

Neighbourhood Planning Advice Note

Engaging a Consultant

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This planning advice note describes how to engage a consultant to support the town / parish council in the production of a neighbourhood plan.¹ It describes the support they can provide, the process of engaging a consultant, and what happens after the consultant is appointed.
- 1.2 You will need to know what you want your neighbourhood plan to achieve ***before*** you begin the process of engaging a consultant. This will inform the skills you may need to support the plan-making process.

2. Support within your community

- 2.1 Before engaging a consultant, consider the skills and expertise you can draw on within your local community to carry out the following stages of preparing a neighbourhood plan:
- Gathering baseline information about your neighbourhood and the surrounding area, for example, defining heritage assets;
 - Identifying local groups and businesses you will need to consult;
 - Consulting those living and working in the neighbourhood area;
 - Defining the vision for your neighbourhood using written and visual material;
 - Talking to local landowners and developers to help identify potential sites for future development.

¹ N.B. This note focusses on neighbourhood development plans, but the advice is sound for neighbourhood development orders, which are prepared in a similar way.

3. How a consultant can help

Community engagement expertise

- 3.1 Presenting complex information to a large audience and gathering views from members of your local community requires skill. Consider appointing a specialist in community engagement and consultation early on, before the plan-making process has begun.

Evidence gathering and data analysis

- 3.2 Using consultants with the right experience and knowledge can ensure your neighbourhood plan has enough evidence to support your proposals through examination. It also provides greater certainty that the proposals and policies are achievable over the lifespan of the plan. Identify areas where you will need professional support, for example identifying and assessing development and land assembly options.

Drafting policies and preparing plans

- 3.3 Experienced consultants will be able to draft clear and concise land use planning policies that influence and guide development. Your project will benefit from their knowledge of lessons learnt from other planning documents and similar approaches, to ensure your neighbourhood plan is of a high quality, robust and fit for purpose.

4. How to engage a consultant

- 4.1 Selecting your preferred consultant from a minimum of three allows you to compare their skills and experience and their track record in working on similar projects, to assess whether they are the best qualified for the task. Competitive selection also allows you to compare costs; however; you should never select a consultant solely based on cost.
- 4.2 The best way to find consultants is through recommendation by others:

- approach neighbouring communities who have prepared, or are in the process of preparing neighbourhood plans;
- approach professional bodies such as the Royal Town Planning Institute.²

4.3 The local authority can tell you which consultants have worked on neighbourhood plans in the County, but they cannot recommend one.

4.4 An appropriate method for selecting a consultant is using a simple selection process. The main steps in this process are:

- A pre-selected number of consultants are invited to respond to the project brief by submitting relevant information and costs;
- Information is prepared and submitted by each consultant;
- Submitted information is assessed and compared against pre-agreed criteria;
- The consultant who best meets the selection criteria is selected and appointed.

Preparing a project brief

4.5 The project brief describes your needs and expectations, the work that is to be carried out by the consultant, your budget, timetable and deadlines. See Annex A for a template brief that may help you with this process.

4.6 A project brief has two main functions:

- It describes the outputs that the consultant must produce, against which the consultant can provide a cost; and
- It is the means by which expectations for the project are recorded.

4.7 It is likely that you will be commissioning several small pieces of work; make your brief specific to the requirements of that piece of work and the expertise you are seeking to appoint.

² The RTPi website is available here: <https://www.rtpiconsultants.co.uk/#/>

Budgeting

- 4.8 Adjust the scope of work to fit your budget before finalising the brief so that what you are expecting to be delivered is clearly set out. For larger pieces of work, set a contingency sum to allow for refinements of the scope during the plan-making process. Each parish and town council will have its own policy on procurement that should be followed.
- 4.9 Consultants' day rates vary depending on the area of specialism and experience. Locality set a limit of £550 a day for consultancy paid for from the neighbourhood planning support grants.
- 4.10 Whilst the brief will have fixed elements such as timescales and budget, some of the information may change as the project progresses. If new information arises during a project, it could affect the scope of work and this is likely to increase costs. The brief should not be seen as a fixed tool but something that reflects changes to a project and is updated once the consultant is appointed. Ensure objectives and outcomes are refined to reflect an updated view of everyone's expectations for the project.

