



Devon
Wildlife Trust

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By Email to: Planning.policy@exeter.gov.uk

Dear Sir/Madam,

The Exeter Plan 2021-2041: Publication Plan (Regulation 19)

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Exeter Plan. It is disappointing to note that many of our previous comments on the Full Draft Plan have not been reflected in the Publication Plan. In order to ensure the best outcome for nature and the environment across the landscape of Exeter city, we urge the Council to address the comments provided below in the final copy of the Plan. We confine our comments to those relating to nature and environment.

General comments

- It is disappointing to note that the wording of much of the Plan relates to restrictive actions which must not be carried out in relation to biodiversity. Nature presents a crucial opportunity to enhance the built environment and wellbeing of its residents, rather than a constraint imposed on development, and this should be reflected in the Plan. We would encourage the use of phrases such as 'must be included' and 'must be demonstrated' in relation to habitat creation as part of the development process. Biodiversity should be seen by all as a positive part of everyday life and not as a hindrance to development.
- The Environment Act requires a Biodiversity Net Gain for new development. While the recognised minimum gain is 10%, DWT would like the council to recognise the uniquely valuable environment and biodiversity of the city and its surrounds and require a Biodiversity Net Gain of 20%, with the multiple benefits that will bring to the place and people of Exeter. East Devon District Council has included a requirement for 20% Biodiversity Net Gain within their recent Local Plan. Now that a precedent has been set within Devon, we urge ECC to adopt a similar approach.
- The Environment Act brings Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS) into law. This demands that new development adheres to the strategy and the associated habitat map, which in Devon is currently being developed by the Responsible Authority, Devon County Council. We note that reference to LNRS is limited to a single policy which relates only to biodiversity. For LNRS to be effective, their use must be

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embedded throughout the Local Plan. We identify the need for environment, nature, nature recovery and climate change to be embedded throughout the plan and given the weight and level of resource needed to deliver positive enhancements in these areas.

- We welcome the recognition that ECC has given to the climate crisis, however DWT urges the council to publicly acknowledge the biodiversity emergency that is intrinsically linked to the climate emergency. Many of the same actions would benefit both but ensure a joined-up approach that puts nature recovery at the heart of a climate resilience approach.
- While it is generally preferable to target brownfield sites for development (in order to minimise further development of greenfield sites), it should be recognised that brownfield sites often support a wealth of wildlife, providing a network of sites across an urban area, creating islands and corridors for wildlife across otherwise inhospitable environments. Where possible, sites should be retained/enhanced for nature where they provide important habitats and opportunities for nature recovery in the city. The Exeter Biodiversity Reference Map is an excellent resource that should be updated and used as a central tool for steering development in the city.
- The use of photographs within the document is limited to the front page. This is a missed opportunity. Photos can be used throughout the document to demonstrate good practice. The biodiversity value of the city should be fully integrated within developments, providing space for wildlife, adding interest and place-making to developments, providing engagement and wellbeing opportunities with local communities and providing other ecosystems services. It would be good to start this process by including the right messaging within this document. The photograph of the high street in the top left hand corner could be replaced. ECC should be striving to include nature in every facet of the authority boundary. This includes high streets, which should include trees, hanging baskets, planters etc. This is particularly important in a heavily urbanised environment to create shading, reduce temperatures during heatwaves and slow down drainage, in addition to the myriad additional benefits including carbon storage and enhancement of biodiversity.

3. This is our city, this is our future

DWT is hugely concerned that no reference to the environment is made in the vision or key outcomes of the plan. The environment is the foundation of the city, and its absence as a cornerstone of the plan sends a message that environment and wildlife are not considered important by Exeter City Council, undermining the council's declaration of a climate emergency.

Biodiversity loss and climate change are prominently leading to drastic changes that threaten the human environment - for example the increased impact of floods, droughts, heatwaves and storms. Yet there is clear evidence that nature recovery, building nature into developments and embedding nature-based solutions into our ways of working can mitigate these impacts.

We strongly recommend that the summary of the vision and key outcomes are revised to include specific reference to the environment. It is essential that wildlife and environmental decisions are tackled at the earliest possible stage of the planning process. Previous experience tells us that where this is pushed back, poor outcomes for wildlife and the environment are the result. The environment must form the backbone of any Local Plan.

4. Spatial strategy

‘Providing high quality, mixed use development at optimal densities appropriate to the characteristics, heritage and function of the local area to minimise the need to travel and maximise walking, cycling and public transport’. ‘Ecology’ should be added to the list of features which must be considered.

5. Climate change

Three visions are provided for Climate change, but reference to the natural environment is absent. Climate and the environment are intrinsically linked and aspirations to provide an environmentally rich city will play a significant role in adapting to climate change.

Mitigating and adapting to climate change can only be achieved by maximising the creation of robust nature-rich green spaces, widespread tree planting and the use of innovative habitat creation measures such as green roofs and walls.

