

Notes of Public Meeting held on 20th July 2017 to consider a Neighbourhood Plan for Great Gransden

There were 35+ members of the public present including Great Gransden Parish Councillors Jeff Gorton, Michael Capps, Debi Pearce and Ann Cosgrave. The meeting was chaired by Jeff Gorton who introduced Mark Deas, Rural Housing Officer of Cambridgeshire Acre who provided information on what is involved in preparing a Neighbourhood Plan, which can help the community to deliver a whole range of economic, social and environmental benefits as well as determining planning to safeguard the village.

Mark Deas gave an overview of the work of Cambridgeshire Acre, providing advice on village halls, environmental matters, affordable housing for local people and neighbourhood planning. A Neighbourhood Development Plan is a statutory plan, involving a formal process and is a legal document which sits alongside the Local Development Plan and National policies. If the Neighbourhood Plan is adopted it will be used to influence planning in the parish. The process can help, encourage and promote growth, giving the parish more control but the plan must be consistent with strategic policies.

The process will involve consulting the community to see if there is an interest. If there is, a simple project plan should be publicised and volunteers identified. An application will need submitting for the area which can be done jointly with neighbouring areas. The plan will usually cover the whole parish and HDC can't refuse the application. There are 35 designated areas across the county, with 7/8 in Huntingdonshire. Only 1 plan has been adopted in the area – St Neots. Once the application is submitted, engage the community; look at data; survey; consult; what does the parish look like; is there a high or low level of affordable housing? The process takes about 2 years, although it can be quicker if it is a straight forward plan.

Consultation process:

- Community engagement – what are the issues?
- Evidence – facts and figures, existing housing stock, type of development, characteristics of buildings.
- Developing a vision for a Neighbourhood Plan – a mini development plan can be written or if the community is happy with most of the Local Development Plan, just develop a few issues.

The plan will influence planning applications as the planning officer will have to look at the Neighbourhood Plan.

Once a plan has been written, it is submitted to HDC who organise a 6-week consultation. Next a consultation statement is submitted together with a statement confirming:

- It is consistent with National Government Policy and the National Policy framework;
- Complies with strategic policies on what is sustainable development.

Once submitted, an examination is organised and a planning inspector appointed who looks at and assess the plan, testing it against basic conditions. He can say:

- Yes, okay; or
- Throw it out; or
- Yes, broadly okay but suggest modifications.

The plan goes to a referendum and as long as 50% +1 person vote in favour it will be adopted.

There is lots of information, websites, case studies and tool kits available to help tackle issues.

RTPI has a range of resources and the government has given money to provide grants - £9,000 is available to help write a Neighbourhood Plan. Once the area has been designated, bids can be made for the grant money. There is additional support including technical support for complex areas. Whether £9,000 is enough depends on the type of plan and how much work the community is prepared to do. Cambridgeshire Acre has set up a support service and teamed up with other organisations. Cambs Acre offers a project inception meeting, the cost of which cannot be claimed back from the grant money.

Summary:

- Do you think there is a need in this area? Are you happy or unhappy with planning applications at the present time?
- Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) – when developers submit planning, they pay a levy to the district. Once a neighbourhood plan has been adopted, parishes receive 25%. Without a plan 15%
- Are there better ways of dealing with your issues? Neighbourhood Plans are for land use issues.
- Think about geography. Are there enough volunteers and people with the relevant skills?
- Funding – communities should get it all done within the £9,000 but if not do you have reserves available?
- A Neighbourhood Plan is only right if you want to do it.

Jeff Gorton opened up questions from the floor. Questions included:

Q: If Little and Great Gransden were each to have a plan how do we ensure there is no adverse impact on us?

A: If Little Gransden were to do a Neighbourhood Plan, neighbouring parishes would be consulted.

Q: Can these 2 villages write a combined plan, although governed by different district authorities? Would it cause confusion?

A: There can be 1 steering group but separate Neighbourhood Plans although there is no reason why you can't do it informally. HDC has a statutory duty to help you.

Q: Government is keen on efficient land usage, urban development in a rural environment – how can a local plan comment on density of development when nationally looking to cram them in?

A: There needs to be some common sense with rural areas. Do a character assessment – look at the characteristics, street lay-out, existing densities and put the evidence together. Make a good argument but have the evidence in support e.g. shortage of affordable housing – need evidence.

Q: The process is led by the Parish Council?

A: The Parish Council is the body that becomes the authority. Set up a steering group with more representatives from the outside than parish councillors.

Q: What period of time are we planning for?

