

## How to CONTACT us

We are here to support parishes through the neighbourhood planning process.

For further information and advice please contact the neighbourhood planning team:

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## Hexham Neighbourhood Plan successful at Referendum

**On 6 May, voters in Hexham Parish were asked if they want Northumberland County Council to use the Hexham Neighbourhood Plan to help to decide planning applications in the area in the future.**

84% of the votes recorded voted 'Yes'. The Hexham Neighbourhood Plan will now go forward to be formally 'made' by the County Council, to become part of the statutory development plan for the area. Find out more about the experiences of the Hexham steering group on page 3.

### Forthcoming referendums

On 10 June, referendums will take place in **Embleton, Wooler, Lesbury, Craster and Alnmouth**. Like Hexham, these referendums have been delayed by Covid-19, however, the plans are influencing planning decisions. See page 2 for further information.

All of these plans and supporting documents may be viewed on the [Council's neighbourhood planning website](#).

**Embleton** Neighbourhood Plan seeks to ensure the long-term sustainability of its communities with high quality and locally distinctive development that responds to the needs of the Parish.

**Wooler** Parish Council is planning for growth to ensure a *sustainable, vibrant and friendly place for all ages to live, work and play*. Its plan allocates five sites for development in Wooler.

**Lesbury** Neighbourhood Plan will contribute to making the area an attractive, well connected, healthy and safe place to live, visit and work, with community facilities, green spaces and distinct settlements.

The popularity of **Craster** and **Alnmouth** Parishes as holiday and leisure destinations is the mainspring behind their plans. Each focuses on housing, to ensure the sustainability of their communities, with a single planning policy to restrict the use of new dwellings to ensure that they are available only for permanent occupation.





# What's happening around the County?

## PREMATURITY- Neighbourhood Plans

In what circumstances might it be justifiable to refuse planning permission before a neighbourhood plan has been brought into force on the grounds of prematurity?

The circumstances are set out in the [NPPF](#) and are limited to:

- a) where the development proposed is so substantial that to grant permission would undermine the plan-making process by predetermining decisions about the scale, location or phasing of new development; and
- b) the emerging plan is at an advanced stage but is not yet part of the development plan for the area.

A recent appeal decision in Lesbury will help to illustrate these points.

The [appeal](#) against refusal of permission for the development of 41 dwellings on land north of Alnwick Road was dismissed. The Inspector said: *“A grant of permission at this time, in advance of the referendum on the Lesbury Neighbourhood Plan, would predetermine decisions about the scale and location of new development and undermine the plan making process... especially given that the scale and location of the development proposed... is not envisaged in the Plan.. This would... undermine the neighbourhood plan process where a community can set out a positive vision for how they want their community to develop.*

**There are currently ten made neighbourhood plans in Northumberland. These plans form part of the Development Plan for their areas and planning decisions must be made in accordance with their policies unless material considerations indicate otherwise.**

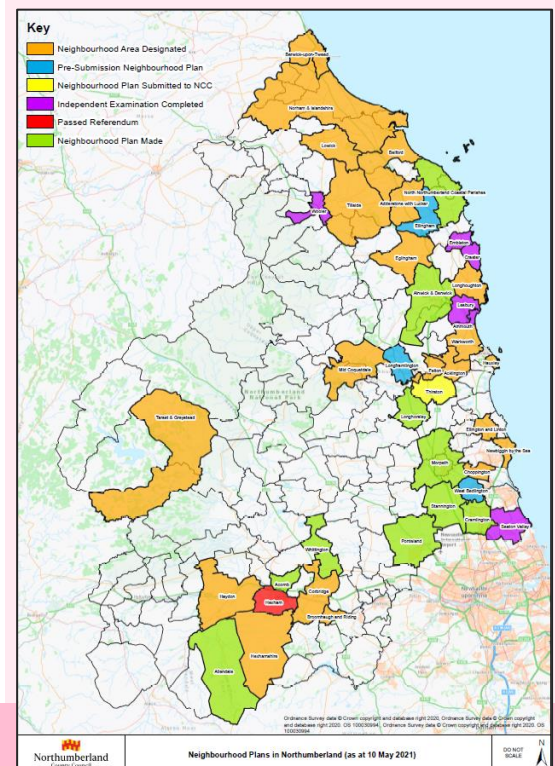
Five Neighbourhood Plans are at Referendum stage. **Embleton, Wooler, Lesbury, Craster and Alnmouth** Neighbourhood Plans have successfully passed independent examination and will proceed to referendum on 10 June 2021. These plans can be given significant weight in decision-making, so far as they are material to the application.

