

Briefing Note on Neighbourhood Plans

What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

Neighbourhood planning is giving a more local voice to set policy in a specified area. It has made great strides in the five years or so since it was brought into being via the Localism Act.

The purpose is to bring local people into the process of planning their towns, but the output of the Neighbourhood Plan is to produce planning policy.

The Neighbourhood Plan and its accompanying two documents, the Consultation Statement and the Basic Conditions Statement have to be scrutinised by an Examiner who checks they are compatible with regulations covering the Development Plan already in place, emerging Local Plans that are at an advanced stage, and several pieces of legislation on sustainability, habitats, human rights, etc.

And, finally you have a Referendum where people vote on the final Neighbourhood Plan and its policies. Assuming that the examiner recommends that your draft Neighbourhood Plan can proceed then your local planning authority will organise and pay for a referendum.

The question to which the public must answer yes /no will be worded very specifically:

"Do you want Breckland Council to use the neighbourhood plan for Swaffham to help it decide planning applications in the neighbourhood area?"

This is why concentrating on a process to produce valid planning policies is so important.

Steering Group and Topic Groups

These are set up to help to create the evidence and ideas for the NP. But the relationship between any group and the formal functions of the town council should be transparent to the wider public. The main purpose of the Steering Group is to oversee the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan in order that it will progress to independent Examination and a successful community referendum and ultimately be adopted by Breckland Council to become planning policy.

The way groups are set up and operate and how they vote, whether advisory or 'sub-committees' of the Council, for example, is for the Town Council to choose. In Swaffham Topic Groups will report to the main Steering Group which has a

role to consult as widely and thoroughly as is possible to ensure that the draft and final NP is representative of the views of residents, and to agree, subject to approval by the Town Council, a final submission version of the Swaffham Neighbourhood Plan for consultation and Examination.

All the topic groups are ultimately set up to consider and report back on land-use and infrastructure needs that derive from the issues discussed and consultations. Groups will help to engage people and consider the town in the round. There will be a cross-cutting theme of social, economic and environmental infrastructure for the town.

Five Topic Groups are proposed:

- Education and Young People
- Sport, Leisure and Open Spaces
- Town Centre, Visitors and Heritage
- Business and Employment
- Health and Community Services

Each group needs to agree a provisional Topic work plan, meeting dates and timeline to complete work. Minutes should be kept.

EARLY STAGE PLAN DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

Establish plan scope and formulate draft vision and objectives	01/12/2016
Develop a community engagement strategy	07/04/2017
Engagement formal 6 week consultation	01/09/2017
Initial meetings/discussions with Local Planning Authority to identify scope of their support for the neighbourhood plan group (i.e. establishing remit of duty to support)	tba

Setting policy is challenging

Land use planning is the heart of the Neighbourhood Plan and topic groups are tasked with looking at land use related issues, so they will be able to create sensible local planning policy that has a fighting chance of getting through examination. Projects can be done through other routes; it is the land use that is the meat of the NP process.

Even after a Plan has passed a Referendum, this is really only the beginning of a very different way of delivering new development that we are only beginning to explore. *'We're still learning. Neighbourhood planning has an endless capacity of throwing up new and unexpected situations you haven't come across before and no-one else has come across before.'*

It is important to focus on 'a few things that could make a difference'.

Start from the Vision of life in 2036 in Swaffham and create objectives to flow from the vision. They will be more specific than the vision and will set out what you want to achieve in order to help make the vision a reality. For each element of the vision there may be one or more objectives, depending on the different priorities the community have highlighted. An example of an objective, leading from a vision could be to 'Provide an informal, outdoor recreation space, within easy walking distance from the centre of the settlement.' Policies would then describe why the additional space is needed, where the options are to provide it, criteria for choosing the best location, and, if there is clear evidence and a strong justification for a preferred site to be selected, the site can be shown as an allocation provided the owner agrees.

What do you want the policy to achieve?

Set out the policy to meet the particular theme or topic, with references to the evidence. It should be clear from the evidence why the policy is needed and what it seeks to address, how it would be used and when - in what circumstances - it would apply.

Explore your policy options

Separate your policy options into those that do involve the development and use of land and those that do not. This will enable you to identify and separate your planning policies from your community aspirations and projects, which need to go into a different part of the NP.

