

From Parish Plan to Neighbourhood Plan – is it a good idea?

We have a Parish Plan with a number of actions that are ongoing and ably driven by our Chair. The Parish Plan is effectively a template for year-on-year activities to improve various aspects of life in our parish but it is not, and was never intended to be, a strategic plan for the longer-term development of the parish. In particular, it does not give local people any real say in future planning decisions, such as housing or commercial developments, that impact on their neighbourhood.

The Localism Act (2011) introduced new rights that allow local communities to shape future development by preparing a Neighbourhood Plan (NP). Developing an NP would enable local people to have a greater say in the strategic development of our parish and more importantly, it would sit alongside the County Plan and have a measure of legal force behind it.

To gain a better understanding of what is involved in developing an NP I recently met with the Witton Gilbert Neighbourhood Planning team to discuss the steps they had gone through to gain acceptance of their plan. Observations from that meeting are as follows:

- WG have a team of 5 or 6 local volunteers on its steering group, meeting weekly.
- WG team comprises an architect, planner, 2 profs and a parish councilor – all retired.
- It has taken them 6 years to go from initial thoughts to getting their plan accepted.
- Being an “early starter” they had to navigate a number of time consuming blind alleys.
- They have accumulated a vast amount of information that other PCs can benefit from.

Unlike WG, who were having to learn as they went along, , any PC considering developing an NP today can benefit from the information gathered by “early starters” such as WG. Although the time scale to completion should be less than 6 years, realistically it will probably still be at least 4 years.

Neighbourhood planning is an opportunity for all the community to weigh in, voice their opinions and take greater control over future developments in our parish.

The purpose of this agenda item is to discuss whether the PC considers such a project could benefit our community.

PROPOSED ACTIONS - In the event of agreement to proceed

1. Presentation to Village Partnership (contains majority of active volunteers)
2. Article for Village News
3. Presentation at monthly Village Fair to gauge response

PREPARING A NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

- The Parish Council would be designated a qualifying body entitled to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan for the area.
- A Neighbourhood Plan is developed by a team of local volunteers with the aid of guidance from professionals, such as planning consultants, as and when required.
- Although the team operates independently, members would be appointed/approved by the Parish Council.
- Neighbourhood plans must align with national planning policies as well as policies contained in Durham CC local plan.
- Neighbourhood plans cannot block development already agreed through the DCC local plan or development which has already been agreed.

(As of 2019, 25 of 104 local councils in DCC have submitted Neighbourhood Plan proposals.)

POLICIES

Neighbourhood planning gives us the opportunity to plan the future development and appearance of our parish by defining how we want our neighbourhood to grow and change in the future.

In addition to any existing planning policies, the neighbourhood planning group can develop further policies relating to the future development and use of land in their neighbourhood.

This can include general or site specific policies.

- Developing a shared vision for our neighbourhood
- Choosing where new homes, shops, offices, and other development should be built
- Identifying and protecting local green spaces
- Having a say on what new buildings should look like

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN PROCESS

Seven steps required to develop and implement a Neighbourhood Plan:

1. Submit application of intent
2. Prepare draft plan
3. Publicity and consultation
4. Formal submission to DCC
5. Independent examination
6. Referendum
7. Plan brought into force