A: Not beyond the Local Development Plan to 2036. Usually they have a 5-year shelf life and refresh it after that.

Q: In accordance with the principle of the Local Development Plan, if it says 50 houses in the next 50 years, can the Neighbourhood Plan apply to spread it?

A: Yes, but need to make a case. There are a number of guides – Housing Need Guidance, Housing Needs Assessment. The objective is to ensure you allocate housing needs and you have to include wider housing needs.

Q: We share many facilities with Little Gransden. If Huntingdonshire's Local Development Plan maximises housing in Great Gransden will this restrict Little Gransden to little development because Great Gransden will have it all?

A: HDC will have to be aware of Little Gransden.

Q: Village envelope - generally development within is permitted and outside won't. Link with Little Gransden and facilities. Comes down to infrastructure; the LEA has a statutory duty to provide school places.

A: Rare for LEA to object to planning because they can't cope.

Q: Will they fund the expansion of the school?

A: There is only so much expansion you can do. Reason for oversubscription may be because it's a good school and pupils are coming from outside the area.

Q: The numbers of houses – does it reflect the numbers and size of houses?

A: Duty to plan for the wider needs. In Huntingdonshire, there are major allocations but villages are normally specific site allocations or generic policies. Types of housing, you can say what you want.

Q: Do volunteers have to make declarations of interest.

A: Good practice to. There are templates for that.

Q: Is this just about planning or is it land use planning?

A: Yes, includes land use.

Q: Can it encourage things not regulated by planning?

A: You can use it as an enabling document – try and use it to talk to people, e.g. if they want a new hall, or cycle path. Money from new builds will cover it.

Q: What about infrastructure, regenerate buses, doctors surgeries. Would it do that?

A: You can have policies on employment, transport, buses but who will fund that. District plan doesn't cover public transport, essentially, it's a land use plan. Inspectors will look at viability.

Q: How many villages have a Neighbourhood Plan?

A: There are 35 areas with designated status and 1 adopted plan – St Neots. A number of others are very close. Great Gransden has approximately 380 properties and 1000 population according to the 2011 census. Look at similar size villages who have a plan.

Q: If a developer has planning refused and an inspector is appointed, are they restricted by HDC and government?

A: A Neighbourhood Plan sits alongside the Local Development Plan and a 5-year housing plan. If you can't demonstrate that there is a 5-year housing plan, the plan is considered out of date. HDC has a 5-year housing land supply. If your neighbourhood plan is adopted it will carry the same weight as the Local Development Plan.

Q: What is meant by sustainable?

A: A balance between social, environmental and economic benefits. That's what an inspector looks at – on balance if it's sustainable.

Q: Time line. Committee and vote?

A: Realistically 2 years.

Q: Is there a danger with social media that there could be a no vote for their own plan?

A: Over 200 Neighbourhood Plans have been adopted over the country and this has not happened yet. If vote no, you've not engaged with the community.

Questions to the Parish Council:

Q: What is the Parish Council's view?

A: Open – previously not convinced planners would take much notice but looks now as if it will be listened to.

Q: If more development, more money coming into the Parish?

A: No, the Parish Council applies for a precept, it is not per household. Any money spent in the village is your money. It is not possible to precept for large projects as it would mean raising rates significantly.

There followed specific points about the development in Eltisley Road with no footpath for existing residents along Eltisley Road.

Mark Deas stated that extra things can be put in a plan as long as it can be justified e.g. car parking. HDC limits car parking spaces. Parking issues could be an argument for different parking standards. Needs to be reasonable and justifiable.

On a show of hands approximately half were in favour of going forward with a plan.

Members of the public asked about what planning applications councillors were not happy with. Councillors commented that there was no clear direction from HDC concerning building outside the village limits with applications not automatically being turned down.

Mark Deas commented that if there is no 5-year housing plan, there is no village envelope – the boundary disappears. If so, sites become fair game unless environmentally sensitive. Must ensure HDC has a 5-year housing land supply and everyone takes their fair share. If the village envelope comes back, it does so in exactly the same place.

Developers can challenge Neighbourhood Plans. Developers will have sites for development in 10/20 years' time. Developers have not been seen to rush to make applications before Neighbourhood Plans have been adopted.

Jeff Gorton drew the meeting to a close concluding that volunteers will be needed, the advantages and disadvantages have to be weighed up, the work involved and it will be dependent on the public's view. The matter will be on agenda for the next Parish Council meeting.

Mark Deas will provide some website links for members of the public to look at examples of Neighbourhood Plans, preferably based on villages of a similar size to Great Gransden.

The meeting drew to a close at 8.50pm.