

***Sustainability Appraisal  
(SA) Report:  
Non-technical Summary***

***Ashurst Wood  
Neighbourhood Plan***

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1	Non-technical summary of the SA Report published for consultation alongside the draft ('pre-submission') version of the Ashurst Wood Neighbourhood Plan	Mark Fessey <b>Principal Consultant</b>	Alex White <b>Associate Director</b>	Alex White <b>Associate Director</b>	January 2015

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# Introduction

AECOM is commissioned to undertake Sustainability Appraisal (SA) in support of the emerging Ashurst Wood Neighbourhood Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan, once in place, will present planning policy and guidance for the neighbourhood area. Alongside the MSDC Local Plan (2004) and the District Plan (once adopted), it will provide a framework for determining planning applications.

SA is a mechanism for considering and communicating the likely effects of a draft plan, and alternatives, with a view to avoiding and mitigating adverse effects and maximising the positives.

This is the **non-technical summary** (NTS) of the SA Report being published alongside a draft version of the plan. This summary should be read alongside the main SA Report document.

## Structure of the SA Report / this non-technical summary

The SA Report (and this NTS) sets out to answer four questions:

1. What's the scope of the SA?
2. What has plan-making / SA involved up to this point?
3. What are the appraisal findings and recommendations at this current stage?
4. What are the next steps?

## What's the Scope of the SA?

An important first step in the SA process involves establishing the 'scope', i.e. those sustainability issues and objectives which should be a focus of the SA, and those that should not. The following is a brief summary of some of the sustainability issues discussed within the SA Report (as falling within the scope of SA). It is important to emphasise that the following list is not comprehensive.

### Environmental issues

- The parish of Ashurst Wood is located within the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB), which was designated in 1983. The parish is made up of large areas of open space, with farmland, ancient woodland, and park areas, and one Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) at Mills Rocks. The Ashdown Forest SPA is also nearby. The Neighbourhood Area also includes one Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI).
- Ashurst Wood is situated on a prominent ridge 400 feet (122 m) above sea level. The elevation location of the village is defined by an attractive countryside setting, being surrounded on all sides by high quality landscape. There are many attractive views looking out from the village, towards the village, and from local rights of way, with extensive views reaching as far as the North Downs to the north, and across the Ashdown Forest to the south.
- There is also easy access to open countryside via the local network of footpaths, which includes the Vanguard Way and the High Weald Landscape Trail. The footpaths also link up with the Sustrans road traffic free cycle path that runs along the old railway line, and links East Grinstead to Groombridge, as well as the Weir Wood Reservoir to the south, which is a Local Nature Reserve.
- The village has a rich and well understood heritage, with close ties to East Grinstead ever since the railway arrived at the town (which lies less than two kilometres to the north-west) in 1855.

### Socio-economic issues

- Ashurst Wood is not a deprived area when measured against national statistics. However, there are some elements of the community, including the elderly and those who live alone, who do not enjoy the same level of prosperity as the wider population. In terms of age, the highest proportion of villagers (412) fall within the census age range age 45 to 59. Over 60% of villagers are aged 30 or above. This indicates an age profile that is somewhat out of balance.
- Ashurst Wood is a popular place for families to live – given high quality countryside and ease of access to employment areas such as at Gatwick, Crawley, Tunbridge Wells, Brighton and London – and this is reflected in relatively high property prices locally.

- Traffic associated with the A22 Lewes Road is a major issue for local residents. Problems are accentuated by rat-running combined with narrow roads, lack of pavements, and on street parking.
- The village is served by direct bus routes to East Grinstead, Tunbridge Wells, Crawley, Uckfield and Haywards Heath/Brighton, and the nearest railway station is at East Grinstead (to London) and Three Bridges in Crawley (to Brighton). The daytime frequency of buses is reasonable but connections to train services at East Grinstead are not always reliable.
- Ashurst Wood is well served with two recreation grounds, and there are several community spaces that can be hired by local groups and residents. There is also a weekly community café.
- Village services include a post office/news store, a larger village shop, two public houses, a hairdresser, a vehicle servicing garage, a blacksmiths/forge, butchers, mobile library (monthly), mobile waste amenity service. Broadband internet speed is an issue.
- According to the 2011 census of 1,269 residents aged 16 to 74, 912 are classed as economically active, with 198 part-time employees, 455 full-time employees, 190 self-employed, 33 full-time students and 36 unemployed (2.9%). The qualifications and skills level of the local population is generally high.
- A large proportion of residents are employed in 'professional occupations, although many others are employed in skilled trades, caring / leisure and other areas of work. There are 75 rail commuters in Ashurst Wood, while 85 people walk or cycle to work, 569 drive a van or car, and 84 work from home.
- There is a limited amount of local employment, including the two village pubs, the village store, post office, ironmongers/forge, butchers, Primary School, Brambletye preparatory school, and businesses located in the small Ivy Dene industrial estate.

## The SA 'framework'

Drawing on the review of sustainability issues, a concise list of sustainability objectives was established. This list of objectives together comprises a methodological 'framework' for the SA.

