

Process towards completion of a Neighbourhood Plan.

1. Introduction

There are few prescribed stages leading to the completion of a Neighbourhood Plan, and there is no standard template for producing one.

The first stage is for the Parish Council to become a Qualifying Body for the production of a Neighbourhood Plan and for the Parish boundary (or other area) to become a designated area. Thereafter it is required that a specific number of statutory stakeholders as well as local people are contacted; that consultation continues throughout the production of the Neighbourhood Plan in an inclusive and open manner in the process of producing policies that will ultimately form the body of the final document. The emerging policies must be evidence-based and add local detail to the strategic planning policies of the Local Planning Authority. They are required to meet what are known as 'Basic Conditions', primarily broad compliance with Local and National policies and European legislation, and to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development.

Once the draft Plan has been prepared, it is necessary to undertake pre-submission consultation for a period of 6 weeks. It is then submitted to the Local Planning Authority who will publicise the proposal for a further 6 weeks and invite representations. It will then be submitted for an Independent Examination and finally a Referendum, of everyone on the electoral register within the designated area.

This paper concentrates on the drafting of the Plan and the various activities that are recommended should be undertaken to produce appropriate policies that meet the aspirations of the local community and are sufficiently robust to withstand challenge.

It will then consider the role of *Yourlocale* in working alongside the Steering Group to deliver the Neighbourhood Plan.

Neighbourhood planning represents a simplification of the planning system but still requires robust policy formation as the document will be a formal part of the development plan for the Local Planning Authority.

2. Yourlocale

Yourlocale is a Company Limited by Shares which has been established to support communities undertaking Neighbourhood Plans.

It was formed a little over 12 months ago and is currently providing professional support to 19 Parish and Town Councils across the Midlands and Yorkshire, including 12 in Leicestershire.

The Directors are Gary Kirk, a RICS appointed Neighbourhood Plan Independent Examiner and a Parish Councillor and Andrew Towler, a qualified Planner, a Parish Clerk and the National Planning Advisor for the Society of Local Council Clerks.

In addition, there are a number of Associates that can be called on by *Yourlocale* as necessary covering specialisms such as geology, transport and statistical analysis.

3. Drafting the Neighbourhood Plan

Although there are no prescribed stages in undertaking this work, experience on the development of Neighbourhood Plans elsewhere suggests a sequence of activities that will meet the statutory requirements and help to produce meaningful policies.

The start of this has already been achieved in establishing a Steering Group to drive the process forward. The activities that need to be undertaken thereafter include the following:

- a) Programming
- b) Applying for funding;
- c) Informing stakeholders;
- d) Agreeing the broad vision for the area/scope of the Neighbourhood Plan and gathering evidence to support the emerging policies;
- e) Consulting on the scope of the Plan;
- f) Writing the Plan Policies.
- g) Submission of the Plan to the Local Planning Authority

An explanation of what is involved within the above headings is as follows:

a. Programming

It is useful for the Steering Group to have an idea of the stages of the delivery of the Neighbourhood Plan and an understanding of the approximate timescales within which the Plan is to be delivered. It can only be indicative as there are a number of factors outside of the control of the Steering Group that can impact on the delivery of the programme.

b. Applying for funding

Two primary funding pots to support Neighbourhood Planning are currently available, offering a financial contribution of up to £18,000 towards the cost of producing a Neighbourhood Plan. The Locality funding pot provides up to £8,000 to be drawn down in up to three stages, with each stage having to be delivered within a period of 6 months. The Awards for All fund offers up to £10,000 and has to be spent within 12 months of the funds being made available.

c. Informing Stakeholders

It is a requirement that stakeholders are advised of the development of the Neighbourhood Plan and a list of statutory consultees is identified in legislation to be contacted alongside local residents, businesses, landowners and others with an interest in the designated area.

Early contact enables the individuals and organisations concerned to have an active role in the Neighbourhood Plan as it evolves and to contribute local or specialist knowledge in the development of the Plan.

d. Agreeing the broad vision for the area/scope of the Neighbourhood Plan and gathering evidence to support the emerging policies

This represents the meat of the Neighbourhood Plan and needs to be undertaken in a structured manner.

