



Northumberland
County Council

Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan

Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

Environmental Report

Prepared by the Neighbourhood Planning Team, Northumberland County Council for Thirston Parish Council

15 January 2021

Quality Control

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Non-Technical Summary

Introduction

1. Thirston Parish Council is currently preparing a neighbourhood plan for the Thirston Parish area. Once in force, the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan (the Plan) will form part of the statutory development plan for Northumberland, which is the background against which planning decisions are made.

What is the purpose of Strategic Environmental Assessment?

2. This document is the Environmental Report for a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan. This report has been prepared in order to meet the obligations set out in The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (the SEA Regulations) which implements European Directive 2001/42/EC (the SEA Directive) into UK law.
3. The aim of undertaking a SEA is to identify and assess the potentially significant environmental effects of a plan; and to suggest measures to avoid, reduce or manage damaging environmental impacts, and enhance positive effects. The SEA process enables engagement with stakeholders and certain specified consultees to allow them to comment on and shape the approach taken to assessment and to comment on the outcomes.
5. The need for SEA was triggered by the need for 'appropriate assessment' of the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan under the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended) (HRA). The HRA screening process, undertaken by the County Council, determined that appropriate assessment was necessary because the Plan would be likely to have significant effects on European sites. This conclusion automatically triggered the need for SEA. An environmental assessment must therefore be undertaken, and an environmental report prepared for submission with the Neighbourhood Plan to meet the requirements of Regulation 15(1)(e) of the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 (as amended).
6. This Environmental Report describes the assessed impact on the environment of the Draft Submission version of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan (January 2021). That version of the Plan will be made available alongside the Environmental Report for the purposes of consultation required under the SEA Regulations.

What has the Strategic Environmental Assessment involved so far?

7. The first step is to decide whether or not an SEA is required. This is referred to as 'screening'. The need for a SEA for the Plan was triggered by a separate assessment (the HRA). Accordingly, no further consideration was required about whether the Plan should be subject to SEA. Once 'screened in' there are five stages in undertaking an SEA:

Stage A: Scoping

The scoping stage of the SEA process seeks to ensure that the 'scope' of the assessment covers the likely significant environmental effects of the Plan. It describes the approach proposed for undertaking an environmental assessment of the Neighbourhood Plan and for preparing the environmental report. A scoping report was produced and consultation took place with the 'consultation bodies' in accordance with the SEA Regulations, specifically: Natural England, Historic England and the Environment Agency. The Scoping Report is available at: <https://www.northumberland.gov.uk/Planning/Planning-policy/Neighbourhood.aspx>

Stage B: Testing

This stage is about assessing the Neighbourhood Plan. This involves:

- Testing the Neighbourhood Plan objectives and policies;
- Examining and assessing any reasonable alternatives;
- Predicting the effects;
- Evaluating and scoring the effects;
- Identifying measures to mitigate adverse effects and maximise positive impacts; and
- Proposing measures for monitoring the environmental effects of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Stage C: Reporting

This Environmental Report presents the outcome of the assessment carried out at stage 3 of the process at this point in time. This may be modified in future should further significant changes be made to the Plan prior to it being brought into force.

Stage D: Consulting

This report will be subject to consultation with prescribed consultation bodies and others who have an interest in the Plan and in the area.

Stage E: Monitoring

This stage will not take place until the Neighbourhood Plan is 'made' (brought into force) and the effects of implementing the Plan can be monitored.

SEA Scope and Limitations

8. Taking a proportionate approach is a key principle in undertaking SEA. The process should only focus on what is needed to assess the likely significant effects of a plan. The scope of the SEA of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan has been influenced by the relatively small geographic area covered by the Plan and the overall strategy, vision and objectives. It has also been informed by a higher level 'Sustainability Appraisal' of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan. That process includes an assessment of the environmental impacts of introducing the Local Plan.
9. SEA is not an exact science and there are certain difficulties commonly encountered in undertaking any SEA. For example, the baseline analysis which describes the current situation of various factors is dependent upon the availability of information. Projecting what might happen with or without the Plan or in light of alternatives is also inherently difficult and requires a degree of judgement.

What does the Strategic Environmental Assessment tell us?

10. The area covered by the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan is environmentally sensitive, hosting a number of important nature conservation sites. Some of the key environmental issues based on the current state of the environment and how it is likely to evolve without the Neighbourhood Plan include:
 - The area is rich in biodiversity. There may be opportunities for enhancement but there are also potential pressures which could lead to disturbance or depletion of habitats and species. The SSSI water course (Swarland Burn to Coquet Mouth) is in an 'unfavourable – recovering' condition and is at 'high' threat risk.
 - Reliance upon private vehicles is high reflecting the rural nature of the area. This is the main cause of rising carbon emissions in the County. There are significant barriers to reducing carbon emissions. The changing climate variables (temperature / rainfall) have the potential to affect the area.
 - The health and well-being of those in the Neighbourhood Area is generally good. However, this could change relatively over time as a result of there being an increasingly ageing population. The quality and availability of existing community facilities is limited which could affect health and wellbeing.
 - There are barriers to housing and services and the quality of the living environment.
 - The 'moderate' condition of Longdike Burn water quality.
 - The area contains a range of heritage assets which could be sensitive to new development. There is a lack of information about these heritage assets – West Thirston Conservation Area does not have a Character Appraisal and there is limited information available on the condition of listed heritage assets – which

will make it difficult to determine the effect of development on these assets and their settings.

- The erosion of landscape character in LCA 39a.
11. The assessment demonstrates that the Neighbourhood Plan objectives are in accordance with the SEA environmental objectives, having a largely neutral or slightly positive effect.
 12. The assessment demonstrates that individually and collectively the policies of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan serve to support development that has limited environmental impact and the Plan provides appropriate tools to ensure mitigation of any potential negative environmental effects. The Plan encourages the protection and enhancement of the environment as a whole, and provides an appropriate framework, working alongside other plans and programmes, to protect and enhance the environment. Implementation of the Plan overall is assessed as having positive or neutral effects on the environment.
 13. An assessment was carried out on the July 2020 version of the Plan. This resulted in recommendations for changes; the revised Plan was assessed with the conclusion that no further changes were needed.

In autumn 2020, the Parish Council consulted on the SEA Environmental Report (in line with Regulation 13 of the 2004 SEA Regulations) alongside the Regulation 14 publicity and consultation on their pre-submission draft plan. Comments received during this consultation have led to changes being made to the draft plan and the Environmental Report. This report is the latest version and is based on the submission draft of the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan (January 2021).

14. The 'reasonable alternatives' considered in the plan making process related to:
 - the approach to settlement boundaries; and
 - locally important green spaces.
15. The SEA demonstrates the alternative approaches to meeting the objectives of the Plan which were considered by the Parish Council do not represent more favourable outcomes in respect of environmental impacts. For settlement boundaries, having regard to progress made in establishing housing requirements for the Parish over the Plan period to 2036, and the objectives of the Plan (which does not propose to allocate land for a greater quantum of development than that apportioned to the parish by the Local Planning Authority strategy for the area), there were no genuine reasonable alternative options other than the preferred policy approaches defined in the draft Plan.

16. For locally important green spaces, these may only be designated where they serve particular purposes and they are demonstrably special to the local community. The Plan designates all green spaces identified by the community that achieve the recognised status in terms of their function and the value attributed to them by the community. Accordingly, there are no further spaces that could be considered reasonable alternatives.

Next Steps

17. The Environmental Report was subject to consultation in accordance with the SEA Regulations. The assessment and the Environmental Report has been reviewed and, where necessary, revised to take account of representations made by the consultation bodies and to take account of the subsequent changes made to the Plan by the Parish Council. The final draft Neighbourhood Plan will now be submitted by the Parish Council to Northumberland County Council, along with the Environmental Report and other supporting documents required by legislation. The County Council will then consider whether the Plan and the various submission documents meet certain legal requirements. Provided these requirements are met the Plan will then progress to Independent Examination.

1. Introduction

Overview

- 1.1 Thirston Parish Council is currently preparing a neighbourhood development plan, often referred to simply as a 'neighbourhood plan', for the Thirston Parish area.
- 1.2 The Localism Act 2011 introduced neighbourhood planning powers. These various powers are contained in modifications to the Planning Acts and allow parish councils and, where parishes don't exist, groups of people from the community, called neighbourhood forums, to formulate neighbourhood development plans and neighbourhood development orders. These documents are intended to guide and shape development in a particular area. Neighbourhood planning powers are discretionary and there is no particular obligation on parish councils or local communities to prepare plans. However, where neighbourhood plans are prepared they must have regard to national policies and must be in general conformity with local strategic planning policies.
- 1.3 To be brought into legal force, which is known as being 'made', a neighbourhood development plan must pass an independent examination and meet certain 'basic conditions' defined in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. These include that the making of the plan does not breach and is otherwise compatible with EU obligations.
- 1.4 One of these EU obligations is European Directive 2001/42/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment. This is often referred to as the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (the SEA Directive). The need for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) must be determined and, where necessary, an assessment of the effects a plan may have on the environment must be completed prior to a plan being brought into legal force.
- 1.5 The SEA Directive '*seeks to provide a high level of protection of the environment by integrating environmental considerations into the process of preparing plans and programmes*'. The SEA Directive is transposed into UK legislation through the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (the SEA Regulations). It is these regulations with which a neighbourhood plan must comply.
- 1.6 It is the responsibility of the Local Planning Authority (LPA) to decide whether a neighbourhood plan complies with relevant legislative obligations. The Local Planning Authority for Thirston Parish is Northumberland County Council. The County Council has confirmed that SEA is required for the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan (the Plan). This requirement was triggered by an assessment under the Habitats Regulations which concluded that the introduction of certain

policies in the Plan would be likely to have significant effects on sites protected for their ecological importance at a European level. This automatically means that a SEA must be completed before a plan can be brought into force.

- 1.7 Beyond its duty to advise and assist Thirston Parish Council with neighbourhood planning¹, Northumberland County Council offered additional assistance by undertaking the SEA process and preparing this report. This additional support is akin to the role of an independent consultancy and was offered to assist in light of the limited resources available to the Parish Council and the lack of support available from any other sources, including the government's national support programme for neighbourhood planning.
- 1.8 The outcome of the SEA process is the preparation of an 'Environmental Report'. This Environmental Report has been prepared in line with the procedures prescribed in the SEA Regulations.

Structure of the Report

- 1.9 Regulation 12 of the SEA Regulations specifically sets out the requirements of an Environmental Report. It must identify, describe and evaluate the likely significant effects on the environment of implementing a plan, and of the reasonable alternatives, taking into account the objectives and geographical scope of the plan. The Environmental Report must clearly show how these requirements have been met.
- 1.10 In order to meet requirements described in the SEA Regulations, and to produce a user-friendly document, the remainder of this report has been structured to include the following chapters:

Chapter 2: The Strategic Environmental Assessment Approach

Chapter 3: Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan and policy context

Chapter 4: Environmental baseline position

Chapter 5: The Strategic Environmental Assessment Framework used to appraise the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan

Chapter 6: Appraisal of the effects of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan, and reasonable alternatives, on the environment

Chapter 7: Monitoring and Next steps

¹ as required by paragraph 3 of Schedule 4B to the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as amended).

Scope and Limitations

- 1.11 In accordance with national Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)², Strategic Environmental Assessment should only focus on what is needed to assess the likely significant effects of a neighbourhood plan. It should focus on the environmental impacts which are likely to be significant. To this end, the SEA does not need to be done in any more detail, or using more resources, than is considered to be appropriate for the content and level of detail in the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan.
- 1.12 Furthermore, in undertaking the assessment, it is necessary to be mindful of the extent to which certain matters are more appropriately assessed at different levels in the plan making process in order to avoid duplication of assessment. Accordingly, the SEA process has been informed by the Sustainability Appraisal of the emerging Northumberland Local Plan, which includes an SEA of that Plan.
- 1.13 It should be noted that in undertaking any SEA, there are certain limitations which are referred to throughout this Environmental Report. For example, the assessment is based on the information found to be available at the time of undertaking the SEA. There may be additional information, which has not been identified or in some instances the available information may be dated, such as data derived from the census. In addition, projecting or forecasting the future situation, with or without the plan is not a precise science. It involves a level of judgement to be applied, including considering the wide range of external factors which could have an indirect influence on the environment over time.

² Paragraph: 030 Reference ID: 11-030-20150209

2. The Strategic Environmental Assessment Approach

What is Strategic Environmental Assessment?

- 2.1 Strategic Environmental Assessment is a mechanism for considering and communicating the likely significant effects on the environment of an emerging plan, and reasonable alternative approaches to achieve the objectives of that plan. The aim of SEA is to inform and influence the plan-making process with a view to avoiding or mitigating negative environmental effects and maximising positive effects. Through this approach, the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan seeks to maximise the emerging Plan's contribution to achieving sustainable development.
- 2.2 In some circumstances a Strategic Environmental Assessment may be undertaken as a part of a 'Sustainability Appraisal'. The Sustainability Appraisal process has a broader remit than SEA. In addition to assessing the likely effects of a plan or programme on the environment, a Sustainability Appraisal involves examining the likely effects of a plan in social and economic terms.
- 2.3 Neighbourhood development plans are 'development plan documents' for the purposes of the Planning Acts. Accordingly, 'Sustainability Appraisal' is not required. The SEA of the Thirston Parish Neighbourhood Plan therefore addresses only the requirements of the SEA Directive and the SEA Regulations. Whilst it does not constitute a Sustainability Appraisal, it has informed wider considerations by the Parish Council in respect of ensuring the Neighbourhood Plan contributes to the achievement of sustainable development which is one of the 'basic conditions' required of neighbourhood plans.

Determining the need for Strategic Environmental Assessment

- 2.4 Not every neighbourhood plan requires SEA. The need for SEA is influenced by the objectives and policies proposed in the plan and the nature of the area to which the plan applies and any likely significant environmental effects. In order to determine if a neighbourhood plan requires SEA, a screening process is necessary. Screening the need for SEA includes consideration of requirements set out in The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (the 'Habitats Regulations'). Where a Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) concludes that significant environmental effects are likely as a result of the objectives or policies contained in a plan the SEA Regulations indicate that this automatically triggers the need for SEA.
- 2.5 The Habitats Regulations require that competent authorities assess the potential impacts of land use plans on the Natura 2000 network of European protected sites. For the purposes of the Regulations, Northumberland County Council is the

competent authority. The purpose of assessment is to determine whether there will be any 'likely significant effects' on any European site as a result of the plan's implementation, either alone or 'in combination' with other plans or projects; and, if so, whether these effects will result in any adverse effects on that site's integrity with reference to the site's conservation objectives. The process by which the effects of a plan or programme on European sites are assessed is known as 'Habitats Regulations Assessment' (HRA).

