

Babergh & Mid Suffolk District Councils

Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan 2024-2036

SEA Screening Opinion

Final report

Prepared by LUC

May 2024



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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Hitcham Parish Council is in the process of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan covering the period 2024 to 2036. Hitcham is located within Babergh District, approximately 12 miles north-west of Ipswich. LUC has been appointed by Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils to consider whether there is a need for Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to be undertaken for the Neighbourhood Plan.

1.2 SEA may be required for a Neighbourhood Plan, if it is likely to have significant environmental effects. Sustainability Appraisal (SA) is similar to SEA. However, SA includes assessment of the likely significant effects of a plan or programme on economic and social factors, as well as environmental factors. Planning Practice Guidance (PPG)¹ clarifies that there is no legal requirement for a Neighbourhood Plan to be subject to SA, but that SA can be used to demonstrate how the plan will contribute to sustainable development.

1.3 Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils have commissioned LUC to carry out SEA Screening of the Pre-Submission Draft version of the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan (March 2024) (hereafter referred to as the Neighbourhood Plan) in order to determine whether an assessment is required under European Directive 2001/42/EC (the SEA Directive), transposed into UK law through the SEA Regulations².

1.4 In October 2023 the Levelling up and Regeneration Act received royal assent, setting out detailed reforms to the planning system. Amongst other things, the Act allows for the replacement of the current SEA regime with a new requirement for an Environmental Outcomes Report. The specific requirements will be set out in forthcoming regulations, along with information about transition arrangements; however at present the requirement for SEA remains as set out in existing legislation.

¹ [Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities \(2016, updated 2024\) Planning Practice Guidance](#)

² The Environmental Assessment of Plans and Programmes Regulations 2004 (SI 2004/1633), as amended by The Environmental Assessments and Miscellaneous Planning (Amendment) (EU Exit)

Regulations 2018 (SI 2018/1232). It should be noted that the purpose of the amendments to the SEA Regulations is to ensure that the law functions correctly after the UK has left the European Union. No substantive changes are made to the way the SEA regime operates.

Chapter 2

SEA Screening

Scope of the Neighbourhood Plan

2.1 Hitcham Parish Council has prepared a Pre-Submission Draft version of the Neighbourhood Plan, which is being subject to public consultation in May and June 2024.

2.2 The Plan includes a vision for the long-term future of Hitcham as well as six objectives through which the vision will be achieved:

Housing

1. To ensure that new residential development meets the needs of the parish by delivering smaller, affordable, energy efficient units suitable for all ages which enable a mixed and sustainable community.

Design

2. To require new development within the parish to be sensitively designed and of high quality which respects the character of its immediate surroundings and reflects the distinctive character and identity of the village and the individual hamlets.

Environment

3. To preserve the rural character and tranquillity of the parish by protecting the existing green spaces, built heritage, landscape and enhancing biodiversity.
4. To improve the health and well-being of the community through promoting accessibility to and the quiet enjoyment of the countryside.

Community and Services

5. To sustain and enhance the important existing village facilities and support the development of appropriate new facilities.

Business and Employment

6. To support small scale rural enterprise, agricultural diversification and opportunities for homeworking.

2.3 The Neighbourhood Plan then sets out 13 planning policies (HIT 1-13) to realise and deliver the vision. The policies are structured in line with the same themes as the objectives above.

2.4 The Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate any sites for new housing or other built development. Policy HIT1: New housing development states that the Neighbourhood Plan area will accommodate development commensurate with the designation of Hitcham in the relevant adopted settlement hierarchy, taking into account the rural character of the parish. The policy specifies that the focus for new development will be within the adopted settlement boundary of the main built-up part of the village, where it can best integrate with existing development and benefit from proximity to the existing community infrastructure.

2.5 Policy HIT2: Housing Mix sets out that proposals for new housing should provide for and contribute to a mix of housing that meets local needs and enables the creation of a mixed and balanced community.

2.6 Other policies in the Plan address topics including design, heritage, natural assets, community facilities and business and rural diversification.

