

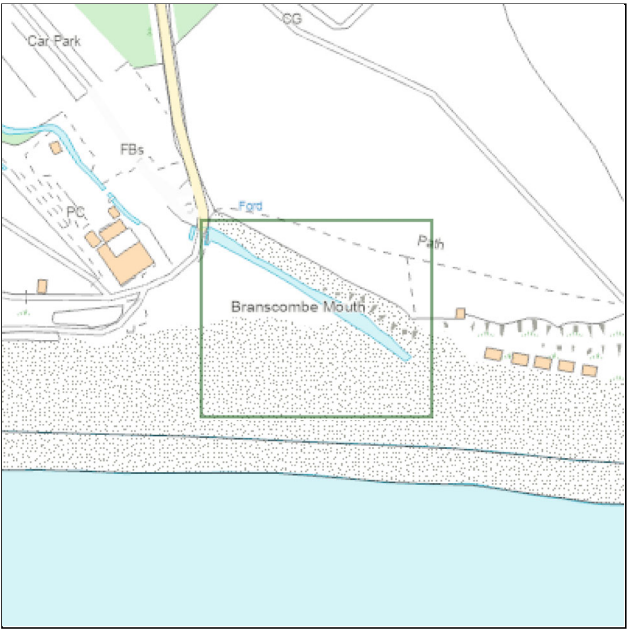
Ward Beer And Branscombe

Reference 25/1034/FUL

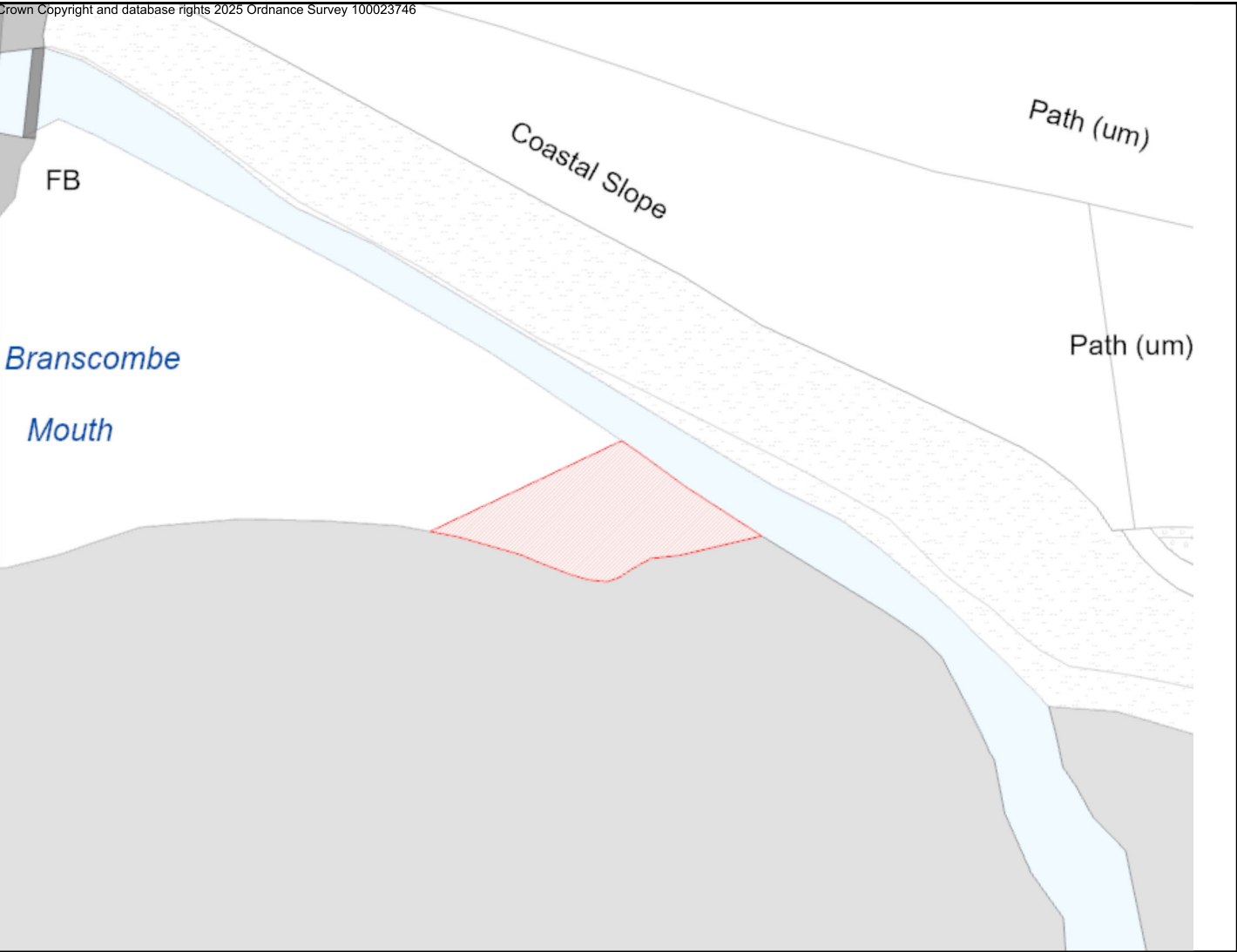
Applicant Jurassic Saunas

Location The Sea Shanty Branscombe Seaton EX12 3DP

Proposal Change of use of land for the siting of a mobile sauna unit (retrospective)



RECOMMENDATION: Refusal



		Committee Date: 18.11.2025
Beer And Branscombe (Branscombe)	25/1034/FUL	Target Date: 07.07.2025
Applicant:	Jurassic Saunas	
Location:	The Sea Shanty Branscombe	
Proposal:	Change of use of land for the siting of a mobile sauna unit (retrospective)	

RECOMMENDATION: Refusal

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This application seeks retrospective permission for the siting of a mobile sauna unit at Branscombe Beach. While the proposal has attracted overwhelming public support and is praised for its contribution to wellbeing, tourism, and the local economy, the planning assessment must weigh these benefits against the serious environmental and safety concerns associated with the site.

The sauna is located within a highly sensitive coastal landscape, including the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, East Devon National Landscape, and a designated Coastal Preservation Area. It occupies a visually prominent and undeveloped part of the beach, where its presence detracts from the natural beauty and tranquillity of the setting. The design, while modest, introduces commercial activity into an area valued for its open coastal character.

