

Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

# Neighbourhood Planning

## The rural frontrunners: research and case studies

### Executive summary

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# Executive Summary

## This report

The research report presents a series of case studies that communities considering neighbourhood planning can consult as they develop their own neighbourhood plans and development orders. It has a particular focus on rural planning issues and is based upon research into the progress made by, and lessons being learnt from, the rural-based neighbourhood planning frontrunners.

It has drawn upon the most advanced rural-based neighbourhood plans, where good information is available to help inform others, and where the issues being addressed are those that might be faced by other communities.

We recognise that neighbourhood planning is still in its infancy. As more plans come forward, more learning, knowledge and practical examples will come to light. The case studies and findings presented in this report reflect early practice and will need to evolve over time. Until then, we hope this provides a useful reference point for others.

Although the research has a rural focus, the work has drawn out a series of tips that will be of interest to all communities undertaking neighbourhood planning, whether they are in rural or urban areas.

## Rural planning issues

Over the past decade there has been much research into the planning, socio-economic and environmental issues affecting rural areas and communities. These have been reported upon - for example, in the Taylor Review<sup>1</sup>, by the Rural Coalition<sup>2</sup> and in previous research for Defra and DCLG<sup>3</sup>.

These have identified concerns with regard to the provision of affordable housing, protecting and retaining shops and community facilities, and the need to diversify and grow the economy but, at the same time, retaining the very character and qualities that define our rural communities.

Many rural areas are caught in what has been termed the 'sustainability trap': many are identified in local plans as inherently unsustainable locations because they lack services and facilities and have limited transport accessibility. This has denied them the ability to provide new homes and jobs which might help sustain services, facilities and local shops. Without these, some places are becoming even less sustainable locations, with polarised

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<sup>1</sup> Taylor, M. Living Working Countryside: The Taylor Review of Rural Economy and Affordable Housing, DCLG, July 2008

<sup>2</sup> See for example The Rural Coalition, The Rural Challenge: Achieving Sustainable Rural Communities for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, TCPA, August 2010

<sup>3</sup> See for example Colin Buchanan et al for Defra, Research into Rural Housing Affordability, 2010

demographics. Because of a lack of affordable housing and jobs, many lower income households are being excluded from rural areas, and is detrimental to the social and economic vitality of these areas.

## How can neighbourhood planning help?

Neighbourhood planning provides communities with a much greater say in how the places where they live and work should change and develop over time. Through the neighbourhood plan, communities can influence the amount, type and location of any new development, what uses should be provided, and where.

A neighbourhood plan can be a very powerful document: if successfully brought into force it will be used to inform planning applications and decisions for an area. It will sit alongside the local development plan prepared by the district, presenting more locally specific policies responding to local concerns and objectives.

For example, some of the neighbourhood plans looked at for this research have been establishing policies that promote the provision of locally affordable housing. Others have been identifying land for development and establishing how many new homes should be accommodated in an area. Others have been seeking to strengthen the local economy by promoting the provision of business space and protection of local services. In all plans, extensive consultation with residents, businesses and others is being undertaken so that the neighbourhood plan reflects the community's wishes.

A wide range of neighbourhood plans are coming forward, addressing different issues and following different processes. However, a number of common themes have emerged. These form the basis of our case studies.

## Case studies

The research identified three main issues that the more advanced neighbourhood plans have been tackling. These cover both policy and process matters. They are: local housing need; governance; and engagement. A total of seven case studies are presented, showing how the issues are being tackled in different areas.

### Issue 1: Local development need

*Case study 1.1: A dispersed housing strategy: allowing modest development in small villages*

In Upper Eden the neighbourhood plan is seeking to address the 'sustainability trap': policies have been prepared that allow for a small amount of housing in rural areas rather than just being focused in the main settlements. This is to help provide for local housing needs and also help support and sustain services, facilities and support networks.

### *Case study 1.2: Where should new housing go? Identifying land for development*

In Much Wenlock and Thame the focus of the neighbourhood plans has been to identify and allocate land for development. This is in response to growth targets established by the local plan, and reflecting the communities' desire to have more control over where this development should be located and in what form.

### *Case study 1.3: Limiting second homes: restricting the use of new housing as holiday homes*

In the Exmoor National Park there are many second and holiday homes. These are unoccupied for much of the year. This contributes little to the day-to-day life of the area and limits the ability of local people to enter the housing market. In the Lynton and Lynmouth neighbourhood plan a policy has been drafted that allows open-market housing to be developed but which requires this housing to be used as the permanent residence of the purchaser.

