

A NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN FOR HARTLEY - WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Background

Residents will recall the massive public support in Hartley against the Sevenoaks District Council Draft Local Plan, which included large scale proposals for residential development in the Fawkham Valley. Largely because of these objections and the lack of infrastructure, the Fawkham Valley proposals were withdrawn from the Plan.

The draft Plan has not yet been approved and the Parish Council continues to be alarmed by the prospect of large scale residential development in the Valley and, has reviewed possible solutions in conjunction with Fawkham Parish Council.

2. Possible Solutions

The possibility of seeking an extension of the North Downs Area of Outstanding Beauty to incorporate Fawkham Valley, has been explored but, it appears that any solution by these means is not likely to be considered for many years, due to Natural England's workload.

An alternative solution of seeking designation through a Neighbourhood Plan was recommended by a Planning Consultant engaged by the Kent Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, as the only possible means of gaining some legal control over the area. This was discussed at a meeting with representatives of Fawkham Parish Council and it was agreed that a Neighbourhood Plan could well be the only means open to a Parish Council to influence planning matters in its areas.

It was also felt that if local communities were prevented from making representations against future development proposals, it could result in considerable anger. Further discussion resulted in agreement that each Parish should produce its own Plan but these should be co-ordinated where there are common boundaries and grounds including sharing of professional advice. Fawkham Parish Council has now formally agreed to process its own Plan and is making progress.

3. Government's review of the Planning System.

Thrown into the melting pot is the Government's recent announcement, that it was proposing a major overhaul of the Planning System, which dates from 1947. This review contains proposals which could seriously reduce the roles of the Local Planning Authority, Parish Councils and

residents to influence planning decisions, by limiting long standing rights to be consulted.

However, the Government's proposals retain Neighbourhood Plans as an important means of Community input and since 2011 over 2,600 communities have started plans to produce a Neighbourhood Plan and 1000 of these achieved their aim. There are 12 communities in Sevenoaks engaged in this process.

4. What is the Legal Status of a Neighbourhood Plan?

Neighbourhood Plans were introduced in 2011 by the Localism Act and, once approved, they will pass some decision making from National and Local Government to Communities, including Parish Councils.

A Neighbourhood Plan will become part of the Development Plan and, as such, will enable the Parish Council to take the lead in the Community and, it will have a legal force.

The Neighbourhood Plan is not a panacea for stopping development included in the Sevenoaks District Local Plan, but it provides an opportunity to influence that development in terms of layout, design and needs for infrastructure i.e. roads, doctor surgeries etc.

In the future, the development of the Local Plan will reflect the needs of the Neighbourhood Plan.

By being part of the Development Plan a Neighbourhood Plan could influence planning decisions.

Developing a Neighbourhood Plan can take up to 3 years to complete but it will help Communities play a greater role in determining the future of their area. It can also bring the community together to share ideas and build consensus about needs and priorities for the area and create lasting partnerships for the future.

5. Producing a Neighbourhood Plan.

The Parish Council would have to take the lead but the key to the production of a Neighbourhood Plan is Community involvement and, therefore, it would be essential to set up a Steering Group, which would include local residents willing and able to help.

This Steering Group would oversee the production of the Plan. It will involve a robust programme of Community engagement to establish the support and views, aspirations, needs and wants of all residents. The

Steering Group would report periodically to Residents and the Parish Council on progress and consult on various issues.

6. Financial Implications.

Clearly there will be a cost for the development of the Neighbourhood Plan and it is difficult to judge the amount, as it will depend on the number of issues which the Parish Council and the Steering Group wish to investigate and also the extent to which volunteers are prepared to help.

One of the main costs will be the administrative work to support the Committee and the typing up of reports and consultations. The cost of delivering updates to residents could be significant and volunteers would be a great help for this.

Depending on the number of volunteers, the costs appear to range from £15k to £25k over the 2 to 3 years of the development process.

A grant is available from the Government to support this work.

The Parish Council is satisfied that it is the right course of action to protect the Village and will make up any shortfall in costs from its reserves.

7. Next Step.

The Parish Council has invited residents to consider the benefits of a Neighbourhood Plan and if there is sufficient support it will take the next step of notifying the District Council that it wishes to designate the whole Parish as a "defined area". The Parish Council would then move to set up the Steering Group to support the work of the developing the Neighbourhood Plan.

Sevenoaks Council would appoint a Planning Officer to advise on the Plan and provide plans and survey documents which will be needed.

8. Final Steps towards Approval

Once a Plan has been produced and consulted with local residents the Parish Council would submit it to Sevenoaks District Council for the final stages, these are:-

(a) submission of the Plan to an independent Examiner who will be looking to ensure that it complies with the legal requirements. The Examiner may or may not seek modifications.

However the advice of the Planning Officer in the development of the Plan will be essential and hopefully would avoid any complications at this stage.

(b) submit the Plan to a Referendum in the Community where at least 50% of those voting support the Plan.

For this reason it is essential that the development of the Plan has public support throughout the various stages of its production.

Throughout the whole process we need to keep uppermost in our minds. Does the Hartley Village Community wish to influence its own future or would it be happy to leave it to another body from outside the Village?