More critically, the site lies within Flood Zone 2, with access routes through Flood Zone 3, and is adjacent to a watercourse known for rapid and unpredictable flooding. The Environment Agency has confirmed that no flood warning service is available for this location, and the submitted flood risk assessment fails to demonstrate that the development can be made safe for its lifetime. No emergency evacuation plan has been provided, and the risks posed by erosion, ground instability, and flash flooding remain unresolved.

Although the ecological impacts have been screened out under the Habitat Regulations Assessment and are considered acceptable, and the sauna's recreational value is widely recognised, the proposal cannot be supported in its current form. The risks to life is significant and cannot be mitigated through conditions or minor design changes.

In conclusion, while the sauna is clearly valued by the community and offers genuine benefits, its siting within a vulnerable and protected coastal environment renders the development unsustainable. The application is therefore recommended for refusal.

CONSULTATIONS

Local Consultations

Beer And Branscombe - Cllr John Heath

I have no objections to the installation of a mobile sauna on Branscombe Beach providing it meets the criteria laid down by EDDC's planning officer and other involved parties. I think it would be beneficial to the tourist industry in Branscombe, provide a unique service, and from my understanding would have minimal environmental impact on the beach or surrounding area. Branscombe parish council is also supportive of the proposal.

Cllr John Heath 3 /11/2025

My response to the executive summary:

This application seeks retrospective permission for the siting of a mobile sauna unit at Branscombe Beach. While the proposal has attracted overwhelming public support and is praised for its contribution to wellbeing, tourism, and the local economy, the planning assessment must weigh these benefits against the serious environmental and safety concerns associated with the site.

The sauna is located within a highly sensitive coastal landscape, including the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, East Devon National Landscape, and a designated Coastal Preservation Area. It occupies a visually prominent and undeveloped part of the beach, where its presence detracts from the natural beauty and tranquillity of the setting. The design, while modest, introduces commercial activity into an area valued for its open coastal character.

The sauna will be sited on land adjacent to the sea shanty which is a raised area of green space. Not only is the Sea Shanty a commercial operation being a cafe, but so is the car park, the caravan site located above the beach, many of the beachside chalets on holiday lets, Great Seaside B&B, and the Branscombe Brewery all within 200m of the location. i.e., on land adjacent to the Sea Shanty.

More critically, the site lies within Flood Zone 2, with access routes through Flood Zone 3, and is adjacent to a watercourse known for rapid and unpredictable flooding. The Environment Agency has confirmed that no flood warning service is available for this location, and the submitted flood risk assessment fails to demonstrate that the development can be made safe for its lifetime. No emergency evacuation plan has been provided, and the risks posed by erosion, ground instability, and flash flooding remain unresolved.

The portable sauna is adjacent to the Sea Shanty on land in their ownership and is easily removable to a safer location in the car park (where other, fixed, structures are already located – e.g., payment machines) in the event of forecasted bad weather, taking advantage of much improved forecasting in recent years."

Although the ecological impacts have been screened out under the Habitat Regulations Assessment and are considered acceptable, and the sauna's recreational value is widely recognised, the proposal cannot be supported in its current form. The risks to life is significant and cannot be mitigated through conditions or minor design changes.

No one has ever lost their lives or have been adversely affected by flooding on that part of the beach. You would have to apply the same rationale in respect of flooding as you would the Sea Shanty.

In conclusion, while the sauna is clearly valued by the community and offers genuine benefits, its siting within a vulnerable and protected coastal environment renders the development unsustainable. The application is therefore recommended for refusal.

I would remind planners and the planning committee that this is a portable, easily removable hut where the applicants have stated they will ensure the facility blends in harmoniously with the environment,

There appears to be a considerable dichotomy between the wishes and feelings of the district councillor, the parish council, and many local residents notwithstanding two objections and the designated planning officers. The portable sauna is adjacent to the Sea Shanty and will be on their land and is therefore easily removable in the event of bad weather. The owners have stated as much in their submissions.

This is a mobile sauna facility which has no impact on the ecology of the area and therefore any refusal is an unjustifiable decision in my opinion. I would remind planners and the planning committee that this is a portable, easily removable hut where the applicants have stated they will ensure the facility blends in harmoniously with the environment, it will be no more unsightly than the café or the car park adjacent to the café or some of the holiday chalets being a portable type chalet size in its own right.

And since this is a retrospective application, the quality of the sauna and its minimal visual impact on the environment is already demonstrated.

I note the Parish Council can speak to applications in their parish at the Committee Meeting as of right, and I have been informed they will exercise this right as indeed I will in my role as district councillor. We should be encouraging small businesses that will support and benefit the community and tourism, not seeking to curtail such enterprises

Parish/Town Council

Council felt the mobile sauna was a huge asset to the area and encouraged visitors to Branscombe.

Other Representations

Supportive Comments (96 total)

The vast majority of comments are enthusiastically supportive, with recurring themes:

Wellbeing & Health

- Users describe the sauna as a transformative experience for mental, physical, and emotional wellbeing.
- It provides a peaceful, restorative space that encourages mindfulness and connection to nature.

Community & Social Value

- The sauna is seen as a cherished community asset, fostering social connection and inclusive gatherings.
- Many locals and visitors say it has become a weekly ritual or a reason to visit Branscombe more often.

Design & Environmental Sensitivity

- Described as modest, wooden-clad, and unobtrusive, blending well with the natural landscape.
- No noise pollution, minimal footprint, and eco-conscious ethos praised by many.

Tourism & Economic Impact

- Supports year-round tourism, especially in quieter months.
- Visitors report spending money at local cafés, shops, and other businesses as part of their sauna visits.

Operational Quality

- Run by friendly, professional staff who maintain the area and promote respect for the environment.
- Several comments note the sauna team helps keep the beach clean and tidy.

Objections (2 total)

The objections raise concerns about the visual, environmental, and locational impact of the sauna unit:

Visual Impact:

- The sauna is considered visually intrusive, disrupting the natural beauty of the coastline and introducing an urban or industrial feel to a sensitive landscape.
- Its metallic cladding is seen as out of character with the traditional materials used in nearby buildings.

