

Wealden District Council Site Selection Methodology

Wealden Draft Local Plan (Regulation 18)

March 2024

How to Contact Us

Planning Policy

Wealden District Council

Council Offices, Vicarage Lane, Hailsham, East Sussex BN27 2AX

Telephone 01892 602008

E-mail: planningpolicy@wealden.gov.uk

Website: www.wealden.gov.uk

If you, or somebody you know, would like the information contained in this document in large print, Braille, audio tape/ CD or in another language please contact Wealden District Council on 01323 443322 or info@wealden.gov.uk

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 Wealden District Council (WDC), in line with the requirements of both the planning regulations and National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) (December 2023) is preparing a new Local Plan that will seek to replace the existing statutory development plan for the District that includes the ‘saved’ policies of the Wealden Local Plan (1998)¹, the Wealden District Core Strategy Local Plan (February, 2013)² and the Affordable Housing Delivery Local Plan (2016)³. The Local Plan will determine the overall strategy for future development across the district to 2040, including the location of both residential and employment development to address housing and employment needs.
- 1.2 As well as identifying how much development the District needs over the plan period, the new Local Plan must endeavour to ‘allocate’ sufficient land in appropriate locations to meeting housing (all types) and employment needs over the plan period. These sites (known as ‘allocations’) will need to be sustainable, deliverable and justified through an extensive evidence base. At a future stage, the Local Plan will progress through to the Examination in Public (EiP) by an independent Planning Inspector who will be appointed to examine whether the Plan is ‘sound’ or not (see paragraph 35 of the NPPF). As part of the evidence base for the emerging Local Plan, potential development sites have been assessed using this draft Site Selection Methodology (SSM). To ensure the Local Plan proposes the most sustainable and deliverable development allocations, which are in conformity with national planning policy and guidance, and will deliver the Local Plan’s vision and objectives, a SSM has been developed and has been followed consistently.
- 1.3 The SSM has been developed to enable a robust and transparent site assessment process, which will inform the decisions the Council makes on future site allocations within the emerging Local Plan. The site selection process takes account of the key requirements identified in the NPPF, Planning Practice Guidance (PPG), as well as the Council’s own evidence base, to develop a shortlist of potential sites that could be allocated in the new Local Plan.

¹ [Wealden Local Plan \(1998\)](#)

² [Wealden District Core Strategy Local Plan \(February, 2013\)](#)

³ [Affordable Housing Delivery Local Plan \(May, 2016\)](#)

Purpose of the Paper

- 1.4 The purpose of this paper is to explain the methodology that will be followed to develop a shortlist of potential housing and employment sites that could be allocated in the new Local Plan at the Regulation 18 stage. Any final decisions on which sites will be allocated will be informed by further evidence base documents such as the Sustainability Appraisal (SA)/Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) and the Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA), which are discussed later in this methodology.

Structure of this Report

- 1.5 The report set's out the Council's SSM and is structured in the following manner:
- Chapter 2 provides a brief summary of national planning policy and guidance in relation to overall growth, sustainability as well as housing and employment development;
 - Chapter 3 provides a summary of the key local evidence base documents relating to site selection that have been completed/ progressed for the emerging Local Plan;
 - Chapter 4 sets out the detailed stages of the SSM;
 - Stage 1: Site Identification – SHELAA;
 - Stage 2: Contribution to the Delivery of the Spatial Strategy;
 - Stage 3: Absolute Constraints;
 - Stage 4: Overall Assessment against Detailed Physical and Planning Constraints; and
 - Stage 5: Availability and Achievability.
 - Chapter 5 provides an outline of the Sustainability Appraisal process and how this links back to the SSM;
 - Chapter 6 provides an overall conclusion at this stage of the site selection process and next steps.

2. National Planning Policy and Guidance

Sustainability of Development

- 2.1 The starting point for local plans and growth is outlined at paragraph 11a of the NPPF, which states that *‘all plans should promote a sustainable pattern of development that seeks to: meet the development needs of their area; align growth and infrastructure; improve the environment; mitigate climate change (including by making effective use of land in urban areas) and adapt to its effects’*.
- 2.2 In addition, in terms of sustainable transport, the NPPF at paragraph 109 confirms that the planning system *‘should actively manage patterns of growth’* and that *‘significant development should be focused on locations which are or can be made sustainable, through limiting the need to travel and offering a genuine choice of transport modes’*. It is recognised in the NPPF that opportunities to maximise sustainable transport solutions will vary between urban and rural areas, and this should be taken into account for plan-making, although this is not necessarily defined in the NPPF.
- 2.3 This SSM will be applied to all housing types, including specialist accommodation for older people, self-build and custom-build and traditional dwellings. It is considered that all housing should be provided in sustainable locations well located to existing sustainable settlements, or form part of new ‘stand-alone’ settlements that can provide those services and opportunities for sustainable transport modes. This approach will contribute to the delivery of sustainable communities within Wealden District and align with the Local Plan’s vision and objectives, as well as national planning policy.
- 2.4 There is no formal national planning policy for devising an SSM. Nonetheless, the NPPF does provide some high-level guidance for the location and assessment of both housing and economic development sites that is presented below.

Housing

- 2.5 The NPPF at paragraph 69 in relation to housing sites confirms that *‘planning policies should identify a sufficient supply and mix of sites, taking into account their availability, suitability and likely economic viability’*. The paragraph goes on to state that planning policies should identify a supply of:
 - a. specific, deliverable sites for years one to five of the plan period; and
 - b. specific, developable sites or broad locations for growth, for years 6-10 and, where possible, for years 11-15 of the plan.

- 2.6 The NPPF at paragraph 74 confirms that the *'supply of large numbers of new homes can often be best achieved through planning for larger scale development, such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns, provided they are well located and designed, and supported by the necessary infrastructure and facilities (including a genuine choice of transport modes)'*. However, in doing so, there would be an expectation that the size and location of the development would support a sustainable community, with sufficient access to services and employment opportunities within the development itself (without expecting an unrealistic level of self-containment), or in larger towns to which there is good access.
- 2.7 This is a key issue for the Council in considering large-scale opportunities for residential and mixed-use development, such as new villages or large-scale extensions to existing villages and towns and links back to whether such developments are or can be made sustainable.

Economic Development

- 2.8 In relation to economic development, the NPPF at paragraph 87 confirms that planning policies *'should recognise and address the specific locational requirements of different sectors. This includes making provision for clusters or networks of knowledge and data-driven, creative or high technology industries; and for the storage and distribution operations at a variety of scales and in suitably accessible locations'*.
- 2.9 Paragraph 89 of the NPPF relates to economic development in rural areas and notes that planning policies *'should recognise that sites to meet local business and community needs in rural areas may have to be found adjacent to or beyond existing settlements, and in locations that are not well served by public transport'*. The NPPF states that it will be important to ensure that development does not have an unacceptable impact on local roads and exploits opportunities to make a location more sustainable. Nonetheless, national planning policy does foresee that some economic development uses (particularly storage and distribution uses) could be provided outside of existing sustainable settlements, particularly in circumstances where it is easily accessible by major roads, or where existing businesses exist, subject to other constraints.

