



Northumberland
County Council

**Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan
Strategic Environmental Assessment Adoption Statement**

DATE: 22 October 2021

1. *Introduction*

1.1. The Thirston Neighbourhood Plan (the Plan) was made (brought into force) at Cabinet on 13 October 2021. It now forms part of the development plan for Northumberland and is a material consideration in the determination of planning applications in Thirston 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 Thirston 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 Thirston 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:

Planning Services
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
NE61 2EF

(office hours: Monday – Thursday, 9am – 5pm, Friday 9am – 4:30pm).

Tel: 0345 600 6400

Email: Neighbourhoodplanning@northumberland.gov.uk

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 the Plan

Date	Description
February 2020	A Regulation 14 consultation on the Pre-Submission Draft Plan was carried out but abandoned due to the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, the need for Appropriate Assessment under the Habitats Regulations was screened in; this in turn triggered the need for the Plan to be subject to Strategic Environmental Assessment.
May 2020	The SEA Scoping Report was sent to the consultation bodies (Historic England, Natural England and the Environment Agency) for consultation for five weeks. Responses were received from all three consultation bodies and their comments taken into account through the SEA process. These responses are included in an appendix to the final SEA Environmental Report.
September 2020	Following the abandoned Regulation 14 consultation in February 2020, consultation on a revised Pre-Submission Draft Plan was carried out for a period of eight weeks, alongside consultation on the Draft SEA Environmental Report. The Environment Agency made further representations on the Environmental Report; this representation is included in an appendix to the final SEA Environmental Report.
March 2021	The Submission Draft Plan was submitted to Northumberland County Council who then publicised the Plan for eight weeks in accordance with Regulation 16 of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations (as amended). The publicity on the Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan included the final SEA Environmental Report (January 2021).

2.2. The SEA Scoping Report helped to inform the creation of an SEA Framework, which comprised a list of objectives under eight 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 Plan

SEA Themes	SEA Objectives
Biodiversity, flora and fauna	Objective 1: Protect and enhance biodiversity features
Climatic factors	Objective 2: Reduce the level of contribution to climate change made by activities within the Neighbourhood Area

	Objective 3: Support the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change, including flooding.
Population and Human Health	Objective 4: Provide everyone with the opportunity to live in good quality housing which people can afford, and ensure an appropriate mix of dwelling sizes, types and tenures. Objective 5: Support a vibrant, mixed economy which enables residents of the neighbourhood area to work locally. Objective 6: Improve the health and wellbeing of residents within the neighbourhood area. Objective 7: Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel. Objective 8: 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.
Soil	Objective 9: Manage soil and land resources in a sustainable manner.
Water	Objective 10: Use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner.
Historic Environment	Objective 11: Protect and enhance the character and quality of the historic environment.
Landscape	Objective 12: Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes.

2.3 A full draft SEA Environmental Report was prepared and published alongside a pre-submission consultation version of the Neighbourhood Plan. 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 (January 2021) 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 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 Thirston Neighbourhood Plan was published in June 2021. Paragraph 36 of that Report confirms the examiner's conclusions that the relevant statutory requirements in respect of SEA were satisfied through the plan-making process.

Reasonable Alternatives

3.3 Where the Plan is heavily influenced by policies in the emerging Northumberland Local Plan, it was not considered necessary to consider alternatives.

3.4 In preparing the Plan, alternative options were considered in relation to settlement boundaries and Local Green Spaces:

- **Settlement boundaries**

Settlement boundaries were considered for Eshott and West Thirston. The Vision and Objectives proposed for the Neighbourhood Plan clearly envisaged the Plan providing some general protection of the countryside and valued landscapes within the Parish. Objective 1 specifically set out that settlement boundaries will be defined through the Plan. The alternative of preparing criteria based policies would fail to accord with the stated intentions of the Objectives for the Plan. Not having settlement boundaries was therefore not a reasonable alternative within the context of the Plan's Objectives. It was therefore considered that the Plan should include settlement boundaries.

The Parish Council's justification for the use of settlement boundaries and their methodology for the definition of the boundaries are discussed and described in detail in the 'Settlement Boundary Methodology and Background Report available on the Parish Council website:

<https://northumberlandparishes.uk/thirston/documents/neighbourhood-plan>

Further information can be found in Section 6 of the SEA Environmental Report available on the County Council's website¹.

