

Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership

The Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership (the “NEP”) wishes to make a written statement to note the following in relation to the matters, issues and questions raised by the Inspector of the Plan:MK Local Plan Examination. As Milton Keynes Council is a member of the NEP, the NEP’s responses refer to key areas of work where they relate to the Inspector’s questions and in particular to the Statement of Common Ground agreed between the NEP and Milton Keynes Council. The NEP’s written statement also summarises and cross-refers to the NEP’s previous submission where appropriate, and includes updated information. In this way we hope to offer the NEP’s perspective to assist with answering relevant aspects of the Inspector’s questions.

Written Statement in relation to Matter 8, Issue 4 – Environment and Heritage.

Natural Environment

Q8.17

Do Policies NE1-6 (with reference to the proposed modifications in the Statements of Common Ground appended to the Duty to Cooperate Statement and presented in the schedule of modifications) provide clear, justified and effective guidance for the protection and enhancement of the Borough’s landscape, biodiversity and geodiversity? What is the evidence, or what are the measures, that will enable assessment against impacts on “tranquillity” in Policy NE5?

The NEP has agreed a Statement of Common Ground ¹ with Milton Keynes Council, which includes agreements on wording to improve the soundness and clarity of Policies NE1-3. In particular the NEP would wish to note and summarise the following:

- The proposed changes to policy NE1 are to enhance the clarity of the policy, in particular regarding the practical application of the mitigation hierarchy and the nature of the various designated sites that need to be taken into account when considering development proposals. The amendments to Paragraph 12.19 are to ensure consistency with the NPPF wording (particularly Paragraph 117 and 118). The proposed additional amended wording of Paragraph 12.20 in Plan:MK regarding minimum buffers for irreplaceable habitats is to bring the Policy in line with national standing advice (provided by

¹ See Plan:MK Duty to Cooperate Statement March 2018 (MK/SUB/008) Appendix 2, page 30, Available at the [Plan:MK Evidence Base Pages](#).

Natural England and the Forestry Commission), guidance and recognised good practice² which are provided in more detail in our previous submission³.

- The proposed changes to policy NE2⁴ and the accompanying supporting text (proposed paragraphs 12.22, 12.23, 12.24 and 12.25⁵) are intended to improve the clarity of the policy wording, and to bring it in line with recognised approaches and Government Policy objectives.

For example, alongside the policies and good practice we highlighted in our previous submission response⁶, including national Standing Advice and compliance with NPPF Paragraph 117, to support the suggested wording changes, we also note here that employing the current Defra metric (from 2012; a new metric is due for launch shortly) or locally-derived mechanism to measure biodiversity impacts as a result of proposed development brings Policy NE2 in line with new national policy.

Of particular note, the Government's 25 Year Environment Plan (January 2018) clearly states the "*immediate ambition*" to "mainstream the use of existing biodiversity net gain approaches within the planning system" in its aim to embed the environmental net gain principle for development.⁷

And, while we acknowledge the examination is to be held with the previous NPPF requirements (2012) in mind, we note that the latest NPPF wording (July 2018, [link available here](#)) states that (with NEP underlining):

Para 170: "Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by...d) minimising impacts on and providing net gains for biodiversity, including by establishing coherent ecological networks that are more resilient to current and future pressures;..."

Para 174: "To protect and enhance biodiversity and geodiversity, plans should: ...identify and pursue opportunities for securing measurable net gains for biodiversity...";

Para 175: "When determining planning applications, local planning authorities should apply the following principles:...d) development

² Details of the proposed changes to wording are set out in the Schedule of Proposed Additional Modifications, June 2018, pg 24, MK/SUB/004b, AddM98 [link available here](#); and in the Statement of Common Ground between MKC and the NEP – see reference 1, above.

³ The NEP's previous submission is available via the [Plan:MK consultation portal](#), ID reference number 1005474

⁴ See NE2, pg5, Schedule of Proposed Main Modifications MK/SUB/004, MM9 - [link available here](#), and our Statement of Common Ground (See Plan:MK Duty to Cooperate Statement March 2018 (MK/SUB/008) Appendix 2, page 30, Available at the [Plan:MK Evidence Base Pages](#).)

⁵ See NE2, pg 25, Schedule of Additional Modifications MK/SUB/004, AddM99 - [link available here](#) and our Statement of Common Ground (See Plan:MK Duty to Cooperate Statement March 2018 (MK/SUB/008) Appendix 2, page 30, Available at the [Plan:MK Evidence Base Pages](#).)

⁶ The NEP's previous submission is available via the [Plan:MK consultation portal](#), ID reference number 1005474

⁷ HM Government, A Green Future: Our 25 Year Plan to Improve the Environment. Chapter 1, Page 33, [available here](#)

whose primary objective is to conserve or enhance biodiversity should be supported; while opportunities to incorporate biodiversity improvements in and around developments should be encouraged, especially where this can secure measurable net gains for biodiversity....”