### Sustainability objectives (the 'SA framework')

	<i>Sustainability objectives</i>
1/Env	Retain the distinctiveness and <b>character</b> of the village by preserving its historic and environmental features.
2/Env	Protect and enhance the <b>natural beauty</b> of AW, including its geology and landform, ridgetop settlement pattern, rights of way and open spaces.
3/Env	Protect the outstanding <b>landscape</b> setting of the village through the reuse of previously developed land and buildings where appropriate, including reuse of materials.
4/Env	Conserve and enhance the <b>biodiversity</b> of the Parish, its wildlife habitats and species, including those of its SSSI,
5/Env	Reduce impact on <b>climate change</b> , and vulnerability to its effects
6/Env	Maintain and improve the <b>water</b> courses and aquifers in the parish, and use and manage water resources in a sustainable manner
7/Env	Encourage reuse, <b>recycling</b> and food composting
8/Env	Reduce the impact of <b>traffic</b> , improving safety for pedestrians, cyclists and horse-riders
9/Soc	Ensure that residents have the opportunity to live in a decent, well-constructed and affordable <b>home</b>
10/Soc	Ensure that the community has adequate access to the key <b>services</b> it needs, including health facilities, convenience shops, schools, recreation and leisure.
11/Soc	Ensure that the community has a high quality and <b>healthy lifestyle</b>
12/Soc	Ensure a <b>cohesive and safe</b> village community
13/Soc	Encourage sense of <b>community</b> and engagement in local issues, and the inclusion of vulnerable groups
13/Econ	Encourage and support local <b>businesses</b> and promote the enhancement of business units, locations and estates.
14/Econ	Facilitate employment opportunities, including home working

# WHAT HAS PLAN-MAKING / SA INVOLVED UP TO THIS POINT?

It is a legislative requirement that every SA Report includes an explanation of how and why the preferred (i.e. draft plan) approach was selected/developed in-light of earlier appraisal of 'reasonable alternatives'. As such, an interim stage of SA (i.e. a stage prior to appraisal of the draft plan / preparation of the SA Report) must involve appraisal of reasonable alternatives.

The SA Report explains how reasonable alternatives were appraised in relation to the fundamental plan issue of 'housing numbers'. Specifically, the following alternatives were appraised:

- **Option 1:** 27 market homes
- **Option 2:** 62 market homes
- **Option 3:** 78 market homes.

An appraisal of the alternatives against the SA framework (i.e. the list of objectives established through scoping) is presented within **Table 6** of the SA Report. The appraisal concludes with the following statement:

*"There is a tension identified in the appraisal. This tension is between the preservation of the natural environment and delivery of housing development to accommodate need in the village. This is a common issue and one that must be resolved by planners taking into account community views and potential effects on the sustainability baseline. Whilst the appraisal is fairly evenly weighted, it is likely that the best option is one that lies in the middle (Option 2). Under this option provision of housing will certainly lead to beneficial effects, and whilst there may be negative environmental consequences, there is the potential for mitigative policies to ensure that significant negative effects on the baseline are avoided."*

Finally, the Chapter is brought up-to-date with an explanation of the Parish Council's reasons for selecting the preferred approach, in-light of alternatives appraisal findings:

*"In considering the housing requirements for the Neighbourhood Plan, a lengthy consideration of all relevant factors has been carried out, including the need to provide local affordable housing; these are explained in more detail in the document "Housing for the Ashurst Wood Neighbourhood Plan" which forms part of the evidence base for this plan. The conclusion reached is that the Neighbourhood Plan should plan for 62 new homes between 2015 and 2031. This approach is felt to be broadly in-line with alternatives appraisal findings."*

# WHAT ARE THE APPRAISAL FINDINGS AT THIS CURRENT STAGE?

This Chapter of the SA Report presents an appraisal of the draft plan against the SA framework established through scoping (with the sustainability objectives grouped under eight 'topic' headings for conciseness). Appraisal findings are supplemented by a series of specific recommendations, which will be taken into account by the Parish Council when finalising the plan for submission.

Summary appraisal findings are presented here.

## Nature conservation, geology and landscape

The expansion of Ashurst Wood, through the provision of further housing and economic development will result, directly, in land take in the village. The land take and building of new developments has been identified as a threat to the character of the area and also has the potential for impacts to biodiversity, dependant on the biodiversity value of the sites being developed (this is unknown at the time of the appraisal). It is concluded that whilst there is a threat and that there might well be an impact, it is unlikely given the scale of the development, and the nature of the spatial strategy, that these are likely to result in significant effects (positive or negative) for nature conservation, geology and landscape. It is considered that the effect of the plan on these objectives would be Neutral.

## Heritage

The expansion of Ashurst Wood, through the provision of further housing and economic development will result, directly, in land take in the village. The land take and building of new developments has been identified as a threat to the character of the area and also has the potential for impacts to the 'village-scape' and to the character of the area. There are a number of policies in the plan that seek to limit this impacts. With appropriate design there should be a Neutral impact. However, the plan could be strengthened with a design policy / bullet that require the preserving and / or enhancement of heritage assets. This would accord with the background text under 5.2 Countryside and Environment that states: "...the conservation of wildlife and cultural heritage are important considerations".

