

Adopted Local Plan - Rural and Natural Environment

The Rural and Natural Environment

Objective: To strike a balance between preserving and enhancing the quality and character of the countryside in terms of the landscape and nature conservation, promoting a healthy, modern and sustainable rural economy and ensuring a high quality of life for rural communities.

7.1

The District is essentially rural, with the City of Salisbury being the only major urban area. Even here the built-up area is relatively inextensive, and, as with many of the settlements in the District, the transition to countryside is both sudden and dramatic. The landscape therefore dominates the District, and its quality is exceptionally high and varied.

7.2

The countryside also includes downland, wetland and woodland habitats of great importance for wildlife, some of which are of national and international importance, and several sites of geological interest.

7.3

The Local Planning Authority attaches great importance to the preservation of the countryside and wishes to conserve the character, appearance and resources of the rural area whilst promoting the well-being of rural communities and the viability of agriculture.

Policy C1

The Landscape of the District

7.4

Situated at the western end of the Hampshire Basin, the landscape of the District is dominated by geology, in particular the extensive area of chalk and the lower lying areas of greensand, clays and sands. Superimposed on to this is the drainage system which has helped to mould the landscape into distinctive areas:

- the extensive open downlands of Salisbury Plain
- the dramatic chalk downlands of the West Wiltshire Downs
- the east-west chalk escarpments
- Cranborne Chase
- the Vale of Wardour
- the river valleys
- the New Forest

7.5

Man's actions over the centuries have added to the diversity of the landscape in terms of historical remains, land-use patterns and settlements and, together with the rich flora and fauna, have created a countryside worthy of preservation.

The Rural Environment

7.6

In order to fulfil the objective of conserving the countryside, new development will not normally be permitted. Exceptions will only be made for specific uses such as affordable housing for local people, the requirements of agriculture and forestry, limited recreational and tourist developments, and the conversion of appropriate buildings. It will also be necessary to allow development essential for the provision of public utilities, such as sewerage, gas, electricity, telephone and water supply, which cannot be located within settlements. However, where such development is required, it is important that a countryside location (as opposed to one in a settlement) can be justified by the relevant service provider, that it can be demonstrated that the selected site is the most appropriate in environmental terms and that the impact of the development on the surrounding area will be minimised by taking satisfactory measures such as careful siting, effective landscaping and sensitive design. Extensive areas of countryside are under the control of the Ministry of Defence and are subject to separate procedures as described in paragraphs 2.22 and 2.23. All development proposals in the countryside will need to satisfy the criteria listed in policy G2 and it is particularly important that their impact on the environment is minimised.

Policies C2 & C3

Landscape Conservation

7.7

Much of the District is covered by special designations reflecting the regional, or in some areas national, significance of the landscape. These designations are shown on the Proposals Map. The south-east part of the District is within the New Forest, policies for which are dealt with in Chapter 8.

7.8

Most of the western part of the District forms part of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which was designated by the Countryside Commission in 1981 and confirmed by the Government in 1983. Within the AONB particular attention will be paid to conserving the character and scenic quality of the

landscape. Development will generally be restricted to that essential to maintain the rural economy or desirable for the enjoyment of its amenities. Where development is acceptable in principle, special emphasis will be placed on scale, location and siting, and a particularly high standard of design and landscaping will be required.

Policies C4 & C5

7.9

With the exception of the urban areas of Salisbury and Wilton and the Amesbury/ Bulford/ Durrington/Larkhill area, the remaining part of the District not included in the AONB is designated in the Structure Plan as a Special Landscape Area. The landscape in this area, whilst generally not of as such high quality as within the AONB, is considered worthy of being preserved. Therefore only development which is essential to the rural economy or desirable for the enjoyment of its amenities will be permitted, and the location, scale and nature of such development will be carefully controlled in order to conserve the character of the Special Landscape Area.

Policy C6

7.10

Salisbury and Wilton have particularly fine landscape settings, being contained in a bowl shaped formation within the chalk downlands. The high quality of the surrounding landscape is a constraint on the development of any land on the edge of, or close to, the urban areas, especially where it forms the skyline. Built development or changes of use of land will therefore only be permissible where, in addition to being fully in accordance with other relevant policies of this Local Plan, it can be demonstrated that the quality of the landscape will not be impaired. Informal outdoor pursuits which do not require many or large buildings and do not alter the character of the landscape are likely to be regarded favourably. More formal proposals, such as golf courses, will be permitted only where there will be no adverse impact on the landscape.