- The proposed changes to Policy NE3 are a direct result of bringing the Policy in line with the national policy objectives for achieving a measurable net gain in biodiversity as a result of development, which have been outlined in the Government’s 25 Year Environment Plan and also recently in the new NPPF (see above bullet point).

The reinstatement of the 5 dwelling threshold to apply the metric is a continuation of the previous Local Plan, to provide consistency, and also to ensure that the guidance for applying the metric is effective and can be practically applied. Further details on how the metric will work in practice will be provided in an SPD. The NEP is currently working on a model SPD for consideration by all the Local Authorities in its area, including Milton Keynes Council.

The NEP therefore encourages consideration of the proposed modifications as contained in the SOCG between the NEP and Milton Keynes Council⁸ to policies NE1-3 to improve clarity, as justified with respect to both existing and to new national policy objectives in particular, and to provide effective guidance on employing the policies to protect and enhance the landscape and biodiversity of Milton Keynes.

Q8.18

Are Policies NE1 and NE3 consistent with paragraph 117 of the NPPF, in particular, with regard to the need to plan for biodiversity at a landscape-scale across local authority boundaries, and, identify and map components of the local ecological networks, including the hierarchy of international, national and locally designated sites of importance for biodiversity, wildlife corridors and stepping stones that connect them and areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration or creation?

Plan for biodiversity at the landscape scale across LA boundaries; and to Identify and map components of local ecological networks

The NEP, in its SOCG with MKC, agreed potential amendments that include emphasis on various ways in which biodiversity is being planned for at the landscape scale, beyond local authority boundaries. For example:

- NE1 – the proposed modifications at Paragraph C list specifically how development should be considered which could harm specific sites of conservation value – including Local Wildlife Sites and Biodiversity Opportunity Areas (BOAs). The supporting text to that policy includes a

⁸ See Plan:MK Duty to Cooperate Statement March 2018 (MK/SUB/008) Appendix 2, page 30, Available at the [Plan:MK Evidence Base Pages](#).

suggested additional Paragraph (12.159) which discusses how considerations for development within or adjacent to a BOA.

- The NEP’s SOCG, resulting in the proposed amendments to Paragraphs 12.15 and 12.19 – 12.25, highlights the need to take into account the BOAs, highlights priority habitats and priority species and their habitats, and covers the need to follow national standing advice, guidance and good practice on buffers, long-term management of irreplaceable habitat, and retention of hedgerows.

Plan:MK therefore endorses the NEP’s Biodiversity Action Plan and BOAs in the policies and supporting text.

The NEP’s Biodiversity Action Plan itself takes a landscape-scale approach to targets efforts in the areas across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes already identified as being of high value for biodiversity. BOAs are the most important areas for biodiversity across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes and are the key focus areas in the landscape for the creation of ecological networks. They represent a targeted landscape-scale approach to conserving biodiversity and form basis for an ecological network¹⁰, to work towards habitat creation targets.

We wish to note here that while the current NEP’s BAP targets are for 2020, the NEP plans to complete a revision of the existing BAP by the end of 2019, so local authorities will have a full year to adopt them. The new BAP will run until 2030, from 2020, so that there is no gap between the new and old BAP. At this stage, no major changes are anticipated – it is expected that the revised BAP will still include target areas (BOAs, priority habitats) and 10 year targets, with some minor updates, e.g. possible on climate change and tree diseases.

Policy NE3 (A) and the supporting text at Paragraph 12.22 in the proposed submission plan make reference to the NEPs Vision and Principles for the Improvement of Green Infrastructure in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes (see below answer to Q8.19 for a brief explanation of this), as does Policy NE4 (Green Infrastructure). At Paragraph 14.11 of the proposed Plan:MK, the NEP’s document is stated to be seen as supplementing MK Council’s 2008 Green Infrastructure Plan.

To achieve the NEP’s stated Vision for GI across the area, one of the principles as set out in the draft Plan:MK at Paragraph 12.22 refers to the landscape approach – to “...*seek opportunities to protect, enhance, extend, create and connect GI for all its benefits (including landscape-scale connectivity of habitats for biodiversity outcomes).*”

⁹ Additional paragraph 12.15 added in relation to development in or adjacent to a BOA - see AddM95 pg 24 at the Schedule of Additional Modifications, MK/SUB/004b, [link available here](#); see also the NEP / MKC Statement of Common Ground (See Plan:MK Duty to Cooperate Statement March 2018 (MK/SUB/008) Appendix 2, page 30, Available at the [Plan:MK Evidence Base Pages](#).)

