Witton Gilbert Settlement Boundary Methodology (2017)

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**Introduction**

This background paper sets out a methodology for the definition of the settlement boundary in the Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Plan.

Witton Gilbert’s place in the wider planning context is integral to the development of the Durham County Plan. The Durham County Plan was first submitted in April 2014. Following the examination and publication of a negative Independent Inspectors report, The Council applied for a Judicial Review which saw the inspector's interim report quashed and removed from the record. This allowed The Council to withdraw the 2014 plan before consulting and then submitting a new plan to be heard by a new inspector. This new plan is now in the early stages of formulation and public consultation.

To deliver the growth strategy for Durham City the 2014 County Plan showed that a significant number of new homes would be needed around and in the City. Parts of these strategic housing allocations were to be placed in the eastern part of the Neighbourhood Plan Area (Sniperley). The scale was such that it would have doubled the population of the parish over the plan period. Although the proposed new housing was located close to the edge of the city and was to develop its own facilities, this housing would not have contributed to the sustainability of the settlement of Witton Gilbert. Following the early consultations on the revised County Plan and the limited development options available to the Council, we anticipate that a similar option will most probably emerge. The Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Plan accepts the County Plan’s strategic housing development proposals as our community’s contribution to the County’s strategic objectives, but we also seek to ensure that the main settlement of Witton Gilbert will be able to achieve its own development aims while retaining its unique and separate character.

A Settlement Boundary was the planning tool selected to achieve the community’s aims of providing development opportunities within a well-defined settlement area based on clear geographical boundaries and ensure that the village maintains its rural character by retaining its connection to the open countryside, much of it designated Green Belt, which currently surrounds it. The aim of the Green Belt in this area is to prevent development which will erode the sense of separation between Witton Gilbert and our neighbouring settlement of Sacriston.

A settlement boundary was defined through the 2004 Durham City Local Plan. The Neighbourhood Plan seeks to redefine this boundary to allow for sustainable development to take place in the village of Witton Gilbert. The current settlement boundary for Witton Gilbert is shown below:

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Since the Durham City Local Plan was adopted, there have been a number of significant developments and changes to the area; major changes include the construction of the bypass (A691), adjustments to the Green Belt, introduction of a wildlife corridor and construction of new housing on infill sites. However the 2004 Settlement Boundary did not allow for sufficient development land to meet the anticipated housing requirement for the village. (See Housing Topic paper: Witton Gilbert 2017)

**What is a settlement boundary?**

In simple terms, a 'settlement boundary' is a dividing line, or boundary between areas of built/urban development (the settlement) and non-urban or rural development (the open countryside). Although a settlement boundary does not preclude all development beyond the boundary1, it does give clarity as to where new development (particularly housing) is likely to be acceptable in planning terms.

1 A number of exceptions exist, including 'exceptions' housing proposals, some business and employment related activities and development in the countryside in accordance with paragraphs 55 and 28 of the NPPF.

Inclusion of land within a settlement boundary does not mean that all land within the boundary is automatically suitable for new development. There may be areas of land within the settlement boundaries that are not suitable for development due to other constraints, for example, tree preservation orders, land protected as Local Green Space (to be allocated through the neighbourhood planning process) or areas of special townscape character, Conservation Areas, Scheduled Monuments, listed buildings, etc. Policies in the neighbourhood plan and elsewhere will clearly define what proposals are likely to be acceptable, and where.

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**Advantages and disadvantages of settlement boundaries**

The advantages of settlement boundaries to each community will invariably differ. There are, however, a few generic advantages to having a settlement boundary which are detailed below;

• Provides certainty: with a ‘black line’ being plotted on a plan it is easy to identify the ‘settlement’ from ‘open countryside’.

• Settlement boundaries are an understood and accepted planning tool for guiding and controlling developments.

• Ensure development is directed to sustainable locations, both in terms of accessibility to and support of existing services and transport.

• Protect the special character of the countryside from the encroachment of land uses more characteristic of built up areas.

• In conjunction with other policies in the neighbourhood plan, to sustain the individual identity and maintain the distinctiveness and separation of the settlement.

• Ensures a more plan led approach to development.

• Co-ordinated and consistent approach providing a firm basis for refusing planning applications which are unacceptable in planning terms

• Provide greater certainty to communities, landowners and developers over where certain types of development could be acceptable in principle.

• Allows the development of small sites which cannot be identified as allocations.

The generally accepted disadvantages of a settlement boundary are as follows;

• Increases land values within the settlement boundary.

• Increases hope values for land adjoining but outside the boundary.

• The use of settlement boundaries has led to criticism that they result in cramming within the village resulting in loss of landscape quality and character – unless other policies are in place.

• Village boundaries can be a crude and inflexible tool.

The specific benefits for the Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Plan are;

• Maintain the separation from our neighbouring settlement of Sacriston as identified in the Neighbourhood Plan consultations.

• Clearly maintain the separation of the surrounding countryside from the developable areas, an important objective identified in the Neighbourhood Plan consultations.

• A clear and unambiguous tool which together with the other Neighbourhood Plan policies will provide guidance for the planning decision maker.

