

Site Assessment for Neighbourhood Plans:

A toolkit for neighbourhood
planners

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Introduction

This toolkit is aimed at neighbourhood planning groups who are intending to allocate sites for development within the neighbourhood plan. It explains the principles for allocating sites and the methods that should be applied to make sure the sites that are chosen are the most appropriate for the neighbourhood.

If you are new to neighbourhood planning you are encouraged to read the [Locality Roadmap](#) which explains the process of preparing a neighbourhood plan.

Benefit of carrying out a site assessment

Neighbourhood plans can identify and allocate sites for new development including housing, employment, business use, leisure and other forms of development. You can also protect and safeguard land for future uses such as open space.

Allocating sites is one of the most powerful, but also most controversial aspects of neighbourhood planning. Groups should expect challenge and controversy but there are also many benefits, including bringing forward sustainable development to meet local needs and providing new infrastructure and services for the benefit of the community.

With a clear process and careful site assessment you will feel more confident at presenting your work, not only at the end, but also at various stages in the site assessment process.

Carrying out a site assessment will provide the evidence that the sites selected for allocation are the most appropriate - that they are in the most sustainable location, they are in conformity with the strategic policies of the Local Authority's Local Plan and that there is a good prospect that they will be developed.

At the end of the process you will have a site or sites that you can demonstrate to an examiner has been thoroughly and objectively assessed for suitability. You can then allocate the site in the neighbourhood plan, which establishes the principle for a particular form of development in that location.

This process will also allow you to 'tell the story' of how the sites that are chosen for allocation were selected, and why others were not. This will help to demonstrate to the community and to landowners and developers who may be promoting other sites that are not chosen to be allocated, the basis on which the decisions were reached.

How to carry out a site assessment yourselves

Understanding the context

Planning Policy Guidance and conformity with the Local Plan

The site selection process should be carried out in an open and transparent way and should include consultation with the community. An evidence base will be necessary to support and justify the selected sites and the reasons why some sites have been selected over others.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) has produced guidance on neighbourhood planning, including on how to allocate sites in a neighbourhood plan¹.

All policies included in the neighbourhood plan, including site allocations, **must** be in general conformity with the strategic policies in the Local Planning Authority's (LPA) Local Plan. This applies to adopted policy which has been tested by an independent examiner, but emerging or draft policy should also be taken into account in neighbourhood plan proposed site allocations. The neighbourhood planning group should work with the LPA to ensure consistency between sites allocated in neighbourhood plans and Local Plans.

You should review the LPA's most recent Local Plan or Core Strategy, and any associated site allocations documents, to check whether there are any sites already allocated for development in the neighbourhood plan area.

The site selection process should also use the LPA's most recent Housing Land Availability Assessment, sometimes called a SHLAA or HELAA² as a starting point. This is an assessment of all potential sites for housing (and sometimes employment uses), including sites that have been put forward by land-owners and developers within the Local Authority area, and an indication of whether each site is deliverable within the local plan period. You should review the report

¹ Planning Practice Guidance (DCLG) 2012

² Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) or Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (HELAA)

to establish whether there are any sites identified within your neighbourhood plan area, and what conclusions are reached. If a neighbourhood plan allocates sites that were found to be not developable in the SHLAA, you will need evidence to justify the allocation, for example new information that has come forward. Likewise for sites in the SHLAA that have been assessed as deliverable / developable which have not been included as site allocations in the neighbourhood plan³.

However SHLAA reports are often ‘high level’ and if more information or more recent evidence is available which indicates a different conclusion than that contained in a SHLAA for a site, this can be used to justify alternative site allocations for the neighbourhood plan. Neighbourhood plans can also include small sites, for example sites for up to 5 houses. Most SHLAAs have a site size threshold of five dwellings (approximately 0.15 hectares).

It should also be noted that while a SHLAA sets out all land with potential for housing, it does not follow that all deliverable sites in a SHLAA should be allocated. A housing needs assessment provides evidence of the demand for housing and it is that figure, or other evidence of housing need, which should be used as a guide for the amount of land that should be allocated for housing.

Different types of site allocations

There are different ways in which sites can be included in a neighbourhood plan.

A site can be allocated for development, which means it is identified for a particular type of land use, e.g. housing, employment, business use, leisure or a community facility, and this will be used to determine any planning application that is proposed for the site. In order to allocate a site for development you will need to be able to demonstrate the site is deliverable, in other

³ The National Planning Policy Framework states that: To be considered deliverable, sites should be available now, offer a suitable location for development now, and be achievable with a realistic prospect that housing will be delivered on the site within five years and in particular that development of the site is viable (NPPF Footnote 11) and To be considered developable, sites should be in a suitable location for housing development and there should be a reasonable prospect that the site is available and could be viably developed at the point envisaged. (NPPF Footnote 12)

words it must be **suitable, available and economically viable**. These three pre-requisites are crucial and definitions are set out in more detail in the three boxes in the Site Assessment section of this document (pages 13-15).

