

## SECTION 14

# 14 THE NATURAL AND HISTORIC ENVIRONMENT

### 14.1 Introduction

14.1.1 The facilitation of sustainable development is a key objective of the Structure Plan Second Review. This refers to social and economic development in the context of safeguarding and improving the whole environment.

14.1.2 The natural environment encompasses soil, air, water, plants and animals. Historic environment can be defined as the inheritance of past human activity. These combine to contribute to our appreciation of the world and our sense of place. It is vital that development and change in the County protect and enhance these resources.

14.1.3 Gloucestershire's countryside has evolved from the interaction of people with the natural environment over a long period of time. This interaction has created varied and locally distinctive landscapes. The appeal of the County's countryside is integral to the local economy, leading to investment that may protect and improve the countryside. New development should respect and enhance the environment in its scale, location and design.

### 14.2 Policies

#### Policy NHE.1

**The countryside's character, appearance and non-renewable and natural resources will be protected from harmful development unless the social and economic needs of the area or wider environmental objectives outweigh such harm.**

14.2.1 The Government's policy is that the countryside should be safeguarded for its own sake and non-renewable and renewable resources should be protected. Post-war policies have focused on designating and protecting those areas of the countryside that are most important for landscape and wildlife. The priority now is to find ways of enriching the quality of the whole countryside.

14.2.2 The Countryside Agency and English Nature have analysed the distinctive features of the whole English countryside in both landscape and conservation terms. They have identified broad areas of cohesive character which can be described in terms of their landscape character, sense of place, local distinctiveness, characteristic wildlife and natural features, and nature of change. The agencies have produced a national map and a set of summary statements; the Countryside Agency in terms of character descriptions and English Nature with regard to natural area profiles. In Gloucestershire the Countryside Agency and English Nature identify the broad character areas as being the Severn and Avon Vales, the Cotswolds, the Forest of Dean Plateau and Lower Wye Valley and the Upper Thames Clay Vales.

14.2.3 Local character and distinctiveness may be defined in detail at the local plan level using this approach. The safeguarding of undesignated sites when permitting and implementing development can also be assisted through the 'Environmental Capital' approach promoted by the Countryside Agency, English Nature, English Heritage and the Environment Agency, where benefits can be assigned to features which local people may value.

14.2.4 In addition to identifying and protecting the County's character PPG.7 advocates that development plans should be informed through Local Agenda 21. This seeks to identify what sustainable development means at the local level. Gloucestershire's Local Agenda 21 organisation (Vision 21) is progressing the process of securing sustainable development. In 1996 Vision 21 published "*Sustainable Gloucestershire*" which sets out visions and analysis of the current situation; key issues and solutions for the major topics which, together, can create more sustainable development. It is an evolving movement of people and ideas that is seeking to address local development issues at a fundamental and integrated level.

14.2.5 Efforts should be made to work with local people where possible to identify how best to achieve locally distinctive development and sustainable change, building on initiatives such as the Countryside Agency's techniques for Countryside Design Summaries and Village Design Statements. These enable the community to determine the quality and nature of change to their local environment, and enhance qualities of distinctiveness.

## **Policy NHE.2**

Development will be required to protect and, wherever possible, enhance the biodiversity, including wildlife and habitats, of the County.

Potential and classified SPAs, candidate and designated SACs, and Ramsar sites will be protected from development that is likely to affect their integrity.

SSSIs and NNRs will be protected from development which would have a significant effect on their nature conservation interest.

Local Plans should identify:

sites of nature conservation importance including unfragmented and linear features such as small woods, traditional field boundaries, ponds and disused railways which act as wildlife corridors or stepping stones; and

appropriate targets for the enhancement of biodiversity.

14.2.6 Planning Policy Guidance Note.9 "*Nature Conservation*" (PPG.9, October 1994) advises that sites designated for their nature conservation importance should be afforded differential levels of protection based on their position in the hierarchy of international, national and local importance. This is reflected in Policy NHE.2.

### **International sites**

14.2.7 Gloucestershire's international sites are of three types:

Ramsar sites - wetlands of international importance (The Severn Estuary, Upper Severn Estuary and adjacent Walmore Common);

Special Protection Areas (SPAs) – sites of European importance under the Wild Birds Directive (Severn Estuary); and

Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) – sites of European importance under the Habitats Directive (5 Candidate SACs in Gloucestershire).

