

Longstock Village Parish Council

GUIDANCE NOTE ON SETTING UP A STEERING GROUP TO ASSIST WITH THE PRODUCTION OF A NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Introduction

Although, within Test Valley, it is only a Parish Council that can instigate a Neighbourhood Plan, the Parish Council should enlist the help and assistance of volunteers from the local community via a Steering Group to undertake the day to day tasks.

It is important to remember, that the Parish Council still has responsibility for the Plan and all the final decisions made.

Why you need a steering group?

Due to the work involved in producing a Neighbourhood Plan, additional people to those who are on the existing Parish Council will be required. The establishment of a Steering Group will allow delegation of the day to day tasks of organising events, editing drafts and producing the final plan to others, whilst the Parish Council concentrates on other wide ranging existing parish matters.

- Consider the overall aims of the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Set a project plan and monitor activities against the timetable outlined.
- Link the aims and objectives of your plan in a wider context.

A successful Steering Group meeting should question, provide ideas and have a useful distance and perspective to assist working on the details of your Neighbourhood Plan.

What is the main role of a Steering Group?

As the Parish Council remains the responsible body for the Neighbourhood Plan, the Steering Group must report to the Parish Council on a regular basis and receive ongoing endorsement, via a Parish Council Minute, during production of the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Steering Group will need to develop a Project Plan and Consultation Plan for the production of the Neighbourhood Plan within the budget set by the Parish Council. The Parish Council are accountable for the expenditure and ensuring that the project budget remains on track.

Therefore, the Steering Group needs to keep the Parish Council informed of any changes in timetable or budget requirements. The Steering Group will be responsible for ensuring that links between the Parish Council, the community and professionals involved are maintained and everyone has the opportunity to be engaged within the project. In addition, the Steering Group is not just limited to the tasks already detailed; there are many other possible tasks that they could also undertake, such as:

- Acting as a focal point for people living or working in the Neighbourhood Area.
- Providing a forum for discussion and debate.
- Helping to see more effective ways of getting things done.
- Motivating the community to be involved throughout the plan.
- Troubleshooting any conflicts raised.

- Assisting the Parish Council to meet the terms of the service level agreement.
- Assisting the plan to achieve a high profile within the local area and wider community.
- Maintaining the energy and enthusiasm to ensure that whatever needs to be done, will be accomplished.
- Setting up sub-groups to focus on particular themes that arise through the consultation process.
- Identifying ways of involving the whole community and gather the views and opinions of as many individuals, groups and organisations in the community as possible.
- Determining the types of survey and information gathering to be used.
- Co-ordinating the collation and analysis of the consultation feedback in accordance with the Data Protection Act.
- Obtaining advice and information about relevant matters and policies.
- Prioritising actions, using the findings from the consultation process and information from other sources.
- Establishing the necessary skills required to complete the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Undertaking and producing the complimentary material such as consultation reports and environmental assessments.
- Reporting back to and receiving endorsement from the Parish Council on progress, issues arising and outcomes throughout the process.

Setting up a steering group

How to set up your steering group

The Steering Group should be representative of the neighbourhood area. The Steering Group should include both Parish Councillors and members of the community. There is no required size for a group but smaller groups can sometimes lack the breadth of experience or resources required whilst larger ones can lose focus.

Deciding on the skills and experience required within the group would be a good starting point. Remember that enthusiasm and drive is just as important as an identified skill such as planning experience or project management.

When forming the Steering Group for your Neighbourhood Plan, via a Parish Meeting called by the Parish Council, try to get a diverse range of skills involved, therefore avoiding people with similar skills or backgrounds and try to incorporate members from all of your community.

It is a good idea for everyone on your Steering Group to have clearly defined roles, which will also enable the group to make the best use of resources, for example; a people person would be good at getting community support and organising consultation events, yet a financial background would be good at keeping a control on the budget plan.

Try and develop a clear project plan early in the process, outline a working budget, set aims and objectives, and set guide timescales. It is important to keep up regular meetings throughout the development of your Plan, this will not only keep everyone abreast on the progress of the Plan but will also help to maintain enthusiasm at all times. You may like to involve your Ward Councillor in helping you develop the steering group.

