



East Cambridgeshire
District Council

SEA Screening Report (updated June 2025, post consultation)

Submission Draft Witcham Neighbourhood Plan
Strategic Environmental Assessment

June 2025

On behalf of Witcham Parish Council in relation to the emerging Witcham
Neighbourhood Plan

Date of assessment:	May and June 2025
Date/ version of neighbourhood development plan to which SEA Screening Report applies:	Witcham Neighbourhood Plan Submission Draft Plan May 2025

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Introduction

- 1.1 For a new or modified plan to be ‘made’, a neighbourhood plan must meet certain basic conditions. These include that the making of the plan does not breach, and is otherwise compatible with, the assimilated obligations of EU legislation (as consolidated in the Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Act 2023 (Consequential Amendment) Regulations 2023. One of these obligations relates to Directive 2001/42/EC ‘on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment’.
- 1.2 This is often referred to as the **Strategic Environmental Assessment** (SEA) Directive. 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 English law through the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations (the ‘SEA Regulations’) and it is these regulations that a plan will need to be compatible with.
- 1.3 A key stage in the neighbourhood planning process is determining whether SEA is required. The process for deciding whether SEA is necessary is referred to as ‘screening’.
- 1.4 SEA is a process with specific documents that are consulted on and considered through the decision-making process. Failure to adhere to the process and generate the required documents may increase the risk of legal challenge to the adoption of that plan.
- 1.5 The SEA Regulations set out a series of sequential steps that must be undertaken as part of any SEA. Article 3(5) of Directive 2001/42/EC details the criteria for determining whether plans are likely to have significant environmental effects. These criteria are outlined in **Appendix 1**.
- 1.6 The (former) Department of the Environment produced a flow chart diagram¹ which sets out the process for screening a planning document to ascertain whether a full SEA is required. The flow chart diagram is provided in **Appendix 2**.
- 1.7 More recently, the national Planning Practice Guide reflects the SEA Regulations in a six-stage flowchart process for undertaking SEA for a neighbourhood plan (see **Appendix 3**).
- 1.8 These various pieces of law and guidance have been used to help prepare this report.
- 1.9 To decide whether a SEA is required for a neighbourhood plan, East Cambridgeshire District Council (ECDC) needs to consider the following sorts

¹ Department of the Environment, A Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive (2005)

of issues:

- How the policies in the draft plan might affect the environment, community or economy.
- Whether the policies are likely to adversely affect a “sensitive area”, such as a European Site (Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar) or a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), National Nature Reserve (NNR) etc.
- Whether the policies propose a higher level of development than what is set out in the existing development plan (with that existing plan having already been assessed by the SEA or Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) for that plan).
- Whether the implementation of the policies is likely to lead to new development.
- Whether the cumulative impact of the policies taken together may give rise to a significant effect.

1.10 Not every neighbourhood plan will need SEA. However, when a parish council submits a plan proposal to the local planning authority (LPA) it is mandatory to provide, either:

- a statement of reasons as to why SEA was not required; or
- if SEA is required, an Environmental Report (a key output of the SEA process).

1.11 As a rule of thumb, SEA is more likely to be necessary if both of the following two elements apply:

- a neighbourhood plan allocates sites for development (for housing, employment etc.); **and**
- the neighbourhood area contains sensitive environmental assets (e.g., a SSSI) that may be affected by the policies and proposals in the Neighbourhood Plan.

1.12 In light of these two considerations, it is very unlikely that a neighbourhood plan would require SEA if the plan was not allocating land for development (which isn't already allocated or with consent). This is because allocating land for development is more likely to generate physical changes which lead to significant effects.

1.13 There are three recommended steps in the initial screening process:

1. Prepare a preliminary screening report
2. Request a screening opinion from the consultation bodies in light of this (this took place 16 April to 16 May 2025)
3. Considering their responses, determine whether the plan is likely to have significant effects on the environment (and therefore require a full SEA) (THIS DOCUMENT).

1.14 Whilst it is not prescribed, in most instances the LPA, which is ECDC in this case, will undertake SEA screening for a neighbourhood plan. This is because

the LPA will ultimately be responsible for ensuring that the SEA requirements have been met prior to the neighbourhood plan being made. **It is confirmed that ECDC prepared this Screening Report.**

- 1.15 The neighbourhood plan should be screened as soon as there is sufficient information available to consider whether the proposed content of the plan or its likely intent (e.g., will it allocate development sites or not?) are likely to lead to significant effects to effectively inform the development of the neighbourhood plan.
- 1.16 Please note that this screening report uses the term 'European Site' when referring collectively to SPAs, SACs, and Ramsar sites. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) also expects candidate SACs, potential SPAs and Ramsar sites to be included within the assessment.

Feedback from the consultation bodies

- 1.17 Regulation 9 of the SEA Regulations requires the local authority to consult the 'consultation bodies'. For the purposes of SEA, the consultation bodies are executive non-departmental public bodies with responsibilities for managing the environment on government's behalf, namely:
- Environment Agency
 - Historic England
 - Natural England
- 1.18 The LPA undertook a preliminary SEA screening on the Regulation 14 version of the Witcham NP in April 2025 and consulted the consultation bodies on this work during the period 16 April to 16 May 2025.
- 1.19 The preliminary SEA screening concluded the emerging Witcham NP could be screened out for environmental assessment under Regulation
- 1.20 Their responses have been included in this report, at Appendix 3. In summary:
- The Environment Agency confirmed they did not consider there to be potential significant environmental effects relating to environmental constraints falling within their remit, namely flooding and watercourses. The Environment Agency did however make a comment suggesting the biodiversity policies contained in the plan should refer the need for any Biodiversity Net Gain assessment incorporating a watercourse metric in the event of development coming forward that falls within 10m of a watercourse.
 - Historic England confirmed they concurred with the findings made by the LPA that the preparation of a full environmental assessment would not be required.
 - Natural England confirmed they considered that significant effects on statutorily designated nature conservation sites or landscapes to be unlikely as a result of the draft Witcham NP and based on the material supplied with the consultation.

Key changes to Witcham NP since Regulation 14 consultation

- 1.21 Since the undertaking of the Regulation 14 consultation, the Witcham NP has been updated to take account of responses received from residents, statutory consultees and local stakeholders on the content of the Regulation 14 version of the Witcham NP.
- 1.22 The amendments to the plan have not been substantive. The overall strategy set out in the Regulation 14 Witcham NP remains in place and the planning policies themselves appear unchanged with the exception Policy WHM 14 'Public Rights of Way'. It now supports measures 'to improve and extend the existing network of public rights of way in the immediate vicinity of the built up area of the village' rather than in the parish as a whole.

How does this SEA screening report differ from the Preliminary SEA screening report?

- 1.23 Reflecting the content of the proposed submission NP, this SEA screening report is very similar to the Preliminary SEA Screening report. Key changes include:
- Updates to Table 1 to reflect the change of emphasis in Policy WHM 14 'Public Rights of Way'
 - Incorporation of Appendix 4 setting out the feedback from the environmental consultation bodies to the preliminary SEA screening report.

2 Strategic Planning Context

- 2.1 The basic conditions require a neighbourhood plan to be in *general conformity* with the strategic policies contained in the development plan (primarily, the Local Plan) for the area. Through its strategic policies, the Local Plan effectively defines the parameters within which a neighbourhood plan may operate.
- 2.2 Throughout their preparation, Local Plans are subject to SEA (generally incorporated through a Sustainability Appraisal (SA)) and HRA (Habitats Regulations Assessment). Where a neighbourhood plan is in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Local Plan, it is likely that many of the environmental effects of the plan will have already been considered through the Local Plan-making process.
- 2.3 National policy states that evidence should be proportionate and should not repeat policy assessment already undertaken. It is therefore relevant to consider the strategic policy context for the purpose of avoiding duplication and to identify environmental effects not already considered and addressed through the Local Plan-making process.

Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023)

- 2.4 The current East Cambridgeshire Local Plan is the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023), which defines strategic (and more locally specific) policies for the area. The Local Plan was adopted by the Council on 21 April 2015, with some small changes to it adopted by the Council on 19 October 2023. It is therefore referred to as the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023).
- 2.5 At the time at which the Witcham NP is to be examined, the Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023) will remain the adopted Local Plan.
- 2.6 The Local Plan directs the majority of growth to the main settlements of Ely, Littleport and Soham. Growth in villages such as Witcham is considerably more limited.
- 2.7 The Local Plan defines a 'development envelope' within which growth is, in principle, generally acceptable. During its preparation, the Local Plan was subject to SA (incorporating SEA) and HRA, both for the 2015 version and the 2023 updated elements.

Withdrawn Local Plan 2018

- 2.8 It is also worth noting that, prior to the preparation of the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023), ECDC had embarked on a full update of its Local Plan. In February 2018, ECDC submitted for examination the updated Local Plan along with a supporting evidence base. Examination of the Local Plan commenced in June 2018. However, in February 2019, ECDC withdrew the draft Local Plan, so it never reached the final adoption stage.
- 2.9 At the point of withdrawal, the draft Local Plan was at an advanced stage of its preparation and had been subject to a full SA incorporating SEA, and a full

HRA. The withdrawn Local Plan proposed a similar growth strategy to the adopted Local Plan, focussing growth principally in the market towns, albeit with an increased role for large and medium villages in the rural area.