- 2.6 In accordance with the Habitats Regulations, an HRA screening exercise was undertaken to identify the likely impacts of the Thirston Parish Neighbourhood Plan upon European sites, either alone or 'in combination' with other projects or plans, and to consider whether these effects are likely to be significant.
- 2.7 The screening exercise found that the possibility of significant effects could not be excluded, therefore it was deemed necessary to undertake a more detailed assessment, known as 'Appropriate Assessment' (AA). This conclusion automatically triggered the need for SEA. The AA is reported separately from the SEA of the Plan, but importantly has helped to inform the appraisal process, particularly in respect of the potential impact the introduction of some policies may have on biodiversity and habitats.

SEA of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan

- 2.8 The point in the plan-making process when it was determined that SEA should be undertaken, and the time at which this assessment was completed, has had some impact on the evaluation of reasonable alternatives through the SEA process. The extent to which genuine reasonable alternatives were available to assess through the SEA process at the time this assessment was undertaken is, to some extent, a reflection of progress at the strategic planning level made by the County Council in the preparation of the Northumberland Local Plan. More particularly, the need for indicative local housing requirements for neighbourhood areas was introduced through paragraphs 65 and 66 of the National Planning Policy Framework (February 2019). Those requirements, including for Thirston Parish, have now been included in the draft Northumberland Local Plan which is at an advanced stage in the plan-making process.

Strategic Environmental Assessment Stages

- 2.9 The SEA Regulations prescribe a process for undertaking SEA and specific guidance on what must be addressed at each stage. The stages for the SEA of the Neighbourhood Plan are included in Planning Practice Guidance³ and are described in Figure 1.

³ Paragraph: 033 Reference ID: 11-033-20150209

Figure 1: Stages in the SEA Process

Stage	Tasks
Stage A: Setting the context and objectives, establishing the baseline and deciding on the scope	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify other relevant plans, programmes and environmental protection objectives. 2. Collect baseline information. 3. Identify environmental problems. 4. Develop SEA objectives. 5. Consult on the scope of SEA.
Stage B: Developing and refining alternatives and assessing effects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Test the Plan objectives against the SEA objectives. 2. Develop the Plan options including reasonable alternatives. 3. Predict the likely effects of the Plan, including alternatives. 4. Evaluate the likely effects of the Plan, including alternatives. 5. Consider ways of mitigating adverse effects and maximising beneficial effects. 6. Propose measures to monitor the significant effects of implementing the Plan.
Stage C: Preparing the Environmental Report	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Present the predicted environmental effects of the Plan, including alternatives, in an Environmental Report.
Stage D: Consultation and decision-making	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Consult the public and Consultation Bodies on the draft Plan and the Environmental Report. 2. Assess significant changes to the Plan to ensure that the environmental implications are assessed and taken into account. 3. Make decisions on how the Environmental Report and consultees' opinions have been taken into account in deciding the final form of the Plan.
Stage E: Monitoring implementation of the plan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Develop methods for monitoring implementation of the Plan and publish these in a 'post adoption statement'. 2. Monitor significant effects of implementing the Plan. 3. Respond to adverse effects.

Stage A

- 2.10 The SEA Regulations require that *“When deciding on the scope and level of detail of the information that must be included in the report, the responsible authority shall consult the consultation bodies”*. In England, these consultation bodies are Natural England (NE), Historic England (HE) and the Environment Agency (EA). The

consultation bodies were consulted on the scope of the SEA for the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan in April 2020.

2.11 The Scoping Report included:

- A review of the key environmental and sustainability objectives of European, national, regional and local plans, policies and programmes relevant to the Neighbourhood Plan – this work has been kept under review, but has not required updating since the scoping stage and is presented in Appendix A.
- A baseline against which the Neighbourhood Plan could be assessed – based on the anticipated scope of the neighbourhood plan's effects, the baseline position was presented in respect of the following environmental topics:
 - a. Air
 - b. Biodiversity, flora and fauna
 - c. Climatic factors
 - d. Population and human health
 - e. Soil
 - f. Water
 - g. Historic environment
 - h. Landscape
- Key environmental issues or problems for the Neighbourhood Area – based on the above topics, the key issues and problems were identified. Where the issues were of little or no relevance to the Plan they would not be addressed or afforded more limited weight.
- An SEA Framework – the SEA framework is a set of objectives and guiding questions used to determine and assess the likely significant effects on the environment of the objectives and policies in the Plan. It is a recognised method by which the likely effects of the plan and alternative options can be described, analysed and compared. The SEA framework is set out in Section 5.

2.12 Consultation responses to the SEA Scoping document are provided in Appendix B to this Report and were taken into account and informed the subsequent stage of assessment. Responses are summarised as follows:

Historic England: *They agree that historic environment issues should be scoped into the SEA. They advise enlarging the context with the inclusion of the principal duties of the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act 1979. Under 'summary of current baseline, HE advise expanding on the significance and sensitivity to change of the assets identified (and non-designated heritage assets) and give advice on how to address the lack of a conservation area character appraisal for West Thirston. Under*

‘triggers’, HE wonder if the Plan should include policies to manage the impact of the A1 proposals on the historic environment. [It should be noted that, unless the Plan would fail to meet the ‘basic conditions’ by omitting a particular policy or theme, only the Parish Council may decide the scope of their Neighbourhood Plan.] In addition, they suggest including any likely positive impacts on the historic environment. Under ‘Objectives’, HE advise considering if additional questions are needed and suggest consideration of indicators and monitoring to clearly demonstrate the effects of the Plan in operation.

Natural England: *They welcome the comprehensive approach to the scoping and note specific reference to the Coastal Mitigation Service which is welcomed in addressing potential impacts on the designated sites at the cost. They also welcome the reference to likely national strategic infrastructure projects and mitigation requirements as appropriate and the inclusion of reference to biodiversity net gain.*

Environment Agency: *They support the inclusion of SEA objectives which support a net gain in biodiversity and multifunctional green space. To ensure the Plan does not cause deterioration in the Water Framework Directive (WFD) status of the River Coquet, they advise including an objective in relation to this. They welcome the inclusion of an objective to support resilience to the potential effects of climate change and advise taking account of relevant policies and strategies. The EA welcome consideration of water quality and water availability and advise having regard to the objectives of the WFD. Regarding Policy 8, they recommend making reference to the cemetery section of the ‘Environment Agency’s Approach to Groundwater Protection’ and information on the Natural Death Centre website. They advise that a hydrogeological risk assessment should be undertaken and refer to the EA documents ‘Assessing the Groundwater Pollution Potential of Cemetery Developments’.*

Stage B

- 2.13 Following consultation on the SEA Scoping Report, testing of the objectives and policies in the Neighbourhood Plan was progressed. This involved each of the five actions identified in the defined SEA stages, that is:
- Testing the Plan objectives and policies against the strategic environmental assessment framework;
 - Developing the Plan options including reasonable alternatives;
 - Evaluating the likely effects of the Neighbourhood Plan and alternatives;
 - Considering ways of mitigating adverse effects and maximising beneficial effects; and
 - Proposing measures to monitor the significant effects of implementing the Neighbourhood Plan

Stage C

2.14 The Environmental Report is prepared. It seeks to present information on the draft Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan and the reasonable alternative options considered. The Environmental Report explains the process that was undertaken and provides an assessment setting out how the policies chosen in the draft Plan, and any reasonable alternatives, perform against a range of environmental objectives.

2.15 In accordance with **Stage D**, this report was subject to consultation. No comments were received from Historic England or Natural England. The Environment Agency made the following comments:

- There is a known Great Crested Newt population at Burgham golf course and around Longfield Cottage / Park Wood just north of the river Coquet. This should be considered within the SEA.⁴
- With respect to 'Figure 3: SEA Framework, we welcome the inclusion of the guide question in relation to WFD.
- Much of the focus of the SEA is on designated sites and local wildlife sites. Consideration should be given to priority habitats and species. For example, Longdike Burn is a priority river habitat which has a moderate WFD status. We would encourage opportunities through community projects to enhance this priority river habitat in order to improve biodiversity.

Their response is included in Appendix C to this report. The environmental assessment has been reviewed and modified and this report has been updated to reflect these comments.

2.16 **Stage E** will not take place until the Neighbourhood Plan is made and the effects of implementing the Plan can be monitored.

⁴ Longfield Cottage and Park Wood lie beyond the boundary of the Neighbourhood Area and are therefore not assessed in this report.

3. The Thirston Neighbourhood Plan and Policy Context

Neighbourhood Plans

- 3.1 Communities have a right to use discretionary powers introduced into the Planning Acts in 2011 to produce a neighbourhood development plan, often just known as a 'neighbourhood plan'. Communities are not required by legislation to produce such a plan but they may choose to do so in order to shape development in their area. Local Planning Authorities have a duty to support those groups which choose to pursue a neighbourhood plan and are required to bring plans into force provided they meet all statutory obligations. Once neighbourhood plans are 'made' (brought into legal force) they become part of the statutory development plan and must be used in making decisions on planning applications in the area to which they apply.
- 3.2 There are various regulations governing neighbourhood planning. Neighbourhood plans may only be prepared by a 'qualifying body' defined under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990. Where parish councils exist these are, by default, the 'qualifying body' for the purposes of neighbourhood planning. The preparation of plans is subject to The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012; The Neighbourhood Planning (Referendums) Regulations 2012 (and subsequent amendments); and the Neighbourhood Planning Act 2017. Neighbourhood plans may only be prepared for areas specifically defined as 'neighbourhood areas'. For areas where parishes exist it is normally the whole of a parish that is defined as a neighbourhood area.
- 3.3 Neighbourhood plans must meet several statutory requirements to ensure they are legally compliant. This includes meeting what are known as the 'basic conditions'. It must be demonstrated that the basic conditions have been met before a neighbourhood plan can proceed to a referendum and then be formally 'made' by the Local Planning Authority. These are set out in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and Planning Practice Guidance⁵. Independent examination of neighbourhood plans comprises an assessment of the extent to which a plan meets the basic conditions and other legal obligations. The basic conditions applying to neighbourhood plans are that:
- having regard to national policies and advice contained in guidance issued by the Secretary of State it is appropriate to make the neighbourhood plan;
 - the making of the neighbourhood plan contributes to the achievement of sustainable development;
 - the making of the neighbourhood plan is in general conformity with the strategic policies contained in the development plan for the area of the authority (or any part of that area);

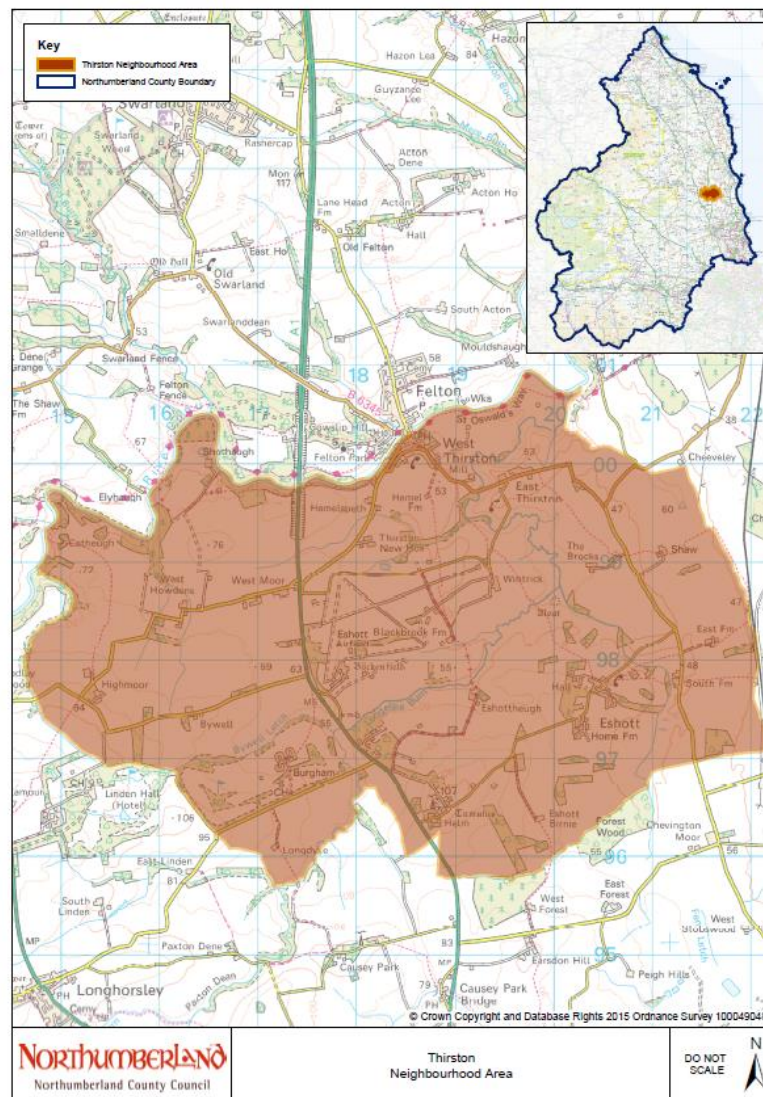
⁵ Paragraph: 065 Reference ID: 41-065-20140306

- the making of the neighbourhood plan does not breach, and is otherwise compatible with, EU obligations; and
- all prescribed conditions are met in relation to the plan and prescribed matters have been complied with in connection with the proposal for the neighbourhood plan.

Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan

- 3.4 The Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan is being prepared by Thirston Parish Council, as the qualifying body. If the Plan passes independent examination and is supported in a local referendum it will be 'made' by Northumberland County Council as the Local Planning Authority. The Neighbourhood Plan will cover the Thirston Neighbourhood Area which comprises the whole of the administrative area of Thirston Civil Parish (figure 2).

Figure 2: Thirston Neighbourhood Area



3.5 Thirston Parish is in a rural area situated north of Morpeth. Initial work on a Neighbourhood Plan for Thirston began in late 2017. The Thirston Parish Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group was created to help guide the preparation of a plan and comprises volunteers from the community and Parish Councillors. In July 2018, the Parish Council carried out an initial consultation on a draft vision and objectives, giving the opportunity also to raise other concerns to be addressed within the Parish. This was followed in May 2019 by a survey of all businesses in the Parish. Consideration of feedback received from both consultations helped to further shape the draft vision and objectives and inform draft policy areas.