Baseline Information

2.7 This section summarises baseline information for the parish of Hitcham, drawing from the information set out in the Pre-Submission Draft version of the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan 2024-2036.

Context

2.8 Hitcham is a civil parish located within Babergh District and is one of the largest parishes (4,308 acres) in the claylands of the county of Suffolk. The village is located approximately five miles to the west of the town of Stowmarket and 12 miles northwest of Ipswich.

Biodiversity, Flora and Fauna

2.9 There are no international or nationally designated sites within the parish. However, the majority of Hitcham parish falls within Impact Risk Zones relating to Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) outside the parish. Therefore, relevant planning applications need to be assessed for their likely impact on the SSSIs.

2.10 There are four County Wildlife Sites in Hitcham parish. These are:

- Babergh 148 – Hitcham Hall Meadows
- Babergh 162 – RNR 168 (This site is also a Roadside Nature Reserve.)
- Babergh 68 – Home Wood
- Babergh 69 – Consent Wood

2.11 In addition, the Suffolk River Valleys Environmentally Sensitive Area extends into Hitcham parish.

2.12 There are small areas of priority habitat in Hitcham parish, including deciduous woodland, traditional orchards and lowland meadow. There are also two areas of ancient and semi-natural woodland and one area of ancient replanted woodland.

Population

2.13 At the time of the last Census (2021), Hitcham had a population of 785 people. The 2021 Census indicates that 57.9% of those aged 16 years and over were in work compared to 42% being economically inactive.

2.14 The population of Hitcham is ageing. The largest age brackets are those between 50-79 years (51.8%), while those aged 0-39 make up 30% of the population.

Human Health

2.15 Based on the 2021 census, 81.1% of the Hitcham population was in either 'very good health' or 'good health'. This is lower than the average for Babergh District as a whole which is 82.2%.

2.16 There are no GPs within Hitcham, with the closest being 1.45 miles away in Bildeston. The closest hospital is in Bury St Edmunds.

Soil

2.17 The majority of the parish is made up of Grade 3 Agricultural Land, although it is not clear if it is Grade 3a (classed as high quality) or the lower quality Grade 3b. There are also some patches of Grade 2 Agricultural land.

2.18 The soils of the parish are mixed, consisting of:

- Slowly permeable calcareous/non calcareous clay soils;
- Deep well drained fine loam, coarse loam and sandy soils, locally flinty and in places over gravel; and
- Fine loam over clay soils with permeable subsoils and some calcareous/non calcareous slowly permeable clay soils³.

Water

2.19 Hitcham lies at the head of a south-flowing tributary of the River Brett. Areas of Hitcham Parish along the tributary are located within areas at risk of flooding from rivers. A minority of land around the river is within Flood Zone 3 where land has a 1 in 100 or greater annual probability of river flooding. The majority of the parish lies within Flood Zone 1 and as such is at very low risk of flooding from rivers.

³ [Suffolk Heritage Explorer \(undated\) 1. Parish: Hitcham](#)

2.20 Hitcham town centre, within the south of the Parish, lies near the confluence of two tributaries and as such land around the streams, falls within Flood Zones 2 and 3.

Air Quality and Climatic Factors

2.21 There are no Air Quality Management Areas (AQMAs) within or near to Hitcham Parish. The closest AQMA is about 12 miles from the parish to the south-east within Ipswich.

2.22 Climate data are not available at parish level, but within Babergh District as a whole, reductions in overall carbon emissions of 28% were achieved between 2005 and 2019. This reduction was mostly due to progress in reducing emissions from domestic sources, closely followed by industrial and commercial sectors, with minimal progress on transport emissions. Transport makes the largest contribution to carbon emissions in Babergh District.

Material Assets

2.23 The Neighbourhood Plan lists a number of key community facilities that are located within Hitcham:

- Village hall;
- All Saints Church;
- Hitcham Post Office and Stores;
- A mobile library service on the second Wednesday of each month, which stops at four points in the parish; and
- Honey Bees Nursery: a pre-school Playgroup held at the village hall in Hitcham.

