Policy SAN2 Local Gap Test

Test 1. Does any land in the proposed Local Gap already have planning permission, or has it been allocated for development in the NFDC Local Plan?

• The first stage in the assessment will be to review the planning history of each part of the proposed gap to ensure that it is not subject to an extant planning permission, and that it has not been allocated for development under a local plan.

• A Local Gap designation will rarely be appropriate where land already has planning permission, or where it has been allocated for development under the local plan.

• An exception to this may be where it can be demonstrated that the Local Gap designation would be compatible with the planning permission / local plan allocation, or where the planning permission / local plan allocation is no longer capable of being implemented.

Test 1 – There are no extent planning permissions or local plan allocations within the defined area.

Test 2. Does the area play an important role as a buffer preventing coalescence between settlements, and if so, could this role be significantly harmed by development?

• An area could qualify for designation as a Local Gap if it played an important role as a buffer preventing coalescence between settlements, and if this role could be significantly harmed by development.

• Coalescence is the growing together of settlements. This frequently takes the form of ribbon development along main roads between neighbouring settlements. The merging of settlements is often accompanied by a loss of individual identity: instead of being experienced as a community in its own right, a settlement may be regarded as a neighbourhood or suburb of a larger combined entity.

• In evaluating the importance of an area's role as a buffer, consideration should be given as to how much open space currently exists between settlements. Where little open space remains between settlements, its designation should be prioritised.

• Consideration should also be given to the quality of the remaining open space. A significant stretch of undeveloped land will be more effective at preventing coalescence than land punctuated by built forms.

• In determining if development would significantly harm an area's ability to act as a buffer, account should be taken of how even low levels of development can bring about changes in the way an area is experienced. For example, a few dwellings, modern agricultural barns, holiday caravans or equine structures can in some situations fragment the sense of uninterrupted open countryside, and create the experience of a sub-urban rather than a rural landscape.

• Account should also be taken of the fact that large settlements tend to exert greater effects on their hinterlands than small ones. The impacts of noise, litter, light pollution, traffic and incidental development tend to extend further from large settlements than from small ones. Larger settlements may therefore require larger buffers than smaller ones in order to prevent a sense of coalescence.

Test 2 The area acts as an essential buffer preventing coalescence between two settlements.

Only a small length of undeveloped frontage remains (maximum extent 150m) to the north of Main Road between Sandleheath and Ashford/Fordingbridge following the allocation of SAN5

Even a limited amount of new development in this gap would have a significant detrimental impact. The settlements of Sandleheath and Ashford are close to merging.

The loss of any further land along the Main Road would lead to coalescence, so that it would no longer be possible to determine by visual means alone where Sandleheath ends and Ashford/Fordingbridge begins.

Further fragmentation of the gap through development would harm its role as a buffer and increase the sense that the two settlements were part of a larger settlement continuum.

To the northeast, with the allocation of the strategic Local Plan site at Fordingbridge (see image below) which abuts the Sandleheath parish boundary, any further development to the west and/or south would result in the open aspect of the Sandleheath Wooded Farmland (See Appendix) being eroded with creeping development wrapping around the north of Sandleheath, reducing the visual and physical separation between the two areas.

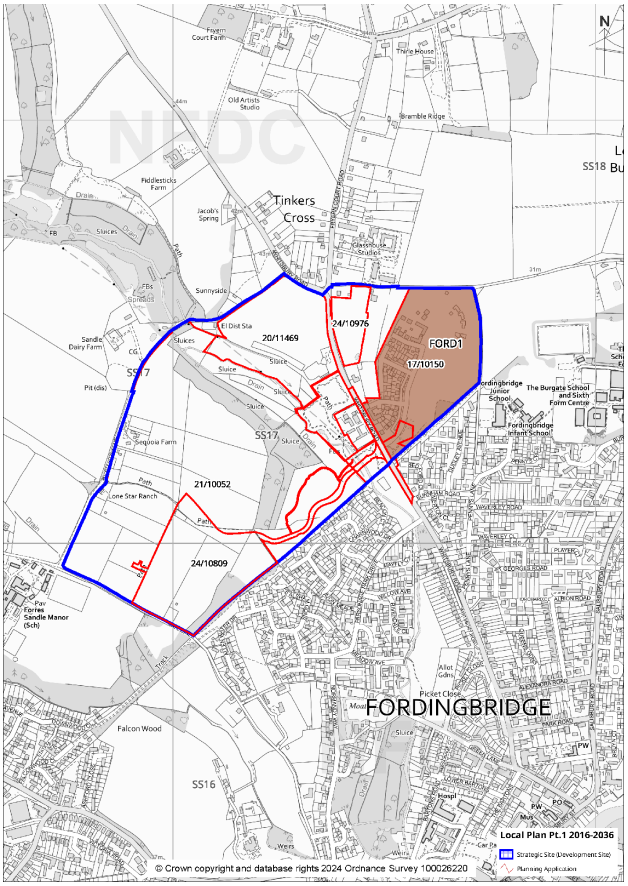

Figure 1 New Forest District Council Local Plan Strategic Site 17 Land at Whitsbury Road, Fordingbridge.

