



Northumberland
County Council

Hexham Neighbourhood Plan

The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004

Regulation 16 Adoption Statement

Published **XX** July 2021

1. Introduction

1.1. The Hexham Neighbourhood Plan (the Plan) was made (brought into force) at Cabinet on 13th July 2021. It now forms part of the development plan for Northumberland and is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications in Hexham Parish. Planning applications must be determined in accordance with the policies in the Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

1.2. Preparation of the Plan included consultation with the statutory consultation bodies, stakeholders and the local community. In parallel with the preparation of the Plan, a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) was undertaken. SEA is a process by which the Plan and its policies, and any reasonable alternative approaches to achieve the objectives of the Plan, were appraised against a set of environmental objectives. The purpose of SEA is to help ensure that potential significant adverse environmental effects are identified and then avoided or mitigated; and to consider opportunities for improving expected outcomes from implementing the Plan.

1.3. SEA is undertaken as a series of stages in line with the requirements of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (the SEA Regulations). Once a plan that has been subject to SEA is brought into force Regulation 16 of the SEA Regulations require the local authority that brings the plan into force to publish an 'adoption statement'.

This document is the Regulation 16 Adoption Statement for the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan for the purposes of the SEA Regulations.

1.4. In accordance with the SEA Regulations this adoption statement includes the following prescribed information:

- an overview of the process that has been undertaken;
- how environmental considerations have informed the development of the Plan, including consideration of reasonable alternatives;
- how the results of any consultations have been taken into account; and
- the measures that are to be taken to monitor the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the plan.

1.5 The Hexham Neighbourhood Plan, the SEA Environmental Report, and this statement are available on the County Council's website through the following link: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Planning/Planning-policy/Neighbourhood.aspx>

A hard copy of these documents can be inspected by prior appointment by contacting the Neighbourhood Planning Team at:

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2. Overview of the Process

2.1 SEA was completed over a series of stages in parallel with the development of the Neighbourhood Plan. The key stages are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1 – Key Stages in the SEA Process for Hexham Neighbourhood Plan

Date	Description
October 2017	<p>Northumberland County Council (NCC) published a revised SEA Screening Opinion Report, prepared in consultation with the statutory consultation bodies. The report concludes that SEA of the Plan is required for these reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Hexham Neighbourhood Plan seeks to allocate sites for housing and/or mixed use development (the Plan identifies that these sites are capable of providing at least 171 dwellings). These sites are in addition to those in the existing development plan; • The Hexham Neighbourhood Area includes a number of sensitive receptors, including Local Wildlife Sites, designated and non-designated heritage assets and Historic Parks and Gardens. The Neighbourhood Area extends to the south-west almost to the edge of the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty; • The Hexham Neighbourhood Area includes areas of significant flood risk, which should be considered through the SEA process.
October 2017	A SEA Scoping Report (produced by AECOM Consultancy) is published for consultation with the statutory consultation bodies. Their comments help inform the final scope of the SEA for the Plan.
March – April 2018	Hexham Town Council carry out consultation for 6 weeks in accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended) on the draft pre-submission Plan but not on the draft SEA Environmental Report.
September 2018	A draft SEA Environmental Report is published.
October – November 2018	An additional Regulation 14 consultation is carried out to include the Plan and this time the SEA Environmental Report
February 2019	An addendum to accompany the final draft SEA Environmental Report is published.
May 2019	The final version is submitted to NCC along with the final draft version of the Plan. These documents are subsequently publicised by NCC for 6 weeks in accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended).
October 2019	A second addendum is produced to accompany the submission version of the neighbourhood plan

2.2. The SEA Scoping Report helped to inform the creation of an SEA Framework, which comprised a list of objectives under seven environmental themes, against which the Plan and its policies were assessed throughout its preparation. This SEA Framework is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Environmental Themes and Objectives for the Hexham Plan