¹ Thirston Neighbourhood Plan SEA Environmental Report, January 2021
<http://www.northumberland.gov.uk/NorthumberlandCountyCouncil/media/Planning-and-Building/planning%20policy/Neighbourhood%20Planning/Thirston-NP-SEA-Environmental-Report-January-2021.pdf>

- **Local Green Spaces**

In developing the Neighbourhood Plan, a number of green spaces were identified for consideration for protection through community engagement. The suitability of the locally important sites were considered and two Local Green Spaces which met the criteria defined in national policy were designated. No other sites were considered to be of sufficient value to merit this level of protection. The approach employed by the Parish Council resulted in protection being afforded through proposed planning policies to the only areas identified by the community as having sufficient value and importance to them. Accordingly, no reasonable alternatives were assessed through the SEA process.

Policy Appraisals

3.5 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 environmental 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. 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 Theme	SEA Objectives	Summary of Effects
Biodiversity, flora and fauna	Protect and enhance biodiversity features	The Neighbourhood Plan is likely to have positive effects on biodiversity and geodiversity through the implementation of preservation and habitat enhancement policies.
Climatic factors	Reduce the level of contribution to climate change made by activities within the Neighbourhood Area	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely neutral or positive effect.
	Support the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change, including flooding.	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely positive effect.
Population and Human Health	Provide everyone with the opportunity to live in good quality housing which people can afford, and ensure an	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a neutral/positive effect in relation to design principles and settlement boundaries.

	appropriate mix of dwelling sizes, types and tenures.	
	Support a vibrant, mixed economy which enables residents of the neighbourhood area to work locally	Where policies are relevant to this objective, they are likely to result in positive effects through introducing settlement boundaries and supporting local businesses and the local economy.
	Improve the health and wellbeing of residents within the neighbourhood area	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely positive effect.
	Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel.	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely neutral effect.
	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.	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely neutral effect but with some positive effects relating to the protection of locally-important Local Green Spaces, and support for local businesses, services and facilities.
Soil	Manage soil and land resources in a sustainable manner.	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely positive effect due to policies which protect the countryside and which steer development to within settlement boundaries.
Water	Use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner.	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely neutral effect.
Historic Environment	Protect and enhance the character and quality of the historic environment.	Although the Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely neutral effect, policies relating to design and settlement boundaries were considered likely to result in positive effects as they will help to preserve and enhance the historic form of settlements.
Landscape	Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes.	The Neighbourhood Plan policies are considered to have a largely neutral effects, but with some positive effects due to policies relating to design and settlement boundaries, as well as policies relating to the effects of tourism development.

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

4.1 As illustrated in table 2, 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 May 2020 with the statutory consultation bodies (Natural England, Environment Agency and Historic England). Comments were received from all three consultation bodies set out in the SEA Regulations. Copies of these responses can be found in Appendix B of the SEA Environmental Report (January 2021).

4.3 A draft SEA Environmental Report (August 2020) was published to accompany the Regulation 14 consultation of the Neighbourhood Plan. Comments were received from the Environment Agency and can be found in Appendix C of the final SEA Environmental Report (January 2021).

4.4 The final SEA Environmental Report was submitted to Northumberland County Council along with the final draft version of the Plan in March 2021. These documents were subsequently publicised by the County Council for a period of eight weeks in accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended) and taking account of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. All representations made in response to that publicity were considered by the Examiner during the independent examination of the Plan.

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 (January 2021) states that monitoring will be led by the Parish Council but will be informed by monitoring data captured by Northumberland County Council in respect of the Northumberland Local Plan.

5.3 The County Council will provide relevant information and updates through the annual Authority Monitoring Report process.

6. Sources

6.1 The following documents have informed this Report. They are available on the County Council's Neighbourhood Planning webpage here:

<https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Planning/Neighbourhood.aspx>

- The Thirston Neighbourhood Plan, Made Plan, October 2021.
- The Thirston Neighbourhood Plan Consultation Statement, January 2021.
- The Thirston Neighbourhood Plan Strategic Environmental Assessment Environmental Report, January 2021.
- Report to the Northumberland County Council on the Independent Examination of the submission draft Thirston Neighbourhood Plan, 18 June 2021