

Central Lincolnshire Policy S66: Protecting the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land Evidence Report

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1. Introduction

- 1.1. The Central Lincolnshire Local Plan is being updated since the first Local Plan for Central Lincolnshire, an area covering the districts of City of Lincoln, North Kesteven and West Lindsey, was adopted in April 2017.
- 1.2. This Evidence Report (which is one of a collection) provides background information and justification for Policy S66, which relates to the protection of the best and most versatile agricultural land.

2. Policy Context

National Policy and Guidance

- 2.1. Since the Central Lincolnshire Plan was adopted the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was updated in July 2018 with subsequent additional changes being published in February 2019.

- 2.2. Paragraph 7 of the NPPF explains that:

“The purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. At a very high level, the objective of sustainable development can be summarised as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

- 2.3. Paragraph 8 goes on to state that:

“Achieving sustainable development means that the planning system has three overarching objectives, which are interdependent and need to be pursued in mutually supportive ways (so that opportunities can be taken to secure net gains across each of the different objectives):

*...c) **an environmental objective** – to contribute to protecting and enhancing our natural, built and historic environment; including making effective use of land, helping to improve biodiversity, using natural resources prudently, minimising waste and pollution, and mitigating and adapting to climate change, including moving to a low carbon economy.”*

- 2.4. The NPPF seeks to support a prosperous rural economy, stating in paragraph 83 that:

“Planning policies and decisions should enable:

a) the sustainable growth and expansion of all types of business in rural areas, both through conversion of existing buildings and well-designed new buildings;

b) the development and diversification of agricultural and other land-based rural businesses;

c) sustainable rural tourism and leisure developments which respect the character of the countryside; and

d) the retention and development of accessible local services and community facilities, such as local shops, meeting places, sports venues, open space, cultural buildings, public houses and places of worship.”

2.5. Paragraph 118 in seeking to make effective use of land sets out:

“Planning policies and decisions should:

...b) recognise that some undeveloped land can perform many functions, such as for wildlife, recreation, flood risk mitigation, cooling/shading, carbon storage or food production;...”

2.6. Paragraph 170 is seeking the conservation enhancement of the natural environment:

“Planning policies and decisions should contribute to and enhance the natural and local environment by:

...b) recognising the intrinsic character and beauty of the countryside, and the wider benefits from natural capital and ecosystem services – including the economic and other benefits of the best and most versatile agricultural land, and of trees and woodland;...

e) preventing new and existing development from contributing to, being put at unacceptable risk from, or being adversely affected by, unacceptable levels of soil, air, water or noise pollution or land instability. Development should, wherever possible, help to improve local environmental conditions such as air and water quality, taking into account relevant information such as river basin management plans;...”

2.7. The Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) was first introduced in 2014 which offers 'live' government guidance. The PPG provides guidance to help in the implementation of policy in the NPPF.

2.8. The NPPG provides additional guidance for the production of Local Plans. This includes reference to the importance of considering the value of agricultural land where it says:

“Where significant development of agricultural land is demonstrated to be necessary, local planning authorities should seek to use areas of poorer quality land in preference to that of a higher quality.”

Local Policy

2.9. The adopted Local Plan does not have a specific policy relating to the protection of the best and most versatile agricultural land. Rather, the subject is addressed within a wider Development in the Countryside policy (Policy 55). This some elements of this policy have been separated out into individual policies, one of which is this new policy.

3. Context and Evidence

3.1. Central Lincolnshire has a large rural area with different characteristics, opportunities and constraints. Agriculture and directly and indirectly related businesses form a significant

part of the local and regional economy. Agri-food is identified by the GLLEP as a priority sector. Ensuring that the rural areas are not starved of growth, and agricultural businesses can thrive, whilst making sure that only suitable development occurs is a key challenge for the Central Lincolnshire authorities.

- 3.2. Given the scale of the rural area, it would not be possible in the Local Plan to include specific policies for each parcel of the rural area, therefore a range of criteria based policies should apply a degree of guidance and certainty.

4. Issues and Options Consultation

- 4.1. The Issues and Options consultation was undertaken June-July 2019. The consultation document did not identify Policy LP55: Development in the Countryside as a policy not intended to be amended, nor did it set out any detail for what amendments were intended to be made or ask any specific questions on the policy.
- 4.2. Very few comments were made in respect to the adopted Policy LP55 being omitted from the list of policies not proposed for change. These were summarised as:
- Concerns expressed that the policy was to be amended with no details of how.
 - Concern at changes that would open up the countryside to development.

5. Proposed Approach in Draft Local Plan

- 5.1. It is proposed that the Draft Local Plan will retain a broad general 'Development in the Countryside' policy similar to that in the Adopted Local Plan. It will also have some specific policy areas addressed in separate policies, including a policy relating to 'Protecting the Best and Most Versatile Agricultural Land'.

6. Reasonable Alternative Options

- 6.1. The following alternative options have been considered for this policy (option 1 being the preferred option within the Draft Local Plan).
- 6.2. Option 2: No policy on protecting the best and most versatile agricultural land, rely on the NPPF. This option was discounted, as it would not provide the same level of protection for the best and most versatile agricultural land as having a specific policy would.

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. This Evidence Report demonstrates the rationale for the proposed policy as contained in the Draft Central Lincolnshire Local Plan January 2021. This report will be updated following responses received during the Regulation 18 consultation prior to finalising the Local Plan for submission. This helps bring together relevant evidence that has informed this policy and how we have responded to comments received during the plan making process, as well as how the latest evidence and national guidance has been taken into account.