

Our ref: RJ.DW60a

Your ref:

Date: 19th August 2020

Durham County Council
BY EMAIL ONLY

Dear Sir or Madam,

**SITES FOR ALLOTMENT GARDENS AT WITTON GILBERT, COUNTY DURHAM
REVIEW OF POTENTIAL ALTERNATIVE SITES**

I am requested by Durham County Council, and in turn Witton Gilbert Parish Council, to provide my opinion as to whether there are any alternative sites that would be readily available and suitable for use as community allotment gardens, in Witton Gilbert, County Durham.

Whilst of course any land could theoretically be utilised for any purpose, there are a number of barriers and factors that need to be taken into account when assessing a sites viability for any purpose. I have broken down my analysis into the below headings:

1.0 Background

Durham County Council intend to use a Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) to acquire a 2.10 acre plot of land in Witton Gilbert (see Appendix 1.0 for a site plan), to provide continued use of the land for community allotment gardens. Notice to Quit has now been served on the Parish Council and so the community asset will be lost from November 2020. Part of the CPO procedure requires a review of the locality to ensure that there are no other sites that could readily be used for allotment gardens.

I understand that the site is currently utilised for a significant number of allotment gardens, sub-let out on various tenancy agreements to individual members of the local community.

2.0 Location and Proximity to Witton Gilbert as a Settlement

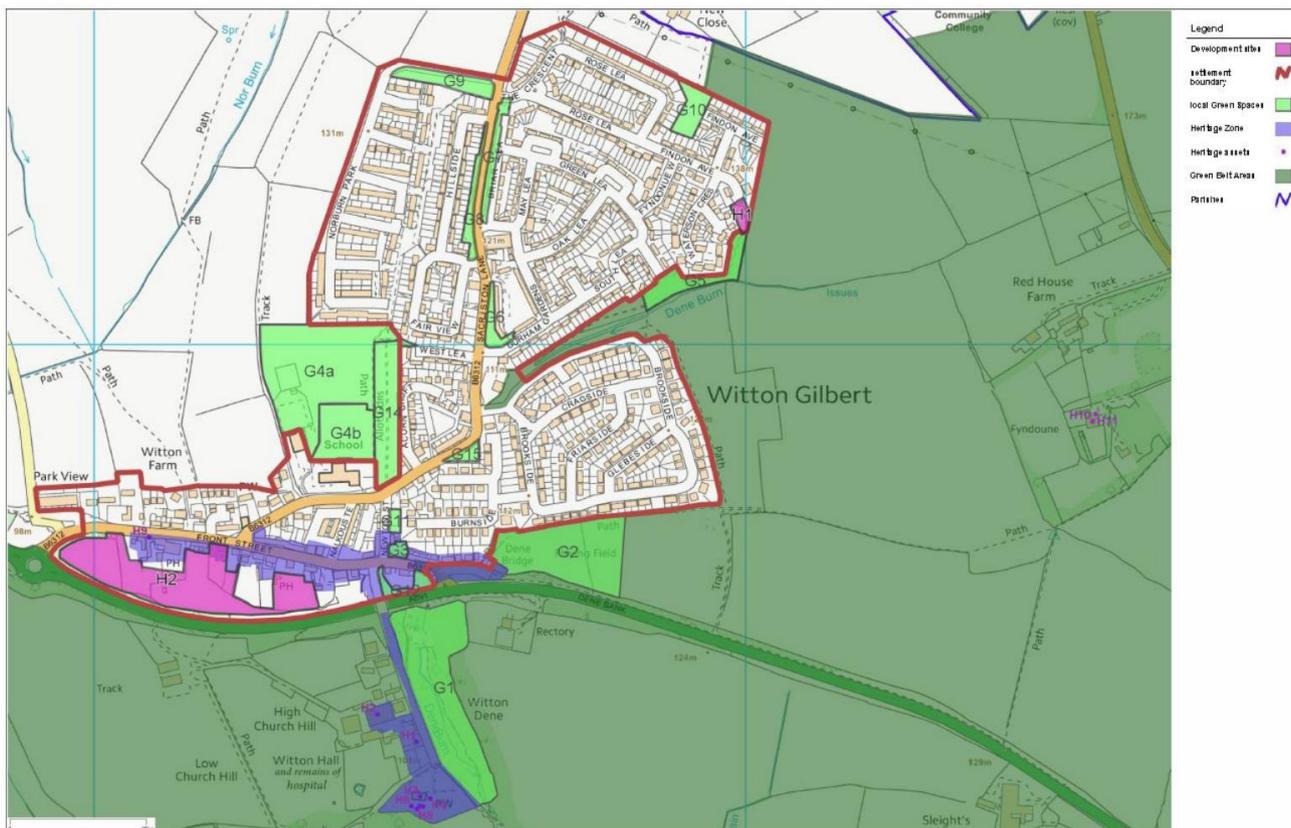
Firstly, given the proposed land use of the identified site would be community allotment gardens, it is important that the site is easily accessed, for both those with and without vehicles. In practice, in my view, this therefore results in the site needing to be located either within or adjacent to the settlement boundary. The existing site is located in a convenient location, adjacent to Witton Gilbert Primary School, within the village itself, so is very easily accessed for a range of members of the community, both on foot and with vehicles.

