Neighbourhood Planning

brought to you by locality

Guidance notes for the site assessment template

A toolkit for neighbourhood planners

Contents

Introduction

This guidance is for neighbourhood planning groups who are intending to use the Neighbourhood Planning Site Assessment Template to assess potential development sites for allocation in a neighbourhood plan. The guidance note should be read together with the Site Assessment and Allocations toolkit.

The template is intended to help neighbourhood plan groups to create a shortlist of sites, from which proposed sites can then be selected. It is a generic template and should be adapted to the specific circumstances of the neighbourhood area, with additional criteria added if necessary. Equally, some of the questions may not apply and can be left blank or removed.

The colour rating relating to the criteria (Red, Amber, and Green) are for guidance only and indicate whether the constraint poses a low/medium or high risk to the site being considered acceptable for allocation.

The guidance note sets out the various elements of the site assessment template, with some explanatory text for each.

Site details

Site Reference / Name

Numerical reference of site and site name e.g. NP01 Land at rear of community centre.

Site Address / Location

Site address, postcode, grid reference or description of location that would allow location to be identified.

Gross Site Area (Hectares)

The area within the site boundary.

This can be measured using tools such as Google Maps.

SHLAA/SHELAA Reference (if applicable)

The site reference if it is included in a Local Planning Authority's (LPA) Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA or SHLAA) or equivalent.

Existing land use

What is the land used for currently, e.g. agricultural, employment, vacant?

Land use being considered, if known (e.g. housing, community use, local green space, mixed use)

Is the site being considered for a particular land use by the neighbourhood plan group in order to meet an identified development need, such as housing?

Is the site being promoted for a particular land use/development by a landowner?

Landowner estimate of development capacity

Has the site been put forward for consideration in the neighbourhood plan by a landowner, and if so, is there an estimate of the amount of development proposed?

If there is no existing estimate of the development capacity of the site from the landowner or from the LPA's SHLAA/SHELAA, an estimate can be made and recorded in the conclusion section of the template. See Site Assessment and Allocations Toolkit for guidance on how to estimate development capacity.

Site identification method / source

How has the site been identified for inclusion in the assessment? This can include more than one method e.g. the LPA's SHLAA/SHELAA and neighbourhood plan Call for Sites.

Planning history

Has there been a planning application on the site within the past 5 or 10 years? If so, what was the proposed development and result of the application? If permission has been granted, has it been implemented? Record the planning permission details and the reason(s) for refusal (if applicable).

Neighbouring uses

Is the site surrounded by housing, commercial uses, industrial uses, agriculture or trees/woodland etc.?

List any neighbouring uses that might affect the suitability of the site for development or might be affected by development.

Assessment of Suitability

Environmental Constraints

Statutory environmental designations

The National Planning Policy Framework (2021) (NPPF) gives protection to statutory and non-statutory environmental designations.

Natural England has developed a mapping tool which identifies Statutory Environmental Designations. The LPA's website may also have an interactive map which shows relevant designations.

For any site that is within or close to a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), the Impact Risk Zones should also be checked, which vary according to the particular sensitivities of the SSSI. Within each Impact Risk Zone, the mapping tool specifies the type(s) of development that have the potential to impact on the SSSI.

Risk of flooding (rivers and tidal)

The NPPF (Planning and Flood Risk) 2021 and the Planning Practice Guidance set out a sequential, risk-based approach to the location of development which is designed to ensure that areas at little or no risk of flooding from any source are developed in preference to areas at higher risk.

The aim is to direct development away from medium and high flood risk areas (Flood Zones 2 and 3) and other areas affected by other sources of flooding including surface water flooding where possible (see Paragraph: 018 Reference ID: 7-018-20140306 for further information).

The Flood Map for Planning (for river/tidal Flood Zones) should be reviewed when assessing risk of flooding and tidal sources.

To assess the risk of flooding from river/tidal sources, the vulnerability of the proposed site use should be considered, using Table 2: Flood risk vulnerability classification; followed by the Flood Map for Planning to determine which flood zone the site is in. The site should be categorised as follows:

- Any site in Flood Zone 1: Green;
- Sites in Flood Zone 2 and:
    - Amber: Sequential Test would need to demonstrate that there are no alternative sites available in Flood Zone 1 in order to comply with the NPPF
    - Red: If alternative suitable sites are available in Flood Zone 1.

- Any site in Flood Zone 3 and
  - Amber: Sequential Test would need to demonstrate that there are no alternative sites available in Flood Zones 1 or 2 in order to comply with the NPPF
  - Red: If alternative suitable sites are available in Flood Zones 1 or 2.

If part of the site is in Flood Zone 2 or 3, this could be deducted from the site area and the remaining portion of the site assessed for suitability/ availability/ achievability.

