

CHAPTER 3

RURAL ENVIRONMENT

INTRODUCTION

- 3.1. Some 60% of the Borough is open land designated as Green Belt. The continued success of Green Belt policy has done much to preserve the open character and landscape of the area. However, Green Belt policy alone cannot guarantee the quality of the landscape. This chapter deals with landscape and nature conservation issues in an integrated way and sets the context for a wide range of policies throughout the Plan. Although the policies in this section relate primarily to the open 'countryside areas' of the Borough, many are relevant to the urban areas and therefore the policies will be applied as appropriate to all parts of the Borough.

POLICY CONTEXT

- 3.2. The national policy background on rural environment issues is set out in the White Paper "This Common Inheritance" (1990) and carried through into various Planning Policy Guidance documents and Circulars. Policies for the countryside are based on sound stewardship of the heritage and included in the main aims are the conservation and improvement of the landscape, the encouragement of opportunities for recreation, and the conservation of the diversity of wildlife, particularly by protecting and enhancing habitats. PPG1 "General Policy and Principles," confirms the Government's clear intention to work towards ensuring that development and growth are sustainable. It emphasises the positive role of the planning system in contributing to these objectives. PPG2 "Green Belts" refers to the importance of land management and the role of local authorities in assisting landowners with the aim of enhancing the countryside, especially areas of land in the Green Belt suffering from disuse or neglect. PPG7 "The Countryside - Environmental Quality and Economic and Social Development" (1997) makes clear the need for a positive approach to developments in the countryside, particularly in the urban fringe, aimed at securing environmental improvement and beneficial use of land, with increased public access to provide an amenity for the residents of urban areas. It also stresses the need to protect the best agricultural land. PPG9 "Nature Conservation" (1994) sets out the Government's objectives for conserving the diversity of wildlife and emphasises the importance of both designated and undesignated areas for nature conservation.
- 3.3. Both the regional policy background, set out in RPG9 "Regional Planning Guidance for the South East" (2001) and the Surrey Structure Plan (1994) continue the theme of sustainable development and stress the need for a positive approach to planning and management aimed at securing environmental improvement and beneficial use of land. The Structure Plan recognises that the Surrey countryside contains a significant proportion of valued habitats and landscapes which need to be protected and establishes clear policies on river corridors, landscape and nature conservation.

LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

- 3.4. In 1997 Surrey County Council published guidelines for the management of the landscape, trees and woodlands as part of its Countryside Strategy. "The Future of Surrey's Landscape and Woodlands" together with its three technical reports, sets out a full assessment of the landscape character areas of the County and includes guidelines for the management of landscape and its trees and woodlands.
- 3.5. The whole of the Borough of Spelthorne lies within the Thames Flood Plain character area, where the sands and gravels overlying the London clay have produced good quality agricultural land. The characteristic landscape is flat and open with some hedgerows, tree belts and a few small woodland areas. The extensive deposits of sand and gravel have resulted in a legacy of wet gravel pits and poorly restored land of little agricultural value. Modern restoration techniques have improved significantly but the consequences of past and present workings will continue for some considerable time. The effects of urban development, major roads, reservoirs and electricity pylons have further fragmented the landscape, so that no countryside areas of the Borough are far from urban features or the hard edge of urban development.
- 3.6. The River Thames forms a separate landscape character area within the Thames Floor Plain. In contrast to the open landscape of the floodplain, the River Thames is a small scale corridor, often enclosed by trees or development, meandering through the flat landscape. It is the most important landscape feature of the area and many of the best landscapes of the Borough, such as the flood plain meadows, are associated with it and its tributaries, the River Colne and the River Ash. Although stretches of the Thames have become 'urbanised' particularly by inter-war 'plotland' development with its own special character, much of the river landscape is 'natural' and provides important focal points and connecting links. The maintenance of riparian tree cover is vital to the character of the river landscapes.
- 3.7. Within this general setting a number of landscape types can be identified. An essential feature of the landscape is its diversity and fragmentation, with few cohesive elements except the rivers and the highway network. Pockets of high quality landscape are adjoined by damaged landscapes providing considerable opportunity for enhancement.
- 3.8. The agricultural landscape is broadly typified either by intensive horticultural production or by low grade pasture providing grazing for cattle or horses. Because of past mineral workings or the prospect of the land eventually being used for mineral extraction, there is little investment in the maintenance of landscape features or field boundaries, so despite being an acceptable use in Green Belt terms the agricultural landscape with some notable exceptions tends to represent a picture of decline.
- 3.9. More than 40% of the open land in the Borough has been, or is, the subject of gravel extraction and falls into three main categories:-

- (a) sites which have been left as wet pits and where natural regeneration has taken place. In some places the new belts of trees have become significant landscape features but there is scope for further landscape work to improve the diversity of habitats
- (b) sites which have been filled but where the restoration has been of such poor quality that the land is unused, derelict or in use as very low grade grazing land. Such sites are usually devoid of landscape planting even on the margins
- (c) sites where mineral extraction and restoration is still in progress.

Since the landscape of the Borough is generally flat, any proposals for doming or raising land above its original level will be resisted where out of character with the area.