Two stages are suggested as a means of gathering the necessary information:

Firstly a 'visioning' exercise is undertaken with the Steering Group. One meeting should be sufficient for this purpose.

Neighbourhood Plans often cover broad areas such as the economy; environment; community facilities; housing/design and transport. The purpose of the 'visioning' exercise is to consider the above themes in turn and the issues that apply to each, linking this to local and national planning policy and to what the Neighbourhood Plan can do to influence planning decisions in the specific areas.

This exercise helps to shape the vision for the area in question and to highlight the key areas that the Neighbourhood Plan will seek to address.

Secondly, the detail of the policies can be developed through discussing each theme in more detail. Within larger Parishes, this is best undertaken by establishing 'Theme Groups' comprising a broader range of individuals and organisations than is represented on the Steering Group, with each group looking in detail at the area in question; brainstorming issues, obstacles and solutions and gathering evidence in support of emerging priorities and action areas. These groups would routinely run over a period of 3 to 4 months and would gradually produce planning policies backed by a range of supporting evidence that would form the basis of the Neighbourhood Plan. As previously indicated, themes can include the economy; environment; community facilities; housing/design and transport/highways. The evidence can include 'soft' information gained through the consultation/questionnaire activities and 'hard' information through statistical records such as census data and specialist reports/studies. Within smaller Parishes, the same outcomes can be achieved by these discussions taking place within the Steering Group, expanding it as necessary to include other residents/stakeholders depending on the topic under discussion.

e. Consulting on the scope of the Plan

Governmental guidance suggests that the need for constant and wide ranging consultation is at the heart of the production of a Neighbourhood Plan.

Having said this, the statutory requirements are relatively light. Nonetheless, Examiners will be looking to see how the consultation with stakeholders has been undertaken and how any comments made have influenced the final version of the Plan.

An initial open event, with display boards describing the Neighbourhood Planning process and describing each theme, provides an opportunity both to promote the plan and also to gather initial information about broad issues that the community is concerned about. It is recommended that the first of these events is an interactive process that invites comment from people who attend, such as what is good or bad about living or working in the Parish? What are the key issues that need to be addressed? This can help to establish the priorities for the Neighbourhood Plan.

The Steering Group may consider it important – and it is certainly good practice – to consult with specific groups as the process continues. Events can take place at the local school dedicated to the youth perspective and other sessions can be organised with other stakeholders such as businesses and community services operating locally; developers and landowners. This should ideally take place after the initial consultation and feed into the discussions on the various themes to contribute to the evidence gathering process and to inform the development of policies.

Each consultation exercise needs to be recorded and analysed to ensure a record exists of the event as part of the evidence gathering.

A questionnaire is welcomed to add to the opportunities for local people to have a say on issues and priorities. It is recommended that this is produced in an electronic as well as a paper version to aid analysis.

f. Writing the Neighbourhood Plan

Once the work described above has been concluded, the various strands can be brought together in chapters that correspond to the Theme Group discussions. This can take the form of a vision for each broad area or theme; narrative about the existing situation as it applies across the Parish and policies listed separately with a description of the evidence supporting each policy. Maps and photographic images can be added along with opening and closing chapters.

g. Finalisation of the Plan/submission to the Local Planning Authority

When the document is finalised, it needs to be subject to a further period of statutory consultation (six weeks). A further open event is recommended at this stage where the

precise policies are shared with the community, and all those organisations and individuals that were previously consulted must be given a copy of the draft Neighbourhood Plan. Further comments must be recorded along with any action taken (amendments to the plan or reasons why no changes are to be made).

At the end of this period of consultation and after any further amendments have been made, the draft Plan is to be submitted to the Local Planning Authority along with a consultation statement that records all engagement activities undertaken and a Statement of Basic Conditions that states how the Neighbourhood Plan meets the Basic Conditions.

The Local Planning Authority will publicise the document for a period of six weeks and invite further comment, and will need to satisfy itself that the draft Neighbourhood Plan complies with all relevant statutory instruments.

Once this stage is passed, the Local Planning Authority will submit the draft Plan for Independent Examination. The expectation is that this will be undertaken by written representation only, although the Examiner has the authority to call a Public Hearing if it is considered that an issue needs to be explored in greater detail or if an individual has had insufficient opportunity to present a case. Ultimately, the Plan will proceed to a Referendum. If it passes this stage on a simple majority of those voting it will become 'Made' and be part of the Local Development Plan.

