

Assessment of site allocations in Fernhurst Neighbourhood Plan – submission version

Oil Depot site (Policy SA1)

A small site and the only one considered by the Parish Council to be suitable and available to meet housing needs within the settlement policy boundary. A proposal for four detached dwellings on this site was granted planning permission in April 2014 (SDNPA/13/05945/FUL).

Recommendation: there is no objection to this policy.

Hurstfold Industrial Estate (Policy SA3)

Hurstfold Farm Industrial Estate is, as indicated by its name, a farm that has been adapted to accommodate industrial functions. The industrial sheds are similar to agricultural barns and the site retains an agricultural appearance that is appropriate to its setting. It sits reasonably well in the landscape.

The policy involves the redevelopment of an active employment site for housing on a site well detached from Fernhurst village. The Neighbourhood Plan seeks to address the implications arising from the loss of these employment premises through re-providing equivalent premises elsewhere in the parish (potentially through two allocations at Syngenta and Fernhurst Business Park). There are doubts whether this approach is achievable: in light of the viability concerns surrounding the Syngenta proposal, the Syngenta policy's lack of a requirement for new employment floorspace and a planning application to develop the Fernhurst Business Park land which was dismissed at appeal. The likely upheaval these businesses would experience through being relocated is also relevant¹. The proposition that a relocated occupier "must be offered tenancies on the same terms at present" is an understandable desire but probably unworkable. There are also concerns about the sustainability of new housing in such an isolated location and the impact residential development would have on landscape character. A pre-application enquiry was made in respect of a similar proposal for this site in 2013 and at the time was considered to be unacceptable to Officers (SDNP/13/04822/PRE). It is proposed the pre-application advice is provided to the appointed Examiner to consider this matter further.

Recommendation: this policy should be deleted as the proposal is in an unsustainable location and would potentially lead to a loss of jobs (especially since the re-location requirements are unrealistic and may be undeliverable taking into SDNPA's concern relating to the viability of the proposed Syngenta policy and the appeal decision for the Fernhurst Business Park site).

Bridgelands, Verdley Place (Policy SA4)

The site was formerly part of the ICI estate supporting activities at the Syngenta site. There is an extant permission for a commercial scheme (which includes the Syngenta site). The South Downs Integrated Landscape Character Assessment (SDILCA) refers to the "modification of areas of former enclosure to allow more modern farming methods to be adopted (particularly around the Verdley Place Horticultural Research Station)...however these small patches of modern fields do not affect the essentially medieval appearance of the landscape." (para. O.1.5) Under 'landscape management issues/development considerations' specific to the Milland Basin, the SDILCA queries whether there would be an opportunity to enhance the setting and identity of villages

¹ A concern raised at Pre-Submission stage by Brian Dodd's Pre-Submission Review of the Fernhurst Neighbourhood Plan, Mediation and Planning Services (2013)

and developments through appropriate planting which is in keeping with the existing landscape pattern- including at Verdley Place (para. O1.12).

The policy refers to the requirement for a “green infrastructure strategy”: the supporting text in paragraph 5.70 explains how this will demonstrate how connectivity between the site and existing green infrastructure networks will be enhanced. As with Syngenta, this is an important consideration in determining the sustainability of any proposal (particularly since the proposal includes an element of affordable housing). The impact of the proposal on landscape character very much depends on what management arrangements are put in place. It is welcomed that the policy seeks to retain the “predominantly green parts of the site”, however it is the long-term management of this area which needs to be assured – the policy needs to be more precise as to how this undeveloped land and the mature trees will be maintained. Particular opportunities could arise from habitat management, succession planting for the mature trees and measures to enhance integration of the site with the surrounding landscape character (e.g. incorporation of new tree planting which is consistent with surrounding tree patterns).

The neighbourhood plan states “*the site has not been used for commercial activity of any form since at least 2000*”. This is a crucial statement in view of the overall acceptability of the approach. The site does not have a number of active small businesses like Hurstfold.

Recommendation: this policy should refer to the long-term management of the site, particularly the area of open space to ensure the proposal positively contributes to conserving and enhancing the local landscape character, in line with the first National Park Purpose.

Fernhurst Business Park (Policy EMI)

The submission version of the Plan features a new policy which provides for additional commercial floorspace (B1/B2/B8). This involves the use of an “*existing yard area*” to provide new-build to the rear of existing buildings on the estate (para. 13.5). A broadly similar site was subject to an appeal in 2008/9 (APP/L3815/A/08/2078644). The Inspector concluded that the far south-west of the site until 2007 appeared to comprise of open grassland or similar. He considered it had not been demonstrated that the appeal site was part of the Business Park, nor that the appeal site as a whole was previously developed land. He observed the site’s elevated position about 2m above the adjoining area of the Business Park, which would make the proposed scheme visually prominent.

The neighbourhood plan policy does not adequately acknowledge this constraint identified by the Planning Inspector: “*development of a similar scale and layout to the existing development on the site*” could be as large as the appeal development. The creation of a new access onto the A286 would add to the visual impact of the business/industrial park. The site is open to the road and is not well screened. There are already clear views of car parking and industrial activity from the collection of various unconnected industrial building over much of the site. Views would be opened up over the site from the south due to tree removal which would be needed to facilitate this access. The existing residential property facing onto the A286 would be surrounded by industrial activity. This proposal should be removed from the Neighbourhood Plan. This, in turn, heightens the likelihood of the Hurstfold policy being undeliverable. The Fernhurst Business Park allocation does not appear to have been separately tested in the Sustainability Appraisal, although its merits in being located on the A286 (rather than small country lanes) and away from ancient woodland are briefly referenced.