- 3.10. The embankments of the reservoirs are dominant features which are difficult to integrate into the landscape. Safety requirements tend to preclude extensive landscape planting on the embankments themselves and the slopes are maintained as grassland by sheep grazing. However, opportunities for tree planting exist on land around the margins of the embankments and some schemes have now been implemented. The landscaping and grounds maintenance of the water treatment works tend to reinforce their urban character. Security boundary fences are often particularly intrusive in the landscape and the Council will explore with Thames Water how the appearance of these sites can be improved.
- 3.11. The villages contain buildings which provide links with the area's agricultural past and although representing a more urban landscape, the quality of the buildings, especially new development, the peripheries and the open spaces within the villages are all important to the landscape character of the area.
- 3.12. In August 1990 the Council published "A Strategy for Landscape Improvement in Spelthorne". This has provided a framework for landscape enhancement initiatives. The Borough Council intends to ensure that the quality and diversity of the landscape is maintained, and will take every opportunity to promote and encourage schemes for enhancement throughout the Borough.

POLICY RU1

The Borough Council will seek to protect and enhance the landscape of the Borough in order to conserve its natural beauty and amenity value, and in particular will:-

- (a) seek, in development proposals, the retention of existing trees, hedgerows and other landscape features which contribute positively to the existing landscape**
- (b) encourage landowners and other organisations to bring forward proposals for the improvement of the landscape,**

especially areas which have been damaged by previous activity or land uses

- (c) require high standards of landscape design and after-care in development proposals**
- (d) promote high quality landscape design and after-care in the management of its own land**
- (e) resist proposals for raising land above the natural ground level where this would be out of character with the landscape of the area.**

3.13. Although there are no recognised areas of national landscape importance within the Borough there are areas of special character in the local context, and these are designated on the proposed map as Areas of Special Landscape Character and include:-

- (a) land at Poyle, west of the M25 motorway and south of Horton Road - river side water meadows adjoining Wraysbury River with established trees and hedgerows. Most of the area is included in the Staines Moor Site of Special Scientific Interest
- (b) Staines Moor and land adjoining - a large area of unimproved alluvial meadows adjoining the River Colne. The area includes Metropolitan Common land and a Site of Special Scientific Interest
- (c) land adjoining the River Thames and to the east and south of Laleham Village - mostly open farmland or parkland with well established trees and hedgerows
- (d) land in the Shepperton area north of the River Thames between Chertsey Bridge and Walton Bridge
- (e) Sunbury Park.

3.14. The Borough Council will take appropriate opportunities itself and support other initiatives to improve Areas of Special Landscape Character, as well as ensuring the retention and management of existing features. Development proposals which would damage the landscape character will not be permitted and special care will be taken to ensure that acceptable proposals preserve or enhance the setting of the area. Some of the land is already subject to existing or proposed mineral operations and the Council, in consultation with the County Council, will ensure that restoration proposals further enhance the landscape of the area.

3.15. Because of the quality of the landscape these areas are attractive for recreation and leisure. The riverside area in particular attracts a large number of visitors and it is therefore important that the provision of necessary facilities, including car parks, does

not detract from the character or lead to the urbanisation of the area. The Borough Council is committed to improving public access where appropriate for recreation, particularly in the Colne Valley Park. However, some areas, such as Staines Moor, are sensitive to visitor pressure and measures to improve public access will need very careful consideration and will also need to take account of possible adverse effects on nature conservation interests.

POLICY RU2

Within the Areas of Special Landscape Character defined on the Proposals Map, development adversely affecting the landscape character of the area will not be permitted. The Borough Council will expect any new development proposals to preserve or enhance the landscape character of such areas, and to ensure that the scale and quality of open space and any features important to the area are protected.

- 3.16. Adjoining the Areas of Special Landscape Character are tracts of degraded landscape much of which has been affected by existing or former mineral workings. Some of these areas were previously identified as Landscape Improvement Areas but in order to distinguish between those areas where the scale of degradation requires priority action, and those where smaller scale schemes will be effective, only those most in need of major improvement have been identified on the Proposals Map. The problem of restoring these degraded landscape areas is complex and may be dependent on securing an appropriate economic use for the land as part of a package of improvements, balancing the linked priorities for landscape enhancement, nature conservation and recreation. However, in all cases where recreational or other development is seen as a way of achieving landscape improvement, the prime objective of safeguarding the Green Belt from further urbanisation will remain paramount and inappropriate development will not be accepted.

POLICY RU3

The Borough Council will give priority to improving the landscape of the Borough within the Areas of Degraded Landscape defined on the Proposals Map, by encouraging landowners and other funding agencies to implement a package of enhancement measures designed to secure visual improvements as well as effective long term management of the land in an appropriate use.

- 3.17. The problem of improving the landscape of the Borough is a major and challenging issue, especially where land ownership and uses are fragmented. In some cases landscape improvement involves screening or the better integration into the landscape of major features such as reservoirs, motorways, major roads and pylon lines. There are four main reservoirs in the Borough - Wraysbury, King George VI, Staines North and South and the Queen Mary. Proposals P1, P2, P3 and P4 identify the need for landscape planting at each of these sites. Though some landscaping work along the M25 and M3 was undertaken at the construction stage there is scope to further

mitigate the impact of these motorways and also that of the A30 trunk road. Whilst there are no specific proposals in this Plan for landscaping highways and features such as pylon lines, opportunities will be actively sought and implemented. Finding acceptable and viable uses for derelict or neglected sites will be the key to improving extensive tracts of poor landscape in the Borough. However, small scale schemes to mitigate the intrusive effects of urban features or to improve "neglected corners" can make an important contribution to the necessarily long-term comprehensive treatment of large areas. Thus the implementation of small schemes, especially when carried out by, or in association with local groups such as Spelthorne Civic Pride and the Tree Wardens, can be cost-effective in generating real improvements, whilst at the same time creating a wider public interest and involvement in landscape enhancement.