2.24 The Neighbourhood Plan identifies eight Local Green Spaces in Hitcham:

1. Meadow adjacent to the village hall;
2. Community play area;
3. Hobbets;
4. Church Green;
5. Hitcham Hall lower meadow;
6. Falls footpath wooded area;
7. Henslow's Meadow; and
8. Browns Close bellmouth.

2.25 There are limited bus services operating in Hitcham parish. There are services operating between Hitcham – Bildeston – Somersham – Ipswich and Hitcham to Hadleigh High School and Bury St Edmunds. There is also a service between Stowmarket – Bildeston – Hadleigh operated by Hadleigh Community Transport. However, this service only runs weekly.

2.26 The nearest railway station is at Stowmarket, 12.1km from Hitcham.

2.27 The parish contains a number of footpaths and permissive paths that provide access to the surrounding countryside. There is no school in the parish.

Cultural Heritage

2.28 There are 58 listed buildings and one Scheduled Monument within the parish. The Church of All Saints is a Grade I listed building and the other buildings are Grade II listed. The Scheduled Monument is a moated site and associated fishponds at Wetherden Hall. There is no Conservation Area in the parish.

2.29 The Neighbourhood Plan also identifies the following non-designated heritage assets:

- Roman Road;
- Ancient Burial land opposite Brick House Farm;
- Oak Tree Farm Moat;
- Oak Tree Farmhouse;
- Whitehouse Farm on Bird Street;
- Peppertree Farm;
- School House, The Causeway; and
- Karnser Raised Pavement.

Landscape

2.30 There are no designated landscapes within or very close to Hitcham Parish, the nearest being Dedham Vale National Landscape approximately 10.6km to the south.

2.31 Hitcham is enhanced by its relationship to the surrounding undulating landscape. Development is generously spaced allowing for outward views to the Suffolk landscape. Deep green verges and lush mature planting help to create a soft transition between the village and the open countryside. Green and natural features such as woodland, shrubs, and water courses, drainage ditches and farmland ponds serve to reinforce the village's connection to the landscape.

2.32 According to the Joint Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Council Landscape Guidance 2015, Hitcham falls within three Landscape Character Areas: 3: Ancient Plateau Claylands, 4: Ancient Rolling Farmlands and 18: Rolling Valley Farmlands. The key characteristics of those character areas are:

- Ancient Plateau Claylands landscape are gently rolling heavy clay plateaux with ancient woodlands – in Babergh district.
- Ancient Rolling Farmlands landscape are medium clay soils studded with blocks of ancient woodland. The settlement pattern mainly consists of dispersed

farmsteads of mediaeval origin with some larger hamlets and smaller villages that complement the rural landform and landscape.

- Rolling Valley Farmlands landscape are valley sides with some complex and steep slopes in some places with deep well drained loamy soils and often sunken lanes – this type of valley is only found south of the River Gipping. This landscape makes a significant contribution to the specific local character of the district because it is the focus of historic settlement and wealth creation.

2.33 In addition, a number of important views and vistas have been identified within the Neighbourhood Plan:

1. Views from the Causeway across the Dale;
2. Behind the Causeway Estate looking towards Wattisham Road;
3. View from Bury Road across farmland to The Dale;
4. Views south towards Home Wood;