14.2.8 This list also includes sites which the UK Government has formally proposed to the European Union as sites of European importance: candidate Ramsar sites, candidate SPAs and proposed SACs (Forest of Dean).

14.2.9 Ramsar sites are wetlands of wide international importance. Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) are of European importance and contribute to the Natura 2000 Network. This network is made up of habitats which have been identified as being of European Community importance, by a careful process of selection. The protection of the integrity of these sites is required by the Habitats Directive (1992) which defines 'integrity' as "the coherence of its ecological structure and function, across its whole area, that enables it to sustain the habitat, complex of habitats and/or levels of populations of the species for which it was classified".

### **National sites**

14.2.10 Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) are statutory sites of national importance. SSSIs cover areas of land or water notified by English Nature under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981) as being of special nature or geological conservation importance. Gloucestershire contains over 100 SSSIs covering approximately 9% of the County's area. Some of the very highest quality SSSIs may be designated as National Nature Reserves (NNRs) by English Nature, whereby nature conservation is the primary management aim.

### **Local sites**

14.2.11 In addition to the protection of designated sites, Policy NHE.2 relates to the protection of the wildlife value of the approximate 900 Key Wildlife Sites (KWSs) in the County which have been identified by the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust against technical criteria. These cover a range of

habitats and the bulk of the County's wildlife heritage. The Trust also manages approximately 80 non-statutory nature reserves, whilst others are owned or managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and by other agencies and individuals. Local Authorities can also establish Local Nature Reserves (LNRs) where there is an emphasis on the site's value for people to see, learn about and enjoy wildlife in addition to its intrinsic nature conservation value.

14.2.12 Despite the range of protective initiatives, the County's important habitat has been greatly reduced over the last 50 years. It is now recognised that nature conservation cannot be effectively sustained if it is an objective only when managing designated areas. The need for development should, where possible, be met through integrating it into the natural environment, not displacing it. In addition it is not just about protecting the best of what we have, but of enhancing its status.

14.2.13 PPG.9 sets out the principles and policies that apply to the integration of nature conservation priorities with land use planning. Policy NHE.2 builds on this guidance by directing that planning and development decisions be made in the context of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP 1994). The UK BAP recognises that "biodiversity is ultimately lost or conserved at the local level" and that, as stated in PPG.9, "statutory and non-statutory sites, together with countryside features which provide wildlife corridors, links or stepping stones from one habitat to another, all help to form a network necessary to maintain the diversity of flora and fauna".

14.2.14 In Gloucestershire this has culminated in the Gloucestershire Biodiversity Action Plan (GBAP) Consultation Draft (1999). The final GBAP is being produced and will be endorsed by Gloucestershire County Council, the District Councils, English Nature, the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and supported by the European Union's Habitats Regulations and PPG.9.

14.2.15 The GBAP identifies targets for increasing habitat and species diversity in Gloucestershire, thereby enabling land use planning to take account of sites and features of existing importance and also areas where there is potential to enhance the value of the land for nature conservation. In addition to the GBAP, District Councils may gain valuable assistance in this task by drawing upon the habitat and species information contained in the Natural Area Profiles devised by English Nature. This approach is invaluable in identifying which ecosystems and natural features are naturally characteristic of the local landscape. This contextual information enables consistent choices to be made in setting priorities and targets for biodiversity at the local level.

14.2.16 As the GBAP becomes established its recommendations will be incorporated into local plans and it will be used as supplementary planning guidance. Information generated by the GBAP will assist the planning process by providing more detailed information as a basis for revision of development plans. Development plans will therefore make a significant contribution to the delivery of the GBAP.

### **Policy NHE.3**

**The best and most versatile agricultural land (grades 1, 2 and 3a) will be protected from development. Provision will only be made for development affecting such land exceptionally if there is an overriding need for the development and either sufficient land of a lower grade (grades 3b, 4 and 5) is unavailable; or available lower grade land has an environmental value recognised by a statutory wildlife, historic or archaeological designation, and outweighs the agricultural considerations. If best and most versatile land needs to be developed and there is a choice between different grades, land of the lowest grade available should be used.**

14.2.17 Policy NHE.3 relates to the need to protect the 'best and most versatile agricultural land' from development. At present, this categorisation relates to Grades 1, 2 and 3a land in the Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Fisheries (MAFF) Agricultural Land Classification. PPG.7 advises that the productive potential of this land should be protected as a national resource for the benefit of future generations.