Open countryside surrounds the village of Witton Gilbert, but there are significant restrictions associated with creating a new allotment site here, which will be discussed later.

3.0 Planning Restrictions on Alternative Sites

One of the most significant factors impacting the viability of other sites to provide the space needed for a brand-new site for allotment gardens is the planning policy affecting the surrounding land. Planning consent would be required both for change of use of the land in question, as well as the material works associated with creating allotment gardens.

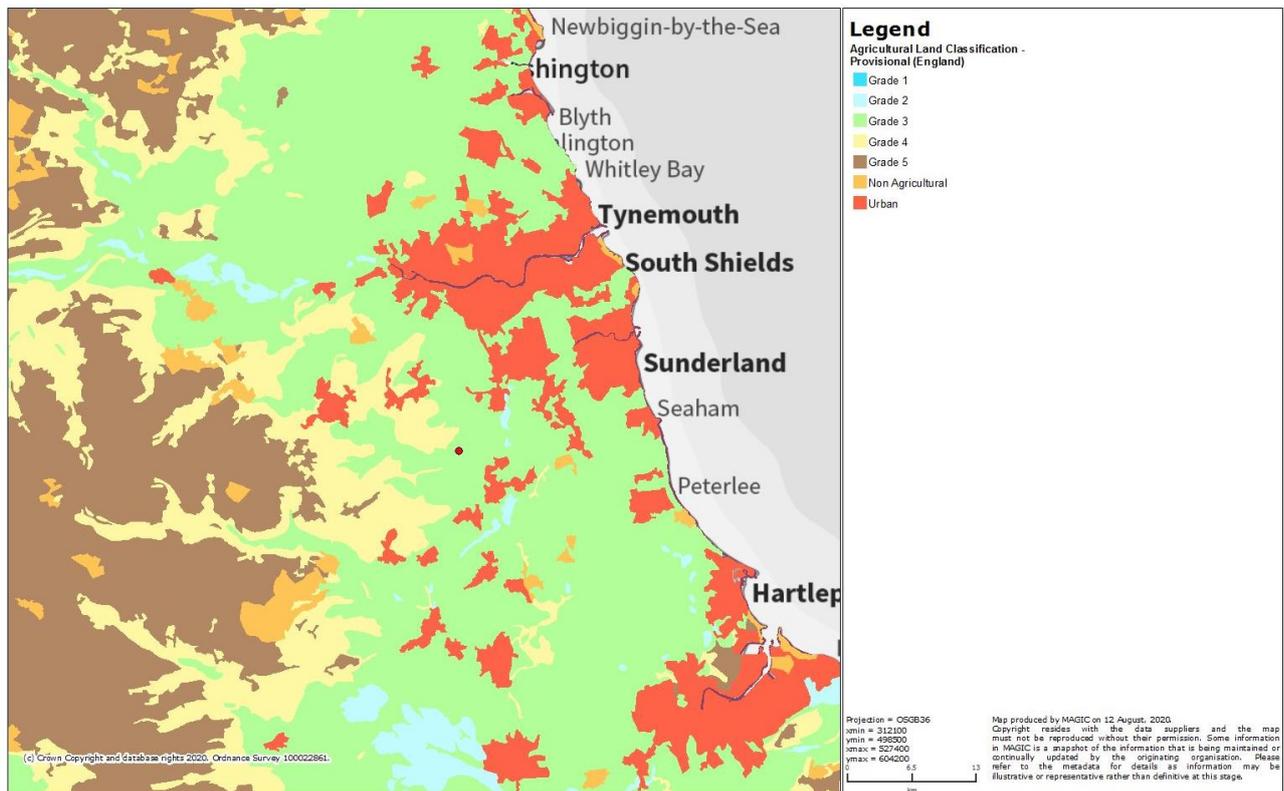
The below plan shows that the entirety of the western and southern boundaries of the settlement are designated as Green Belt land. There is a strong presumption against any form of new development in Green Belt areas and in my view it is unlikely that planning consent could be obtained for the development of a similar 2.10 acre allotment plot (with associated structures and services connections) in Green Belt land.



This therefore leaves the small piece of land at the northern tip of the village, as well as land to the west of the School and Norburn Park.