SEA Themes	SEA Objectives
Protect and enhance the function and connectivity of biodiversity habitats and species	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support connections between habitats in the Plan area • Support continued improvements to the designated sites in the Plan area • Achieve a net gain in biodiversity • Support access to, interpretation and understanding of biodiversity and geodiversity
Contribute to climate change mitigation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote high quality design • Promote the use of sustainable modes of transport, including walking, cycling and public transport? • Reduce the need to travel
Support the resilience of Hexham to the potential effects of climate change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve green infrastructure networks in the plan area to support adaptation to the potential effects of climate change • Sustainably manage surface water run-off, ensuring that the risk of flooding is not increased (either within the plan area or downstream) and where possible reduce flood risk • Ensure the potential risks associated with climate change are considered through new development in the plan area • Increase the resilience of biodiversity in the plan area to the effects of climate change
Protect, enhance and manage the fabric and setting of cultural and natural heritage assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conserve and enhance landscape and townscape features • Support the integrity of the surrounding landscape • Support the integrity of the Conservation Area
Protect ground and surface water quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minimise water consumption • Reduce surface water pollution and encourage the use of SUDS to manage water quality
Cater for existing and future residents' needs as well as the needs of different groups in the community, and improve access to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the provision of a range of house types and sizes • Support enhancements to the current housing stock • Meet the needs of all sectors of the community • Provide quality and flexible homes that meet people's needs

SEA Themes	SEA Objectives
local, high-quality community services and facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve the availability and accessibility of community facilities
Protect and improve the health and wellbeing of residents by enhancing access to health facilities, open space and facilities for recreation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote accessibility to a range of leisure, health and community facilities, for all age groups • Provide and enhance the provision of community access to green infrastructure, in accordance with Accessible Natural Greenspace Standards • Improve access to the countryside for recreation • Ensure good access to health facilities.
Reduce the need to travel and support modal shift to active and sustainable modes of travel such as walking, cycling and public transport	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote accessibility to the town centre • Improve linkages between the town centre and other community facilities • Improve parking provision for commuters and residents • Reduce the need to travel to access services and facilities

2.3 A full draft SEA Environmental Report (September 2018) was prepared but the pre-submission consultation period on the draft Plan had already been carried out. The pre-submission consultation version of the HNP was updated to reflect commentary in the SEA and both the SEA and the draft Plan were subject to a further 6 weeks of consultation to satisfy SEA regulations. This provided a comprehensive assessment of the draft Plan including consideration of reasonable alternatives to the policies proposed in the Plan. The findings helped to inform a review and further revisions to the Plan. The SEA Environmental Report and Addendums (February and October 2019) is an amended iteration that takes account of changes to the draft Plan following consultation. This aligns with the purpose of SEA which must be seen as a continuous process applied throughout the period of plan preparation.

3. How SEA has informed the Development of the Plan

3.1 SEA has been undertaken as an iterative process to ensure that environmental considerations have guided the neighbourhood plan-making process. Policies have been developed having regard to objectives established in the SEA Framework and the need to deliver, through planning policies, Plan's Objectives which are set out in Chapter 4 of the Plan. Together these seek to place environmental considerations at the heart of decision-making.

3.2 The process for preparing a neighbourhood plan requires an independent examination of the draft plan. This requires an independent person to consider and make recommendations on whether the plan meets a range of legal and policy requirements. That examination concludes with the publication of a report by the independent person appointed to examine the plan. The Examiner's Report for the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan was published in January 2020. In Paragraph 33 he noted A Strategic Environmental Assessment, containing a Scoping Report, was submitted alongside the Neighbourhood Plan. An Addendum document was also submitted, presenting relevant updates to the findings in the SEA since Regulation consultation. Further to consideration of the submitted documents, Historic England submitted a representation setting out concerns: "...about the lack of a clear train of thought to conclude an absence of significant environmental effects on the historic environment, even if this might well be the case." Taking this into account, the Qualifying Body asked the Local Planning Authority to request a pause in the examination to allow further work to be undertaken to supplement the environmental report and to undertake consultation on an addendum to that report. Further work was undertaken and a further addendum was thus produced and submitted, following consultation with statutory bodies. None of the statutory bodies dissented from its conclusions and Historic England stated that they are: "...satisfied with the revised environmental report...there is a clear train of thought to conclude an absence of significant environmental effects on the historic environment..." The Examiners Report confirms the examiner's conclusions that the relevant statutory requirements in respect of SEA were eventually satisfied through the plan-making process.

Reasonable Alternatives

3.3 A key element of the SEA process is the appraisal of 'reasonable alternatives' for the HNP. The SEA Regulations are not prescriptive as to what constitutes a reasonable alternative, stating only that the Environmental Report should present an appraisal of the 'plan and reasonable alternatives taking into account the objectives and geographical scope of the plan'.