7.11

The Local Planning Authority considers the landscapes which surround and flow through Salisbury and Wilton to be intrinsic to their character. The Landscape Settings of these settlements incorporate the main contributory features and the boundaries are, of necessity, tightly drawn around each settlement.

7.12

The downlands which surround Salisbury conceal the extent of the city in approaches to it. They afford comprehensive views across Salisbury, highlighting its situation at the confluence of the five rivers which converge in and flow through the city. These river valleys, and their associated flood meadows, provide extensive views towards the city and the Cathedral. They also avoid the coalescence of Salisbury with surrounding settlements, and the centre with outlying parts of the city, which have managed to retain their own identity. The Landscape Setting of Salisbury encompasses the setting of the Old Sarum Ancient Monument, which was the site of the original settlement of Salisbury. Views towards the monument are available over a wide area, and the prevailing character of the surrounding area, when viewed from the monument, is one of an agricultural landscape.

7.13

The Landscape Setting of Wilton mirrors that of Salisbury, in that the settlement sits within the valleys of the River Wylye and Nadder and is surrounded by chalk downlands, which contain the town and afford views into and across Wilton and the countryside beyond.

7.14

Development within the Landscape Settings of Salisbury and Wilton should avoid encroaching on to the chalk slopes which encompass the settlements, and the river valleys should be kept open to maintain their dominance in the settlements' character.

7.15

The landscape setting designation is not intended to operate in the same way as a statutory green belt since its boundaries will not be permanently fixed, but will be subject to regular review, with possible peripheral amendment in future Local Plans. This exercise will be necessary to facilitate the allocation of development sites, and to take account of changes in the landscape resulting from development. In the case of the former, the release of additional development land will need to be weighed carefully against any resulting erosion of the landscape setting.

7.16

Policy C7 adopts a restrictive stance in order to protect the high quality of the landscape settings of Salisbury and Wilton. More positively, the Local Planning Authority will actively encourage enjoyment of the countryside surrounding the settlements through the extension of public access and the provision of interpretative facilities designed to increase public awareness of the ecological, archaeological and landscape importance of the area. Measures to protect and enhance wildlife and visual features

through the planting of native trees, shrubs and wild flowers, the fencing of sensitive sites and the management of visitors, will be particularly encouraged.

Policy C7

7.17

The Local Planning Authority will assess carefully the visual impact of proposals, as incremental growth, which by itself may appear innocuous, could, cumulatively, have a significant impact on the character of the landscape and may result in the coalescence of the city with its surrounding settlements.

7.18

Trees and woodland form particularly important features within the landscape and additionally may be of historic or nature conservation value. In order to prevent their loss, the Local Planning Authority will impose Tree Preservation Orders where appropriate. Felling licence applications affecting woodland will be considered carefully, and objections will be raised to proposals that would lessen the landscape, amenity, nature conservation or historical value of the area. With skillful management an area of woodland can produce an adequate income from timber without detriment to wildlife, landscape or recreation interests. The Local Planning Authority will support proposals which will improve the management, interest and long term survival of broad-leaved woodlands. Advice and publications on woodland conservation are available from the Forestry Commission, the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust and English Nature. The Forestry Authority operates the Woodland Grant Scheme and the Ministry of Agriculture the Farm Woodland Premium Scheme. The latter, in particular, aims to encourage the appropriate conversion of agricultural land into woodland, thereby enhancing the landscape and creating new wildlife habitats and opportunities for sport and recreation.

Policy C8

7.19

Where the Local Planning Authority is able to influence tree planting proposals, for example by imposing landscape conditions or by commenting to the Forestry Commission on woodland grant applications, the planting of indigenous species appropriate to the area will be encouraged. Development proposals which would be damaging to woodlands, especially ancient semi-natural woodlands will be resisted.