Siting and Land Use:

- The unit is located forward of existing development, on previously undeveloped land, and partially on beach owned by a conservation body.
- The siting is viewed as inappropriate for a protected coastal area, and there are concerns about the accuracy of the submitted site plan.

Environmental and Amenity Concerns:

- Potential issues include wood smoke emissions, proximity to picnic areas and the South West Coast Path, and the impact on public enjoyment of the beach.
- The objections suggest that the sauna could be relocated to a less sensitive area, closer to existing buildings and infrastructure.

Technical Consultations

EDDC Emergency Planning Officer

Emergency Planning is not a statutory consultee for planning applications, but make comments when requested by the Environment Agency or the EDDC planners.

There is insufficient information in the current flood risk assessment to support this application. The comments and observations relate to safe access for emergency services and safe egress for people/emergency services during design flood events for the lifetime of the proposal and this is not documented.

Having looked at the map supplied in the FRA figure 1 I believe in its current position staff and guests who were attending the sauna could become trapped by either coastal flooding or river flooding or a combination of both as the development is shown in flood zones 3/2 for an unknown period to an unknown level.

Having looked at the wider site even safe relocation of the Sauna to a higher part of the site which sits as an island site of flood zone 1 on the beach area away from the access road. The FRA does not document the aspect of safe access for Emergency services to attend and rescue staff or guests who could be trapped in a design flood event.

A new detailed Flood Risk Assessment (FRA) in support of a Flood Emergency Plan would be needed to show how the owner would consider mitigating these factors for staff, guests and the emergency services.

The owners would need to document in the FEP/FRA how this proposal would have safe access and egress to the site location via the access road, without placing additional burden on the Emergency services, unless they can document triggers that they could act upon so that the sauna and public could be safely removed from danger ahead of a design flood event. This would have to be away from the beach area and outside the island area created by flood zone 3/2.

EDDC Landscape Architect

This report forms the EDDC's landscape response to the full application for the above site.

The report provides a review of landscape related information submitted with the application in relation to adopted policy, relevant guidance, current best practice and existing site context and should be read in conjunction with the submitted information.

The application site is situated on the beach at Branscombe Mouth, on the bank of a river which flows between it and a low cliff forming a backdrop to the site in views

from the west. The proposed development comprises a small, portable timber structure with sheet metal roof and projecting metal stove pipe.

The site lies within the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, the East Devon National Landscape and the Coastal Preservation Area as defined in the East Devon Local Plan and is situated in close proximity to the South West Coast Path, a national long-distance footpath.

Section 245 (Protected Landscapes) of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023 (LURA) amends the duty on relevant authorities in respect of their functions which affect land in Protected Landscapes. Relevant authorities must now 'seek to further' the statutory purposes of Protected Landscapes. This replaces the previous duty on relevant authorities to 'have regard to' their statutory purposes. The statutory purpose of National Landscapes is the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty.

Branscombe Mouth is a notable tourist honeypot. Although there is significant development in the form of a car park and café/ restaurant nearby, these are set back from the beach. There are also beach huts/ chalets within 90m of the site to both the east and west which are set above the beach and tucked against the cliff edge. Notwithstanding this existing development the beach area and approaches to it from the car park and southwest coast path afford outstanding open views of undeveloped coastal scenery.

Unlike the existing development in the vicinity, the application site forms part of the natural beach area which contributes to the scenic quality of the area. The location is also within a dynamic landscape subject to natural coastal processes which it could impede or be affected by.

The proposal extends commercial activity onto the undeveloped beach area and introduces a structure prominent in near-views from the beach and visible as a skyline feature in near-views from the south. It is also visible in mid-distance views from the southwest coast path to the west. Whilst the timber elements of the structure are arguably in keeping with nearby development, the sheet metal roof and stove pipe are not and add to its conspicuity.

The application provides no measures for conservation or enhancement of natural beauty and gives rise to localised adverse landscape and visual effects. As such it should be considered contrary to NPPF paragraph 182 and Local Plan strategy 7 (Development in the Countryside), strategy 46 (Landscape conservation and enhancement and AONBs), strategy 44 (Undeveloped coast and coastal preservation area) and policy D1 (Design and local distinctiveness).

Environment Agency

05/06/25 - Thank you for consulting us on this application.

Environment Agency position

We object to the proposed development on the grounds that the submitted flood risk assessment (FRA) is inadequate. The reason for this position and advice is provided below.

Before you determine the application, your Authority will also need to be content that the flood risk Sequential Test has been satisfied unless (or until) a site-specific flood risk assessment demonstrates that no built development within the site boundary would be located on an area that would be at risk of flooding now and in the future, in accordance with paragraph 175 of the NPPF Dec 2024. As you will be aware, failure of the Sequential Test is sufficient justification to refuse a planning application.

Reason

The application site is located within Flood Zones 3 and 2 (associated with a watercourse) which Environment Agency maps indicate to have a high and medium risk of flooding respectively. The site is also within an area at risk from coastal flooding and processes. The structure is located immediately adjacent the river channel which we highlight is liable to erosion especially in light of historic diversion from its natural course.

Whilst the applicant has recognised that the structure is located in an area at risk of flooding, we highlight that the flood risk assessment (FRA) does not adequately assess the flood risks posed by the development. In particular, the FRA fails to:

- consider how a range of flooding events (including extreme events) will affect users and the structure itself,
- consider how people will be kept safe from the identified flood hazards,
- consider the requirement for flood emergency planning including flood warning and evacuation of people for a range of flooding events up to and including the extreme event,
- take the impacts of climate change into account:
 - There is no assessment of the impact of climate change using appropriate climate change allowances, (for which the applicant should use: ['Flood risk assessments: climate change allowances'](#)).

Way forward

Following the application of the sequential test, if it is found that there are no other sites reasonably available at a lower risk of flooding, then a sequential approach should be taken to the siting of the structure, given its proximity directly next to a watercourse which is at risk of flash flooding.

We would not agree with the suggested classification of the proposal being 'Water compatible' and your authority should take this into account in your decision making.

Consideration should also be given to how realistic it would be to move the structure ahead of flooding, especially in light of the very flashy nature of the watercourse in question. In light of this, we recommend you consult with your authority's emergency planner's as well.

20/06/25 - Thank you for re-consulting us on the above planning application.