A site allocation would usually be accompanied by site-specific information such as the number of residential dwellings, employment space or other land uses that can be expected to be accommodated on the site as well as the type. Additional information to include could include access or on-site mitigation measures, for example flood risk, landscaping, open spaces and play spaces, biodiversity or conservation.

Site Allocations

Potential information to include in site policy

- The site boundary, usually on a map with a red line around the site
- Proposed land use e.g. housing, employment, leisure, community facility
- Design principles, e.g. building heights, layout and materials.
- Access points, e.g. where vehicles or pedestrians would enter and leave the site
- Infrastructure to be provided, e.g. community facilities, play space or open space
- Any mitigation measures, such as flood risk, landscaping or biodiversity.
- Phasing of development, e.g. 0-5 years, 6-10 years.

Where you cannot demonstrate that a site is deliverable, for example it may be in a good location but there is no evidence that it could become available, your plan can identify ‘aspirations’ for sites you would like to see developed, and set out principles for each site linked to plan policies.

If there are sites that have been assessed as suitable, available and achievable but are not selected as the preferred options to meet the identified need, you may decide to include these as ‘reserve’ sites which would be expected to come forward at a later date.

Green spaces can also be designated for protection from future development. This is known as a local green space designation and can include, for example, sites of open space value, sites of nature conservation value, or sites of amenity value. There would need to be evidence to support this designation⁴ and it would only be appropriate to designate a local green space if this would afford greater protection than that already provided by the local plan.

If a site is already allocated in the Local Plan, it does not need to be re-allocated in the neighbourhood plan. However it is useful to include any Local Plan allocated sites on a map in the neighbourhood plan, so all future housing sites within the neighbourhood plan area are shown.

Understanding the development need

Before you decide which sites may be suitable for future development, and what type of development would be appropriate, it is important to understand what the development need for the neighbourhood plan area is. This can initially be established through a discussion with the Local Planning Authority and through a review of the documents relating to development need which form part of the LPA's local plan evidence base, for example the Strategic Housing Market Assessment, or Employment Land Review.

There may also be sites within the neighbourhood plan which are more strategic and can cater for housing need or other requirements outside the neighbourhood plan area.

In addition, you may choose to carry out a housing needs survey of the neighbourhood, or a business needs survey of local businesses and employment estates to establish the amount and type of new development needed. A separate toolkit has been prepared in parallel with this as a guide to housing needs assessment for neighbourhood plans⁵.

⁴ The designation should only be used:

where the green space is in reasonably close proximity to the community it serves;

where the green area is demonstrably special to a local community and holds a particular local significance, for example because of its beauty, historic significance, recreational value (including as a playing field) tranquillity or richness of its wildlife; and where the green area concerned is local in character and is not an extensive tract of land. (NPPF Para 77)

⁵ Housing Needs Assessment at Neighbourhood Plan Level: A toolkit for neighbourhood planners (Locality) 2015

Site Identification process

Setting up a site identification working group

A working group should be set up to carry out the site assessment process. This would ideally be a core group who are involved in the assessment of each site, to ensure consistency. Each member should declare any interests and also avoid assessing sites that they may have an interest in (e.g. they live next door or have a close relative that lives next door).

Identify all possible sites

The next stage in selecting sites to meet the identified development need, is to look for any possible sites with development potential. Casting the net as wide as possible is important to ensure the most appropriate sites are allocated and also in the event of your plan being challenged by landowners or developers who own or control sites they consider deliverable. If these are not considered and objectively assessed, the plan may be at risk.

Sites that should be considered include:

- Sites known to the community
- Sites identified by the neighbourhood planning group
- Sites allocated or proposed for allocation in the adopted or emerging development plan. These are usually found in a site allocation document. Also check the evidence base, particularly the Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA/ HELAA) or employment land review for deliverable sites within the neighbourhood plan area.
- Other sites in the area with development potential, e.g. sites that have come forward through a recent Call for Sites or pre-application discussions. This information can be requested from your LPA.

