



STEVINGTON NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

TYPICAL QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Why are Stevington Parish Council preparing a Neighbourhood Plan?

The Localism Act gives Parish (and Town) Councils a leading role in neighbourhood planning in an area, which includes all or part of a parished area. The Government think this is right because they are the tier of local government which is closest to the local community, and have an electoral mandate to speak on its behalf. Parish (and Town) Councils have established experience of representing local communities and experience in considering planning issues.

The Parish Council began work on the Plan having identified a number of issues that a Neighbourhood Plan may be able to influence moving forward. It is now important that the community engage with the proposed extensive consultation programme that will be managed by members of the Parish Council's Steering Group and put forward issues of concern and potentially how they may be overcome.

2. How long will the production of the Neighbourhood Plan take?

A project plan sets ambitious timescales for the production of the Neighbourhood Plan. It is not a quick process and it is anticipated, at this stage, that a draft plan could be in place within twelve months. There will be some reliance on the patience and support of the people of the Parish as the plan progresses – the engagement and support of local people is critical to the process.

3. What sort of things will the Neighbourhood Plan be able to cover?

Neighbourhood Plans are a new type of community plan - whilst the finished product may resemble documents that have been seen before, such as Parish Plans, they are somewhat different in their scope. Whereas previous community strategies dealt with all manner of issues important to community life, such as maintenance of community facilities, highways, use of open space, dog fouling, the importance of local clubs and societies, Neighbourhood Plans are designed to operate at a higher level. Because the Neighbourhood Plan will comprise part of the Borough's Council's overall development plan it must deal with land use planning issues, such as where new development is located, how much development should happen, what it should look like and what facilities or amenities that exist should be protected.

4. Can the people of the Parish get involved in making the Neighbourhood Plan, even if they are not on the Parish Council?

Definitely - in fact engagement is firmly welcomed. A Neighbourhood Plan is a plan prepared by the community for the community. The Parish Council is only the statutory lead. It is intended that the research, consultation, assessment and creativity needed to produce a successful plan will be provided by a Parish appointed Steering Group that will include Councillors, residents and anyone else who can lend objective and willing support to the process.

The sort of skills that will be vital in the formulation of the plan will include the need for strong and clear communication, a willingness to work for the benefit of the community, good IT skills, a curious mind and a willingness to commit to supporting something that has genuine importance to the community. Anybody interested in getting involved should contact the Parish Council and make them aware.

5. What help will be provided by Bedford Borough Council?

The Localism Act places a legal duty on local planning authorities to support and advise Parish Councils and Neighbourhood Forums that want to do neighbourhood planning. Bedford Borough Council have prepared a neighbourhood planning protocol that clearly sets out the types of support that will be provided to all parishes in the Borough. It includes general guidance on how to make the Plan, contact details for key consultees and a steer of the Plan through the statutory stages of the process. The way in which the Borough support plans is under continual review and there is confidence that, following early engagement with Officers, they will provide strong guidance and support throughout the plan making process.

6. What are the costs of the Neighbourhood Plan likely to be?

There is no fixed format or template for a Neighbourhood Plan and it is not intended that Neighbourhood Plans should be mini-Local Plans or Core Strategies. Communities may, for example, wish to concentrate on a few policies only which have a major impact on their area.

For example, in some of the neighbourhood planning front-runners, their plans focused on issues such as density or housing for older people or rural diversification which are of particular importance. The cost of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan is, therefore, likely to vary depending on the complexity and size of the proposed scope of the Plan and the status of the Plan prepared by the local authority. It is unlikely that the Neighbourhood Plan for the area will be too intricate or complex and it often is intended to only focus on a narrow range of key issues.

The costs associated with plan making are often directly aligned with the complexity of the plan and the amount of work that needs to be undertaken to support it. There is no check-list of evidence or additional reports which a Neighbourhood Plan must contain. It is expected that communities will carefully scope the content of their Neighbourhood Plans as a preliminary exercise to ensure that they reflect their own priorities – the residents of the Parish will play a large part in this exercise. They will also want to look at what existing evidence is available for planning in the area, such as assessments prepared by the local authority for their Local Plan.

Often the two largest costs associated with the process are the arrangement and staging of the examination of the plan and the community referendum. These costs are assumed by Bedford Borough Council.

7. Will specialists need to be appointed to support the Neighbourhood Plan at examination?

Not necessarily, although available grants and potentially a contribution from Parish funds can be used to appoint professional support for the plan, with expertise in neighbourhood planning and community engagement. Whilst this can be important to the success of the plan, it is essential that their input will be closely managed by the Parish Council and will be proportionate to needs. Not every aspect of Neighbourhood Plan making requires the hand of a professional planner. It is intended to keep costs to the Parish Council to a minimum wherever possible.