- 2.10 The SA prepared for the submitted (but subsequently withdrawn) Local Plan incorporated the requirements of SEA. Throughout the stages of plan preparation, the SA influenced policy formulation and the allocation of development sites.
- 2.11 In June 2018, ECDC published a HRA report² which accompanied the now withdrawn submitted Local Plan 2018. The purpose of the HRA report was to set out the method, findings and conclusions of the Habitats Regulations Assessment (Stage 1 Screening and Stage 2 Appropriate Assessment) of the submitted East Cambridgeshire Local Plan, which was carried out by ECDC, in consultation with Natural England. ECDC has retained the HRA (dated June 2018) as it provides evidence and guidance on issues relating to European Sites which the Council believes remains relevant to applicants, decision-makers and to the preparation of neighbourhood plans. It remains published on the Council's website³.
- 2.12 The HRA complied with the judgement of the Court of Justice for the European Union of 12th April 2018, as described in section 1 of this report. Through the Local Plan examination, Natural England confirmed the HRA was legally compliant.
- 2.13 The following European sites were scoped into that HRA for consideration:
- Fenland Special Protection Area (SAC) (including Wicken Fen, Woodwalton Fen and Chippenham Fen Ramsars)
 - Ouse Washes Special Area of Conservation (SAC)/SPA/Ramsar
 - Devil's Dyke SAC
 - Breckland SAC/SPA
- 2.14 The potential likely significant effects identified as a result of the submitted (but subsequently withdrawn) Local Plan 2018 were:
- Habitat damage and/or loss
 - Disturbance from urbanisation effects
 - Disturbance from increased recreational pressure
 - Reduced air quality as a result of increased vehicle journeys
 - Water quality changes from water consumption and abstraction

2

<http://www.eastcambs.gov.uk/sites/default/files/HRA%20Appropriate%20Assessment%20Post%20Submission%20Local%20Plan%20-%20published%2015.6.18.pdf>

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<https://www.eastcambs.gov.uk/sites/default/files/HRA%20Appropriate%20Assessment%20Post%20Submission%20Local%20Plan%20-%20published%2015.6.18.pdf>

- Reduced water quality from pollution due to increased demand for waste-water treatment

2.15 Witcham parish is in the west of the district, 6km to the west of Ely. A section of the Ouse Washes Special Protection Area (SPA)/Ramsar cuts across a corridor of land in the northwest of the parish. A section of the Ouse Washes Special Area of Conservation (SAC), which is a narrower strip of land but within the wider Ouse Washes SPA, is located alongside Witcham's parish boundary in the northwest; a border it shares with Manea parish. The entirety of Witcham parish lies within the 'impact risk zones' (IRZ) of the Ouse Washes SAC/SPA/Ramsar.

2.16 The parish is also around 6km from Ely Cathedral, with the cathedral visible from parts of the parish.

2.17 All of the above commentary has been taken into account when preparing this Screening Report.

3 Summary of the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan (draft Submission Draft Plan, May 2025)

- 3.1 The Witcham NP covers the period 2024 to 2036. It contains a vision statement, supported by fourteen objectives that sit under six themes: spatial strategy, housing, natural environment, historic and built environment, facilities and services and highways and travel. Each theme contains a combination of planning policies and community aspirations. Only planning policies are relevant to the SEA process and there are, in total, fourteen planning policies that sit under the six themes, as shown below.

Table 1: An overview of the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan (draft Submission version)

Policy by theme	Summary
Theme – Spatial Strategy	
WHM1 ‘Spatial Strategy’	<p>This policy supports, in principle (and subject to criteria), development within the Witcham ‘development envelope’ (a boundary defined in the adopted Local Plan) and takes a more restrictive approach to development outside the development envelope. The policy is consistent with the approach taken in Policy GROWTH 2 ‘Locational Strategy’ in the adopted Local Plan.</p> <p>For any development proposed outside the development envelope, the policy requires the provision of a Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment or other appropriate and proportionate evidence that demonstrates how the proposal can meet certain criteria including not having significant detrimental impact on the distinction of the countryside from the main built-up areas as defined by the development envelope.</p>
Theme – Housing	
WHM2 ‘Affordable Housing on Rural Exception Sites’	This policy supports in principle the delivery of small scale affordable housing schemes of under 10 dwellings subject to criteria, including demonstration of a proven local need.
Theme – Natural Environment	
WHM3 ‘Conserving and Enhancing Internationally Designated Sites’	This policy seeks to give statutory weight to Policy SPD.NE1 ‘Conserving and Enhancing Biodiversity – Internationally Designated Sites’ that is contained within ECDC’s Natural Environment Supplementary Planning Document (SPD), adopted 24 September

Policy by theme	Summary
	2020. The wording in Policy WHM3 is the same as Policy SPD.NE1
WHM4 'Biodiversity Enhancements'	<p>This policy encourages development proposals that are exempt from the Biodiversity Net Gain requirements of the Environment Act 2021 to incorporate on-site measures to benefit biodiversity such as bird boxes, insect 'hotels, bee blocks etc.</p> <p>The policy also requires the planting of hedgerows where loss occurs via the creation or widening of a new access.</p>
WHM5 'Locally Important Views'	<p>This policy is linked to two maps identifying the location of locally important views as well as the Witcham Important Views Assessment, a document prepared alongside the Witcham NP.</p> <p>The policy states that proposals should not detract from the key landscape features of these identified views.</p>
Theme – Historic and Built Environment	
WHM6 'Design Considerations'	A detailed design policy requiring proposals to positively contribute to the neighbourhood area through the provision of high quality, safe and sustainable development and respond positively to the design principles set out in the Witcham Design Guidance.
WHM7 'Dark Skies'	A policy that applies to proposals that incorporate outdoor lighting. The policy requires the lighting to have minimum impact on the environment and wildlife, whilst taking account of highways safety and the security.
WHM8 'Flooding and Sustainable Drainage'	This policy requires all proposals (appropriate to the scale of the proposal) to submit detail to explain how on-site drainage and water resources will be managed so as not to cause or exacerbate surface water and fluvial flooding elsewhere. The policy states that proposals should include the use of above-ground open SuDs.
WHM9 'Sustainable Building Practices'	This policy states development proposals should incorporate best practice in energy conservation and

Policy by theme	Summary
	be designed for the maximum energy efficiency. The policy sets out expectations in relation to this.
WHM10 'Renewable Energy'	This policy supports, in principle renewable energy generation schemes, including those that form part of wider development proposals. The policy clarifies that such proposals should not have an unacceptable impact on, inter alia, 'environmental and heritage assets'.
WHM11 'Heritage Assets'	A policy that applies to development proposals that could affect Witcham's heritage assets
WHM12 'Buildings and Features of Local Heritage Significance'	A policy applicable to proposals that affect buildings identified as being of local heritage significance (non-designated heritage assets).
Theme – Facilities and Services	
WHM13 'Infrastructure and Community Facilities'	<p>A policy that supports proposals that provide and enhance community facilities subject to these being appropriately located.</p> <p>The policy identifies specific facilities and states that proposals that result in their loss will only be supported subject to certain criteria being met.</p>
Theme – Highways and Travel	
WHM14 'Public Rights of Way'	A policy that supports measures that would improve and extend the existing network of public rights of way in the immediate vicinity of the village.

4 Summary of the environmental characteristics of the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan area

- 4.1 To determine the likely significant effects of the Witcham NP on the environment, it is important to consider the characteristics of the area likely to be affected and the key areas of sensitivity. Enough information needs to be included in the screening report to allow the consultation bodies to take a view on the likely significant effects of implementing the plan. For the purposes of screening, it is appropriate to undertake a systematic review of these issues.
- 4.2 The following paragraphs provide a high-level contextual overview of environmental issues and key areas of sensitivity in and around the Witcham neighbourhood area. A range of sources of information have been used to gather this information, including Office for National Statistics, DEFRA Magic Maps, Environment Agency Flood Risk Maps for Planning, and the Witcham NP's own evidence base.

Population and human health

- 4.3 The total population of Witcham parish at the time of the 2021 Census⁴ was 440 people. 49.2% of the total population were female and 50.8 % were male, similar to the average for England.
- 4.4 Life expectancy at birth in the district is above the England average for both males and females⁵.
- 4.5 46.8% of the total population within the Witcham NP area described their health as 'very good' and 37% as 'good'. These figures are above the average for England. 14.1% of the total population were classed as disabled under the Equality Act. This figure is below the England average of 17.3%.
- 4.6 Typical for its rural location and context, Witcham parish has an older age profile compared to England. Figure 1, below shows that there is a higher proportion of the parish population aged 45 to 74, compared to the national average, a low proportion of young children (ages 0 to 9) as well as a low proportion of people aged 25 to 44 compared to the national average.