3.6 A Submission Draft Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan has been prepared which seeks to address the key issues of:

- supporting local businesses and home-working whilst minimising the impact of some businesses on residential amenity;
- protecting the value of tranquillity, wildlife and the rural nature of the area;
- conserving the character and rural setting of the villages of West Thirston and Eshott;
- protecting the natural environment in the Neighbourhood Area with the River Coquet corridor and other green spaces being highly valued for recreation and biodiversity;
- supporting the needs of the local community by maintaining community facilities, whilst recognising that many of the community facilities are in nearby Felton;
- ensuring that new development is of high-quality design and sympathetic to the local environment and of a scale that results in incremental growth;
- the potential impact on local facilities of the large number of caravan and chalet parks that now have consent in the Parish;
- concerns about additional pressure for development within the Parish following the future dualling of the A1.

3.7 The Submission Draft Neighbourhood Plan sets out the following vision:

“Our vision for Thirston Parish is that we maintain the tranquil, rural nature of our diverse small rural communities, recognising the historic and natural environmental heritage that we enjoy, whilst embracing change that will enhance the lives of all parishioners.”

3.8 To deliver the vision, the following objectives are set out in the draft Plan:

Objective 1: The built and natural environment

To value the peaceful, beautiful nature and the rural setting of the parish, our objective is to ensure that:

- *new development conserves and respects the special character of buildings and places and enhances wildlife across the parish;*
- *settlement boundaries are defined to ensure the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside in the Parish is recognised in decision-making;*
- *Local Green Spaces are identified and protected;*
- *the natural environment is preserved and where possible enhanced.*

Objective 2: The economy, employment and the community

To build on the strong sense of community across the Parish our objective is to:

- *retain and support our facilities, local services and employment generating businesses providing they respect the special rural and tranquil character of the area and the amenity of residents;*
- *support tourism in the Parish but ensure that new development is at an appropriate scale;*
- *support the provision of a new crematorium and protect the Woodland Burial site.*

3.9 To deliver the vision and objectives, the draft Plan included the following policies:

- Policy 1: Design and Development Principles
- Policy 2: New Housing Development
- Policy 3: Wildlife Corridors and Site of Special Scientific Interest
- Policy 4: Coastal Mitigation Service
- Policy 5: Local Green Spaces
- Policy 6: Businesses and Community Facilities
- Policy 7: Tourism Accommodation
- Policy 8: Woodland Burial Site and Crematorium

The policies in full are set out in Appendix A of this report.

The Strategic Planning Policy Context

3.10 Neighbourhood Plans must be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan. In Northumberland, the development plan consists of the adopted Core Strategies and saved policies of the Local Plans of the former local planning authorities that made up Northumberland, prior to Local Government Reorganisation in 2009.

3.11 Specifically, Thirston lies within the former Castle Morpeth District Council administrative area. The Castle Morpeth District Local Plan was adopted in 2003. A number of policies from the Castle Morpeth Local Plan were 'saved' beyond September 2007 and continue to form part of the statutory development plan for the former Castle Morpeth District Council area.

- 3.12 A new Northumberland Local Plan is set to supersede all existing Core Strategy and Local Plan documents currently extant in Northumberland. Northumberland County Council submitted the Northumberland Local Plan, to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government on 29 May 2019 for examination. The Local Plan is, at the time of preparing this Report, subject to independent examination by the Planning Inspectorate. Phase 1 hearings took place in autumn / winter of 2019 and spring 2020 and phase 2 hearings are expected to take place in autumn 2020 with a view to adoption thereafter in 2021.
- 3.13 The Neighbourhood Plan has been prepared having regard to the need to meet the ‘basic condition’ requiring policies and the Plan as a whole to be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan. It is recognised by the Parish Council that the existing Castle Morpeth District Local Plan (2003) is somewhat dated; however, for the purposes of neighbourhood planning they contain the strategic policies against which the Neighbourhood Plan must be assessed. The Parish Council has also taken into account the emerging strategic planning policy context set out in the draft Northumberland Local Plan when formulating the Neighbourhood Plan. This approach has regard to advice provided in national Planning Practice Guidance concerning the relationship between emerging local plans and neighbourhood plans.
- 3.14 The Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan will be submitted to Northumberland County Council, alongside this Environmental Report. The County Council will consider whether the Plan may progress to Independent Examination in terms of meeting legal requirements.
- 3.15 If the Plan is successful at Independent Examination and meets the basic conditions, the Plan will progress to Referendum. If more than 50% of the local electorate vote in favour of the Plan, it will then be for Northumberland County Council to seek to ‘make’ the Plan. Once made, the Plan will become part of the statutory development plan for the Parish of Thirston.
- 3.16 The SEA has been undertaken to support the Neighbourhood Plan in meeting the basic conditions, and particularly the need to ensure that the Plan is compatible with and does not otherwise breach EU obligations. The Environmental Report provides an assessment of the impact policies presented in the Draft Pre-Submission (August 2020) version of the Plan may have on the environment.

4. Environmental baseline position

Plans, programmes, policies and strategies

- 4.1 In order to establish a clear scope, and in accordance with the requirements of the SEA Regulations, it was necessary to review and develop an understanding of a wide range of relevant plans, programmes, policies and strategies. The Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan first needed to be framed in the context of international, European, national, regional and local objectives and take account of strategic planning and environmental policies. The purpose of this review was to highlight the key elements of these plans and strategies that will influence the preparation of the SEA to ensure that their requirements are taken into account.
- 4.2 Recognising national Planning Practice Guidance in respect of taking a proportionate approach to SEA of Neighbourhood Plans and avoiding duplication of work, the review of such plans and programmes, policies and strategies was derived from the Sustainability Appraisal of the Northumberland Local Plan (produced by Wood Environment & Infrastructure Solutions UK Ltd). It was considered that the same plans, programmes, policies and strategies would be relevant to the Plan but additional consideration would be given to any more locally specific context. Appendix C provides the full schedule and outlines brief details of their potential relevance to the Neighbourhood Plan.
- 4.3 The plans and programmes identified do not act in isolation and links between their scale and objectives can be made. International and national plans and strategies often provide high level guidance, with their objectives being reflected in plans at a regional, sub-regional or local level. The schedule of plans and programmes identifies the diversity of documents that are considered to have a bearing on the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Baseline – Environmental issues

- 4.4 The selected environmental themes for the assessment, set out below, incorporated the 'SEA topics' suggested by Annex I(f) of the SEA Directive⁶. These were refined to reflect a broad understanding of the anticipated scope of Neighbourhood Plan effects. These topics are:
- a. Air
 - b. Biodiversity, flora and fauna
 - c. Climatic factors

⁶ The SEA Directive does not set out to prescribe particular issues that should and should not be a focus, beyond requiring a focus on *"the environment, including on issues such 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"*.

- d. Population and human health
- e. Soil
- f. Water
- g. Historic environment
- h. Landscape

The interrelationships between the above topics were also taken into account.

- 4.5 The following provides a brief overview of the baseline environmental characteristics in the Thirston Parish area and the likely evolution thereof without the implementation of the Neighbourhood Plan as required in Planning Practice Guidance⁷. As described, some of the issues are of little or no relevance i.e. do not represent environmental problems or opportunities and therefore have not been addressed in the SEA or have been afforded a more limited focus. The baseline provides the broad basis against which to assess the likely effects of the draft plan and any reasonable alternatives.

Air

- 4.6 Due to the absence of significant and tangible air quality issues in the Thirston Neighbourhood Area, air has been scoped **OUT** of the SEA process.

Biodiversity, flora and fauna

Nature conservation designations

- 4.7 The River Coquet and Woodlands SSSI runs along the northern boundary of the Neighbourhood Area. As a relatively unmodified fast-flowing upland river supporting characteristic fauna and flora the Coquet is of key significance in the national resource for nature conservation. The Coquet valley has several long-established woodlands which, being relatively unmodified by planting, retain semi-natural plant communities. There are few such woodlands now remaining in Northumberland.⁸ The condition of the river course within the Parish (Swarland Burn to Coquet Mouth), is recorded as 'unfavourable – recovering' and the condition threat risk is high (25/08/2010). An earlier survey (10/12/2002) recorded the condition as 'unfavourable – no change'. Therefore, the data would suggest a marginal improvement in the outlook for this stretch of the SSSI though the threat risk remains high.

⁷ Paragraph: 036 Reference ID: 11-036-20140306

⁸ <https://designatedsites.naturalengland.org.uk/PDFsForWeb/Citation/2000052.pdf>
Views about Management

- 4.8 Within the SSSI are two areas of ancient and semi-natural woodland: Hedley Wood; and Duke's Bank Wood. In recent surveys, their condition was classed as 'favourable' with no loss evident.

Habitats

- 4.9 There are two other ancient woodlands in the Parish: Catheugh Woods in the north west corner of the area; and Windy Banks, an ancient replanted woodland along its western edge. There is no data to indicate the condition of these woodlands, however, ancient woodland is acknowledged as being a rich and complex habitat, home to more threatened species than any other.⁹
- 4.10 The Coquet River Moldshaugh Local Wildlife Site (LWS) lies within the north eastern corner of the Parish. This is an area of ancient grassland on the south bank of the River Coquet which holds rare plants of regional and national importance. The site record, which dates from 2008, makes no reference to the condition of this LWS.

Species

- 4.11 Several important bird species are found in the Parish. These are listed under section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (NERC), and include corn bunting, northern lapwing and curlew. In addition, the Coquet provides an undisturbed habitat for otters. The rich insect life creates feeding grounds for bat colonies which roost and rear their young within the valley. The river is frequented by water voles along much of its length. The fish fauna of the Coquet is diverse with salmon and trout being particularly significant. There is a known Great Crested Newt population at Burgham golf course.

Key environmental problems or issues

- 4.12 There are two issues relating to biodiversity, flora and fauna:
- The 'unfavourable – recovering' condition of the SSSI water course (Swarland Burn to Coquet Mouth) and 'high' threat risk;
 - The presence of rare and threatened bird species in the Parish.

Climatic factors

Greenhouse gas emissions by source

- 4.13 No emissions data is available for the Neighbourhood Area. At the local authority level, detailed information is available for Carbon Dioxide (CO₂). Total emissions in

⁹ <https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/trees-woods-and-wildlife/habitats/ancient-woodland/>

Northumberland decreased by 40% between 2005 and 2017 mainly because of reductions from industrial and commercial sources. The main source of CO² emissions in Northumberland is now transport, which has shown only a very marginal reduction since 2005, not surprisingly in a large and largely rural county where more people rely on private transport.

Greenhouse gas emissions trends

- 4.14 Per capita emissions of CO² in Northumberland are higher than both the regional and national averages; however, levels in the County decreased more quickly than in the Country as a whole between 2005 and 2017.

Effects of climate change

- 4.15 In Northumberland, compared to the period 1981-2000, winters are projected to be slightly wetter, but summers may be slightly drier. Average year-round temperature is expected to be higher with a slightly greater increase in the daily maximum temperature in the summer. Changes in rainfall patterns, including more frequent and more intense storm events, are predicted.
- 4.16 It is anticipated that climate change will create a number of issues in the area, including: changes in arable cultivation that could have a negative effects on soils and water and cause the loss of landscape features; increased soil erosion; more river flooding; reduced river flows in summer months, which could reduce water quality affecting the River Coquet's habitats and wildlife. Northumbrian Water expect water supply to remain in surplus over the Plan period because water demand is expected to fall in response to water efficiency and leakage strategies.

Flood risk

- 4.17 Lying inland, the Neighbourhood Area is not at risk of coastal flooding as a result of climate change. However, the chance of flooding is high in areas immediately adjacent to the River Coquet and Thirston Burn. This means that each year these areas have a chance of flooding greater than 3.3%. Significant areas of agricultural land could experience increased risk of flooding and threats to livestock and crops. Surface water flooding is also a risk for some parts of the Neighbourhood Area. Areas of agricultural land could experience increased risk of flooding.

Key environmental problems or issues

- 4.18 There are two issues relating to climatic factors:
- The rising carbon emissions from transport in the County;
 - The changing climate variables (temperature / rainfall) and their potential impact on the area.

Population and human health

Population characteristics

- 4.19 Between 2001 and 2011, the number of households in the Parish increased significantly (by 22.5%) while average household size reduced. Overall, in percentage terms, there was a very slight increase in the population of Thirston between 2001 and 2011 though significantly lower than for the county as a whole.
- 4.20 The population in Thirston Parish is ageing: between 2001 and 2011 there was a 60% increase in the number of residents aged 65+ years; at the same time, the number of children fell by 40%. In 2001, the average age of residents was 38.5 years; in 2011 it was 44.8 years. However, the Parish still has a greater percentage of people of working age and a smaller proportion of older residents compared to the County overall.

Education and skills

- 4.21 The Parish has a well-qualified population: for level 4 qualifications or above, the percentage in Thirston is almost twice that of the North East. In line with the County, Region and England, the percentage of residents with lower level qualifications fell between 2001 and 2011. At the same time, the proportion with level 3 or level 4 qualifications increased, often at a greater rate than elsewhere.

Health indicators and deprivation

- 4.22 Data from the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) show that Thirston is in the 30% least deprived neighbourhoods in the country. Figures for income, employment, education and crime are particularly positive though it is noticeable that for crime, the risk of personal and material victimisation at a local level has increased. In terms of barriers to housing and services, the Parish scores poorly, a reflection of limited geographical accessibility to local services and not having the right housing mix. The figure for living environment is middling reflecting average quality of the indoor and outdoor local environment.
- 4.23 Health appears to be good and significantly better in Thirston than in Northumberland or the North East or the country as a whole. The trend is upwards too. However, the number of residents providing unpaid care to family members, friends, neighbours or others because of long-term physical or mental ill health or disability, or problems related to old age, is increasing: the number of residents providing more than 20 hours of unpaid care per week doubled between 2001 and 2011.
- 4.24 Overall, the baseline for Population and Human Health is very positive for Thirston Parish, with almost all indicators being at or above comparison figures. The trends

for the indicators described are, generally, stable or improving. The exception would be that its population is ageing in line with the rest of the County, and at a higher rate than elsewhere. No vulnerable social groups have been identified in the Parish.

Key environmental problems or issues

4.25 There are several issues relating to population and human health:

- Barriers to housing and services and the quality of the living environment (indoors and outdoors);
- The population is ageing which puts extra pressure on healthcare and other services;
- The quality and availability of existing community facilities is limited which could affect health and wellbeing.

Soil

Soil resource

4.26 Generally, soils in the Neighbourhood Area are slowly permeable seasonally wet slightly acid but base-rich loamy and clayey soils with moderate fertility. Such soils are most suited to grass production for dairying or beef with some cereal production often for feed. To the north and east of the Neighbourhood Area, the soils are predominantly freely draining slightly acid loamy soils with low fertility. Such soils are suitable for a range of spring and autumn sown crops; under grass the soils have a long grazing season. As a result, land use in the Parish comprises mainly arable and horticulture and improved grassland with broadleaved woodland particularly associated with water courses, and small pockets of coniferous woodland.

