



NEWS UPDATE: October 2019

START selects first batch of sites for affordable housing

At last it feels as though we are beginning to spend more of our time on our core rôle (truly affordable housing for local people) than on the bureaucracy we had to deal with in our setup phase!

This week, we received some preliminary views back from the South Downs National Park planning team on our first batch of potential sites. We had identified 19 sites that we felt might be worth looking more closely at – mainly small sites on the edges of our three parishes (Rogate, Trotton and Stedham). The planners have looked at issues such as: whether housing on the sites would adversely affect views; environmental factors; vehicle and pedestrian access to the sites; previous planning applications or discussions, and so on.

After their preliminary assessments (much more detailed planning application processes would be needed if we took any of these sites forward) they have told us that they would not support development on eight of the sites. They said the other 11 might be worth exploring further, so we have discussed these at a board meeting this week. Adding in the local knowledge of our board members, we have made ourselves a priority list. On this, four of the sites are in our priority one category, so we will be researching the ownership and some other details and then trying to arrange an informal meeting with the owners, to see if they have any interest at all in more serious discussions. The other sites look more complicated or less likely to be viable for smallish groups of affordable homes, so we will work through those later. We will also be sending some more potential sites to the planners as we identify other prospects – or as local people make suggestions.

Eleven out of 19 sites looks like quite a hopeful result, but we need to be careful not to get too optimistic about this: our neighbouring community land trust in Midhurst was set up several years earlier than START and they are still trying to negotiate their first “live” site! To be fair, they are much further down the line than we are but, talking to them makes it clear what a long process, and how many false starts, the process can involve.

The ideal site, of course, would be: on the edge of one of the existing villages / hamlets; not visible from the road or from any attractive viewpoint; with easy access onto a decent road; with nearby drainage, water and electricity. Perhaps most importantly, it would be poor quality agricultural land, so not of much value to its owner, but it would be just outside the existing “settlement boundary”, so therefore unlikely to be given planning permission for “market housing” development. Therefore, the owner might be willing to sell but would only be able to get agricultural land values if we were not around. Even more ideally, the owner would be community-minded and keen to see the land (and houses) reserved for local people and essential workers.

In those ideal circumstances, the owner would be glad to do the community and him/herself a service by selling the land to us at a reasonable price – which is the key to us being able to build some houses but charge locally-affordable prices for them. And, since the new houses would not impinge on anyone else (or would be attractive enough to be seen as an improvement) the community would welcome the development.

What are the chances of all our stars aligning like that? Well, we can only hope! If they did, we’d have to try to negotiate a firm option to buy and then start bringing in experts to do viability studies, outline plans, etc and then present them to our members for comment. In the meantime, we’re obviously not going to identify the sites publicly before speaking to the owners, and we’d advise you not to hold your breath!