⁴ Office for National Statistics - Census 2021

⁵ Office for Health Improvement & Disparities, access online at <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/health-profiles>

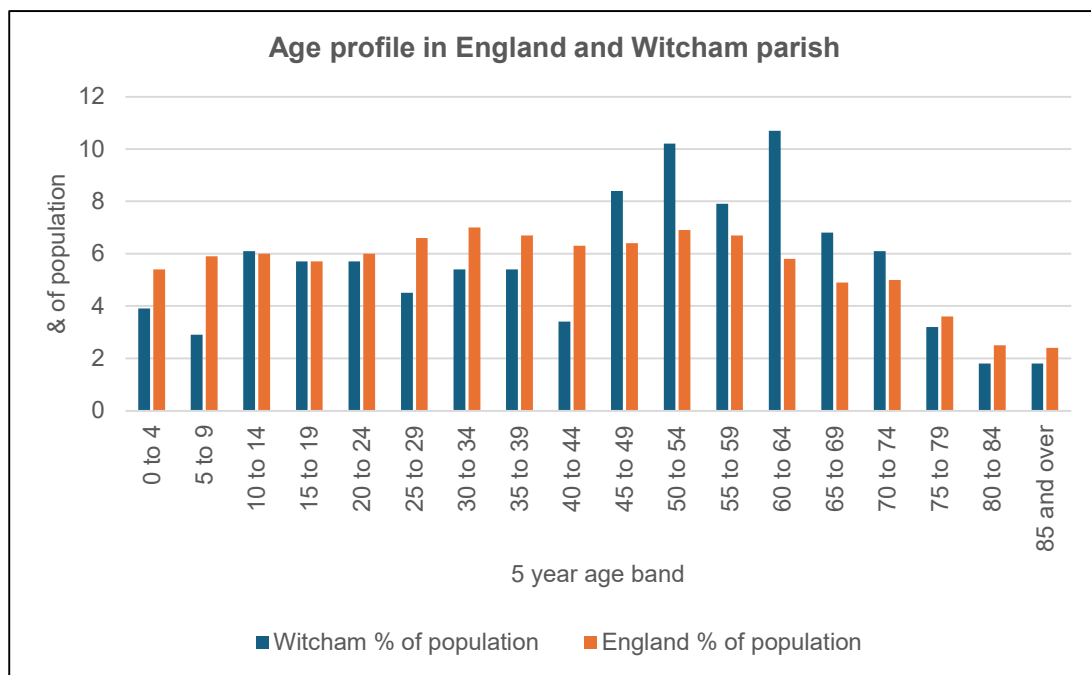


Figure 1: Age profile in England and Witcham parish, as per Census 2021

- 4.7 The 2021 Census recorded a total of 180 households (rounded to the nearest 10). Over 80% of all households owned their own home (compared to 62.3% across England) with 41.3% owning their property outright (above the England average that sits at 32.5%).
- 4.8 Property sizes are heavily skewed towards larger dwellings with four bedrooms or more, compared to the national profiled.



Figure 2: Dwelling size by number of bedrooms in Witcham and England, Census 2021

Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

Internationally Designated Sites

4.9 A part of the Ouse Washes SPA and Ramsar corridor falls within the boundary of the Witcham neighbourhood area. A part of the Ouse Washes SAC corridor abuts the northwestern boundary of the neighbourhood area.

4.10 In addition, the following European Sites lie within approximately 30km of Witcham NP area (source Magic maps):

- Chippenham Fen Ramsar
- Wicken Fen Ramsar
- Woodwalton Fen Ramsar
- Nene Washes SAC, SPA, Ramsar
- Breckland SAC, SPA
- Orton Pit
- Rex Graham Reserve SAC
- Devils Dyke SAC
- Fenland SAC
- Portholme SAC
- Eversdon and Wimpole Woods SAC

4.11 There are no proposed Ramsar sites, Possible Special Areas of Conservation, or Potential Special Protection Areas in proximity of the Witcham NP area.

National Nature Reserves and Sites of Special Scientific Interest

4.12 There are no NNRs within the Witcham NP area.

4.13 Part of the Ouse Washes SSSI corridor falls within the Witcham NP area.

4.14 According to Magic Maps, the SSSI Impact Risk Zone (IRZ) for Ouse Washes SSSI extends across all of the Witcham NP area.

4.15 The Goose and Swan Functional Land Impact Risk Zone is an area of land surrounding the Ouse Washes SSSI in the area around Witcham parish that has been identified as providing important functional habitat for qualifying bird species. The IRZ covers a large area of land in the northern part of the district including the very northern part of Witcham Parish.

4.16 Broadly speaking, therefore, the neighbourhood area is on the very periphery of the Goose and Swan Functional Land Impact Risk Zone and the parish itself falls within the Impact Risk Zone for the Ouse Washes SSSI. The part of the Goose and Swan IRZ within Witcham's neighbourhood area contains no or a very low population.

4.17 For planning purposes, Magic Maps instructs LPAs the following for when Natural England should be consulted for proposals in the parish of Witcham (as a consequence of the SSSI sites and their IRZ zones):

Within the Ouse Washes SSSI corridor:

- All planning applications in this location

Within the **Goose and Swan IRZ** (where it falls in Witchham NP area):

- All planning applications (except householder) outside or extending outside existing settlements/urban areas affecting greenspace, farmland, semi natural habitats or landscape features such as trees, hedges, streams, rural buildings/structures.
- Solar schemes with footprint > 0.5ha, all wind turbines.
- Large non-residential developments outside existing settlements/urban areas where net additional gross internal floorspace is > 1,000m² or footprint exceeds 0.2ha.
- Residential development of 10 units or more.
- Any residential developments outside of existing settlements/urban areas with a total net gain in residential units.
- (other less used categories are also listed – please check Magic maps for full details)

Within the **Ouse Washes IRZ**

- Solar schemes with footprint > 0.5ha, all wind turbines.
- Large non-residential developments outside existing settlements/urban areas where footprint exceeds 1ha
- At a certain distance in proximity to the Ouse Washes, any residential developments of 50 or more houses outside of existing settlements/urban areas although this reduces to 10 or more dwellings the closer to the Ouse Washes.
- (other less used categories are also listed – please check Magic maps for full details)

4.18 What can be seen above is that for the southern area of the parish, including the settlement of Witcham itself, the consultation thresholds are quite high before Natural England need consulting, but this is not the case for proposals within the Goose and Swan IRZ area, which has much lower thresholds.

4.19 Also of particular note is that throughout the neighbourhood area is the requirement to consult Natural England on all solar schemes with footprint greater than 0.5ha and all wind turbines. This is particularly relevant when we consider proposed policy WHM10 'Renewable Energy' in the Witcham NP.

Locally Designated Sites

4.20 There are no Local Nature Reserves within the Witcham neighbourhood area.

4.21 There is one County Wildlife Sites (CWSs) located within the Witcham neighbourhood area:

- The Bury Meadow, a 2.03 hectare area of land to the east of the village (Grid reference TL 474 803) that is adjacent to the Bury Road ancient drove way between Witcham and Wardy Hill. East Cambridgeshire District Council's Supplementary Planning Document 2010 states the site qualifies because it supports more than 0.05 hectares of NVC (National Vegetation Classification) community MG5 (unimproved neutral grassland) and has 8 or more neutral grassland indicator species present in frequent numbers

4.22 CWSs are defined areas, identified and selected locally for their nature conservation value based on important, distinctive and threatened habitats and species within a national, regional and importantly a local context. CWS are areas of land important for their wildlife and can be found on public and private land. They vary in shape, size and may encompass a variety of different habitat types. The habitats and species present are often because of past management and many sites provide a refuge for rare or threatened plants and animals.

Ancient Woodland

4.23 There are no areas of ancient and semi natural woodland or ancient replanted woodland within or adjacent to Witcham NP area.

4.24 The Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory⁶ maps the oldest and most important trees in the UK. It is a live database where records are provided by members of the public and verified by the Woodland Trust. Within the Witcham NP area, there is one record of a 'notable tree', an Elm tree close to/within a hedgerow, close to the Bury Meadow County Wildlife Site and just south of the Bury Road public byway. There is also a 'veteran tree', an Ash tree that is located a short distance to the east of the Elm

Priority Habitats

4.25 Priority habitats are those which have been deemed to be of principal importance for the purpose of conserving biodiversity, being listed in the UK Biodiversity Action Plan, and with maintenance and restoration of these habitats being promoted through agri-environment schemes.

4.26 Priority habitats are mapped by Natural England. In the Witcham NP area, four areas of deciduous woodland are mapped, all to the north of the village and three of which are within the Ouse Washes SPA/Ramsar/SSSI. The extents can be viewed on DEFRA's Magic Map.

Landscape

National Character Areas (NCAs)

⁶ <https://ati.woodlandtrust.org.uk/>

4.27 The Witcham NP area falls within The Fens NCA. The Fens National Character Area (NCA) is a distinctive, historic and human-influenced wetland landscape lying to the west of the Wash estuary, which formerly constituted the largest wetland area in England. The area is notable for its large-scale, flat, open landscape with extensive vistas to level horizons. The level, open topography shapes the impression of huge skies which convey a strong sense of place, tranquillity and inspiration.

Green Infrastructure

4.28 Natural England's Green Infrastructure Map is a useful source of evidence to help understand green infrastructure provision. The mapping shows that a number of residents within the Witcham NP area have access to a natural greenspace close to home, with an extract of the website below.

