

Update on Ford Farm Site and status within the Neighbourhood Plan

Cllrs are aware that that Harberton Parish Neighbourhood Plan process is ongoing and has been since 2013. The site known as 'Ford Farm' has been in discussion as a site in the Neighbourhood Plan. It was included in the 2014 draft and was retained as a site in the 2018 draft, following a round of public consultation in 2015. A site options assessment undertaken in 2023 assessed the Ford Farm site as 'green'; and the summary of a consultation undertaken in 2024 indicated that development of the site was supported in principle, more so if certain conditions were applied. The condition that ranked highest through consultation was 'reducing risk of flooding in Harberton village' closely followed by 'Protecting and enhancing the Harberton stream' and 'Maximising biodiversity around the site'.

What is happening now? (September – April 2025)

- Following the 2024 public consultation, publication of the results and increased interest from members of the public in site allocation across the Parish, it was agreed to ask consultants to review the findings of their Site Options Assessment report. This was to ensure consistency on how AECOM applied their own criteria.
- This work is underway and ongoing. Nothing has reached the point of publication nor has the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group made any final decisions about site allocation.
- A first draft of the revised site options assessment was received in March 2025, which indicated that the status of the Ford Farm site is likely to change from a 'green' site to an 'amber' site. Differences between the two ratings are shown below:
 - 'green' for sites that show no or very few constraints and are thus appropriate as site allocations
 - 'amber' for sites which are potentially suitable if constraints can be resolved
- The possible revision in ratings of this site, and another site in the Parish, was discussed at the last meeting of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, following which members agreed to request a meeting with AECOM to discuss the findings and to better understand them.
- A meeting with AECOM was held on 31st March at which questions about site ratings, application of criteria around access, flood mitigation, definitions of sustainability, and managing the issue of meeting indicative housing targets were discussed.
- AECOM is now taking on board some verbal and written questions in order to provide an updated draft for consideration.

What does it say about Ford Farm in the March 2025 draft Site Options Assessment?

Quoting directly from the report:

"The development of the site would form a natural eastward extension of Harberton along Vicarage Ball. The site is approximately 200m from Harberton village centre, however, Vicarage Ball does not provide a separate footpath, therefore pedestrian safety would need to be considered through the design process. Existing access from Vicarage Ball is along a single lane with poor visibility splay. If suitable vehicular and cycle/pedestrian access and connections were provided, the site may be potentially suitable for development under the provision that these changes are made as part of any future development and are agreed upon by National Highways. Vicarage Ball is also partially sunken, so the topography on site may affect the developable area and site viability. A very small part of the northern section of the site is within Flood Zone 2, which may limit the site capacity. There is an ecological corridor along the stream close to the northern boundary of the site which includes semi mature trees and a hedgerow. Landscaping and natural screening would be necessary to ensure that views across the site from the elevated land to the south are protected. There have been pre-application discussions on the site with proposals for nine new homes. The site is potentially suitable for a limited number of homes if the identified constraints are resolved or mitigated, and could therefore be considered as a potential allocation in the Neighbourhood Plan."

What's different between this wording, and wording in the 2023 draft?

- A paragraph in the 2023 SOA that says that it is appropriate for allocation in the Neighbourhood Plan has been removed.
- The paragraph about vehicular and pedestrian access was added.
- The final paragraph indicating that the site is 'potentially suitable' is now included.

What are the current issues under discussion by the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group?

- That the 2024 public consultation was based on previous Site Options Assessment, at which the site was rated green. Is the consultation therefore valid, or should it be rerun?
- The Environment Agency flood zone boundaries changed in March 2025, placing more of the northern section of the site in Zone 3.
- Flood is an ongoing concern. The flooding chapter on the table for discussion by the Parish Council is important to the Ford Farm site.
- Questions have been asked about safe pedestrian access, and if AECOM have applied their criteria consistently.
- Does Harberton Parish have the capacity to meet indicative housing targets? During the call with AECOM it was commented that evidence from the Site Options Assessments indicates that none of the sites that have come forward are good/suitable for development. The sites are not suitable to meet the indicative housing figures. The AECOM Consultant commented: *It is unusual to do a site assessment where there are so suitable sites. Even where we've allocated sites as amber, they are not great sites. Not sure why you have the sites you have – none are sustainable sites for development. This is one case where there isn't a lot of opportunity for new housing within the villages.* The Steering Group is planning on meeting with South Hams District Council officers to discuss this.

Other topics of conversation from the meeting with AECOM related to Ford Farm

- **How 'sustainability' is defined by National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF)** 'Sustainable' is about access to services and facilities; it's about trying to limit car-based journeys. Flooding comes into it to an extent, but generally when assessing sustainability, you are looking at how you travel to it (a site). There is no fixed definition of what 'considerable distance' means, a rural area and a town are considered differently. AECOM has been asked by the Steering Group to look at how it applies 'considerable distance' to all sites for consistency.
- **Areas at risk of flooding and mitigating flood risk**
 - Steering Group Members asked specific questions about a clause in the NPPF that says, *"inappropriate development in areas at risk of flooding should be avoided by directing development away from areas of highest risk"*. It was noted that there are areas of the Ford Farm site that are in flood Zones 2 and 3, but there is an area of the site that is not in a flood zone, and therefore could be considered developable.
 - It's up to the planning process for the developer to demonstrate that all flood risk mitigated through that development.
- **What the Neighbourhood Plan Steering group does with the information provided by the Site Options Assessment** The RAG ratings provided by AECOMs work assessing the sites takes into account the planning practice guidance and three tests (whether a site is suitable, available and achievable). This includes a professional judgement on whether a site is in conflict with national or local policy. The site options assessment is intended to give Neighbourhood Planning groups enough flexibility to decide on what sites to allocate. There is very deliberately a site selection process: *"You can take those ratings, put forward their own evidence, tying up with the NP objectives, and what the community has told you what it wants. Linking back to objectives, leads to your allocations. You can have evidence to show why you have refined the ratings, as long as you tell the story."*