Policy C9

7.20

Within the countryside and the settlements there are many different elements which together shape the landscape. There are also many threats to conservation both to individual features such as trees, hedges, watercourses, and to wider areas of landscape. These threats take many forms, including agricultural improvements, road and development proposals, mineral extraction and water disposal, and intensive recreational pursuits. Where such activities are within the control of the Local Planning Authority, proposals will not be permitted where they would involve the loss of features of landscape or nature conservation interest or would have an adverse impact on the landscape. Grants for countryside management are available from DEFRA, through the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency under the Countryside Stewardship Scheme and the designation of the River Avon and the South Wessex Downs Environmentally Sensitive Areas offers financial assistance to farmers who undertake to farm in an environmentally sensitive area (see paragraph 7.44).

Wildlife and Natural Features

7.21

Salisbury District is an area of exceptional importance for wildlife and natural features, with many sites of national or international importance. In 2001 there were 63 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) in the District, and these are listed in Appendix III. Four of these (Langley Wood & Holmans Copse, Parsonage Down, Prescombe Down and Wylde Down) are managed as National Nature Reserves. Porton Down and Salisbury Plain are also Special Protection Areas (SPAs), an additional European designation which reflects their international importance as habitats for rare birds. A number of other SSSIs are candidate Special Areas for Conservation (cSACs), a further European designation which applies to particularly rare habitats and species.

7.22

The District contains a significant proportion of Britain's chalk downland, which is an internationally threatened habitat. Thirty-three SSSIs are notified partly or wholly for chalk grassland interest, including three of the National Nature Reserves. Porton Down and Salisbury Plain are particularly extensive areas. The international importance of downland sites for wildlife in general is currently being considered under the Habitats and Species Directive, and designation of some sites in the area as Special Areas of Conservation is likely.

7.23

Other important wildlife habitats include ancient semi-natural woodland, unimproved river valley meadows and the acidic woodland, heathland and meadow complex of the New Forest Heritage Area which juts into the south of the District.

7.24

Nine SSSIs have been notified for their geological importance, such as Dead Maid Quarry and Chilmark Quarries. The varied landscape within the District is directly related to its underlying geology and spans approximately 150 million years of geological history, from the upper Jurassic Period to the present day. Other sites are of regional importance and a programme is currently underway to designate these as Regionally Important Geological/Geomorphological Sites (RIGS) as they are considered worthy of protection for their educational, research, historical or landscape importance.

Policy C14

7.25

Sites of Special Scientific Interest are notified by English Nature for their national importance by reason of flora, fauna or geographical or physiographical features and protected under The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Wildlife and Countryside (Amendment) Act 1985, the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. The Local Planning Authority will support English Nature and other organisations in the protection of these special areas, and development proposals which would adversely affect their nature conservation value will not be permitted. A number of SSSIs are managed as nature reserves by the Wiltshire Wildlife Trust, and the Local Planning Authority has the power to designate Local Nature Reserves under Section 21 of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949, a power conferred to Districts in the Local Government Act of 1972 (Schedule 17).

7.26

The Bern Convention on the Conservation of European Wildlife and Natural Habitats set out obligations to conserve wild plants, birds and other animals with particular emphasis on endangered and vulnerable species, and these obligations underlie the EC Habitats Directive and the UK's wildlife legislation.

7.27

The EC Council Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora: 'the Habitats Directive', protects sites and species

by requiring measures to maintain or restore natural habitats and wild species at favourable conservation status; Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) may be designated under this legislation. The River Avon (which includes tributaries Nadder, Wylfe, Till and Bourne, Lower Woodford Water Meadows and Porton Meadows), Salisbury Plain, Prescombe Down, Chilmark Quarries, Parsonage Down, Porton Down, Great Yews, Landford Bog, New Forest SSSI, Loosehanger Copse and Meadows, Whiteparish Common SSSI, Langley Wood and Holman's Copse SSSIs have all been identified as candidate Special Areas of Conservation (cSACs).

7.28

The UK Government attaches great importance to its national and international obligations for nature conservation. The Conservation (Natural Habitats &c.) Regulations 1994 formally transpose the requirements of the EC Habitats Directive into national law.