### *Case Study 1.4: Providing affordable homes for the local community*

Many neighbourhood plans are seeking to provide local affordable housing for those in local need. In the Allendale neighbourhood plan in Northumberland definitions of 'local person' and 'local need' have been established, amending definitions set out in the Core Strategy to make them more locally specific. In the Thame neighbourhood plan, a policy requires planning applications for six or more dwellings to be supported by a Thame specific affordable housing and dwelling mix strategy. This is to make sure that new housing meets the needs of current and future households.

## **Issue 2: Governance**

### *Case study 2.1: Plan areas that cross boundaries: how parishes can work together*

The district of Blaby in Leicestershire is a rural area surrounded by towns and cities where major new housing and employment growth is proposed. Parishes in Blaby are concerned about the impact of this development on the rural area, and the associated traffic movements. Eleven parishes have come together to prepare the Fosse Villages neighbourhood plan. They are working together to address common concerns and have set up a joint working board with equal representation from each parish. A lead parish and terms of reference have been established.

## **Issue 3: Engagement**

### *Case study 3.1: Increasing interest and involvement in the plan: using community champions*

In Lynton and Lynmouth a network of volunteers has been working alongside the steering group to help spread the word about the neighbourhood plan, generate interest, and liaise

with wider interest groups and networks they are linked to. People have responded well to these familiar faces and this has helped build ownership of the plan.

### *Case study 3.2: Community consultation: how to involve younger people*

In Leicestershire a neighbourhood planning network has been established that allows people working on neighbourhood plans in the area to come together and share ideas and knowledge. Various techniques for engaging younger members of society in the plan have been shared, including involving them closely in its production. This has included working with schools in the Fosse Villages plan and, elsewhere, working with the Guides and talking to people at organised family events.

## **Tips from the frontrunners**

In addition to the case studies the research has drawn out a series of useful tips that may prove useful to communities in both rural and urban areas:

### **Is a neighbourhood plan right for you?**

A neighbourhood plan will not be the right vehicle for everyone, particularly if the concerns of the community are not land-use related. Parish plans can be equally useful if that is the case. Elsewhere, opportunities might exist to influence the local plan rather than follow the neighbourhood planning route.

### **What are you trying to achieve?**

A recurring theme is to focus on what you want to achieve through the plan, whether it is an existing local plan policy that needs updating or one that needs making more locally specific. It is better to focus on a small number of issues where change can be influenced, rather than collecting lots of evidence and then trying to write policies that address every issue: this of course also has time and cost implications.

### **Plan the plan**

Time should be spent upfront organising the plan: what needs to be done, when and by whom. Time associated with consultation and administrative processes should not be underestimated, but this needs to be balanced with the need to maintain interest and momentum.

### **Is it enough to be in ‘general conformity’ with the local plan?**

The ultimate aim of the neighbourhood plan should be to influence decision making. The wording used in policies needs to be carefully considered: the more ambiguous the policy, the more it is open to interpretation and the less value it will have when determining planning applications.

## **Think about the basic conditions from day one**

Before a neighbourhood plan can come into force the inspector will need to be satisfied that it meets certain conditions, including having regard to national policies, the achievement of sustainable development, and being in general conformity with the local plan. Early thinking about these will help set the context for the neighbourhood plan and avoid any pitfalls later in the process.

## **Work in partnership with the local authority**

Local authority officers can help enable the process, provide information and review policies. Where good relationships have been developed the results can be far greater than the sum of the parts. A collaborative approach can lead to a positive outcome for the plan.

## **Use existing evidence**

Much information will already be available and will not need to be reinvented. Technical studies prepared by the local authority for the local plan are a good basis for developing locally specific policies. Housing land assessments, demographic information and infrastructure studies will be readily available. The local authority can help provide or find these.

## **Share and exchange knowledge with your neighbouring areas**

Neighbours should come together to share experiences and knowledge, learning together in what is a new and rapidly evolving area of practice. Common issues can be worked through and plans strengthened as a result.

The key underlying message is to focus on what you want to achieve, how and where you would like to make a change, and how you might do that.

Throughout the report and case studies, a selection of links to neighbourhood plans, advice and guidance material is provided.

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