14.2.18 However, other considerations will be applied in considering the suitability of agricultural land of any grade for development. For example, land of high ecological quality frequently has a low agricultural value. In examining the material considerations affecting a development proposal, other non-agricultural values should also be weighed.

14.2.19 It should be emphasised that the main focus of this Plan is for new development to have an urban focus. The optimum re-development of brownfield sites, which are usually urban, is intended to reduce the pressure on greenfield sites and agricultural land for development. Best and most versatile land should only be used where there is a strong case for doing so and where the need for development is supported by Structure Plan policy.

### **Policy NHE.4**

**In Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty the conservation and enhancement of the natural beauty will be given priority over other considerations. Regard will also be had to the economic and social well-being of the AONB.**

**Provision should not be made for major development within the AONB unless it is in the national interest and the lack of alternative sites justifies an exception.**

14.2.20 Over half of Gloucestershire has Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) status. This comprises a substantial part of the Cotswolds to the east of the County, and also parts of the Wye Valley and the Malvern Hills AONBs.

14.2.21 PPG.7 advises that the primary purpose of AONB designation is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty of the landscape. In pursuing this, account should be taken of the needs of agriculture, forestry, other rural industries and of the economic and social needs of local communities. Particular regard should be paid to promoting sustainable forms of social and economic development that in themselves conserve and enhance the environment.

14.2.22 The definition of 'major development' is affected by issues such as location, scale, context and design. 'Major' cannot be quantified or determined at the strategic level in this context. However, potential impact can be judged against the local characteristics of a particular proposed site through the local plan process, thereby allowing for the local interpretation of 'major' and so ensuring the retention of qualities of local distinctiveness within the AONB.

14.2.23 Recreation is not an objective of AONB designation, but the demand for recreation should be met so far as this is consistent with the conservation of natural beauty and the needs of agriculture, forestry and other land uses. The Joint Advisory Committees (J.A.C.s) for each of the three AONBs in Gloucestershire have developed management strategies (planning policy guidelines) which aim to reconcile the needs of people living in and visiting the AONBs with the need to conserve the natural beauty of these areas.

#### **Policy NHE.5**

**Provision should not be made for development that would detract from the particular landscape qualities and character of Special Landscape Areas. The broad locations of Special Landscape Areas are as follows:**

**the north eastern and north western fringes of the Cotswolds;**

**on the southern fringes of the Cotswolds near Cirencester, Tetbury and Fairford;**

**the upland western and southern parts of the Forest of Dean District;**

**between Gloucester urban area and the Cotswolds, including Robinswood Hill;  
and**

**Chosen Hill in Churchdown.**

**The precise boundaries of, and additions to, the Special Landscape Areas will be identified in local plans.**

14.2.24 Special Landscape Areas (SLAs) are areas that are not designated as AONB but are of comparable high quality and require special attention in the implementation of planning policy. Identifiable physical features should define their boundaries such as:

- i) breaks of slope and any important foreground setting to a change in slope and or;
- ii) change of landscape character.

14.2.25 SLAs were proposed in each of the earlier Structure Plans. The local landscape designation 'Area of Great Landscape Value' (AGLV) was the precursor to both Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and Special Landscape Areas (SLAs). Much SLA designation relates to margins of the AONB.

14.2.26 SLAs in Gloucestershire were therefore reviewed as a consequence of the Cotswold AONB Boundary Review in 1990. When the AONB boundaries were re-drawn as an outcome of this review, some of the fragmented pockets of AGLVs which had been excluded by the AONB designation review were designated SLAs. SLAs remain areas of considerable, if more localised, importance in the

landscape, being areas of discernible local character. This is reflected in both the strategic and local plan strategies. The County Council consider it appropriate for precise boundaries to be defined at the District level. District Councils, in consultation with the County Council, may designate new SLAs within the Structure Plan period.