3. Emerging Local Plan Evidence Base for Site Selection

3.1 As part of the Local Plan process, the Council has progressed a new evidence base to help inform the Plan and its policies and importantly in this context, it's emerging site allocations. The main evidence bases produced by the Council (or in progress) on site selection matters are as follows and can be accessed on the Council's evidence base webpage⁴:

- The Strategic Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessment (SHELAA), (February 2024);
- Employment and Economic Study for Eastbourne and Wealden (April, 2022);
- Wealden Landscape Character and Site Assessment Studies;
- Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (Levels 1 and 2);
- Sustainable Settlement Hierarchy Paper;
- Wealden Local Plan Viability Assessment; and
- Habitats Regulation Assessment.

SHELAA

3.2 The SHELAA is an essential piece of evidence which is required to support the Local Plan process and is a technical assessment which considers the availability, suitability and achievability of the land in the District for possible development. The SHELAA is not however, the evidence base that considers which of the submitted sites perform more strongly or sustainably than others and which should be taken forward to allocation.

3.3 In general terms, the SHELAA does not involve the assessment of sites against local planning policy priorities, whereas the process of site selection is undertaken in the emerging Local Plan context and involves making professional planning judgments to produce a list of sites and broad locations suitable for allocation in the Local Plan. The SHELAA represents a broad-brush assessment of the land which, whilst considered comprehensive, does not go into the same level of detail required for the site selection process and sustainability appraisal. As such, the SHELAA provides the starting point for the assessment, helping to identify sites and guide the site selection process.

⁴ Local Plan Evidence Base webpage: <https://www.wealden.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/planning-policy/wealden-local-plan/local-plan-evidence-bases/>

- 3.4 As part of the process of producing the new Local Plan, a new SHELAA was produced in February 2024, which has been published to support the Draft Regulation 18 Local Plan consultation.
- 3.5 As part of the SHELAA process, a formal ‘Call for Sites’ exercise was undertaken between 1 June and 10 August 2020, although, WDC has continued to accept a number of sites for assessment beyond this date. The most recent version of the SHELAA includes all sites that have been submitted to the Council up to 31st March 2023.

Employment and Economic Study for Eastbourne and Wealden

- 3.6 The Employment and Economic Study for Eastbourne and Wealden (April 2022)⁵ considers the need for additional employment floorspace across the District to 2039. The report sets out the quantity of floorspace for B1 uses (now Use Class E), B2 uses and B8 uses required over the plan period. It will be for the Council to determine which sites to allocate employment uses over the plan period by considering sites submitted for employment use in the SHELAA and taking into account the Local Plan evidence base to then inform the plan-making process and overall growth strategy. The study also provides an overview of existing major industrial estates in Wealden District, including whether the industrial estate should be protected for employment uses and whether there are any further opportunities for the intensification of those existing uses.

Landscape Assessments

- 3.7 The Council commissioned Land Use Consultants (LUC) to produce a new and comprehensive landscape evidence base on behalf of the Council, which consists of the following reports:
- Wealden Landscape Character Assessment⁶;
 - Wealden Landscape Sensitivity Assessment to Residential and Employment Development;
 - Wealden Landscape and Visual Appraisal – New Settlements and Large Urban Extensions;
 - Wealden Landscape and Visual Appraisal – Potential Development Sites in the High Weald National Landscape; and
 - Wealden Landscape Sensitivity Assessment – Renewable Energy Development.

⁵ [Employment and Economic Study for Eastbourne and Wealden \(April, 2022\)](#)

⁶ [Wealden District Council - Landscape Character Assessment \(May, 2022\)](#)

- 3.8 These assessments will help to inform policies within the new Local Plan, as well as provide guidance on specific sites within the SHELAA process as to their landscape sensitivity to development and any potential mitigation measures. These assessments will be considered within the site selection process for individual sites and will therefore assist in the site selection process.

Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA)

- 3.9 The Council has produced two SFRAs including the North Wealden Level 1 SFRA⁷ and the Eastbourne and South Wealden Level 1 SFRA⁸, on which the Council worked jointly with Eastbourne Borough Council. Both SFRAs will be used to inform decisions on the location of future development and the preparation of sustainable policies for the long-term management of flood risk. The SFRAs will also be used by applicants to inform site specific flood risk assessments.
- 3.10 The Council has also produced a further SFRA Level 2 that is a more detailed assessment of all sources of flood risk for specific sites requiring targeted assessment. One of the main outcomes of a full Level 2 SFRA is to provide evidence needed for an assessment of feasibility of development sites as well as ensuring that sites will be safe for their lifetime. These assessments will be considered within the site selection process for individual sites.

Sustainable Settlement Strategy

- 3.11 The Sustainable Settlement Strategy looks to provide the Council's evidence on the role and function of settlements across Wealden. The strategy surveys a wide range of settlements within Wealden to determine the services and facilities present and the accessibility to existing public transport networks, providing a basis for understanding the sustainability of settlements across the District. The study has informed the development of a Settlement Hierarchy and the spatial strategy within the emerging Local Plan. This paper contributes, alongside other evidence base studies, to where new development should be focused and will feed into the site selection process and SA.

⁷ [Wealden Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment \(May, 2022\)](#)

⁸ [Eastbourne and Southern Wealden Level 1 Strategic Flood Risk Assessment \(September, 2022\)](#)

Wealden Local Plan Viability Assessment

- 3.12 The Council has also commissioned BNP Paribas to undertake a viability study for the emerging Local Plan. This initial report supporting the Regulation 18 Local Plan tests the ability of developments to accommodate emerging draft Local Plan policies alongside alternative rates of the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) to those in the adopted Charging Schedule. The aim of the study is to assess at a high level the viability of hypothetical development typologies that represent the types of sites that are expected to come forward over the life of the plan to test the impact of emerging policies.
- 3.13 Between the Regulation 18 and the Regulation 19 stage of the Local Plan, the Council will commission further work on development viability for specific development sites within the draft Local Plan. This information will feed into the SSM at the Regulation 19 stage and will influence its outcomes.