The sequential test and if necessary, the exception test, would need to be met before development in Flood Zones 2 or 3 is permitted.

Risk of flooding (surface water)

The NPPF (Planning and Flood Risk) 2021 and the Planning Practice Guidance set out a sequential, risk-based approach to the location of development which is designed to ensure that areas at little or no risk of flooding from any source are developed in preference to areas at higher risk.

To assess this indicator the Long Term flood risk should be considered to determine the extent to which the site is affected by surface water flooding. The site should be categorised as follows:

- Less than 15% of the site is affected by medium or high risk of surface water flooding – Green, few constraints or likely to be easily mitigated
- >15% of the site is affected by medium or high risk of surface water flooding – Amber, significant mitigation may be required

Refer also to the LPA's Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (with adequate climate change allowances) if it is recent.

Best and most versatile agricultural land

The NPPF seeks to direct development away from areas of high quality agricultural land (see Footnote 58 of the NPPF).

Annex 2 of the NPPF defines 'best and most versatile agricultural land' as 'land in grades 1, 2 and 3a of the Agricultural Land Classification'.

The boundaries of Agricultural Land Classification are available to view on Natural England's Magic Map or the Government's website.

For data on which land is within Agricultural Land Classification 3a or 3b contact the LPA or Natural England.

Habitat and Biodiversity

Habitats with the potential to support priority species include, but are not limited to:

- mature trees
- woodland
- hedgerows
- waterbodies
- scrub

See National Planning Policy Framework paras 179-182 for further information. Contact the LPA about whether your neighbourhood area is affected by any specific habit or biodiversity designations.

Air Quality Management Area

An AQMA within or close to a site does not preclude development, but measures may need to be taken to ensure development complies with AQMA standards.

The boundaries of AQMAs are available to view here.

Physical Constraints

Topography

A steeply sloping topography may preclude development or may add to the development costs which could affect the viability of development.

Vehicle access

Things to consider in relation to vehicular access include:

- Is there existing vehicular access to the site?
- Is the existing vehicular access suitable for the intended use?
- If the existing vehicular access is not suitable for the intended use, does it appear likely that it could be upgraded so that it becomes suitable?
- If there is not an existing vehicular access to the site, does it appear likely that a suitable vehicular access could be created?

In addition, is the site affected by any of the following:

- Physical constraints (i.e. narrow roads on the approach);
- Proximity to junctions that are known to be at capacity (ask the relevant Highways Authority or LPA);

- Road safety issues (ask the relevant Highways Authority); or
- Bends in the road or other obstacles that may affect emerging visibility?

Advice from the local Highways Authority may be needed in relation to the above.

Tree Preservation Orders and Conservation Areas

Check LPA website or contact LPA tree officer / arboriculturalist.

The presence of a TPO, or the site being within a Conservation Area, does not necessarily preclude development but either of these factors could limit how much of the site could be developed.

This would be considered further at detailed design stage (not within an assessment of suitability, however, the presence of significant trees could make a site less suitable for development).

Veteran/Ancient or other significant trees within or adjacent to the Site

Veteran and ancient trees are irreplaceable, and their protection is given a high priority in the planning process. Veteran or ancient trees may be recorded on the Ancient Tree Inventory or may require identification by an Arboriculturalist and/or LPA Tree Officer.

Veteran and ancient trees are typically large, mature trees; however, smaller/younger trees may be veterans if they have relevant characteristics (speak to an Arboriculturalist and/or LPA Tree Officer).

The presence of high and moderate quality trees similarly does not preclude development but may limit how much of a site could be developed. This would be considered further at detailed design stage (not within an assessment of suitability, however, the presence of significant trees could make a site less suitable for development).

Trees outside the site boundary may have roots and branches which extend into the site, and again, could constrain how much of the site could be developed.

Check aerial imagery and Google Street View. Consider tree cover outside the site boundary.

Public Rights of Way

See Magic Map or the County Council or LPA website.

The presence of a PRoW does not preclude development but is a consideration that would be considered further at detailed design stage (not within an assessment of suitability).

Ground contamination

Are there any current or former uses on site that could have caused, or could cause, contamination, such as industrial use?

Is there anybody or anything that may be affected by ground contamination on or adjacent to the site?

It is important to understand whether there is a source of contamination, a receptor (somebody or something that could be affected) and a pathway between the two to understand whether this may be a risk.

The presence of ground contamination does not necessarily preclude development (this is dependent on the type, scale and extent); however, the presence of ground contamination, and the need to remediate, could impact the viability of a site.

Utilities infrastructure

Check for the presence of utilities infrastructure during site visits and using aerial mapping.

Contact utility providers if further information is required.

The presence of utilities infrastructure does not necessarily preclude development; however, utilities providers will require an easement (right of access) and may require buffer between the infrastructure and any development.