¹⁰ See “[Forward to 2020, Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Biodiversity Action Plan](#)” (Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Natural Environment Partnership, Section 6.1, Biodiversity Opportunity Areas, pg 20

Being a member of the NEP and its work will also help MK Council to retain landscape scale approach in practice and discussions with other local authorities on environmental matters.

Mapping components including designated sites, wildlife corridors and stepping stones

We note the proposed Plan:MK includes in the supporting text to Policy NE3, at Paragraph 12.22, reference to the NEP's expectations for Local Plans concerning Green Infrastructure, and at 12.23 its emphasis that adhering to the Principles to achieve the Vision (as set out in the NEP's GI Vision and Principles document) will require identifying (mapping) where current GI is, the functions it serves (to understand its potential importance), gaps in provision, and opportunities for how and where it should be improved.

One of the key principles included in the NEP's document is to work across borders and look beyond the immediate development / administrative boundary for opportunities to extent, improve, create and connect Green Infrastructure at all scales.

The NEP has recently published a map of GI Opportunity Zones covering Buckinghamshire and MK (see below for detailed explanation). The NEP looks forward to working with MKC to contribute, through application of its policies, to creating over time broader-scale GI Opportunity Zones (see below), encompassing the BOAs.

We also encourage MKC to take into account the specific location (maps) of Local Wildlife Sites (LWSs) in the area, as well as BOAs, areas of priority habitat, ancient woodland and other irreplaceable habitats. LWSs are a crucial part of the ecological network and can in some cases be equivalent to SSSI standard.

Areas identified by local partnerships for habitat restoration or creation

The areas identified by the NEP / or as a result of the work it contributes to, for habitat restoration or creation have both been mentioned in the proposed plan:

Biodiversity Opportunity Areas – as set out above – these are part of the broader landscape and represent target (but not the only) areas for focusing efforts to meet habitat creation targets and helping to build / improve ecological networks at broader scales. The NEP's BAP will be updated over the coming months and a new BAP is intended to be in place by the end of 2020, with targets likely to 2030.

In addition, since the proposed submission Plan:MK was submitted for Examination, the NEP has recently launched its Green Infrastructure Opportunity Zones map. This looks at the broad-scale opportunity zones for GI across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, including cross-border, to identify the key features, threats and opportunities in each zone.

We expect the GI “Opportunity Zones” identified on the map to be taken into account by all Local Authorities across the area when considering development and infrastructure proposals. It represents the start of looking at the enhancement of natural capital at a landscape scale across LA boundaries (new NPPF Para 171), and should also be used as a means to inform more detailed, local planning, so that local development can help to achieve the broader, more strategic, larger-scale ambitions at the landscape scale.

Q8.19

What is the latest position on a Green Infrastructure Strategy for MK? Is Policy NE4 soundly based in its approach to Green Infrastructure?

The NEP was involved in reviewing an early draft version of the Green Infrastructure Strategy for Milton Keynes.

Alongside this strategy sit two key areas of NEP strategy that we advocate must also be taken into account to inform how MK-scale biodiversity and Green Infrastructure enhancement can contribute to broader, landscape-scale objectives.

- In 2016, the NEP launched its [Vision and Principles for the Improvement of Green Infrastructure in Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes](#)¹¹. This document sets out a vision for GI by 2013 across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, and a set of principles by which to achieve it. These include working across borders and looking beyond the development / administrative boundary at opportunities to extend, improve, create and connect Green Infrastructure at all scales.
- The NEP has recently launched a supplementary mapping exercise showing [large-scale zones of Green Infrastructure Opportunity](#), covering Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes, and we would welcome acknowledgement of this by MKC as it implements its own GI Strategy.

The map itself and the interpretation document are available on our website¹². The map identifies, at a landscape scale, large-scale zones of GI Opportunity extending across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. These have been identified based on expert consideration of underlying maps of GI assets and features of GI (biodiversity as well as water and access routes) as well as likely areas of growth, infrastructure development and demand for GI, threats posed to GI and identification of the key opportunities for GI in each zone. The NEP invited experts in Green Infrastructure and Health to assess the baseline information, which included reviewing the current features of GI and the benefits they provide to society, health and the environment, the likely

¹¹ Available on the NEP's website [via these pages www.bucksmknep.co.uk](http://www.bucksmknep.co.uk)

¹² See footnote 11.

demand for GI and its benefits, the potential / opportunities for GI across the landscape, and the existing and likely threats to achieving them.

The resulting zones represent broad areas of opportunity for green infrastructure that currently provide certain benefits, are faced with particular threats and but which have the potential for specific types of GI opportunities. These are outlined in detail in the accompanying document to the map.

Working towards achieving the network would help achieve the Vision for GI (as set out above) - to produce a better connected, improved, extended and valued Green Infrastructure network across Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes. Such strategic-level maps are needed so that local planning and development decisions can look across boundaries and beyond individual development sites at how they can contribute to the GI Opportunity Zones at the larger scale.