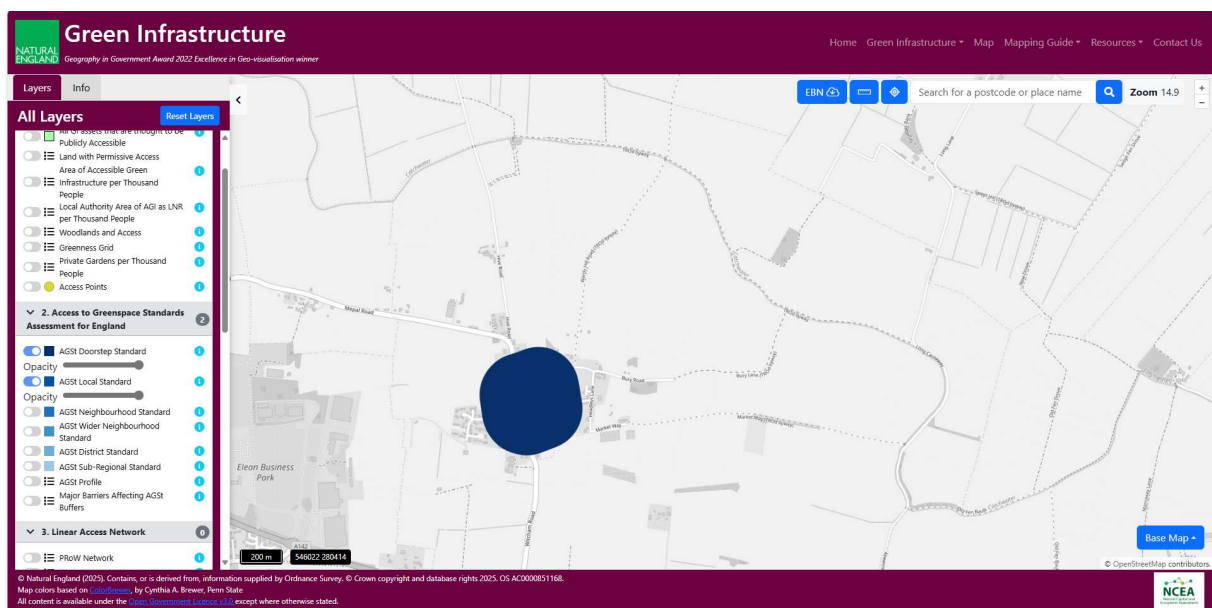


Figure 3: Accessible Natural Greenspace Standard buffers for Witcham parish

Cultural heritage, including architectural and archaeological heritage

4.29 A large area of Witcham village is designated as a Conservation Area.

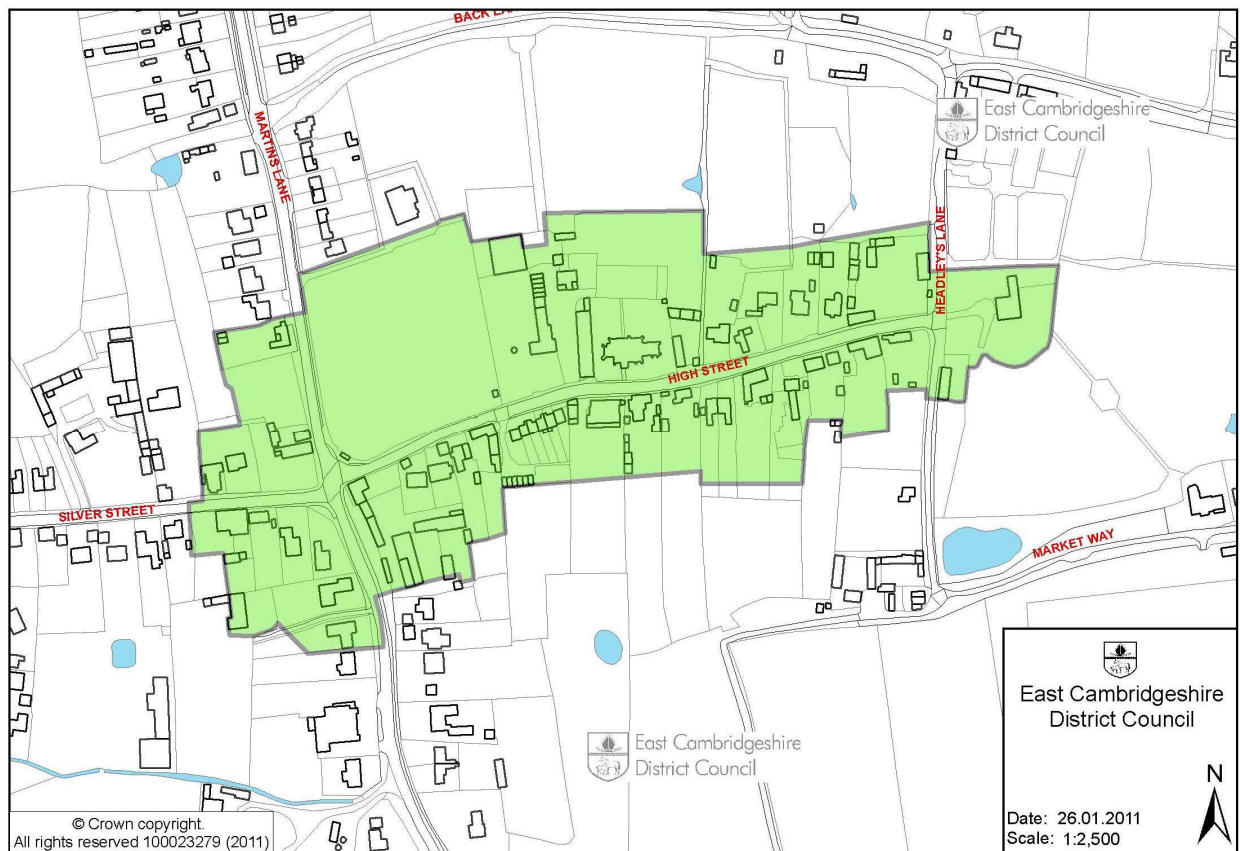


Figure 4: Witcham Conservation Area

4.30 There are 10 listed buildings within the Witcham NP area (1 Grade 1 and 9 Grade II).⁷ They are all in the village centre.

4.31 There are no Scheduled Monuments within the neighbourhood area.

4.32 There are no Registered Parks and Gardens in the neighbourhood area.

4.33 In addition to the designated heritage assets in Witcham parish, it is also important to note that Ely Cathedral is only about 6km from the edge of the neighbourhood area and is visible from the parish (see View 5 in the Witcham Views Assessment).

Soil, Air and Water

4.34 The Soilscape (England) dataset is based on the National Soil Map of England and Wales (NATMAPvector). There are three main soil types in the neighbourhood area according to the national soil map (see Magic Maps):

- Fen Peat Soils

⁷ <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/>

- Loamy and sandy soils with naturally high groundwater and a peaty surface (in the central and far eastern part of the parish)
 - Lime-rich loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage (in the south of the parish)
- 4.35 The Agricultural Land Classification (ALC) classifies land into six grades (plus 'non-agricultural' and 'urban'), where Grades 1 to 3a are the 'best and most versatile' land and Grades 3b to 5 are of poorer quality. The ALC data does not distinguish between grades 3a and 3b (instead simply referring to Grade 3). More detailed assessment would be required to identify subgrades 3a and 3b. Most land within the neighbourhood area has been classed as Grade 1, 2 or 3.
- 4.36 Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) are designated because they are not likely to achieve national air quality objectives. At the time of preparing this report, there were no AQMAs within the neighbourhood area. Indeed, there are no AQMAs within East Cambridgeshire district⁸.
- 4.37 The Environment Agency has assessed water company areas and determined whether they are either in 'not serious or in 'serious' water stress.⁹ Water stress applies both to the natural environment and to public water supplies. Both will be affected by climate change. The neighbourhood area falls within the Anglian Water company area, which has been classified as seriously water stressed.
- 4.38 There are a number of watercourses in the neighbourhood area:
- the New Bedford River/Hundred Foot River (classified as a main river by the Environment Agency) – the Old Bedford River runs parallel to this but this is outside the parish, and on the other side of the Ouse Washes; and
 - the Catchwater Drain and a number of awarded watercourses. These watercourses fall under the authority of the Middle Level Commissioners and the Littleport and Downham Internal Drainage Board (IDB).
- 4.39 As with other parts of the district, the area is largely pumped and reliant on flood defences.
- 4.40 There are flood defences either side of the Hundred Foot River, comprising mostly of flood embankments. There are also flood defences on either side of the Old Bedford River. Land in the north of the parish benefits from these defences.
- 4.41 The Ouse Washes that sits between the Hundred Foot River and the Old Bedford River is a flood storage area. The Environment Agency can direct flow via the Old Bedford River and the Hundred Foot River. During flood conditions, the Earith Sluice can direct water into the Old Bedford River to fill the Ouse Washes.
- 4.42 The flood risk maps maintained by the Environment Agency show that the north of the parish falls within fluvial flood zone 3a, with the Ouse Washes falling

⁸ <https://uk-air.defra.gov.uk/aqma/maps/>

⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/water-stressed-areas-2021-classification>

within flood zone 3b (the functional flood plain). Witcham village itself does not fall within an area at risk of fluvial flooding.