As a result, the presence of utilities infrastructure could reduce the developable area and could impact the viability of a site (if infrastructure is required to be buried or relocated).

Social, amenity or community value

Is the site used by the community or does it have a value to the community in its current use that could not be re-provided if the site was redeveloped?

Accessibility

The NPPF seeks to direct development to the most sustainable locations. New development should be located where residents can easily access services and facilities, ideally by sustainable modes of transport such as walking, cycling or public transport.

If a large site is being considered with the potential to create new infrastructure (public transport, health, education, green infrastructure) to serve a new population, this should be taken into account in the assessment.

Landscape Constraints and Visual Constraints

Landscape

Existing Landscape Character Assessments and/or Sensitivity Studies should be reviewed as the starting point for this assessment. These may be part of the LPA's Local Plan evidence base or can be commissioned for the Neighbourhood Plan.

Contact the LPA to understand the most relevant evidence documents for your neighbourhood plan Area.

For more information refer to An Approach to Landscape Sensitivity Assessment (2019) published by Natural England and Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (Third Edition)[1].

Visual

Contact the Local Planning Authority to understand the most relevant evidence documents for your neighbourhood plan area.

In determining visual sensitivity in line with the Guidelines for Landscape and Visual Impact Assessment (Third Edition), the value and susceptibility of specific visual receptors (people) to a development should be considered.

This means whether the site can be viewed by people from the surrounding areas and whether the places it may be viewed from and/or the view are of value (i.e. views identified in the local plan or neighbourhood plan's evidence base).

Heritage Constraints

Designated heritage assets

Annex 2 of the NPPF defines 'Designated Heritage Assets' as:

- World Heritage Sites
- Scheduled Monuments
- Listed Buildings
- Protected Wreck Sites

[1] GLVIA3 is concerned with the assessment of a specific development (usually for an Environmental Impact Assessment). An Approach to Landscape Sensitivity is concerned with sensitivity to strategic development and allocations, and can be used to look at relative sensitivity.

- Registered Parks and Gardens
- Registered Battlefields
- Conservation Areas

Annex 2 of the NPPF defines significance (for heritage policy) as "The value of a heritage asset to this and future generations because of its heritage interest. The interest may be archaeological, architectural, artistic or historic. Significance derives not only from a heritage asset's physical presence, but also from its setting. For World Heritage Sites, the cultural value described within each site's Statement of Outstanding Universal Value forms part of its significance."

Things to consider:

- Does the site contain, or is it within the setting of, a designated heritage asset?
- What is the significance of the designated heritage asset?
- Is there screening (other buildings or vegetation) between the site and the designated heritage asset which could help mitigate the impact of the development of the site on the designated heritage asset?

Check Historic England's online database for details of designated heritage asset listings.

Contact the LPA and their heritage/conservation team. Historic England could also be contacted if necessary.

Check the LPA's Local List and any other heritage evidence such as Conservation Area Appraisals. Speak to the LPA and their heritage/conservation team.

Non-designated heritage assets

A heritage asset is defined by the NPPF (2021) as "a building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified as having a degree of significance meriting consideration in planning decisions because of its heritage interest."

The Planning Practice Guidance (Conserving and enhancing the historic environment, 2018) explains that a non-designated heritage asset is "a building, monument, site, place, area or landscape identified by the LPA as having local interest" (see Paragraph: 039 Reference ID: 18a-039-20140306 for further information).

Things to consider:

- Does the site contain, or is it within the setting of, a non-designated heritage asset?
- Is there screening (other buildings or vegetation) between the site and the non-designated heritage asset which could help mitigate the impact of the development of the site on the designated heritage asset?

Check the LPA's Local List. Contact the LPA and their heritage/conservation team.

Planning policy constraints

Green Belt

Sites within the Green Belt should only be considered for allocation in the neighbourhood plan if the need for Green Belt release has been established through the Local Plan.

There are several online interactive Green Belt maps available.

Also check the LPA policies map or contact the LPA.

Planning Policy Allocations/Designations

See LPA adopted local plan and any emerging/draft local plans or documents.

Are there any other relevant planning policies relating to the site?

Contact the LPA and check adopted Local Plan and any emerging/draft Local Plans or documents. Check LPA website for any online interactive maps which may show relevant policies.

Site Type

The NPPF defines 'previously developed land' as 'land which is or was occupied by a permanent structure, including the curtilage of the developed land (although it should not be assumed that the whole of the curtilage should be developed) and any associated fixed surface infrastructure.

This excludes:

- land that is or was last occupied by agricultural or forestry buildings;
- land that has been developed for minerals extraction or waste disposal by landfill, where provision for restoration has been made through development management procedures;
- land in built-up areas such as residential gardens, parks, recreation grounds and allotments;
- and land that was previously developed but where the remains of the permanent structure or fixed surface structure have blended into the landscape'.