Test 3. Does the area make an important contribution to the character or rural setting of a settlement, and if so, could this be significantly harmed by development?

• An area could qualify for designation if it made an important contribution to the character or rural settling of a settlement, and if that contribution could be significantly harmed by development.

• Contributions to character or rural setting might include helping to create an attractive rural backdrop for a key approach to the settlement, or providing important views into or out of the settlement or its environs.

• Harms might include the interruption of views, or a reduction in the sense of rural isolation.

• In determining harms to the character or rural setting of a settlement, account should be taken of how even low levels of development can bring about changes in the way an area is experienced in certain contexts. For example, a single dwelling, modern agricultural barn or equine complex on open land can fragment a sense of rural isolation deriving from uninterrupted countryside.

• Account should also be taken of the effects of incidental development such as gardens, lighting, vehicle splays and signage. For example, the planting of alien coniferous trees or shrubs around new dwellings can have a powerfully suburbanising effect in a rural location

Test 3

Development in this gap would harm the character and rural setting of Sandleheath through loss countryside in this key location, leading to a loss of the individual identity of the village through merger.

The open wooded farmland at the northeast of Sandleheath makes a very important contribution to its character and rural setting. In particular, much of it provides the rural setting and historical context for Sandle Manor (Now Forres Sandle Manor School (Grade II listed) the parkland character of which would be lost through inappropriate development.

The area is visually prominent either side of the bridleway at Marl Lane and the gap here gives rise to spectacular views across the to the Cranborne Chase National Landscape,

North of Marl Lane the land is exceptionally rural with a sense of remoteness. Field patterns are historic and bound with strong hedgerows and oaks. There is a strong physical and visual connection to the farmed landscape beyond.

In the southern extent of the proposed gap the area identified immediately north and east of the proposed site allocation SAN5, is essential to the maintenance of the character, identity and setting of both Sandleheath and Ashford. The NFDC Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study (2015) indicates the whole area to have a low capacity for development. The proposed site allocation SAN5 (Land north of Main Road) has been considered through community engagement, the SEA process and landowner discussions, to be able to respond to the sensitivity of the location through its density, design and layout. As a result, the land to the immediate east of SAN5, which was not assessed as part of this NFDC study become the only remaining parcel to prevent coalescence and as such should not be developed. There is currently a single property within this proposed gap, but it is discretely set back off the road and has a significant and dense green buffer surrounding it including along the frontage of the Main Road/Station Road.

The main source of evidence for this report are:

NFDC Landscape Character Assessment July 2000 (Pages 33 and 34 reproduced below)

NFDC Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study (draft) (2015)

NFDC Landscape Sensitivity and Capacity Study Avon Valley Site Reports (2015)

