the social and economic effects of the Plan, although it is worth noting that the SEA Regulations also include some social issues (such as health and material assets) in its definition of the environment quoted above.
- 1.5. SA of Local Plans is currently required by the National Planning Policy Framework. Planning Practice Guidance requires that SEA be addressed as an integral part of the sustainability appraisal process.

### ***Legal requirements***

- 1.6. Planning Practice Guidance notes that: ‘*there is no legal requirement for a Neighbourhood Plan to have a sustainability appraisal as set out in section 19 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004*’<sup>3</sup>.
- 1.7. However, it goes on to say that ‘a qualifying body must demonstrate how its plan or order will contribute to achieving sustainable development and that preparing a sustainability appraisal is one approach that can be used.
- 1.8. Planning Practice Guidance acknowledges that there may be some limited circumstances where a neighbourhood plan is likely to have significant environmental

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/1633/contents/made>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/1633/schedule/2/made>

<sup>3</sup> Paragraph: 026 Reference ID: 11-026-20140306 Revision date: 06 03 2014

effects and that a strategic environmental assessment is required. A strategic environmental assessment may be required, for example, where:

- 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 is likely to have significant environmental effects that have not already been considered and dealt with through a sustainability appraisal of the local plan or other strategic policies for the area.<sup>4</sup>

1.9. The SEA Regulations<sup>5</sup> require the responsible authority to determine whether a plan is likely to have significant environmental effects, and therefore whether a SEA is needed. This process is commonly called “screening” and is the focus of this document. The responsible authority is required to consult with the SEA consultation bodies in making this determination. The Guidance goes on to say:

1.10. ‘Where it is determined that the plan is unlikely to have significant environmental effects (and, accordingly, does not require an environmental assessment), a statement of reasons for the determination should be prepared. A copy of the statement must be submitted with the Neighbourhood Plan proposal and made available to the independent examiner’<sup>6</sup>.

1.11. The detailed criteria for determining whether a plan is likely to have significant environmental effects are outlined in the regulations<sup>7</sup>. These criteria have been included in the template which follows.

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<sup>4</sup> [Paragraph: 046 Reference ID: 11-046-20150209](#) Revision date: 09 02 2015

<sup>5</sup> The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 para 9

<sup>6</sup> Environment Agency, Natural England, and Historic England

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/uksi/2004/1633/schedule/1/made>

## 2. Screening the neighbourhood plan

- 2.1. This report sets out the Screening Determination for the Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan and has been prepared by North Herts Council. The purpose of the screening is to assess if the Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan requires a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to be prepared.

### ***Neighbourhood Plans and Strategic Environmental Assessment***

- 2.2. European Union Directive 200142/EC requires an SEA to be undertaken for certain types of plans or programmes that could have significant environmental effects. The Directive has been transposed into law for England and Wales in the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (the Regulations). The purpose of Strategic Environmental Assessment is to promote sustainable development through assessing the extent to which the plan will help to achieve relevant environmental, economic and social objectives.
- 2.3. Under Regulation 9 of the Regulations, the responsible body (local parish or town council or neighbourhood forum) is required to determine whether a plan or programme is likely to have significant environmental effects, and therefore whether an SEA is required. This process is called screening and is undertaken using a specified set of criteria (set out in Schedule 1 of the Regulations). The Regulations require that the results of this process are set out in an SEA Screening Determination (this document), which must be publicly available. This document should be submitted with the Neighbourhood Plan proposal and made available to the independent examiner.
- 2.4. Before the responsible body makes a formal determination, there is a requirement to consult three statutory consultation bodies designated in the regulations (Historic England, the Environment Agency & Natural England) on whether an environmental assessment is required.
- 2.5. Planning Practice Guidance states that “to decide whether a draft [Neighbourhood Plan](#) might have significant environmental effects, it must be assessed (screened) at an early stage of the plan’s preparation according to the requirements set out in regulation 9 of the [Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004](#)”<sup>8</sup>.
- 2.6. The Guidance also suggests that the “The local planning authority, as part of its duty to advise or assist, should consider putting in place processes to determine whether the proposed Neighbourhood Plan will require a strategic environmental assessment.”<sup>9</sup> In this case North Herts Council (NHC) is providing assistance by undertaking the screening determination.
- 2.7. The Guidance notes particular circumstances which may require a SEA<sup>10</sup>:
- “A strategic environmental assessment may be required, for example, where:*
- *a Neighbourhood Plan allocates sites for development*

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<sup>8</sup> Paragraph: 028 Reference ID: 11-028-20150209

<sup>9</sup> ibid

<sup>10</sup> Paragraph: 046 Reference ID: 11-046-20150209

- *the neighbourhood area contains sensitive natural or heritage assets that may be affected by the proposals in the plan*
- *the Neighbourhood Plan is likely to have significant environmental effects that have not already been considered and dealt with through a sustainability appraisal of the [Local Plan](#)".*

2.8. This Screening Determination has taken account of the Guidance in reaching its conclusions, and it notes that the particular circumstances described above are encompassed by the criteria outlined in Schedule 1 of the Regulations.