Habitat Regulations Assessment

- 3.14 The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017 (Habitat Regulations)⁹ as amended, transpose the requirements of EC Directive 2009/147/EC on the Conservation of Wild Birds (the Birds Directive) and EC Directive 94/43/EEC on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (the Habitats Directive). The Habitat Regulations set out a requirement for a HRA to be applied to all land use plans to assess the potential effect of a plan against the conservation objectives of European Sites including SACs, SPAs and Ramsar Sites.
- 3.15 There are a number of European Sites within Wealden District that need to be protected including the Ashdown Forest SAC and SPA, and the Pevensy Levels SAC and Ramsar Site. The HRA considers the protected areas against the Regulation 18 growth strategy to determine whether there is a detrimental impact to any of the European Sites identified (either within or outside the District).
- 3.16 The HRA has informed the emerging Wealden Local Plan (Regulation 18) and confirms that within a 400-metre buffer zone around Ashdown Forest Special Protection Area (SPA), mitigation measures are unlikely to be capable of protecting the integrity of the SPA and, therefore, residential development will not be permitted on sites where the curtilage of a property falls within 400m from the SPA.
- 3.17 Proposals for a net increase in residential development between 400m and 7km from Ashdown Forest SPA will be required to contribute to mitigation in the form of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspace (SANG) and a financial contribution to the Ashdown Forest Strategic Access Management and Monitoring (SAMM) Strategy.

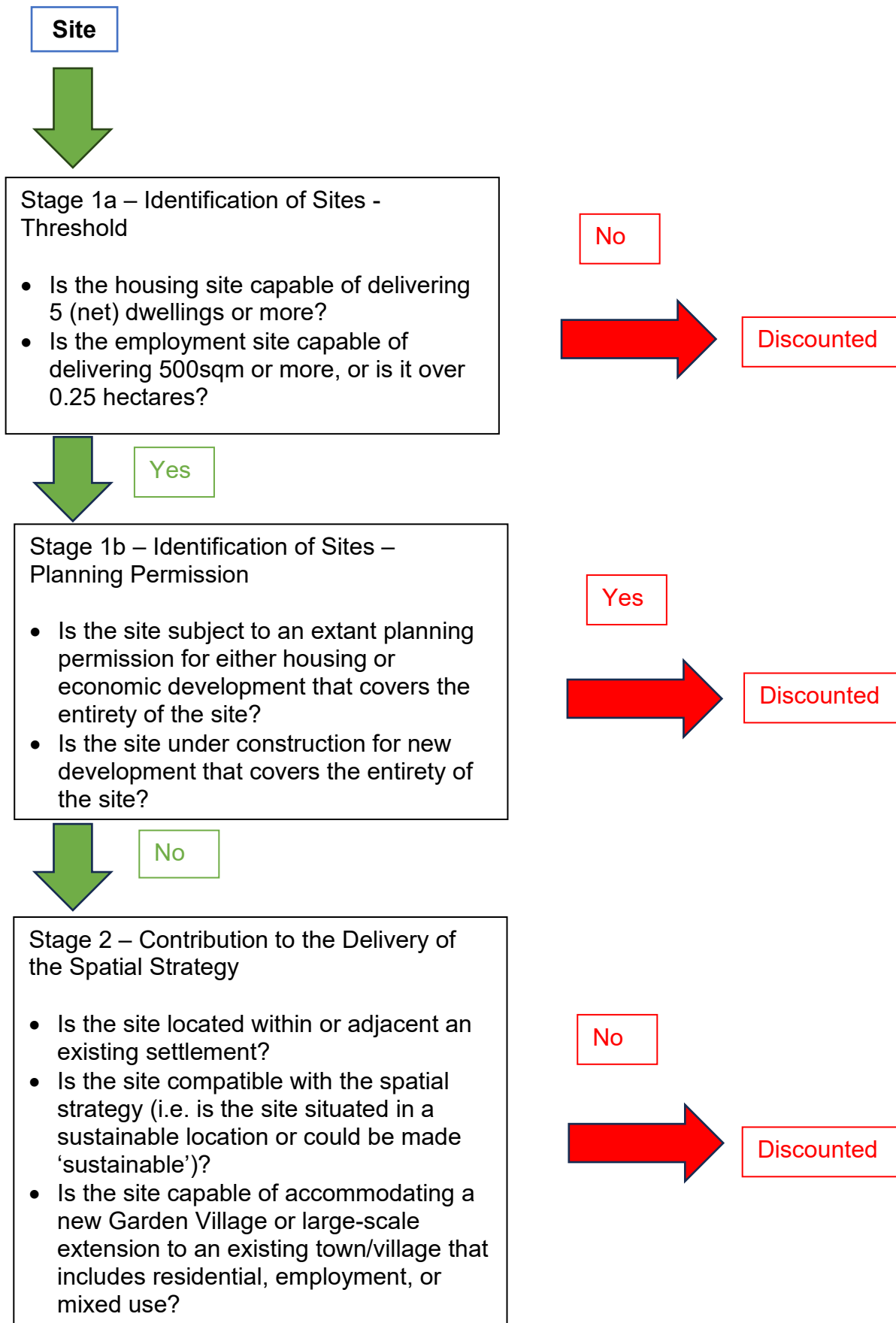
⁹ [The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017](#)