Neighbourhood planning groups can initiate their own 'Call for Sites' at this stage, particularly if the last local authority one was more than 2-3 years ago. This is an invitation for any resident, landowner, business, developer or agent to submit a site or sites for consideration in the neighbourhood plan. This can be advertised through a door to door leaflet drop, on the

neighbourhood plan and LPA website, on local noticeboards, in local newspapers and through social media. Write a simple Call for Sites template which might request the following:

- Site name
- Site address
- Site plan (showing 'red line' boundary around the site)
- Ownership
- Site area (in hectares)
- Expected number of units
- Timescales for development, e.g. available now or at some point in the future
- Any barriers to delivery, e.g. legal issues, contamination

Early engagement with landowners can help overcome possible conflicts. Your LPA will be able to advise on managing this type of engagement, helping to ensure that the process is transparent and objective. Most groups find that individual meetings with landowners and developers who are putting forward sites is the most productive approach.

Site Assessment

Site Assessment process

The site identification process should have generated a list of sites to be considered for their development potential. If there are known current or historical reasons why these sites may not be deliverable, they should be included in the assessment, for completeness.

In order to demonstrate that there is a good prospect the site will be delivered, there should be evidence that it is suitable, available and economically viable. These are explained in the boxes below (pages 13-15).

You should assess each potential site against these three criteria (suitable, available, and achievable) and should include as much information as possible to support the conclusions. The same criteria and scoring method should be used for each site to ensure consistency. You can add your own local criteria providing it does not discriminate against one or more particular sites and the same criteria and scoring method is used for each site.

An example of a summary of a site assessment has been produced below the boxes as a guide:

Suitable -

Is the site suitable for the type of development proposed?

A site is considered to be suitable if there are no insurmountable physical or environmental factors which would restrict development. Whether or not a factor is insurmountable is a matter of judgement but often depends if it can be mitigated. Constraints which would rule out development include any potential negative impact on a national environmental designation such as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) or the site falling within the functional floodplain (Flood Zone 3a or 3b)

If a site is allocated in the local plan, or has planning permission it will generally be considered to be suitable, although where circumstances may have changed these sites should be included in the assessment.

Factors which should be considered in the assessment of suitability include:

- Consistency with the policies in the adopted or emerging local plan. If the Local Plan rules out development, it is considered to be not suitable.
- Physical factors such as access to the site, infrastructure, flood risk or contamination
- Accessibility to services and facilities such as public transport, shops, education and health services. If the site is not close to facilities and residents could only travel by car to access services, this location may not be suitable.
- Impacts on national and local environmental features. If development of the site for the proposed land use caused harm to an environmental asset, the site would not be suitable.
- Environmental impacts experienced by residents and neighbouring areas. If prospective residents or neighbours would be affected by the location of the site, e.g. it was adjacent to an industrial or polluted area, it would not be suitable.

Available

Is the site available for development?

A site is available if there is evidence that a landowner or developer is willing to sell or develop the site at a known point in the future, and within the plan period. Any legal or ownership issues should also be taken into account, such as multiple ownership.

Sites submitted through a Call for Sites are considered available, as are sites allocated in the local plan or assessed as available in a recent SHLAA or HELAA.

The LPA may be able to provide land ownership information. If landownership is unknown a search of the Land Registry website (for a small fee) can provide land ownership details which can be used to make enquiries.

Site allocations in the plan should include an indication of the expected timescale for delivery, for example years 0-5 or 6-10 of the plan period. This may depend on the landowner/ developer's timescales, an existing use to be re-located or a long lease, development lead-in times and delivery rates, or if there are mitigation measures or legal obstacles to overcome.

Achievable

Is the site economically viable?

A site is considered 'achievable' when there is evidence that it is economically viable and there is a reasonable prospect that the particular type of development will be developed on the site at a particular point in time.

In order to establish whether a site is viable, you can consider the following actions:

- Involve businesses, developers and landowners at early stages of evidence gathering to advise the neighbourhood group on viability of sites.
- Review the site using existing viability reports published by the Local Planning Authority. These may be called a CIL viability report, Whole Plan viability report or Affordable Housing Viability report. These reports will often provide an assessment of the viability of different 'typologies' of site within the Local Authority Area, e.g. brownfield town centre infill, or greenfield urban extension. These typologies can then be applied to similar sites in the neighbourhood plan assessment to give an indication of whether that site would be viable for development.
- Check with the local planning authority that the proposals for development are appropriate and in conformity with the local plan / core strategy.