Environment Agency position

On the basis of your email of 10 June 2025 and the additional information provided by the applicant, we can withdraw our objection to this planning application. However, there are emergency planning related considerations that still need to be taken account of in your decision-making and a flood emergency management plan should be agreed with your Emergency Planners. We therefore advise you not to determine the application until you have consulted your Emergency Planners and they are satisfied that users of the development would be safe over its lifetime.

The reasons for this position are set out below.

Reasons – Flood Risk

We acknowledge that your Authority has received additional information (including an email from the applicant's Agent dated 06/06/2025), and that your Authority are, perhaps, minded to grant planning permission on the basis that you:

- Deem the proposal to be a change of use of land and, if so, then the Sequential Test is not relevant.
- Deem 'the mobile sauna does not necessarily (need to be sited adjacent to a water body in order to operate...' and are mindful to classify the proposal as 'Water compatible' recreation rather than 'less vulnerable'.

Whilst it is not our role to formally challenge the local planning authority's stance on the vulnerability classification of proposals, we feel we have a role to provide commentary on this where appropriate. We understand, having provided input into the production of the original planning practice guidance, that the inclusion of 'changing rooms' within the 'water compatible' vulnerability category was based upon recognition that users of established sports pitches on areas of land on floodplain (including functional floodplain) would reasonably require changing room facilities. The definition, however, did not expand on 'changing room'.

Regardless of the above, the NPPF (paragraph 181 and footnote 63) is explicit that all development, irrespective of the vulnerability classification, should be made safe from flooding for their lifetime without increasing flood risk elsewhere.

We highlight that your Authority's decision would be based upon:

- the submissions to date, including our formal response dated 5 June 2025.
- the understanding that the decision would be made in the absence of a detailed FRA.
- the knowledge that the site could be at risk from both tidal and fluvial flood risk.
- the knowledge that the structure sits in an area at risk of flooding from a very flashy watercourse and where there is the real potential for little or no warning of flooding and/or associated potential for bank collapse given the circumstance present in this particular instance.

We advise that we are currently unable to provide a Flood Warning for the site in question. We can, however, provide Flood Alerts which give an alert of possible flooding, but which are based upon forecast rainfall amounts that may or may not arise, because the site sits within the River Axe, Coly, Yarty, Umbourne Brook and coastal streams from Branscombe to Axmouth Flood Alert Area. We strongly advise

the applicant, if they have to date not already having done so, sign up with the EA to receive such via Home page - Sign up for flood warnings - GOV.UK

We recommend that you make your Emergency Planner aware of the above points so they can advise you on the emergency planning implications of this proposal. Essentially, the site will need a flood emergency management plan that your Emergency Planners consider to be appropriate for this type of development.

Advice to LPA – Emergency Planning

The Environment Agency does not normally comment on or approve the adequacy of flood emergency response procedures accompanying development proposals, as we do not carry out these roles during a flood. Our involvement with this development during an emergency will be limited to delivering flood warnings to occupants/users covered by our flood warning network.

The Planning Practice Guidance to the National Planning Policy Framework states that those proposing developments should take advice from the emergency services when producing an evacuation plan for the development as part of the flood risk assessment.

In all circumstances where warning and emergency response is fundamental to managing flood risk, we advise local planning authorities to formally consider the emergency planning and rescue implications of new development in making their decisions. As such, we recommend you consult with your Emergency Planners and the Emergency Services to determine whether the proposals are safe in accordance with the guiding principles of the Planning Practice Guidance (PPG).

Further guidance has been produced by us and ADEPT to support local authority planners in understanding what information they need to ask applicants to provide with their planning applications. This can be viewed at:
<https://www.adeptnet.org.uk/floodriskemergencyplan>

Environmental Health

I have considered the application and do not anticipate any environmental health concerns

Natural England

04/06/25 - As submitted, the application could have potential significant effects on Sidmouth to West Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and Sidmouth to Beer Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). Natural England requires further information in order to determine the significance of these impacts and the scope for mitigation.

The following information is required:

- Habitat Regulations Assessment

Without this information, Natural England may need to object to the proposal.

World Heritage Site/Jurassic Coast

Thank you for the invitation to comment on the above application. Having reviewed the documentation supplied I would like to make the following comments regarding impacts arising to the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site.

The position of the mobile sauna unit is noted as being vulnerable to storms and flooding, and whilst this is mitigated by the fact that the unit can be moved to safer areas at times of high risk, I recommend that the applicant supply a recovery plan should the worst happened, and the unit be destroyed during a flood or storm event. In such circumstances, debris from the unit could be swept onto and spread along the beach, creating an unsightly and potentially dangerous hazard, which I presume both the sauna operator and landowner would wish to avoid. I recommend that the planning consent, if granted, make clear who would be responsible for the cost of clearing the beach of any debris created by the sauna should it be lost to flood or storm.

The position and nature of the sauna creates no other actual or potential threat to the geological heritage features of the World Heritage Site and is in keeping with its setting.

Several locations along the Jurassic Coast now host similar facilities, each proving to be a popular addition to public use of the seafront. These operate in line with management policy for the World Heritage Site, specifically;

"W1 Initiatives to promote the Jurassic Coast as an area supportive to well being and / or health are strongly encouraged, as long as they are within agreed environmental tolerances"

However, most other mobile saunas along the coast present much more clearly as moveable units, where the wheels of the trailer etc remain visible. The current design of the sauna at Branscombe makes the unit appear semi-permanent, which is less in keeping with its functionality, temporary nature and vulnerable location. Overall, this gives the structure a less sympathetic look within its environment. We recommend that adjustments are made to the overall look of the sauna, in particular the cladding of the base trailer, so that its characteristics as a movable and temporary unit are much more obvious and clearer at a glance.

PLANNING HISTORY

None relevant.