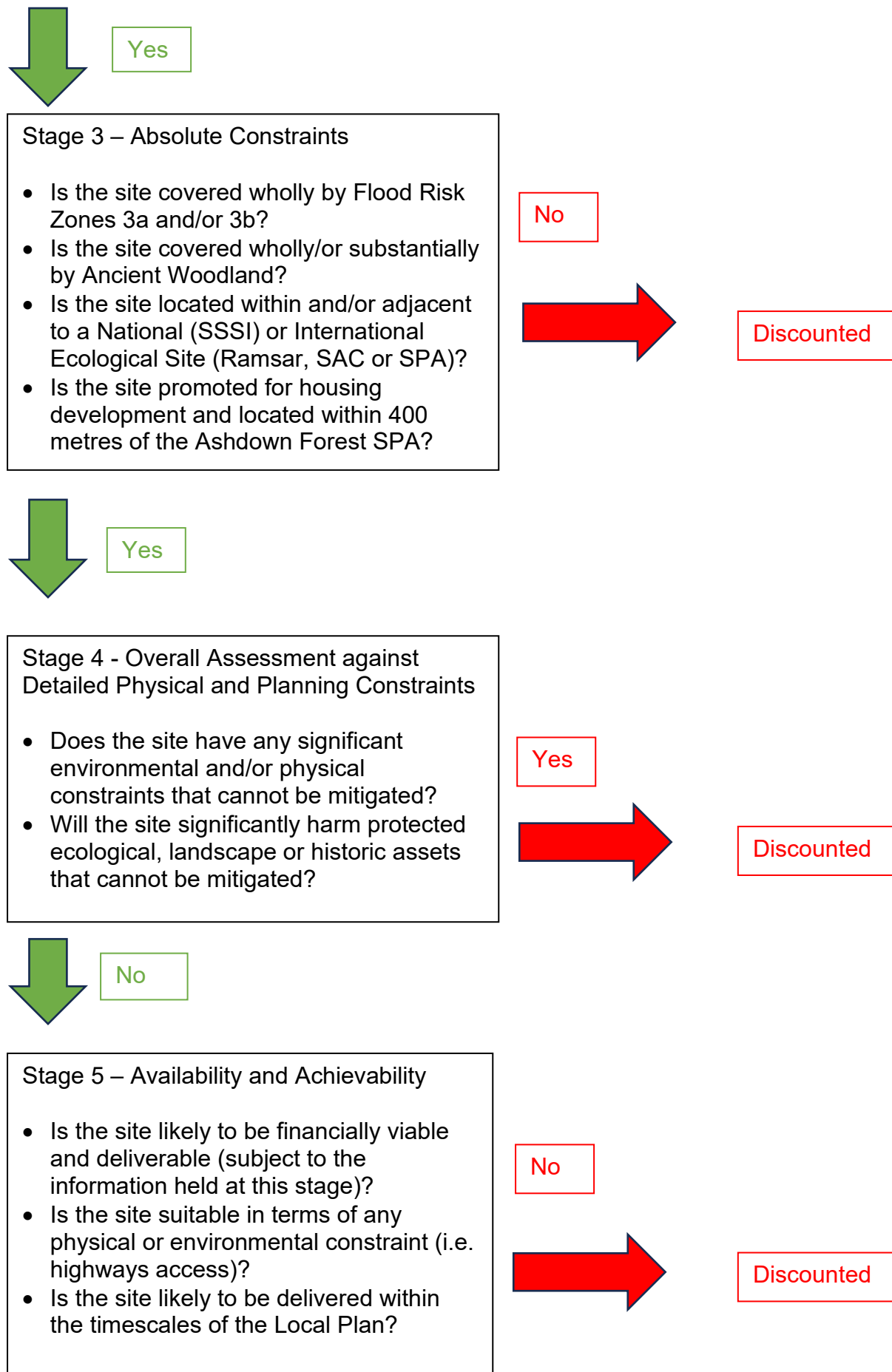
4. Site Selection Process Methodology

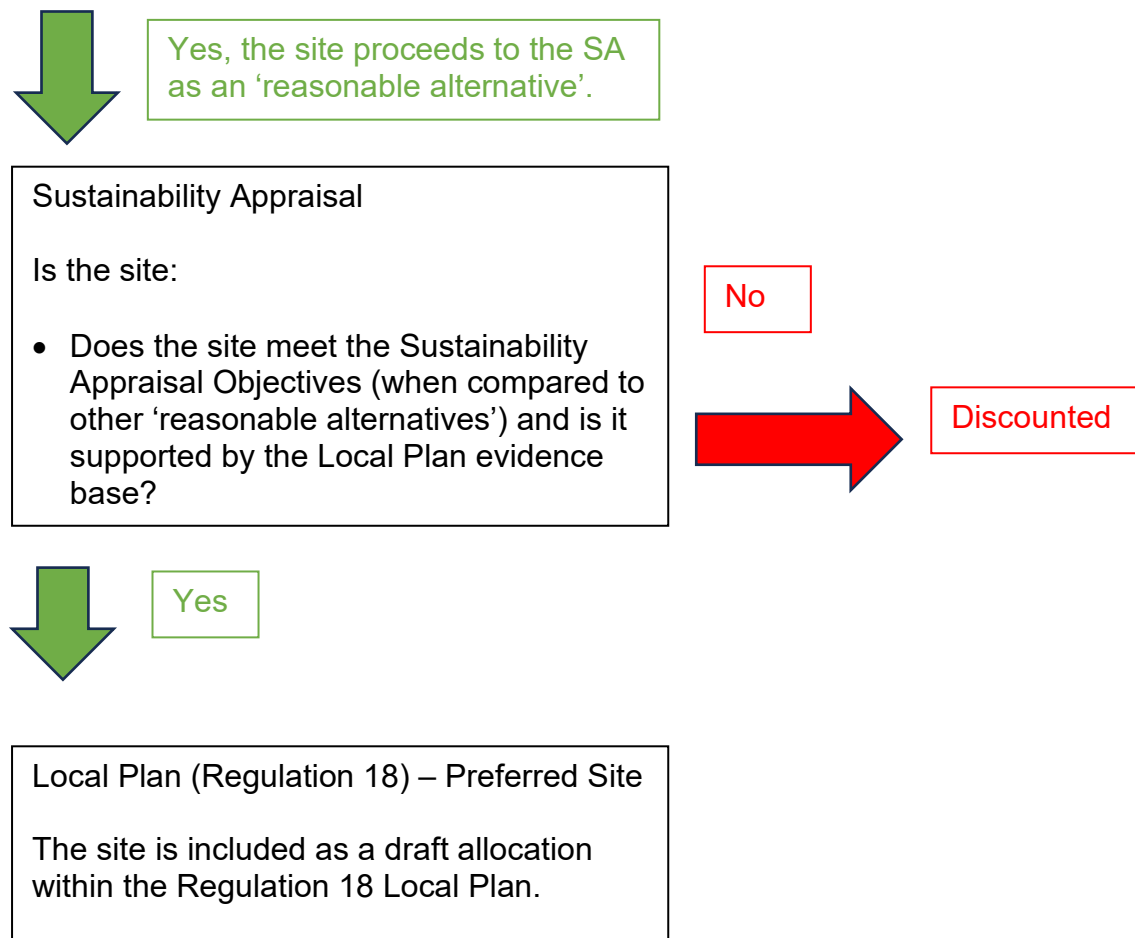
Site Selection Process – Overview

- 4.1 The site selection process has been developed to determine the most sustainable and developable sites in accordance with the NPPF, which will ensure that the site selection is consistent with the principles of sustainable development. This process helps to eliminate sites at an earlier stage than the SA, where it is known that there are specific reasons why sites should not be considered a 'reasonable alternative' in the SA. This SSM explains the steps that will be undertaken for each stage. A flowchart for the site selection process is shown below.

Figure 1 – Site Selection Methodology Flowchart







4.2 The overall site selection methodology can be summarised in five stages, and this is set out in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Overview of Site Selection Process

Stage	Site Assessment Process Overview
Stage 1: Site identification – SHELAA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The identification of sites through the SHELAA process. <p><u>Size threshold</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the housing site capable of delivering 5 (net) dwellings or more? Is the employment site capable of delivering 500sqm or more, or is it over 0.25 hectares? <p><u>Planning Permission</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the site subject to an extant planning permission for either housing or economic development that covers the entirety of the site? Is the site under construction for new development that covers the entirety of the site?
Stage 2: Contribution to the delivery of the spatial strategy	<p><u>Site's Contribution to Sustainable Development</u></p> <p><u>Housing Sites</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the site located within an existing settlement within the sustainable settlement hierarchy? Is the site located adjacent to an existing settlement within the sustainable settlement hierarchy? Is the site compatible with the spatial strategy (i.e. is the site situated in a sustainable location or could it be made 'sustainable')? Is the site capable of accommodating a new Garden Village or large-scale extension to an existing town/village that includes residential, employment, or mixed uses? <p><u>Employment Sites</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the site located in an accessible location, with links to the major road network? Is the site situated in close proximity to other businesses?
Stage 3: Absolute constraints	<p><u>Absolute Constraints</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the site wholly located within Flood Risk Zones 3a and/or 3b?

