

Neighbourhood Planning Advice Notes

Setting up a Steering Group

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Although a parish council is the responsible body for neighbourhood planning, it may choose to enlist the support of volunteers from the local community via a steering group. This guidance note helps to explain how to set up your steering group and what benefits such a group could bring to the neighbourhood planning process.

2. Why have a Steering Group?

- 2.1 Because of the work involved in producing your Neighbourhood Development Plan (NDP) or Neighbourhood Development Order (NDO), you are likely to require wide-ranging support from people in the local community in addition to that provided by parish councillors. The establishment of a steering group will allow you to agree the scope of your project, manage the tasks involved in delivering the project, and secure the support needed to deliver the tasks.

3. The main role of a Steering Group

- 3.1 The main role of a steering group is to provide effective project management for the preparation of a NDP or NDO. The steering group will be responsible to the parish council since the parish council remains the responsible body for neighbourhood planning in the designated neighbourhood area. The steering group must report to the parish council on a regular basis during production of the plan or order. It must act from the outset on the understanding that the parish council must ultimately agree the content of a draft plan or order prior to consultation or its submission to the County Council.

- 3.2 The steering group should develop a project plan and consultation plan for the production of the plan or order. It must operate within any budgetary constraints set by the parish council, which is accountable for expenditure on the project.
- 3.3 In addition, there are many other tasks that the steering group should lead or undertake, such as:
- Providing a forum for discussion and debate;
 - Motivating the community to be involved throughout the process;
 - Raising the profile of the plan or order locally;
 - Setting up sub-groups to focus on particular themes that arise through the consultation process;
 - Collecting and managing the collection and presentation of evidence to justify policies or proposals;
 - Providing day-to-day support and management to any consultants engaged in supporting preparation of a plan or order;
 - Providing and co-ordinating feedback to consultants and others in the local community involved in creating evidence to justify policies and proposals;
 - Identifying ways to gather the views and opinions of as many individuals, groups and organisations in the community as possible;
 - Determining the types of survey and information gathering to be used;
 - Co-ordinating the collation and analysis of the consultation feedback in accordance with Data Protection legislation;
 - Undertaking and producing the complimentary material such as consultation reports;
 - Reporting back to and receiving endorsement from the parish council on progress, issues arising and outcomes throughout the process.

4. Setting up a Steering Group

- 4.1 The steering group is directly responsible to the parish council or the nominated 'qualifying body' where a group of parish councils are working collectively in a multi-parish neighbourhood area. It is therefore essential to establish Terms of Reference for the steering group which create the formal agreement allowing the group to act on behalf of, or provide advice to the parish council. Further detail is provided in Section 7 below.

- 4.2 A steering group should be representative of the interests likely to be affected by neighbourhood planning activity in the neighbourhood area. If the neighbourhood area covers more than one parish, then this should be reflected in the membership of the group. The steering group should include both parish councillors and members of the community.
- 4.3 It would be appropriate to include representation on a steering group from elected members on the County Council. It would also be helpful to include an invitation for officers from the County Council's Neighbourhood Planning Team to attend steering group meetings and to provide professional and technical guidance to the parish council through the steering group.
- 4.4 There is no required size for a steering group, but smaller groups can sometimes lack the breadth of experience or resources required whilst larger ones can lose focus. Establishing the initial scope of a plan or proposal would help in deciding on the skills and experience required within the steering group. The responsibility for identifying the initial scope of a project should lie with the parish council.
- 4.5 It is important for everyone on the steering group to have clearly defined roles, and that they understand their role and the purpose of the steering group. This will help to enable the group to remain focussed on outcomes and make the best use of resources.

5. Relationship with the Parish Council

- 5.1 Below is a checklist of things it is important to remember about the relationship between the parish council and the steering group.
- ✓ Members of the parish council can be in the steering group.
 - ✓ Elected members of the County Council can be on the steering group.
 - ✓ Throughout the development and implementation period of the plan or order there should be a standing Neighbourhood Planning item on the parish council agenda.
 - ✓ There should be minutes of parish council decisions in relation to the steering group and NDP / NDO.
 - ✓ Budget responsibility lies with the parish council and not the steering group.

- ✓ The steering group should give regular feedback to the Parish Council.
- ✓ The steering group present the NDP / NDO to the parish council who will ultimately sign off the document.
- ✓ Conflict within the steering group should be referred to the parish council.
- ✓ Terms of reference used by the steering group will have been agreed by the parish council.
- ✓ It may be beneficial to use someone as a 'bridging co-ordinator' to oversee the communication between the steering group and the parish council.

6. Financial Considerations

- 6.1 The steering group cannot make any financial decisions on behalf of the parish council. However, the parish council can delegate authority to the clerk, (usually in consultation with the chairman and vice-chairman), to approve payments up to a certain amount. This must be clearly minuted.
- 6.2 Large items of expenditure should be placed on the parish council agenda for approval. The threshold of which is to be decided by each individual parish council and written into their Terms of Reference.
- 6.3 Invoices should be made out to the parish council (to enable VAT reclaim) and should be paid in accordance with the parish council's financial regulations. The accounts relating to the neighbourhood planning process will be audited and open to the public.
- 6.4 Substantial decisions, such as contracting a planning consultant, must be approved by the parish council. The parish council will also need to approve the terms and conditions of the contract. Any commissioning of funded expertise from other bodies must be undertaken by the parish council.