POLICY RU4

The Borough Council will encourage local groups and individuals to carry out small scale landscape schemes and countryside management tasks and will seek to ensure that appropriate funding is made available in the form of grant aid and that future maintenance is carried out.

RIVER CORRIDORS AND OTHER WATER AREAS

- 3.18. The River Thames together with its tributaries the River Colne (including the Colne Brook and Wraysbury River) and the River Ash, has dominated and shaped the landscape of the Borough. The attraction of the rivers, as distinctive landscape features and as a resource for nature conservation and recreation, requires careful protection. It is particularly important that riverside areas are kept free from inappropriate development which could damage their character and setting. The Council will also seek opportunities to make environmental improvements and to improve access to the riverside. In addition to the specific policies in this section of the Plan, the policies within the nature conservation section which follows and Chapter 11 - Recreation may also be relevant to specific proposals. For the purpose of the policy a river corridor is generally identified by the limits of views from the river (the visual envelope) and while its extent will vary from place to place it will always include the watercourse itself, its banks, and adjoining open or undeveloped land which has physical or ecological links and any urban development flanking the river.

POLICY RU5

To protect the attractiveness of the river corridors, development will only be permitted which does not detract from their landscape character, nature conservation or recreational value. The Borough Council will seek opportunities to make environmental improvements and extend public access to the riverside as appropriate and particularly in considering any development proposals.

- 3.19. For much of its length the River Thames and its tributaries are concealed from general view by trees and buildings. Views of the rivers at specific locations have therefore assumed importance and need to be safeguarded. Whilst the Council is keen to improve the River Thames and, where appropriate, its tributaries as a recreation resource, and to make them more accessible as a public amenity, it is important that the overall sense of enclosure is maintained, particularly on the Thames for users of the towpath as well as those in boats. Much of the riparian development and tree cover is integral to the character of the riverside scene and can easily be damaged by insensitive new development, improvement schemes or unnecessary tree felling. Inappropriate development and tree planting can also damage the integrity of riverside open spaces, meadows and wetlands. New planting schemes will therefore need to maintain the balance of tree cover and open areas adjoining the rivers.

POLICY RU6

The Borough Council will seek to protect and enhance views of the River Thames and its tributaries. When considering proposals for development and/or landscaping schemes, the Council will seek to protect the existing visual enclosure of the River and its tributaries and ensure that the balance of tree cover and open spaces adjoining the rivers is maintained.

- 3.20. Although some reaches of the River Thames remain open and semi-natural, much of its length has been developed to a greater or lesser extent. Some areas are completely urban, where often the development has turned its back on the river. There are areas of housing, commercial development and remnants of traditional riverside industries. There are several stretches where 'plotland' development from the inter-war years has become consolidated and now forms part of the accepted riverside scene. All these diverse features contribute to the special character of the River Thames which is appreciated by both residents and users of the river. In order to ensure that the riverside areas are safeguarded from inappropriate development which could damage the character and setting, most of the River Thames has been defined on the Proposals Map as an Area of Special Character.
- 3.21. By working with other agencies, including the Environment Agency and the adjoining riparian local authorities, the Borough Council will seek to achieve a co-ordinated approach to the environmental enhancement of the river. The Environment Agency is currently preparing a Landscape Strategy for the River Thames which will provide practical advice to guide improvement initiatives. In any redevelopment proposal adjoining the River Thames, particular attention will be given to the relationship between the proposed development and the rivers edge, in addition to the overall impact of the proposal.

POLICY RU7

The Borough Council will give careful consideration to development proposals affecting the River Thames Area of Special Character, which is defined on the Proposals Map, to ensure that

the character and setting of the River are protected and that any uses proposed are appropriate to a riverside location. Environmental improvements will be sought where appropriate. The Borough Council will seek to work with other agencies including the Environment Agency and adjoining riparian local authorities to achieve a co-ordinated approach to environmental enhancement.

'PLOTLAND' AREAS

- 3.22. Within the Borough there are significant stretches of the River Thames where 'plotland' development has become established although not all plots have a river frontage. Most of the properties in these areas originated as weekend or holiday bungalows during the 1920's and 30's but are now occupied on a permanent basis. Their distinctive character is an important element in the overall special character of the River Thames and should be retained.
- 3.23. The main characteristics of plotland properties in Spelthorne are:-
- (a) they are normally single storey;
 - (b) they have shallow pitched roofs;
 - (c) many have/had verandahs facing the river;
 - (d) generally they are small plots;
 - (e) traditionally they are constructed in wood; and
 - (f) some show individuality in their detailed design.
- 3.24. The Borough Council is concerned that such 'plotland' areas do not become urbanised to the extent that their character is prejudiced. Therefore, any proposals to extend or rebuild such properties will be subject to the specific requirements of Policy RU8 below as well as the general criteria set out in Policy GB2 where the property is within the Green Belt.
- 3.25. Along some reaches of the River Thames there are a number of boating chalets and summer houses which do not have the benefit of permanent residential use. Although the Council will consider applications to rebuild or extend such structures, nothing in this Plan should be taken as implying that the Council will grant permanent residential use on such sites.
- 3.26. Many properties have already been extended or redeveloped and provide a high standard of amenity for the occupants. In accordance with the general intent of Policy GB2 of the Plan, the Council will not seek to prevent the provision of essential facilities or basic amenities where they are currently lacking, subject to compliance with all other aspects of the Policy. However, it must not be overlooked that these

small plotland bungalows originated for occasional use. Within the Green Belt such structures would not now be approved and therefore the Council considers that, because a structure may now be accepted as providing permanent residential accommodation, this does not justify its extension, enlargement or rebuilding to the size or space standards which might be expected in any modern suburban dwelling.