Stage	Site Assessment Process Overview
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Does the site contain, either wholly or in part any ancient woodland or is the site located adjacent to ancient woodland that would prevent development? Is the site located within or adjacent to an international or national designated site for nature conservation (i.e. Ramsar Site, Special Area of Conservation (SAC), Special Protection Area (SPA) or a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI))? <p><u>Housing Sites only</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In the case of sites promoted for housing development, is the site located within the 400-metre zone of influence of the Ashdown Forest SPA?
Stage 4: Overall assessment against detailed physical and planning constraints	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consideration of technical/physical constraints of the site (for example highways, topography, utility providers and capacity); and Consideration of other non-absolute constraints (e.g. heritage issues, ecological issues, landscape protections etc.).
Stage 5: Availability and achievability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is the site available for development now and is the site achievable, for example, are there any known issues that would impede the site coming forward (i.e. viability, legal issues, physical constraints such as highway access)? Does the evidence indicate that the site could be delivered within the plan period?

- 4.3 For each of the stages identified above, a number of questions have been asked for each site to determine whether it can proceed to the next stage of the site selection process.

Stage 1: Site Identification - SHELAA

- 4.4 Paragraph 69 of the NPPF (December 2023) states that ‘*strategic policy-making authorities should have a clear understanding of the land available in their area through the preparation of a strategic housing land availability assessment.*’
- 4.5 The SHELAA is an evidence-based document, which lists all possible housing and economic development sites that have been put forward for development and provides a high-level assessment of the potential of those sites for

development. The role of the SHELAA is to provide information on the range of sites which are available to meet housing and employment needs in the District (excluding the portion of the District within the South Downs National Park (SDNP)).

- 4.6 In terms of identifying sites, the PPG¹⁰ provides a list of additional sources, alongside the SHELAA, which can be used to identify sites. In accordance with the PPG, WDC has used additional means of site identification outside of the SHELAA process to identify sites for assessment in the emerging Local Plan process. The full list of sources used by WDC to identify sites is available in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Sources used to identify sites for assessment for potential allocation in the new Local Plan

Sites identified by the Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Existing housing allocations; - Existing employment allocations; - Sites with unimplemented planning permissions for housing or economic development; - Sites with planning permission for housing that are under construction; - Sites where planning permission has been refused or withdrawn – whilst a site may have been refused permission it has still been included as it may be possible to overcome those reason(s) for refusal at a later stage. For example, an application may have been refused previously on the grounds of density, meaning an application for fewer units on the same site could be feasible; - Vacant and derelict land and buildings; - Surplus public sector land and land within the local authority ownership; - Land in non-residential use which may be suitable for redevelopment such as commercial buildings.
Sites submitted to the Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sites submitted to the Council SHELAA by individuals, landowners or agents; - A formal ‘Call for Sites’ exercise was held between 1 June and 10 August 2020;

¹⁰ [Paragraph: 011 Reference ID: 3-011-20190722](#)

Sites submitted to the Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Targeted call for sites in strategic areas for growth identified by the Council. The landowners of identified areas were sent a letter asking them to submit their site to the SHELAA;- Details on the SHELAA together with New Site Form and Site Review Form have been available on the Council's website;- The Council has engaged constructively with the applicants of large-scale strategic sites to understand deliverability and achievability.

- 4.7 The PPG also confirms that plan-makers, for the SHELAA process, will need to assess the suitability, availability and achievability of sites, including whether the site is economically viable. It is considered that this will provide information on which a judgement can be made as to whether a site can be considered deliverable within the next five years, or developable over the longer period. A full explanation of the SHELAA methodology for WDC can be found at our SHELAA webpage¹¹.

Eliminating Sites at Stage 1

Size Threshold

- 4.8 The PPG¹² in relation to the SHELAA process confirms that plan-makers will need to assess a range of different site sizes from small-scale sites to opportunities for large-scale development such as village and town extensions and new settlements where appropriate. However, the PPG states it is appropriate for the SHELAA to only consider all sites capable of delivering 5 or more dwellings, or economic development on sites of 0.25 hectares (or 500 square metres of floorspace) and above. WDC has adopted the same approach for its SHELAA, which is outlined in the methodology. The SSM will not consider the allocation of potential housing or employment sites that fall below this size threshold.

¹¹ [Wealden District Council SHELAA webpage](#)

¹² [Paragraph: 009 Reference ID: 3-009-20190722](#)

- 4.9 The only exception is where smaller sites may have alignment value with larger adjacent sites and/or could make a contribution towards a place-based approach to development in the area. In these instances, some smaller sites have been included for consideration as potential site allocations where appropriate. All sites that are considered 'too small for assessment' will be labelled as such for transparency in the write-up for each Parish.

Sites with Planning Permission

- 4.10 There are a number of sites that have been identified through the SHELAA process that have now obtained planning permission for either housing or economic development, which covers the entirety of the site, or the entirety of the net developable area (i.e. there is no further land to develop). In such cases, where a site already has planning permission for development and is either in progress (i.e. under construction) or is expected to be delivered within the next 5-year period, the SSM will eliminate the site at this stage. The Council already considers such sites as 'commitments' within its emerging Local Plan and expects those sites to come forward for development within the plan period. These sites are outlined within the Council's Five-Year Housing Land Supply Statement¹³ with respect to housing development, which is updated regularly.
- 4.11 It is noted that during the process of producing the Local Plan some sites, that have planning permission at the time of writing for residential or employment development, may lapse. The site selection process will be revisited at the Regulation 19 stage of the Local Plan and if a planning permission has lapsed, the Council will reconsider the site (particularly the reasons for the lapse of the planning permission) and reassess the site through the SSM.
- 4.12 In cases where only part of the site has planning permission for new residential/employment development, the Council will make a professional judgment on the remaining part of the land as to whether it meets the size threshold, or whether absolute constraints would render the site unsuitable. In cases where further development could come forward (subject to constraints), the sites have been assessed through the SSM.
- 4.13 All SHELAA sites that have an 'extant planning permission' for residential or employment development that covers the entirety of the site will be labelled as such for transparency in the write-ups for each Parish.