## Air and climate

The expansion of Ashurst Wood, through the provision of further housing and economic development will result, directly, in increased energy use (overall) in the village. This is based on the fact that each additional resident would increase the amount of energy used by the village. The only way this would be prevented would be by implanting policy that required all new development to be zero carbon. Further transport movements, increasing traffic in the area might also result in negative effects on air quality. Given the scale of development, and the sensitivity of the village (i.e. there is no AQMA designated in the area) it is likely that the effect on this objective would be Neutral.

## Water

The expansion of Ashurst Wood, through the provision of further housing and economic development will result, directly, in increased water use (overall) in the village. This is based on the fact that each additional resident would increase the amount of water used by the village. The only way this would be prevented would be by including policy that required all new development to be water neutral. Given the scale of development, and the sensitivity of the village (i.e. there is no indication that water cannot be supplied to the village by South East Water) it is likely that the effect on this objective would be Neutral.

## Human characteristics

The expansion of Ashurst Wood, through the provision of further housing and economic development will result, directly, in a number of dwellings being delivered that, whilst below the historical delivery rate, should go some way to meeting the housing need. This is balanced against the need and desire to preserve the character of the area which closely relates to the social cohesion of the village e.g. if the level of development were unsustainable the village may become fragmented both socially and physically. Some elements of the plan will contribute to community safety but it is felt that the plan might benefit from some additional design points that focus on safe design (Designing out Crime for example) as well as safe access not only to the properties but also to community facilities. It is considered that the effect of the plan on these objectives would be Minor Positive overall driven mainly through the effect on objective 9/Soc.

## Roads and transport

The expansion of Ashurst Wood, through the provision of further housing and economic development will result, directly, in a number of dwellings being delivered that, whilst below the historical delivery rate, should go some way to meeting the housing need. The net result of this is a likely increase in transport movements and traffic. Traffic has been identified as a key issue in the village and any effect on this issue is likely to have an effect. The impact of the increase in traffic has, to some extent, been mitigated through a number of policies, both site specific and thematic. However it is considered that these policies are rather 'treatment' based rather than 'preventative' in that it seems that a developer can propose ways of mitigating the potential impact rather than trying to avoid the impact from the outset. Given the sensitivity of this issue, and the scale of change, there are likely to be Minor Negative effects on this objective. It is recommended that the plan adopts a more proactive approach to minimising transport movements (both during construction and 'operation' by augmenting either Policy 13 or 19 to the effect that new developments should design transport minimisation in from the outset and, where possible, avoid generating increased transport movement or traffic.

## Infrastructure

Scoping identified "Maintaining viability of Primary School and Pre-School through adequate pupil numbers" as key issues and that without the Neighbourhood Plan the Primary School or Pre-school might close. It is assumed that the spatial strategy would provide enough of an increase in population that the school would remain viable and that the access improvements set out in the background text of Policy 22 would serve to improve access to the school. The SWOT analysis identified as a key weakness the lack of "health facilities

e.g. doctors surgery” in the area. There is mention of the provision of health services ( the “Establishment of a satellite GP surgery within the village”) in the plan. It is likely that the effects on this objective would be Minor Positive.

## Economic characteristics

The plan itself does not appear to be ‘pro’ economic development. As identified in the plan, and in the NPPF, Neighbourhood Plans should support a strong rural economy by promoting the retention and sustainable growth of local business and enterprise. There is a clear link between housing provision and providing jobs for those residents. Admittedly this is not necessarily a 1:1 ratio and in Ashurst Wood a significant number of residents are employed outside of Ashurst Wood. Nonetheless there needs to be some reconciliation between the provision of new homes and the provision of additional jobs. Given the constraints to the Ivy Dene Lane Industrial Estate that limit the gross floorspace, thought should be given to alternative business uses that generate either a larger number of jobs, jobs that are high in terms of output or jobs that the village aspires to develop to encourage economic growth and insure flexibility for the rural economy in the village. It is considered that at this stage the effect of the plan is likely to be Minor Negative on this objective.

## WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS?

Subsequent to consultation on the draft (‘pre-submission) plan and SA Report the main issues raised will be identified and addressed by the Parish Council. Once the plan has been finalised it will then be submitted to the District Council alongside a ‘Consultation Statement’ that describes issues or concerns raised through the Pre-submission Plan / SA Report consultation and how these have been addressed. The District Council will then ‘publicise’ the Proposed Plan so that stakeholders can make representations that may then be considered at Examination.

Eventually, if and when the plan is ‘made’ (i.e. adopted) by the District Council, an ‘SA Statement’ will need to be published alongside the final plan that presents:

- An explanation of the plan-making / SA process all the way up to the point of plan finalisation; and
- measures decided concerning monitoring.

At the current stage – i.e. in the SA Report - there is a need to present ‘a description of the measures envisaged concerning monitoring’ only. In light of the appraisal findings presented in this report, it is suggested that monitoring might focus on: traffic monitoring (both traffic counts and emissions); health provision; and economic growth.

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