We applaud the ambition of the LPA to be carbon neutral by 2030. As with all such challenging goals, the details of how we meet this and monitor our progress is critical if it is to be met. We would like the council to underpin the aspiration with firm commitments including timescales and resources required for delivery.

This plan will be live for a further 10 years after the carbon neutral ambition in 2030. DWT advises the council to extend the commitment and, following this being met, set the challenge to make Exeter a carbon positive city by 2040, with some outline goals attached to this to provide detail.

CC4: Ground-mounted photovoltaic arrays

Ground-mounted photovoltaic arrays have enormous potential to support nature-rich habitat, in particular species-rich grassland. Applications for this type of proposal are often submitted which commit to creating biodiverse habitat, however once permission has been granted habitats have been observed to be poorly created or inadequately managed, resulting in a missed opportunity for wildlife. An additional bullet point is required for this policy which states that habitat creation within the site must be delivered to the highest standard, and managed for the lifetime of the development. Clear mechanisms must be put in place which ensure that these requirements are funded, delivered and monitored.

6. Homes

Reference to proximity to green space is required in the visions for homes.

We welcome the recognition of need for good quality homes. The plan should highlight the use of recognised accreditations, such as Building with Nature, which will be critical to ensure high quality green infrastructure and homes that are sustainable and that support the other natural residents of the city. The Design Guide section on Biodiversity in the previous Local Plan was excellent and should be updated and included in this plan.

7. Economy and jobs

Requirements for functional economic areas are discussed throughout this section, however access to useable green space is missing. Proximity to green space is essential for any employment area to allow employees access to the many established benefits that green spaces provide e.g. exercise, relaxation, reduction in stress.

9. Sustainable transport and communications

Whilst nature is touched upon, clear targets for incorporating biodiversity into active travel routes is needed throughout this chapter.

STC2: The transport hierarchy (Strategic policy)

'Highway enhancements will only be supported when they do not cause unacceptable harm to the local natural, built or historic environments'. This needs to be reframed. Highway enhancements should only be supported when they result in positive gains for the local natural environment.

STC3: Supporting active travel (Strategic policy)

Sustainable transport links offer an excellent opportunity to create connectivity through the landscape. *'Major development proposals must'* – an additional point should be included here. All new active travel routes must demonstrate how ecological connectivity through the landscape will be created. This could include strips of wildflower grassland alongside the travel route, and planters, hanging baskets and shrub beds created in suitable locations along the route.

10. Natural Environment

The number and breadth of policies provided within this section are weak and fail to meet the challenges faced by the natural environment. Significant reworking of this section is required in order to bring it in line with current consideration of the environment and other Local Plans across the county.

NE1: Landscape setting areas (Strategic policy)

The policy states that development within Landscape Setting Areas would be permitted where it can be demonstrated that it is reasonably necessary for the purposes of a number of types of development including *'the rural economy'*, *'outdoor recreation'*, *'providing green infrastructure'* and *'achieving net zero'*. These headers cover a broad range of development types which could allow for significant development within Landscape Setting Areas. We would strongly encourage the LPA to carefully consider the types of development which should be included within this list and significantly reduce the types of development included in order to ensure that the objective of this policy is delivered.

NE2: Valley Parks (Strategic policy)

As for NE1, inclusion of *'environmental education'* and *'achieving net zero'* as a type of development which would be supported should be removed.

The policy states that development proposals will be permitted *'...and where the development proposals do not result in unacceptable harm to the key purposes for which the Valley Parks are designated'*. This should be rephrased to remove the word *'unacceptable'*. Any type of development which results in a deleterious impact to the Valley Parks is unacceptable.

NE3: Biodiversity (Strategic policy)

'Where development is likely to have either a direct or indirect adverse effect on a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or on Irreplaceable Habitats (such as Ancient Woodland or Veteran Trees) it will not be permitted unless the benefits of the development clearly outweigh both the impacts on the features of the site and any broader impacts on the national network of sites.' The text which continues from *'unless the benefits'* is not appropriate and must be removed. Alternatively, additional text is needed to make clear that this will only apply in very exceptional circumstances.

'Development proposals that are likely to have either a direct or indirect adverse impact on other known sites of biodiversity interest' is followed by a list (a-c) of circumstances where development of sites of biodiversity interest will be permitted. The breadth of coverage within these points will effectively result in development being permitted in most situations and

undermines the purpose of including any reference to protection of sites of biodiversity interest within the plan. Points A-C are not appropriate and must be removed.

'All development proposals, where relevant, will be required to:' – Points a and c are statutory requirements and point b is an established mitigation mechanism. We would encourage ECC to be more ambitious in their aspirations for biodiversity within the site. Point d should be expanded to specify that bat and bird boxes and bee bricks must be incorporated into each new dwelling, insect boxes must be provided within every residential garden and hedgehog highways incorporated into every development. Native tree and hedgerow planting should also be required.