5. Views from Balls Hill Road towards the Dale; and

6. Views from Hobbets across to Bildeston.

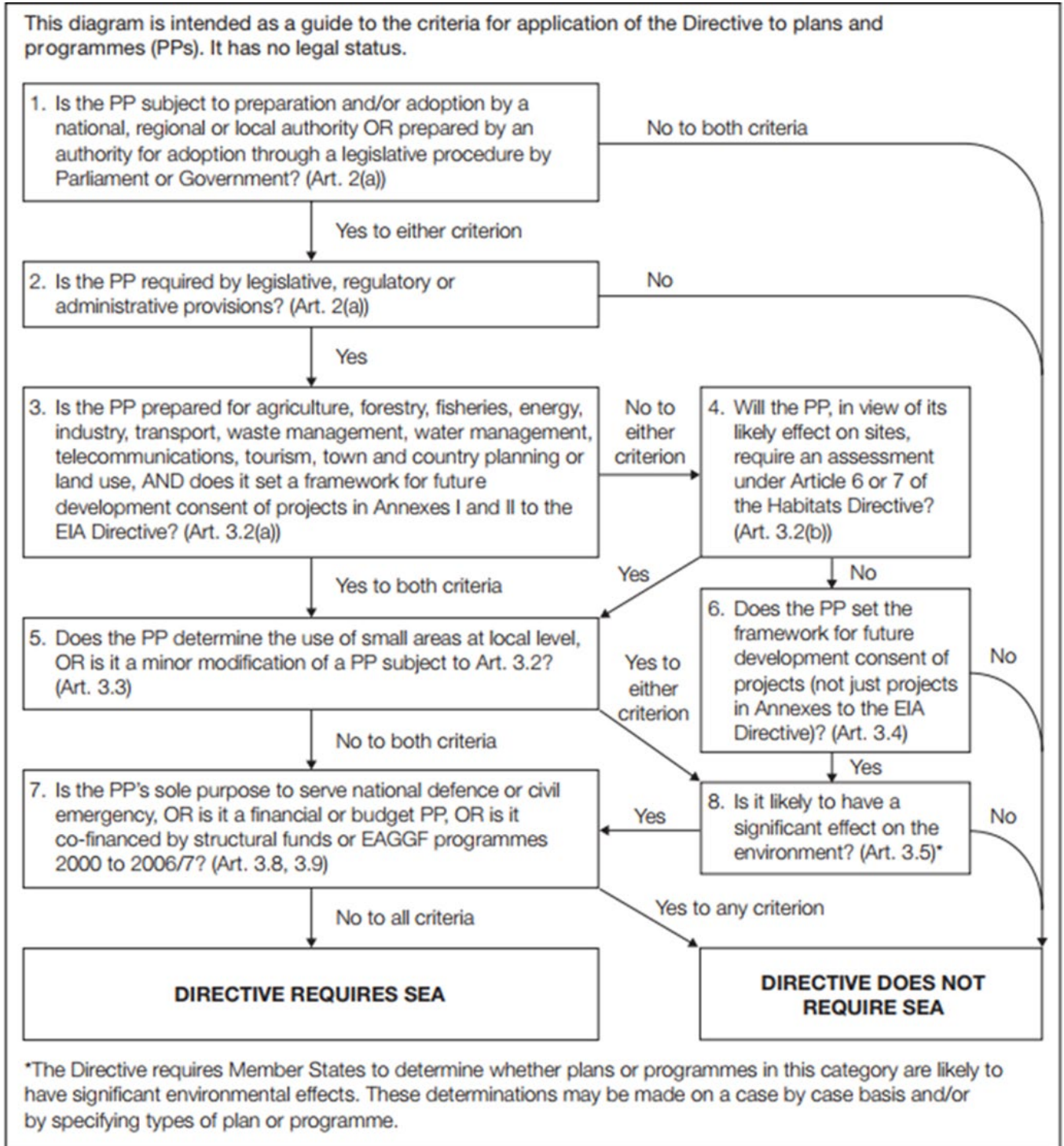
SEA Screening

2.34 An assessment has been undertaken to determine whether the Pre-Submission Draft version of the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan 2024-2036 requires SEA in accordance with the SEA Regulations.

2.35 **Figure 2.1** overleaf presents the flow diagram entitled 'Application of the SEA Directive to plans and programmes' which is taken from the Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive⁴, published in September 2005. This is a useful guide when considering whether a plan should be subject to SEA (The Practical Guide has been superseded by the Planning Practice Guidance; however it still provides a useful and relevant guide to the process to use in making SEA screening decisions).

⁴ Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (2005) A Practical Guide to the Strategic Environmental Assessment Directive

Figure 2.1 Application of the SEA Directive to plans and programmes



2.36 Table 2.1 below presents the assessment of whether the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan will require a full SEA. The questions in the first column are drawn from the diagram above which sets out how the SEA Directive should be applied.