How does the Steering Group relate to the Parish Council

Activities undertaken by the Steering Group should be transparent and communications links with the full Parish Council strong as they will remain the responsible body.

The Steering Group should report to and receive endorsement from the Parish Council (via a Minute) on a regular basis.

Below is a checklist of things it is important to remember about the relationship between the Parish Council and the Steering Group.

- Throughout the development and implementation period of the Neighbourhood Plan there will be a standing Neighbourhood Planning item on the Parish Council agenda.
- There should be Minutes of Parish Council decisions in relation to the Steering Group and Neighbourhood Plan.
- The Steering Group may identify a need for funded expertise from other bodies and make recommendations to the Parish Council.
- Budget responsibility lies with the Parish Council and not the Steering Group.
- It is recommended that the Steering Group gives a presentation to the Parish via a Parish Meeting, at key stages of the Neighbourhood Plan process.
- The Steering Group present the Neighbourhood Plan to the Parish Council who will ultimately sign the document off.
- The Parish council will submit the Neighbourhood Plan to Test Valley Council.
- Members of the Parish Council can be in the Steering Group.
- Conflict within the Steering Group should be referred to the Parish Council.
- Terms of reference used by the Steering Group will have been agreed by the Parish Council.
- Utilising someone as a 'bridging co-ordinator', who essentially oversees the Communication between the Steering Group and the Parish Council.

How to facilitate Steering Group success

To help ensure a successful Steering Group the members should:

- Take an active part in the meeting (not just sit there).
- Make positive proposals (when ideas are needed).
- Ask questions (if information is needed).
- Offer alternatives (to create agreement).
- Build on proposals (to cement group vision).
- Test ideas (not reject them out of hand).
- Explain opposition (not just flat rejection).
- Help others (to cement solidarity).
- A 'Terms of Reference' developed that are approved by the Parish Council, see Appendix 1.
- A chairman or facilitator, through which all discussion is handled.
- An agenda, which discussion should follow.
- Someone to take notes, to be circulated later.
- Everyone should be clear at the end of each meeting what recommendations are to be taken forward, or work to be done, prior to the next meeting.
- Ensure that discussions are for the benefit of the whole community.

Finance considerations of your Neighbourhood Plan

The financial implications of your Neighbourhood Plan will be a key priority throughout the process. However there are some considerations the Steering Group will need to be aware of.

The Steering Group cannot make any financial decisions on behalf of the Parish Council. However, the Parish Council can delegate authority to the Clerk and Responsible Finance Officer, (usually in consultation with the Chairman and/or Vice-chairman), to approve payments up to a certain amount (£500). This must be clearly Minuted.

Points include:

- A budget will be agreed by the Parish Council.
- Large items of expenditure should be placed on the Parish Council agenda for approval. The threshold of which is to be decided by the Parish Council and written into the Terms of Reference.
- Invoices should be made out to the Parish Council (to enable VAT reclaim) and should be paid in accordance with the Parish Council's Financial Regulations. The accounts relating to the Neighbourhood Plan process will be audited and open to the public.
- Substantial decisions, such as contracting a planning consultant, must be approved by the Parish Council. The Parish Council will also need to approve the terms and conditions of the contract.
- Any commissioning of funded expertise from other bodies must be undertaken by the Parish Council.
- Insurance – The Steering Group will be covered under the Parish Council's insurance, however the Responsible Finance Officer should check the details with their insurer.

Terms of Reference

Appendix 1 sets out the purpose and remit of the group and the reporting and decision-making procedures.

Terms of Reference for the Steering Group should be approved by a meeting of the Parish Council. Terms of Reference should ensure that the Parish Council receives regular written reports from the Steering Group. Draft sections should be endorsed by the Parish Council to ensure the Council is fully on-board with the Plan before it reaches completion.

The Steering Group is responsible for liaising with both Test Valley Council and the Parish Council.

July 2014

Appendix 1

Steering Group Terms of Reference

Name

The name of the organisation shall be the Longstock Parish Council Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.