8. What funding or support is there for those who want to do neighbourhood planning?

The Government originally committed up to £50 million until March 2015 to make neighbourhood planning a success, and has allocated £23 million new funding for the period 2015 to 2018 to encourage more communities across England to get involved in neighbourhood planning thus ensuring that local Councils can fulfil their legal duty to support groups and Parish Councils doing neighbourhood planning. This funding helps to provide community groups with expert advice, grant funding and technical assistance in respect of their neighbourhood plans. The Government is also funding a consortium of support organisations to provide direct help and assistance to community groups and Parish Councils undertaking neighbourhood planning. It is from this programme of support that initial grant funding has been made available to Stevington Parish Council.

9. Does the Neighbourhood Plan have to conform to the Adopted Local Plan?

Neighbourhood Plans are a powerful tool for shaping the development and growth of a local area. They are not just re-stating the Council's plan but setting out the community's views on the development and use of land in their neighbourhood. The Localism Act includes a "basic condition" that Neighbourhood Plans have to be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the local plan.

In most cases the most important strategic policies with which a Neighbourhood Plan will have to generally conform is the assessment of what the requirement is for housing and other development across the Borough. Neighbourhoods are expected to come to their own view on policies which should be decided at the neighbourhood level (i.e. non-strategic), whilst contributing to meeting the needs of the wider area.

Unlike many of the Parish, Village or Town plans produced in the past, a Neighbourhood Plan becomes a formal part of the planning system. It forms part of the Local Development Plan and sits alongside the Local Plan prepared by the local authority. Planning applications will need to be decided against both the Local Plan and any appropriate Neighbourhood Plans, and any other material considerations.

10. How will the production of a Neighbourhood Plan relate to Local Authorities which are putting Local Plans in place, such as Bedford Borough?

The Government wants local authorities to get up-to-date local plans in place as soon as possible and neighbourhood planning does not alter that ambition. Where an up-to-date Local Plan is not in place, the community and the local authority should work together to produce complementary neighbourhood and local plans. It appears that this will very much be the case as the indications are that there will be good support from the Borough Council. In many cases local authorities will have an emerging Local Plan which can be informed by the neighbourhood planning process.

11. Can a Neighbourhood Plan be prepared if Bedford Borough Council has not yet finished its Local Plan?

It is not a necessity that the local planning authority has an approved up-to-date Local Plan in place before a community embarks on the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan. In many cases, local authorities will have an emerging Local Plan in preparation. It is expected that the Parish Council and the Borough Council will work together in developing both the Local and Neighbourhood Plan.

A Neighbourhood Plan could be produced even if the Borough Council's Local Plan 2032 is not finalised, provided that it is in general conformity with the strategic policies of the current adopted Local Plan. However, it makes sense to be in step with an emerging new Local Plan in case the strategic policy framework changes which could make a Neighbourhood Plan out of date.

12. What happens if the Neighbourhood Plan is completed after Bedford Borough Council has finished its Local Plan?

A Neighbourhood Plan can be produced at any time, however, at the time it is submitted for examination it must be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the current adopted Local Plan. Once the Borough Council has finished (adopted) its Local Plan 2032, its strategic policy framework will be clear and unlikely to change for the next few years.

13. Who carries out the examination – is it only a planning inspector?

The examination of a Neighbourhood Plan can be carried out by anyone with appropriate qualifications and skills who meets certain requirements set out in the Localism Act and is acceptable to the local authority and the community.

This could be a planning consultant or other planning professional, an employee of another local authority or a planning inspector. They will be appointed by Bedford Borough Council, but with the appointment agreed by the Parish Council.

It is expected that, in the vast majority of cases, the examination of a Neighbourhood Plan will be light touch. The examination may be conducted by anyone who has the necessary skills and experience and is acceptable both to the local authority and the Neighbourhood. The purpose of the examination is to ensure that the Plan has been prepared in accordance with the law and is consistent with national policy and in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Local Plan.

14. Does the Parish Council have to run a referendum?

A Neighbourhood Plan only gets made if more than 50% of those members of the local community who vote at the referendum endorse it. It is important that the whole community has the opportunity to be involved in a Neighbourhood Plan which may have significant effects on the shape of that community in the future.

Alongside the importance of wide community engagement in developing the plan, a referendum is an important way of doing this and providing democratic legitimacy for the content of the plan. The Parish Council will not have to run the neighbourhood planning referendum – this will be the responsibility of Bedford Borough which runs elections in the neighbourhood area.

15. What role do Bedford Borough Council have once the Neighbourhood Plan has been approved at a referendum?

A Neighbourhood Plan which has had a successful examination and has been approved by a majority of those voting on it in a local referendum must be approved by the local authority. It will then sit alongside their own local plan as a part of the statutory development plan for the Borough.