



COLIN BUCHANAN

neighbourhood planning



Neighbourhood Planning: Questions and Answers

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Questions and Answers

The Localism Bill introduces the concept of Neighbourhood Planning: a bottom-up approach to planning for the future of an area led by the community. Communities now have a real opportunity to develop plans and shape proposals for the places they live in. But many questions have been raised: what is a neighbourhood? how do we produce a plan? who is responsible for preparing them? This crib sheet seeks to provide answers to the most commonly asked questions.

What is a Neighbourhood Plan and what are the benefits of having one?

The purpose of Neighbourhood Planning is to give local people greater ownership of the plans and policies that affect their local area. The intention is to empower local people to take a proactive role in shaping the future of the areas in which they live. Once in place, the plans will comprise the framework for change in that area for the next ten years.

Government has said that Neighbourhood Planning will help communities to play a greater role in finding creative and imaginative ways to overcome the pressures that development can create for conservation and local services and amenities. It could also help ensure that development is in line with local needs, provides greater public amenity and more certainty for developers. A neighbourhood plan would be able to identify the specific site or broad location, specify the form, size, type and design of new development.

How do I get started preparing a plan?

Get interested people together and agree why you would benefit from having a plan. Think about all the residents, community groups, local organisations, interest groups, social networks and enterprises who might have an interest in a neighbourhood plan. This should include groups often described as hard-to-reach but which might have specific social needs that should be reflected in a neighbourhood plan. Organise a community walk around your neighbourhood to identify key issues. Discuss what the objectives would be. Discuss these with your local planning authority and prepare a work programme. Set up a management committee to oversee the plan preparation and formulate a programme of engagement with residents, businesses, landowners and service providers located in your neighbourhood.

Who will be responsible for preparing them?

The Localism Bill suggests that only three people need to come together to propose that a plan is produced. This number may increase. A management committee or constituted body will need to be established to prepare the plan. Where parish council's exist they will comprise the management committee, should they choose to do so. Elsewhere a Neighbourhood Forum will need to be established and approved by the local authority. The forum must be representative of the plan area and it should have an agreed constitution and membership.

What should the plan look like?

Government has said that the neighbourhood should decide what a neighbourhood plan contains, but that they should be flexible enough to address different needs and expectations. They could have high level visions and objectives for the future of an area, they could identify small projects for change or they could take the form of a masterplan: a comprehensive land-use plan embracing spaces, movement, activities and the development of buildings.

How does it relate to the Council's Local Development Framework?

The Neighbourhood Plan will become part of the formal planning process and set the tone for future change and development. It must be in conformity with national planning policies and the strategic policies in the Council's LDF Core Strategy. Your local authority planning department should be able to advise you what this means in practice.

The intention is that a neighbourhood plan cannot promote less housing and economic development than envisaged in the Council's development plan because a neighbourhood plan must be in "general conformity" with the strategic elements of the development plan.

But what happens if a Core Strategy has not been adopted?

Don't worry, you can still work on preparing your Neighbourhood Plan. The Council, through its duty to cooperate, will advise you on the objectives and policies within their emerging Core Strategy and the relationship between this and your emerging Neighbourhood Plan. This might even provide you with an opportunity to strengthen your plan and the Core Strategy through working in partnership with the Council.

What is a 'neighbourhood'?

To date, Government have expressed Neighbourhoods in terms of Parishes, but there are no fixed definitions. A Parish Council containing more than one neighbourhood (e.g. multiple villages) could produce plans for each. Local communities are free to define their own neighbourhood areas for the purposes of preparing a plan, subject to approval by their local council. In towns and cities where parishes don't exist, neighbourhoods might, for example relate to local centres and their surrounding residential area. Ideas about what constitutes a neighbourhood are personal. They are shaped by the local services we use (shops, schools, post office, pub, library), geographical landmarks, transport connections, work patterns, social interests and relationships with friends and family. Defining the boundaries of a neighbourhood can be challenging and needs to reflect and bring together different, sometimes conflicting views.

But our neighbourhood is in more than one Parish / local authority area

This is not a problem. In much the same way that many authorities currently produce 'joint plans', the same can be undertaken for a Neighbourhood Plan. You will though need agreement from both or all local authorities which your proposed plan area straddles.