POLICIES

Adopted East Devon Local Plan 2013-2031 Policies

Strategy 7 (Development in the Countryside) Adopted

Strategy 44 (Undeveloped Coast and Coastal Preservation Area) Adopted

Strategy 46 (Landscape Conservation and Enhancement and AONBs) Adopted

Strategy 47 (Nature Conservation and Geology) Adopted

D1 (Design and Local Distinctiveness) Adopted

EN9 (Development Affecting a Designated Heritage Asset) Adopted

EN14 (Control of Pollution) Adopted

EN21 (River and Coastal Flooding) Adopted

RC4 (Recreation Facilities in the Countryside and on the Coast) Adopted

Draft East Devon Local Plan 2020-2042 Policies

Strategic Policy SP06 (Development beyond Settlement Boundaries) Draft

Strategic Policy CC02 (Moving toward Net-zero carbon development) Draft

Strategic Policy AR01 (Flooding) Draft

Policy AR03 (Coastal Change Management Areas (CCMAs)) Draft

Strategic Policy DS01 (Design and local distinctiveness) Draft

Strategic Policy OL02 (National Landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty))
Draft

Policy OL09 (Control of pollution) Draft

Strategic Policy PB01 (Protection of internationally and nationally important wildlife
sites) Draft

Policy PB07 (Ecological enhancement and biodiversity in the built environment) Draft

Policy PB10 (Protection and enhancement of the Jurassic Coast World Heritage
Site) Draft

Policy OS05 (Leisure and recreation developments in the countryside) Draft

Strategic Policy OL03 (Coastal Preservation Areas) Draft

Government Planning Documents

National Planning Policy Framework 2024 (as amended)

National Planning Practice Guidance

Site Location and Description

The application site is located at Branscombe Mouth, a coastal area within the historic village of Branscombe. The site lies within the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, the East Devon National Landscape (formerly AONB), and the Coastal Preservation Area as designated in the East Devon Local Plan. It is also within the Sidmouth to West Bay Special Area of Conservation, the Sidmouth to Beer Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest, and adjacent to the South West Coast Path, a nationally recognised long-distance footpath.

The site comprises a small, level triangle of land formed by a grass lawn, a stream (Old Mill Stream), and the pebble beach. It is situated to the south-east of The Sea Shanty café and adjacent to the public beach. While the site is above the mean high water line, it lies within Flood Zone 2, with surrounding land designated as Flood Zone 3, indicating a higher risk of flooding from both fluvial and coastal sources. The site is also located within a Coastal Change Management Area, reflecting its vulnerability to long-term coastal erosion and change.

The surrounding area includes a mix of beach-related development such as car parking, café facilities, and beach huts, although these are generally set back from the beach or tucked against the cliff edge. In contrast, the application site forms part of the natural beach area and contributes to the open, undeveloped coastal character of Branscombe Mouth.

ANALYSIS

This report considers an application for the retrospective change of use of land for the siting of a mobile sauna unit at Branscombe Mouth.

The sauna is a custom-built, timber-clad mobile unit (approx. 7m x 2.1m x 2.8m high, 4.4m to chimney), placed on a trailer. The sauna is used by up to eight people at a time and is operated as a commercial venture, with associated use of the Sea Shanty's car park and facilities.

Analysis

Principle of Development

The application site lies outside any built-up area boundary and is therefore classified as countryside under the East Devon Local Plan. Policy RC4 (Recreation Facilities in the Countryside and on the Coast) supports outdoor recreation proposals in such locations where the nature of the activity or its space requirements justify a countryside or coastal setting.

While a sauna does not strictly require a coastal location, the proposal is functionally linked to sea swimming and cold-water immersion, which are increasingly recognised for their health and wellbeing benefits. This connection provides a reasonable justification for a coastal location in principle.

However, Policy RC4 also requires that proposals:

- Be in scale with the character and environmental setting of the area;
- Not conflict with countryside, nature or landscape policies;
- Provide safe access and discreet parking, particularly in sensitive areas;
- Avoid disruption to public rights of way;
- Ensure any built structures are limited in scale and located near existing buildings or settlements.

In this case, the proposed structure is located on an undeveloped section of beach within a highly sensitive landscape setting, including the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, East Devon National Landscape, and Coastal Preservation Area. The site is also within Flood Zone 2, surrounded by Flood Zone 3, and designated as a Coastal Change Management Area, indicating vulnerability to flooding and long-term coastal erosion.

While the recreational intent may align with the broad aims of RC4, the environmental constraints and visual impact of the proposal raise concerns about compliance with the policy's criteria, particularly in relation to scale, landscape character, and siting.

Landscape and Visual Impact

The application site lies within a nationally and internationally designated landscape, including the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, the East Devon National Landscape (formerly AONB), and the Coastal Preservation Area. It also falls within Landscape Character Type (LCT) 4D: Coastal Slopes and Combes, as defined in the *East Devon and Blackdown Hills Landscape Character Assessment 2019*. This

landscape is valued for its dramatic coastal scenery, sparse settlement pattern, and strong sense of tranquillity and natural beauty, all of which are highly sensitive to change.

The proposed sauna introduces a new structure into a visually prominent part of the beach. The EDDC Landscape Architect has advised that the unit is conspicuous in near views from the beach, appears as a skyline feature from the south, and is visible in mid-distance views from the South West Coast Path. While the timber cladding is sympathetic, the sheet metal roof and stove pipe increase its visual impact and detract from the undeveloped character of the beach.

The agent has disputed this assessment, stating that the sauna is located on a grassed area of private land adjacent to commercial picnic benches associated with the Sea Shanty café, and that the wider area includes beach huts and other built form. Drone footage and photographs have been submitted to illustrate the sauna's proximity to existing development. It is accepted that the site is not entirely isolated and that there is a degree of commercial activity in the vicinity. However, the sauna occupies a more exposed and open part of the beach, distinct from the more contained and elevated locations of surrounding development. Its siting and design result in a more prominent visual presence within the landscape.

The Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site Team has confirmed that the sauna does not pose a threat to geological heritage features and is broadly in keeping with the setting. However, they have recommended that the unit's temporary and mobile nature be made more visually apparent, noting that its current design gives a semi-permanent appearance. The applicant has responded with photographs showing how the base skirting can be removed and the trailer components disassembled quickly, which may help to reduce visual impact if secured by condition.

Under Section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023, the Council has a statutory duty to *seek to further* the purpose of Protected Landscapes, which is the conservation and enhancement of natural beauty. This duty requires active support for landscape protection and enhancement in all decisions affecting designated areas. The government's guidance makes clear that relevant authorities must give significant weight to this purpose and demonstrate how their decisions contribute positively to it.