**Seaton Valley Neighbourhood Plan** has passed independent examination and, subject to the County Council confirming its agreement to modifications recommended by the Examiner, the Plan will proceed to referendum. At this stage, some weight will be given to the Plan in decision-making so far as material to the application.

**Thirston Parish** has submitted its plan to the County Council. The County Council invited comments on the submission draft Plan until 24 May. The Plan, which is now being examined, currently carries limited weight in decision making.

Following consultation, **West Bedlington Town Council** and **Longframlington Parish Council** are revising their plans before submitting them to the County Council.

Twenty-six other parishes are at an earlier stage of plan-making. More information is on our [website](#), plus a larger version of this map.



# Neighbourhood Planning in Hexham



**We are pleased to introduce Dave Clegg, Chair of the steering group, which put together Hexham's plan. Dave shares his experiences and insights.**

**Why did the Town Council decide to prepare a neighbourhood plan?**

*Hexham Town Council was keen to have greater influence over planning application decisions, in particular to ensure that new build complemented or enhanced its surroundings, with high levels of energy efficiency; to protect the town centre and its heritage buildings; to sustain the character of the town with its many special green spaces, and overall, to contribute to the town's attractiveness and economic as well as environmental sustainability.*

*In the first of its nine open public forums, strong support was expressed for the construction of affordable homes for local people instead of the seemingly endless, status-driven detached houses. It was the Plan's housing needs analysis that later provided the hard evidence of a disconcertingly high level of housing need in Hexham.*

**How was the process of preparing a neighbourhood plan?**

*There was an assumption among town councillors that the necessary level of public consultation would be a serious hurdle.*

*This was the main reason behind the Town Council's consideration of engaging external consultants to engineer a plan and take a leading role in community consultation, but the anticipated cost of this consultancy over 2-3 years was an inhibiting factor.*

*The establishment of a steering group of local people with a good range of skills was a crucial first step. The appointment of a pro-rata town planning consultant with experience of neighbourhood planning and who had an affinity for our town was very important and necessary. The overall cost to the Town Council was more than halved through access to the grants and support packages available via Locality.*

*The extensive public consultation led by the NP Steering Group proved fruitful, collaborative and enjoyable. It spanned exactly the planned two years. It was seen as a strength by the Independent Examiner and influenced some examination decisions.*

*The support that the County offers was appreciated and at times crucial. The support officers made valuable inputs into Steering Group discussions and attended reliably. We had over time four support officers, so consistency was absent. When one officer was able to provide consistent support over an extended period, the value was obvious, technically and effectively.*

*Support officers frequently expressed the need to refer back before providing clear judgements on critical issues, which could be frustrating.*

**What advice would you give to other groups who are embarking on the process?**

- 1. Make the public aware of the purposes, scope and limitations of a NP.*
- 2. Engage a MRTPI planning consultant with proven experience in NP production.*
- 3. Clarify the objectives of the NP as early as possible and target the consultation and plan production processes accordingly.*
- 4. Keep the plan as focused as possible – a multiplicity of themes can render it difficult to achieve coherence and relevance.*
- 5. Record everything in detail, including full responses to submissions made during statutory consultations and subsequent changes made to the draft of the NP.*
- 6. Make no promises regarding timescales beyond the processes that are directly within a steering group's control.*
- 7. Be prepared to encourage, and if necessary, demand timely completions of external pieces of work, i.e. assessments.*
- 8. Apply for all available support via Locality, both financial (grants) and specific specialist support packages.*

# Planning Bill, 2021

A bill aimed at 'modernising' England's planning system was announced in the Queen's Speech (11 May).

The bill, which is expected to be brought before Parliament this autumn, is being designed to enact planning reforms outlined in 2020's [planning white paper](#).

## [Main elements of the Bill](#)

- Changing local plans so they provide more certainty over the type, scale and design of development permitted on different categories of land.
- Significantly decreasing the time it takes for developments to go through the planning system.
- Replacing the existing systems for funding affordable housing and infrastructure from development with a new levy.

## What about Neighbourhood planning?

It is not clear what will happen to neighbourhood planning. However, in the White Paper, the government proposed to retain neighbourhood plans, to encourage their continued use, and to help spread their use further, particularly in towns and cities.

It is possible that future neighbourhood plans will become more focused, to reflect proposals for reforms to Local Plans. This focus could be on design to shape the form and appearance of development in their areas, which fits into the Government's aim of placing greater emphasis on beauty and place-making.