A step-by-step guide to running a competitive selection process

- i. Identify costs of producing your neighbourhood plan, including consultant costs;
- ii. Identify funding sources, including grants;
- iii. Prepare a project brief;
- iv. Talk to your local authority, professional bodies and other local or regional organisations who can help you to draw up a list of relevant consultants;
- v. Call the consultants to ask if they would be interested in preparing a quote for your project;
- vi. Issue your brief to at least three consultants setting a clear deadline for submission of their quotation and other material such as CVs;
- vii. Where consultants must engage members of the community, invite your shortlisted consultants to be interviewed as part of the selection process;
- viii. The decision about which consultant to select should be made by members of the group, not by an individual;
- ix. Contact the successful consultant and issue an appointment letter or contract

- x. It is good practice to also contact the unsuccessful consultants – you may use them in the future and feedback is often welcomed.
- 4.11 The template for scoring and selecting a consultant in Annex B may help you with this process.

5. Appointing and managing a consultant

- 5.1 The simplest form of appointment is by letter. This will set out the terms by which the consultant is appointed (drawing from the project brief), the amount that is to be paid and the payment terms. To ensure you have control over the final quality of information that is produced, final payment should be on completion and handover of the work.

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Annex A: Template for writing a Project Brief

This template is designed to help you create your own brief when hiring a consultant. Complete the boxes with information relevant to your plan / area.

<i>Insert name of Neighbourhood Plan</i>
1. Introduction and Context
<i>Information on the qualifying body, including some general background to the neighbourhood plan</i>
<i>The natural, social and economic context, the things the neighbourhood plan is seeking to change or protect</i>
<i>Summary of any background work so far and other related studies and commissions that may be underway</i>
<i>Purpose of this particular commission and the type of consultant expertise you are seeking to appoint.</i>
2. (Draft) Vision and objectives
<i>Draft Vision</i>
<i>Draft Objectives</i>
3. Community and stakeholder involvement
<i>Details of any community engagement up to this point, including how consultation outputs have been / will be used</i>
4. Scope of work
<i>The main elements of the commission.</i>
<i>How this commission fits into the whole neighbourhood planning process</i>
<i>Key milestones and client sign-off procedures</i>
5. Outputs of the Commission
<i>Interim and final outputs expected from the commission</i>
<i>Any requirements in terms of format</i>
6. Management Arrangements
<i>Details of nominated lead(s) from Steering Group (who will receive bid / sign off key documents and milestones)</i>
<i>Details of NCC Link Officer</i>
7. Programme and Timetable
<i>Start and completion dates</i>
<i>Draft project programme including provisional dates for key events / deadlines.</i>
8. Value of Contract
<i>The amount stated as a fixed price or maximum figure that is available to the commission. Consider how the price should be expressed: day rates, inclusion of VAT and expenses, and what constitutes allowable expenses.</i>

Annex B. A Template for Scoring and Selecting a Consultant

Selection criteria and scoring guidance

These criteria can be adapted to suit your circumstances:

- *Approach (30%)*
- *Skills and experience: technical and professional capability of the consultant and relevant track record (40%)*
- *Price (30%)*

The scoring principles below can be used to score each consultant:

Score thresholds 0 – 4: Poor 5 – 6: Average 7 – 8: Good 9 – 10: Excellent

Poor: The response is significantly below what would be expected because of one or more of the following:

- *The response indicates a significant lack of understanding relating to the requirements*
- *Experience and skills do not demonstrate competence*
- *The response is light with little evidence.*

Average: The response meets elements of the requirement but gives concern because of one or more of the following:

- *Basic understanding of the requirements*
- *Basic experience*
- *Minimal competence demonstrated.*

Good: The response broadly meets what is expected for the criteria. The response therefore shows:

- *Good understanding of the requirements*
- *Relevant experience and skills*
- *Sufficient competence demonstrated.*

Excellent: The response exceeds what is expected for the criteria. The response therefore shows:

- *Very good understanding of the requirements*
- *Excellent experience, skills and achievements demonstrated through relevant evidence*
- *Highly competent, likely to add value to the project*

Scoring sheet					
Criteria	Evidence	Comments	Score out of 10	Weighting	Final score
Approach	<i>Has the consultant understood the project and the key issues?</i> <i>Has the consultant understood the requirements and demonstrated a clear approach to the scope of services?</i> <i>Has the consultant clearly described their approach?</i> <i>Does the submitted statement clearly convey the consultant's technical capability?</i>			30%	
Skills and experience: technical professional of the consultant and relevant track record	<i>Check for range of expertise in the CV against requirements in project brief.</i> <i>Check the CV for relevant qualifications.</i> <i>Is the information clear and concise?</i> <i>Are the example projects described relevant or do they showcase equivalent challenges, to this project?</i> <i>Does the approach demonstrate an understanding of the neighbourhood planning process?</i>			40%	
Cost				30%	