Soil quality

4.27 A significant portion of the Neighbourhood Area is defined as grade 3 Agricultural land, i.e. good to moderate quality agricultural land. In terms of land pollution, there are no 'Special Sites' within the Neighbourhood Area, as defined under Part 2A of the Environmental Protection Act. The Neighbourhood Area does not have a history of heavy industrial land use, which may cause soil pollution. The risk of water erosion to soils caused by rainfall running off the soil in sloping terrain is generally low to moderate in the Parish. Generally, soils in the area are not prone to wind erosion though the risk is slightly higher along the northern and eastern edges of the Parish.

Key environmental problems or issues

4.28 None were identified at the scoping stage.

Water

Water availability

- 4.29 Water supply in the area is provided by Northumbrian Water Ltd. The Kielder Water Resource Zone (WRZ) serves the Neighbourhood Area. There is a large surplus of supply over demand in the Kielder WRZ and the area is not classed as seriously water stressed.

Water quality

- 4.30 Groundwater Source Protection Zones (SPZs) show the risk of contamination from activities that might cause groundwater pollution in the area. The Neighbourhood Area contains no SPZs.
- 4.31 The River Coquet flows along the northern edge of the Parish. Water quality along this stretch of the river (from Forest Burn to the tidal limit) is classed as 'good'. With the exception of 2014, water quality has remained stable at 'good' for the period 2013-2016. The River Coquet has been identified as a Drinking Water Protected Area (DrWPA) within the Water Framework Directive. The River is a raw water source that is at risk of deterioration from the effects of pesticides (Metaldehyde) which would result in the need for additional treatment. A 'Safeguard Zone' has been designated in which the use of pesticides must be carefully managed to prevent the pollution of the River.
- 4.32 Longdike Burn flows through the Parish. It is a tributary of Thirston Burn which joins the River Coquet just beyond the north east corner of the parish boundary. It is a priority river habitat and its overall classification for 2016 is 'Moderate'. Water quality has remained stable at 'moderate' for the period 2013-2016. The main issue preventing this river reaching 'good' status is pollution from agriculture, specifically: diffuse and point phosphate pollution caused by poor nutrient management.

Key environmental problems or issues

- 4.33 There is one issue relating to water:
- the 'moderate' condition of Longdike Burn water quality.

Historic environment

Landscape and townscape character and quality

- 4.34 The Historic Landscape Character of the Parish is quite complex but in the main comprises enclosed fields of varying ages: to the south of the Parish, west of the A1

lies mainly piecemeal enclosure dating from the 17th to 18th centuries; above this is largely surveyed enclosure of the mid 18th to 19th centuries; the north of the Parish is dominated by 20th century fields, mainly the result of post World War II improvements; and to the east of the A1 is mainly surveyed enclosure of the mid 18th to 19th centuries.

- 4.35 To the east of the A1 is the Airfield which was built as a training school for pilots in World War II and is still in use today; to the west is the golf course and ornamental parkland at Burgham. There are small areas of woodland; most notably around the village of Eshott (late 19th century), south of the river Coquet (Ancient Semi-Natural close to the village of West Thirston, and Ancient Replanted woodland further west), and Forest Wood on the southern boundary of the Parish (Ancient Semi-Natural).

Designated and non-designated heritage assets

- 4.36 West Thirston village is of special architectural and historic interest, with many listed buildings. The older core of the village is situated adjacent to the medieval bridge crossing the river and was designated as a Conservation Area in 1987. However, there is a gap in the evidence base: there is no conservation area appraisal for West Thirston.
- 4.37 There are 25 listed structures in the Parish and two scheduled monuments. Of those structures considered by Historic England in 2019, none are said to be at risk. In addition, there are several locally important non-designated heritage assets. There is limited information about the condition of these assets and therefore their sensitivity to change.

Key environmental problems or issues

- 4.38 There are two issues relating to the historic environment:
- The lack of a Character Appraisal for the Thirston Conservation Area;
 - The lack of information about the condition of listed heritage assets in the Neighbourhood Area.

Landscape

Landscape character and quality

- 4.39 The Parish is divided between two National Character Areas (NCA): the east falls into the South East Northumberland Coastal Plain; the western portion is in Mid Northumberland.

- 4.40 Key characteristics of the Mid-Northumberland NCA (NCA12) are: it is an intermediate plateau of rolling farmland between the Pennine uplands to the west and the low-lying coastal plain to the east. In the northern part are ridges and enclosed river valleys. Within this predominantly farmed landscape there are many small woodlands and shelterbelts, and a few areas of open water.
- 4.41 Key characteristics of the South East Northumberland Coastal Plain NCA (NCA13) are: a generally flat, low-lying strip along the coast, extending from north Tyneside in the south to the Coquet Estuary in the north. It is more rural to the north, with large fields supporting mixed farming, with fields divided by low, often guppy hedgerows and few trees.
- 4.42 The Northumberland Landscape Character Assessment (2010) identified three distinct Landscape Character Areas (LCA) within the NCAs covering the Neighbourhood Area.
- LCA 35a Coquet Valley is varied but lacks complexity. The Coquet forms a gently v-shaped valley with incised gorge sections, which create a sense of enclosure. Land use here is a mix of farmland, woodland and estates with medium-scale woodland and field pattern.
 - LCA 38b Longhorsley has some variety. It is generally open with occasional enclosure formed by undulations. This is an intensively farmed landscape with large-scale farmland and some woodland plantations.
 - LCA 39a Coastal Coalfields is a simple, gently rolling or flat landscape with limited variety in land cover, mainly arable, much resulting from reclamation. It is an open, exposed landscape.
- 4.43 LCAs 35a and 38b have experienced change over the last 30 years but the overall trend is one of maintaining the landscape with some enhancements to woodland habitats. LCA 39a has experienced mark changes inconsistent with character. Changes in agriculture and increasing development have eroded the character of the landscape. More recently, woodland character has weakened and overall, landscape character appears be eroding slowly.

Key environmental problems or issues

- 4.44 There is one issue relating to landscape:
- the erosion of landscape character in LCA 39a.

5. The SEA Framework used to Appraise the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan

The SEA Framework

- 5.1 An SEA Framework is a recognised method by which the likely effects of a Plan, and any reasonable alternative options, can be described, analysed and compared. It comprises objectives, which are statements of what is intended should be achieved through the implementation of the Plan, specifying a desired direction of environmental change, and these are evaluated having regard to various guiding questions. It is not the intention of the assessment to answer all of the guiding questions. The questions will act as prompts to help focus the assessment as an informed evaluation of likely significant environmental effects arising from the implementation of the Plan or any reasonable alternative options.
- 5.2 The SEA Framework for the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan (figure 3) was informed by the review of relevant plans and programmes and the analysis of the baseline position to identify environmental issues. The framework was subject to consultation with the consultation bodies as part of the SEA Scoping stage.

Figure 3: SEA Framework for the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan

SEA Objective	Guiding questions
Biodiversity, flora and fauna 1. Protect and enhance biodiversity features.	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support continued improvements to the status of the European designated sites of significance within the neighbourhood area? • Support the status of SSSIs located wholly or partly within the neighbourhood area? • Protect and enhance semi-natural habitats? • Protect and enhance priority habitats, and the habitat of priority species? • Achieve a net gain in biodiversity? • Support enhancements to multifunctional green infrastructure networks? • Support access to, interpretation and understanding of biodiversity and geodiversity?
Climatic factors 2. Reduce the level of contribution to climate change made by activities within	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce the number of journeys made and reduce the need to travel? • Promote the use of sustainable modes of transport, including walking, cycling and public transport?

SEA Objective	Guiding questions
the Neighbourhood Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase the number of new developments meeting or exceeding sustainable design criteria? • Generate energy from low or zero carbon sources? • Reduce energy consumption from non-renewable sources?
Climatic factors 3. Support the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change, including flooding	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure that inappropriate development does not take place in areas at higher risk of flooding, taking into account the likely future effects of climate change? • Improve and extend green infrastructure networks in the plan area to support adaptation to the potential effects of climate change? • Sustainably manage water run-off, reducing surface water runoff (either within the neighbourhood area or downstream)? • Ensure the potential risks associated with climate change are considered through new development in the neighbourhood area? • Increase the resilience of biodiversity to the effects of climate change, including through enhancements to ecological networks?
Population and Human Health 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.	Will the option/proposal help 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? • Promote the use of sustainable building techniques, including use of sustainable building materials in construction? • Provide housing in sustainable locations that allow easy access to a range of local services and facilities?
Population and Human Health 5. Support a vibrant, mixed economy which enables residents of the neighbourhood area to work locally	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and enhance the viability of small local businesses? • Support the diversity of local businesses and the economy? • Support employment opportunities which enable residents to work from home?

SEA Objective	Guiding questions
Population and Human Health 6. Improve the health and wellbeing of residents within the neighbourhood area	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote accessibility to a range of leisure, health and community facilities, for all age groups? Promote the use of healthier modes of travel? Improve access to the countryside for recreational use?
Population and Human Health 7. Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel.	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduce the need to travel through sustainable patterns of land use and development? Encourage modal shift to more sustainable forms of travel? Enable sustainable transport infrastructure enhancements? Facilitate working from home and remote working? Improve road safety? Reduce the impact on residents from the road network?
Population and Human Health 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	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the development of a range of high-quality, accessible community facilities? Encourage and promote social cohesion and encourage active involvement of local people in community activities? Minimise fuel poverty? Maintain or enhance the quality of life of existing local residents? Improve the availability and accessibility of key local facilities, including specialist services for disabled and older people? Support the provision of land for allotments and cemeteries?
Soil 9. Manage soil and land resources in a sustainable manner.	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote the use of previously developed land? Avoid the development of the best and most versatile agricultural land?
Water 10. Use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner.	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support improvements to water quality? Minimise water consumption? Ensure the Plan does not cause deterioration in the Water Framework Directive status of the River Coquet and Longdike Burn?

SEA Objective	Guiding questions
Historic Environment 11. Protect and enhance the character and quality of the historic environment	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the significance of the historic environment? • Conserve and/or enhance heritage assets, their setting and the wider historic environment? • Respect, maintain and strengthen local character and distinctiveness? • Ensure that development within or affecting conservation areas is sympathetic to its surroundings?
Landscape 12. Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes	Will the option/proposal help to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support the integrity of the landscape in the neighbourhood area? • Conserve and enhance landscape features?

Methodology

5.3 Based on the contents of the current Pre-Submission Draft Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan (August 2020), the SEA Framework has been used to appraise:

- the Neighbourhood Plan objectives;
- the proposed policies; and
- reasonable alternatives where they exist.

5.4 Along with identifying effects, consideration was given to the likely level of significance of the effects. This includes an assessment of whether the effects are positive or negative and whether the degree of significance is major or minor. The SEA Regulations specify the criteria which should be taken into account. These criteria essentially relate to the nature of the effects arising from the Plan and the value and vulnerability of the receptors as follows:

- How valuable and vulnerable is the receptor that is being affected?
- How probable, frequent, long lasting and reversible are the effects?
- What is the magnitude and spatial scale of the effect?
- Are the effects positive or negative?

5.5 The assessment involved judgement in respect of the likely effects of the Neighbourhood Plan, the significance of any effects and the nature of those effects.

5.6 Evaluating effects is inherently challenging. There are inevitably many limitations. There is uncertainty about predicting the implications of implementing planning policies. The ability to evaluate effects is also limited by the understanding of the

baseline. Accordingly, the SEA can only be assumed to identify the broad implications for the SEA topics. In this regard the assessment takes a proportionate approach, as required by the guidance.

- 5.7 Figure 4 illustrates the scoring system applied to assist in the assessment. Given the assessment must be informed by judgement, a small group of suitably qualified and experienced practitioners was engaged to undertake the assessment. This collective approach helped to ensure a degree of consensus and sought to ensure objectivity which may not necessarily come from those familiar with or directly engaged in the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Figure 4: Matrix for the SEA of the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan

Score	Description	Key
Major positive effect	The objective/policy/alternative addresses all the elements that are required to protect the environment and address the relevant sustainability issues in the neighbourhood area and would help achieve the applicable SEA objective. The objective/policy/alternative also sets out how, where and when the policy will be implemented. It will have a positive impact in relation to characteristics of the effect and the sensitivity of the receptors.	✓✓
Minor positive effect	The objective/policy/alternative addresses all the elements that are required to protect the environment and address the sustainability issues in the neighbourhood area and would help achieve the applicable SEA objective.	✓
Minor negative effect	The objective/policy/alternative conflicts with the SEA objective.	X
Major negative effect	The objective/policy/alternative conflicts with the SEA objective. It also sets out how, where and when the policy will be implemented and this will have a negative effect in relation to characteristics of the effect and the sensitivity of the receptors.	XX
Neutral effect	The objective/policy/alternative does not have an effect or has a neutral effect on the achievement of the SEA objective.	0
Not Applicable	The objective/policy/alternative does not apply to the SEA objective	NA

6. Appraisal of the Likely Effects of the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan and Reasonable Alternatives on the Environment

- 6.1 The key purpose of this Environmental Report is to present information and an assessment of the effects the implementation of the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan, and any reasonable alternative options considered, may have on the environment. This chapter presents the findings of the assessment in relation to the Draft Submission version (August 2020) of the Neighbourhood Plan. An earlier draft version of the Plan (July 2020) was assessed using the defined SEA methodology. This concluded that some minor modification to policies would be required to limit or avoid adverse environmental effects. The recommended changes were subsequently made to the Plan prior to this assessment being undertaken.

Appraising the Thirston Parish Neighbourhood Plan Objectives

- 6.2 It is important that the objectives of the Neighbourhood Plan are aligned and compatible with the SEA objectives. The Plan objectives have therefore been assessed using the SEA Framework which is presented in figure 5. The assessment finds that Objectives of the Plan are generally compatible with all of the SEA objectives and are assessed as having a largely neutral or slightly positive effect on the environment. No modification is required to Objectives of the Plan.

Appraising the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan Reasonable Alternatives

- 6.3 The SEA needs to consider and compare any reasonable alternatives that could deliver the Plan's objectives as the Plan evolves, including the preferred approach, and assess these against the baseline environmental characteristics of the area.
- 6.4 Reasonable alternatives are defined in Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) as '*the different realistic options considered in developing the policies in the plan*'. They need to be sufficiently distinct so that meaningful comparisons can be made. However, PPG acknowledges that there may be limited alternatives that can realistically be considered in the context of the strategic policies for the neighbourhood area.¹⁰ In some instances the only reasonable alternative would be a 'no policy' alternative, which is appraised in the baseline analysis. This is provided in detail in the Scoping Report and in summary in Chapter 4 of this Report.
- 6.5 Progress made on the preparation of the Northumberland Local Plan, and the introduction through paragraphs 65 and 66 of NPPF more specifically of the obligation placed on the Local Planning Authority to identify at least an indicative

¹⁰ Paragraph: 038 Reference ID: 11-038-20190722

housing requirement figure for neighbourhood areas, have further limited the extent of reasonable alternatives available to meet the objectives set for the Thirston Parish Neighbourhood Plan. Nevertheless, it is helpful, as part of this assessment, to describe the outcomes of the plan-making process as they emerged and changed over time in the context of considering what may have been reasonable alternatives. This is particularly relevant to the intention to create settlement boundaries.

