

The Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan



Our Community

Our Future

Our Plan

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ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

1. Introduction

- 1.1 This Strategy has been prepared to help guide the process of community and stakeholder engagement needed to produce an informed and relevant community-led Neighbourhood Development Plan for Morpeth. It sets out a range of activities and actions that can be taken to draw information from the community in and around Morpeth and its environs. Effective engagement with local residents, community groups, businesses, and service providers in Morpeth and adjoining areas is a crucial aspect in creating a credible plan.
- 1.2 Neighbourhood planning is an inclusive approach to considering how land should best be used or developed to meet community needs. It extends beyond traditional ‘land-use’ planning activity which tends to focus on regulation and control of development. Neighbourhood planning allows greater scope for plan makers, acting with the community, relevant agencies and service providers to promote and manage change in an area. This is why we need to ensure that extensive, appropriate and well planned engagement takes place at all stages of the plan-making process.
- 1.3 Neighbourhood Plans are a new form of statutory spatial plan. Morpeth has been chosen, as part of a Government pilot project, to test how these plans can be prepared using a community-led approach and to learn from that experience.
- 1.4 As with all plan-making, the project requires leadership. The Localism Act has given that leadership role to Parish Councils. This carries significant responsibility in terms of producing a representative plan. The way in which the process is led and implemented will need to secure confidence from the community in the Morpeth area and those organisations and businesses that serve our needs. Confidence in the process and support for the outcomes will be more certain by starting this process in a demonstrably transparent way and continuing in that way through all stages of plan preparation. We will do this by:
- showing a willingness to openly encourage opinions and suggestions from all individuals and organisations within the community whether or not these present potentially conflicting, challenging or critical views of the Plan or the process;
 - making every effort to understand all views expressed from all individuals and groups and respond clearly on all matters raised in a timely manner;
 - demonstrating, in a form that is readily accessible and easily understood by the whole community, how the Plan reflects the views and opinions expressed during each stage of engagement and, where those views cannot legitimately be taken into account, explaining why that is the case; and
 - presenting a reasonable, realistic, evidence based and cogently argued case to support the Plan at each stage of its preparation.

- 1.5 The Engagement Strategy is a way of explaining the steps we intend to take, from the start to the end of the process. The Strategy has been prepared to demonstrate from the start that this is a process that **needs** community involvement and that the community knows this. The remainder of the document provides some brief comments on the background to community-led planning and the emerging relationship with statutory spatial planning at the local level; describes the processes and methods that may be employed in community engagement activity; and presents a set of commitments to the community about how we will seek to inform, communicate with and involve them throughout the project.
- 1.6 An Action Plan is attached to the Strategy which sets out in greater detail a proposed programme of community engagement activity and various actions needed to deliver that programme. The Action Plan will evolve as the project develops over time.

2. Community-Led Neighbourhood Plans

- 2.1 In general, previous community-led planning activities have tended to look at ways in which the community can *influence* service delivery to meet their needs and they have often been seen as aspirational. Neighbourhood Plans, whilst still being led by the community, will differ in two key aspects:
- **spatial:** they will show where development can or should take place to meet defined community needs based on an understanding of the ability of the private sector and other service delivery partners to provide that development; and
 - **statutory:** they will be prepared from the outset in the knowledge that, provided certain steps are taken during their preparation, they will have clear legal status. This means that the Plan will have to be used to make decisions on all planning matters coming forward in the Morpeth and its adjoining parishes.
- 2.2 In the past all statutory spatial plans have been prepared by the local planning authority, Northumberland County Council. These plans are collectively known in legal terms as ‘the development plan’ and will remain in place. These plans were prepared *in consultation with* local communities. Neighbourhood Plans will be prepared *by* the community.
- 2.3 Through the Localism Act we will now have the opportunity to actually prepare the plan that shapes how our local area looks. We can say what type of development we wish to encourage, how much development should take place (subject to generally conforming with higher level strategic plans), where and when that development should take place, and what we want to see protected in the long term. We will do this by establishing what the community says it most expects the area to look like over the coming years. We will then look to establish how relevant delivery organisations in the private, public, community and voluntary sector are able to meet those expectations.