14.2.27 PPG.7 states that local countryside designations carry less weight than national designations and development plans should not apply the same policies to them. SLAs should not be used to restrict development without identifying the particular features to be protected and enhanced, as other policies within the Plan should safeguard the open countryside. As the approach of defining and interpreting the whole of Gloucestershire's character emerges, the County's SLAs, together with other local and national landscape designations, will form important components in the identification of natural areas, wildlife corridors and habitat blocks, providing important natural resources for both people and wildlife.

#### **Policy NHE.6**

**The distinctive historic environment of the County will be conserved and enhanced. Scheduled Ancient Monuments, Listed Buildings, Conservation Areas, and their settings will be preserved.**

**Historic settlements and landscape, historic parks and gardens, and sites of archaeological importance will be protected from the adverse effects of development.**

14.2.28 The physical survivals of the past are to be valued and protected for their own sake, as a central part of cultural heritage and a sense of national identity. Their presence adds to the quality of life, by enhancing the familiar and cherished local scene and sustaining the sense of local distinctiveness which is so important an aspect of the character and appearance of Gloucestershire's towns, villages and countryside. The historic environment is also of immense importance for leisure and recreation.

14.2.29 Planning Policy Guidance Note 15 "*Planning and the Historic Environment*" (PPG.15, September 1994) states that effective protection of all aspects of the historic environment is fundamental to the Government's policies for environmental stewardship. Planning Policy Guidance Note 16 "*Archaeology and Planning*" (PPG.16, November 1990) identifies the importance of archaeological remains as the source of information about our society's past, and stresses their finite nature and their vulnerability to damage and destruction. Their protection through the planning system is essential to their survival.

14.2.30 The historic environment of the County has been formed from the activities of human communities over many thousands of years in clearing, farming and settling the landscape. There is extensive evidence of the past in the form of prehistoric settlement and burial sites, Roman towns and villas, medieval churches and villages, and industrial landscapes of national importance. There are many other archaeological sites, historic buildings and other features of more local importance. Local plans should protect the historic environment, preserving the important elements and its general historic character.

14.2.31 Characterisation of the historic landscape of the County is currently in progress. The landscape character areas and descriptions that will result from this project will assist in local plan preparation and in the conservation of the locally distinctive landscapes within the County.

14.2.32 Similarly, for the small historic towns of the County, the Gloucestershire Historic Towns Survey will provide information on the historic urban character of these settlements and their archaeological potential. This will assist in local plan preparation and in guiding the location of development.

14.2.33 Historic parks and gardens may be included within English Heritage's Register of Parks and Gardens of Special Historic Interest. Whilst this confers no additional statutory controls, development proposals affecting them are subject to statutory consultation procedures. Similarly, a Register of Historic Battlefields has been prepared by English Heritage. These include the battlefield sites at Tewkesbury [1471] and Stow-on-the-Wold [1646]. Again the effects of development proposals on them should be a material consideration in determining planning applications.

14.2.34 Local Planning Authorities are under a duty to designate as conservation areas any 'areas of special architectural or historic interest the character or appearance of which is desirable to preserve or enhance'. Whilst many of these areas are of local significance, cumulatively they contribute to Gloucestershire's diverse historical character. This is different to the conservation of individual buildings. Individual historic buildings and other structures of special historical or architectural interest may be given protection as Listed Buildings. However, where works may affect a listed building, special regard should be had for the desirability of preserving its setting, as this is often an essential part of the building's character.

14.2.35 About 18,000 archaeological sites are currently recorded in the Gloucestershire Sites and Monuments Records (SMR) which is maintained by the County Council. Approximately 400 of these are Scheduled Ancient Monuments of national importance, protected under the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Areas Act (1979). Not all nationally important monuments are scheduled. There is a presumption in favour of the preservation of nationally important sites and their settings, whether scheduled or not. In addition, the SMR records many sites of more local significance, and will contain archaeological information about local areas. Local plans should contain policies which will protect significant archaeological sites and which set out how the archaeological implications of development will be assessed and mitigated through the development control process.

#### **Policy NHE.7**

**Development will not be permitted which has a detrimental impact on the scientific value, landscape setting and character, and the archaeological remains of the Severn Estuary. The integrated management of the estuary will be essential to the protection of its special qualities.**

14.2.36 The Severn Estuary includes nationally and internationally important habitats and communities in the marine, intertidal and landward areas. The estuary is an important fish nursery area. The intertidal areas support internationally significant numbers of wintering waders and wildfowl. The low-lying reclaimed grazing marshes and ditches host important floral and faunal communities. Large areas are protected by international designations.