Figure 5: Assessment of the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan Objectives against the SEA Objectives

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN OBJECTIVES	Objective 1: The Built and natural environment	Objective 2: The economy, employment and the community
SEA OBJECTIVES		
1. <i>Protect and enhance biodiversity features</i>	✓	0
2. <i>Reduce the contribution to climate change</i>	0	0
3. <i>Support resilience to the potential effects of climate change</i>	0	0
4. <i>Provide an appropriate mix of good quality affordable housing</i>	✓	0
5. <i>Support a vibrant, mixed economy which enables residents to work locally</i>	✓	✓
6. <i>Improve the health and wellbeing of residents</i>	✓	✓
7. <i>Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel.</i>	0	0
8. <i>Cater for residents' needs, and improve access to local, high-quality community facilities</i>	0	✓
9. <i>Manage soil and land resources in a sustainable manner</i>	✓	0
10. <i>Use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner</i>	0	0
11. <i>Protect and enhance the character and quality of the historic environment</i>	0	0
12. <i>Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes</i>	✓	✓

Settlement Boundaries

- 6.6 The Plan defines settlement boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott. This is an appropriate approach to the management of development provided it recognises the need to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development, which is the main purpose of the planning system in England. The definition of settlement boundaries must be associated with meeting at least the recognised needs for new housing, and other development, in an area. The definition of settlement boundaries must therefore reflect the expectation that development is likely to happen in any given area in order to comply with the Local Planning Authority strategy and strategic policies for that area, unless there are particular reasons for significantly greater control. This expectation must be recognised in undertaking the assessment of environmental effects through the SEA process and must be reflected in the outcome of that process.
- 6.7 The generic alternative to the definition of settlement boundaries allied with planning to accommodate sufficient development is the use of criteria-based policies. These set out in general terms the criteria to be applied in considering whether development can be considered sustainable and appropriate. This is often regarded as a less prescriptive approach to managing development but creates greater uncertainty since the application of such policies relies largely on planning judgement rather than reference to described and discernible features defined on policy maps.
- 6.8 The County Council has advised the Parish Council that an adequate supply of land for housing is available to meet the needs of the Parish and to contribute towards the delivery of housing requirements in Northumberland. This advice has been given having regard to current housing development commitments in the Parish, both from extant planning permissions and from development that has been either completed or commenced since April 2016 (the commencement date for monitoring purposes for the emerging Northumberland Local Plan). The County Council advise that there is currently no requirement to provide land for additional housing in the Parish before the end of the proposed plan period (April 2036). This advice is further reflected in Policy HOU 3 of the emerging Local Plan which defines the housing requirements for all designated neighbourhood areas in Northumberland. This shows no requirement to provide additional housing in Thirston Neighbourhood Area during the plan period.

Assessment of Alternative Options

Option 1: No settlement boundaries

- 6.9 The Vision and Objectives proposed for the Neighbourhood Plan, particularly Objective 1, clearly envisage the Plan providing some general protection of the

countryside and valued landscapes within the Parish. Objective 1 specifically sets 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 is therefore **not a reasonable alternative** within the context of the Plan's Objectives.

Option 2: Settlement boundaries

- 6.10 The creation of settlement boundaries is a stated intention of the Objectives of the Plan. The way in which these are defined must have regard to the Local Planning Authority strategy for the management of development in the Neighbourhood Area, and to the aspirations of the local community in preparing the Neighbourhood Plan, given that the final outcome on support for the Plan is determined through a local referendum. 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>.
- 6.11 It is evident from the advice provided by the Local Planning Authority that there is no expectation that further new housing need be accommodated in the Parish. It is also evident from community engagement undertaken by the Parish Council, and from the outcome of community consultation and involvement in recent housing development proposals, that there is no particular appetite from the local community to plan for additional housing growth, although such an approach would accord generally with the intentions of neighbourhood planning powers. This is, quite properly, a matter for the local community to decide and for the Parish Council to give expression to through the Neighbourhood Plan.
- 6.12 There is an existing settlement boundary for West Thirston. This was defined under (saved) Policy WTC1 in the Castle Morpeth District Local Plan, 2003. The emerging Northumberland Local Plan under Policy STP1 proposes to retain this settlement boundary, albeit with slight adjustments to reflect more recent development or other changes that have taken place. This approach recognises the particular development pressure along the A1 corridor: the boundary is defined to apply a policy of constraint, to protect the countryside and character of the settlement.
- 6.13 The Parish Council agreed with strategic approach proposed by Northumberland County Council to retain the existing boundary for West Thirston. This was backed up by public support following a planning application submitted in 2017 for the building of 30 properties just outside West Thirston to which 55 objections were received from residents whose concerns included the impact on wildlife and landscape and visual impact on the character of the settlement.

- 6.14 A planning appeal against the refusal of that application was subsequently dismissed. This included consideration of the merit of settlement boundary policies which, in general terms, was supported through the appeal outcome. However, it was noted in the appeal decision that the approach in the Castle Morpeth District Local Plan was in part in conflict with current national policy due to the age of that plan. Therefore, the Parish Council considered that, for West Thirston, the definition of an updated policy defining an appropriate settlement boundary would meet the Objectives for the Plan and that this is a reasonable approach to the proper management of development in the Parish.
- 6.15 Similarly, a proposed settlement boundary for Eshott Village proved overwhelmingly popular with residents when they were consulted in February 2019. Burgham residents were consulted in June 2019: a substantial majority of residents opted for a settlement boundary. However, as Burgham lies within the extension to the Tyne & Wear Green Belt to the north of Morpeth, the detail of which is defined in the emerging Northumberland Local Plan, the Parish Council decided there was no need for a settlement boundary since the settlement and surrounding land would be washed over by the Green Belt. Any development proposed in that area should be managed according to national Green Belt policy. The Parish Council considered that East Thirston is too small a settlement to warrant a settlement boundary and that development management should be consistent with national policy for the countryside.
- 6.16 The Parish Council decided, in consultation with the local community, to define settlement boundaries to give precision, clarity and context to the Objectives of the Plan. Specifically, the Parish Council considers the benefits of establishing settlement boundaries to be to:
- ensure development is directed to the most suitable locations in the village, both in terms of accessibility to and support of existing services and transport, and in terms of landscape and the historic environment;
 - protect the special character of the villages in the parish and the landscape around them and maintain the character and distinctiveness of West Thirston and Eshott; and
 - provide greater certainty to communities, landowners and developers over where certain types of development could be acceptable in principle, and where.
- 6.17 In considering where to draw the settlement boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott, the Parish Council took into account:
- the emerging Northumberland Local Plan housing requirements for the Parish;
 - Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) data (there are currently no suitable, available or achievable sites around West Thirston or Eshott);

- the recent refusal of planning permission for a proposed development on the edge of West Thirston (the Inspector cited the importance of the landscape context as a significant reason for refusal);
- the current settlement boundary (and proposed settlement boundary in the emerging Northumberland Local Plan) for West Thirston;
- local features (where possible, the boundary has been drawn along defined features such as walls, garden curtilages and existing development); and
- further comments given in consultation responses from the local community.

6.18 The Parish Council determined it would not be necessary to draw more extensive settlement boundaries or to allocate any sites for housing development through the Neighbourhood Plan because no such requirement had been provided by the Local Planning Authority. The result is settlement boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott that are relatively tightly drawn around existing built development, while allowing for infill development, or redevelopment where appropriate, within those settlements.

6.19 Having regard to there being no strategic need to plan to accommodate additional housing development in the Parish during the plan period beyond that already committed; the intentions of the Vision and Objectives established in the Neighbourhood Plan; and the availability of land through windfall sites within settlements, it is evident that there are **no genuine reasonable alternatives** in relation to establishing settlement boundaries other than those defined in the Neighbourhood Plan. Accordingly, no further detailed assessment is required on this matter.

Locally Important Green Spaces

6.20 In developing the Neighbourhood Plan there were a number of green spaces identified for consideration for protection through community engagement. Qualities like their recreational use, environmental use and wildlife value and their significance and value to the local community were discussed through the community engagement process. By using criteria defined in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) the Steering Group assessed the suitability of the locally important sites and decided to designate two Local Green Spaces which met the criteria defined in national policy. No other sites were considered to be of sufficient value to merit this level of protection.

6.21 The approach employed by the Parish Council has 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, there are **no reasonable alternatives** to assess through the SEA process.

Appraising the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan Policies

- 6.22 The appraisal has been structured using the SEA Framework. For each SEA Objective, the likely significant effects of each of the planning policies in the Neighbourhood Plan have been predicted and evaluated where possible. Account has been taken of the criteria presented within Schedule 2 of the SEA Regulations, including the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of effects, as far as this is possible.

Biodiversity, flora and fauna

SEA Objective 1: Protect and enhance biodiversity features

- 6.23 The Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan sets out a number of provisions to limit the impact of development on features and areas of biodiversity interest, and to support enhancements to ecological networks within the Neighbourhood Area.
- 6.24 Key designations in the Neighbourhood Area and their attributes are described in the Scoping Report and in section 4 of this Report which outlines the environmental baseline characteristics. Designations which demonstrate the value and potential vulnerability of the area to environmental effects include the River Coquet and Woodlands SSSI, Catheugh Woods and Windy Banks ancient woodlands and the Coquet River Moldshaugh Local Wildlife Site.
- 6.25 Policy 1 relates to design in new development. Criterion d) of the policy requires appropriate landscaping to be incorporated into any scheme including the retention of trees and hedgerows, where possible. Criterion h) requires development to take opportunities to realise at least a 10% net gain for biodiversity, including by incorporating native species in landscaping schemes. Overall, it is recognised that these measures could be delivered through development to protect existing vegetation and associated habitats and to achieve net gains for biodiversity.
- 6.26 Policy 2 identifies settlement boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott. Settlement boundaries help to ensure development is directed to the most suitable locations in each village and protects the special character of the villages and the landscape around them. Settlement boundaries support the intention expressed in paragraph 170 of the NPPF that planning policies should recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside.
- 6.27 Policy 3 is supportive of proposals that would promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of the biodiversity value of the River Coquet and Longdike Burn Wildlife Corridors. By seeking to prevent development that would have an adverse effect on the SSSI, unless the benefits of the development clearly outweigh the impact on the SSSI, this policy supports the status of the SSI and would help to protect it. The policy also supports proposals to improve public access along the river

where they do not have an adverse effect on the SSSI thereby supporting access to, interpretation and understanding of biodiversity.

- 6.28 Policy 4 sets out the requirement for new residential and tourist accommodation within 10km of the coast to contribute to the Coastal Mitigation Service. This is a developer-funded warden service which seeks to ensure that effective mitigation can be provided to address the impacts of new residential development and recreational activity within coastal European sites. Advice provided by the County Ecologist during the HRA pre-screening of the Plan, confirmed mitigation would need to be required through a policy in the Plan to address likely significant impacts on coastal European sites. It was recommended that this should comprise a requirement for contributions to be made to the Northumberland Coastal Mitigation Service from development that results in a net increase in the number of dwellings or additional tourist accommodation. In the current version of the Plan (August 2020) the necessary mitigation requirements have been set out in Policy 4.
- 6.29 Policy 5 designates two Local Green Spaces. Each space serves a number of purposes including in respect of biodiversity. Specifically, The Peth in West Thirston is valued for biodiversity interest. It is a Priority Habitat (under the Wildlife Acts) and comprises 0.62 hectares of Deciduous Broadleaved Woodland. Its location directly adjacent to a SSSI means that it has an important function as a link and buffer to the SSSI. In this way, the policy helps to protect and enhance semi-natural habitats.
- 6.30 Policy 6 supports business development that accord with policies elsewhere in the Development Plan. It sets out a list of criteria which should be met by all new and/or expansions to existing businesses. The policy provides support to tourism and leisure development that provides net gains for biodiversity.
- 6.31 Policy 7 supports proposals for bunkhouses, chalets, touring caravans and camping accommodation where they are of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape. The policy does not support the expansion, or creation of new large-scale holiday parks. These controls would be a positive factor in protecting biodiversity by limiting land-take and limiting further significant tourist activities on sensitive sites.
- 6.32 Policy 8 allocates a site for woodland burials and a crematorium. It seeks to restrict proposals that would have a significant adverse effect on the site.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.33 Whilst it is recognised that Thirston Parish has important biodiversity features, the Neighbourhood Plan is likely to have positive effects on biodiversity through the implementation of preservation and habitat enhancement policies. The Plan seeks to ensure that development in the area is limited to a relatively small scale and

therefore any negative effects are likely to be minor. However, residential development and tourist accommodation of any scale could have a negative effect on European sites because development will increase recreational pressure. Policies in the Plan ensure that those negative impacts will be minimised through the scale of development supported and mitigated through the requirement for contributions from residential and tourist accommodation development to be made to the Northumberland Coastal Mitigation Service. The Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a positive, minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 1. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 1.

Climatic Factors

SEA Objective 2: Reduce the level of contribution to climate change made by activities within the Neighbourhood Area

SEA Objective 3: Support the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change, including flooding

- 6.34 Policy 1 requires new development, including extensions and conversions to incorporate, where possible, measures to reduce the carbon footprint and energy efficiency of the building. Criterion c) which requires new development, where relevant, to incorporate sustainable drainage, helps to manage water run-off in a sustainable way to mitigate the increased flood risk associated with climate change. Other criteria support the resilience of biodiversity to the effects of climate change, including through enhancements to ecological networks through landscaping, including the retention of trees and hedgerows wherever possible, taking opportunities to realise a net gain for biodiversity. These approaches would support SEA Objectives 2 and 3.
- 6.35 Policy 2 supports development within the settlement boundaries of West Thirston and Eshott where they comply with policies elsewhere in the development plan. This permissive approach within the settlement boundaries would help to reduce the number of journeys made and also reduce the need to travel to access any new business. Overall, this approach would support SEA Objective 2. In addition, these settlements are not in areas at higher risk of flooding, fluvial or surface, associated with climate change. Development is supported only by exception outside the settlement boundaries, in accordance with national planning policies. The scale of development supported through the Plan would be such that major negative impacts on flood risk should not occur. In this way, this Policy would support SEA Objective 3.
- 6.36 Policy 3 supports proposals that promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of the biodiversity value of the River Coquet Wildlife Corridor. In this way, the Policy would support SEA Objective 3 by increasing the resilience of

biodiversity to the effects of climate change, through enhancements to ecological networks.