- 3.27. The design and use of materials should not detract from the character of the river and the Green Belt. It is not just the river frontage therefore that is relevant in design terms. The whole building, including the elevation facing away from the river, must reflect the character of the area and make a positive contribution to the area. Extensions should reflect the style and materials of the existing dwellings, but this may not be appropriate in the case of rebuilds. Nevertheless, the choice of materials should attempt to reflect the general style and character of the plotland development, where painted wood and timber cladding have predominated, rather than to emulate the styles of adjoining areas of urban riverside development.
- 3.28. The provision of basic amenities in the form of bathroom, separate kitchen area or even an additional bedroom can usually be provided within the limits of permitted development. Where they cannot, Policy RU8 seeks to limit any increase in floor area in relation to the existing structure. Any proposed extension which significantly changes the scale of a building would not be considered as a "small" increase. Extensions must remain subordinate to the original dwelling. In considering the suitability of any proposed extension or rebuild, the relationship between the building, the plot size and adjoining buildings will determine the acceptability of any particular development and its effect on the character of the area. It is particularly important for the character of 'plotland' areas to maintain the small scale of the dwellings. Proposals which significantly reduce the space between adjoining dwellings or seek to cover the full width or depth of a plot will not be acceptable.
- 3.29. Two-storey extensions or rebuilds will not be acceptable even where the plot size is not large enough to accommodate any increase of floorspace at ground level. Some original dwellings were built at ground level with floor levels below the 1947 flood level. Proposals to rebuild such structures will need to be in accordance with the requirements of the Environmental Agency and comply with Policy BE29 on flood protection.
- 3.30. Many of the original structures were built with very shallow pitch roofs using either roofing felt or asbestos cement tiles. In order to minimise the impact of any new development it is considered that the roof profile should be kept low. In general, the height of the roof will be determined by the pitch and by the size of the building. In order to meet the requirements of Policy RU8 the height of the roof structure (eaves to ridge) should not exceed 2.4 metres. A roof pitch of up to 25° may be acceptable and will still allow a wide choice of roofing materials to be used. On very small dwellings a steeper pitch may be appropriate and on larger dwellings it may be necessary to include a double pitch roof with a valley gutter in order to maintain an overall low roof profile. In all cases the design and massing of the whole building will determine the appropriateness of the roof design.

3.31. Because of the small size of some plots it may not be possible to provide car parking spaces to the Council's currently adopted maximum standards¹. It is recognised that some sites, such as Hamhaugh Island, have no car parking, except in remote communal areas. However, in most cases, adequate car parking and amenity space must be provided although large garages and car ports found in urban areas are unlikely to be acceptable. Any proposals which result in the unacceptable loss of any established car parking space will be resisted. Whilst it is recognised that, to many, the river itself provides part of the basic amenity space, the Council will still expect a reasonable level of amenity area to be maintained. Any proposals which would result in a significant reduction in existing amenity space will therefore be resisted. To maintain the present character of plotland areas, replacement dwellings should normally occupy the same siting as the original. However, there may be occasions when a small adjustment to the siting could provide benefits for the wider amenity of the area.

POLICY RU8

In 'plotland areas' as defined on the Proposals Map, the extension or rebuilding of any dwelling will be only allowed where it meets the following requirements:-

- (a) the design and use of materials do not detract from the character of the river or the Green Belt**
- (b) the structure is compatible in size with traditional "plotland" dwellings and siting of adjoining properties and in the case of small plots is compatible with the constraints of the site area**
- (c) the dwelling is set in from flank boundaries to maintain existing gaps in the river frontage**
- (d) any increase in floorspace is small in relation to the size of the existing building (as defined in GB2(c))**
- (e) the structure is single storey with a low profile roof**
- (f) there is adequate space for amenity and car parking**
- (g) the structure does not project toward the river further than the existing buildings or adjoining properties**
- (h) it complies with Policy BE29 on flood protection.**

¹ The Council reviewed its car parking standards in 2001 and reference should be made to the notes attached to the revised standards.

OTHER WATER AREAS

- 3.32. In addition to the main rivers there are streams, ponds and lakes, mainly water filled former gravel workings, which are important both as landscape features and for nature conservation or recreation. The Council will seek to retain such features wherever possible. Where development is proposed which may adversely affect existing water bodies appropriate mitigation and/or compensation proposals must be included. These may include landscape enhancement measures but must also recognise the need to safeguard species and habitats identified under the Wildlife and Countryside Act. In particular proposals must have regard to policies RU12, 13 and 14 of this Plan.

POLICY RU9

To protect the value of surface water features such as streams, ponds and lakes, development will only be permitted which does not detract from their landscape, nature conservation or recreational importance. Any development proposals adversely affecting existing water features must incorporate appropriate mitigation measures.