7.29

The EC Council Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds: the Birds Directive provides for the protection, management and control of all species of naturally occurring wild birds in the European territory; requires measures to preserve a sufficient diversity of habitats for all species of wild birds; and requires special measures to conserve the habitat of certain particularly rare species and migratory species. Porton Down and Salisbury Plain Special Protection Areas (SPAs) are classified under the Birds Directive.

Policy C10

7.30

The designation of Local Nature Reserves will be considered should any opportunities arise; part of the Avon Valley Project Area has already been designated as such.

Policy C16

7.31

It is important however that specially designated areas such as SSSIs are not protected and managed in isolation from the rest of the countryside; there are many other important habitats such as copses, hedgerows, ponds, flushlands and areas of unimproved land which may lack any formal recognition of their importance, yet play a vital role in providing refuges for different species of wildlife and connecting features linking the various habitats and elements of the landscape.

7.32

Parts of the District which are important for their general or cumulative wildlife habitat value in the District context are defined as Areas of High Ecological Value (AHEV). This is a non-statutory local designation for a broad-brush area, but may include individual sites of higher nature conservation interest such as statutorily-designated SSSI within the overall area. Development which would result in the loss of the characteristic wildlife habitat which typifies an AHEV and would therefore be damaging to the overall nature conservation value of the area will be resisted according to the conservation status of the interest affected (local, national or international status).

Policy C11

7.33

Throughout the District, development which would result in the significant loss of wildlife habitats will be resisted in order to protect the network of wildlife habitats necessary to ensure the maintenance of the current range and diversity of flora and fauna as encouraged in PPG9 and in the Habitats Directive. The degree of protection afforded will relate to the conservation status of the habitat or species affected, with statutorily designated habitats and species specifically protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 afforded the highest protection.

7.34

It is essential that an adequate database of the nature resource of the District is prepared and maintained, and the District Council is therefore a partner in the Wiltshire Wildlife Sites Survey, and, subsequent to this, the preparation of a strategy to conserve and enhance this resource. The Wiltshire Wildlife Sites Survey has identified non-statutory designated sites (County Wildlife Site or Site of Nature Conservation Importance) of wildlife habitat value at County level. These complement the statutory sites by providing wildlife networks and supportive habitats.

7.35

Where development is considered, the status of the wildlife resource (international statutory designation e.g. SPA, SAC; national statutory designation e.g. SSSI; or local non-statutory designation e.g. AHEV, County Wildlife site), the effect of the environmental loss, and any cumulative loss, on the current baseline environmental resource as identified in the Environmental Appraisal will be taken into account with a view to practicing sustainable development. In view of this, opportunities for enhancement and the ability to find replacement value for any environmental loss will be a consideration. Developers will be expected to

provide sufficient environmental information to demonstrate that the above issues have been fully covered.

Policies C13 & C14

Protected Species

7.36

Certain plant and animal species, including wild birds, are protected under the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act and other legislation. The presence of a protected species is a material consideration in considering a development proposal and it is important to ensure that account is taken of these matters. English Nature will be consulted on such proposals. Developers will be expected to provide sufficient information to indicate that protected species have been taken into account.

Policy C12

Rivers and River Valleys

7.37

A particular feature of the District is the river systems, for example the River Avon and its tributaries. The floodplains are considered to be of outstanding landscape and ecological importance and the watercourses themselves are noted for their purity and comprise a valuable fishery. The valleys are also of historic importance, particularly where remnants of the water meadow system still exist. The Avon river system, which broadly correlates with the AHEV designation, is recognised as being of international importance to nature conservation. Defined as a Grade 1* key site by the Nature Conservancy Council in 1977, it was designated an SSSI in 1997 and is a candidate SAC. The Avon Valley from Netheravon in the north to Christchurch in the south, excluding the tributaries, has been designated as an Environmentally Sensitive Area by the Ministry of Agriculture (see paragraph 7.44).

7.38

It is important that the amenity and resources of the rivers and floodplains are conserved and developments which would adversely affect their historic, landscape, or nature conservation value, or water quality, are prevented. To this end the Local Planning Authority will consult the Environment Agency on development applications which might have an effect on water quality and/or river flows, and will encourage works which would reduce or prevent pollution, for example by farmers. River banks may need to be protected for flood control and the prevention of subsidence, particularly where property or rights of way are threatened. Where this is the case, nature conservation interests should be taken into

account and the scheme should be designed sensitively using appropriate materials. The valley sides are also important in landscape terms and any development which takes place on the slopes should be carefully sited to adhere to the requirements of the landscape policies and relevant conservation policies.