Can we start a Plan before the Localism Bill becomes an Act of Parliament?

Yes, there is nothing to stop you starting the process now and, in fact, many places across the country have started working on Neighbourhood Plans already.

How long will it take to prepare?

The length taken to prepare the plan will depend on a number of factors, including for example whether there is already a forum or appropriate body set up to manage and run the Plan. It could take a year to prepare, but will depend on the availability of people to regularly meet, discuss and agree the content of the Plan. You may have people in your area who have particular skills or training in planning, design or housing matters for example. Try and make best use of these: knowledge and enthusiasm can go a long way. Government has established a ten-step process for the production of a plan:

1. Define the Neighbourhood
2. Designate the Neighbourhood Forum
3. LPA duty to support (in terms of agreeing the area, the forum and providing general guidance and advice as to the shape and content of the Plan)
4. Prepare the Plan
5. LPA validation check (to see whether it is in line with the strategic objectives of the Core Strategy)
6. Independent Examination (see below)
7. Examiners Report
8. Plan modifications
9. Referendum (see below)
10. Adoption by local authority

What is meant by examination and what will be examined?

The examination will test whether the Neighbourhood Plan is in accordance with strategic policies in the local plan / core strategy. It will be undertaken by a suitably qualified person who is independent of the process: they will not, for example, be a planner within your local authority. It will be a 'light touch' examination. The examiner may suggest that changes be made. These could, for example, relate to the phrasing of text to provide greater clarity. If the examiner agrees that the plan is in line with strategic objectives, then a referendum can be held.

What is the referendum?

Following an examination, the plan needs to be subject to a referendum, where 50% of the votes need to be in favour of the plan. As with a general election, the vote is not based on the total population of the area, rather the number of people who actually turn out to vote. If the vote is in favour of the plan the local authority are legally obliged to adopt it for plan making and development control purposes. It will then comprise the plan for the area for the next ten years, after which it will be reviewed and can be updated as necessary.

What help is out there?

The local authority has a duty to support communities in the production of neighbourhood plans. This could take the form of advising on the nature of the plan area and advice on how to establish a neighbourhood forum, advising and explaining issues of conformity with strategic and national policies, assisting and facilitating consultation. There is no requirement for local authorities to provide financial assistance, though of course they can if they wish.

Government has recently received bids from a number of charity and voluntary organisations for grant funding. To be awarded over a two year period, the purpose of the grant is that the successful organisations will then provide support to communities through the planning process. This is not just limited to Neighbourhood Planning, but can provide advice on all planning matters, including for example becoming involved in the planning application process.

The Neighbourhood Planning LinkedIn Group also acts as a resource for everyone involved in the Neighbourhood Planning process, allowing members to debate and discuss issues and share examples of best practice.

How much will it cost and who will pay?

The cost of the Plan will depend upon its size, scope and complexity. Government estimate it could cost upwards of £17,000 to produce. The Governments Supporting Communities fund will provide financial assistance for professional support. The local authority has a duty to support but may or may not be able to provide financial assistance. Developers and landowners may provide financial assistance where they may have an interest in securing planning permission.

Further reading, useful links and websites:

The Neighbourhood Planning Website

www.neighbourhoodplanning.info

Neighbourhood Planning LinkedIn Group

<http://lnkd.in/aVatYm>

Colin Buchanan Neighbourhood Planning

www.colinbuchanan.com/neighbourhood-planning

Urban Forum

www.urbanforum.org.uk/

The Young Foundation

www.youngfoundation.org

The Young Foundation Community Action Toolkit

www.youngfoundation.org/community-action-tool-kit

CLG – Neighbourhood Plan Vanguard Information

www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/neighbourhoodplanningvanguards/

CLG – Supporting Communities Fund

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/neighbourhoodsprospectus

CLG - Localism Bill: Neighbourhood plans and community right to build - Impact Assessment

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismneighbourhoodplans

CLG – Localism Plain English Guide

www.communities.gov.uk/publications/localgovernment/localismplainenglishguide