



Sussex
Wildlife Trust

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By email only

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Wealden Local Plan Direction of Travel

Thank you for consulting the Sussex Wildlife Trust (SWT) on the Wealden Local Plan Direction of Travel. SWT is encouraged by Wealden District Council's (WDC) commitment to early engagement. SWT is keen to work with WDC to help it ensure that it plans for the natural capital needed within the district and ensures that any development is truly sustainable.

Overarching Comments

There are positive policy options listed within the consultation document. However, we are concerned that there are no clear strategic connections between the themes. In particular, the policy options for the natural environment are all positive, however we are not certain that they are achievable given the volume of development WDC appear to be considering. Additionally, it is not clear what impact these policies might have on the ground as there is no real commitment to targets or objectives for biodiversity when compared to the targets for housing or employment space.

SWT is disappointed that in the Forward, Cllr Newton only talks about protecting valued landscapes, natural environments and the ecological services that our environment provides. WDC must plan for growth in natural capital and enhancements to valued landscapes. WDC should be ambitious in its commitment to delivering nature's recover within the district and achieving net zero, prioritising these objectives alongside appropriate and sustainable housing delivery. The council should include ambitious policies that go beyond the requirements of the NPPF.

SWT is pleased that WDC acknowledges in section 1.19 that relevant and up-to-date evidence is needed and that WDC cannot rely on its existing evidence base. WDC should be clear from the outset what evidence is required and must ensure that this evidence informs decisions on the content of the plan and is not retrofitted once growth options and site allocations have been set. We would expect WDC's evidence base to include:

- Up to date Green Infrastructure Strategy that identifies assets and potential for enhancements to connectivity and function
- Nature Capital and Ecosystem Services Assessment
- Preliminary Ecological Appraisal of potential strategic sites
- A detailed Sustainability Appraisal that allows clear conclusions on growth options
- Consideration of the district's Nature Recovery Network (NRN)

Without this information, SWT cannot see how WDC can make informed decisions about the most sustainable options for development. Given the timeline for the local plan, we expect WDC to consider the NRN from the outset. In particular, we expect WDC to include strong spatial policies on the areas of the district that should be the priority for nature's recovery.

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4 Tackling Climate Change

SWT understands that transport is also covered in some of the other themes, however in relation to climate change this section needs to be more transparent that the policy priority needs to be to reduce the need to travel and increase non-motorised travel rather than converting all vehicles to electric. As such, policy option 4 should be '**prioritise** active and sustainable transport', not just encourage. This would be consistent with paragraph 110 of the NPPF which states that applications for development should give priority first to pedestrian and cycle movements.

SWT is concerned that the policy options do not really consider the necessary shift away from car dependence within the district. Given that almost half the carbon emissions in the district relate to transport, it is vital that the new plan does not lead to more car-dependent new development. WDC need to be more ambitious in its options in relation to transport and particularly in the priority of reducing the need to travel. We strongly encourage WDC to adopt the recommendations of Transport for New Homes¹ and particularly their checklist for new housing developments².

Whilst the supporting text has positive wording around natural solutions, this is not reflected in the policy options. In particular option 7 should be clear in the need to prioritise natural solutions to flooding that result in multiple benefits, including biodiversity gains. WDC need to set policies that ensure SuDs are effective through good monitoring.

SWT is very supportive of the reference to natural solutions in section 4.25, however WDC must do everything possible to reduce emissions, before considering offsetting/sequestration, as there is simply not enough natural capacity to rely on this to get to net zero.

We also feel that option 10 also needs to be more ambitious with development framing design around the urgent need for climate change adaptation. For example, through proper consideration of the impact of potential development on carbon sequestration and emissions i.e. considering how carbon is currently captured by different habitats within the district and how this, and the potential for increases in carbon capture through habitat enhancement and creation, may be impacted by different growth options and spatial strategies.

5 Infrastructure to Support Growth

Again, SWT believe WDC needs to prioritise reducing the need to travel rather than just a modal shift. Additionally, we are concerned that WDC acknowledge the climate and biodiversity emergencies and include strong commitments to achieving net zero, there is still a commitment to strategic road infrastructure which is contradictory. WDC acknowledge that transport is a huge issue in relation to carbon emissions and that there must be a change in transport policy. This needs to be reflected in the council's infrastructure choices and increasing road capacity is not compatible

6 Housing

SWT strongly disagrees with the content of paragraph 6.3 and recommends that WDC is braver in setting out the constraints in the district to delivering housing. The Government have made it clear in their response to the changes to the current planning system consultation on the standard method³, that:

'Within the current planning system the standard method does not present a 'target' in plan-making, but instead provides a starting point for determining the level of need for the area, and it is only after consideration of this, alongside what constraints areas face, such as the Green Belt, and the land that is actually available for development, that the decision on how many homes should be planned for is made.'

This response also states that *'It is for local authorities to determine precisely how many homes to plan for and where those homes most appropriately located. In doing this they should take into account their local circumstances and constraints.'*

¹ <https://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/>

² <https://www.transportfornewhomes.org.uk/the-project/checklist-for-new-housing-developments/>

³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/changes-to-the-current-planning-system/outcome/government-response-to-the-local-housing-need-proposals-in-changes-to-the-current-planning-system>

We therefore strongly encourage WDC to consider the strength of its evidence base in helping to determine the level of development that the district's natural capital can absorb. Creating a plan with an unachievably high housing target will only cause further degradation of biodiversity and will not help WDC 'take back control'. The first policy option for housing should be to set a realistic housing target that is sustainable and can be delivered within the environmental capacity of the district. It should be WDC priority to evidence this so that it is able to clearly set out why the target is reasonable under the NPPF.