- 6.37 Policy 4 supports SEA Objective 3 because it seeks to ensure that the impacts arising from increasing levels of recreational disturbance on coastal Sites of Special Scientific Interest and European Sites can be addressed. In this way, it would help to increase the resilience of biodiversity to the effects of climate change.
- 6.38 Each of the two local green spaces designated in Policy 5 is located within a settlement. The LGS Evidence Paper describes how each area is used by the community for social and recreational activities. This would reduce the need to travel as each space is easily accessible by walking and cycling and the Policy would secure their retention in the long term. As such, this Policy would support SEA objective 2.
- 6.39 Policy 6 supports proposals for new and/or expansions to existing businesses within and beyond settlement boundaries where they accord with policies elsewhere in the development plan. As such, this approach could reduce the number of journeys made and reduce the need to travel long distances to work or to access services and facilities. Criterion d) requires consideration to be given to whether access to the new or extended business can be accommodated without significant impacts on the local and national road network. This criterion *may* help to promote the use of sustainable modes of transport; however, given that a key issue is the rising level of CO² emissions associated with private transport, it is likely that the proposed dualling of the A1 would simply allow more cars to easily access this part of Northumberland. Criterion e) (sic) has regard to national policy in that it requires a development proposal to demonstrate the extent to which it could be made accessible by sustainable modes of transport including cycling and walking. Therefore, overall, this policy is neutral in terms of its contribution towards achieving SEA Objective 2.
- 6.40 Policy 7 supports proposals for bunkhouses, chalets, touring caravans and camping accommodation where they are of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape. The policy does not support the expansion, or creation of new large-scale holiday parks. These controls would be a positive factor in limiting the impact of development on climate change and flooding.
- 6.41 Policy 8 allocates a site for a woodland burial site and crematorium on a site adjacent to the airfield. The site is operational as a burial site and comprises Clarefield Meadow which provides a resting place for traditional burials, Merlin Wood which is a dedicated woodland for ashes burials and Griffon Wood which is a pet burial woodland area. The site also has planning permission for the construction of a crematorium. In terms of SEA Objective 2, this policy supports development whose activities contribute to climate change: the site would be mostly accessed

by private transport, the approved crematorium application, for example, has parking for 40 cars. This would likely increase the number of journeys made within and into the Parish. In addition, gas cremation releases significant amounts of CO² into the atmosphere. However, the Plan cannot respond to development that has planning permission and therefore the assessment in this respect is neutral.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.42 Overall, the strategic approach set out in the Neighbourhood Plan does not specifically seek to reduce the need to travel. However, in terms of business development, it does directly support sustainable transport. The Plan does, however, include policy provisions to ensure climate change is considered and mitigated in new development and it has some measures to support the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change. Overall, the policies are assessed as not making a significant contribution towards the achievement of SEA Objectives 2 and 3; where they do, this effect is slightly positive. No changes are required to meet SEA Objectives 2 and 3.

Population and Human Health

SEA 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

- 6.43 The Neighbourhood Plan does not directly address the issue of housing provision; indirectly, it is addressed through policies for design and settlement boundaries.
- 6.44 Policy 1 requires new development, where relevant to demonstrate how: local context and character are reflected in scale, density, height, massing, layout, use of materials, hard and soft landscaping and means of enclosure; and features including windows, doors, roof lights, chimneys, flues, roofs, and boundary treatments have regard to surrounding character and materials used locally. In this way, the policy may support provision of high-quality homes and enhancements to the current housing stock. However, the emphasis on reflecting local character and materials could come at the expense of adopting more sustainable building techniques including the use of sustainable building materials in construction. This may conflict with criterion g) which requires proposals to demonstrate the incorporation of measures to reduce the carbon footprint and promote energy efficiency in new building. This criterion supports the use of sustainable building techniques. Overall, this policy is neutral in terms of its contribution towards achieving SEA Objective 4.
- 6.45 Policy 2 supports new residential development within the settlement boundaries of West Thirston and Eshott, and in the countryside beyond by exceptions which reflect national planning policy. In this way, it supports the provision of housing in

sustainable locations, including affordable housing to meet local needs that allow easy access to a range of local services and facilities. The Policy supports the achievement of SEA Objective 4 in that it supports housing to meet the needs of different people in the community.

- 6.46 None of the remaining policies in the Plan are associated with achieving SEA Objective 4.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.47 Overall, the relevant Neighbourhood Plan policies support the provision of good quality and affordable homes and are assessed as having a minor positive effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 4. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 4.

Population and Human Health

SEA Objective 5: Support a vibrant, mixed economy which enables residents of the neighbourhood area to work locally

- 6.48 Policy 6 supports proposals for new and/or expansions to existing businesses where they accord with policies elsewhere in the development plan. This supports the achievement of SEA Objective 5.
- 6.49 Policy 7 supports proposals for tourism accommodation of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape and for visitor accommodation associated with farm diversification schemes. This Policy supports and enhances the viability and diversity of local businesses and the economy. In this way, it supports the achievement of SEA Objective 5.
- 6.50 Policy 8 allocates a site as a Woodland Burial Site and Crematorium. Within the site, planning proposals directly related to the use of the site as a burial site and crematorium will be supported. In this way, the Policy supports the diversity of the local economy and supports the achievement of SEA Objective 5.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.51 The Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 5. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 5.

Population and Human Health

SEA Objective 6: Improve the health and wellbeing of residents within the neighbourhood area

- 6.52 Policy 1 seeks to secure high quality and sustainable design. Good design can improve the character and quality of the area, indirectly improving people's wellbeing and enjoyment of the area in which they live or visit.
- 6.53 Policy 2 directs new small-scale development to locations within the settlements and close to services thereby promoting walking and cycling to nearby facilities and services.
- 6.54 Policy 3 supports proposals to improve public access along the River Coquet. In this way, it improves access to the countryside which may indirectly promote recreational activity.
- 6.55 Policy 5 designates two sites as Local Green Spaces. Each site has recreational value and the village green in Eshott is a demonstrable community facility hosting village events which may indirectly improve the wellbeing of residents.
- 6.56 Policy 7 supports the limited development of tourism accommodation in the Parish, including bunkhouses and campsites, which could help to promote access to the countryside and leisure activities, though this effect is likely to be negligible given its limited applicability to local residents.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.57 The Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 6. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 6.

Population and Human Health

SEA Objective 7: Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel

- 6.58 The approach adopted in the Neighbourhood Plan is to support housing development within settlement boundaries and beyond those boundaries only by exception in accordance with national planning policy. Business development and other community facilities are supported within settlements and beyond, in accordance with national planning policy.
- 6.59 This approach reinforces the role of these settlements as centres providing the focus for new homes and other development being close to local services. This supports SEA Objective 7 in that it can reduce the need to travel. However, it must be

recognised that the area is rural in nature and there will be continued reliance on services, facilities and employment outside the Neighbourhood Area and many of the journeys taken to access those will be by private car. There is scope for limited modal shift to sustainable transport due to the presence of a local bus service to Alnwick and Berwick in the north and Morpeth and Newcastle upon Tyne in the south.

- 6.60 Policy 1 sets out design principles including a requirement that new development, including extensions and conversions, must, where relevant, demonstrate how safe access can be achieved to the development site for all users to and from the highway.
- 6.61 Policy 2 directs new housing development to locations within the settlements and close to services thereby reducing the need to travel through sustainable patterns of land use and development. The Policy also supports housing for rural workers near their place of work which could reduce their need to commute longer distances.
- 6.62 Under Policy 6 proposals for new and/or expansions to existing businesses would be assessed against criteria including whether access can be accommodated without significant impacts on the local road network. This may also help to improve road safety. Criterion d) supports the sustainable growth and expansion of home-based businesses where planning permission is required. Criterion e) (sic) requires a development proposal to demonstrate the extent to which it could be made accessible by sustainable modes of transport including cycling and walking.
- 6.63 Policy 7 supports proposals for tourism accommodation that is of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape and where it does not have a significant impact on the local highway network. It does not support the creation or expansion of large-scale holiday parks. This should help in limiting the amount of holiday accommodation in the Parish and thereby limiting any growth in the need to travel.
- 6.64 Policy 8 allocates land for a woodland burial site and crematorium within the Neighbourhood Area. The burial site is already operational and the site has planning permission for the construction of a crematorium. Once built and operating, the crematorium, along with the burial site, is likely to generate a significant number of additional journeys into and within the Neighbourhood Area. These will almost entirely be made by private transport. The Plan cannot respond to development that has planning permission and therefore the assessment in this respect is neutral.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.65 Overall, the Neighbourhood Plan is assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the on the achievement of SEA Objective 7. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 7.

Population and Human Health

SEA 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

- 6.66 Policy 5 designates two sites as Local Green Spaces. These sites, in particular the village green in Eshott which hosts village events, will help to maintain or enhance the quality of life of existing residents by encouraging involvement in community activities.
- 6.67 Policy 6 supports proposals for new business or expansion to exiting businesses and the creation of accessible services and facilities. These would help in meeting the community's needs for accessible employment opportunities and for services and facilities.
- 6.68 Policy 8 supports SEA objective 8 because it allocates a site as a woodland burial site and crematorium which will be able to cater for the future needs of residents.
- 6.69 Fuel poverty is not expressly addressed in the Neighbourhood Plan. However, Policy 1 requires new development to demonstrate that opportunities have been taken where possible, to incorporate measures to reduce the carbon footprint and improve energy efficiency of the building. This criterion could indirectly have positive impacts addressing fuel poverty in the longer term.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.70 The Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 8. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 8.

Soil

SEA Objective 9: Manage soil and land resources in a sustainable manner

- 6.71 A significant portion of the Neighbourhood Area is defined as grade 3 Agricultural land, i.e. good to moderate quality agricultural land.

- 6.72 The Plan does not allocate land for development and therefore does not actively promote development on previously developed land, a matter implied in SEA Objective 9 as promoting the use of land resources in a sustainable manner. Policy 2 directs residential development to existing settlements and gives support to residential development outside settlements in accordance with exceptions established in national planning policy. In this way, the Policy may indirectly promote the use of previously developed land, and it limits the types and scale of development in the countryside.
- 6.73 Policy 2 defines settlements boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott. These boundaries have been drawn tightly in recognition of the scale of proposed housing required to meet needs in the Parish as set out in the emerging Northumberland Local Plan and the need to recognise the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside. Settlement boundaries should have a positive effect on the efficient use of land by avoiding sprawl into the countryside. They should also contribute positively to the avoidance of the development of the best and most versatile agricultural land in the Neighbourhood Area which is a specific requirement of national planning policy. This is assessed as having an overall positive environmental effect since it encourages the management of land resources in a sustainable manner.
- 6.74 Policy 6 supports proposals for new business or expansion to exiting businesses and the creation of accessible services and facilities. These would help in meeting the community's needs for accessible employment opportunities and for services and facilities in accordance with national planning policy. Whilst this may have minor negative impacts, the scale of such development is likely to be limited and consistent with the recognised national approach to the management of sustainable development. Overall, the impact of implementing Policy 6 on this SEA Objective is assessed as being neutral.
- 6.75 Policy 7 seeks to promote the development of tourism accommodation including that associated with farm diversification schemes, where they are of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape. Given the suggested 'small-scale' nature of such development, and the intention not to support large-scale holiday parks, this should help in limiting the amount of holiday accommodation in the Parish and therefore any effect is likely to be negligible.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.76 The Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 9. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 9.

Water

SEA Objective 10: Use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner.

- 6.77 Water quality is not addressed in the Neighbourhood Plan. The requirements of the Water Framework Directive are likely to lead to continued improvements to water quality in watercourses in the wider area. Water quality could also be affected by pollution incidents in the area, the presence of non-native species and physical modifications to water bodies. It is not expected that climate change would affect the ability to supply water in the Kielder Water Resource zone.
- 6.78 Policy 1 requires new development to demonstrate how opportunities to incorporate sustainable drainage have been taken. Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) can include elements of water harvesting thereby reusing water with positive effects in respect of water consumption.
- 6.79 Policy 8 requires that proposed development adheres to the Environment Agency's advice on burial grounds and groundwater pollution. This secures alignment of the Plan with SEA Objective 10 by seeking to support controls over burials in the interest of managing water resources in a sustainable manner.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.80 The Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 10. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 10.

Historic Environment

SEA Objective 11: Protect and enhance the character and quality of the historic environment

- 6.81 Policy 1 seeks to support the significance of the historic environment and ensure the protection of designated and non-designated heritage assets and their settings by requiring proposals to demonstrate, where relevant, how heritage assets and their settings are conserved in a manner consistent with their significance. This should be identified in any planning application through the submission of a Heritage Statement. The policy also seeks to ensure that development within or affecting the West Thirston Conservation Areas is sympathetic to its surroundings by requiring applicants to submit a Heritage Statement that details how the proposal will preserve or enhance the character of the Conservation Area and its setting.
- 6.82 Historic England point out that the lack of an appraisal makes it difficult to judge the likely environmental impacts of the Plan's policies on the Conservation Area. They offer advice to the qualifying body on how to fill this gap in their publication

‘Neighbourhood Planning and the Historic Environment’.¹¹ Given that Policy 1 provides less detail than the existing development plan, a Character Appraisal would provide greater protection in terms of conserving and / or enhancing heritage assets (including their setting) and strengthening local character and distinctiveness.

- 6.83 The Plan does not propose any specific allocations, with the exception of two areas of Local Green Space which would have no adverse impact on heritage assets; and the woodland burial ground which similarly is not expected to impact any heritage assets. However, it is noted that the Plan includes some ‘Community Projects’ in addition to its land use planning policies. Community Project CP1 supports joint working between the Parish Council and Northumberland County Council to secure preparation of a conservation area character appraisal. The Parish Council cannot be obliged to secure a conservation area character appraisal since this may only be approved by the County Council and it is not a pre-requisite for the preparation of planning policies which are tested only against the neighbourhood plan ‘basic conditions’. Any development proposals which arise in future will be capable of assessment against the policy requirements for development in or affecting conservation areas, other designated heritage assets and any non-designated heritage assets. No modification is required to the Plan in this respect to meet SEA Objectives.
- 6.84 Policy 2 supports proposals for development within the settlement boundary of West Thirston, and elsewhere by exception. Policy 6 supports business development. In all cases it is a requirement that the development plan be read as a whole in applying relevant planning policies. Policy 1 supports the proper management of sustainable development in the context of heritage impacts, thereby helping to conserve heritage assets (including the Conservation Area), their setting and the wider historic environment. In addition, Policy 2 supports proposals for residential development outside settlement boundaries where the development would present the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.85 Overall, the Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 11. No changes are required to meet SEA Objective 11.