14.2.37 The wildlife value of the Severn Estuary is reflected in its national nature conservation designations and accorded a commensurate level of protection by Policy NHE.2. The Severn Estuary has been identified as an internationally important Wetland and as an EC Habitats Special Area of Conservation; it has been designated a Ramsar site and classified as an EC Wild Birds Special Protection Area. These designations ensure that the estuary is protected by international, European and national legislation. Other protected areas include Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), National Nature Reserves (NNRs) and the local Wildlife and Wetland Trust Reserve.

14.2.38 The value of the low-lying landscape of the Severn Levels also requires protection. Several landscape assessments have been carried out and zones of landscape character have been identified. Landscape characterisation and descriptions will be detailed in the relevant local plans. Planning Policy Guidance Note 20 "*Coastal Planning*" (PPG.20, September 1992) advises that local planning authorities should define coastal zones, within which development not requiring a coastal location should not generally be permitted. Estuaries and surrounding areas of land are also mentioned in PPG.20 as potentially benefiting from this approach. The Severn Estuary is a large area of such vital importance that close attention must be paid to the safeguarding of its setting.

14.2.39 The tidal range of the Estuary, the historic ports of Gloucester, extensive intertidal areas and soft sediments make the Severn Estuary an area of great archaeological significance including, for example, evidence of previous human exploitation and management of the area, ranging from prehistoric and Roman land reclamation to post- medieval ports. The particular environment of the Severn Estuary enables a very high rate of survival of archaeological evidence.

14.2.40 In recognition of both the importance of the Severn Estuary and the wide variety of interests associated with it, local plan policies to safeguard and manage these interests should be informed by a wide range of sources such as: "*The Shoreline Management Plan*", "*The Local Environment Action Plan*" (LEAP) and guidance produced by the Association of Severn Estuary Relevant Authorities (ASERA).

#### **Policy NHE.8**

**Proposals for development in the Cotswold Water Park should be considered in the context of all the objectives of the Water Park, which include the:**

**Nature conservation interests;**

**Mineral extraction and the beneficial after-use of worked sites;**

**Facilitation of a wide range of recreation and tourism opportunities which reflect the special character of the area;**

**Facilitation of access to and within the Cotswold Water Park using sustainable modes of transport;**

**Protection of the integrity of existing villages and rural communities; and**

### **Protection of the best and most versatile land in accordance with Policy NHE.3.**

14.2.41 The Upper Thames Valley on the Gloucestershire and Wiltshire county boundary has been a major source of sharp sand and gravel since the late 1940's. The mineral resources of this part of the Upper Thames, between Somerford Keynes in the west and Lechlade in the east, were designated as the Cotswold Water Park in 1969. These mineral resources are substantial and their extraction will continue for the foreseeable future.

14.2.42 The Cotswold Water Park has arisen as a result of meeting opportunities to manage this long-term mineral resource through the regeneration of flooded and disturbed landscapes into areas of great ecological and landscape value. It has resulted in the establishment of a national, regional and local asset for sport, recreation and tourism, and the creation of the largest freshwater wetland habitat in the UK. There is great potential for new landscapes to be created as a beneficial after-use of mineral working, and new areas of wetland habitat and landscapes will be created following mineral extraction in this area.

14.2.43 The Cotswold Water Park is a complex evolving area with important environmental, archaeological and scientific qualities. The marl lakes, which have been created from gravel extraction in the Upper Thames area, are unique wetland habitats, which are becoming increasingly diverse. The area was accorded Grade 1 status in the then Nature Conservancy Council's "*A Nature Conservation Review*" (1977). It now has its own Biodiversity Action Plan (BAP).

14.2.44 Development policies and proposals within the area should be considered in the context of the Cotswold Water Park Joint Committee's emerging development strategy (2000 – 2004). It is also important that the needs and identities of local communities are considered. This may be achieved through in-depth consultation with them on the continuing changes, and through managing leisure and tourism demands (particularly in terms of impact on transport and utilities infrastructure) in a way that is environmentally and socially acceptable.