It is clear that the types of houses needed in the district will never be delivered by setting one, unachievable 'target' and relying on the market to deliver this. SWT encourage WDC to adopt strong red lines when it comes to local need. The council currently appear to rely on large scale market housing to deliver a very small amount of affordable and appropriately sized homes. SWT is unclear how this will help the council meet its true housing needs, homes are needed.

One clear 'constraint' within the district is the high percentage of land designated for its biodiversity value. Another is the fact that a large proportion of the district falls within the High Weald AONB. Given this, we would not expect the council to plan to accommodate the housing number derived from the standard method. Instead WDC must robustly evidence and argue that the housing number should be reduced to reflect the proportion of protected land in the district.

Further to this, a housing target is not an exceptional reason to allow major development in the AONB. The NPPF is clear that the AONB should be protected and yet WDC do not appear to have any ambition to do this.

Any planning policies relating to conversion of rural buildings should include a requirement for ecological surveys and retention and enhancement of biodiversity feature given the frequency of protected species such as bats and barn owls being present.

10 Our Natural Environment

Chapter 10 sets out very well the huge value of the natural environment within the district. Whilst there is an abundance of biodiversity it is not clear what the quality of each feature and habitat is or the level of connectivity between sites.

SWT strongly supports the policy options for the natural environment and see that WDC are being positive in their approach to nature's recovery. We are also very supportive of a strategic approach to any offsite biodiversity net gain delivery, however WDC must be clear that it should not just be 'seeking to deliver' net gain, but actually delivering it.

SWT would like all these policy options to be taken forward, however we are not confident that these policies will actually achieve a net gain when considering the volume of development WDC plans to deliver. WDC needs to ensure it has a strong evidence base that demonstrates that housing can be delivered whilst still achieving a Nature Recovery Network. The overarching policy aim should be to deliver a net gain in biodiversity and a growth in natural capital over the lifetime of the plan.

There must also be strong monitoring of the application of policies as we are concerned that WDC's warm words may not be delivered on the ground. For example, the volume of development around Pevensey Levels is already a concern in terms of surface water runoff and its impacts on water quality. We acknowledge that these developments include SuDs, but it is not clear that WDC have the mechanism to ensure effective management of the SuDs in perpetuity. Additionally, the cumulative impact of these developments and particularly the interaction of these multiple SuDs schemes does not appear tested.

It is strange that there are no policies options considered for Ashdown Forest SAC/SPA or Pevensey Levels SAC/Ramsar. These are two highly designated sites within the district which require focussed protection and enhancement. We also encourage WDC to adopt a requirement for a 20% biodiversity net gain rather than the minimum of 10%. Several leaders in this policy area have already successfully adopted 20% minimum gain with a robust justification for doing so, including Lichfield District Council⁴. The Surrey Local Nature

⁴<https://www.lichfielddc.gov.uk/downloads/file/1112/supplementary-planning-document-biodiversity-and-development>

Partnership has created a justification for the need for Surrey LPA's to adopt a 20% gain⁵ and we expect the Sussex Local Nature Partnership to produce a similar justification which we encourage WDC to embrace.

Green Infrastructure

SWT strongly supports the creation of a Green Infrastructure Strategy before there is any further work on potential site allocations. The GI Strategy must help inform where the most sustainable locations for development might be and the best opportunities for GI enhancements, rather than retrofitting GI at a later date.

We strongly support the policy options and particularly the commitment to including green infrastructure in any generic infrastructure policies. We believe this should also include blue infrastructure.

11 Our Landscape, Heritage and Cultural Assets

SWT would support a policy protecting blue and green corridors, preferably any corridors should comprise part of the district's nature recovery network.

SWT is very concerned about WDC's insistence that it may need to consider meeting its growth requirements within the AONB. The NPPF is clear that major development in the AONB should not happen except in exceptional circumstance. Meeting a housing target is not an exceptional circumstance and WDC need to be clear that it is not appropriate to plan for large scale market housing within this protected landscape. We urge WDC to follow the example of the South Downs Local Plan and prioritise small scale affordable housing within the AONB. We also recommend that the High Weald Design Guide is adopted as a material consideration.

12 Design

SWT supports the policy option which relates to ensuring that any policies take full account of the need to protect and enhance the natural environment and wildlife. The orientation and design of both public and private outdoor space can be pivotal in creating permeability for wildlife and connectivity of habitats.

We also strongly support the requirements for greening and water efficiency measures. It is important that these are included for all scales of development.

14 Our Growth Options

SWT does not believe it can give an opinion on this without a sufficient and up to date environmental evidence base in order to assess the sustainability of options. SWT encourages WDC to prioritise the creation of robust environmental evidence which can help WDC make informed decisions, rather than retrofitting policy options.

We do however strongly disagree that there must be major growth within the AONB. As stated previously, the NPPF makes clear that the housing figure produced by the standard method is a starting point, not a target. A large proportion of Wealden District is protected via biodiversity and landscape designations, this is a reasonable and justified constraint in terms of assessing a sustainable level of development. WDC must focus on delivering needed, affordable housing and a growth in natural capital to support this housing, rather than an unachievable and unjustified 'target'.

Additionally, any further consideration of growth options need to be illustrated by realistic figures to help demonstrate the different options. It is not clear what the different options would look like in the district or whether they are even feasible given the large environmental and infrastructure constraints.

Sustainability Assessment Scoping Report

We support the Sussex Ornithological Society's recommendation for improved monitoring indicators and methods under SA Objective 5.

⁵ https://surreynaturepartnership.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/recommendation-for-20-bng-in-surrey_snp-november2020_final.pdf

SWT would be keen to meet with you to discuss the progress of the local plan and in particular the environmental evidence base.

Yours sincerely,

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