

Neighbourhood Planning

Getting started on your Neighbourhood Plan

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Waveney District Council
Serving the Community

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Overview

Waveney District Council and Suffolk Coastal District Council have been working with Suffolk ACRE (now Community Action Suffolk) and Suffolk County Council to support a number of towns and parishes in the districts to develop and deliver their community led plans. A range of different approaches have been used including parish plans, town plans and village reviews. These approaches all aim to identify a community's ambitions for their local area and an action plan to achieve them. Although these types of community led plans don't carry statutory weight, they have helped communities deliver local projects such as the provision of new community facilities.

The Localism Act 2011 introduced new rights for communities including tools that can be used to influence how their local area develops. These new tools are Neighbourhood Development Plans, Neighbourhood Development Orders and the community right to build. These are similar to parish and town plans in that they are not compulsory and they must be community led. However, the key difference is that they carry statutory weight and once the necessary processes have been successfully completed and the plan or order is adopted by the Council, they become part of the Local Plan and will be used to make decisions on planning applications. An important thing to keep in mind is that none of these plans can be used to stop development.

Part 1 is a guide to help communities understand the options available to them by explaining the different types of community plan, the benefits and/or limitations of each type of plan to be able to make an informed decision about which approach is appropriate for them.

Part 2 explains how to get started, practical advice on how to get the community involved in the process to come up with issues and options and how these can be turned into a vision and objectives.

Part 3 provides practical advice on developing a plan and describes what needs to be done and when. It includes details of the early formal stages such as designating a Neighbourhood Area and Neighbourhood Forum and how the Council will support the process.

Part 4 explains the formal processes from submission of the plan to the Council, through the examination process and formal adoption.

Part 5 provides further detail on where to find other help and advice and current sources of funding.



What is Neighbourhood Planning?

Since April 2012 communities have been able to get involved in neighbourhood planning. It is optional but neighbourhood planning is a way for communities to influence the future of the places they live and work and as discussed in Part 1 of this guidance, is only one of a range of community led planning options available. It is also a way of choosing where new homes, shops and offices are built, having a say on what new buildings will look like and granting planning permission for new buildings they want to go ahead.

Neighbourhood Development Plans set out a vision, aims, policies and proposals for the future development of a neighbourhood. If adopted, the neighbourhood plan will become part of the statutory development plan for the area and any planning decisions will have to take the plan into account.

A Neighbourhood Development Plan can:

- ✓ Be a single issue or a range of topics
- ✓ Propose more development than the Local Plan
- ✓ Take precedence over the Local Plan on non-strategic issues
- ✓ Shape and direct future development
- ✓ Help determine what type of development should take place
- ✓ Identify the most suitable local sites for development
- ✓ Identify key areas for protection (i.e. historic buildings, open space)
- ✓ Set out the improvements required alongside any development
- ✓ Add more detail to support existing Local Plan policies to give them more local relevance

A Neighbourhood Development Plan cannot:

- ✗ Prevent any development from ever taking place in an area
- ✗ Propose less growth than the Local Plan
- ✗ Block development
- ✗ Be prepared solely by a developer or land owner
- ✗ Be prepared with no input or support from the community
- ✗ Deal with county matters such as minerals, waste or major infrastructure
- ✗ Make policies beyond the plan area

Who can Produce a Neighbourhood Development Plan?

In areas where there is a town or parish council they are the relevant body responsible for the formal stages of preparing and submitting the plan to the Council. Elsewhere, any community, or group of communities, can prepare a Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Communities who want to produce a Neighbourhood Development Plan where there is no parish or town council¹ must first establish a Neighbourhood Forum. The Forum should consist of at least 21 people and must be created from a cross section of people living and working in the area of the proposed Neighbourhood Development Plan. It is desirable that the Forum should include at least one elected member whose ward or electoral division falls within the Neighbourhood Area. An application to designate a Neighbourhood Forum must be made to the Council. The Forum will then act as the relevant body responsible for preparing and submitting the plan to the Council. How to apply and what information is required for an application is set out in Guidance Note 3.