2.4 Preparation of plans within a statutory framework will need to follow certain steps. These are normally prescribed in national regulations, policy and guidance from the Government. We will need to follow those regulations at appropriate stages in the process and will be guided through this by the County Council. The Engagement Strategy does not set out to describe in detail what those legal steps are since these will be covered in the Action Plan. It sets out a framework to show how we will approach the task of securing participation and involvement at all stages of the project.

3. Participation and Engagement in Spatial Planning

3.1 Community and stakeholder participation in any planned activity can take place on a number of different levels. These range from providing information to empowering individuals and groups to take decisions on relevant matters (and for those responsible for implementing plans to stand by those decisions). Community participation in plan-making is most likely to happen if the following processes and activities are planned to be included from the start of the project:

- **Inform:** Provide information about processes, events, issues and proposals;
- **Consult:** Obtain feedback and analysis on options and proposals;
- **Involve:** Work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure their issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered;
- **Collaborate:** Create partnership with the community in each aspect of decision making including development of options and analysis of alternatives;
- **Empower:** Final decisions on all matters lie with the community.

Each step is normally dependent upon previous activity having been carried out, that is: successful consultation would normally follow earlier dissemination of information, and so on.

3.2 The purpose of encouraging continuous participation and engagement in preparing a locally based spatial plan is fundamentally to ensure that relevant issues identified by the community are covered in the plan. The process of policy development at the local or neighbourhood level should respect and respond to locally expressed needs. This gives focus and purpose to the process of plan-making. Participation and engagement is an important component in achieving local understanding and acceptance of the aims, objectives and outcomes expected of the plan. However, this should be carried out at an appropriate time and in a meaningful way showing those involved that their input is valued and that it can influence outcomes. This is what is meant by community ‘buy-in’.

- 3.3 Engagement activities seek to create opportunities to bring together the views of the community and other stakeholders who will have an interest in how the area might be protected, change or grow over time. The intention ultimately would be to develop a shared view about the range of issues affecting the area. . From this activity a plan can be developed that presents a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach showing how development required addressing these matters can be delivered.
- 3.4 Underlying any successful form of engagement is a commitment to listen and, equally importantly, to respond. For engagement to be effective the methods used must be fit for purpose. It should be relevant; focussed; proportionate and clear in its aims. In every case communication about outcomes will be a key factor in securing continued community involvement.
- 3.5 In dealing with the preparation of statutory spatial plans it is important to remember that democratic accountability remains at the heart of decision making on planning matters. For this reason it is unlikely that either the current or emerging planning system would enable significant community empowerment such that decisions about statutory planning matters could be taken without reference to elected bodies. Nevertheless, it is the intention of this project to promote and encourage appropriate collaboration with the community and stakeholders to produce a plan based on their knowledge, needs, aspirations and commitment to the area. And, subject to the outcome of community engagement events, there is no reason why the project could not develop to look at opportunities for further community empowerment.

4. Methods of Engagement in Spatial Planning

- 4.1 Community engagement can take place in many different ways. The methods used should reflect the objectives of the exercise and can be as specific or as wide-ranging as is necessary. It can involve simply telling people that something is happening, or asking people what they think about a particular matter. It can also mean asking people what they think the issues are that need to be addressed. This normally takes place at the start of a process of responsive and inclusive spatial plan-making. The Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan is to be formally “launched” through a programme of drop-in events in October 2012 across the plan area. The launch event programme is designed to raise awareness of the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan, and plan making process, and to encourage direct involvement in its preparation.
- 4.2 Participation and engagement can take place at an individual level; with self-forming groups having a shared interest; or through pre-arranged facilitated group discussion. Where groups form or are created as a result of the project, given sufficient support, these can usefully evolve to the extent that collaboration takes place on specific matters. In effect, the level of participation can extend beyond simply knowing about or commenting on an issue that may benefit from a policy response; it can move towards actively engaging, influencing and agreeing how that issue will be resolved. Direct community involvement in the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan is possible through membership of a Topic Group or participation in planned workshops. Advice and support on effective community engagement is being provided by Planning Aid.

4.3 Techniques used will vary depending upon the stage of plan-making. The first stage of engagement must be to **inform** the community about planned activities. This should be the start of a continuous process of information sharing and relationship building and should allow appropriate messages to get to the right people at the right time. Techniques will include:

- **written correspondence:** letters, leaflets and newsletters giving information to individuals, groups and organisations; posters displayed in the local area.
- **media coverage:** drafting press releases, advertisements about events and maintaining dialogue as necessary to secure media coverage to maintain a public media profile throughout the life of the project.
- **public exhibitions:** mainly in the form of informal drop-in sessions where information can be provided and initial opinions gathered.
- **face-to-face meetings:** planned discussions with local groups and people in the community.