- 4.43 The north of the parish is susceptible to surface water flooding as are several areas in the peripheries of the village itself
- 4.44 The NP area falls within two different internal drainage board Areas. The Hundred Foot Washes Internal Drainage Board (IDB) manages the Hundred Foot Drain where it is not classified as a main river and the Littleport and Downham IDB manages the water courses in other parts of the parish.
- 4.45 Source Protection Zones (SPZ) for groundwater sources such as wells, boreholes and springs used for public drinking water supply have been designated by the Environment Agency. These zones show the risk of contamination from any activities that might cause pollution in the area. Generally, the closer the activity, the greater the risk. Three main zones (inner, outer and total catchment) have been applied to groundwater sources with a fourth zone of special interest occasionally applied. An Inner zone (Zone 1) is defined as the 50 day travel time from any point below the water table to the source. This zone has a minimum radius of 50 metres.
- 4.46 No part of the Witcham NP area is located within a SPZ.

Climatic factors

- 4.47 Greenhouse gas emissions in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough are high. The Combined Authority estimate that emissions are 25% higher per person than the UK average.¹⁰ In Autumn 2019 ECDC declared a climate emergency and is working to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.
- 4.48 The UK climate is changing. A report into the kinds of impacts that are likely to be felt in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough¹¹ found that the region is at high risk from a changing climate. Risks include: flooding, high summer temperatures, water shortages, and damage to the natural carbon stores in the deep peat of the Fens.

Materials assets

- 4.49 The SEA Directive does not define what is meant by 'material assets' and it can be interpreted in several ways. This screening report takes material assets to include a range of social, physical and environmental infrastructure, such as schools, health facilities, roads, railways, bus services, wastewater treatment works, flood defences etc. Impacts on materials assets are likely to relate to several other SEA topics.
- 4.50 Provision of community services and facilities is limited, reflecting the small size

¹⁰ Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Independent Commission on Climate (2021) Fairness, nature and communities: addressing climate change in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough

¹¹ CZ (2021), Aines, E.D., Simpson, C., Munro-Faure, A., Shuckburgh, E., Preliminary report on climate risk in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough region, 2020-2099, Cambridge Zero, University of Cambridge

of the village (440 people and 180 households recorded at the 2021 Census). There is a village hall, a part-time post office service, a church, a recreation area including a play area and a public house.

5 Development Opportunities within the Witcham NP area arising from the Neighbourhood Plan

- 5.1 None of the draft planning policies provide a fundamental new opportunity for new development within the neighbourhood area when considered against the development opportunities already arising from existing policies in the development plan.
- 5.2 The emerging draft policies do not create specific mapped opportunities for new development, neither do the policies increase the overall growth targets to be achieved in the area.
- 5.3 Draft policy WHM1 ‘Spatial Strategy’ in the Witcham NP establishes an overall approach to the location of development in the NP area. The policy supports, in principle, development within the ‘development envelope’ and takes a more restrictive approach to proposals outside it. This approach is consistent with the strategy established in the 2015 Local Plan (amended in 2023). No other policies in the NP direct development to any specific sites.
- 5.4 Some of the policies in the NP are site specific but only from the perspective of flagging up sensitivities or characteristics to protect. This applies as follows;
- WHM 5 ‘Locally Important Views’ identifies locally important views identified and applies to development proposals that might impact upon them
 - WHM 12 ‘Buildings and Features of Local Heritage Significance’ applies to buildings that have been included by the district council on the Local List¹²
- 5.5 The other policies in the Witcham NP seek to influence development, setting expectations relating to aspects such as design and landscape character.
- 5.6 Given the sensitivity of the Ouse Washes SPA/Ramsar site there are two emerging policies that warrant closer inspection.
- 5.7 Policy WHM 10 ‘Renewable Energy’ is of note since it supports renewable energy schemes in the parish although it does not refer to specific types of schemes.
- 5.8 The policy states:
- “Renewable energy generation schemes, including those that form part of wider development proposals, will be supported where their scale, siting and cumulative effects would not have an unacceptable impact on:
- i. neighbouring uses or amenity;
 - ii. visual amenity, particularly from sensitive viewpoints;
 - iii. environmental and heritage assets;

¹² www.eastcambs.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-xx/built-heritage/buildings-local-interest

- iv. the best and most versatile agricultural land; and
- v. highway safety.

Where development is permitted, mitigation measures, such as landscaping, may be required to minimise any potential negative visual amenity and/or highway impacts”

5.9 The policy doesn't refer to specific types of renewable energy schemes.

5.10 Policy WHM 14 'Public Rights of Way' – applies to the existing network of public rights of way, a network which extends into the Ouse Washes SPA/Ramsar site. The policy supports measures to improve and extend the existing network in the immediate vicinity of the village.

5.11 The policy states that:

“Measures to improve and extend the existing network of public rights of way in the immediate vicinity of the built-up area of the village will be supported where their value as biodiversity corridors is safeguarded and any public right of way extension is fit for purpose. Where practicable, development proposals should incorporate measures to enhance biodiversity within the improved or extended public right of way”

6 Determination of likely significant environment effects - SEA

- 6.1 Once data on environmental issues and sensitivities has been gathered (see early chapters of this report), it is then possible to determine whether there would be any likely significant effects (positive or negative) on the environment. The 'responsible authority' in the case of SEA must determine whether a plan or programme, in this case the Witcham NP, is likely to have a significant environmental effect with reference to specified criteria. The following section sets out an assessment of the Witcham NP against these criteria, considering the area characteristics outlined in **Section 4** above.
- 6.2 When the new policies in the Plan are read as a whole, and tested against the SEA themes (as set out in Annex I (f) of the SEA Directive), the following conclusions are drawn:

Population and human health:

- 6.3 Overall, the Witcham NP is not likely to have a significant negative impact on population and human health, given the relatively small population that the plan applies to and no sites are specifically allocated or promoted for housing development within the plan. Through its various policy measures, it is likely that the needs of the population, and standards of human health, will be maintained and potentially enhanced. For example, the protection and enhancement of community facilities via Policy WHM 13 'Infrastructure and Community Facilities', the positive attributes in the parish via Policies WHM 6 'Design considerations, WHM 7 'Dark skies' could have a positive effect on physical and mental health and wellbeing. However, these effects are not likely to be 'significant' for the purposes of SEA.

Biodiversity, flora and fauna:

- 6.4 Overall, the potential for significant negative impacts on biodiversity, flora and fauna to arise from the implementation of the plan are unlikely as a consequence of the new policies. It is expected that Policies WHM 3 'Conserving and enhancing internationally designated sites' and WHM 4 'Biodiversity enhancements' will help to protect and enhance biodiversity, flora and fauna in the neighbourhood area.
- 6.5 Policy WHM 10 'Renewable Energy' is worthy of mention since some types of renewable energy infrastructure (e.g. wind turbines) would not be compatible with protecting the Ouse Washes SAC/SPA, also taking into account the Goose and Swan Functional Land Impact Risk Zone. In basic terms (and excluding taking into account any mitigation measures in the policy), this policy supports in principle all types of renewable energy infrastructure in the neighbourhood area. However, there is nothing in the policy that goes significantly beyond national policy support for such measures, nor beyond existing local policy support in the form of Policy ENV6 of the Local Plan, which states:

Local Plan Policy ENV 6: Renewable energy development

Proposals for renewable energy and associated infrastructure will be supported, unless their wider environmental, social and economic benefits would be outweighed by significant adverse effects that cannot be remediated and made acceptable in relation to:

- The local environment and visual landscape impact.
- Impact on the character and appearance of the streetscape/buildings.
- Key views, in particular those of Ely Cathedral.
- Protected species.
- Residential amenity.
- Safeguarding areas for nearby airfields; and
- Heritage assets.

Renewable energy proposals which affect sites of international, national and local nature importance or other irreplaceable habitats will be determined against the relevant sections of Policy ENV 7.

The visual and amenity impacts of proposed structures will be assessed on their merits, both individually and cumulatively.

Provision should be made for the removal of facilities and reinstatement of the site, should they cease to operate.

- 6.6 Therefore, compared to the baseline policy context provided by the Local Plan, Policy WHM 10 will not likely lead to significant effects.
- 6.7 Also of relevance here is that the emerging neighbourhood plan includes Policy WHM 3 'Conserving and enhancing internationally designated sites'. The emerging policy in the Witcham NP is more up to date than the Local Plan Policy ENV 7 'Biodiversity and geology' with respect to the policy considerations required to be given to internationally designated sites – see below.
- 6.8 Policy WHM 14 'Public Rights of Way' is also noteworthy as it supports measures that improve and extend the PROW network which extends into the Ouse Washes SPA/Ramsar site. However the policy only proactively supports measure which deliver improvements within the vicinity of the village itself, which is some distance away from the Ouse Washes.
- 6.9 Furthermore, the Witcham NP also includes Policy WHM 3 'Conserving and enhancing internationally designated sites' which will ensure that no development could come forward under Policy WHM 14 'Public Rights of Way' that could then undermine the conservation objectives of the Ouse Washes SPA/Ramsar site. Policy WHM 3 is clear that 'the highest level of protection will be afforded to international sites designated for their nature conservation importance' and that 'proposals having an adverse impact on the integrity of such sites, either alone or in combination, that cannot be avoided or adequately mitigated to remove any adverse effect, will not be supported other than in exceptional circumstances.'