¹³ [Wealden District Council - Five Year Housing Land Supply Statements](#)

Stage 2: Contribution to the Delivery of the Spatial Strategy

- 4.14 As discussed above, the NPPF at paragraph 11 confirms that Local Plans should apply the presumption in favour of sustainable development and that *‘all plans should promote a sustainable pattern of development that seeks to meet the development needs of their area’*. At paragraph 16 of the NPPF, it goes on to state that Local Plans should *‘be prepared with the objective of contributing to the achievement of sustainable development’*¹⁴ and be *‘prepared positively, in a way that is aspirational but deliverable’*.
- 4.15 In order for development to be considered sustainable, it needs to be supported by the appropriate infrastructure and services, such as shops, places of employment, education, health care facilities and/or sustainable modes of travel (i.e. rail and mass transit). It is considered that development that is isolated and disconnected from existing settlements is unlikely to contribute towards a sustainable pattern of development. In addition, the Council is also required to consider whether development needs can be met without adversely impacting areas or assets of importance, such as designated biodiversity sites and irreplaceable habitats, national landscapes such as the South Downs National Park and High Weald National Landscape, designated heritage assets or areas at risk from flooding or that would impede meeting climate change targets.
- 4.16 Stage 2 of the site selection process seeks to exclude those sites that will not contribute to a sustainable pattern of development. An assessment, using professional judgment, has been made regarding the degree of separation from a ‘sustainable settlement’ (as defined in the emerging Regulation 18 Local Plan). This assessment is based on the consideration of:
- The proximity of the site to a ‘sustainable settlement’;
 - The physical separation from the site from the existing built-up area of settlements in Wealden District, such as ancient woodland, major roads and watercourses;
 - The ability to safely access the site, on foot or through cycling, via an existing footpath from the nearest settlement;
 - The ability of the site to provide safe pedestrian access for potential occupiers of the site to the nearest settlement through new footpaths (including on existing highways); and
 - The ability of the site to provide new bus stops or links to other sustainable modes of transport (i.e. railway) or village/town centres.

¹⁴ This is also a legal requirement of local planning authorities exercising their plan-making functions (section 39(2) of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004).

- 4.17 If it is considered that the site cannot overcome any of the issues assessed above at this stage, then the site will not be subject to any further assessment as part of the SSM, as the site would not represent sustainable development and be rejected. All sites that are considered 'isolated' will be concluded as such for transparency in the write-up for each Parish.

Strategic Sites

- 4.18 A number of sites submitted to the WDC as part of the SHELAA process are considered of such a significant scale that they could act as a 'stand-alone' settlement, supported by on-site infrastructure and services, which could enable them to be self-sufficient and deliver sustainable places in their own right. Indeed, the NPPF at paragraph 74 states that the *'supply of large numbers of new homes can often be best achieved through planning for larger scale development, such as new settlements or significant extensions to existing villages and towns, provided they are well located and designed, and supported by the necessary infrastructure and facilities (including a genuine choice of transport modes)'*.
- 4.19 In assessing large scale sites, the local planning authority needs to assess whether the size and location of the site will support a sustainable community, with sufficient access to services and employment opportunities within the development itself (without expecting an unrealistic level of self-containment), or in larger towns to which there is good access. If it is considered that the site can support a sustainable community, the site automatically goes to the next stage of SSM.

Employment Sites

- 4.20 The approach to selecting employment sites is different in the NPPF in terms of location and requires striking the right balance between the location and scale of sites to ensure integrated strategies with housing and other land uses, support for sustainable travel modes, and a portfolio of sites which meet the development needs of businesses and the wider economy.
- 4.21 There are a number of qualitative factors that have been considered and these include:
- The locational needs for industry (Use Class B2) and storage and distribution uses (Use Class B8), including access to the Strategic Road Network (particularly the A22, A27, A26 and A272);
 - The compatibility with surrounding land uses;
 - Opportunities to benefit from clustering dynamics with other similar businesses;
 - The demand for employment premises; and
 - Improving and modernising existing premises to meet existing business needs.

- 4.22 In short, for employment uses, the site does not necessarily need to be within and/or adjacent to existing settlements. The site could still be suitable in terms of location if adjacent to existing businesses of a similar type or if it is situated in an accessible location for the Strategic Road Network, subject to constraints. Nonetheless, a site promoted for employment uses will be rejected at this stage in the SSM if it is not considered to meet any of the locational criteria above and will be deemed 'isolated'.

Stage 3: Absolute Constraints

- 4.23 All sites that are considered to have 'absolute constraints' will be sifted out of the site selection process at this stage, as they are not considered to be 'reasonable alternatives' for the SA, or indeed suitable to be allocated for development in the emerging Local Plan.
- 4.24 This initial sift focuses on those sites which are entirely covered by an absolute constraint, or where a significant proportion of a site is affected. This will ensure that sites are not excluded in their entirety at this stage where alterations to the boundary could be made to remove absolute constraints at a later date, or where areas of absolute constraints could be considered for other uses (i.e. open space or green infrastructure).
- 4.25 The initial list of 'absolute constraints' are considered to be the following:
- The site is wholly located on Flood Risk Zones 3a and/or 3b;
 - The site is wholly located on ancient woodland (or sufficiently so and/or surrounded by ancient woodland to prevent development);
 - The site is located wholly on, as well as located adjacent to nationally/internationally designated sites of importance for their biodiversity (i.e. SSSIs, Ramsar Site, SACs and SPAs); and
 - The site is promoted for housing development and is located within the 400-metre influence zone of the Ashdown Forest SPA.
- 4.26 These constraints are discussed in further detail below.

Flood Risk

- 4.27 The NPPF¹⁵ and PPG¹⁶ clearly set out that development for housing/employment uses is not appropriate in the flood plain. Any sites which fall entirely or largely within Flood Risk Zone 3b (functional floodplain) will therefore not be assessed further in the SSM.

¹⁵ Annex 3: Flood Risk Vulnerability Classification

¹⁶ [Paragraph: 077 Reference ID: 7-077-20220825](#)

4.28 For land promoted for employment development, it is noted that land falling within Flood Risk Zone 3a may be made appropriate for that type of use subject to the 'sequential test' as outlined in the NPPF at paragraph 167 and can therefore continue to be included at this stage in the SSM process. For land promoted for housing development, land falling within Flood Risk Zone 3a will be subject to both the 'sequential test' and the 'exceptions test', where it will need to be demonstrated¹⁷ that:

- development that has to be in a flood risk area will provide wider sustainability benefits to the community that outweigh flood risk; and
- the development will be safe for its lifetime taking account of the vulnerability of its users, without increasing flood risk elsewhere, and, where possible, will reduce flood risk overall.

4.29 If a site is promoted for housing and includes a mixture of Flood Risk Zone 3a and 3b, a professional judgement, based on the Strategic Flood Risk Assessment (SFRA) and the quantum of the land in the flood risk zones will be made as to whether the site should proceed any further in the site selection process.