Site allocations

- You can allocate more sites than in the Local Plan but not less.
- Identify the sites that you are allocating (e.g. for housing) on a map. The map should be clear and leave no doubt about what land is included and what is omitted.
- Ensure that the sites you allocate are developable during the NP period.

- Speak to the landowner to understand whether the land is available, whether there are any constraints to its development and ideally to secure their support for your proposals

Town Centre retail support policy

In Thame the following possible draft policies were explored:

- WS1: Locate new retail development in the town centre
- WS2: Retain and enhance primary and secondary retail frontages
- WS3: Redevelop the postal sorting office and/or telephone exchange for retail
- WS4: Develop the Fire Station site for a use that supports the town centre
- WS5: Develop land at no. 10 High Street for a use that supports the town centre
- WS6: Permit small shops on allocated residential sites
- WS7: Retain small scale employment in the town centre
- WS8: Encourage a diverse range of uses in the town centre by supporting new residential use on upper floors
- WS9: Encourage a diverse range of uses in the town centre by avoiding loss of residential uses
- WS10: Encourage a diverse range of uses in the town centre

Land use policy relates to development needing planning permission.

Policy language – take great care in wording: must = compulsory in all cases, should = some exceptions possible, will be supported = encouragement for certain actions, (where a more strict policy is unlikely to be enforceable) an example could be low carbon development or renewable energy use. Criteria should be given so an applicant would know if the proposed development would meet the policy. Be clear whether all criteria have to be met to be acceptable or just meet at least one of them?

Sustainability and impacts on local wildlife sites

In allocating sites in the NP you must consider whether your plan or proposal has any impacts on local wildlife sites, e.g. nationally significant sites SSSIs, SACs, RAMSAR sites, Sites of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) or Local Nature Reserves (LNR) and whether opportunities exist for enhancing such sites. In Swaffham The Brecks is very close and recreation impacts are possible. If it appears there could be negative impacts then you should ensure you have sufficient information to fully understand the nature of the impacts of the proposal on the local wildlife. A Habitats Regulation Assessment screening report should be requested from Breckland Council and if there are negative impacts, say from

recreation, alternative recreation sites called SANGs (preferably sites over which the NP will have some say, so need to consider if there are suitable places of sufficient size within the NP area), will need to be identified and offered as mitigation. The Open Spaces Topic Group would probably need to work with all the other groups that are allocating sites for development or approving the Local Plan allocations.

Consulting with and reaching a wide audience

Groups working on other NPs have come up with a range of ideas to make consultation interesting. One that works is a drop in exhibition over a weekend, which can typically attract around 600 people if well advertised. Another is to hold an information stall in places people already visit like the GP surgery and supermarkets. Posters, flyers, leaflets and newsletters through the post are all helpful - though 50% will probably get binned and residents will claim they were not leafleted/ didn't see the posters, or say we read the flyer, meant to come, forgot about it and visited mum that weekend etc. In Attleborough a huge banner was strung up on a very visible place for the whole key 6-week consultation period.

Reaching younger people is a key challenge. The schools in Attleborough took a strong role, running a series of assemblies with speakers from the steering group talking about the Plan, and a reputable locally based organisation interviewed young people on the streets and in parks to ask their views.

One NP Group in another town took over an empty shop for the initial consultation period and called it the 'urban room' where it could stage events and give space for the community to create a 'wall of ideas' covered in post it notes and drawings and plans, and this energised local people. Swaffham has several locations where 'an assembly of ideas' could take place, such as the school halls, the hall in the Campingland Community Centre and the Assembly Rooms. Another idea is to call in artists to sketch the town now and as it could be in the future – this gives a fresh perspective. In Daventry some very forward-looking ideas emerged in a caravan hired to stand in the central square for a weekend with an exhibition and ideas wall. Being on the spot was helpful - if controversial as some parking was lost! But it was easy to notice and intrigued people. Staff from the local authority gave up personal time but enjoyed meeting people in such a novel way. Design workshops and weekend-long events also energise, but need forward planning and funds for refreshments and a crèche so younger families can attend. A stall at a key summer event could work, with a design work in progress table under a tent, and a café nearby as a fall-back if there is a sudden storm.

The details of all consultations need to be scrupulously recorded as they form an audit trail of i) how the policies were created, ii) what the reactions to them were, was there broadly support or not, how they could be altered to meet people's needs in a better format and iii) what was then changed in the Plan as a result.