3.4 **Housing.** Given that the Plan is not dealing with the overall housing target or potential release of Green Belt land, it is considered that there are no alternative strategic approaches for supporting additional housing provision in Hexham. Though the Local Plan has been withdrawn since the draft Hexham Neighbourhood Plan was prepared, the strategic level of housing growth and the consideration of Green Belt

release will be considered in a new iteration of the Local Plan. Therefore, it is not considered necessary or appropriate to explore these factors through the Neighbourhood Plan.

3.5 Site Allocations. The Plan proposes to allocate twelve sites for housing development plus one ‘reserve site’. To inform the decision on which sites to allocate, the Group identified a range of sites that could potentially be allocated. Twenty eight such sites were identified by residents (at a Public Forum), and Steering Group. Research reduced these to 13 viable sites with owner consent. These sites were assessed by AECOM (through a separate technical support package), with the findings helping the Group to identify which sites should be allocated and those which should be discarded. This report can be accessed by following a link at the end of this report.

Policy Appraisals

3.6 The Plan policies were appraised against the SEA Framework at various stages to help inform the final policies in the made version of the Plan. The appraisal commentary for each sustainability theme does not necessarily discuss every single Plan policy, only those where notable effects are predicted. The results of the policy appraisal are summarised in Table 3 below. Notably, there were no policies which were expected to result in significant negative impacts. SEA findings helped give assurance that the Plan would contribute positively toward meeting environmental objectives.

Table 3 – Summary of Policy Appraisal by Environmental Objective

SEA Themes	SEA Objectives	Summary of Effects
Biodiversity and geodiversity	Protect and enhance the function and connectivity of biodiversity habitats and species	The majority of plan policies have no effects upon biodiversity , particularly those relating to the built environment, local economy and housing types. However, policies that seek to protect and enhance the natural environment are likely to have significant positive effects due to their greater focus on enhancement and links between ecological networks.
Climate change (including risk of flooding)	Reduce the level of contribution to climate change made by activities within the Neighbourhood Area.	The majority of plan policies are unlikely to have effects upon climate change mitigation. However, policy HNP2 contains some specific measures that should help to encourage resource efficiency. The general approach to development in accessible locations, and support for cycling and walking, should also help to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from transport. The effects would be small scale though. Overall, a minor positive effect is predicted.

SEA Themes	SEA Objectives	Summary of Effects
	Support the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change, including flooding;	Overall, the effects of the plan are broadly positive. This relates to the benefits for resilience that could be gained through enhancement of green infrastructure, the need for SUDs and water saving measures and a net gain in biodiversity. The effects are unlikely to be significant given that resilience will be dependent upon a much wider range of factors.
Landscape and historic environment	Protect, enhance and manage the fabric and setting of cultural and natural heritage assets	The site allocations proposed in the Plan are predicted to have mostly neutral or minor positive effects. Though there are some historic features on several sites, the condition of the sites is generally poor and development offers the potential to better reveal the significance of assets and to contribute to a higher quality build environment (Addendum October 2019)
	Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes and townscapes	The Plan is predicted to have mostly positive (though minor) effects on townscapes and landscapes through the protection of existing open space, and ensuring that development respects the character of the settlement.
Land, soil, air and water resources	Protect ground and surface water quality	Although there are some benefits associated with the plan policies (such as the retention of open and green space) the majority of policies in the plan are likely to have neutral effects. Overall, the effects on water quality are likely to be neutral
Population and human health	Cater for existing and future residents' needs as well as the needs of different groups in the community, and improve access to local, high-quality community services and facilities	Overall, the plan is predicted to have a significant positive effect upon local people and the community. Collectively, the plan policies will make a positive contribution in achieving local housing need whilst seeking to maintain or enhance social infrastructure.
	Protect and improve the health and wellbeing of residents by enhancing access to health facilities, open space and facilities for recreation.	Overall, the plan ought to have a significant positive effect upon health and wellbeing. Though the plan policies are only predicted to have minor positive effects in isolation, each would contribute towards an overall improvement in health and wellbeing.
	Reduce the need to travel and support modal shift to active and sustainable modes of travel such as walking, cycling and public transport	The plan is predicted to have a minor positive effect overall. Although new development is likely to be located in accessible locations, and support is provided for improved cycle and transport links; the magnitude of effects is low and is unlikely to have significant effects on the baseline position

4. *How the Results of Consultations have been taken into Account*

4.1 As illustrated in Table 1, the Plan and corresponding SEA have been subject to several rounds of public consultation with responses informing the preparation of both documents.