Role of the Local Planning Authority

Although it is important to involve the Local Planning Authority at the earliest opportunity and have an ongoing dialogue throughout the process, developing a Neighbourhood Development Plan is the responsibility of the community. The Local Planning Authority will not get involved in the decision to develop a plan or have any input in the content of the plan. However, under The Neighbourhood Planning (General) Regulations 2012 the Council is required to: -

- Designate a Neighbourhood Area;
- Where required, designate a Neighbourhood Forum;
- Carry out formal consultation stages;
- Arrange and pay for an independent examination;
- Arrange and carry out the referendum;
- Formally adopt the plan.

The Council will also: -

- Provide assistance and advice in the preparation process;
- Check that the Neighbourhood Development Plan meets all relevant regulations and legislation;
- Check that the Neighbourhood Development Plan is consistent with the strategic elements of the Local Plan;
- The Council will prepare a Service Level Agreement at the earliest opportunity, setting out the roles and responsibilities of the Council and the Neighbourhood Planning Group.

¹Lowestoft, Benacre, Covehithe, Ilketshall St John, Ilketshall St Margaret, Redisham, St James South Elmham, Rushmere, Boulge, Burgh, Chillesford, Cransford, Dallinghoo, Debach, Dunwich, Henley and Ramsholt do not have a Town or Parish Council and must establish a Neighbourhood Forum to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan.



Getting Started and Community Engagement

The most important part of producing a Neighbourhood Development Plan is involving the community from the beginning and this includes the initial decision as to whether to develop a neighbourhood plan. It is also essential that the content of the plan represents the views of all sections, ages and groups of the wider community² and not just the Parish Council or Forum members. Early engagement is not only essential to build consensus and avoid misconceptions but is also a statutory requirement.

Communication and publicity is vital from an early stage and throughout the process. This could be achieved by holding a public meeting within the community, to identify broad issues that residents would like to consider. The Parish or Town Council or Neighbourhood Forum could also write to local groups and organisations to identify the level of interest these groups have in taking part in the Neighbourhood Development Plan. Different approaches to engagement will be necessary for different locations and also depending on the issues and scope of the plan.

Assumptions should not be made about what sort of plan to prepare. The purpose of the first stages of community engagement is to help define the issues and aims for the plan and to inform the overall vision. Ultimately this will determine whether the preparation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan is right for the area or whether an alternative option (as set out in Guidance Note 1) would be more appropriate.

The key to keeping the community on board is good publicity and communication from the outset, something which needs to continue throughout the process. Recruiting volunteers from the community to form a project steering group is a good way to achieve this.

The steering group may find it useful to develop a communication strategy setting out how and when it will communicate with the community and other stakeholders.

Ways of getting information out to the community include: -

- Posters
- Flyers through letterboxes
- Talking to neighbours, community groups and businesses
- Use of websites, social media, email groups
- Regular notices in community newsletters and magazines
- Local press and radio for other announcements
- Holding special community meetings and attending existing events

²The community includes residents, community organisations, businesses, landowners and ward members.

Establishing a Steering Group

Although only a Parish Council, Town Council or Neighbourhood Forum can instigate a Neighbourhood Development Plan, volunteers from the local community can assist with day to day tasks in producing a plan as part of a steering group. A steering group can oversee the process and help to keep progress of the plan on track. The parish council or neighbourhood forum still has overall responsibility for final decisions and all decisions the steering group make must be with the agreement of the Parish Council, Town Council or Neighbourhood Forum.

Producing a plan will require a range of skills and recruiting volunteers to assist with the various stages will be important. Some skills, such as planners, surveyors, environmental or legal professionals may already be available within the community and should be utilised. In addition to specialist help volunteers will be needed to organise meetings, collate material, do leaflet drops and put the plan together.

The steering group should be representative of the Neighbourhood Area. If your Neighbourhood Area covers more than one parish, then this should be reflected in the membership of the group. The group could include representatives from local businesses, the chamber of commerce, local schools, health centres, local residents and other community groups who have a diverse range of skills between them and are from different backgrounds. Everyone should have clearly defined roles to enable the group to make the best use of their resources.

Drawing up a simple 'terms of reference' will help set out the purpose and remit of the group and the reporting and decision making procedures. This should be approved by the Parish Council, Town Council or Neighbourhood Forum.