In this case, the proposal does not conserve or enhance the natural beauty of the area and introduces commercial activity into a sensitive and visually open part of the beach. It conflicts with the aims and guidelines set out in the Landscape Character Assessment, which emphasise that tourism development should be of appropriate scale and character and should not negatively impact views or tranquillity.

While the proposal is modest in scale and located near existing visitor infrastructure, the harm identified is considered to outweigh the limited benefits of the proposal in this location. It is acknowledged that a similar facility may be acceptable in a less exposed or more integrated location nearby. However, in its current form and siting, the proposal is considered harmful to the landscape and contrary to the statutory duty and Strategies 7, 44 and 46 and Policies D1 and RC4 of the Local Plan.

Flood Risk and Emergency Planning

The proposed sauna is located within Flood Zone 2, with access routes and surrounding land falling within Flood Zone 3. The site is exposed to flood risk from the sea and from the Branscome Stream, which is adjacent to the site. The adjacent stream poses a particularly acute hazard due to its very flashy nature, capable of rising rapidly and unpredictably. The Environment Agency has confirmed that no formal flood warning service¹ is available for this location owing to the flashy nature of the stream. Only general flood alerts² are issued, based on forecast rainfall, which may not materialise.

Figure 1 shows Flood Zones 2 and 3 for all sources of flood risk. The site is outlined in red and all the land within the blue outline is at risk of flooding from the stream and the sea. Other land shaded in blue is either at risk of flooding from the sea or from the stream.

The applicant has argued that the sauna should be classified as water-compatible development, but this is not supported by the Environment Agency. While they acknowledged that the final judgment rests with the local planning authority, they did not agree with the classification and offered guidance that changing rooms are included in the water-compatible category because they support the use of sports pitches. A sauna, by contrast, is a non-essential, luxury amenity and is more appropriately classified as 'less vulnerable'. This classification, like 'water compatible' development, is acceptable in Flood Zones 2 and 3a only if the development meets all criteria in paragraph 181, which are addressed below.

¹ According to [Flood alerts and warnings: what they are and what to do - GOV.UK](#), "A flood warning means that flooding is expected so you should act now"

² "A flood alert means that flooding is possible so you should prepare now"

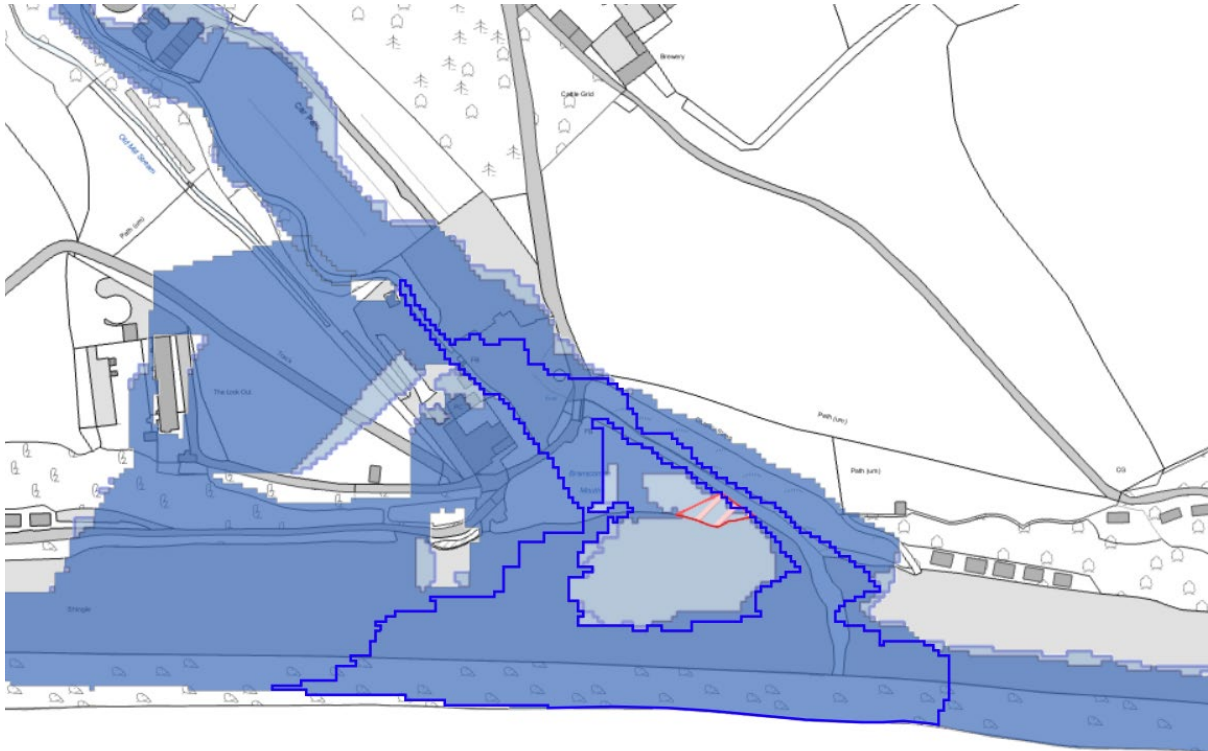


Figure 1 © Crown Copyright and database rights 2025 Ordnance Survey AC0000809498

Although the proposal does not involve residential accommodation and is therefore exempt from the sequential and exception tests under paragraph 176 of the NPPF, it must still satisfy the requirements of paragraph 181, which requires that development in flood-prone areas be made safe for its lifetime without increasing flood risk elsewhere.

a) within the site, the most vulnerable development is located in areas of lowest flood risk, unless there are overriding reasons to prefer a different location;

The sauna is sited on the lowest-risk part of the site outlined in red, but this does not make it acceptable. The surrounding area, including access routes, remains highly vulnerable to flooding, and the proposal must also satisfy the remaining criteria of paragraph 181.

b) the development is appropriately flood resistant and resilient such that, in the event of a flood, it could be quickly brought back into use without significant refurbishment;

The sauna's raised design may offer limited protection against shallow flooding. However, deeper flooding, whether from the stream or wave action, could cause the structure to become mobile, break apart, or be swept away. The Environment Agency has warned of bank collapse, and the site lies within a Coastal Change Management Area and a zone of potential ground instability, where the Shoreline

Management Plan³ promotes a non-intervention approach. These risks have not been addressed in the flood risk assessment.