¹¹ <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/neighbourhood-planning-and-the-historic-environment/neighbourhood-planning-and-the-historic-environment-historic-england-advice-note-11/>

Landscape

SEA Objective 12: Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes

- 6.86 Apart from the Coquet Valley along the northern edge of the Parish, landscape in the area is largely open, gently rolling farmland. Though the landscape has experienced change over the last 30 years the overall trend is one of maintaining the landscape with some enhancements to woodland habitats. The eastern part of the Parish has experienced the greatest changes: here, agricultural intensification and increasing development have eroded the character of the landscape, including weakening woodland character.
- 6.87 Policy 1 requires new development to, where relevant, demonstrate how: local context and character are reflected in scale, density, height, massing, layout, use of materials, hard and soft landscaping and means of enclosure; and landscaping has been incorporated into the scheme including the retention of trees and hedgerows wherever possible. This would help to achieve SEA Objective 12 because it supports the integrity of the landscape in the neighbourhood area and helps to conserve and enhance landscape features.
- 6.88 Policy 2 defines settlement boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott. Paragraph 5.11 of the Plan explains that the settlement boundaries have been created having particular regard to the need to ensure recognition of the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside in the Neighbourhood Area. Outside of these settlement boundaries, proposals would be supported that re-use a redundant or disused building and enhance its immediate setting; or the design is of exceptional quality, in that it significantly enhances its immediate setting, and is sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area. In this way, the Policy would help to protect or enhance landscape features.
- 6.89 Policy 6 supports proposals for new business or expansion to existing businesses and the creation of accessible services and facilities. These would help in meeting the community's needs for accessible employment opportunities and for services and facilities in accordance with national planning policy. Whilst this may have minor negative impacts on the character and quality of landscapes, the scale of such development is likely to be limited and consistent with the recognised national approach to the management of sustainable development. Overall, the impact of implementing Policy 6 on this SEA Objective is assessed as being neutral.
- 6.90 Policy 7 supports the development of tourism accommodation where they are of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape. It does not support the creation or expansion of large-scale holiday parks. This should help in limiting

the amount of holiday accommodation in the Parish. This approach would help to support the integrity of the landscape in the Neighbourhood Area.

Assessment Conclusions

- 6.91 Overall, the Neighbourhood Plan policies are assessed as having a minor positive or neutral effect on the achievement of SEA Objective 12, particularly with regard to preventing further erosion of the landscape character of the coastal coalfields in the eastern part of the Parish. Whilst no changes are required to meet SEA Objective 12, the Parish Council could refer to the specific Landscape Character Areas in their policies to help in drawing attention to the particularly valued or threatened aspects of those landscapes to aid in better protecting and enhancing the character and quality of the landscapes in the Neighbourhood Area.

Strategic Environmental Assessment Conclusions

- 6.92 The summary of the assessment of the Neighbourhood Plan Policies against SEA Objectives is set out in figure 6. The assessment concludes that overall, the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan is likely to lead to slightly positive or neutral environmental effects. Whilst the area hosts a number of environmental designations reflecting its environmental value and sensitivity, the Neighbourhood Plan's vision, objectives and policies should, on the whole help to avoid significant environmental impacts arising from development in the future, and the policies will, to a limited degree, serve to mitigate some of the potential adverse effects.

Figure 6: Assessment of the Neighbourhood Plan Policies against the SEA Objectives

POLICIES	Policy 1: Design Principles	Policy 2: Settlement Boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott	Policy 3: River Coquet Wildlife Corridor and SSSI	Policy 4: Coastal Mitigation Fund	Policy 5: Local Green Spaces	Policy 6: New Businesses and Expansions to Existing Businesses	Policy 7: Tourism Accommodation	Policy 8: Woodland Burial Site and Crematorium
SEA OBJECTIVES								
1. Protect and enhance biodiversity features	✓	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓	✓	0	0
2. Reduce the contribution to climate change	✓	✓	NA	NA	✓	0	✓	0
3. Support resilience to the potential effects of climate change	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	0	0	0
4. Provide an appropriate mix of good quality affordable housing	0	✓	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
5. Support a vibrant, mixed economy which enables residents to work locally	NA	✓	NA	NA	NA	✓	✓	✓
6. Improve the health and wellbeing of residents	✓	✓	✓	0	✓	0	0	0
7. Promote sustainable transport use and reduce the need to travel.	0	✓	NA	NA	NA	✓	0	0
8. Cater for residents' needs, and improve access to local, high-quality community facilities	0	0	0	0	✓	✓	0	✓
9. Manage soil and land resources in a sustainable manner	0	✓	✓	✓	✓	0	0	0
10. Use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner	✓	0	NA	NA	NA	0	0	✓
11. Protect and enhance the character and quality of the historic environment	✓	✓	NA	0	0	0	0	NA
12. Protect and enhance the character and quality of landscapes	✓	✓	0	0	0	0	✓	✓

7. Monitoring and Next Steps

Monitoring

- 7.1 Monitoring the significant effects of the implementation of a neighbourhood plan that was subject to a Strategic Environmental Assessment will enable unforeseen adverse effects to be identified and enable appropriate remedial actions to be taken. For identified significant effects consideration should be given to identifying:
- the criteria or thresholds for remedial action;
 - the type of remedial actions that could be taken, for example reviewing the relevant policy or implementing additional mitigation measures; and
 - the responsibility for taking the action.

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.

Next Steps

- 7.2 This Environmental Report will be subject to consultation. Subject to any necessary amendments the report will be finalised.
- 7.3 There are a number of subsequent stages before the Thirston Neighbourhood Development Plan can come into force, as described in the relevant legislation. In summary, the Neighbourhood Plan will be finalised and submitted to Northumberland County Council, alongside the SEA Environmental Report. The County Council will consider whether the Plan may progress to Independent Examination in terms of meeting legal requirements.
- 7.4 If the Plan passes Independent Examination, it will progress to Referendum. If more than 50% of the local electorate vote in favour of the Plan Northumberland County Council must 'make' the Plan, unless doing so would breach EU obligations. Once made, the Plan will become part of the statutory development plan for the Parish of Thirston and will be used to make decisions on planning applications in that area.

Appendix A: Thirston Neighbourhood Plan Policies

POLICY 1: DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES

Proposals for new development, including extensions and conversions, must, where relevant, demonstrate how:

- a) local context and character are reflected in scale, density, height, massing, layout, use of materials, hard and soft landscaping and means of enclosure; and
- b) features including windows, doors, roof lights, chimneys, flues, roofs, and boundary treatments have regard to surrounding character and materials used locally; and
- c) opportunities to incorporate sustainable drainage have been taken; and
- d) landscaping has been incorporated into the scheme including the retention of trees and hedgerows wherever possible; and
- e) external lighting is minimised to reduce light pollution; and
- f) in terms of the massing, height, scale and proximity, the proposed development does not result in an unacceptable loss of light, overshadowing, significant adverse noise impacts or other significant adverse amenity impacts on existing or future residents and businesses; and
- g) opportunities have been taken where possible to incorporate measures to reduce the carbon footprint and energy efficiency of the building; and
- h) how a minimum of 10% biodiversity net gain will be achieved including by incorporating native species in landscaping schemes to enhance biodiversity; and
- i) safe access can be achieved for all users to and from the highway; and
- j) heritage assets and their settings are conserved in a manner consistent with their significance which should be identified in any planning application through the submission of a Heritage Statement; and
- k) within the West Thirston Conservation Area, development demonstrates, through the submission of a Heritage Statement, how it will preserve or enhance the character and appearance of the Conservation Area and its setting; and
- l) within the village of Eshott, the development will reflect the special character of the village in terms of materials, design, density and boundary treatments consistent with neighbouring properties.

POLICY 2: NEW HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Settlement boundaries for West Thirston and Eshott are defined on the Policies Maps. Residential development within the settlement boundaries will be supported subject to compliance with relevant policies elsewhere in the Neighbourhood Plan and the Development Plan.

Land outside the defined settlement boundaries will be treated as countryside whose intrinsic character and beauty must be recognised in all decision making on development proposals. Outside defined settlement boundaries, residential development will be limited to affordable housing delivered as 'rural exception sites' as defined in national planning policy. Rural exception sites will be supported on the edge of the settlements where they are well related to existing development and comply with policies elsewhere in the development plan.

Isolated homes in the countryside will not be supported unless one or more of the following circumstances apply:

- a) housing where there is an essential need for a rural worker, including those taking majority control of a farm business, to live permanently at or near their place of work in the countryside;
- b) housing that represents the optimal viable use of a heritage asset or that which would be appropriate enabling development to secure the future of heritage assets;
- c) additional housing created through the sub-division of an existing residential dwelling;
- d) housing whose design is of exceptional quality in that it is truly outstanding or innovative, reflecting the highest standards in architecture, and would help to raise standards of design more generally in rural areas; and would significantly enhance its immediate setting, and be sensitive to the defining characteristics of the local area;
- e) the re-use of redundant and disused buildings to provide new housing where this would enhance their immediate setting.

Residential development within the Green Belt will be considered in accordance with national planning policy on Green Belts set out in the National Planning Policy Framework.

POLICY 3: WILDLIFE CORRIDORS AND SITE OF SPECIAL SCIENTIFIC INTEREST (SSSI)

Proposals that promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of the biodiversity value of the River Coquet Wildlife Corridor, comprising the River Coquet and Coquet Valley Woodlands SSSI and the areas of broadleaved woodland, ancient and semi-natural woodland identified on the Policies Map will be supported.

Proposals that promote the conservation, restoration and enhancement of the biodiversity value of the Longdike Burn Wildlife Corridor will be supported.

Development on land within or outside the River Coquet and Coquet Valley Woodlands SSSI which is likely to have an adverse effect on it (either individually or in combination with other developments) will not normally be permitted unless the benefits of the development in the location proposed clearly outweigh both its likely impact on the features of the site that make it of special scientific interest and any broader impacts on the national network of SSSIs.

Proposals to improve public access along the river will be supported where they do not have an adverse effect on the SSSI.

POLICY 4: COASTAL MITIGATION SERVICE

To ensure that the impacts arising from increasing levels of recreational disturbance on coastal Sites of Special Scientific Interest and European Sites can be addressed, all development within 7km of the coast that will result in a net increase in the number of residential units or tourist accommodation will be required to contribute to the Coastal Mitigation Service, or provide alternative mitigation of demonstrable effectiveness. Within a zone, as shown on the policies map, extending between 7km and 10km from the coast, only major development will be required to make a contribution to the Coastal Mitigation Service, or provide alternative mitigation of demonstrable effectiveness.

All financial contributions required in accordance with this policy will be secured by way of a planning obligation under section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, or any subsequent amending legislation.

POLICY 5: LOCAL GREEN SPACES

The following sites are designated as Local Green Spaces and are shown on the Policies Map:

LGS1: Eshott Village Green

LGS2: The Peth, West Thirston

These Local Green Spaces will be protected in a manner consistent with the protection of land within the Green Belt.

POLICY 6: BUSINESSES AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES

The sustainable growth and expansion of the following types of development will be supported subject to compliance with relevant policies elsewhere in the Development Plan:

- a) the development and diversification of agricultural and other land based rural business including the provision of well-designed buildings to support that business;
- b) new sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside and deliver net gains for biodiversity;
- c) the development of local services and community facilities;
- d) the expansion of home-based businesses where planning permission is required.

Any planning applications for new and/or expansions to existing businesses will be assessed in accordance with policies elsewhere in the Neighbourhood Plan and Development Plan in relation to the following:

- a) impacts on the amenity of residents, holiday makers and other businesses and tourist attractions in the Neighbourhood Area;
- b) impacts of noise generating businesses and in particular, their impact on residents and other businesses in the Neighbourhood Area;
- c) hours of operation and impacts on neighbouring businesses and residents;
- d) whether access to the new or extended business can be accommodated without significant impacts on the highway network. This may be assessed through a submitted Transport Statement or Transport Assessment; and
- e) the extent to which the new or extended business development can be made accessible by cycle, walking and/or other sustainable modes of transport.

Proposals that have a significant adverse effect on the peaceful nature of the Woodland Burial Site and Crematorium will not be supported.

POLICY 7: TOURISM ACCOMMODATION

Expansion of existing large-scale holiday parks and the creation of new large-scale holiday parks will not be supported.

Proposals for bunkhouses, chalets, touring caravans and camping accommodation will be supported where they are of a scale that can be sensitively accommodated into the landscape and where they do not have a significant impact on the highway network or the amenity of neighbouring residential properties.

Visitor accommodation associated with farm diversification schemes will be supported where they comply with policies elsewhere in the Development Plan.

POLICY 8: WOODLAND BURIAL SITE AND CREMATORIUM

This site is allocated on the Policies map as a Woodland Burial Site and Crematorium. Within the site, development proposals directly related to the use of the site as a burial site and crematorium will be supported where they meet requirements for groundwater protection set out in the most recent Environment Agency guidance documents.

Appendix B: Statutory Consultees' Responses to the SEA Scoping Report

Date: 24 June 2020
Our ref: 317634
Your ref: Thirston Neighbourhood Plan SEA Scoping Report



Ms. Sarah Brannigan
Planning Policy
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
NE63 2ER

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

BY EMAIL ONLY

T 0300 060 3900

Dear Ms. Brannigan,

Planning consultation: Consultation on Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Scoping Report
Location: Thirston Neighbourhood Plan

Thank you for your consultation on the above dated 21 May 2019 which was received by Natural England on the same date.

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.

In our review of the Thirston Neighbourhood Plan SEA Scoping report, we wish to make the following comments:

Natural England welcomes the comprehensive approach to the Scoping and report and notes specific reference to Northumberland County Council's Coastal Mitigation Service (CMS) which seeks to promote a strategic approach in countering negative effects through recreational disturbance, and this is welcomed in addressing potential impacts on the designated sites at the coast. We note reference to likely National Strategic Infrastructure Planning proposals to include major roadways and note that the document refers to mitigation required as appropriate. We also note the inclusion of reference to Biodiversity net gain and welcome this inclusion.

We would be happy to comment further should the need arise but if in the meantime you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact us.