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**Current Planning Context**

The Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Plan proposes a general presumption in favour of sustainable development within the settlement boundary *and seeks to be in conformity with current planning policy, and national planning policy in the NPPF*.

The principle of development within the settlement boundary will be supported provided that it complies with other relevant policies in the neighbourhood plan, is of a scale and nature appropriate to the character and function of the settlement and is in accordance with the spatial strategy for the neighbourhood area. Development will not be permitted outside the settlement boundary, subject to a number of exceptions which will be set out in neighbourhood plan policy, within the context of the NPPF.

Hamlets and small settlements in the neighbourhood plan area do not have settlement boundaries.

**Methodology for defining settlement boundaries**

**Background**

There is no single established methodology for defining settlement boundaries, and different local planning authorities across the country have taken different approaches to drawing settlement boundaries. However, where a methodology has been used the criteria are generally similar from one local authority to another. These include questions such as whether to draw a boundary around clusters of buildings close to but separate from the main settlement; and whether particular uses should be included or excluded from the boundary, where they occur at the edge of a settlement. This report has drawn on existing methodologies, and sought to pull together a methodology considered to be most appropriate within the context of the landscape around the settlements in the neighbourhood plan area.

The neighbourhood plan will not allocate sites for development, but seeks to have a positive approach to development within the settlement boundary. It is important therefore, that the settlement boundary is clear, and that a clear methodology has been used to define the boundary.

**Existing evidence**

There is a significant amount of evidence available to the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, and the desk-top element of defining the settlement boundary has drawn on a range of published studies and evidence base relating to landscape, townscape, land ownership and the historic and natural environments.

The following evidence has been used as background information to inform the settlement boundary, as well as the criteria put forward later in this paper.

 Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) and Register of Brownfield Land

 Strategic Housing Market Assessment (June 2016)

 County Durham Demographic Analysis and Forecasts (Feb 2016)

 County Durham Landscape Strategy (2008)

 Landscape Character Assessment (2008)

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 Durham Strategic Flood Risk Assessment - Level 1 (2010)

 Durham City Local Plan

 Witton Gilbert Parish Plan (date?)

 Statutory designations

**Local Features**

Barring the exceptions below, the settlement boundary will be drawn along defined features such as walls, hedgerows, waterways and roads where possible.

Site visits, aerial photographs and use of evidence base documents referred to above, as well as criteria listed below will be essential to ensure a consistent approach.

Where no specific recommendations arise from the above evidence base studies, the following principles have been applied to the inclusion or exclusion of specific uses from within the settlement boundary where they occur adjacent to the proposed new settlement boundary. The reasoning for these principles is provided in the paragraphs that follow.

Other considerations;

• Planning History – Consideration has been given to existing commenced planning permissions, recent refusals, planning appeal decisions and previous Local Plan inspector’s comments concerning areas on the edge of the village.

• Village enhancements – The definition of the boundary also includes buildings and associated lands that make up the village form. In some edge of village areas, the boundary may need to include small areas of land and/or buildings which offer the opportunity for improvements to the entrance of the village or ensure infrastructure improvements or a general enhancement to the village.

• Recent development - Where appropriate the settlement boundary has included new developments which have occurred and sites that have recently received planning permission.

• Important amenity areas - These form part of the character of the settlement and have been identified and protected by policy and included in the settlement boundary due to their contribution to the built form.

• The settlement boundary was drawn to facilitate an appropriate level of proportional growth within the plan period, as land is not formally allocated within the Settlement boundary.

The table below describes what types of existing development will be included or excluded from settlement boundaries. Inevitably, some types of existing land use or development may need to be decided on a site by site basis. Witton Gilbert Settlement Boundary Methodology (2017)

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| **Site by site basis** | **Generally included**  **within the Settlement Boundary** | | **Generally excluded from the Settlement Boundary** |
| Agricultural fields or paddocks that are surrounded by development on all sides | Built development that clearly visually forms part of the settlement | | Allotments (unless within the built up area) |
| Former farm buildings, converted to other uses adjacent to the settlement (account will be taken of defensible boundaries and the age of building - i.e. how established it is within the settlement) | Hard surfaced school playgrounds and playing fields within, or on the edge of a settlement | | Isolated buildings not well related visually to the settlement. Housing in large plots on the edge of settlements, but not well related to the built form, will be excluded. |
| Caravan sites, except where clearly within a settlement | Community facilities e.g. schools, public houses where they are within the existing built environment | | Designated wildlife sites (unless within the built up area) |
| Edge of settlement sites included in the SHLAA or put forward by local landowners | Local Green Spaces (designated through the neighbourhood plan) within settlements | | Woodlands, orchards and other community green spaces, including cemeteries and churchyards (unless within the built up area) |
| Land with planning permission for new development within or well-related to the settlement | | Agricultural units (farmyards and farm buildings) including agricultural workers' dwellings, horticultural nurseries, equestrian facilities where not well related to the settlement | |
| Car parks on the edge of settlements | | | |
| Community facilities clearly outside the settlement (e.g.pubs/hotels) | | | |
| Roads, tracks and public rights of way running along the boundary and their verges | | | |
| Land in the County Durham Green Belt as shown in the Durham City Local Plan | | | |