### 3. Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan

- 3.1. Ickleford is a village and a civil parish in Hertfordshire, extending northwards towards Bedfordshire. It is located close to the outskirts of Hitchin along the bank of the River Hiz. It is a medium sized village with a range of facilities and the population of the Parish was 1833 residents recorded at the 2011 census which was relatively unchanged from the 2001 census.
- 3.2. Most of the Parish of Ickleford is relatively flat farmland. The village itself lies at the southern end of the Parish, with the River Oughton at its southern boundary. This joins the River Hiz, which then runs north along the village's eastern edge through meadows and commons. These rivers are rare chalk streams, celebrated for their high biodiversity. A stretch of the East Coast Mainline runs to the east of the River Hiz, and beyond this the land rises up Wilbury Hill towards Letchworth. The fields of Hitchin Lavender lie on these slopes, which are also traversed by some of the many popular footpaths and bridleways in the Parish. The busy A600 forms much of the Parish boundary to the East.
- 3.3. The Neighbourhood Plan has been produced by the Qualifying Body, Ickleford Parish Council, and covers the period 2022 to 2035. North Herts Council (NHC), as the local planning authority, designated a Neighbourhood Area contiguous with the parish on 23 September 2014 to enable the Parish Council to initiate the Plan. A map of the designated neighbourhood area is shown in Figure 1 below.

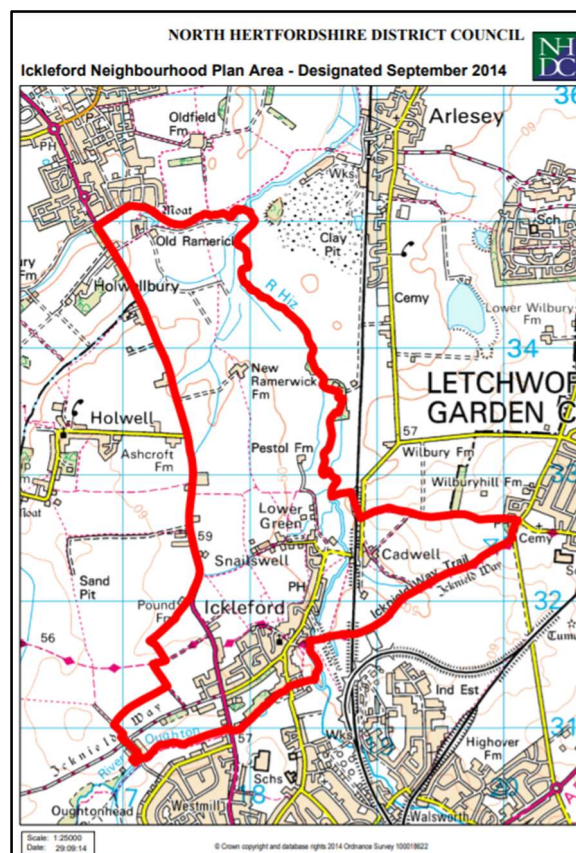


Figure 1: Map of the designated Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan area

- 3.4. The Neighbourhood Plan is the result of consultation within the community through questionnaires, informal consultation events and a formal consultation period in 2022.
- 3.5. The neighbourhood plan sets out the following vision for the Parish alongside a number of aims as illustrated in the tables extracted from the neighbourhood plan below:

**Vision**

Ickleford will thrive as a strong community retaining its own rural village identity and strong central hub, while maintaining excellent links with surrounding towns for employment and essential services. The needs of the village and parish population will be met, including local facilities, access to the countryside and sustainable transport, while protecting and enhancing the distinct natural and historical heritage in the Parish.

Future development will be carried out sensitively to maintain the character of the village, with new housing that is built to high quality standards and meets local need.

<b>Neighbourhood Plan Aims</b>
<b>Environment</b>
1. The countryside setting of the village will be protected and enhanced, by ensuring separation from the urban edge of Hitchin whilst retaining access to the countryside. Green spaces, views and local wildlife habitats, including rare chalk streams will be maintained and enhanced.
2. Parish heritage assets and key public spaces will be protected and enhanced, ensuring that any future development enhances the existing character of the village.
<b>Sustainable Development</b>
3. High quality design will be secured in all new development reflecting the character of Ickleford and its rural setting and complying with Ickleford Design Code.
4. Future housing will respond to local housing needs, be of a high standard of design and construction, and fit well into the context of the village in terms of type, mix, scale and character.
5. New build housing should be constructed to high energy saving standards and be resource efficient in ways which are appropriate to the existing rural environment.
<b>Traffic and Transport</b>
6. The roads in Ickleford will be safe and accessible for pedestrians, cyclists and motorists. Improvements to the road network to increase safety and reduce the



impact of congestion will be required alongside new development. Beneficial sustainable transport links (including pavements, footpaths, cycle routes and public transport) will be provided and appropriate parking solutions required.