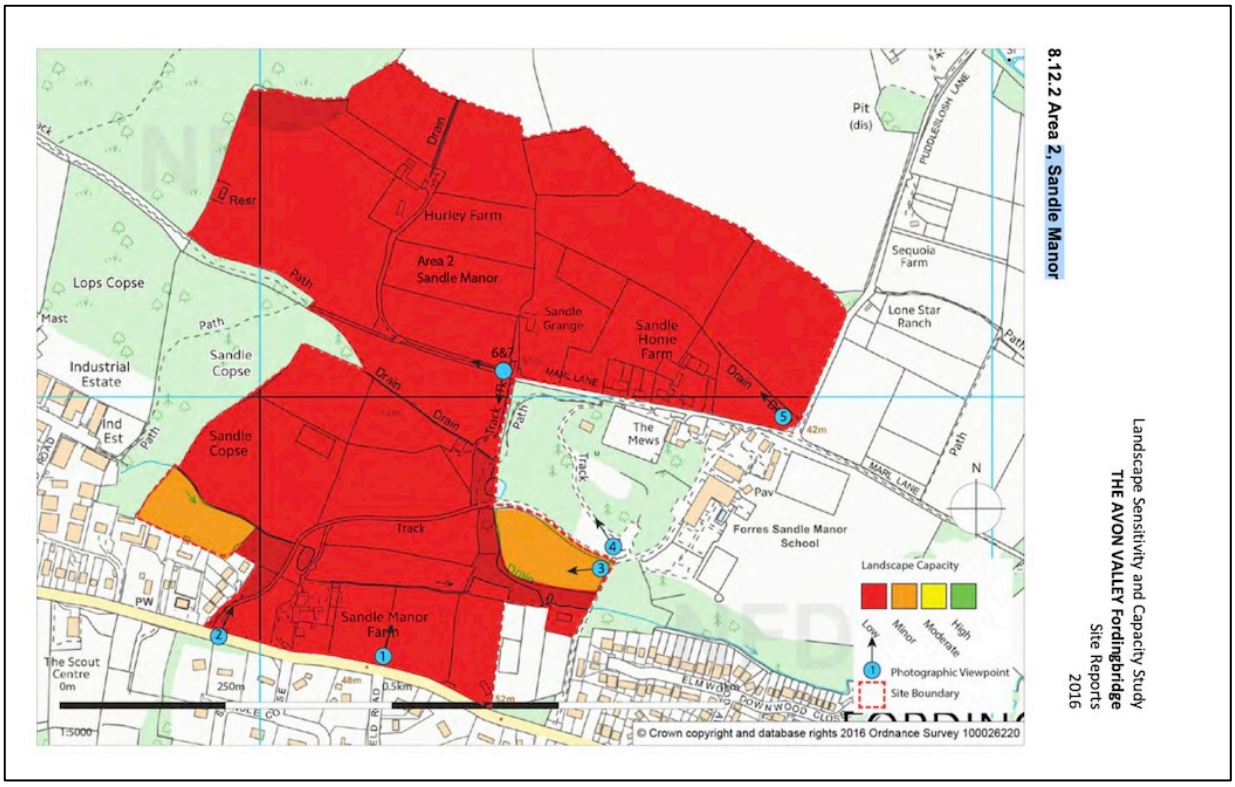

Figure 2 NFDC Landscape sensitivity and capacity study in the vicinity of the proposed Local Gap policy