7. Terms of Reference

7.1 This document provides the structure and detail of how the steering group operates and will typically include the following information:

- Purpose
- Membership
- Roles and relationships (with the parish council)
- Meeting arrangements
- Finance
- How appointments / dismissals will be made
- Dissolution of the group

7.2 An exemplar Terms of Reference for a NDP is included at Annex A.

8. Transparency

8.1 The relationship between the steering group and the formal functions of the parish council should be transparent to the wider public. Its terms of reference and minutes of meetings should be published, including online.

Annex A: Exemplar Terms of Reference

XXXX NEIGHBOURHOOD DEVELOPMENT PLAN STEERING GROUP

TERMS OF REFERENCE

1. Purpose of the Steering Group

- 1.1 XXXX Parish Council is the qualifying body for the preparation of a Neighbourhood Development Plan for their civil parish area. The Parish Council has established a Steering Group to facilitate the delivery of this plan.
- 1.2 The Group will:
- i. provide a locally accountable and representative lead for plan-making;
 - ii. agree a project timetable and endeavour to secure compliance;
 - iii. agree a project communication, consultation and engagement strategy;
 - iv. agree the initial scope of the Plan prior to early public engagement;
 - v. confirm, subject to consultation with the Parish Council, the scope of the Plan following analysis of early and subsequent community engagement;
 - vi. consider all background and evidence-based reports prior to publication;
 - vii. consider all consultation documents prior to publication;
 - viii. agree, subject to ratification by the Parish Council, a final submission version of the XXXX Neighbourhood Development Plan; and
 - ix. actively support and promote the preparation of the XXXX Neighbourhood Development Plan throughout the duration of the project.
- 1.3 The Steering Group will be established for a time-limited period. The project is intended to run until a Plan has been presented for independent examination. The Steering Group will remain active until the independent examiners report is published.

2. Steering Group Objective

- 2.1 The objective of the Steering Group is to produce a sound Neighbourhood Development Plan for the Parish of XXXX that defines the spatial planning policy priorities identified by the community taking into account all relevant representations made during the plan-making process and having regard to all relevant existing plans and evidence. The Plan will include or be supported by an appropriate delivery plan setting out, where relevant, the means by which these policy priorities may be implemented.

3. Steering Group Membership

3.1 The Steering Group will comprise the following members:

- XXXX
- XXXX
- XXXX

3.2 Membership will be reviewed and confirmed at the annually meeting of the Parish Council.

4. Reporting and Communication

4.1 The Steering Group is established with full authority from the Parish Council to deliver the plan-making functions up to and including providing appropriate draft documents and a Pre-submission Draft Neighbourhood Development Plan. The Group will report to the Parish Council setting out progress on its work after each Steering Group meeting. The Parish Council will approve the Submission Draft Neighbourhood Development Plan prior to submission to the Local Planning Authority.

4.2 The plan-making process remains in the control of the Parish Council as local authority and qualifying body. All publications, consultation and community engagement exercises will be undertaken by or on behalf of XXX Parish Council with appropriate recognition of the Parish Council's position given in all communications associated with the project.

5. Meetings

5.1 Steering Group meetings will take place XXXX, normally to commence at XXXX on a XXXX, XXXX days prior to the Parish Council meeting. All meetings should take place within the XXXX Parish. The Parish Council will arrange appropriate venues for the meetings.

5.2 The Steering Group is chaired by XXX.

5.3 Decisions made by the Steering Group should normally be by consensus at Steering Group meetings. Where a vote is required each member shall have one vote. A minimum of three members shall be present where matters are presented for decisions to be taken. A simple majority will be required to support any motion. The Chair, or in their absence the Vice-Chair shall have one casting vote.

6. Support

- 6.1 The County Council have a duty to support parish councils that decide to prepare neighbourhood plans or orders. They will:
- provide advice to ensure neighbourhood plans and orders meet the legal requirements; and
 - allocate a planning officer to provide support and technical advice throughout the production of the neighbourhood plan.
- 6.2 The Parish Clerk and Deputy Parish Clerk will provide support and administration with delegated powers where provided by the Parish Council.

7. Conduct

- 7.1 The Steering Group will follow the code of conduct set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life. Whilst Members as individuals will be accountable to their parent organisations, the Steering Group as a whole is accountable to the wider community for ensuring that the Plan reflects their collective expectations. The Steering Group will achieve this through applying the following principles:
- Work with mutual trust and respect, and combine their expertise;
 - Be clear when their individual roles or interests are in conflict;
 - Provide feedback from Steering Group meetings to their parent organisation;
 - Assist their parent organisation to bring appropriate ideas and concerns to the attention of the Steering Group;
 - Inform the Steering Group when they are unable to deliver agreed actions;
 - Treat everyone with dignity, courtesy and respect regardless of their age, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, ability, or religion and belief; and
 - Actively promote equality of access and opportunity.