

Natural and Rural Environment: comments on Joint Local Plan

Issues consultation

Impact of development on the countryside and rural environment

Green Belt

The Green Belt is having unintended consequences for the NuL rural area by creating pressure for development in the open countryside.

Para.8.22 of the Issues Consultation paper draws attention to the pressures on ‘the areas of highest quality landscape and best quality agricultural land within Newcastle-under-Lyme’s rural area ... in countryside beyond the Green Belt boundary, where speculative development pressures are more likely’.

Need for plan-led development

It is *essential* for NuL to develop Local Plan policies that (1) specifically protect the rural area from inappropriate development and (2) focus on the natural environment, biodiversity and supporting a healthy rural economy. Housing and employment development in the rural area should focus on sustaining the rural population and economy, not on expansion.

It is also *essential* for NuL to have a Local Plan that enables it consistently to demonstrate a five-year supply of housing land. NuL should not plan for more housing development than its recent planning history demonstrates that it can realistically deliver. Without this, development will continue to be developer led, not plan led; the Joint Local Plan will be unenforceable; and NuL will find it difficult to protect its rural area.

Wildlife corridors

A joined up network of wildlife corridors needs to be defined across the borough. Wildlife does not respect administrative boundaries. It needs to link into wildlife corridors in adjoining administrative areas, just as the highway network does.

Wetlands and watercourses

Meres and Mosses

NuL is nationally significant in hydrological and environmental terms because (1) it is located within three of England’s major water catchment areas: the Severn, Humber and Mersey; and (2) it lies within the West Midlands Meres and Mosses area. The Meres and Mosses are locally, nationally and

internationally important sites. NuL has more Meres and Mosses sites than any other district or borough in Staffordshire.

Staffordshire Wildlife Trust (SWT) has identified 'maintenance, restoration and expansion of wetland complexes, with particular emphasis on the mosses resources' as a primary objective for this habitat type (SWT Biodiversity Opportunities Mapping, 3.1.4.). A further objective is to 'promote appropriate management of the immediate catchment areas of wetlands to increase site sustainability, resilience to environmental change and improve biological water quality' (ibid.).

Mosses areas in the Rural South are Chorlton Moss in the Humber catchment and Maer Moss, the Bogs, the Wellings and Willoughbridge Bogs in the Severn catchment. Water abstraction from the principal aquifers that underlie these sites, to serve the growing population of the N. Staffordshire conurbation, is lowering the water table in this area. Urbanisation in local settlements, climate change and changes in agricultural land use pose further threats to these sites.

Carbon capture and climate change

Protection and maintenance of the Mosses sites is extremely important environmentally because of their carbon capture role. Peat bogs perform a far greater role as carbon sinks than does woodland.

Meece Brook

The Meece Brook originates in the Rural South. It has an important role in habitat networks and in flood mitigation and defence work both in and beyond NuL borough.

Watercourses do not respect administrative boundaries. Urbanisation in the vicinity of the Meece Brook in NuL borough presents risks (e.g. from Baldwins Gate sewage works) to water quality downstream and to important Local Wildlife Sites beyond NuL borough.

The Meece Brook is 'part of an important habitat network linking the borough to a diverse network of Local Wildlife Sites as well as areas such as Doxey Marshes SSSI and could therefore influence or be influenced by these habitats' (SWT, Biodiversity Opportunities Mapping, 3.5.1).

Floodplains created on farmland along the Meece Brook in NuL borough contribute to the flood defences of Stafford borough.

Landscape designations

The Rural South of NuL is the jewel in NuL's crown.

Some landscape quality designations in Staffordshire County Council's 'Planning for Landscape Change' are cause for concern. An area in the Rural South, from south of Baldwins Gate to Madeley is designated as 'landscape restoration' that covers (1) ecologically important and significant wetland areas and (2) historic parkland. The designation has been assigned without any appreciation

of the importance of this land in the wider landscape or in the ecology of the immediate area and areas beyond it.

In contrast to 'Planning for Landscape Change', Staffordshire's 1958 County Development Plan identified 'Six areas of special landscape value', of which one included a large area in what is now referred to as NuL's Rural South: '(c) Maer and Hanchurch Hills (area about 22 sq. miles). The area extends from the Maer Hills at the north-west to Trentham Park at the north-east and includes Whitmore and Swynnerton Old Park. Towards the south-west the boundary extends to near Ashley and at the south it includes the villages of Maer and Swynnerton. Tittensor and Bury Bank are included at the south-east.'

The Rural South is an area of great economic, topographical and environmental importance. It is vital for development in the Rural South to focus on appropriate land uses.