### **Community**

7. Existing community facilities, such as the school, village hall, and sports and recreation centre, will be maintained and improved. Their wider use, and development to meet changing needs will be encouraged.

8. The range of commercial activities and services in the village will be sustained and enhanced. Economic activity such as working from home and provision of small-scale business units will be encouraged.

9. The leisure and recreation opportunities for residents of all ages will be improved by encouraging community activities, and increasing the provision of open spaces and children's play facilities.

## 4. Screening assessment

- 4.1. As noted above, the Regulations specify a set of criteria which must be used to assess whether any plan covered by the Regulation is likely to have a significant environmental effect and therefore require a SEA. The table below considers each of these criteria in turn for the Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan.

Table 1: Screening of the Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan against SEA criteria

Criteria for determining the likely significance of effects	Likely to have significant effects	Justification for assessment
1 (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	No	<p>The framework for development in the Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan is set out in the North Hertfordshire Local Plan 2011 – 2031 and the NPPF.</p> <p>The Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan does not include site allocations or provide for any other projects which are likely to have significant effects.</p>
1 (b) the degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans or programmes including those in a hierarchy.	No	A Neighbourhood Plan is at the bottom of the planning hierarchy and must be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Local Plan.
1 (c) the relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development.	No	The Neighbourhood Plan focuses on protecting the quality of the neighbourhood and its environment, particularly in the case of any development which arises out of the existing planning framework or the new Local Plan. The new Local Plan has been subject to sustainability appraisal at all stages in its preparation and the outcomes of those assessments have been considered with regard to this Neighbourhood Plan. It is

Criteria for determining the likely significance of effects	Likely to have significant effects	Justification for assessment
		considered that the Neighbourhood Plan's likely impact will be to have a positive effect on the environment by providing an additional layer of policy protection.
1(d) environmental problems relevant to the plan	No	None have been identified
1 (e) the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection)	No	The Plan will be in conformity with the new Local Plan Policies and the NPPF, which have each taken account of existing legislation for environmental protection. As noted above it is likely to have a positive effect by improving environmental protection.
2 (a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects	No	No significant effects have been identified
2 (b) the cumulative nature of the effects	No	No significant effects have been identified
2 (c) the trans-boundary nature of the effects	No	No significant effects have been identified
2 (d) the risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents)	No	No significant effects have been identified
2 (e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected)	No	No significant effects have been identified
2 (f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to:	No	The neighbourhood planning area does contain sensitive features, as noted in the neighbourhood plan, but there

Criteria for determining the likely significance of effects	Likely to have significant effects	Justification for assessment
<p>(i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage</p> <p>(ii) exceeded environmental quality standards</p> <p>(iii) intensive land-use</p>		<p>are no proposals in the Plan which are likely to have significant environmental effects on these features.</p> <p>In fact, key Plan policies are designed to protect these features:</p> <p>Policy E2: Protecting the landscape</p> <p>Policy E3: Rural character</p> <p>Policy E4: Biodiversity</p> <p>Policy HE1: Protecting and enhancing local heritage assets</p> <p>Policy SD3: High quality design</p> <p>Policy SD4: Provision of energy efficient buildings</p> <p>Policy C2: Recreation and green spaces</p>
<p>2 (g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, community or international protection status</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>The NP identifies a number of Local Wildlife Sites in the Parish and the Oughtonhead SSSI is within a 2km radius of the south western part of the parish. Policy E4: Biodiversity seeks to protect and enhance these features.</p> <p>The District Council updated the Habitats Regulation Assessment, September 2018. Where a neighbourhood plan does not allocate a site for development, it is not necessary for an HRA to be prepared.</p>

## **5. Consultation Responses**

- 5.1. The Council consulted the three statutory consultation bodies designated in the Regulations (Historic England, the Environment Agency and Natural England) on whether an environmental assessment is required. Responses were received from Historic England and Natural England.
- 5.2. Both Historic England and Natural England have agreed with the draft SEA screening report that a SEA for the neighbourhood plan is not required. Copies of the responses are attached as appendices.

## **6. Screening Determination**

- 6.1. In summary, it is concluded that the Ickleford Neighbourhood Plan 2022 – 2035 is not likely to have significant environmental effects and therefore a SEA is not required. The principal reasons for this conclusion are:
  - there are no sites allocated for development;
  - the neighbourhood plan focuses on protecting the character of the village and its environment;
  - there are no proposals in the neighbourhood plan which are likely to have significant environmental effects on the natural and heritage features in the neighbourhood planning areas; and
  - the neighbourhood plan does not seek to change the outcomes of the development proposals in the Local Plan to the extent that it might lead to substantively different effects to those which have already assessed.