Sites of International and National Ecological Importance

4.30 The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017¹⁸ as well as paragraph 186 of the NPPF set out strong levels of protection for a number of designated ecological sites and confirms that development on land within or outside such sites, which is likely to have an adverse effect on it (either individually or in combination with other developments), should not be permitted. As such, sites will be excluded if they are wholly or partially situated within an international or national ecological site, including:

- Special Protection Areas (SPAs);
- Special Areas of Conservation (SAC);
- Ramsar Sites; and
- Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

¹⁷ [Paragraph: 031 Reference ID: 7-031-20220825](#)

¹⁸ [The Conservation of Habitats and Species Regulations 2017](#)

Ancient Woodland

- 4.31 Paragraph 186 of the NPPF confirms that when determining planning applications, *‘development resulting in the loss or deterioration of irreplaceable habitats (such as ancient woodland and ancient or veteran trees) should be refused, unless there are wholly exceptional reasons¹⁹ and a suitable compensation strategy exists’*. Therefore, a site covered by ancient woodland will be excluded from further assessment. In addition, where the ancient woodland covers the majority of the site and it is unlikely that a suitable buffer (normally at least 25 metres) could be provided for the development, then such sites would also be excluded from further assessment.

Ashdown Forest SPA

- 4.32 As part of the emerging Local Plan, the District Council has undertaken a Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA) to test whether the emerging Local Plan, in combination with other plans and projects, is likely to have an adverse impact on the integrity of the Ashdown Forest SPA and SAC.
- 4.33 It has been determined through the HRA process that increased recreational activity arising from new residential development and related population growth is likely to disturb the protected near-ground and ground nesting birds of Ashdown Forest. With agreement from Natural England and other neighbouring local planning authorities affected by the Ashdown Forest SPA, it is agreed that mitigation measures are necessary to counteract the effects of a potential increase in recreational pressure on the Ashdown Forest SPA arising from new residential development within a 7km zone of influence around the Ashdown Forest SPA (to include provision of SANGs and monetary contributions towards the SAMMS).
- 4.34 With respect to ‘absolute constraints’, it is also agreed that within a 400-metre buffer zone around the Ashdown Forest SPA, such mitigation measures are unlikely to be capable of protecting the integrity of the SPA and, therefore, a net increase in residential development will not be permitted. As such, sites promoted for residential development will be excluded from further assessment if they are wholly contained within the 400-metre buffer zone of the Ashdown Forest SPA. Sites promoted for employment development that are wholly contained within the 400-metre buffer zone of the Ashdown Forest SPA are unaffected.

¹⁹ For example, infrastructure projects (including nationally significant infrastructure projects, orders under the Transport and Works Act and hybrid bills), where the public benefit would clearly outweigh the loss or deterioration of habitat.

Stage 4: Overall Assessment against Detailed Physical and Planning Constraints

- 4.35 This stage will concentrate on non-absolute constraints, how each site performs against them and whether the constraints can be overcome. The assessment does not provide a set scoring system or standards for each site to achieve, but rather, each site will be considered qualitatively against each constraint. The site proforma provided at Appendix A of this report provides the breadth of issues considered for each site and provides a commentary on each constraint, unless it is not relevant for the particular site. All sites concluded as 'suitable' at Stage 4 are automatically taken forward to the final stage of the SSM relating to availability and achievability.

Consideration of Physical/Technical Constraints

- 4.36 This stage involves the consideration/assessment of physical and environmental constraints, in accordance with the PPG²⁰ on Land Availability Assessments. A desktop assessment was initially undertaken to identify any site constraints.
- 4.37 Appendix A of this SSM outlines a number of physical/technical constraints that have been recorded and should be considered for each site. This includes:
- Access to highways;
 - Access to pedestrian and cycle infrastructure;
 - Groundwater and drainage;
 - Topography;
 - Contamination;
 - Adjacent Land Uses (noise and air pollution specifically);
 - Utility issues and capacity; and
 - Pylons.
- 4.38 Where significant technical and physical constraints are identified for individual sites, the Council has sought to gain specialist advice from the Local Highway Authority on matters such as vehicular access and Southern Water on matters of water supply for example. This has included a strategic assessment of whether any constraints identified can be mitigated, for example through on-site infrastructure provision or the use of Section 106 financial contributions.

²⁰ [The PPG on Housing and Economic Land Availability Assessments](#)

- 4.39 For example, site access is a key consideration of the site selection process. However, to be confident that sites will be able to be accessed via a safe and satisfactory highways solution, including any associated works to nearby junctions etc., and ultimately be confident that any proposed allocations are deliverable/developable in the plan period, the Council did share early information on SHELAA sites with East Sussex County Council (ESCC) to garner views on their deliverability at that stage. It is recognised that the process of selecting sites is iterative and that further liaison with both landowners/developers and ESCC may be needed in the future, particularly in terms of mitigation measures.
- 4.40 It is known that there will be some ‘missing’ information for sites, particularly in terms of utility providers and the cumulative impacts of proposed allocation sites on the capacity/adequacy of existing infrastructure. The Council will continue to liaise with infrastructure providers as part of Local Plan process in the lead up to the Regulation 19 Local Plan and will update the site selection process accordingly at that stage.
- 4.41 Where significant technical and/or physical constraints have been identified, and this cannot be mitigated, those sites have not been taken forward for further consideration in the SSM.

Consideration of Non-Absolute Constraints

- 4.42 Stages 2 (Contribution to the Delivery of the Spatial Strategy) and 3 (Absolute Constraints) of the SSM deal with several of the key criteria for site selection and reject sites as appropriate. However, there are a number of other non-absolute constraints (see the Site Pro Forma at Appendix A) that also need to be considered as part of the SSM that includes the following:
- High Weald National Landscape and landscape impact more generally;
 - Flood risk;
 - Heritage and historic assets;
 - Ecological designations;
 - Agricultural land classification;
 - Local green spaces and open space;
 - Land type (brownfield/greenfield)
 - Neighbouring land uses; and
 - Arboricultural impacts.

- 4.43 For each site, all the above issues have been considered and a commentary provided in a qualitative manner, using information from the local evidence base, including the SHELAA process. An element of planning judgment has been used to consider all these factors and decide whether a site is suitable to move to the next stage of the SSM. In short, sites which do not have a significant adverse impact against each of the criteria will have greater chance of moving forward to the next stage, compared to those sites where mitigation may be required, or where there may be a level of harm that cannot be mitigated (for example, substantial landscape harm to the High Weald National Landscape).
- 4.44 Where it is considered there would be significant harm to protected ecological, landscape or historic assets, and where mitigation is not possible, the site is not taken forward for further consideration within the SSM.