For many months it will be a working document. Nobody should criticise too hard in the early stages or take umbrage if a new use for their land is being discussed or their pet project seems to be left out in the cold, or nothing new will emerge. If you do what you always do you get what you already have, but open-ended early discussions can emerge with ideas that could be the best thing for the town's future. In Attleborough a Linear Park along the route of a stream emerged, largely because of worries about flood risk and needing to set aside land for flood water if necessary, and that idea has sparked widespread interest and enthusiasm. In Swaffham what the 'big' idea will be is not yet clear, there may not need to be one, it could be a wide range of small, interlinked interventions, but the hope is that out of consulting the whole population we come up with really good ideas and possible solutions to issues. 'If you go about it in the right way you can really enthuse people to make the effort'.

The future – remember the date you are planning for is up to 2036

Yes, 2036 is the date for which you will describe the Vision for Swaffham. How old will you be then? Will today's Primary School children be having families, working in satisfying well paid skilful jobs, and maybe 30% of cars going through town will run on electricity. What are the tourism implications? Will Swaffham capture those stopping to recharge at well-designed charge-up stations next to alluring parks and dog walking circuits, shop and cafes? Will the tourist use apps to book the recharge point? Who manages the app?

We need the young people to also give their views. The schools have to be key players to deliver meaningful consultations. Topics could become part of Geography, History, Biology, computer science and nature studies, and pupils can discuss where they will go to train and learn skills. Sophisticated sustainable design and construction skills will be needed to make the Vision real. In Attleborough a major construction firm, R G Carter, is investing heavily in building new premises so it can move and expand the workforce, and will need skilled engineers. The Eco-Centre is already a point of interest in Swaffham, can its messages be relevant to the Plan? How could it become involved?

Stages and outputs

1. The draft Neighbourhood Plan report

Preparation of the plan and understanding the legislative background – mining the resources in the Local Plan and the National Policy Planning Framework to ensure the NP policies have sound foundations in planning law.

The neighbourhood area needs to be well understood and the plans should be applicable for the intended period of time for which the plan will be valid. Collating local knowledge in evidence is key to this early stage. Local knowledge can be used to create a Character Assessment of the town, perhaps confined at first to within the Conservation Area – a toolkit and set of questions can be provided for groups to use on a series of walkabouts. Can work be done on defining any particular local housing needs? Is there an appetite for finding a self-build site? What about speaking to housing associations in the area about creating a ‘bespoke’ local typology of housing to meet the needs of some older residents currently in larger houses than they want to manage for the next 20 years? The plan Draft policies have to be written, then consulted on. It is advisable to allow for regular meetings with the Local Planning Authority so their officers are aware of the Plan content and progress. If they do not know the Plan is coming, the later stages will be delayed.

There are other documents to prepare as well:

2. Draft Consultation Statement

Commentary to set out the consultation process to date, who was consulted, including a list of the statutory bodies consulted, and the consultation responses, and how the plan has responded. Can be started as a working document and then easier to finalise.

3. Report of how the Basic Conditions are met

This is technical, so may be best to commission when a draft plan is ready. A Healthcheck of policy is also recommended.

4. A Habitat Regulations Screening Opinion is required on the Plan – will its policies affect key designated habitats in the area? The Local Planning Authority will do this, but will require all the evidence to work with, again the work is technical, so may be best to commission this. In Attleborough Historic England also required technical information on the impact of the NP policies on heritage assets, but the community organised additional evidence of locally significant assets, working through the local heritage society.

How long will all this work take?

There is no set timetable to prepare evidence and to write the draft Neighbourhood Plan, but once written in a draft form, there is a formal consultation stage (called Regulation 14 consultation) which is for a minimum of 6 weeks, and if it straddles a public holiday period, e.g. in the summer it would be best to add an extra week. However there could be advantages to summer consultation as festivals and other outdoor events are already taking place and can be venues.

The timetable for future steps once the report is written and consulted on is:

- a. Finalising the report after the consultation, signing it off at a Town Council Committee. (A date can be set so it forms a clear target to complete!)
- b. Submission version sent to the Local Planning Authority who also carries out a 6 week consultation on the final report, then appoints an Examiner,
- c. Examination, (Examiner looks at all the responses, then recommends final tweaks)
- d. Local Planning Authority organises Referendum
- e. Referendum outcome positive, Local Planning Authority 'makes' the NP.

Dates for each of the stages b. to d. need a long lead-in so best to plan well in advance.

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