The steering group should put together a strategy, budget plan and programme on how the plan will be undertaken. This should include how to consult with everyone in the community and a programme of when to involve the local authority. The steering group will be responsible for ensuring links between the Parish Council, Town Council or Neighbourhood Forum, the ward councillors, the community and professionals involved are maintained and everyone has the opportunity to be engaged within the project.



Scoping

Some initial work is needed before embarking on the preparation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan to establish what the community hopes to achieve. This is the time to undertake a variety of consultation exercises involving as many people as possible both in taking part and expressing their views. Questionnaires are only one potential method of engagement and should ideally come towards the end of the consultation process with questions being drawn from the information already gained. When this initial consultation has been carried out work can then advance to the next stage which is called 'scoping'.

The aim of this stage is to identify and prioritise the key issues and opportunities that the community would like to address and start to consider how they might be achieved. Issues could be things such as identifying a need for more housing, concern about loss of shops and other community uses to other uses or setting a design standard for new development. Opportunities to address the issues raised will come from considering what, where and how they can be achieved. These will probably come from analysing the responses to consultations that have been carried out and can be summarised by the following questions: -

- Where are we now?
- Where do we want to be?
- How do we get there?
- Who else needs to be involved?

To answer these questions it will be necessary to: -

- Gather information about your area
- Assess the strengths and weaknesses of your area
- Draft a vision statement for your community
- Identify a series of objectives
- What resources do we need?

The scoping work will help to identify the best way to address the issues or opportunities facing the community. This may warrant the preparation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan. However, other types of plan could also help to achieve the identified objectives and it may be that other community planning approaches are a better option. Not all issues relate to planning matters and in some communities more than one approach may be appropriate. The scoping work will also help to identify the types of resource required, in terms of time, expertise and an indication of potential costs.

Vision and Objectives

The **vision** is a statement that describes what you hope your area will be like in the future. It can include what you want the area to look like, the facilities that will be provided and what sort of place it will be to live and work in.

The **objectives** will set out how you intend to make your vision happen. There may be more than one objective for each element of the vision depending on the priorities the community have highlighted. Detailed policies and actions can then be developed from the objectives.

To produce a vision and objectives for your area you will need to have an understanding of the community's characteristics and whether there are already any proposals that are likely to affect the area. To do this you will need to: -

- Review existing plans and strategies for your area, and the evidence that sits behind them, and understand the implications of these for the community. This includes, but is not limited to, emerging and adopted Local Plan documents (Core Strategy, Development Management Policies, Site Specific Allocations, Supplementary Planning Documents), Sustainable Community Strategy, Parish or Town Plans, Local Transport Plan, etc.
- Gather information relating to population, family size and ages, earnings etc to build up a profile of people in your area. Information can be found on the Suffolk Observatory website www.suffolkobservatory.info or Office of National Statistics website www.ons.gov.uk which includes the most recent data from the 2011 Census. Another useful website for obtaining community data is www.datashine.org.uk which uses information from the census presented on maps.
- Identify the areas assets, their condition and location. This could include playing pitches, community centres, playgrounds, cycle paths, health facilities, to highlight shortfalls or opportunities of existing facilities.
- Engage with the community, landowners, local businesses, community organisations and groups, to find out what people think of the area and the changes they would like to see. This can be done through surveys, community events, discussion groups etc.

The local planning authority will be able to help with the interpretation of planning documents and provide copies where requested (a charge may be made to cover cost of copying or providing documents). The council's website contains lots of useful information and we can direct you to other sources of information and guidance if required.



When this stage has been completed you will be ready to produce a draft of your vision and objectives. It is important that the community supports the draft vision and objectives and therefore further consultation will be required prior to using these to develop the detailed content of the Neighbourhood Development Plan.


At this stage you should definitely know whether a Neighbourhood Development Plan is the right approach for your community, village or town (or whether one of the alternative community led plans is more appropriate). If it is, now will be time to apply to the Council to formally designate your Neighbourhood Area and where relevant to apply to the Council to designate your Neighbourhood Forum before moving on to developing your plan.

Next Step See part 3 'Developing a Neighbourhood Plan'



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