Landscape:

- 6.10 There are no nationally designated landscapes within the neighbourhood area. With the policies in the existing development plan, it is considered unlikely that the Witcham NP would result in a significant impact on the local landscape, and any landscape issues arising from proposals can be appropriately dealt with using existing policies.

Cultural heritage, including architectural and archaeological heritage:

- 6.11 As highlighted in section 4, the Witcham NP area has a range of heritage assets comprising listed buildings, non-designated heritage assets and the conservation area.
- 6.12 Overall, the potential for significant negative impacts on heritage assets from the implementation of the plan are deemed unlikely as a consequence of the new policies in the Witcham NP. Of note here, Policy WHM 10 'Renewable Energy' clarifies that renewable energy schemes should not have an unacceptable impact on, inter alia 'visual amenity, particularly from sensitive view points'. This likely eliminates the potential of any significant effects on the setting on Ely Cathedral

Soil, air or water:

- 6.13 There are currently no 'significant' air quality issues in the neighbourhood area.
- 6.14 Whilst parts of the parish (away from settled areas) fall within fluvial flood risk areas, and there are areas within the peripheries of the built-up area of the village that fall within areas at risk of surface water flooding, the Witcham NP does not include any specific site allocations for residential development or other forms of development that will be occupied, and therefore is not anticipated to have any direct implications.
- 6.15 The policies do not provide opportunities for new development (beyond opportunities already arising from existing policies), therefore there is no potential for significant effects arising on soil, air or water from them.

Climate Factors:

- 6.16 Climatic factors involve the consideration of a plan or programme in relation to climate change. Climate change adaptation and mitigation are closely interrelated and are closely linked to other environmental issues.
- 6.17 Overall, the potential for significant negative impacts on climate factors from the implementation of the plan are unlikely as a consequence of the new policies. Indeed, to the contrary, with the policies likely to achieve positive impacts through Policy WHM 9 'Sustainable Building Practice's and Policy WHM 10 'Renewable Energy'.
- 6.18 Overall, it is considered unlikely that implementing the policies in the Witcham NP would give rise to significant negative effects on climatic factors, and would, if anything, likely lead to positive effects.

Material assets:

- 6.19 The SEA Directive does not define what is meant by 'material assets' and it can be interpreted in a number of ways. This screening report takes material assets to include a range of social, physical and environmental infrastructure, such as schools, health facilities, roads, railways, bus services, wastewater treatment works, flood defences, etc. Impacts on materials assets are likely to relate to several other SEA topics. It is considered unlikely that that implementation of the Witcham NP would have significant effects on material assets.

Conclusion

- 6.20 Following review, and in conclusion, it is considered **unlikely that implementation of the policies in the Witcham NP will result in significant environmental effects**. The main reason for this conclusion is that the policies in the Witcham NP are not proposing any new additional site allocations or any other policies which are likely to lead to new additional significant development opportunities that are not already opportunities provided for by existing policies. The policies are, to put it simply, either likely to have a positive impact, or they provide additional design guidance and expectations when such opportunities are to be brought forward in the neighbourhood area.
- 6.21 **Figure 4** (in section 8) provides assessment of the Witcham NP to identify likely significant effects on the environment. The first column uses the SEA Directive criteria and Schedule 1 of Environmental Assessment of plans and programmes Regulations 2004 (as set out in **Appendix 1**).;

7 Summary of identified effects

7.1 **Table 2** below, provides an assessment of the Witcham NP to identify likely significant effects on the environment. The first column uses the SEA Directive criteria and Schedule 1 of Environmental Assessment of plans and programmes Regulations 2004 (as set out in **Appendix 1**)

Table 2: Assessment of the likely significant effects on the environment

The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to —	Assessment of the Witcham NP (March 2025)	Likely <i>significant</i> environmental effect
(a) the degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources;	<p>The Witcham NP would, if adopted, form part of the statutory development plan and contribute to the framework for future development projects. However, the Witcham NP would only apply to a very limited geographical area (the Witcham NP area).</p> <p>The Witcham NP does not provide additional opportunities for development beyond that identified by the Local Plan or national policy.</p>	None
(b) the degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy;	The Witcham NP would not influence other plans and programmes to a significant degree due to the locally specific nature of the policies contained within the plan. The Witcham NP is required to be in general conformity with the strategic policies set out in the East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023). The Witcham NP has been prepared having regard to national planning policies and guidance.	None
(c) the relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting	It is a Basic Condition that a Neighbourhood Plan must contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. The proposed Witcham NP includes several policies which promote environmental considerations and promote opportunities for sustainable development.	None

sustainable development;		
(d) environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme; and	There are no specific environmental problems relevant to the Neighbourhood Plan that have not been identified and assessed through the higher-level Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023), the withdrawn Local Plan 2018 and accompanying SA/SEA.	None
(e) the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of retained EU law on the environment (for example, plans and programmes linked to waste management or water protection).	The Witcham NP is relevant to the implementation of retained EU legislation relating to the Habitats Directive	HRA screening is undertaken separately.
Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to—	Assessment of the Witcham NP (March 2025)	Likely <i>significant</i> environmental effect
(a) the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects;	<p>The assessment of the Witcham NP has not identified any significant negative effects.</p> <p>It is likely that some of the policies in the Witcham NP may result in minor positive effects by helping to preserve and enhance the environmental features within the neighbourhood area.</p>	None
(b) the cumulative nature of the effects;	As above in 2(a)	None
(c) the transboundary nature of the effects;	The Witcham NP is not expected to give rise to any transboundary effects.	None

(d) the risks to human health or the environment (for example, due to accidents);	The Witcham NP is not expected to pose any risks to human health or the environment: the effects of policies within the Witcham NP may, if any, enhance these elements.	None
(e) the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);	The extent of any effects of the implementation of the Witcham are expected to be limited to the immediate local area, the extent of which is, therefore, spatially small and covering a small population.	None
<p>(f) the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to—</p> <p>(i) special natural characteristics or cultural heritage;</p> <p>(ii) exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; or</p> <p>(iii) intensive land-use; and</p>	<p>Natural characteristics:</p> <p>The Witcham NP area contains sites of national and international importance (part of the Ouse Washes SPA/Ramsar) and is adjacent to the Ouse Washes SAC. There is also a county wildlife site contained in the plan area, close to the village.</p> <p>Cultural assets:</p> <p>Heritage assets of national importance include the Witcham conservation area and a number of statutorily listed buildings.</p> <p>However, the policies of the plan only apply to the area, and the nature of the planning policies, taken as a whole, means neither the natural or cultural assets are likely to be adversely affected by the NP.</p>	None
(g) the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international protection status.	As above in 2(f)	None

7.2 **Table 3**, below, applies the advice prepared by the (former) Department of

Environment (see Appendix 2) to ascertain whether a full SEA is required for a plan or programme. Please note that as the questions have been answered using the flow diagram, some of the questions may not be applicable because of previous answers: where this is the case, the response is stated as N/A ('not applicable').

Table 3: Application of the SEA Directive to the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan

Criteria	Response: Yes/ No/ Not applicable	Details
1. Is the NDP subject to preparation and/or adoption by a national, regional or local authority OR prepared by an authority for adoption through a legislative procedure by Parliament or Government?	Yes	The preparation and adoption of the Witcham NP is allowed under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 as amended by the Localism Act 2011. Whilst the Witcham NP is being prepared by Witcham Parish Council it will be adopted by ECDC as the local planning authority. GO TO STAGE 2
2. Is the NDP required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions?	Yes	Whilst the production of a Neighbourhood Plan is not a requirement and is optional, it will, if made, form part of the Development Plan for the ECDC area. It is therefore important that this screening process considers the potential effects. GO TO STAGE 3
3. Is the NDP prepared for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, industry, transport, waste management, water management, telecommunications, tourism, town and country planning or land use, AND does it set a framework for future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive?	Yes – Town & Country Planning / land use; No - EIA Directive Annex I & II	The Witcham NP is being prepared for town and country planning and land use. It does not set a framework for future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive. GO TO STAGE 4.
4. Will the NDP, in view of its likely effect on sites, require an assessment for future development	No	The HRA screening, undertaken separately concludes that the Witcham NP does not require an

Criteria	Response: Yes/ No/ Not applicable	Details
under Article 6 or 7 of the Habitats Directive?		assessment under Article 6 or 7 of the Habitats Directive. GO TO STAGE 6
5. Does the NDP determine the use of small areas at local level, OR is it a minor modification of an NDP subject to Art. 3.2?	Yes	The NP relates to a small area of land at the local level covering just Witcham Parish. GO TO STAGE 8
6. Does the NDP set the framework for future development consent of projects (not just projects in annexes to the EIA Directive)?	Yes	(Alongside the East Cambridgeshire District Local Plan, once 'made' the Witcham NP will set the framework for development consents in the neighbourhood area.) GO TO STAGE 8
7. Is the NDP's sole purpose to serve the national defence or civil emergency, OR is it a financial or budget PP, OR is it co-financed by structural funds or EAGGF programmes 2000 to 2006/7?	N/A	
8. Is it likely to have a significant effect on the environment?	No	The extent to which implementation of the Witcham NP will result in likely significant environmental effects is assessed in section 6 and Table 2 of this screening report. The assessment identifies that no likely significant environmental effects are expected to arise through implementation of the Witcham NP. GO TO CONCLUSION
Conclusion: SEA is not required		

8 Screening Outcome

- 8.1 The Witcham NP does not allocate any land or sites for development. The effects of any potential growth have been considered previously through the submitted but now withdrawn East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2018 and supporting evidence base, including the Sustainability Appraisal (which incorporated SEA) and Habitats Regulation Assessment, and the adopted East Cambridgeshire Local Plan 2015 (as amended 2023). For the purposes of SEA screening, this evidence base is considered appropriate and relevant.