NATURE CONSERVATION AND ECOLOGY

- 3.33. Government policy on nature conservation is set out in PPG9 (1994). It sets out clearly the legislative framework for safeguarding the natural heritage under both national and international law. Planning for nature conservation will form an integral part of the Council's approach to landscape and conservation both in the assessment of development proposals and in the management of land generally. All areas of the Borough, both open countryside and green spaces (including gardens) in urban areas, have some conservation value and potential for enhancement. This Plan identifies the main areas of importance for nature conservation and contains policies for the protection of all types of habitats, features and species. One of the key features of nature conservation is effective and appropriate management of land and the Council will seek to manage its own land, and encourage others to manage their sites, in order to enhance the nature conservation interest. Where necessary or appropriate the Council will enter into legal agreements to secure the proper management of land.
- 3.34. In 1994 the County Council adopted supplementary planning guidance on nature conservation. This document clarifies the County Council's ecological policies and sets out advice and procedures for the identification of non-statutory sites of nature conservation interest. This guidance is currently undergoing formal review by the Country Council. In addition it is intended that the policies of this Plan will be supplemented by a Nature Conservation Strategy prepared in consultation with English Nature, Surrey Wildlife Trust and other appropriate organisations, which will set out the Council's approach to the management of sites and promotion of nature conservation.

- 3.35. There are two established Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in the Borough. The largest covers a total of 513 hectares and includes Staines Moor, the adjoining King George VI and Staines Reservoirs, part of Shortwood Common and Poyle Meadows. Staines Moor is the largest area of alluvial meadow in Surrey and the SSSI is important not only for the plant species associated with the Moor but also for the nationally important populations of wintering wildfowl which use the reservoirs. In 1994 another important area of riverside meadow, Dumsey Meadow near Chertsey Bridge, was formally notified as a SSSI. The Council drew up a management plan for this area in 1995 and made a successful application to the Countryside Commission for the site to be included in a Countryside Stewardship scheme which secured funding towards the management of the site for 10 years. The scheme is now administered by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF).
- 3.36. Because of the large number of water bodies within the area, the Borough of Spelthorne contains a range of important wetland habitats which support notable populations of particular bird species. The Ramsar Convention requires the protection of wetland sites of international importance including those that are important waterfowl habitats. Similarly the EC Council Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds ("The Birds Directive") adopted in April 1979 requires Member States conserve the habitats of certain species of birds and to classify the most suitable areas of such. Suitable areas are classified as Special Protection Areas (SPA's) and form part of a network of internationally important wildlife sites within the European Union which is known as "Natura 2000". For planning purposes the Government has chosen to treat listed Ramsar sites in the same manner as classified SPAs. Both designations are based on the existing SSSI network.
- 3.37. Wraysbury Reservoir and Kempton Park Reservoir were formally notified by English Nature as SSSIs in October 1999 and subsequently confirmed in May 2000. These two new SSSIs together with the Staines and King George VI Reservoirs within the Staines Moor SSSI and other similar sites in adjoining local authority areas were classified as the South West London Waterbodies SPA in September 2000, and the same areas were also designated as a Ramsar site at the same time. The SPA was included in the Register of European sites compiled by the Secretary of State in accordance with the Habitats Regulations on 31st October 2000.
- 3.38. The boundaries of the SPA and Ramsar and the new SSSIs are shown on the Proposal Map for information and will be subject to the relevant policies of the Plan.
- 3.39. Proposed development affecting these internationally important areas will require rigorous examination in accordance with the requirements of the Habitat Regulations 1994 and the procedures set out in Annex C to PPG9. The Secretary of State will normally call in for his own decision, planning applications which are likely significantly to affect such sites.
- 3.40. The local authority is required to consult English Nature on all development proposals which may affect directly or indirectly any SSSI. It will also consult Surrey Wildlife

Trust and any local groups as appropriate. There will be a presumption against any development which may damage or adversely affect a SSSI.

POLICY RU10

There will be a presumption against development within or affecting a designated or proposed Site of Special Scientific Interest, National Nature Reserve or Local Nature Reserve, unless it can be demonstrated that there will be no material harm, either direct or indirect to the ecological interest of the site. The Borough Council will have special regard to the United Kingdom's international obligations concerning potential and designated "Ramsar Sites" and Special Protection Areas. The environmental effects of any relevant proposed development which is likely to have a significant effect on a Special Protection Area (SPA), Ramsar Site, potential SPA or candidate Special Area of Conservation (SAC) will be subject to the most rigorous examination.

- 3.41. In addition to the statutorily designated areas there is a wide range of sites providing different types of habitat throughout the Borough, the importance of which is significant at a more local level. Surrey Wildlife Trust has worked with the County Council and this Authority on a detailed and systematic survey of all potentially important sites which are identified as 'Sites of Nature Conservation Importance' (SNCIs). Sites have been selected by the Surrey Nature Conservation Liaison Group using criteria which have been applied across the County to ensure a consistent approach. The selected sites are shown on the Proposals Map and are listed in Appendix 2 with a brief description of the site and the reason for selection. The Council will keep under review the selected sites and the need to identify additional sites and will consult Surrey Wildlife Trust on any proposals affecting an SNCI.
- 3.42. The selection of a site as an SNCI will not affect the status of any extant planning permission relating to the site. However by virtue of Section 54A of the Act the existence of an SNCI will be a material factor in the consideration of any new planning application affecting the site, any renewal of a previous unimplemented permission, or for an application to vary conditions on a planning permission.

POLICY RU11

The Borough Council will safeguard Sites of Nature Conservation Importance as shown on the Proposals Map and will only permit development proposals within these sites, where there will be no adverse effect, either directly or indirectly on their ecological interest, or where the requirements of Policy RU14 are met. The Council, in consultation with the Surrey Wildlife Trust, will keep under review the Sites of Nature Conservation Importance and will seek to protect such sites following their selection on a County-wide basis by the Surrey Nature Conservation Liaison Group.