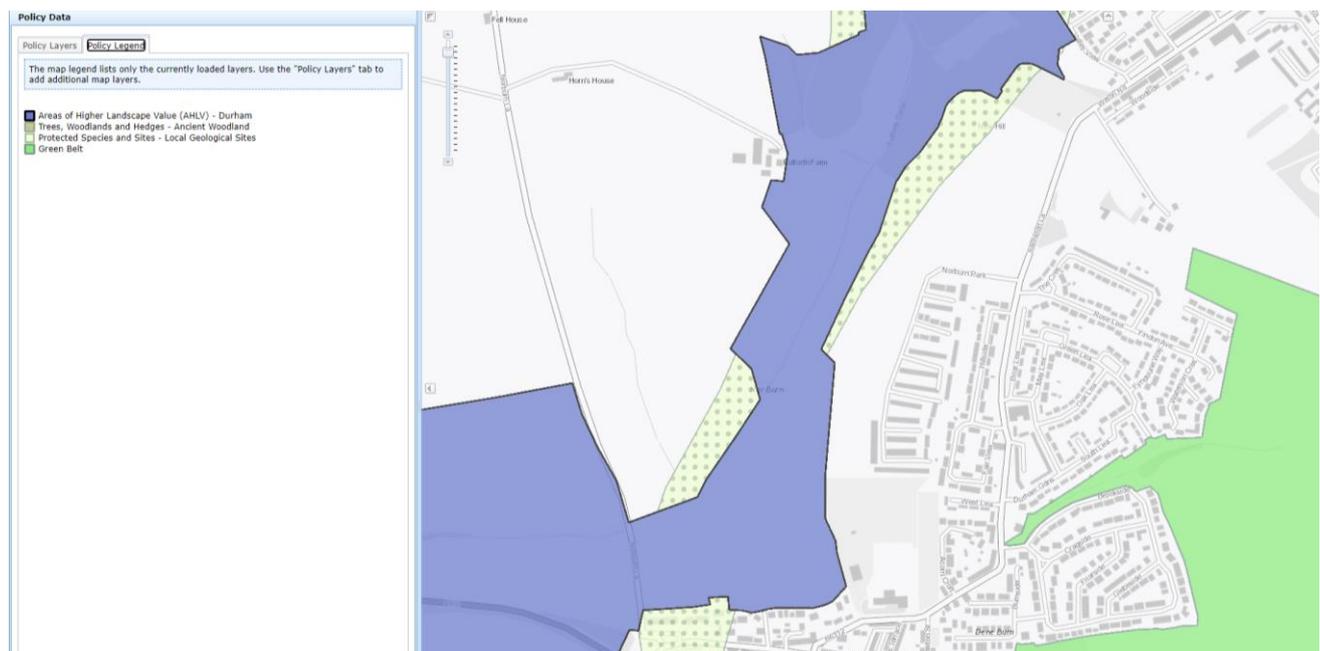
Both of these areas fall firmly outside of the existing settlement boundary and so further development outside of this 'red line' may be treated unfavourably, in an attempt to curb any sprawl of new development.

Further, national planning policy, contained in Paragraph 170 of the National Planning Policy Framework (the most significant piece of national planning policy legislation), aims to protect good quality agricultural land from inappropriate development wherever possible, as well as protecting valued landscapes from inappropriate development. The land to the north and west of Witton Gilbert falls within an area of Grade 3 designated agricultural land, which is good quality agricultural land, usually suitable for the growing of a range of cereal crops and more intensively grazing with livestock/mowing etc.



On the west side of Norburn Park, there are attractive views across open countryside. Development of a large 2.10 acre allotment site here would undoubtedly detract from this landscape, which would likely further harm planning prospects for a similar development in this location. The NPPF includes a strong presumption against any new development in isolated open countryside.

Much of the land to the west of Witton Gilbert is also designated as an Area of Higher Landscape Value (AHLV), as well as an area designated as being a protected geological site, although the land directly adjacent to the settlement boundary is excluded from both. Please see the below map.



The presence of these additional planning policy designations would not completely halt potential development, but at the same time they would certainly be a factor that would be taken into account during the planning application determination process. If the Local Planning Authority determined that unacceptable harm would result to the AHLV, or the protected geological area, then planning consent would likely be refused.

An allotment site, particularly a large 2.10 acre site, would have a significant impact on the landscape, and so this may well be a significant detrimental factor in terms of planning prospects.

4.0 Durham Local Plan and the Open Space Needs Assessment

Durham County Council, as the Local Authority, has prepared a comprehensive document, named the Open Space Needs Assessment (OSNA) (2018). This document analyses the need for community open space and sets quality standards for the provision of the same.

The OSNA states that at a minimum, 0.9 hectares of allotment gardens should be provided for every 1000 population. This high demand for allotments is reassured and evidenced, as the Witton Gilbert allotments have already been split in half (therefore doubling the amount of individual allotments) to cater for the high demand. I understand there is also currently a 14 month waiting list for an allotment space at Witton Gilbert.