SEA screening

- 8.2 Based on the findings of the screening assessment in this report and taking account of the consultation responses from the statutory environmental bodies, ECDC is of the view that the implementation of the Witcham NP will not result in likely significant environmental effects. **As such, a full SEA is not required for the Witcham NP (Submission Draft version May 2025).**

Appendices

Appendix 1 – SEA assessment criteria

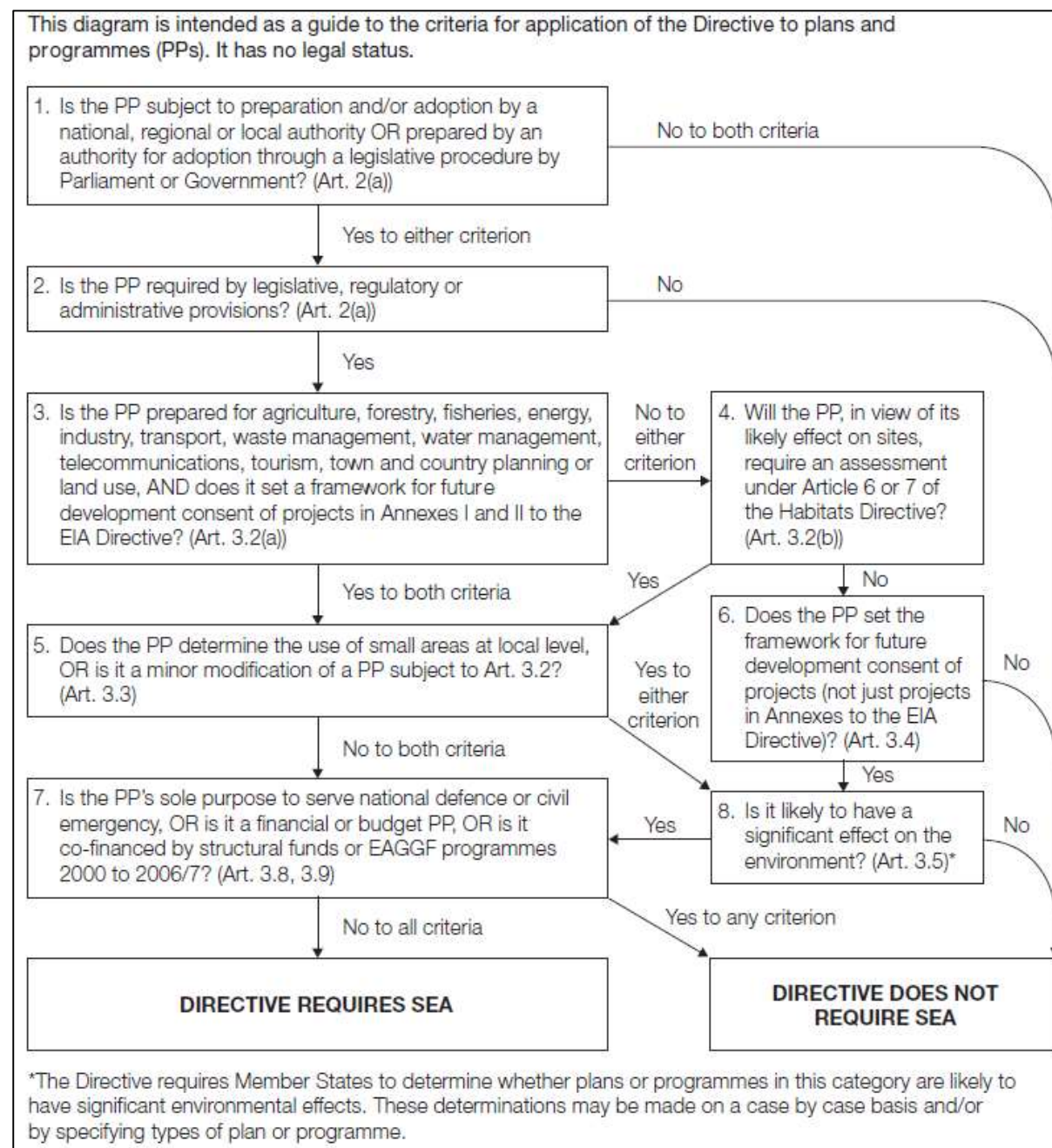
Article 3, Scope

5. Member States shall determine whether plans or programmes referred to in paragraphs 3 and 4 are likely to have significant environmental effects either through case-by-case examination or by specifying types of plans and programmes or by combining both approaches. For this purpose Member States shall in all cases take into account relevant criteria set out in Annex II, in order to ensure that plans and programmes with likely significant effects on the environment are covered by this Directive.

Annex II Criteria for determining the likely significance of effects referred to in Article 3(5)

1. The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to
 - the degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources;
 - the degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy;
 - the relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development;
 - environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme;
 - the relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste-management or water protection).
2. Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to
 - the probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects;
 - the cumulative nature of the effects;
 - the transboundary nature of the effects;
 - the risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents);
 - the magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected);
 - the value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to:
 - special natural characteristics or cultural heritage;
 - exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values;
 - intensive land-use;
 - the effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international protection status.

Appendix 2 – Application of SEA Directive to plans and programmes¹³



¹³ Annexes I and II of Directive 2011/92/EU (as referred to in Figure 2, question 3) available at:

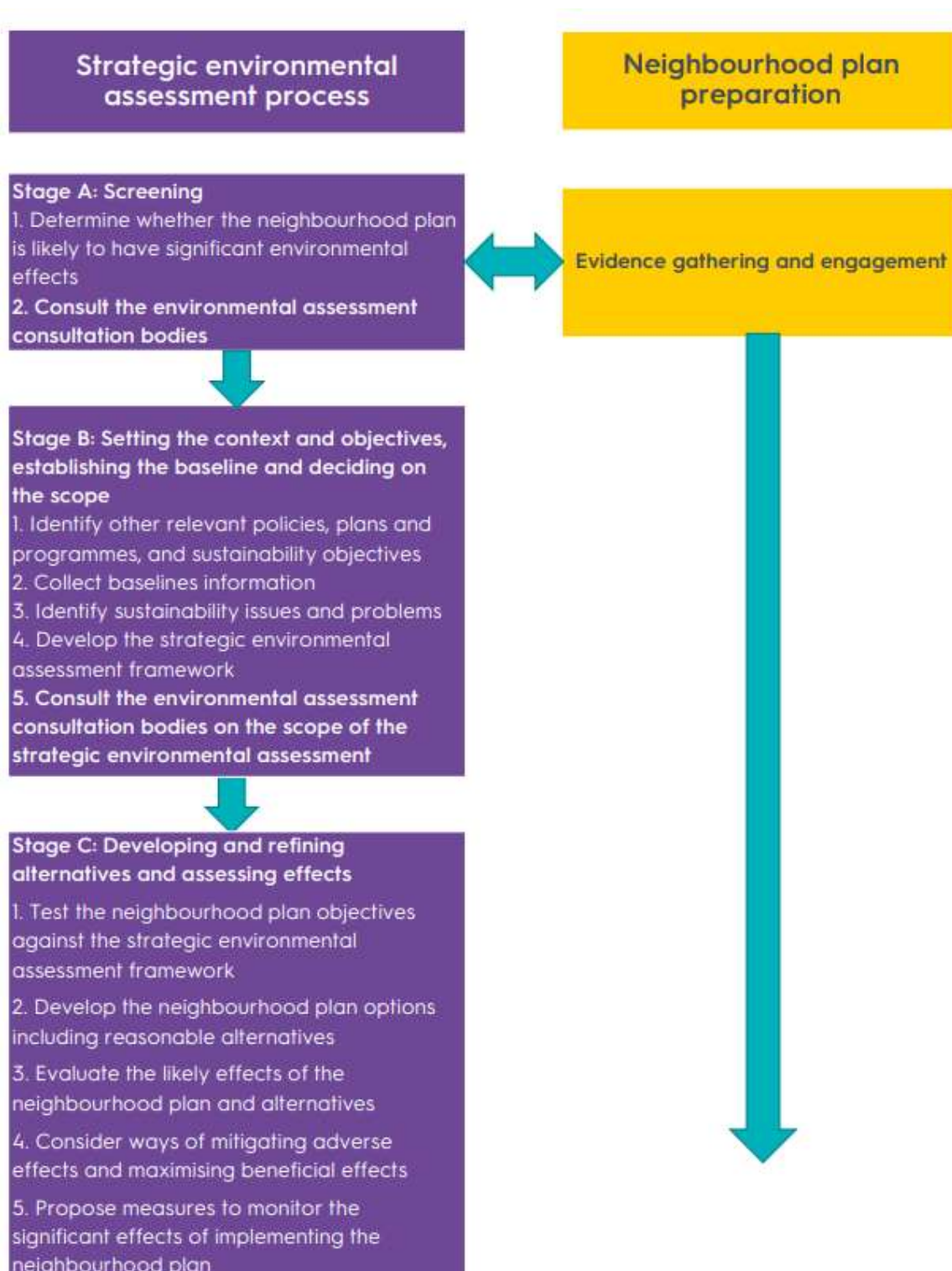
<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011L0092&from=EN>