4.2 An SEA Scoping Report was published for consultation in October 2017 with the statutory consultation bodies (Natural England, Environment Agency and Historic England). The Environmental Report and subsequent Addendums (February and October 2019) sets out how the response to the consultation bodies comments was reflected in the SEA scope.

4.3 A draft SEA Environmental Report (September 2018) was published for consultation alongside the Town Council's second phase of consultation on the draft Neighbourhood Plan. Comments were received on the Environmental Report from Historic England. Page 25 of the Consultation Statement, a document that must be prepared to describe the outcome of consultation undertaken by the Town Council on the Neighbourhood Plan, provides a link in paragraph 5 to the written representations received and the Town Council's response to those representations, including any consequent modification they made to the Plan as a result of those representations.

4.4 The final SEA Environmental Report was submitted to Northumberland County Council along with the final draft version of the Plan in May 2019. These documents were subsequently publicised by the County Council for a period of 6 weeks in accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended). All representations made in response to that publicity were considered by the Examiner during the independent examination of the Plan. A further SEA Environmental Report Addendum was produced in October 2019 and the examination was paused while this Addendum was made. The Addendum to the Environmental Report was prepared to take into account comments from Historic England.

4.5 In addition to the statutory consultation stages, the Town Council also engaged with the local community and stakeholders at a number of informal consultation events throughout the preparation of the Plan. This community engagement provided a further opportunity for the Town Council to consider local environmental considerations. Further information is available in the Consultation Statement.

5. *Monitoring Measures*

5.1 The SEA Regulations require that the significant environmental effects of the implementation of the Plan should be monitored.

5.2 The final SEA Environmental Report (September 2018) highlighted the range of significant positive effects that had the potential to arise as a result of the

implementation of the Plan, with no identified significant negative effects. However, the Environmental Report concludes that:

‘ There is a requirement to present measures that could be used to monitor the effects of the Plan identified through the SEA. It is particularly important to monitor effects that are predicted to be significant, whether this be positive or negative. Monitoring helps to track whether the effects turn-out as expected, and to identify any unexpected effects. The table below sets out the monitoring measures for the predicted significant effects.’

These measures are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 – SEA Monitoring Measures

Significant Effects Identified	Monitoring Measures
A significant positive effect on biodiversity is predicted relating to a potential improvement to wildlife corridors and green infrastructure.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amount of new habitat / GI created (ha) • Connectivity of habitats and wildlife corridors
A significant positive effect is predicted on cultural and natural heritage due to an improved protection for locally important buildings and the potential improvement of townscape through redevelopment on allocated sites.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Townscape character analysis. • Number of locally important buildings identified for protection.
A significant positive effect is predicted for population and communities as the Plan will contribute towards meeting local housing needs in accessible locations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Net housing completions per annum • Number of homes for older people • Affordable housing target achievement
A significant positive effect is predicted on health and wellbeing due to cumulative effects of affordable housing, recreational facilities and accessibility.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of affordable homes delivered. • Achievement of open space and sport standards • Length of new cycle and pedestrian routes

5.3 Whilst the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan does not set out a framework to monitor the effects of implementation of the policies in the Plan, the County Council will provide, periodically, relevant information and updates through the annual Authority Monitoring Report process.

6. Sources

6.1 The following documents have informed this Adoption Statement:

- The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004. Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2004/1633/part/4/made>
- The Hexham Neighbourhood Plan, Referendum Plan, November 2019. Available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/Hexham-NP-Referendum-version-April-2020-2.pdf>
- The Hexham Neighbourhood Plan Consultation Statement, May 2019. Available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/06-NCC-Verified-Consultation-Statement.pdf>
- The Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan Environmental Report, Sept 2018. Available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/08-SEA-REPORT-Hexham-final-Sept-2018.pdf>
- The Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan Environmental Report 1st Addendum Feb 2019. Available at: https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/09-Hexham-NP-SEA-ER-Addendum_V_1-0_080219.pdf
- The Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan Environmental Report 2nd Addendum Oct 2019. Available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/Hexham-NP-SEA-Second-Addendum-October-2019.pdf>
- The Strategic Environmental Assessment for the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan Environmental Report Appendix A Sept 2018. Available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/12-Hexham-SEA-Appendix-A-PROFORMAS-Sept-18.pdf>
- Report to the Northumberland County Council on the Independent Examination of the submission draft Hexham Neighbourhood Plan, January 2020. Available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/Neighbourhood%20Plans/Hexham-NP-Examiner-s-Report-Final.pdf>