For any queries relating to the specific advice in this letter only please contact Michael Miller on 0208 225 6263. For any new consultations, or to provide further information on this consultation please send your correspondences to consultations@naturalengland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Michael Miller
Lead Sustainable Development Advisor



Historic England

Sarah Brannigan
Planning Officer
Neighbourhood Planning & Infrastructure
Planning Services
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF

Our ref:
Your ref:

Telephone (0191) 269 1232
Fax

Dear Sarah

**Environmental Assessment Regulations 2004: Regulation 9
Thirston Neighbourhood Plan: SEA Scoping Report, May 2020**

Thank you for consulting Historic England on the above Strategic Environment Assessment (SEA) scoping report. As the public body that advises on England's historic environment, we are pleased to offer our comments.

We agree that historic environment issues should be scoped in to the SEA when it is completed alongside the emerging neighbourhood plan.

The scoping report goes a long way to setting out the scope and level of assessment which will follow. I provide some additional advice below with reference to *Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment* (Historic England Advice Note 8, December 2016), <https://www.historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/sustainability-appraisal-and-strategic-environmental-assessment-advice-note-8/>.

- Under *Context* (p67), ahead of the NPPF references, it would be worth mentioning the principal duties under the legislation governing the types of heritage asset in the plan area: the Planning (Listed Buildings & Conservation Areas) Act 1990 and the Ancient Monuments & Archaeological Areas Act 1979.
- Under *Summary of current baseline* (p68), I advise expanding a little further on the significance (including that derived from setting) and sensitivity of the assets identified. This only need be proportionate, and so will not require much additional work, but our advice note does explain that a list of assets is unlikely in itself to be sufficient information on which to judge the likely environmental impacts of the plan's policies. You are right to point out that, for the conservation area, this is hampered by



Historic England, Bessie Surtees House, 41-44 Sandhill, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 3JF
Telephone 0191 269 1255 [HistoricEngland.org.uk](https://www.historicengland.org.uk)

Please note that Historic England operates an access to information policy.
Correspondence or information which you send us may therefore become publicly available.

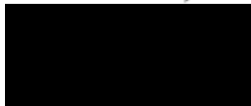


the lack of an existing character appraisal document. Advice on filling this gap is in *Neighbourhood Planning and the Historic Environment* (Historic England Advice Note 11, October 2018), <https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/neighbourhood-planning-and-the-historic-environment/>. For the listed building and scheduled monuments, the report could give a summary of their nature, significance and sensitivity to change, for example by considering their written list entries (<https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>). This section should also mention non-designated heritage assets (for example by reference to the county Historic Environment Record) including a summary of their significance and sensitivity.

- Under *Triggers...* (p72), although the A1 proposals are not found within this plan, they are indeed a trigger to know whether the plan should include policies to manage their impact on the historic environment. For the conservation area, a conservation area character appraisal when prepared would address the condition of and risks to that asset. A modest discussion of condition and risk to the other assets would also be useful, although a survey is likely to be necessary unless a significant trend were identified (eg. under-investment, disuse, etc). This section could also identify any likely positive impacts on the historic environment that the plan might take need to the opportunity to plan for, such as tourism or climate change.
- Under *Objectives...* (p74), the report might consider whether any additional questions are needed once the baseline and triggers are addressed as discussed above. Suggestions of additional questions are found in p9 of HEAN 8. In the questions you already set out, I suggest "significance" is a better word than "integrity".
- The report should also consider indicators and monitoring to clearly demonstrate the effects of the plan in operation. Advice is given on p10 of HEAN 8.

We reserve the right to review our opinion should the plan change materially in its content and direction. Please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any queries relating to our comments or would like any further information.

Yours sincerely



Jules Brown
Historic Places Adviser, North East & Yorkshire
E-mail: jules.brown@historicengland.org.uk

Sarah Branningan
Northumberland County Council
County Hall
Morpeth
Northumberland
NE61 2EF

Our ref: NA/2009/103757/SE-
23/SP1-L01
Your ref:

Date: 29 June 2020

Dear Sarah

**Thirston Parish Neighbourhood Plan Strategic Environmental Assessment
(SEA) Scoping Report May 2020**

Thank for consulting us on the above consultation. The Environment Agency is a statutory consultee for Strategic Environmental Assessments and provides advice to Local Planning Authorities on the scope and findings of the SEA.

Biodiversity

We support the inclusion of SEA objectives which advocates net gain in biodiversity and multifunctional green space. The neighbourhood plan and the SEA should have regard to the objectives of the Water Framework Directive (WFD). In particular, it should seek to ensure that they do not cause a deterioration in the WFD status of the River Coquet. The River Coquet has a WFD status of Good. Therefore, we would welcome the inclusion of an objective in relation to this within the SEA and any other WFD waterbodies within the plan area.

Climatic Factors

We welcome the inclusion of a SEA objective which supports the resilience of the Neighbourhood Area to the potential effects of climate change, including flooding. The SEA should take into account of relevant policies, plans and strategies including your local Strategic Flood Risk Assessment, flood risk strategies and the Northumbria River Basin Management Plan.

Water

We welcome the consideration of water quality and water availability within the SEA. It is noted that policy 8 allocates a site for woodland burials and a crematorium, and seeks to restrict proposals that would have a significant adverse effect on the site.

The WFD and the Groundwater Daughter Directive set out objectives for groundwater including aiming for good chemical and quantitative status; reverse upwards trends in pollution; and preventing or limiting the entry of certain substances to waterbodies. The SEA and the neighbourhood plan must have regard to these objectives and therefore should ensure their decisions help achieve these goals.

We recommend that reference should be made to cemetery section in the '[The Environment Agency's approach to groundwater protection](#)' and information on the Natural Death Centre website.

A hydrogeological risk assessment must be undertaken to show that there are minimal risks to the environment either at time of burial, or in the future. Reference should be made to the Environment Agency document '[Assessing the Groundwater Pollution Potential of Cemetery Developments](#)'. Relevant best practice guidance must be followed and the design should be appropriate for the local circumstances, and should be based on-site investigation.

In principle any new cemetery or the extension of any existing cemetery must:

- be at least 250 metres from a well, borehole or spring used to supply water that is used for human consumption, or for use in dairy farms;
- be at least 30 metres from any other spring or watercourse and at least 10 metres from any field drain;
- have at least one metre of subsoil below the bottom of the burial pit, allowing a hole deep enough for at least one metre of soil to cover the remains; and
- have at least one metre of unsaturated zone (the depth to the water table) below the base of any grave. Allowance should also be made to any potential rise in the water table (at least one metre should be maintained).

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions regarding this letter.

Yours sincerely

Lucy Mo
Planning Technical Specialist - Sustainable Places

Appendix C: Environment Agency's Response to the SEA Environmental Report

creating a better place



Thirston Parish Council
The Arches,
Bockenfield,
Nr Felton,
Northumberland,
NE65 9QJ

Our ref: NA/2009/103757/OR-
22/PO1-L01
Your ref:
Date: 16 November 2020

Dear Sir/Madam

Thirston Neighbourhood Plan and SEA Environmental Report

Thank you for consulting us on the above documents. We have reviewed the documents and have the following comments/advice to offer:

SEA Environmental Report

There is a known Great Crested Newt population at Burgham golf course and around Longfield Cottage / Park Wood just north of the river Coquet. This should be considered within the SEA.

With respect to 'Figure 3: SEA Framework, we welcome the inclusion of the guide question in relation to WFD.

Much of the focus of the SEA is on designated sites and local wildlife sites. Consideration should be given to priority habitats and species. For example, Londike Burn is a priority river habitat which has a moderate WFD status. We would encourage opportunities through community projects to enhance this priority river habitat in order to improve biodiversity.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.

Yours faithfully

Lucy Mo
Planning Technical Specialist - Sustainable Places

Appendix D: Review of Plans and Programmes

The following provides a review of plans and programmes, which is derived from the Sustainability Appraisal of the Northumberland Local Plan. It should be noted that in a number of instances the relevance of the plan or programme relates to the Local Plan and therefore is only indirectly related to the Neighbourhood Plan.

Key Objectives relevant to Neighbourhood Plan	Relevant indicators	How the SEA Framework should incorporate the document's requirements
National Plans and Programmes		
National Planning Policy Framework (MHCLG, 2019)		
<p>The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was published in 2012 and most recently updated in February 2019.</p> <p>The NPPF must be taken into account in the preparation of local and neighbourhood plans and is a material consideration in planning decisions. At the heart of the NPPF is a presumption in favour of sustainable development which should be seen as a 'golden thread' running through both plan making and decision taking. Local Planning Authorities should plan positively to seek opportunities to meet the development needs of their area. The presumption in favour of sustainable development does not change the statutory status of the development plan as the starting point for decision making.</p>	No targets or indicators	<p>The NPPF must be taken into account in preparing the neighbourhood plan. The SEA framework should reflect the presumption in favour of sustainable development, with clear policies that will guide development locally.</p>
National Planning Practice Guidance		
<p>National Planning Practice Guidance (NPPG) is designed to support the NPPF. It reflects the objectives of the NPPF which are not repeated here.</p>	No targets or indicators	<p>The Neighbourhood Plan and SEA framework should reflect the principles of the NPPF and the Planning Practice Guidance.</p> <p>Planning Practice Guidance contains specific guidance on both Neighbourhood Planning and the Strategic Environmental Assessment of Neighbourhood Plans. Therefore, it is essential that both the SEA and the Plan itself are prepared within the context of PPG.</p>

Sustainability Appraisal and Strategic Environmental Assessment (Historic England Advice Note 8)

The purpose of this advice note is to support those involved in assessing the effects of certain plans on the historic environment. It offers advice on heritage considerations during the SEA process.

Identifying unforeseen adverse effects of implementing the plan and enabling appropriate remedial action to be taken.
Testing the accuracy of predictions made in the appraisal and improving future practice.
Determining if the plan is contributing to the achievement of the desired objectives and targets for the historic environment.
Checking the delivery and performance of mitigation measures.

The SEA framework should include objectives relating to conservation and enhancement of the historic environment.

Local Plans and Programmes

ADOPTED DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENTS

Castle Morpeth District Local Plan (Castle Morpeth District Council, 2003)

A considerable number of the policies contained within the Castle Morpeth District Local Plan are saved policies and are therefore still relevant. These policies broadly aim to:

- Provide enough employment and housing land for new, high quality developments to take place that service the needs of the district's residents;
- Protect the existing, built, historical, ecological and landscape character and assets of the district;
- Ensure the district's limited resources are used appropriately and for pollution and waste to be kept to a minimum – sustainable development is key;
- Improve the connectivity of the district through infrastructure improvements that make it easier to traverse the district and make it easier to travel to; and
- Encourage the creation and strengthening of communities and ensuring that communities have the services and facilities required for a good quality of life.

The Neighbourhood Plan must be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan.

The SEA framework should consider the policies outlined within the Castle Morpeth Local Plan and ensure that it contains measures that seek to meet its key objectives where appropriate. It should also include objectives/guiding questions which relate to sustainable development, protecting the historic and natural environment, infrastructure, the creation of new housing and employment land and protecting and enhancing local communities.

EMERGING DEVELOPMENT PLAN DOCUMENTS

Northumberland Local Plan Publication Draft Plan (Regulation 19) (January 2019)

The Northumberland Local Plan is currently undergoing examination. The Plan will be a single new Local Plan, covering the whole of Northumberland and will replace all of the previous District and County Council Local Plan and Core Strategy documents.

When adopted, the Plan will:

- Set the strategic planning policies of the Council, taking account of key factors like population trends, economic growth, climate change, resources and environmental character;
- Set the general scale and distribution of new development which is required to meet Northumberland's needs to 2036;
- Provide the planning principles, including detailed 'development management' policies to guide decisions on planning applications;
- Show in detail where new homes, workplaces and facilities will be located through allocations of land; and
- Show key environmental designations and include site specific proposals for the conservation and enhancement of historic and natural assets.

The Neighbourhood Plan must be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the development plan.

Planning law states that planning applications should be determined in accordance with the Development Plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Therefore, the policies within the Northumberland Local Plan, together with those in neighbourhood plans, will be the starting point for the assessment of all planning applications. While the Local Plan is not yet adopted, it is a relevant consideration and its evidence base should be used to help inform the preparation of Neighbourhood Plans.

Climate Commitment Action Plan 2020-21 (December 2019)

The Action Plan sets out targets for reducing carbon emissions: net zero emissions for the County by 2030; the Council's own operational emissions will be halved by 2025.

Progress will be assessed against 35 measures within: agriculture and land use, energy, industry and commercial, transport, domestic and waste with 4 levels of ambition for each indicator. The measures encompass Scope 1 (all direct emissions owned or controlled by the Council), Scope 2 (all indirect emissions), and Scope 3 (other indirect emissions from business travel).

The Neighbourhood Plan should incorporate policies to support sustainable development and the reduction in carbon emissions in the County.

The SEA framework should include objectives / guiding questions that relate to a reduction in carbon emissions.

Northumberland Biodiversity Action Plan (Northumberland County Council, 2008)		
<p>The Biodiversity Action Plan outlines numerous challenges facing the natural environment of Northumberland including recreational pressure; development; habitat fragmentation; and climate change.</p> <p>The Biodiversity Action Plan also enforces the need to protect Northumberland's important designated natural assets.</p>	<p>Maintain and even enhance the County's natural assets to ensure they can be enjoyed by residents and tourists.</p>	<p>The SEA framework should include objectives/guiding questions that relate to protecting the natural environment and which relate back to the SEA Regulations.</p>
Northumberland Coastal Mitigation Service Strategy Document (Northumberland County Council, 2018)		
<p>This strategy document aims to mitigate the effects of development, and pressure resulting from development, on the Northumberland Coast. It requires mitigation measures to be implemented within designated sites as well as covering monitoring, reporting and governance arrangements.</p>	<p>Policies should include sufficient requirements which include mitigation measures and references to the Coastal Mitigation Service to enable a positive planning policy context.</p>	<p>The SEA framework should include objectives/guiding questions that relate to the protection of important natural and ecological areas and habitats.</p>
Northumberland Landscape Character Assessment (Northumberland County Council, 2010)		
<p>The Landscape Character Assessment looks at the character of the landscape, how nature has influenced it, what it has looked like historically and what things make it distinctive. The study is divided into two parts.</p> <p>Part A - Landscape Classification Part A provides an understanding of the 44 different character types and the 108 landscape character areas. The map and associated descriptions provide a background to understanding landscape and its local distinctiveness and provide a baseline against which change can be assessed.</p> <p>Part B - The Changing Landscape Part B sets out principles for each landscape character type. The principles seek to maintain and enhance the properties most valued in the landscape.</p>	<p>Maintain and enhance the properties most valued in the landscape.</p>	<p>The SEA framework should include objectives/guiding questions that relate to landscape and local distinctiveness. The SEA baseline should include information on landscape character and how landscapes in each neighbourhood area should be managed in order to ascertain the likely effects on these.</p>