Neighbourhood Planning Groups can also carry out or commission their own site viability assessment which is available through the DCLG funded Neighbourhood Planning and Community Right to Build Support programme

Site Assessment example

Site Reference and Name e.g. NP01 Orchard Farm	
Address	Insert address
Site Area	Insert Site Area (in hectares)
Description	<p>Include site plan showing 'red line' boundary</p>  <p>Include photograph of site</p>  <p>Insert short description e.g. Greenfield site on edge of village. Submitted by landowner as part of the neighbourhood plan 'call for sites'</p>

Amount of development	The amount of housing or other development can be guided by a developer's proposal, or through an assessment of the capacity of the site. To work out the capacity of the site, calculate the 'developable area' of the site. This is the site area minus any land that could not be built on due to e.g. existing buildings or flood risk or land that is needed for other uses such as open space or infrastructure. Then multiply this figure by an appropriate density. Guidance on densities may be found in the LPA's Local Plan or could be discussed with your LPA neighbourhood planning officer.	
Planning policy	Insert references to any adopted or emerging local plan policies which are relevant to the site / proposal	
SHLAA/ HELAA status	Insert SHLAA reference and assessment conclusions e.g. suitable and expected to deliver 20 dwellings in years 11-15 of local plan period	
Opportunities	e.g. would meet a particular housing need, or opportunity for regeneration	
Constraints	List any environmental or policy constraints, such as local environmental designations, landscape or heritage impacts.	
Assessment conclusions	Site is suitable	(Y/N)
	Site is available	(Y/N)
	Site is achievable	(Y/N)
Scoring	<p>Sites can be scored as a way of summarising the assessment findings. This can be done in a number of ways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sites can be assessed as 'more positive' or 'less positive' or High/Medium/Low in terms of how they perform against the criteria • Site can be given a 'red-amber-green' traffic light scoring, indicating where a site performs poorly against the criteria, or there is an insurmountable constraint (red); performance is average against the criteria / some constraints but they can be mitigated (amber); performs well against the criteria (green). 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sites can be ranked according to how well they score against the criteria.
Conclusions	<p>Site is suitable, available and viable. It is appropriate as an allocation in the neighbourhood plan OR</p> <p>Site is not currently deliverable or developable [state reasons]. It is not considered to be appropriate for allocation in the plan / it is proposed as a reserve site for future development / it is proposed as an aspiration for the plan.</p>

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Allocating sites may trigger a need for a Strategic Environmental Assessment or SEA. An SEA is a formal assessment of the environmental effects of a neighbourhood plan. This can be very useful in providing objective information for local residents and businesses on the positive and negative environmental effects of your site and wider policy proposals.

An SEA ‘screening’ by your LPA should be undertaken as soon as sufficient information on the potential environmental effects of the neighbourhood plan is known. As a minimum, your LPA is likely to require the aims of the plan, a list of potential policies and whether the plan intends to allocate sites. See also the DCLG guidance on SEA.

Preferred sites

Use all gathered information and assessment results to select a preferred site or sites, and make sure you have the evidence available to support the choice of sites, including your completed site assessment.

There may be choices to make between different options, e.g. allocating one large site or several small sites to meet housing need. The choice should be guided by Local Plan policies

which your LPA can advise on and should also be tested against the vision and objectives of the neighbourhood plan. Once the options have been produced they can be consulted on with the wider neighbourhood plan group. The preferred site(s) may also be tested against alternatives as part of the Strategic Environmental Assessment.

Next Steps

Consulting on preferred options

The results of the site assessment, and the preferred options should be shared with the community, to allow people who live and work in the area to have a say in the option that the core group has proposed. This can be done through, for example, a leaflet drop, an online survey or a public meeting with a presentation and discussion afterwards. It is important that you present your results as a range of options, so that local residents and businesses are able to express a preference and that they understand why you have proposed a preferred option.

Some stakeholders will leave their objections to your formal regulation 14 or regulation 16 stage. If it is the former you will be able to respond to these. If it is at the latter these comments will go straight to the external examiner so it is better to engage with the community at each stage.

Presentation of sites in the plan

Once the preferred sites have been consulted on and the sites for allocation selected, you will need to think about how to present them in your plan and what information to include.