4. Role of *Yourlocale*

The role of *Yourlocale* can be as broad or as narrow as needed to achieve a successful Neighbourhood Plan submission, based on the scope of the Plan, the number of local people involved and levels of knowledge and experience available to the Neighbourhood Plan Group.

Based on the stages identified above, this range of involvement can be as follows:

a) Programming

In discussion with the Steering Group, *Yourlocale* can prepare an indicative programme and show the various stages that need to be undertaken in the preparation of the Plan.

This can be helpful in understanding how the different stages interrelate and showing progress.

b) Applying for funding

Funding applications need to be signed off by the Parish Council, but applications will achieve a greater chance of success if jointly prepared between the group and the facilitator. *Yourlocale* has experience of previous funding submissions and is able to draw on

this experience to tailor the bid to incorporate previous successful outcomes whilst Steering Group members will be able to add local knowledge.

c) Informing stakeholders

Yourlocale can assist the process of informing stakeholders by advising on the list and addresses of the Statutory Stakeholders and by drafting a letter which addresses the key issues. The Parish Clerk will need to send out the letter and add to the list the local stakeholders including adjoining parishes; local businesses; community groups and landowners.

d) Agreeing the broad vision for the area/scope of the Neighbourhood Plan and gathering evidence to support the emerging policies

Members of the Steering Group will understand the range of issues as it affects the Parish, but *Yourlocale* can add value by drawing on this knowledge and linking it directly to the process of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan, specifically by:

- Visioning Exercise – leading the discussion and preparing for the meeting by identifying the connection with the Local Planning Authority’s strategic planning policy and how the Neighbourhood Plan policies can have an impact.
- Discussion on the themes – establishing a framework and structure within which the discussion can take place; providing specialist input alongside local knowledge; leading the meetings themselves; advising on policy development; gathering evidence to support policies; collating the outputs of each group.

e) Consulting on the scope of the Plan

Yourlocale has a ‘house style’ that can be tailored to the needs of the consultation process at each stage. The photographs can be sourced by members of the Steering Group and the maps provided by the Local Planning Authority under their duty to cooperate. It is useful for *Yourlocale* to attend on the day to answer technical questions - and questions relating to the process - alongside Steering Group Members whose presence is necessary for addressing local issues and for recognition amongst the community.

The analysis can be undertaken either by *Yourlocale* or the Steering Group. This can be a costly and time consuming exercise. *Yourlocale* has a team of students who can undertake this work at a competitive cost, but it is probably better being undertaken within the Steering Group itself if the capacity exists.

f) Writing the Plan Policies

It may be considered that this is an area of work that is best undertaken by *Yourlocale* utilising experience of planning language and terminology and building on policy writing

developed through working on other Neighbourhood Plans. Steering Group Members can usefully prepare the narrative describing the Parish and setting the scene for the Neighbourhood Plan.

g) Submission of the Plan to the Local Planning Authority

The role of *Yourlocale* is important at this stage to assist with the Statement of Basic Conditions and to provide a final check of compliance of the draft Plan. The Consultation Statement needs to be collated at this stage into a single all-embracing document and the facilitator can help with this if required.

Yourlocale can advise on the appropriateness of any proposed amendments from respondents prior to submission of the document to the Local Planning Authority and can provide specialist input at a Public Hearing if the Independent Examiner considers one to be necessary.

5. Summary

Yourlocale brings access to technical knowledge; techniques that have been used elsewhere to gather information and to structure discussions along with experience of having gone through similar stages in other Neighbourhood Plan areas.

Steering Group Members bring local awareness and knowledge of the themes that will make up the topics within the Neighbourhood Plan.

The combination of both will enable the local knowledge to be dovetailed with the Neighbourhood Planning experience of *Yourlocale* to produce a Neighbourhood Plan that reflects local need meets the statutory and procedural requirements.

The balance of who does what is to be agreed by the Steering Group and needs to be confirmed at the earliest opportunity to inform the bid for funding.

**Gary Kirk
Yourlocale
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