4.4 When we begin to **consult** the community to gather views about what should be included in the plan, additional techniques may also be appropriate:

- **community profiling:** creating a shared picture with the community of the physical, human, social, economic and community characteristics, assets and issues found in an area. Participatory community profiling has been used successfully to inform plan-making in many areas.
- **organised discussion groups:** such as focus groups which allow small group discussions that give in-depth consideration to relevant local issues surrounding specific topics.
- **surveys:** such as resident opinion polls and questionnaire based surveys where responses to questions about specific issues are gathered in writing. These can take the form of door-to-door or street interviews; postal questionnaires; web-based, electronic and social media hosted surveys; and telephone interviews.

4.5 Moving towards a position where we **involve** the community we will need further intensive dialogue with the community and will need to establish mechanisms to give a voice to those who wish to comment on or contribute towards plan-making, and to seek to engage with those who are often more difficult to reach . Techniques used when we inform and consult with the community will be relevant as will additional activities including:

- **networking:** which is about identifying and talking to a range of different individuals and interest groups in the community and developing and nurturing relationships with those people

- **public events:** such as ‘Open House’ events which involve the use of a local venue as a drop-in centre, allowing people to gather information and share their views. Interactive displays and project leadership presence offers further opportunities to gather comments and information. It also gives an opportunity to develop personal relationships with people and groups who may wish to increase their involvement
- **Planning for Real:** provides formal hosted events where the community can be directly involved in producing a model of the neighbourhood through which the merit of development opportunities can be explored. This may be useful in looking at any specific proposals that come forward and at issues related to potential land allocations for particular uses.

4.6 As the project develops we can explore opportunities to **collaborate** with the community. This level of participation is generally resource intensive for both the lead plan-making body and the community and is likely to involve only a few dedicated groups or individuals. An initial step in reaching a stage where collaboration is more likely to occur would be the creation of a stakeholder group where various voices in the community can take part in planned activities intended to help in forming a shared vision for the area

4.7 It is intended that this Engagement Strategy will focus action on ensuring as much public participation and community engagement as possible is achieved. In designing each event we will ensure that involvement is encouraged by embedding all of the following key features in the process:

- **awareness raising:** to secure maximum participation
- **timely engagement:** when involvement can make a difference
- **inclusive engagement:** so everyone has a voice but none dominate
- **feedback:** to show how participation makes a difference.

5. Our Commitments

5.1 Morpeth Town Council as the lead organisation in the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan project, through the wider Steering Group have agreed to adopt a set of key commitments on community and stakeholder engagement revolving around transparency and inclusivity, but subject to proportionality. These are presented as an agreed set of actions and approaches to engagement that we will offer to the community as part of this project:

- Undertake a Launch Event Programme to raise awareness of the Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan and encourage engagement in the process

- Undertaking formal 6 week consultations on an Issues and Options Consultation Report and a Draft Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan
- A website will be provided for information sharing prior to the launch of the project and will be maintained throughout the plan making process
- Regular press releases will be provided giving activity updates
- Information will be provided through local newsletters
- All information collected to inform plan making will be openly available
- Local permanent exhibitions and displays will be provided in accessible locations to support events and give information throughout the period of all publicised consultation events
- Communication will take place in a form best suited to each person or group as expressed by them
- An open agreement to meet with individuals and groups throughout the project whatever their views and opinions as resources reasonably allow
- Respond within a reasonable time to all written representations demonstrating how comments have been taken into account and how the plan has been informed by those comments
- Explore all opportunities to involve anyone in the community in preparing the plan at all stages of the project
- Where comments and suggestions are made that are not directly relevant to the Neighbourhood Development Plan we will record these and pass the comments on to the appropriate person or organisation for action

5.2 In return we will ask only that anyone seeking to participate by providing information, opinions or analysis of proposals at any stage of the project is prepared to do so in writing to ensure that all comments can be properly noted as a true record of their views. Once we reach the stages in the process where statutory guidance has to be followed we will be required to publish comments made about the Plan.