Nearby cabins and beach huts are generally located on higher ground or behind rock defences, offering greater protection. In contrast, the sauna is positioned on lower, more exposed ground. During Storm Ciaran in November 2023, several cabins behind rock defences suffered significant damage. It is reasonable to conclude that the sauna, had it been present, could have been similarly affected. Realistically, the sauna cannot be made more resilient without fundamentally changing its design and fixing it to the ground.

The applicant suggests the sauna could be towed to safety, but this is not a reliable strategy. Potential refuge areas lie at least 140 metres away and may require towing the sauna through a ford which may become impassable in storm conditions due to fast-flowing or deep water. The practicalities of accessing a suitable refuge location have not been explored, and it is entirely possible that any area could be inaccessible during poor weather or flooding. In such conditions, towing the sauna to safety may not be feasible.

In conclusion, the proposal does not satisfy this criterion. The sauna's exposed location and design make it vulnerable to flooding and the development cannot be considered appropriately flood resistant or resilient.

c) it incorporates sustainable drainage systems, unless there is clear evidence that this would be inappropriate;

Given the coastal location and mobile nature of the structure, drainage impacts are minimal and not a determining factor.

d) any residual risk can be safely managed; and

The proposal fails to demonstrate that residual risks, including flooding, erosion, and ground instability, can be safely managed. The absence of a robust flood risk assessment and practical mitigation measures leaves these risks unaddressed.

e) safe access and escape routes are included where appropriate, as part of an agreed emergency plan.

No emergency plan has been submitted. This is a critical omission, given the nature of the proposed use and the level of flood risk. The Environment Agency has made clear that emergency planning is fundamental to the acceptability of development in flood-prone areas. The NPPF, paragraph 170, requires that development in areas at risk of flooding must be safe for its lifetime, including through the provision of safe access and escape routes and robust emergency planning. Without a credible and detailed evacuation strategy, the proposal cannot be considered safe.

In addition to the concerns raised by the Environment Agency, the EDDC Emergency Planning Officer has reviewed the proposal and confirmed that the

³ [Beer Head to Salcombe Hill 6A34 | Shoreline Management Plans](#)

submitted Flood Risk Assessment (FRA) is insufficient to support the application. Specifically, the FRA fails to address safe access and egress for users and emergency services during design flood events over the lifetime of the development. The Emergency Planning Officer notes that the sauna's current location within Flood Zones 2 and 3 could result in staff and guests, who may be undressed and in a relaxed state, becoming trapped by fluvial or coastal flooding, with no documented strategy for evacuation or rescue.

The absence of a Flood Emergency Plan (FEP) means there is no evidence of how the operator would mitigate these risks or avoid placing additional burden on emergency services. Without clearly defined triggers and procedures for early removal of the sauna and evacuation of users, the proposal cannot be considered safe. These concerns reinforce the conclusion that the development fails to comply with paragraph 181 of the NPPF and relevant local policies, and that the risks to life remain unacceptable and unmitigated.

The agent has cited a precedent, a sauna approved on Weymouth beach, located in Flood Zone 3⁴, as justification for accepting the hazards associated with this site. However, the comparison is flawed. The Weymouth site is:

- Directly accessed from the safety of The Esplanade;
- Within 3 metres of Flood Zone 1, according to the latest data⁵;
- Covered by an active Flood Warning Service;
- Not at risk of unpredictable flash flooding from a river.

In contrast, the site at Branscombe Mouth is remote, lacks direct access to higher ground, and is exposed to unpredictable fluvial flooding. The risks associated with the Weymouth site are therefore not comparable and do not justify placing lives at risk in a more hazardous location.

The risks posed by the Branscombe site are real, immediate, and potentially life-threatening. The proposal places users in harm's way, in a location where flooding may occur without warning and safe evacuation cannot be guaranteed. The absence of a flood warning service, the lack of a viable emergency plan, and the unaddressed risks of erosion and ground instability mean the development fails to meet national policy requirements for safety in flood-prone areas.

Given the combination of hazards - including unpredictable flood risk from the stream, coastal change, and ground instability - it is considered that the site is fundamentally unsuitable for this type of development. These concerns are not minor or easily mitigated, and it is unlikely that a revised flood risk assessment or emergency plan could overcome them. This constitutes a significant and overriding objection to the proposal and conflicts with Policy EN21 of the Local Plan.

Ecology

⁴ Dorset Council planning application P/FUL/2024/06068, approved on 13 December 2024.

⁵ [Get flood risk information for planning in England - Flood map for planning - GOV.UK](#)

The site lies within the Sidmouth to West Bay Special Area of Conservation (SAC) and the Sidmouth to Beer Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). In accordance with regulation 63 of the Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (as amended), a Habitat Regulations Assessment (HRA) screening has been undertaken by the applicant. This screening concludes that the proposal is not directly connected with or necessary for the management of the European site, and that likely significant effects can be ruled out.

The continued use of the mobile sauna does not introduce new recreational pressures beyond those already present in this heavily visited coastal area. Emissions from the wood-fired sauna are minimal and fall well below thresholds that could affect sensitive habitats, and there is no evidence of adverse impacts from water discharge. As such, the proposal does not trigger the need for an Appropriate Assessment.

On the basis of the screening, the development is considered acceptable in ecological terms and compliant with the relevant conservation regulations.

Economic and Tourism Benefits

The proposal has strong support from the Parish Council, Ward Member, and the public (96 letters of support, 2 objections). It offers economic and tourism benefits, supporting local businesses and diversifying the visitor offer. The sauna provides a recreational facility that complements the existing tourism economy and encourages year-round use of the beach. These benefits are material and significant in a rural coastal setting, where opportunities for economic diversification are limited.

Paragraph 88 of the NPPF (2024) encourages planning decisions that support a prosperous rural economy and promote sustainable tourism and leisure developments that benefit rural businesses, communities, and visitors, and respect the character of the countryside.

Other Matters

Smoke Emissions - The sauna uses a clean-burn wood stove, which produces a brief period of smoke (5–10 minutes) during initial ignition in the early morning. Once operational, the stove emits no visible smoke. Kiln-dried logs sourced from a DEFRA-certified supplier are used, supporting compliance with clean air standards.

