

Site Assessment Report for Fittleworth Neighbourhood Development Plan

Purpose of the Site Assessment Report

This report explains how the potential sites for new housing in Fittleworth parish were assessed in the context of the vision and objectives of the Fittleworth Neighbourhood Development Plan. It does this by systematically assessing the sites against a range of sustainability criteria and explaining why some options are considered to meet the aims of the Plan better than others.

This report should be read alongside the Strategic Environmental Assessment of the Neighbourhood Development Plan which assesses these site alternatives against environmental objectives to assess their significant effects.

Vision and Objectives of the Fittleworth Neighbourhood Development Plan

The Fittleworth Neighbourhood Development Plan has the following vision:

“Fittleworth aspires to be a village which by 2032 will have accommodated some new development to meet the needs of its community but retained its special character as an historic and viable village set within a beautiful landscape which is rich in biodiversity and cultural heritage, It will have responded to the identified need for additional affordable housing to attract and retain a younger generation, while requiring such housing to respect existing development , to lie within the settlement area and within the guidelines laid down by the South Downs National Park”.

In order to achieve this vision, the Neighbourhood Development Plan has the following objectives:

“Objective 1: To conserve and enhance the local environment, taking opportunities to enhance the local landscape, ecology and heritage and incorporate measures to reduce the risk of flooding, or other damage to the environment.

Objective 2: To secure development that enhances the design, character and appearance and landscape setting of the village; reflects the existing density, scale and use of local materials and incorporates appropriate renewable and low carbon technology.

Objective 3: To support existing and new community facilities to meet the needs of the parish including the provision of a local shop, and to protect existing sites currently providing local employment.

Objective 4: To improve opportunities for young families with limited financial resources and in housing need, to live in the village by encouraging and supporting the provision of affordable/low cost housing, with preference given to those with local connections”.

In Chapter 8, which sets out the proposed policies for the Neighbourhood Development Plan, the section on housing states:

“In the context of Fittleworth ‘sustainable’ means:

- **A range of homes that respond to peoples’ needs both now and in the future.**

- **Development which imposes the minimum environmental burden on the area and its resources, both during its construction and throughout its lifespan.**
- **Development which both connects to the past and includes current features which provide enhancement to the area particularly in respect of energy usage and environmental factors.**
- **Development which is in locations which are within the settlement area or specifically allocated in this neighbourhood development plan and within walking distance of the facilities thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of the village”.**

Potential Sites

The potential sites were initially taken from the South Downs National Park Authority’s ‘Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment’, but were supplemented by those submitted directly to the Neighbourhood Development Plan. These sites are shown on the appended plan (Annex B) and are:

- The Old Coal Yard, School Close, Fittleworth
- Greatpin Croft, Fittleworth (CH031)
- Land at corner of Limbourne Lane / The Fleet, Fittleworth (CH033)
- Fleet Cottage, The Fleet, Fittleworth (CH032)
- Land north of A283/ Sorrels Farm to junction of School Lane, Fittleworth (CH034)
- Sites A and B Tripp Hill, Lower Horncroft (CH135 A & B)
- Triangle by Church Lane, Fittleworth (CH030)
- Use land available on Site No. CH034 for recreation facilities and develop on the current recreation ground.

Initial Sieving of Sites

In the sustainability definition for housing set out in Chapter 8 of the Neighbourhood Development Plan, only the last bullet point relates directly to the location of sites. This is “Development which is in locations which are within the settlement area or specifically allocated in this neighbourhood development plan and within walking distance of the facilities thereby contributing to the long-term sustainability of the village”.

Given the importance of this aim to the Neighbourhood Development Plan it is considered reasonable to do an initial sieving of potential sites to exclude those that are not either within or adjacent to the existing settlement boundary of Fittleworth village. The two sites affected by this exclusion are sites CH135 A and B at Tripp Hill, Lower Horncroft.

Lower Horncroft does not have a settlement boundary and the sites are well outside the settlement area of Fittleworth, being about one mile from the village Hall. There is no continuous footpath access to the village and no public transport at this point. The sites straddle the Serpent Trail and would have an adverse impact on that important footpath. The South Downs National Park Authority has already rejected a pre application proposal SDNP/13/03770/PRE on an adjoining site on grounds including that “the site is quite isolated from the nearest village, the majority of the built form located to the north. The proposal would therefore represent an unacceptable intrusion into the countryside that would detract from the rural character of the surroundings. It is highly unlikely that the proposal would receive officer support”. The proposal was for the conversion or replacement of an existing outbuilding on a small scale, single dwelling.

Access to the sites is on a bend in the B2138 which is a regular accident blackspot, notwithstanding access to commercial premises at the Barlavington business park. Significant traffic improvement measures would be necessary for any further development. The sites do not therefore meet the

sustainability definition for the location of housing sites in the Fittleworth Neighbourhood Development Plan and no further work was undertaken on them as a result.

The site at the Old Coal Yard, School Close, Fittleworth was granted planning permission for 9 dwellings (including 1 low-cost dwelling) under SDNP/14/02892/FUL on 26th August 2015. Whilst the number of homes can be counted towards the total for Fittleworth, the principle of development has already been determined so there is no benefit to including it in the site assessment process.

Soil and Air

It should be noted that there are no Air Quality Management Areas in or adjacent to Fittleworth parish and the agricultural land classification is Grade 3 over most of Fittleworth, with Grade 4 to the south of the River Rother. It should also be noted that a Nitrate Vulnerable Zone has been identified to the north of the River Rother, where it is considered that there is a risk of nitrates being washed off farmland into the watercourses.

These aspects, while important, are consistent for all of the proposed sites in the assessment and do not help to distinguish between them. They have not therefore been included as criteria for the Site Assessment.