Table 2.1 Application of SEA Directive to the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan

Stage	Yes/No	Reason
1. Is the PP (plan or programme) subject to preparation and/or adoption by a national, regional or local authority OR prepared by an authority for adoption through a legislative procedure by Parliament or Government? (Article 2(a))	Yes	The Neighbourhood Plan is being prepared under the Localism Act 2011 and will be adopted ('made') by the Local Authority (Babergh District Council) as part of the statutory development plan. Move to Q2.
2. Is the PP required by legislative, regulatory or administrative provisions? (Article 2(a))	No	The Neighbourhood Plan is being prepared under the Localism Act 2011 and in accordance with the Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012. However, there is no requirement to produce a Neighbourhood Plan; it is an optional plan. Once made it will become part of the statutory development plan. Therefore, it should continue to be screened. Move to Q3.
3. Is the PP prepared for agriculture, forestry, fisheries, energy, industry, transport, waste management, water management, telecommunications, tourism, town and country planning or land use, AND does it set a framework for future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive? (Article 3.2(a))	Yes & No	The Neighbourhood Plan is being prepared for town and country planning and land use, but it does not set a framework for future development consent of projects in Annexes I and II to the EIA Directive. Move to Q4.
4. Will the PP, in view of its likely effect on sites, require an assessment for future development under Article 6 or 7 of the Habitats Directive? (Article 3.2 (b))	No	Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) screening of the Neighbourhood Plan has been undertaken separately on behalf of Babergh District Council and has concluded that the Neighbourhood Plan is not likely to have a significant effect on any European site, either alone or in combination with other plans or projects. Move to Q6.
6. Does the PP set the framework for future development consent of projects (not just projects in Annexes to the EIA Directive)? (Article 3.4)	Yes	Although the Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate sites for development, it includes policies which proposals for development within the parish will be assessed against. Move to Q8.
8. Is it likely to have a significant effect on the environment? (Article 3.5)	No	See Table 2.2. SEA IS NOT REQUIRED.

2.37 Schedule 1 of the SEA Regulations sets out the criteria for determining the likely significance of effects. These are listed in **Table 2.2** below along with comments on the extent to which the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan meets these criteria.

Table 2.2 Likely Significant Effects of the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan

SEA Requirement	Comments
The characteristics of plans and programmes, having regard, in particular, to:	
1. The degree to which the plan or programme sets a framework for projects and other activities, either with regard to the location, nature, size and operating conditions or by allocating resources.	<p>Once made, the Neighbourhood Plan will become part of the statutory development plan and will guide the delivery of development in Hitcham, including in terms of design. The Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate sites for residential or other forms of development.</p> <p>The previously adopted Babergh Core Strategy (2014) identified Hitcham as a 'Hinterland Village' under Policy CS2: Settlement Pattern. This policy also sought to direct development to towns/urban areas (which includes the Ipswich Fringe) and then to the Core Villages and Hinterland Villages. Policy CS3 made provision for 1,050 homes to be delivered at Core and Hinterland Villages over the Plan period to 2031.</p> <p>The recently adopted Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Part 1 (Nov 2023) does not set out a settlement hierarchy. Following the examination of the Joint Local Plan it was decided that an up-to-date settlement hierarchy will now come forward in Part 2 of the Plan. This is at an early stage in its development and is unlikely to be adopted for some time.</p>
2. The degree to which the plan or programme influences other plans and programmes including those in a hierarchy.	The Neighbourhood Plan has to be in general conformity with the local strategic framework (i.e. the adopted Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Part 1 and saved policies from the previous local plans). The Neighbourhood Plan must also have regard to the National Planning Policy Framework. The Neighbourhood Plan does not have influence over other plans. Once made, the Neighbourhood Plan will form part of the statutory development plan for Hitcham Parish and will be used in conjunction with the adopted Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Part 1 and the emerging Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan Part 2 (once adopted) to determine planning applications.
3. The relevance of the plan or programme for the integration of environmental considerations in particular with a view to promoting sustainable development.	One of the Basic Conditions which the Neighbourhood Plan must meet is to contribute to sustainable development.
4. Environmental problems relevant to the plan or programme.	Baseline information relating to Hitcham Parish was described earlier in this report. Key issues of relevance to the Neighbourhood Plan are the presence of high quality agricultural land in the parish, land within flood zones 2 and 3, SSSI Impact Risk Zones, County Wildlife Sites, multiple Priority Habitats and Ancient Woodland. The Suffolk River Valleys Environmentally Sensitive Area also extends into Hitcham parish.
5. The relevance of the plan or programme for the implementation of Community legislation on the environment (e.g. plans and programmes linked to waste-management or water protection).	N/A
Characteristics of the effects and of the area likely to be affected, having regard, in particular, to:	
6. The probability, duration, frequency and reversibility of the effects.	The Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate sites for housing or other forms of development. The Neighbourhood Plan covers the period up to 2036. Any effects of the Neighbourhood Plan are expected to be indirect (due to not allocating sites) but would be long-term and permanent.