Stage 5: Availability and Achievability

- 4.45 This stage considers whether a site is deliverable or not and the timescales and phasing of delivery, if appropriate (usually for large sites). The starting point will be the assessment of achievability as contained within the Council's SHELAA process and in the PPG. This includes consideration of:
- Land ownership;
 - Access to the road network (including whether the site can genuinely provide a new pedestrian and vehicular access/ransom strips etc);
 - Key infrastructure requirements and any identified capacity issues;
 - Lead-in times, delivery rates and market capacity;
 - Barriers to delivery (including whether or not the proposed site will need to re-provide an existing use on site (i.e. playing pitch, or employment uses)) and whether an acceptable strategy is in place to do so;
 - Dwelling or floorspace capacity taking into account constraints and other relevant factors;
 - Is the site likely to be delivered during the plan period; and
 - Legal constraints (i.e. known covenants or unwilling landowners).
- 4.46 The deliverability of sites has also been assessed. This has involved a high-level assessment of whether development will be economically viable to indicate whether there is a reasonable prospect of a site being delivered and when, a key requirement of the NPPF (see paragraph 34).

- 4.47 This stage of the SSM will evolve between the draft Regulation 18 Local Plan and the Regulation 19 Local Plan, and is currently considered at a high level, unless there are known issues at a specific site. For the Regulation 19 stage of the Local Plan, the Council will commission further work on development viability for specific development sites within the draft Local Plan. This information will feed into the 'site selection' conclusions at the Regulation 19 stage and may influence its outcomes. This approach will also allow time for the Council to discuss sites with landowners and liaise with infrastructure providers on individual site infrastructure requirements.
- 4.48 All sites concluded as both available and achievable at this stage will then proceed to a more detailed assessment as described below that will include in combination impacts emanating from transport modelling, the HRA process and the Sustainability Appraisal.

5. Sustainability Appraisal Process and Links to Site Selection Methodology

- 5.1 The other key part of the evidence base of the emerging Local Plan is the Sustainability Appraisal (SA), which is a systematic process that must be carried out during the preparation of the Local Plan²¹. The SA is an integral part of the plan making process and from the outset, it must consider ways by which the plan can contribute to improvements in environmental, social and economic conditions as well as means of identifying and mitigating any potential adverse effects of the Plan. The SA also promotes sustainable development by assessing the extent to which the emerging Local Plan policies, when assessed against ‘reasonable alternatives’, will help to achieve the economic, social and environmental objectives of the NPPF (paragraph 8).
- 5.2 Only those sites sifted through the site selection process, which have met all the requirements of stages 1-5 will be subject to the SA. It is considered that only those sites that have met the requirements of the SSM should be defined as ‘reasonable alternatives’ and be considered against the SA objectives.
- 5.3 Those sites have been considered against the 20 SA objectives included in the SA Scoping Report (update) that was published in January 2024²². The findings of this work have helped to identify potential scenarios to address both housing and economic needs in the District and preferred options for growth.
- 5.4 The SA concludes on the most sustainable development options and reports the process in full. An additional topic paper published as part of the Regulation 18 Local Plan (named the ‘Spatial Strategy Topic Paper’) that sets out the preferred development scenario at this stage, taking into account the findings of the SA, as well as other considerations through further evidence testing, which document the reasons for the preferred development scenario to be included within the Regulation 18 Local Plan.

²¹ Section 19 of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 requires a local planning authority to carry out a sustainability appraisal each of the proposals in a plan during its preparation.

²² [Wealden District Council Local Plan – Sustainability Appraisal \(SA\) Scoping Report, January 2024](#)

6. Overall Conclusion and Next Steps

- 6.1 The purpose of this paper is to explain the methodology that will be followed to develop a shortlist of potential housing and employment sites that have been taken forward into the SA for the new Local Plan at the Regulation 18 stage. This includes the SSM methodology, as well as an explanation as to how other regulatory requirements (i.e. the SA or HRA) feed into the preferred development scenario to be included within the Regulation 18 Local Plan.
- 6.2 This SSM was developed at an earlier part of the Local Plan process and therefore not all detailed site-specific information may yet be available, including future evidence base documents to be provided by the Council (i.e. site-specific viability evidence, or in-combination transport models). The outputs at this stage of the process are therefore subject to change and will evolve as the Council gathers more evidence in the lead into the Regulation 19 Local Plan stage. The Council anticipates that additional sites will be submitted to the SHELAA process during the intervening period, which may alter the conclusions on site selection.
- 6.3 The Council is committed to updating the SSM prior to the Regulation 19 Local Plan and will consider further sites that are submitted through the SHELAA process at that time. Both the HRA and SA/SEA are also iterative processes and will be updated in parallel with the publication of the Local Plan.

Appendix A – Site Selection Proforma

Site Details						
SHELAA Reference	Site Address	Post Code	Size (ha)	Easting	Northing	Parish

Site Plan

Site Characteristics	Commentary
Current Land Use	
Proposed Land Use	
Land Type (Brownfield/Greenfield)	
Neighbouring Land Uses	
Type of Site (Urban, Rural and Peripheral)	

Designations	Commentary
EA Flood Zone Classification	
SFRA Flood Zones	
Ancient Woodland	
AONB	
Landscape Sensitivity	
SSSI	
SAC	

Designations	Commentary
SPA	
Ramsar	
National Nature Reserve (NNR)	
Local Nature Reserve (LNR)	
Local Wildlife Sites (LWS)/Local Geological Site (LGS)	
Wildlife Corridors/Stepping Stones	
Biodiversity Opportunity Area (BOA)	
Priority Habitats	
Woodlands, Trees and Hedgerows	
Conservation Area/ Listed Building/ other Heritage Assets	
Agricultural Land Classification	
Waste or Minerals Safeguarding	

Planning Designations	Commentary
Within Proposed Settlement Boundary	

Planning Designations	Commentary
Outside of Proposed Settlement Boundary	
Proposed Town Centre Boundary	
Proposed Designated Employment Areas	
Local Green Space	

Transport	Commentary
Access to Highway	
Access to Pedestrian/ Cycle Infrastructure	
Access to Public Transport (Buses or Rail)	
Public Right of Way	

Physical Constraints	Commentary
Vehicular/Pedestrian Access	
Groundwater Protection Zone	
Drainage	
Water Courses	
Topography	
Contamination	
Pylons	
Noise	
Utilities	
Adjacent Land Uses (noise, air pollution)	

Availability/ Achievability	Commentary
Single/ Multiple Landowners	
Known Legal Constraints	
Viability Constraints	

Planning Permission	Commentary
Site has Planning Permission	

Planning Permission	Commentary
Site has a Resolution to Grant Planning Permission	
Site has a Lapsed Planning Permission	
Site has no Planning Permission	

Delivery of Spatial Strategy
Summary

Recommendation

Published by
Wealden District Council
Council Offices
Vicarage Lane
Hailsham
East Sussex BN27 2AX
Tel: 01323 443322
Fax: 01323 443333
e-mail: planningpolicy@wealden.gov.uk
Website: www.wealden.gov.uk