Assessment Criteria

The following criteria were chosen to assess the remaining potential sites against:

- Availability
- Achievability
- Accessible by foot to local village facilities
- Accessible by public transport to wider facilities
- Can be accessed without causing highway safety problems
- Ability to provide affordable housing
- Avoids area of flood risk
- Landscape impact
- Biodiversity Impact
- Heritage Impact
- Community impact

The Assessment Criteria were considered as follows:

Availability

This relates to whether the landowner is willing to make the site available for development. The scoring was 'green' if the landowner has indicated that the site is available for development before 2021; 'amber' if the site is likely to be available before 2031; and 'red' if there is no evidence that the site will be made available.

Achievability

This relates to whether there are any aspects (such as ground contamination, existing use values or expensive site clearance works) which might mean that the site fails to be developed due to viability issues. If the site is free of all such issues it will be scored 'green'; if it has some issues that reduce viability but is still likely to be developed it will be scored 'amber'. If the issues are such that the site is probably unviable it will be scored 'red'.

Accessible by foot to local village facilities

The distance of the site boundary to the main hub of village facilities around Fittleworth Village Hall was measured in metres. Under 500m was scored as 'green'; 500-1000m was scored as 'amber'; and over 1000m was scored as 'red'.

Accessible by public transport to wider facilities

The distance of the site boundary to the nearest bus stop was measured in metres. Under 500m was scored as 'green'; 500-1000m was scored as 'amber'; and over 1000m was scored as 'red'.

Can be accessed without causing highway safety problems

This is a provisional assessment pending comments from West Sussex County Council and any further work needed by the site proponent to demonstrate that a site can be safely accessed. At this stage therefore all sites are scored 'amber' to reflect this uncertainty. However, this will need to be clarified before the Neighbourhood Development Plan is submitted for examination.

Ability to provide affordable housing

The provision of affordable housing is important in order to meet the Neighbourhood Development Plan's objective 'To improve opportunities for young families with limited financial resources and in housing need to live in the village by encouraging and supporting the provision of affordable/low cost housing, with preference given to those in local employment or with family connections in the parish'. 'A range of homes that respond to peoples' needs both now and in the future' is also one of the definitions of sustainable housing provision for the Plan. The ability to provide affordable housing is affected by the size and ownership of the site and the expectations of the landowner. National Planning Policy Guidance indicates that local planning authorities cannot require on-site provision from sites of 10 dwellings or under and can only require sites of 6-10 to provide financial contributions towards affordable housing in designated rural areas such as National Parks. This does not prevent landowners from voluntarily providing affordable housing on smaller sites.

Sites are scored as follows: 'green' for on-site provision of affordable housing; 'amber' for financial contribution towards off-site affordable housing; and 'red' for no on-site or off-site contribution to affordable housing.

Avoids area of flood risk

This criterion distinguishes sites according to whether there are watercourses or ponds on or adjacent to the sites as this raises the risk of flooding and local knowledge about flooding instances. A site with no watercourses or ponds within or adjacent to it and no known instances of flooding is scored as 'green'; and a site that has either of these characteristics is scored as 'amber'. Any site proposed in a 'flood risk zone' by the Environment Agency would be scored as 'red'.

Landscape impact

This criterion distinguishes sites according to the quality of the landscape components on the site; how visually prominent they are in the landscape; and whether they can be adequately screened / there is scope for mitigation. A site will be scored 'green' if it has no important landscape components within it and development will not be intrusive within the wider landscape. It will be scored 'amber' if it does contain important landscape and / or could have a wider visual impact, but that this can be mitigated through measures such as additional planting. A site will be scored 'red' if it is considered to have landscape value in its own right and / or will be visually intrusive in the wider landscape and this cannot be satisfactorily mitigated.

Biodiversity Impact

Fittleworth is a very biodiversity rich environment and contains a high number of sites designated for their flora and fauna at international, national and local level. These are: a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) at the Mens; four Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs) and six Sites of Natural Conservation Interest (SNCIs). There is also a further SSSI (Upper Arun) immediately to the east of the parish boundary which could be affected by development in Fittleworth. None of the

proposed development sites have had individual ecological surveys conducted. All of the sites are between 2,510m and 2,860m from The Mens Special Area of Conservation so there is little difference between them in terms of impact. Similarly, all the sites are between 1,400m and 1,920m from the nearest SSSI. Therefore, the main difference between the sites is their distance from locally designated SNCIs, and in particular Hesworth Common. Sites will be scored 'green' if they are more than 500m from this priority heathland habitat; 'amber' if they are under 500m and 'red' if they are on or adjacent to Hesworth Common.

Heritage Impact

Fittleworth is a very historic parish with two conservation areas and a large number of listed buildings and ancient monuments. Sites have been scored according to their distance from the nearest listed building. Over 100m was scored as 'green'; 50-100m was scored as 'amber'; and under 50m was scored as 'red'.

Community impact

In most cases the community impact of sites will be neutral (scored 'amber'). However, in the case of the proposal to build new homes on the current recreation ground and relocate the recreation ground to the edge of the village, and the proposal to develop part of Hesworth Common, it is considered that there are community impacts which need to be captured in the Site Assessment. Where this impact is considered to be positive this will be scored 'green'. Where it is considered negative, the site will be scored 'red'.

Conclusions of the Site Assessment

The Site Assessments are attached as Annex A. They demonstrate that the highest scoring sites are:

- Greatpin Croft, Fittleworth (CH031);
- Fleet Cottage, The Fleet, Fittleworth (CH032); and
- Land at corner of Limbourne Lane / The Fleet, Fittleworth (CH033).