The Government’s localism agenda is intended to empower local communities through the creation of rights that allows people to get involved with and direct the development of, their own communities.

The Neighbourhood Plan is about creating vision and achievable action plans for Witton Gilbert. It is intended to provide a framework to deliver, review and update community action. It can influence County Planning Policy and provide crucial evidence to support the Parish Council in applying for local funding bids and community projects.

Once adopted, the Neighbourhood Plan becomes a local policy document which will guide development within the village. The aim of the plan is to encourage local identity and ownership, creating a sense of community and a plan for the future of the village.

Our vision is of a place where people choose to live and enjoy a quality lifestyle. A place that offers quality housing set in safe, attractive neighbourhoods, with good access to services.

**Witton Gilbert Village Profile**

**History**

Witton Gilbert is a village some 3 miles west of Durham city centre. It has a long history of association with Durham with the nearby ‘Beau Repaire’ meaning Beautiful Retreat, the rural retreat of the Priors of Durham during the latter half of the 13th century and throughout the 14th and 15th centuries.

At the beginning of the 16th century, the village largely depended upon Bear Park Mansion and Witton Hospital (now a farm). In the reign of Henry V111 , the Acts of Spoliation allowed local officials to destroy the heritage of generations in one fell swoop. The abbeys, priories and hospitals in those days were poor houses and education establishments and their destruction meant many were rendered homeless. The splendour of Bear Park departed in the dissolution of the monasteries and the ruined building gradually fell into decay.

The village was still rural during the 17th and 18th centuries with most people being engaged in agriculture.

Along with most settlements in North East England, rapid development took place during the 19th century due to the growing importance of the coal trade. Witton itself did not have a coal mine, instead being a dormitory village for miners working at the nearby Bearpark, Langley Park and Sacriston pits.

There has never been any industry in Witton that would absorb many workers. Such industries that did exist such as the drift mine at Clink Bank employed only a small number. This in itself has contributed to the success of Witton as an identifiable village. Without the existence of large employers the village did not endure the economic and population decline that beset so many communities.

**Current profile**

*NB Census figures are for the Witton Gilbert Parish area*

Today Witton Gilbert is a village comprising 1,110 households (2011 census) with a population of 2,419 (2011 census) an increase of 147 since the 2001 census. The population split within the 10 years indicates the population is increasing in the older age groups of 50-65+ and declining in the lower age groups.

74% of households live in properties of 2 or 3 bedrooms, 17% in properties of 4 or more bedrooms, whilst 9% live in 1 bedroom dwellings. The population and household profile suggests a shortage of single bedroom houses.

Almost 69% of households are owner/occupiers, 15.7% rent from private sector landlords and 20% rent from social landlords.

66% of the population are economically active either as employees, employers or self- employed. 22% are retired with the remainder being economically inactive or students.

23% of the population has no formal education qualifications, whilst 15% have qualifications to degree standard and above. 36% have professional or vocational qualifications.

The public transport network provides regular bus services to Durham and to the Arnison Centre, the nearest out of town shopping centre some 2 miles away. The service also links to the main East Coast Railway line at Durham Station.

A network of footpaths link the village to the larger nearby settlements of Sacriston and Langley Park where the nearest health care facilities are located. There is also a good footpath network to the public open space and the public rights of way adjacent to the village. The former Browney Valley Railway now provides both footpath and cycling route along the valley.

Local community facilities within the village consist of a primary school, community centre, shop and post office, convenience store, hairdressers, 3 public houses and a social club.

**Village Identity**

The central concern of identity is its representation and manipulation through the planning process. Witton Gilbert is a village defined by its separate physical location from surrounding settlements. The Neighbourhood Plan seeks to retain this village identity, whilst at the same time encourage limited growth in certain locations in order to restore symmetry to the village and secure its future. .

The identity of Witton Gilbert is defined by:

Its physical separation from surrounding villages. It is a self-contained entity and not a suburb of a greater town.

The small businesses which exist to serve the community. Any influx of supermarkets or large businesses would destroy the village environment.

The existence of a primary school

The 2 churches providing a community as well as a religious focus.

It’s pubs and community centre as meeting places

**Conclusion**

The identity of the village has been shaped by its history, from the medieval religious associations with Durham via the agricultural centuries to the rapid development of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as industrialisation expanded.

The larger neighbouring villages of Sacriston, Bearpark and Langley Park owed their rapid growth to the increased use of coal and could easily have dominated and possibly absorbed Witton but they have not. Witton has proved itself a pleasant place in which to live and attracts people from all walks of life. It’s role now is to sustain the appeal as a pleasant home for those who make their living elsewhere.