SEA Requirement	Comments
7. The cumulative nature of the effects.	<p>Cumulative effects could result from the Neighbourhood Plan in combination with development that takes place in the surrounding towns and villages, although the Neighbourhood Plan does not allocate sites for housing or other forms of development.</p> <p>The previously adopted Babergh Core Strategy (2014) identified Hitcham as a 'Hinterland Village' in the settlement hierarchy, with the expectation that it would accommodate some development to help meet local need. The adopted Part 1 Babergh and Mid Suffolk Joint Local Plan does not identify a minimum housing requirement for Hitcham.</p>
8. The transboundary nature of the effects.	The Neighbourhood Plan focuses on Hitcham Parish only. Transboundary effects under the SEA Regulations refers to transboundary effects on other EU Member States; therefore they are not relevant to this Neighbourhood Plan.
9. The risks to human health or the environment (e.g. due to accidents).	There are no anticipated risks to human health or the environment from the Neighbourhood Plan.
10. The magnitude and spatial extent of the effects (geographical area and size of the population likely to be affected).	The Neighbourhood Plan covers the entirety of Hitcham Parish. The population of the parish, according to the 2021 Census, was 785 people.
<p>11. The value and vulnerability of the area likely to be affected due to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Special natural characteristics or cultural heritage; ■ Exceeded environmental quality standards or limit values; and ■ Intensive land-use. 	Hitcham Parish is home to a number of Priority Habitats, and there are 58 listed buildings within the parish. There are several sensitive locations within the parish including the SSSI Impact Risk Zones, as well as patches of ancient woodland. The parish contains Grade 2 and Grade 3 agricultural land. There are no internationally designated nature conservation sites within the parish but there are four County Wildlife Sites in Hitcham and the Suffolk River Valleys Environmentally Sensitive Area extends into the parish.
12. The effects on areas or landscapes which have a recognised national, Community or international protection status.	There are no designated landscapes within or very close to Hitcham Parish, the nearest being Dedham Vale National Landscape approximately 10.5km to the south.

SEA Screening Conclusion

2.38 A screening assessment has been undertaken by applying the criteria from the SEA Directive and Schedule 1 of the SEA Regulations to determine whether or not the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan is likely to have significant environmental effects when assessed against the topics listed in the SEA Regulations.

2.39 The Neighbourhood Plan sets out a vision and detailed planning policies to shape development in the parish up to 2036 and decision makers will need to consider the criteria of these policies when determining future applications in the village. The Neighbourhood Plan does not directly impact on land use through the allocation of sites for housing or other forms of development.

2.40 On this basis, it is considered that the Hitcham Neighbourhood Plan is unlikely to have significant environmental effects and full SEA is therefore not required.

Next Steps

2.41 This SEA screening opinion will be sent to the three statutory consultees (Natural England, Historic England and the Environment Agency) and will be reviewed as appropriate in light of any comments received.

LUC
May 2024