- 3.43. The designation of SNCIs does not diminish the importance of other wildlife habitats throughout the Borough. In particular trees, hedgerows, streams, ditches, ponds and many private gardens all contribute to the diversity of habitats. Many worked out gravel pits provide important new habitats and the opportunities that such areas present can be further advanced by careful landscape design and management. 'Wildlife corridors' also provide valuable resources for wildlife. They are often associated with streams and rivers, and allow the movement of wildlife between urban and countryside areas.

POLICY RU12

The Borough Council will seek to safeguard sites and features, including rivers, streams and their banks, ditches, ponds, hedgerows, woodlands and trees which contribute to the nature conservation interest of the area. The Council will have regard to the possible adverse effects of development proposals on such features and will seek to minimise these wherever possible. Development proposals which could destroy or damage the integrity of wildlife corridors will only be allowed where the provisions of Policy RU14 are met.

- 3.44. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 places restrictions on the killing, taking, keeping and sale of wild birds and their eggs, and of other animals and plants listed in schedules to the Act. In considering proposals for development, the Council will therefore not grant permission for any proposal which would adversely affect such species or their habitats. Legal protection has been granted to bats which includes their roost sites, often in mature trees. Where appropriate, conditions will be attached to any permission granted to ensure the proper protection of species.

POLICY RU13

The Borough Council will seek to protect any site supporting species protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the Conservation (Natural Habitats Etc.) Regulations 1994, the Protection of Badgers Act 1992 or other specific relevant legislation and will only grant permission for development where it can be demonstrated that the proposal will have no material effect on the species at the site.

- 3.45. While the broad thrust of the Council's nature conservation policies is to protect and conserve existing wildlife habitats, there remain considerable opportunities to enhance existing sites and in some cases to create entirely new habitats especially on degraded land. Opportunities to create new habitats will often be linked with development proposals and the Council will, in appropriate cases seek such environmental improvements as part of the new development by way of a planning obligation to secure funding for long term management. However, the opportunities for environmental gains and the associated benefits for nature conservation can never

justify a development that is otherwise unacceptable because of the adverse impact on an existing nature conservation resource. In cases when exceptional circumstances justify a development which would adversely affect a nature conservation site, it will be necessary to demonstrate that any harm has been kept to a minimum and that positive provision has been made to mitigate or compensate for any loss or damage, in nature conservation terms, by the creation or enhancement of alternative habitats and by the establishment of an appropriate monitoring scheme.

POLICY RU14

Where a development proposal would destroy or damage the nature conservation interest of a site, the applicant will be required to demonstrate that the benefits of the proposed development outweigh the decrease in the nature conservation value of the site, that any such decrease has been kept to a minimum, that mitigation or compensation to provide for species protection and/or habitat creation or enhancement has been made within the area, and that appropriate measures to monitor the effectiveness of the mitigation have been established.

- 3.46. References to protecting nature conservation interests from any adverse effects of recreational proposals are contained in Policies R5, R6, R7, R8 and R10 of the Recreation chapter of the Plan.
- 3.47. Planning for nature conservation will constitute an integral part of the management of all appropriate local authority land including highways so that specific areas, particularly within the Green Belt, can be retained as refuges for wildlife and plants. In addition to the management of its own land the Council will encourage private land owners and other organisations to manage their land in the interests of nature conservation where appropriate. In particular there is potential for habitat creation where an Area of Degraded Landscape (identified under Policy RU3) adjoins an SNCI. However, the Council will not support proposals which are part of a development which is otherwise unacceptable. The Council will also seek to develop the educational role of selected sites and where appropriate will designate in consultation with English Nature, Local Nature Reserves at suitable locations. Possible Local Nature Reserves include:
- Poyle Meadows
 - Shortwood Pond, Staines
 - land adjoining Moor Lane, Staines

In all cases the long term future of a site will be improved by the preparation of a site management plan based on adequate survey information.

POLICY RU15

The Borough Council will have regard to and actively promote nature conservation where appropriate:-

- (a) in the management of its own land and other publicly owned land for which it is responsible**
- (b) in considering proposals for development and by entering into management agreements where appropriate**
- (c) by encouraging the creation and management of new wildlife habitats including ponds**
- (d) by supporting appropriate proposals which would increase the number, size and diversity of sites of nature conservation interest**
- (e) by encouraging the use of nature conservation sites for educational purposes**
- (f) by designating selected sites as Local Nature Reserves.**

COMMON LAND

- 3.48. There are areas of land registered under the Commons Registration Act 1965 throughout the Borough, ranging from small village greens to the extensive tracts of common land adjoining Staines which embrace land of ecological importance and special landscape character. The Staines Commons, which are privately owned, include some 143 hectares (353 acres) of land comprising Staines Moor, Shortwood Common, Knowle Green and Birch Green. The Church Lammas land adjoining Staines, although registered as common land, does not form part of the designated Staines Commons which enjoy the special status of Metropolitan Common under the Metropolitan Commons Supplemental Act 1880. This Council has a direct management responsibility for the Staines Commons.
- 3.49. The Metropolitan Commons Act 1866 was the first Act which recognised the need emerging in the 19th Century for public interests in land to be granted in addition to the commoners' rights of an agricultural nature. As a result the public now enjoy rights of air and exercise over the common land. The Act however did not provide for the elimination of the rights of commoners and of the Lord of the Manor and, as a result, there have been two planning applications to extract the underlying gravel from Staines Moor both unsuccessful on appeal. The ecological importance of the Moor was the principal determining factor on both occasions. The main part of the Moor is included as a Category 2 site (very strong presumption against working) in the Surrey Minerals Local Plan (1993).