Public Enjoyment of the Area - Concerns have been raised regarding the sauna's proximity to picnic areas and the South West Coast Path, and its potential impact on the public's enjoyment of Branscombe Beach. While these are valid considerations, it is noted that the sauna is a modest structure with limited operational hours and minimal environmental impact. The majority of public representations describe the sauna as enhancing the visitor experience, contributing positively to wellbeing and appreciation of the natural setting. Furthermore, the structure is reversible, and its presence does not preclude public access to the beach or coastal path.

PLANNING BALANCE AND CONCLUSION

The proposal for the retrospective siting of a mobile sauna unit at Branscombe Beach has attracted considerable public support and is recognised for its contribution to local wellbeing, tourism, and economic activity. Many representations describe the sauna as a valued community asset that enhances the visitor experience and supports local businesses. These benefits are acknowledged and carry weight in the planning balance.

However, the site's location within a flood-prone area presents serious and unresolved risks that cannot be overlooked. The sauna is positioned within Flood Zone 2, with access routes falling within Flood Zone 3, and lies adjacent to a watercourse known for rapid and unpredictable flooding. The Environment Agency has confirmed that no flood warning service is available for this location, and the submitted flood risk assessment fails to demonstrate that the development can be made safe for its lifetime. The absence of a credible emergency evacuation plan is a critical omission, particularly given the nature of the use and the vulnerability of users who may be physically exposed and unable to respond quickly in the event of a flood.

The risks associated with this site are not hypothetical. They are immediate, tangible, and potentially life-threatening. The proposal places users in harm's way in a location where flooding may occur without warning and where safe evacuation cannot be guaranteed. The suggestion that the sauna could be towed to safety is not supported by evidence and does not constitute a reliable or practicable mitigation strategy. The surrounding terrain, including a ford that may become impassable during storm conditions, further undermines the feasibility of emergency relocation.

National planning policy is clear that development in areas at risk of flooding must be made safe for its lifetime without increasing risk elsewhere. In this case, the proposal fails to meet that requirement. The risks to life are unacceptable and cannot be mitigated through conditions or minor design changes. While the landscape and ecological impacts are less severe and potentially reversible, the failure to address the fundamental issue of safety renders the proposal unsustainable.

While the proposal cannot be supported in its current location due to unresolved flood risk and safety concerns, the Council has sought to work proactively with the applicant to identify a safer and more appropriate site. Officers have confirmed that the principle of a mobile sauna is acceptable and have suggested an alternative location nearby that may offer reduced flood risk and improved access to a refuge. The Environment Agency has provisionally supported this alternative, subject to further assessment. This option was shared with the applicant, but no formal engagement or revised proposals have been received. As such, the Council has exhausted reasonable opportunities to negotiate a safer solution and must determine the application on the basis of the submitted scheme.

In conclusion, the economic and social benefits of the sauna do not outweigh the serious and unresolved risks posed by its location. The development cannot be made safe and does not comply with national or local planning policies designed to protect life and manage development in vulnerable coastal areas. The application is therefore recommended for refusal.

RECOMMENDATION

REFUSE for the following reasons:

1. The proposed development is located within Flood Zone 2, with access through Flood Zone 3, and is at risk from both fluvial and coastal flooding, rapid river level changes, and erosion. The submitted Flood Risk Assessment fails to adequately assess these risks or demonstrate that the development can be made safe for its lifetime. No emergency evacuation plan has been provided, and the risks associated with ground instability and bank erosion have not been addressed. As such, the proposal fails to comply with paragraph 181 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2024), which requires that development in areas at risk of flooding should be safe, resilient, and not increase flood risk elsewhere. The proposal is also contrary to Policy EN21 - River and Coastal Flooding of the Adopted East Devon Local Plan 2013-2031 and Strategic Policy AR01 - Flooding and Policy AR03: Coastal Change Management Areas (CCMAs) of the Draft East Devon Local Plan 2020-2042.
2. The proposed development, by introducing a visually intrusive structure onto an undeveloped section of Branscombe beach within the Jurassic Coast World Heritage Site, East Devon National Landscape, and Coastal Preservation Area, would harm the area's natural beauty and scenic character. It fails to conserve or enhance the landscape and introduces commercial activity into a sensitive coastal setting, contrary to Strategies 7 - Development in the Countryside, 44 - Undeveloped Coast and Coastal Preservation Area and 46 - Landscape Conservation and Enhancement and AONBs and Policies D1 - Design and Local Distinctiveness and RC4 - Recreation Facilities in the Countryside and on the Coast of the Adopted East Devon Local Plan 2013-2031, Strategic Policies SP06 - Development Beyond Settlement Boundaries, DS01 - Design and Local Distinctiveness, OL02 - National Landscapes (Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty) and OL03 - Coastal Preservation Areas and Policy OS05 - Leisure and recreation developments in the countryside of the Draft East Devon Local Plan 2020-2042, Paragraph 189 of the National Planning Policy Framework (2024) and Section 245 of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2023.

NOTE FOR APPLICANT

Informative:

In accordance with the aims of Article 35 of the Town and Country Planning (Development Management Procedure) (England) Order 2015 East Devon District Council seeks to work positively with applicants to try and ensure that all relevant planning concerns have been appropriately resolved; however, in this case the development is considered to be fundamentally unacceptable such that the Council's concerns could not be overcome through negotiation.

Plans relating to this application:

Flood Risk Assessment 12.05.25

	Location Plan	12.05.25
	Block Plan	12.05.25
Photos 1-3	Photos	24.07.25

List of Background Papers

Application file, consultations and policy documents referred to in the report.

Statement on Human Rights and Equality Issues

Human Rights Act:

The development has been assessed against the provisions of the Human Rights Act 1998, and in particular Article 1 of the First Protocol and Article 8 of the Act itself. This Act gives further effect to the rights included in the European Convention on Human Rights. In arriving at this recommendation, due regard has been given to the applicant's reasonable development rights and expectations which have been balanced and weighed against the wider community interests, as expressed through third party interests / the Development Plan and Central Government Guidance.

Equality Act:

In arriving at this recommendation, due regard has been given to the provisions of the Equality Act 2010, particularly the Public Sector Equality Duty and Section 149. The Equality Act 2010 requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between different people when carrying out their activities. Protected characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race/ethnicity, religion or belief (or lack of), sex and sexual orientation.