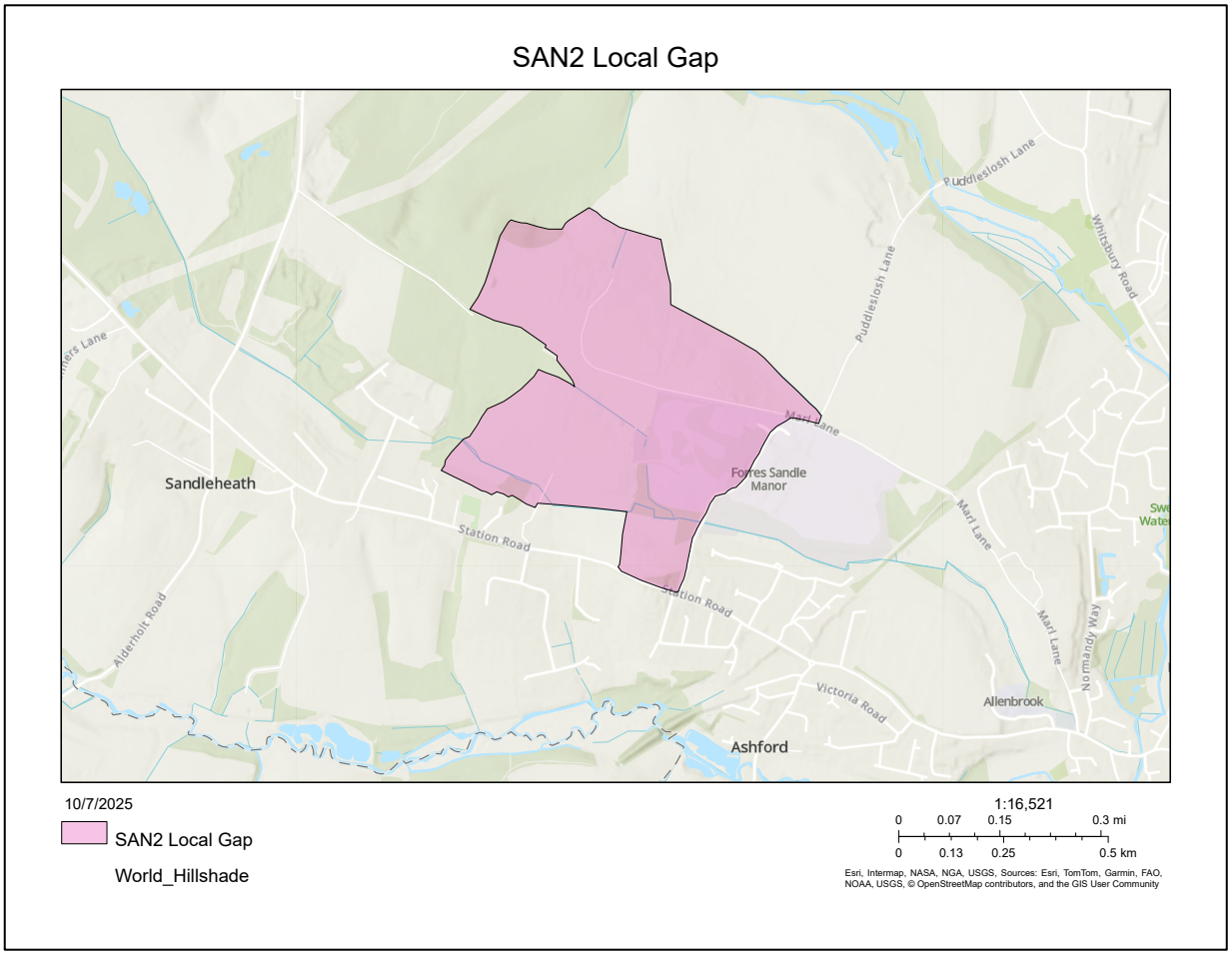

Figure 3 – Proposed Local Gap, which is reflects the NFDC study area with the NP boundary, but accounting for the proposed development site (SAN5) and the inclusion of the land immediately to the east.

4 WOODED SANDLEHEATH FARMLAND

Key Characteristics

- Mosaic of deciduous copses, pasture, water meadows and built development at the transition between chalk downland and lowland heath.
- Areas of open water, tranquil grazed water meadows and stone bridges along the Sweatsford and Ashford Rivers.
- Leafy lanes wind their way through woodland.
- Large built area of Sandleheath with ribbon development branching out along communication routes, into the surrounding countryside.
- Medieval assarted woodland is dominant historic feature of the landscape.
- Pines, gorse and rhododendron indicates an isolated pocket of former heath at Sandleheath.
- Area of scrub and semi-improved grassland at West Park.
- Traditional materials are red brick with clay tile or slate and thatch.
- Rural landscape with no clear landmarks; difficult to orientate.

Formative Influences

The change in underlying geology from chalk to London Clay has the greatest influence in changes in character seen in this area. The structure of the landscape has developed from the surviving earlier/smaller Medieval type assarts interspersed with wooded tracts. There has been later post-Medieval rationalisation.

Landscape Description

This area lies on the edge of the eroded dipslope margins of chalk. Geology has a strong influence on local landscape character; the Reading Beds on higher ground and London Clay around Sandleheath give rise to brown forest soils which support a rich woodland flora. It is this woodland which gives structure to the landscape. Two rivers, the Ashford Water and Sweatsford Water, drain eastwards into the Avon.

The area is dominated by pre 1810 woodland - these ancient deciduous woodlands have a high nature conservation value as well as giving the landscape a robust structure and strong sense of enclosure. The copses are linked by hedgerows which enclose regular, medium sized fields. An isolated patch of former heath at Sandleheath, marked by the presence of gorse, pines and rhododendrons, and an area of scrub and semi-improved grassland at West Park contribute to the biological diversity of this area. The marshy grasslands within the river valleys are particularly important for their nature conservation and landscape value.

Communication routes run SE-NW along the length of the valleys as well as between them, converging at Fordingbridge. These minor routes are leafy lanes which wind their way around hills and through woodlands. The village centre of Sandleheath is relatively small, although recent development has led to growth out into the surrounding countryside, making it difficult to distinguish the traditional built character of the area. Most green space within the settlement is in the form of private gardens.

Key Environmental Features

- *Ancient deciduous copses* and woodlands which give structure to the landscape and many of which are designated as SINCs;
- *winding, leafy lanes* which give the area a distinctive character;
- *water meadows* alongside the Sweatsford and Ashford Waters;
- *semi-improved grassland and scrub* at West Park.

Principles for Landscape Management

- The survival of traditional management techniques such as coppicing within the woodlands will ensure these woodlands are conserved as copses.
- The management and re-planting of hedgerows will conserve the hedgerow network, the linkages these form with the woodlands and the historic field systems.
- Careful management of water courses and controls on abstraction will encourage the conservation of important water meadows along the Ashford and Sweatsford Waters.
- Replacing conifer plantations with native deciduous species will conserve the interplay between broadleaf woodland and farmland which is characteristic of the area.
- Restoration and conservation of heathland at Sandleheath will conserve the distinctive character and ecological value of this isolated former heath.
- Avoidance of road straightening works on winding leafy lanes will ensure that the character of this in this area is conserved.

Principles for Built Form

- The strategic gap between Sandleheath and Ashurst is important in retaining these as distinct settlements.
- The creation of distinctive `gateways' (buildings, walls, tree planting etc) at the entrances to Sandleheath could mark a clear limit of settlement and prevent a nondescript merging of town with country.
- Any new development around existing settlements should be accompanied by significant tree and hedgerow planting to integrate buildings into the surrounding landscape pattern.
- Traditional materials include red brick (orange-toned) with clay tile, Welsh slate or thatch. Weather boarding is often a feature of agricultural buildings.