- 3.50. For the Staines Commons, the Borough Council works in association with the Moormasters who are appointed by the commoners to regulate the day to day exercise of the commoners' rights, principally the control of grazing and stock levels. The Borough Council is responsible for the enforcement of the bye-laws and for tree planting, maintenance and scrub clearance. Under the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, the land management responsibilities of both Moormasters and Council are regulated by, and require consent from, English Nature. In 1987 the Council commissioned a detailed study of the ecology and its relationship with the grazing of Staines Moor. The recommendations of the report were subsequently incorporated in a management plan for Staines Moor published in 1990. A steering committee of relevant organisations was established to guide the implementation of the plan and review its objectives.
- 3.51. The management and control of all other commons varies and is subject either to local bye-laws or to statutory legislation. Unless there are exceptional circumstances which the Borough Council consider are overriding, development will not be permitted which would result in the loss of common land or which would adversely affect its nature conservation or recreation potential.

POLICY RU16

The Borough Council will protect and conserve all land designated as common and as Metropolitan Common and, in consultation with the owners, Moormasters and other appropriate bodies, will seek to encourage schemes to maintain the landscape character, nature conservation and recreational value of those areas. The Borough Council will not normally permit development which would result in the loss of any designated Common or Metropolitan Common or which would adversely affect the nature conservation or recreational value of such areas.

TREES AND WOODLANDS

- 3.52. Trees and woodlands form a vital part of the landscape in both countryside and urban areas. Tree cover in the Borough has never been extensive, and, in the last century the landscape was relatively open with small areas of woodland, orchard and hedgerow trees. The loss of elm trees in the mid 70's was particularly damaging to the landscape and although there has been some regeneration in places, many of the former stands of trees in urban areas are unlikely to be replaced.
- 3.53. A large number of prominent trees have reached maturity and are starting to deteriorate. Only an active policy of replacement planting together with careful management of existing stock, including appropriate tree surgery, can ensure the long term future of tree cover in the Borough. With the exception of the main urban areas the emphasis for tree planting programmes will normally be based on indigenous species, particularly in areas of nature conservation interest; some flexibility may be necessary for certain sites where past mineral working has created difficult planting conditions. The Council carried out a small woodland planting scheme in 1993 with

Forestry Commission grant aid. It is intended to promote similar schemes as opportunities arise, particularly on Council owned land, with a view to providing for nature conservation and public access for recreation having regard to the woodlands strategy which forms part of Surrey's Landscape Strategy referred to in paragraph. 3.4 above.

POLICY RU17

The Borough Council will continue its own programme of new and replacement tree planting, including new woodland and hedgerow planting using, where appropriate, locally native species, and will encourage other public bodies and private owners to carry out such planting on appropriate sites.

- 3.54. Wherever reasonably possible the Council will seek to retain trees on development sites. The requirement to retain trees in new development is included in Policy BE1(b). Inevitably some trees are lost through the development and redevelopment of sites. The needs of future occupiers of buildings have to be balanced against the amenity case to retain trees. Layouts of proposed developments may need to be carefully adjusted to retain significant trees and it is therefore important that all planning applications for new development are accompanied by a detailed tree survey. It will of course be necessary to ensure that retained trees are properly protected during the construction period and appropriate conditions will be imposed on any planning permission granted. The Borough Council has published an advisory leaflet on the care and protection of trees on development sites.

POLICY RU18

Where existing trees form a significant feature of a development site the Borough Council will require planning applications to be accompanied by detailed tree surveys. Proposals will be expected to show the retention of suitable existing trees, the siting of protective fencing for the period of site preparation and construction and details of those trees to be felled. Tree Preservation Orders will be used as appropriate, to ensure the protection and retention of significant trees. Trees of outstanding quality or landscape importance will be expected to be retained even where this might preclude development.

- 3.55. There are some 200 Tree Preservation Orders in the Borough covering a large number of trees and the opportunity is taken to make new orders wherever appropriate, especially if trees are known to be under threat. Only under exceptional circumstances will permission be granted to fell healthy trees included in a tree preservation order and the Council will need to be satisfied that no reasonable alternative exists. Inevitably mature trees have to be felled because of disease and decay and for reasons of safety. However when protected trees are felled, for whatever reason, appropriate replacement planting will be required and compliance with any such conditions or requirements will be carefully monitored. Even 'one for

one' replanting will not maintain the Borough's tree cover in the long term and it is therefore imperative that every opportunity is taken to increase the total stock of trees having regard to the characteristics of the landscape.

- 3.56. Tree surgery on preserved trees, including those situated in Conservation Areas, will be required to be carried out to an acceptable standard in accordance with the minimum specification of British Standard BS3998/1989 "Recommendations for Tree Work". Supplementary guidance on the care, protection and replacement of trees has been published in a leaflet.

POLICY RU19

The Borough Council will promote Tree Preservation Orders whenever appropriate to safeguard and ensure the retention of significant trees, especially those known to be under threat. Permission will not normally be granted to fell protected trees but where such trees are felled for any reason replacement planting will be required.