Recommendation: this policy should be deleted as the site has previously been subject to an appeal decision. The Inspector had raised concerns about the visibility of the site and whether the whole site could be defined as previously developed land.

Syngenta (Policy SA2)

This site is far larger in scale compared to the other sites, which only propose a relatively modest quantum of development. Syngenta is proposed for 150 dwellings, with unspecified support for commercial and leisure/tourism subject to market demands. This is a far greater level of housing than is needed to meet the parish of Fernhurst's housing need. The SDNPA Local Plan Options Consultation Document identifies Syngenta as one of three important strategic brownfield sites in key locations in the National Park (para. 6.34) but doesn't specify any proposals at this stage.

SDNPA has been attempting to address the issues relating to this site since it became the Local Planning Authority in 2011. There is an opportunity to explore whether other uses would be appropriate in this location. The SDNPA Design Review Panel in 2013 queried whether it would be feasible to create an exemplar new community in this location. In such a scenario, some residential would be introduced on this site alongside community uses, new green infrastructure and the provision of more or improved employment floorspace. Chichester District Council and SDNPA prepared a planning brief for the site, many of its principles have been carried into the neighbourhood plan. SDNPA is hoping to enter into a Planning Performance Agreement with the landowner.

The site is partly occupied by a number of active businesses (in the Longfield building and former Conference Centre/Pagoda²) which the neighbourhood plan seeks to retain. There is an extant permission (dating from the 1980s) for a 6,200sqm office building on the site of the Highfield building³. This has not been constructed, however the permission has been implemented. A note on the site's recent planning history is provided in **Appendix 6**. The NPPF is clear that planning policies should avoid the long-term protection of sites allocated for employment use where there is no reasonable prospect of the site being used for that purpose.

The level of development envisaged by the Neighbourhood Plan would undoubtedly be a major development meaning the tests in paragraph 116 of the NPPF would have to be met by an applicant seeking planning permission. While the Neighbourhood Plan policy could potentially address all of Fernhurst's housing need (in a relatively unsustainable location), SDNPA is concerned that an allocation even of 150 dwellings may be insufficient to deliver a truly sustainable scheme of outstanding quality and capable of meeting National Park purposes. A difficult policy balance has to be struck between achieving a critical mass of development which can ensure a scheme of the highest quality to justify the exceptional circumstances for a major development in the National Park and the weight given to extant policy which seeks to tightly control development in the countryside. A masterplanning exercise is required which can test different mixes of development on the site. It is too early to tell whether 150 is an appropriate quantum.

The Neighbourhood Plan policy unfortunately has the effect of hindering the likelihood of new employment activity being delivered at Syngenta. SDNPA commissioned a High Level Viability Review for the Syngenta site in early 2014. In testing the relationship, the consultants undertook an iterative approach whereby the assumed commercial floorspace (B class uses⁴) alongside the residential was increased whilst monitoring the overall effect on viability. Commercial floorspace is generally found to be less viable than residential or even not viable at all (meaning it would not be profitable to build). This means that commercial floorspace on this

² Workshops, storage and offices occupy Longfield; the Pagoda is occupied by a leather goods company.

³ Highfield is entirely vacant – a 16,000sqm building arranged over 3 floors designed as a quadrangle.

⁴ T&C Planning Use Classes Order 1987 (as amended): B uses are: B1 Business a) office other than a use within Class A2; b) research and development of products and processes c) for any industrial process (which can be carried out in any residential area without causing detriment to the amenity of the area); B2 General Industry and B8 Storage and Distribution use for storage or as a distribution centre.

site will require cross-subsidy from more viable residential development.

The testing showed that more than 150 dwellings would be required to ensure some commercial floorspace was delivered and 200-250 dwellings would provide more certainty, as well as scope to deliver other community facilities. The Study also concluded the rehabilitation of the Highfield building for office use would be uneconomic and there is likely to be limited market capacity/demand for such an approach.⁵ The High Level Viability Review is included in **Appendix 7**.

Chichester District Council Economic Development officers report an unmet need for accommodation in the district for start-up businesses. Vacancy rates in Fernhurst are low, the site is well situated on a main road with reasonable access to larger settlements in the Western/Central part of the National Park and beyond. No evidence has been suggested to SDNPA that it is not possible to accommodate additional employment floorspace. Policy SA2 is too passive in the way it addresses the prospect of additional commercial floorspace. Rather than suggesting new B1/B2/B8 “shall be permitted”, the policy should expect it to be required. There may be some merit in providing additional commercial floorspace on the Longfield site but other parts of the site may also be suitable locations, subject to the detailed design of scheme and overall mix of uses.

Recommendation: Any application must demonstrate the exceptional circumstances or public interest reason to justify an exception to the presumption against major development in paragraph 116 of the NPPF. SDNPA should seek the deletion of the 150 dwelling target from the Syngenta policy as it is not based on robust evidence. This would allow the quantum of development for the Syngenta site to be determined through a masterplanning approach capable of testing a range of assumptions for the site. Rather than suggesting new B1/B2/B8 “shall be permitted”, the policy should expect it to be provided. It has not been demonstrated why it is necessary to restrict the promotion of commercial floorspace to the Longfield part of the site and therefore, this requirement should be removed.

⁵ High Level Viability Review: Former Syngenta site, Midhurst Road, Fernhurst, Dixon Searle Partnership for SDNPA (2014)