## Changes to Permitted Development Rights

### *What are the implications for Neighbourhood Plans?*

**The Government has confirmed that a new Permitted Development Right (PDR) will come into effect on 1 August 2021, to allow unused buildings in the class E commercial use class - which includes retail, offices, light industrial, recreation centres and nurseries - to convert to housing.**

How will it work?

The right is subject to a size limit of 1,500 sqm of floorspace changing use and only applies to buildings that have been in a class E use for two years, including time in former uses now within that class. Applicants will need to show that the class E building has been vacant for three continuous months.

National parks, areas of outstanding natural beauty (AONBs) and sites of special scientific interest will be exempt from the right. However, it will apply in conservation areas.

The right will be subject to [prior approval](#) by the local authority in respect of: flooding; transport impacts; contamination; impacts of noise from existing commercial premises; provision of adequate natural light to all habitable rooms; consideration of the impact of the loss of the ground floor commercial, business and service use (in conservation areas only); and the impact of the loss of health centres and registered nurseries on the provision of such local services.

Pros and cons?

The Government says this [new PDR](#) "will help support the creation of much-needed homes while also giving high streets a new lease of life – removing eyesores, transforming unused buildings and making the most of brownfield land."

However, critics including the [Royal Town Planning Institute](#) (RTPI) fear these new rights will do nothing for the high street if ground floor commercial units are turned into homes. Essential local services such as convenience stores, crèches, gyms, pharmacies and post offices could be lost, affecting those who can least afford to travel and reducing local employment.

The RTPI also point out that these homes will not be subject to local design codes, arguing this could lead to a huge increase in poor quality homes for the poorest in our society.

Implications for neighbourhood plans?

The expansion of PDRs will undermine the ability of parish councils to shape their local areas through neighbourhood plans. The [British Property Federation](#) argue that a "holistic approach" to the high street is required to ensure that "...every business and new home support one another, to create coherent and thriving neighbourhoods." They say this new PDR will remove control from local councils at a time when the high street's future "depends more than ever on strong local leadership and vision."

## Self and Custom Build Homes and Neighbourhood Planning

Neighbourhood plans are a great way for local people to decide where and what type of housing is built in their community. They can be a useful tool to bring forward self and custom build homes to help to bring greater choice and diversity to the new build market.

Self-build and custom housebuilding covers a wide spectrum, from projects where individuals are involved in building or managing the construction of their home from beginning to end, to projects where individuals commission their home, making key design and layout decisions, but the home is built ready for occupation ('turnkey').

A developer may provide a 'serviced plot' and outline planning permission. An individual may then work with a small house builder or specialist custom build developer who would do all the building and hard work but to the future owner's vision and specifications.

Local authorities in England have an obligation to keep a register of any individual or group wanting to obtain land to build their own homes and must make sufficient serviced plots available for self-builders on the register to apply, within three years of the application.

### Neighbourhood Plans

Neighbourhood planning groups could include self and custom build policies in their plans and / or designate sites for self and custom build communities. There are already examples of communities doing this.

Policy H4 of the [Lawrence Weston Neighbourhood Plan](#) in Bristol requires all developments of more than 30 houses to include an offer of serviced plots for custom build.

[Petersfield Neighbourhood Plan](#) in the South Downs allocates two sites wholly for self-build housing, totaling 112 dwellings. The Plan seeks to address the issue of affordability in Petersfield as self-build dwellings are likely to cost less than the market equivalent.

Further information about self and custom housebuilding is available on the Government's [Self Build Portal](#). To register your interest in building your own home in Northumberland, click [here](#).

## EYE ON

### The Future Homes Standard

Emissions from buildings account for approximately one third of total [UK greenhouse gas emissions](#).

Understandably, many neighbourhood planning groups wish to include policies to achieve more sustainable buildings, for example, by requiring developers to use thermally efficient building materials or low carbon heating systems. However, it is not possible to require these through a neighbourhood plan.

A [Written Ministerial Statement](#) to Parliament by the then SoS (CLG), states that neighbourhood plans should not set out "*..any additional local technical standards or requirements relating to the construction, internal layout or performance of new dwellings.*" This is clearly frustrating for plan makers.

### Future Homes Standard

However, there is some good news for all communities: [The Future Homes Standard](#) will come into effect in England in 2025 and ensure that new homes are futureproofed with low-carbon heating systems and high levels of energy efficiency. This should deliver homes that produce 75-80% less carbon emissions than homes delivered under current regulations.

Existing homes will also be subject to higher standards, although homeowners will only be affected if they are planning on building an extension or making thermal upgrades. Critics argue that the standard should pay greater focus towards improving England's almost 23 million existing homes, many of which are energy inefficient.