Policy C17

7.39

Where development sites contain or are bounded by watercourses, the Local Planning Authority will, in the interests of amenity, resist their culverting and consider the potential for enhancement measures. Essential works to the banks should be undertaken in a sensitive manner and using appropriate materials, in order to retain a natural character.

Policy C18

Agriculture

7.40

Most of the countryside is in active agricultural production and although not all of outstanding quality the land is generally well farmed and productive. The northern part of the District comprises part of the Salisbury Plain Training Area, within which there are various restriction on farming activities.

7.41

Agriculture is currently going through a period of change due to controls imposed by the Common Agricultural Policy, and, whilst since 1945 the emphasis has been on protecting agricultural land in order to safeguard production, today the emphasis is on retaining the best and most versatile agricultural land whilst allowing farmers to create a more varied economic base. The best agricultural land, especially where it occurs in large blocks, will therefore be safeguarded and development proposals on land of grades 1,2 and 3a in particular will be resisted where they would result in it being irretrievably lost to agriculture. Where there is a demonstrable need for development on agricultural land, it should be directed towards land of the lowest possible classification.

Policy C19

7.42

In order to sustain agriculture, forestry and horticulture in the District it will be necessary to permit suitable buildings and facilities, as these will still be required to cope with the rapid changes in technology which are likely to continue. "Agri-industrial" development will also be permitted where a

location within a settlement would be inappropriate, although such developments should be located on or close to the holding/holdings which they are intended to serve, in order to minimise traffic levels. They should be sited and designed sensitively, and adequate measures should be taken to prevent pollution and other nuisances. The housing policies of this Local Plan allow for the construction of essential farm workers' dwellings or for mobile homes. For further details see paragraphs 4.63-4.66.

Policy C20

7.43

In recent years agricultural practices have had to change and adapt, like any economic activity, to changes in the market place. Increasingly farmers are looking to diversify their farming operations to supplement their incomes and to broaden, and thereby add security to, their means of livelihood. Examples of this diversification include woodland management, farm shops and processing operations and equestrian related activities. The importance of a diverse and robust farming economy to the sustainability of rural areas is recognised in the White Paper "Rural England" and in other government guidance. The Local Planning Authority also acknowledges the contribution these activities make and may make in the future to rural areas but it is also aware that many rural areas are sensitive to development in other ways, such as the beauty of the landscape, or the possible impact of extra cars on nearby communities and has therefore included criteria within this policy to ensure that such diversification is in harmony with other aspects of rural life. It may also be necessary to impose conditions to ensure the removal of temporary structures, such as show jumps. Where animals are to be kept as part of the new activity, buildings will also be required to meet the relevant health and safety standards.

Policy C21

Environmentally Sensitive Areas

7.44

In January 1993, the Ministry of Agriculture designated the South Wessex Downs and Hampshire Avon Environmentally Sensitive Areas (ESA's) to conserve and enhance the special characteristics of the downland and river valley by making payments to farmers who voluntarily undertake to farm in an environmentally sensitive manner appropriate to the character and traditions of the area. For example, in the Avon Valley, payments can be made for maintaining high water levels in order to encourage a

diversity of plant species. In the South Wessex Downs, the scheme covers not only the preservation of features which still exist, such as downland turf, dew ponds and hedgerows, but also the recreation of those which have been lost, including the reversion of arable land to permanent grassland. Although the ESA's are not planning designations and do not introduce any planning or regulatory controls, the aims of the scheme are consistent with the countryside policies of this Local Plan.

Change of Use of Buildings

7.45

Changing agricultural methods, along with the decline in rural services and facilities, and the resultant vacation of premises, have led to buildings in the countryside becoming disused or unsuitable for their original purpose. These include not only farm buildings, but also a variety of other buildings such as schools, chapels, smithies, mills, domestic outbuildings and even large houses.