Settlement Boundaries / Built Up Area

Some settlements have defined settlement boundaries which may be used to assess this criterion.

Contact the LPA or check the LPA's adopted and emerging policies maps to see whether your settlement has a defined settlement boundary.

If there is not a defined settlement boundary, site visits and mapping, including aerial mapping such as Google Maps, can be used to establish whether the site is within, adjacent to or outside the current extent of the built-up area.

Coalescence

Would development of the site result in neighbouring settlements merging into one another?

Scale

Would development of the site be of a scale that would significantly and negatively impact the existing character (discuss with the LPA).

Assessment of Availability

Site availability

Is there a landowner willing to sell or develop the site? Is the site being actively promoted for development by a landowner/developer?

Sites submitted through a Call for Sites consultation or assessed as available in a SHLAA can be assumed to be available for development, unless there is evidence to the contrary.

Landownership information can be obtained from the land registry. Individual landowners can be contacted to establish whether land may be available for development.

Legal or ownership problems

Information can be requested from landowners as part of the Call for Sites consultation or taken from the SHLAA/SHELAA.

Availability

Information can be requested from landowners as part of the Call for Sites or taken from the SHLAA/SHELAA.

Viability

Abnormal costs

Is the site subject to any abnormal costs that could affect viability, such as demolition, land remediation or relocating utilities?

What evidence is available to support this judgement? This refers to the ability of the developer to deliver the scheme and whether the financial returns on the site will be sufficient for the developer to go ahead with the development.

There are a number of things a group can do to establish whether a site is likely to be viable.

- Contact the LPA about any evidence that exists to indicate the viability of development in the proposed location. This could include local plan evidence base reports such as a Local Plan Viability Report or evidence in support of a Community Infrastructure Levy.

- Ask developers for evidence that they can deliver a scheme that would comply with current Local Plan policy on affordable housing, open space and parking requirements (as examples), as well as considering any Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) or other planning obligations.

- Ask developers for evidence that they can provide any additional benefits that have been promised (such as neighbourhood infrastructure or contributions to off-site reinforcements to utilities), including anything the neighbourhood plan group have requested (e.g. improved pedestrian and/or cycle connections).

- Ask developers if, based on the Planning Practice Guidance, they can provide evidence of the viability of the scheme where it is thought that a scheme cannot be delivered in compliance with policy. This may be because, as an example, there are abnormal costs or because a neighbourhood planning group may wish to prioritise the delivery of neighbourhood infrastructure through enabling development.

- Seek the advice of the LPA in instances where a site is submitted that does not fit the site typologies covered in existing viability evidence; or where the site does not benefit from the input of a land promoter or developer that can advise on its financial viability. Alternatively, the qualifying body could seek the views of suitably qualified local agents to provide a high-level local view on the site.

Conclusions

Rating

The rating relates to whether the site is suitable, available and achievable for the proposed use, and therefore an appropriate candidate for allocation for that use in the Neighbourhood Plan.

The overall colour rating indicates:

- Red = the site is unsuitable for development and therefore not appropriate to allocate for proposed use in a neighbourhood plan;
- Amber = the site has significant constraints that would need to be resolved or mitigated, so the site is potentially appropriate for allocation for proposed use in a neighbourhood plan; and
- Green = the site is free from constraints, or has constraints that can be resolved, and therefore is suitable for development. The site is appropriate for allocation for proposed use in a neighbourhood plan.

Site Details

The rating should be based on a consideration of all constraints and opportunities collectively, as identified in the assessment.

Weighting/ ranking/scoring criteria is not recommended as most criteria are difficult to quantify and defend and may be subjective.

Sites should only be ruled out (given a red rating) if there are ‘showstopper’ constraints that would preclude development (such as a statutory environmental designation, no access or the site is unavailable) or if there are a large number of other constraints (red ratings) that would point to the site being unsuitable for development.

The site assessment conclusions and ratings should be shared with the LPA and community as part of the next stage of site selection.

List any further work necessary to establish the suitability, availability and achievability of the site.

Development potential

How much development is proposed on the site, if known? For example, number of homes or amount of commercial floorspace. This can be established using existing estimates from e.g. the SHLAA, developer or landowner estimates or using an estimate of capacity based on an appropriate density. See Site Assessment and Allocations Toolkit for guidance on capacity estimates.

Timeframe

(0-5 / 6-10 / 11-15 / 15+ years). This information can be obtained from a landowner/developer, if known and will depend on the complexity of any constraints on site e.g. a large number of constraints would indicate the site would not be deliverable within 0-5 years.

Summary of justification

Provide a concise justification for the rating above. List any further work necessary to establish the suitability, availability and achievability of the site.

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