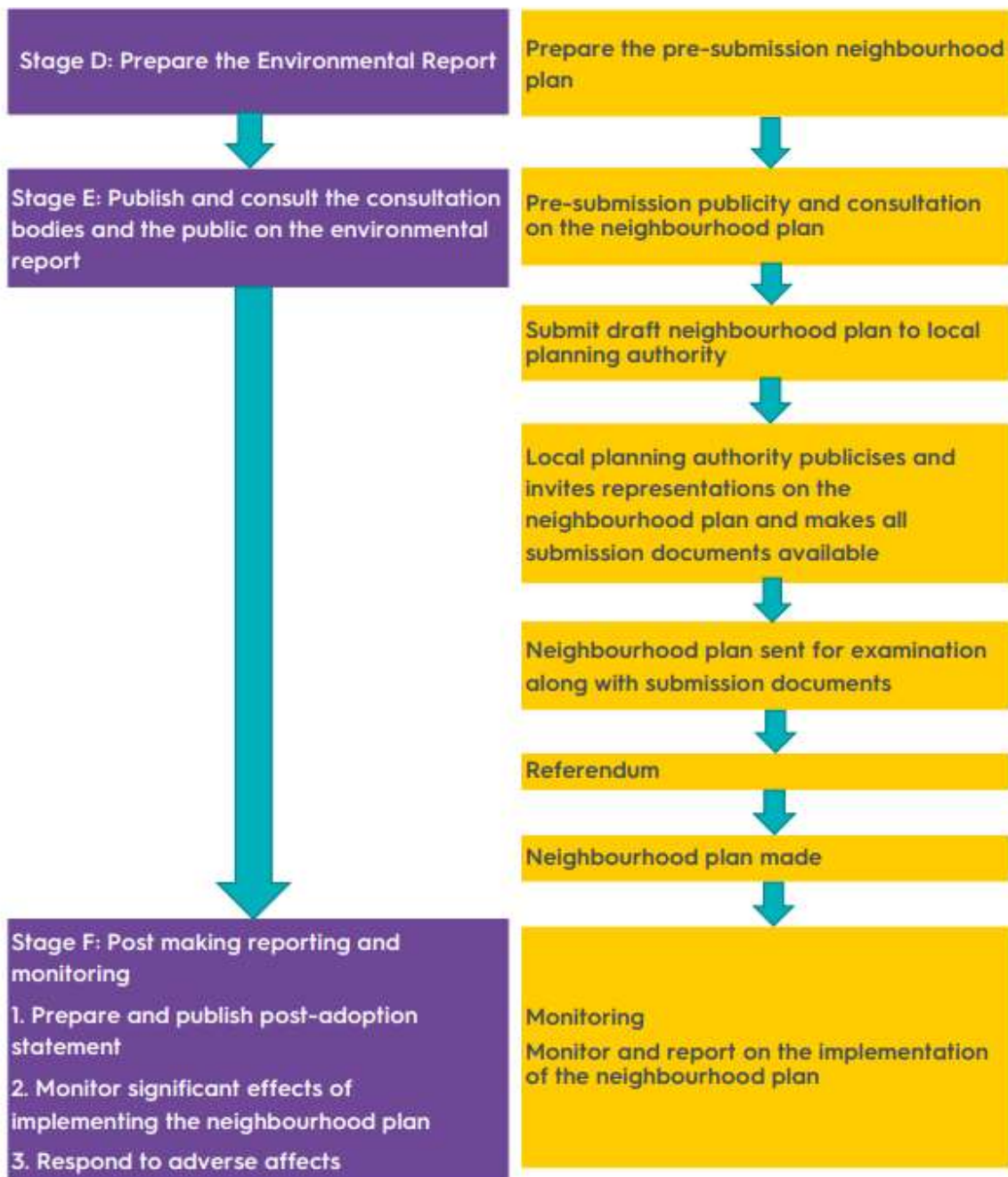
(see <http://ec.europa.eu/environment/eia/eia-legalcontext.htm> for details of amendments).

Articles 6 and 7 of the Habitats Directive (as referred to in Figure 2, question 4) available at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:31992L0043&from=EN>.

Appendix 3 – SEA process for Neighbourhood Planning

(source: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/strategic-environmental-assessment-and-sustainability-appraisal#Strategic-environmental-assessment-process>)





Appendix 4 - Consultation with statutory agencies

The following responses were received:

Natural England

Received 15 May 2025

Dear Ms Hogger

Witcham Neighbourhood Plan - SEA Screening Consultation

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

Natural England is a non-departmental public body. Our statutory purpose is to ensure that the natural environment is conserved, enhanced, and managed for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development.

Screening Request: Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA)

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

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

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

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

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

Furthermore, Natural England does not routinely maintain locally specific data on all environmental assets. The plan may have environmental impacts on priority species and/or habitats, local wildlife sites, soils and best and most versatile agricultural land,

or on local landscape character that may be sufficient to warrant an SEA. Information on ancient woodland, ancient and veteran trees is set out in Natural England/Forestry Commission standing advice.

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

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

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

Yours sincerely

Sally Wintle

Consultations Team

Historic England

Received 7 May 2025

Thank you for inviting Historic England to comment on this consultation. As the Government's adviser on the historic environment Historic England is keen to ensure that the protection of the historic environment is fully taken into account at all stages and levels of the local planning process. Therefore we welcome this opportunity to review the Screening Report for this plan. For the purposes of this consultation, Historic England will confine its advice to the question, "Is it (the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan) likely to have a significant effect on the historic environment?". Our comments are based on the information supplied with the Screening Opinion.

The Screening Report indicates that the Council considers that the plan will not have any significant effects on the historic environment. We note that the plan does not propose to allocate any sites for development.

On the basis of the information supplied, and in the context of the criteria set out in Schedule 1 of the Environmental Assessment Regulations [Annex II of 'SEA' Directive], Historic England concurs with the Council that the preparation of a Strategic Environmental Assessment is not required.

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

I should be pleased if you can send a copy of the determination as required by REG 11 of the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004.

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

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

Please do contact me, either via email or the number below, if you have any queries.

Yours sincerely

Debbie Mack

The Environment Agency

Received 15 May 2025

Dear Rachel

SEA SCREENING CONSULTATION WITCHAM NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN WITCHAM

Thank you for consulting us on the Strategic Environmental Assessment Screening Report for the Witcham Neighbourhood Plan.

Flood Risk

Based on a review of environmental constraints for which we are a statutory consultee, we find that there are areas of fluvial flood risk and watercourses within the neighbourhood plan area.

In particular, we note that the boundary does extend into areas of Flood Zones 2 and 3 of the designated statutory main river 'New Bedford River'. On the basis that future development is steered away from the sensitive aspects of the environment highlighted, we do not consider there to be potential significant environmental effects relating to these environmental constraints. We note it has also been mentioned this is also the site of the Ouse Washes, a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), Special Protection Area (SPA) and RAMSAR Site.

We recommend the inclusion of relevant policies to cover the management of flood risk. Allocation of any sites and any windfall development delivered through the Plan

period should follow the sequential approach. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) sets this out.

Biodiversity Net Gain

We note the Biodiversity Policies within the plan, however without the inclusion of a watercourse metric for windfall developments.

On 12 February 2024, Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) became mandatory under Schedule 7A of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 (as inserted by Schedule 14 of the Environment Act 2021). This means that unless exempt, Developers must deliver a net gain in biodiversity of at least 10%. Consequently, a development will result in more or better-quality natural habitat than there was before development.

For any windfall developments where development falls within 10m of a watercourse, a watercourse metric should be applied to the assessment.

Informative

We encourage you to seek ways in which your neighbourhood plan can improve the local environment. For your information, together with Natural England, Historic England and Forestry Commission we have published joint guidance on neighbourhood planning, which sets out sources of environmental information and ideas on incorporating the environment into plans. This is available at: [How to consider the environment in Neighbourhood plans - Locality Neighbourhood Planning](#)

We trust this advice is useful.

Yours sincerely

Mr Jack Saunders