Purpose

The purpose of the Steering Group shall be to support the Parish Council to carry out the following tasks:

- Investigate and identify support for the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Identify sources of funding. ☐
- Take responsibility for planning, budgeting and monitoring expenditure on the Plan and report back to the Parish Council on these matters.
- Liaise with relevant authorities and organisations to make the Plan as effective as possible. ☐
- Identify ways of involving the whole community and gather the views and opinions of as many groups and organisations in the community as possible.
- Determine the types of survey and information gathering to be used.
- Be responsible for the analysis of the survey, the production and distribution of the final report.
- Identify priorities and timescale for local action in the Action Plan, including the lead organisations and potential sources of project funding.
- Regularly report (monthly) back to the Parish Council on progress, issues arising and outcomes from the exercise.

Membership

The Steering Group will be made up from a good cross-section of the community, including 3 Parish Councillors nominated by the Parish Council.

Roles

At the first meeting, the Steering Group will elect a Chairman, a Secretary and a Finance Co-ordinator.

Wherever possible the Steering Group will also elect a Communication's Co-ordinator and a Volunteer Co-ordinator.

Wherever possible all other members should have a specific role, to be agreed by the Steering Group - see Roles & Relationships.

Roles & Relationships

Parish Council insurance will cover the previously agreed activities of the Steering Group and volunteers, but Steering Group officers, in liaison with the Clerk, need to ensure that terms of the insurance are not breached.

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Parish Councillors who are also members of the Steering Group will act as liaison officers between the Steering Group and the Parish Council.

The Steering Group, via its Parish Council Members, will provide a regular report to the Parish Council, for endorsement. The Parish Council will provide the opportunity for the endorsement of regular reports via its meeting agenda.

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Working Groups will carry out duties specified by the full Steering Group, which may include:-

- Data Gathering
- Consultations
- Making recommendations

The make-up and purpose of working groups will be regularly reviewed by the full Steering Group. It is expected that all Steering Group members abide by the principles and practice of the Parish Council Code of Conduct including declarations of interest.

Meetings

The Steering Group shall normally meet monthly, (but every two months as a minimum), or as may be required.

At least three clear days' notice of meetings shall be sent to members via the communication method agreed with, and appropriate to, each individual member.

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Whenever possible, notices of meetings should detail the matters to be discussed.

The secretary shall keep a record of meetings, and circulate notes to Steering Group members and the Parish Council in a timely fashion. The Parish Council will publicise the notes via the usual methods.

It is recommended that an annual rolling schedule of meetings is set in place, preferably at the first meeting of the Steering Group and made available to the public via notice boards/websites.

All meetings should be held in public and be open to the public.

Copies of the Parish Council's Code of Conduct will be available at all Neighbourhood Plan meetings.

Working groups

The Steering Group may establish such working groups as it considers necessary to carry out the functions specified by the Steering Group. Each working group should have a lead person.

Finance

All grants and funding will be applied for and held by the Parish Council, who will ring-fence the funds for Neighbourhood Plan purposes only.

Notification of all planned expenditure will be given to the Parish Council and approved before actual costs are incurred.

The Responsible Finance Officer shall keep a clear record of expenditure supported by receipted invoices and will regularly review and update the budget in liaison with the Clerk.

The Steering Group Finance Co-ordinator in partnership with the Responsible Finance Office and Clerk, will draw up and agree with the Steering Group procedures for volunteers who wish to claim expenses.

The Finance Co-ordinator will report back to the Steering Group and the Parish Council on planned and actual expenditure for the project.

Invoices will be made out in the name of the Parish Council who will pay them at the next scheduled Finance & HR Committee Meeting/Parish Council meeting.

Members of the community who are involved as volunteers with any of the working groups may claim back any previously agreed expenditure that was necessarily incurred during the process of producing the Neighbourhood Plan. This could include postage and stationery, telephone calls, travel cost.

Dissolving the Steering Group

At the conclusion of the Neighbourhood Plan project the Parish Council and Steering Group should discuss the future working of the Steering Group. If the Steering Group wishes to dissolve it must notify the Parish Council.