

Date: 06th February 2025
Our ref: 496608
Your ref: The Exeter Plan – Publication Plan: Regulation 19



Local Plans Team: City Development
Exeter City Council
Civic Centre
Paris Street
Exeter
EX1 1NN

Planning.policy@exeter.gov.uk

Customer Services
Hornbeam House
Crewe Business Park
Electra Way
Crewe
Cheshire
CW1 6GJ

T [REDACTED]

BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Sir/Madam

Planning consultation: The Exeter Plan – Publication Plan: Regulation 19

Thank you for your consultation on the above, dated 12 December 2024.

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.

Natural England welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Publication Draft of the Exeter Plan. We have a few comments, which are set out below.

- **The Exeter Plan – Publication Plan: Regulation 19 – December 2024**

S1: Spatial Strategy

Natural England would like to reiterate our comment from Regulation 18 stage;

Natural England welcomes the majority brownfield allocation strategy which will work towards safeguarding the long-term capability of best and most versatile agricultural land (Grades 1, 2 and 3a in the Agricultural Land Classification) as a resource for the future in line with National Planning Policy Framework paragraph 180. Development has an irreversible adverse impact on the finite national and local stock of BMV land.

We note that the strategy focusses development in areas which are less likely to impact

upon the landscape setting of the city. It emphasises redeveloping previously developed sites whilst also improving their biodiversity, green infrastructure and residents' access to nature.

Biodiversity

Para. 10.21

This paragraph discusses Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG). Natural England would like to highlight that it seems to confuse the biodiversity gain hierarchy with the biodiversity mitigation hierarchy.

We would advise that para 10.21 could read:

All development proposals will need to provide at least 10% measurable net gains in biodiversity, onsite where possible but elsewhere if not, in line with the biodiversity gain hierarchy. Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG) should be applied after all impacts on statutory designated wildlife sites and protected landscapes have been avoided, mitigated, or compensated for. The BNG requirement is set out in the 2021 Environment Act and is now a legal requirement. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' metric tool must be used for BNG calculations. Small development (that meets the criteria) may choose to use a simpler version of the tool called the small sites metric. The LNRS will help direct BNG interventions to the places that will help maximise delivery of bigger, better and more joined up nature recovery networks.

Valley Parks

Policy NE2:

Natural England supports the approach of this policy which recognises the importance of protecting and enhancing valuable green spaces within the urban environment for biodiversity, natural climate solutions and recreation.

Green Infrastructure

Policy NE4:

Natural England supports the requirement to link onsite green infrastructure with the Green Infrastructure strategy. This will help to maximise opportunities for active travel and wildlife permeability. Natural England also supports Green Circle policy NE5 which preserves an established network of active travel routes. Such routes provide residents of Exeter with valuable access to the natural world while also providing opportunities for the movement of wildlife. Policies NE6 and NE7 are also supported as these align with Natural England's published Green Infrastructure Framework.

• Sustainability Appraisal Report – LUC – December 2024

Site Allocations

Objective 14

Para. 5.32 mentions the loss of Best & Most Versatile soils. Natural England would have welcomed the recommendation for the inclusion of a soil management policy or a requirement in the allocation policies for good soil management, as per our previous advice at Regulation 18 stage. However, we do not believe this to be a soundness issue.

- **Habitats Regulations Assessment of the Exeter Plan: Publication Draft (Regulation 19) – Footprint Ecology – 9th December 2024**

3. Screening Conclusions

Para. 3.10

Natural England has particular concern about loss of potential functionally linked land (FLL) (i.e., habitat supporting SPA birds), where proposed greenfield site allocations are near to nature conservation sites with bird interests (e.g., the Exe Estuary SSSI/SPA/Ramsar).

The Exe Estuary is of international importance for wintering and migratory wetland birds. The estuary birds are particularly sensitive during the winter and during stopovers on annual migrations, throughout which time they must build up energy reserves. Any disturbance that causes them to take flight, especially repeatedly, reduces foraging time and causes additional energy expenditure. This can result in a reduction in fitness making it a challenge to survive the winter. This includes having to fly further, where there is loss of FLL close to the estuary, to find suitable sites for foraging/resting/commuting/moulting/shelter.

Natural England welcome the additional discussion in paragraph 3.10 of the HRA, however we consider more evidence would have enabled greater confidence in the conclusion. This could have included the view of an ornithological expert (it is not clear if this was already part of the HRA), existing data and/or a FLL survey for the eastern side of the Exe estuary. At Appropriate Assessment, mitigation for loss of potential FLL could also have been considered, such as enhancing the availability for high tide roosts at the Riverside Valley Park.

7. Formal Integrity Test and Conclusions

Whilst the additional evidence suggested above would have made the decision more robust, Natural England can confirm that we can concur that the Exeter Local Plan will not result in adverse effects on the integrity of European sites.

For any queries relating to the specific advice in this letter only please contact Jemma Short at jemma.short@naturalengland.org.uk. For any new consultations, or to provide further information on this consultation please send your correspondences to consultations@naturalengland.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Jemma Short and Neil Butler
Higher Officers (Sustainable Development)
Devon, Cornwall & Isles of Scilly Area Team
Natural England