AGRICULTURE

- 3.57. The quality of agricultural land throughout the Borough is generally good but its economic viability is sensitive to a wide range of pressure, not least, because of its proximity to urban areas. Much of the land still in agricultural production is defined by MAFF as being within Grades 2 and 3a, with a small proportion in Grade 1. These grades represent the best and most versatile land which, as set out in PPG1 (para. 29) and PPG7 (paras. 2.16 - 2.20), it is considered desirable to retain for agricultural production and to protect against development. The Council will therefore protect such land from development and other uses which would take it permanently out of agricultural production (see also Policy GB5). Opportunities to maintain and improve the river environment in agricultural areas will be welcomed, for example, through the habitat scheme promoted by MAFF and changing to less intensive agricultural practices.

POLICY RU20

The Borough Council will seek to protect the best and most versatile agricultural land (grades 1, 2 and 3a) from development or other uses which would result in the land being permanently taken out of agricultural production.

- 3.58. Even alternative open uses for agricultural land are likely to result in a situation where the land will not return to agriculture. The Council will therefore seek to ensure that non-agricultural uses otherwise appropriate in the Green Belt are directed towards sites of lower agricultural quality. This may involve land which has been previously worked for minerals but where the quality of restoration has resulted in sites only suitable for low grade grazing. In considering proposals for development on agricultural land the Council will have regard to the need to maintain and support

existing farm enterprises. Where proposals for diversification on agricultural holdings are submitted the Council will encourage the applicant to submit details in the form of a 'farm plan' to explain how the proposals will assist the long term maintenance of the farm businesses (see also para. 2.26 of this Plan).

POLICY RU21

The Borough Council recognises the importance of agriculture within the Green Belt and will support proposals for diversification which would help support and maintain an existing farm business, subject to Policy GB4. When proposals are submitted the Council will encourage the preparation of a 'farm plan' setting out the context of the particular development.

- 3.59. Not all agricultural activities are necessarily compatible with an attractive landscape. There are already concentrations of glass-houses within the Borough. Proposals for intensive livestock rearing may require large buildings inappropriate to the character of the Green Belt. It will be necessary to balance the reasonable needs of agriculture with the maintenance of an attractive landscape to ensure that the Green Belt can fulfil its potential and vital role in the Borough. It may be possible, through careful siting and landscaping, to accommodate large agricultural buildings without detriment to the landscape or nearby residential areas. It is recognised that the erection of certain agricultural buildings is outside the specific control of the local planning authority by virtue of the General Permitted Development Order. Nevertheless, where control can be applied, it is considered that 'low profile' structures will minimise the impact of new buildings on the landscape and that grouping buildings into one or a small number of areas may be more appropriate than a general scattering of buildings.

MINERAL WORKING

- 3.60. Mineral working has affected many open areas of the Borough and has caused severe environmental problems for many years. Much of the damaged landscape requires urgent attention and has been identified on the Proposals Map as Areas of Degraded Landscape. The Structure Plan sets the overall context for minerals policy and the Surrey Minerals Local Plan establishes the detailed proposals and policies which will influence mineral extraction in this Borough throughout most of the Plan period. This Authority supports the policies and proposals set out in the Surrey Minerals Local Plan. It is incumbent on Surrey County Council as Minerals Planning Authority to ensure that restoration proposals are carried out to facilitate the appropriate after use of sites and that those uses are compatible with other specific objectives; in particular those designed to safeguard agriculture and the Green Belt. Some sites, where mineral working has long ceased (mainly 'pre-Act pits'), are not covered by refilling or restoration conditions, and satisfactory environmental improvements may only be achieved by negotiation and agreement. It is important that inappropriate uses are not permitted merely to remove existing eyesores. Whilst there is a policy to safeguard the best and most versatile agricultural land, opportunities to create new landscapes (including areas of new woodland) and to provide for recreational needs will be an important aspect of the restoration of mineral sites both past and present.

POLICY RU22

The Borough Council will seek the proper and timely restoration and aftercare of all sites subject to mineral working, and will work with the County Council to ensure that sites are restored to a use consistent with the Green Belt, agriculture, landscape, nature conservation and recreation policies of this plan.

COLNE VALLEY PARK

- 3.61. In the western part of the Borough lies the Colne Valley Park, an area of some 100 square kilometres (40 square miles) extending from Staines/Wraysbury to Rickmansworth in the north. The boundary of the Park in Spelthorne is shown on the Proposals Map. The regional park was conceived in the 1960's with the overall aim of providing informal recreation in a countryside setting. This Council has been a member of the Colne Valley Park Standing Conference since its inception in 1967 and positively supports the objectives of the Park.
- 3.62. The original objectives and proposals were updated, modified and extended, and published in the form of a broadsheet in March 1985. Subsequently the Standing Conference undertook a complete review of its role and achievements in order to formulate a new vision and objectives to give greater impetus to sustained improvements in the Park. The "Colne Valley Regional Park Strategy" was published in April 1995. The Council supports the objectives and action plan set out in the strategy which gives greater emphasis to environmental enhancement and promoting recreational opportunities. The Council will work in partnership with other organisations, including Groundwork Thames Valley, to implement projects in accordance with the new strategy.

POLICY RU23

The Borough Council supports the key aims of the Colne Valley Park as set out in the 1995 strategy and will seek to identify and implement projects in partnership with other organisations to further the environmental and recreational objectives of the Strategy.

SUMMARY OF RURAL ENVIRONMENT PROPOSALS

- 3.63. Chapter 12 - Implementation contains a schedule of all Proposals contained in this Plan with relevant additional background information. Proposals which relate to the Rural Environment chapter are made for the following sites:

- P1 Wraysbury Reservoir
- P2 King George VI Reservoir
- P3 Staines Reservoirs - North and South
- P4 Queen Mary Reservoir.