The OSNA also highlights the importance of other community open space, such as amenity green space, parks and recreation grounds and sports fields etc. The document states that a minimum of 1.5 hectares of community open space per 1000 population is required.

In correspondence dated 12th August 2020, received from Pawan Pandit (solicitor for Mr and Mrs Hodgson), a potential alternative site is identified by Pawan Pandit, known as 'Clink Bank Field' and as shown below:



However, having reviewed this site in some detail, I am of the opinion it is inappropriate for use as a new allotment site for the following reasons:

- The site is located in the Green Belt and therefore development consent for the construction of a large allotment site is thought unlikely, due to the previously discussed reasons.
- The site is already a designated community open space. I understand the land is used for sports pitches etc, as well as other community events. It would therefore seem inappropriate and inconsistent with the obligations of the Local Authority to remove such community open space and recreation grounds, simply to create a different type of community open space. Clink Bank Field is identified as Local Green Space in the Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Plan, which states the following: *'The Local Green Space and Local Amenity Areas shall be safeguarded and enhanced as open spaces for recreation and amenity. Inappropriate development that is harmful to the Local Green Space will not be supported except in very special circumstances.'*
- The Durham County Council Open Space Needs Assessment also identifies open space such as this as an important feature. Removal of community openspace and conversion into allotment gardens (which by nature are semi private to the allotment holders) is therefore inconsistent with the Durham Local Plan, which carries statutory weight. Removal or conversion of the community open space at Clink Field would be directly contradictory to the County Durham Local Plan, the OSNA and the Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Plan, as well as wider national planning policy.

5.0 Current Land Use

Any alternative site should be undeveloped or already in use as allotment gardens. Demolition of existing buildings would render the scheme prohibitively expensive, in my opinion.

Having reviewed the area, there are a number of surrounding fields that could be utilised for allotment purposes, but the services connections to these sites, and development of associated infrastructure, would represent a significant financial outlay, above and beyond the initial purchase price of the land – see later.

6.0 Services Connection

Further to the above section, the potential site should ideally already benefit from a water supply connection to allow efficient use of the site as community allotment gardens. I have not been made aware of any sites in the immediate vicinity of Witton Gilbert that benefit from such connections that would also be suitable for allotment garden purposes.

7.0 Security

The site should also be located in a site that maximises security, to reduce the chances of vandalism of the allotment gardens. The current allotment site is well suited for this, given its location being largely surrounded by residential properties. Moving the allotment gardens away from the centre of the village would undoubtedly make the site more attractive to vandals. This could be mitigated against with high security fencing, but this would increase costs significantly, as well as increase the impact of any new site on the surrounding landscape and general aesthetics of the area.

8.0 Cost

If an area of agricultural land is identified to create a new allotment site upon, the full market value of the land would need to be paid to the current owner (in exactly the same way as is proposed to the current landowners of the allotment site).

Arable land currently trades at approximately £8,000 per acre, depending on land quality etc. To create a comparable 2.1 acre site, the Acquiring Authority would have to CPO 2.10 acres of land, at an indicative purchase price therefore of £16,800, plus all of the usual disturbance compensation due to the dispossessed landowner.

In the case of agricultural owners I can also foresee the Acquiring Authority having to provide additional compensation for further losses. I note that all land to the north and west of the settlement boundary is within a Mid-Tier Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS). The Acquiring Authority would likely need to pay the landowner for the loss of income as this area of the scheme would have to be withdrawn from the larger agreement, with an associated loss of funding to the landowner.

In addition, there are a plethora of works that would need to also be installed at any 'virgin' site to create a new allotment garden site, including but by no means limited to:

- Fencing – high specification likely to be required to ensure adequate security
- Any additional security, such as secure gates to the site
- Services connection, i.e. water connection and potentially electricity
- Groundworks
- Landscaping
- Purchase and erection of required small buildings
- Planning costs for new development
- Professional fees

It is expected that the sum total of all these costs would be far greater than the current proposed purchase price of the existing allotment site at Witton Gilbert, and therefore, in my opinion, it represents poor use of public funds to acquire an alternative site, rather than the existing community allotment space at Witton Gilbert.

9.0 Conclusion

In summary, in my professional opinion, the acquisition of the existing allotment site represents the best value for public money and allows the continued provision of community allotment gardens without the significant costs associated with a brand new development in open countryside. There do not appear to be any other sites within the settlement boundary itself that could facilitate a new 2.10 acre community allotment garden.

I trust you find this all to be in order but should you have any queries please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert Jauneika', written in a cursive style.

Robert Jauneika MRICS FAAV
Chartered Surveyor

Appendix 1.0 - The Proposed Site