7.46

Although some of these buildings may be suitable for conversion to alternative uses, changes of use will only be permitted where the new use would not be detrimental to the quality of the landscape or to the rural environment. Buildings should be structurally sound and capable of conversion without complete or substantial reconstruction. A structural survey may be required. Extensions to buildings will only be permitted if it can be demonstrated that they are required in order to secure a viable future use and provided that they would comply with other policies of the Local Plan. Buildings may be suitable for conversion to a range of uses, although residential use is regarded as the least desirable due to the Local Plan's strict control over new housing in the countryside. In addition, residential conversions are more likely to have a detrimental effect on the fabric and character of the building, and the creation of a residential curtilage can have a harmful effect on the landscape.

7.47

The change of use of buildings in the countryside, particularly farm buildings, may offer scope for employment use. Therefore a policy has been included in this Local Plan that seeks to establish an order of preference for the change of use of buildings in the countryside. Based on government guidance and the "Rural England" White Paper, this policy favours business use, or business use with an ancillary element of residential use, over purely residential use although the need to protect the quality of the rural environment and the character of traditional farm buildings is recognised. Proposals which would perpetuate a rural eyesore

will not be permitted. Where agricultural buildings are involved, the planning authority will not permit their change of use if it has reasonable cause to believe that the applicant has attempted to abuse the system by constructing a farm building with the benefit of permitted development rights, with the intention of early conversion to another use. In order to control the proliferation of new agricultural buildings following the conversion of old ones to alternative uses, the Local Planning Authority will consider imposing planning conditions withdrawing permitted development rights for new farm buildings in respect of that agricultural unit or holding.

7.48

The conversion of historic agricultural buildings such as barns is in itself a sensitive issue, as the most appropriate use for a building is that for which it was originally designed. Preference will be given to new uses which respect a building's special characteristics and have least impact both externally and internally. The problems outlined in paragraph 7.47 above are particularly relevant to farm buildings, and therefore before residential conversion is considered a number of alternative uses should be evaluated. In order of preference these are community uses such as meeting halls which keep the interior wholly open, industrial uses related to agriculture, office and commercial uses, other industrial uses that preserve the openness of barns, and craft and studio type uses. If after careful investigation no alternative to residential use can be found, the Local Planning Authority will seek to retain undivided as much of the interior volume as possible. The number of units within such a conversion will, therefore, be strictly limited and in many cases only a single dwelling will be acceptable. The conversion of historic farm buildings is a difficult problem and there should be no automatic assumption that alternative uses will be acceptable; there may well be occasions when a change of use would ruin its character and the only acceptable course of action is to preserve it in its present form. This is particularly relevant with regard to listed buildings, to which normal listed building policies will apply.

Policy C22

7.49

Within the District there are a number of large buildings standing in extensive grounds, many of which are country houses still in private residential use. Some of these are unsuitable for modern living and in order to retain the building alternative uses may need to be found. In view of the outstanding historic, architectural and landscape importance of many of these buildings and their associated estate buildings and

grounds, and the space that they offer, the Local Planning Authority will consider a wider range of alternative new uses than would normally be acceptable in the countryside. These include changes of use to institutional uses such as schools or nursing homes, or conversion to hotels, flats or offices. The latter two options are regarded as being the least desirable in view of the greater impact they would be likely to have on the buildings' character and conflict with other policies in this plan. Proposals are therefore only likely to be considered favourably where they would be the only means of retaining and maintaining the building. The settings of these buildings are also important, in terms of both the immediate grounds and the wider landscape. It will therefore be necessary for applicants to submit adequate plans to ensure the retention and, where appropriate, the restoration of the surrounding grounds, particularly where these comprise historic parks and gardens (see also paragraphs 6.27-6.29).

Policy C23

7.50

Redundant buildings may house protected or declining wildlife species such as bats or barn owls. Plans for the conversion or change of use of such buildings will be required to take account of these and to avoid their disturbance.

Extensions to Buildings

7.51

In order to conserve the intrinsic character of the countryside extensions to buildings will only be permitted if they are sympathetic in scale and character with the existing building and surroundings. Additions, i.e. new development which is not necessarily physically linked to the existing building, will be similarly controlled. Extensions and additions must fall within the existing curtilage.

Policy C24