



Sompting Neighbourhood Plan: Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Screening Opinion

6 May 2015

1. Introduction

Sompting Parish Council is working with the local community to produce a Neighbourhood Plan (NP) for the Sompting area. The Parish Council have requested that the Council provide a SEA Screening Opinion on the emerging Sompting NP. A Screening Opinion was previously provided on 11 August 2014 which recommended that an SEA of the Sompting NP be undertaken. This decision was based primarily on the fact that the NP at that time included a criteria based policy for employment development at a waste transfer site off Halewick Lane within the South Downs National Park. However, this policy has since been removed from the NP and it is considered that a new Screening Opinion should be provided in light of this fact.

2. Background

One of the basic conditions that a NP is tested against is whether the making of the NP is compatible with European Union obligations, including obligations under the SEA Directive. The SEA Directive seeks a high level of protection for the environment through the integration of environmental considerations into the process of preparing certain plans and programmes. The aim of the Directive is *“to contribute to the integration of environmental considerations into the preparation and adoption of plans and programmes with a view to promoting sustainable development, by ensuring that, in accordance with this Directive, an environmental assessment is carried out of certain plans and programmes which are likely to have significant effects on the environment.”*

The Neighbourhood Planning Regulations 2015 require that a qualifying body must submit to a local planning authority with a proposal for a neighbourhood plan either an environmental report prepared in accordance with the Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004, or a statement of reasons why an environmental assessment is not required.

To decide whether a proposed NP is likely to have significant environmental effects, it should be screened at an early stage against the criteria set out in

Annex 2 of the Directive. Where it is determined that the NP is unlikely to have significant environmental effects (and, accordingly, does not require SEA), a statement of reasons for this determination must be prepared and published for consultation with the statutory consultation bodies (Natural England, the Environment Agency and English Heritage (now Historic England)). Where a NP is likely to have a significant effect on the environment, an SEA process must be carried out and an Environmental Report prepared / published for consultation alongside the draft plan (which, for NPs, is the 'pre-submission' version of the plan).

The SEA Regulations state that a screening opinion should be reached by 'the responsible authority'. In this case there are two responsible authorities - Adur District Council (ADC) and the South Downs National Park (SDNP). It is these authorities that will eventually 'make' the NP part of their respective Local Development Frameworks

3. The emerging Sompting Parish Neighbourhood Plan

The Parish of Sompting is situated between Lancing and Worthing in West Sussex. Roughly a third of the Parish is situated south of the A27 coastal road. This part of the Parish comprises a built up area of modern housing to the east, the historic village of Sompting (designated as a Conservation Area) and open countryside that forms a green gap between Lancing and Worthing. The majority of the northern two thirds falls within the South Downs National Park.

The whole of the Parish has been designated a Neighbourhood Area for the purpose of preparing the NP. The Parish Council began the process of preparing a plan in 2011, in order to take the opportunity presented by the Localism Act to positively plan for the future of the parish and its surrounding countryside. It is also being developed in response to the emerging Adur Local Plan, which proposes to allocate land for a 480 home scheme at 'West Sompting'.

The Sompting NP would, if made (adopted) form part of the Statutory Development Plan and as such will establish a number of development management principles for Sompting Parish. The NP is the lowest tier in the planning hierarchy and must be in conformity with the National Planning Policy Framework, policies of the development plan and European Directives.

A State of the Parish report has been prepared, the aim of which is to *"summarise the evidence base and the context within which the Neighbourhood Plan will be prepared [and hence] provide the local community with a starting point from which to embark on formulating the Neighbourhood Plan."* Key issues for the local area are identified, drawing on questionnaire responses and other sources of evidence.

This SEA Screening Opinion is based on the Draft Pre Submission Sompting Parish Neighbourhood Plan 2015-2031(January 2015). This version of the

NP was provided to Adur District Council by Sompting Parish Council but had not, at that time, been made available for public consultation. Amongst other things, this document contains the following draft policies:

- The Vision and Objectives of the Plan;
- Key spatial policies including a policy setting out key development and design principles for the 480 home scheme at West Sompting that is set to be allocated through the Adur Local Plan; and
- A number of thematic policies - e.g. in relation to housing design - that will form part of the suite of development management policies to be taken into account by ADC/SDNP when determining future planning applications.

4. SEA Screening - Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected

Effects of a policy establishing development and design principles for West Sompting

The West Sompting site (allocated within the emerging Adur Local Plan) lies directly to the south of the A27, i.e. outside but directly adjacent to the SDNP. It is unlikely that the policy approach taken in the emerging NP would lead to significant effects on the SDNP, given that the site boundary and overall density of development on the site will be determined through the emerging Adur Local Plan. The NP proposes what is likely to be slightly higher density development (Design Zone 4) adjacent to the National Park but it is not considered that an SEA is required to address this issue.

Of course, a policy setting out development and design principles for a 480 home scheme at West Sompting could also lead to environmental effects besides those associated with the SDNP. For example, there could be impacts to 'biodiversity', 'air quality' or 'human health' (all of which are issues that are mentioned within Annex 1(f) of the SEA Directive). However, effects are not likely to be 'significant' to the extent that they would trigger the need for SEA and there is nothing in the policy to suggest that impacts on biodiversity, air quality or human health would be any more significant as a result of this NP policy than the emerging Adur Local Plan policy (which has already been assessed under SEA). Additionally, the emerging Local Plan includes a number of policies which require impacts on biodiversity, air quality and human health to be mitigated where they cannot be avoided. Any effects could be appropriately addressed (i.e. avoided or mitigated) at the planning application stage.

Effects associated with thematic policies

It is unlikely that any of the thematic policies would, in isolation, lead to significant effects on the SDNP. Nor is there the potential for significant effects on any other aspect of the environmental baseline. This statement is made in light of the fact that the Parish is associated with other sensitivities aside from the SDNP. For example:

- Areas of countryside outside of the SDNP boundary form an important 'green gap' between Lancing and Worthing and also contribute to the green infrastructure network;
- An element of the Cissbury Ring Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) – which is associated with chalk grassland habitats – falls within the north-western extent of the Parish (i.e. that part of the Parish that is furthest away from the built-up area);
- Large portions of the Parish, north of the A27, are in the Entry Level and High Level Stewardship Schemes;
- The Parish contains a number of listed buildings and structures; and
- Sompting Village Conservation Area which lies outside of the Built Up Area, and within the countryside has the enclosed character of an historic village with listed buildings, small scale fields and orchards.

It might be that there is some potential for thematic policies to impact (in particular on the sensitive landscape of the SDNP) when considered 'in-combination', and/or when considered in combination with a policy on West Sompting. However, there is little certainty in this respect.

5. Consultation with the environmental assessment bodies and the South Downs National Park

Natural England, the Environment Agency, Historic England and the South Downs National Park Authority have all confirmed that, on the basis of the Draft Pre-Submission Sompting Parish Neighbourhood Plan, they do not consider an SEA to be required. Natural England have also confirmed that a Habitat Regulations Assessment is not required.

6. Conclusions (Screening Opinion)

For the reasons set out above, and taking into account the views of the environmental assessment bodies as well as the South Downs National Park Authority, it is Adur District Council's opinion that an SEA is not required for the Sompting Parish Neighbourhood Plan. This opinion is based on the contents of the Draft Pre-Submission Sompting Parish Neighbourhood Plan 2015-2031 (January 2015).

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