Agricultural land classification

The rural area of NuL comprises 80% of the total area of NuL. It also comprises 55.6% of the total Joint Local Plan area. Agriculture and the rural economy therefore make a significant contribution to the borough's economy.

The Joint Local Plan Issues consultation fails to recognise that agricultural land is a highly important economic asset for NuL and the Joint Local Plan area as a whole. The rural area also has significant areas of ancient woodland, commercial forestry and other woodland.

Paras 6.11 and 6.12 of the technical paper state:

'The vast majority of the rural area to the west of Newcastle-under-Lyme lies within Grade 3 land ... Isolated areas of Grade 2 land are also present within the borough, particularly to the south-west of the borough in the area to the west of Loggerheads.

'Therefore there is some potential for further land falling under the definition of "best and most versatile" agricultural land to be present in Newcastle-under-Lyme's rural area ... the limited amount which can be identified does not adjoin any major settlement within the rural area, so such land may be less likely to come under pressure from speculative development.'

The Agricultural Land Classification for England shows Grade 2 agricultural land immediately to the north of and adjoining Baldwins Gate village. A 5.6ha area of Grade 1 and Grade 2 agricultural land in this location was lost to housing development in 2015. In order to prevent further losses of valuable agricultural land it is *essential* for NuL to have plan-led development.

With a rapidly rising population (both nationally and globally) the importance of ensuring that agricultural land is not lost to development of any sort cannot be sufficiently stressed. Future generations will not thank us for destroying the land that feeds them.

Access to the countryside

Fragmentation of PRow network

In the Rural South the PRow network has become fragmented due to the greatly increased volume and speeds of traffic on the classified roads at which many footpaths and tracks terminate. Where there is no footway or verge, or where unmaintained or deteriorated verges are unsuitable for walking along, these roads are unsafe for walking. Where paved footways or suitable verges do exist, the volume, speed and type of traffic create an unpleasant walking environment.

The classified roads that now fragment the PRow network were once part of the network of rural foot-traffic routes – because the PRow network originates from routes across fields and along tracks, lanes and turnpike roads that were used by local foot-traffic to connect rural settlements to one another and to places of work.

The sparseness of the PRow network in the Rural South reflects a historically lower density of population than in other rural parts of NuL.

Consideration needs to be given to (1) how fragmentation of the network can be remedied and (2) how the network in the Rural South could be extended.

Lanes

The volume and speed of traffic on country lanes is a problem for both walkers and cyclists. Designation of 'quiet lanes', subject to a 20mph speed limit, can be applied to certain lanes that are popular and frequently used walking routes. Action needs to be taken to avoid some country lanes being used as 'rat runs'.

Public transport

The planning system recognises the health and well-being benefits of access to and recreation/exercise in the natural environment.

The rural areas are poorly served by public transport. Some areas have no bus service at weekends and holidays. Some attractions, e.g. the Dorothy Clive Garden at Willoughbridge, are inaccessible by public transport even during the week. This means that people with no access to a car have little opportunity to enjoy and benefit from the rural environment and its attractions. Twenty per cent of households in NuL have no access to a car.

The Joint Local Plan needs to consider provision of public transport between the urban and rural areas and within the rural area. It also needs to consider the location of the different attractions within the rural area so that suitable public transport services can be devised to take people to the places that they would like to visit. The disused railway line that runs from Silverdale through Keele to Manor Road, Baldwins Gate could be brought back into use as one means of public transport into the Rural South, specifically to walking areas.

Protecting the rural environment

Access to the countryside brings the inevitable risk of wear and tear on the environment. Clear designation and signposting of footpaths and other accessible areas and regular inspection and maintenance of such areas are a must. Likewise, users of the countryside need guidance on respect for the environment and the proper use of footpaths and other facilities.

Litter is a serious problem. Not only is it unsightly, but it is a danger to livestock and to wildlife. A real educational programme needs to be put into place to improve the problem, together with strong enforcement measures. Litter bins need to be provided outside shops and wherever there are seats, picnic tables and parking bays.

Car parking and other facilities

Lack of suitable public transport means that the majority people who visit the rural area for leisure and tourism do so by car. Absence of suitable car parking places forces people to pull in at gateways, on grass verges etc., this being one example of wear and tear on the environment. Suitable small car parks, parking bays and laybys need to be created at points of access to walking routes. Seats and picnic tables need to be provided at suitable locations on walking routes.

Maps of walking routes in the rural area, with the locations of parking facilities, seats and picnic tables, need to be made available. (In the 1980s NuL published a series of booklets by George Riley on walks in the rural area. These are no longer available, not even in the County Library system.)

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