Additional policy requirements

We consider that policies relating to the natural environment which have been included within the plan are 'light touch'. A number of critical policies are missing which are required in order to ensure that protection and enhancement of biodiversity throughout the city is achieved.

It is unfortunate to note that delivery of high quality survey, mitigation and compensation can be hampered by the quality of the ecologist involved in the project. It is the responsibility of the LPA to use the Local Plan as a mechanism to ensure that the highest standards of ecological work are met during development undertaken within the city. A stand-alone policy is required which sets out exactly what is required to complete an Ecological Impact Assessment which is of a sufficient standard to ensure that potential ecological impacts, mitigation and compensation measures are properly considered throughout the planning process. Given the existing burden on both planning and biodiversity officers, which has increased exponentially following enactment of the Environment Act 2021, it is essential that the fundamentals of ecological assessment are delivered by a suitably qualified ecological consultant. If this is not the case, planning officers need clear guidance provided within the Local Plan which enables them to demand that an acceptable standard of ecological assessment is delivered within every application. This policy should include details of the mitigation hierarchy, the precautionary principle, best practice and CIEEM guidelines. Consideration should also be given to the inclusion of a stand-alone policy for protected, notable and invasive species.

Biodiversity Net Gain requires a stand-alone policy. Given the legislative requirement to deliver a minimum of 10% net gain, and the complexity of delivery of this condition of planning, we would expect to see additional details included within any Local Plan.

The Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) should be given a stand-alone policy. Again, given the level of detail required to support successful delivery of the strategic objectives required by the LNRS, we would expect this information to be included within any Local Plan.

Additional points

The impact of development and activity in Exeter is felt locally and further afield, including in the freshwater and marine environment. In view of the large-scale expansion of Exeter recently and over the life of this plan, and the judicial reviews that have taken place around deteriorating condition of water environment Natura2000 sites, we strongly recommend the council put in place ambitious and robust measures to protect and enhance the water environment impacted by the city.

DWT would like to see Exeter become a pesticide-free city by 2030 and therefore recommends inclusion of policies within the Local Plan to achieve this. Pesticides are highly carbon-intensive and have disastrous impacts on nature, both on target and non-target

species and at a whole landscape scale. The impact on invertebrates, including insects, has been well documented. DWT is keen to support ECC in making the city pesticide-free.

11. History and heritage

We welcome the proposal to protect and enhance historic assets. Providing the same approach to historic natural features will also play an important part in this. Veteran trees, ancient woodlands, grasslands and other habitats including bat roosts in old buildings and structures - a historic city needs these features as they are a living connection to the past and are irreplaceable features.

12. Culture and tourism

C1: Protecting and enhancing cultural and tourism facilities (Strategic policy)

'The temporary use of sites for cultural activities, particularly in locations where they can help to animate the public realm, will be supported where they will not harm local amenity.'
'or biodiversity' needs to be added to the end of the sentence.

13. High quality places and design

In tackling climate change and placing less pressure on the surrounding landscape, we would urge the council to make new housing carbon neutral/positive. Integrating renewable energy (e.g. solar, wind, geothermal, heat capture, solar gain) into new housing as standard and ensuring high quality insulation is critical to this. It is clear that the opportunity for achieving this and enabling culture change is best done as early in the process as possible, so demanding this of all new housing is critical.

New developments continue to impact the water environment, causing pollution and flooding issues on site and elsewhere. Separating surface water from foul water at source is critical for reducing pollution of waterways in an increasingly stormy environment and must be a commitment in this plan. Infiltration of water to soil (on most soils) reduces surface water flooding so the plan must state that new developments must incorporate measures to achieve this including porous surfaces, SUDS and more nature-rich greenspace.

Building new homes on floodplains has historically led to flooding issues and is clearly not sensible in light of climate change (rising sea levels and increased storms producing greater and more regular fluvial and coastal flooding). We strongly advocate a move away from building on floodplains.

D3: Advertisements

The introduction of poorly designed lighting can have devastating impacts on biodiversity, particularly as there are known roosts of rare bat species in the city. *'Proposals for advertisements will be supported where individually and cumulatively they would not harm amenity or public safety taking account of'* requires the addition of 'biodiversity' alongside amenity and public safety.

14. Health and wellbeing

HW1: Health and wellbeing (Strategic policy)

We would like to see the benefits that nature brings to health and wellbeing recognised within this policy - making nature-rich greenspace accessible and enticing to all with the benefits this brings. A 'nature everywhere' approach together with creating a network of green corridors through the city (using the LNRS and Exeter Biodiversity Reference Map as guidance) will be key ways of achieving this.

Yours faithfully,

Devon Wildlife Trust