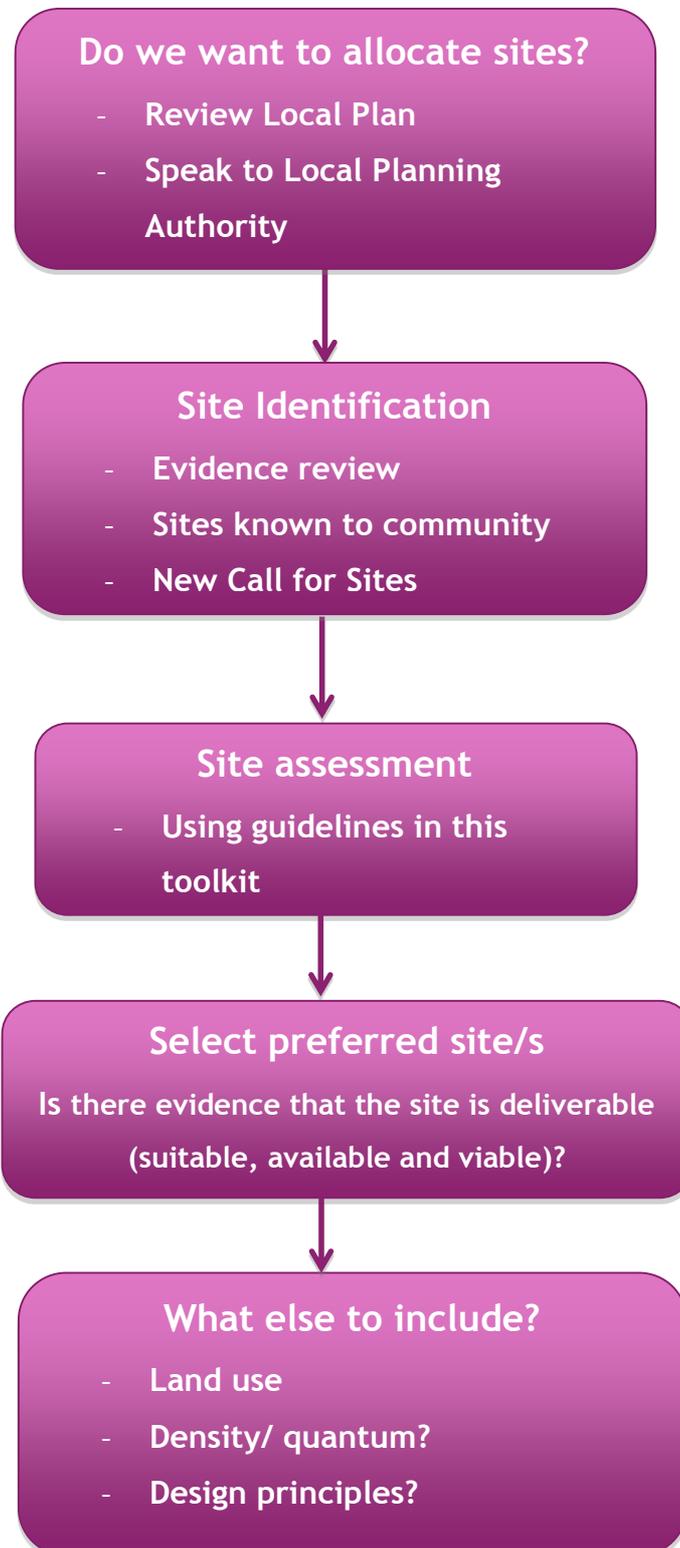
Additional things to consider include:

- Whether the sites are subject to provision of affordable housing, open space and contributions from Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) and what benefits that could bring the community.

- Whether any of the sites could be delivered directly through the community, through a Community Right to Build Order. A proposal for Community Right to Build Order can be developed through a Neighbourhood Plan or on its own.
- Whether all or part of a site would be suitable for self-build or custom build housing, co-housing or other community-led housing provision.

Site assessment flowchart

Steps to allocating sites



Final checklist

Question	Yes/No
Have a reasonable number of people been involved in site assessments and have they declared any relevant interests from outset? Have the same people been involved in assessing all sites?	
Has the Local Planning Authority housing and economic land assessment (SHLAA or HELAA) and site allocations been taken into consideration?	
Have the preferred sites been assessed to ensure they are suitable, available and viable?	
If adding your own local criteria to the site assessment, are they fair? Avoid criteria that will discriminate against one site. Has the same criteria and scoring method been used for each site?	
Have you clearly ‘told the story’ in terms of why sites have been rejected, shortlisted or become preferred sites?	
Have you clearly documented every assessment meeting and in particular short-listing meeting(s) and preferred sites meeting(s)? Identify how this was done from minutes etc.	
Have you integrated a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) into your site selection process, if required?	
Is the proposed amount of development, e.g. number of new homes, appropriate for the site? Density of development should be consistent with the adopted or emerging local plan policies.	
Has the site selection process and its conclusions been properly communicated to local people, site owners, promoters and other stakeholders?	
Have the reasons for the preferred sites been properly and effectively explained? This may be presented on the website, at exhibitions and through newsletters.	

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