

Report on Wiltshire Council's Neighbourhood Planning Workshop No: 3 – 'Consultation and Community Engagement' - Warminster 31st March 2014

Engagement of the community throughout the neighbourhood planning (NP) process is essential for:

- Developing consensus and community support.
- Finding out what people think and drawing upon their skills and knowledge.
- Developing an evidence base for the NP.
- Facilitating deliverable plans and policies.

Failing to engage communities properly at an early stage is a main cause of conflict later on in the NP process that can create additional costs and delays.

The presentation covered how to successfully engage the community; who to engage; what methods to use; and the stages when to consult formally: Wiltshire Council's planners have produced a process diagram and there is further guidance online.

- **Engagement** means building ongoing informal relationships with the purpose of finding a collective vision for the community.
- **Consultation** means formally consulting or discussing.
- **Stakeholders** are individuals, groups or organisations who may have an interest in the NP.

A **Steering Group** should be established at the outset with broad representation: key stakeholders might include councillors, local businesses, voluntary groups, landowners, educational establishments etc. The steering group will decide upon the geographical area of the NP – normally the parish (but with the Freshford and Limpley Stoke NP, two parishes have prepared a joint NP across the Wiltshire boundary). The steering group should define objectives and develop a vision along with a communication and engagement strategy using appropriate methods for different groups.

Is a NP right for us? This initial stage, or 'scoping', will lead to a decision as to whether to prepare a NP or whether to follow a non-NP approach instead. The process can take up to three years, e.g. the Malmesbury NP, begun 2012 and likely to be adopted by the end of 2014.

Developing objectives and a vision for a NP involves assessing what the area is like now, what needs to change, and how to get there, bearing in mind that the NP policies and proposals must be capable of delivery.

Methods of community engagement include questionnaires, suggestion boxes, texting, social media, public meetings, seminars, drop-in surgeries, focus groups, roadshows, graffiti walls, street stalls, workshops, school and college projects, mapping to identify hot or 'grot' spots and how people feel about the area, place checks (walk around surveys).

Drafting the NP should include a basis of evidence, presentation of development options, the examination of specific issues or themes and evidence that the NP proposals can be delivered. Working groups will need to be set up, there should

be discussions with landowners and developers and public expectations should be managed so as to avoid work on undeliverable options.

Six-week consultation prior to submission of the NP to Wiltshire Council: the parish council (PC) must publicise the NP, say when and where it can be inspected and how to make representations, and consider whether the NP would affect statutory consultees or require Environmental Assessment.

Submission to Wiltshire Council: prior to submission to Wiltshire Council, the PC has to prepare a **Consultation Statement** outlining who was consulted, what were the issues and concerns raised, and how they were addressed. Everything has to be documented. Wiltshire Council itself then undertakes a six-week formal consultation, and any further representations are passed to an Independent Examiner.

The Independent Examiner reviews representations, assesses how the PC has addressed issues and concerns, and ensures that legal requirements have been met. If the examiner requests changes to the NP, then the PC will have to re-consult the community.

Wiltshire Council will carry out The Community Referendum. There are restrictions on how the PC can campaign before and during the referendum period. If 50% of people voting support the NP, it is approved and can be formally adopted as a statutory part of Wiltshire's planning framework.

There were a number of pertinent questions raised at the Workshop:

- **Will a PC have enough money in its budget to prepare a NP**, especially with the likelihood of capped precepts next financial year? There is a possibility of small grants from Wiltshire Council and assistance from a 'link' planning officer. However, nobody is going to be as fortunate as Freshford and Limpley Stoke who received a government grant of £20K as a 'front runner' NP. Wiltshire Council's officers suggested that costs could be minimised by using community resources: e.g. printing might be done locally and people might give their services.
- With further radical deregulation of planning control proposed by the Chancellor in a March 2014 Budget document, **will the community have much control over development** and are the community going to be very unhappy if the NP cannot be delivered?
- The **Secretary of State** has a record of **over-riding local planning decisions** and could therefore over-ride a NP.

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