

# The Morpeth Neighbourhood Plan



*Our Community*

*Our Future*

*Our Plan*

Morpeth • Pegswood • Hebron • Hepscoth • Mitford

[www.themorpethneighbourhoodplan.org.uk](http://www.themorpethneighbourhoodplan.org.uk)

## Preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan for Morpeth: Scoping Report

### 1. Background

Community led neighbourhood development plans are being introduced as part of the Government's reforms to make the planning system more democratic and accountable. They are designed to devolve greater power to local communities to manage development in their area through the preparation of their own "local plans", to be known as neighbourhood development plans. In Northumberland town and parish councils are the "qualifying bodies" that are eligible to prepare neighbourhood plans, rather than the local planning authority.

Unlike previous community led planning processes – such as parish plans or village appraisals – neighbourhood development plans have the potential to become part of the **statutory development plan**. This means that the local planning authority – and Planning Inspectors – will have to take account of its policies and proposals when taking decisions on planning applications within the neighbourhood plan area. This gives the plan more weight than other types of community led plans.

Because neighbourhood development plans will be a new type of plan the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) initiated the Frontrunner Programme in order to learn about how neighbourhood planning might work in practice and to clarify how they can support neighbourhood planning initiatives led by town and parish councils. Northumberland County Council submitted a successful application to DCLG on behalf of Morpeth Town Council for Neighbourhood Planning Frontrunner status. In this bid Morpeth Town Council confirmed that it was enthusiastic about becoming involved in neighbourhood planning. It wanted to help "steer, guide and encourage appropriate development ..... to ensure that the right things are built in the right area".

Neighbourhood plans do not have to be for the whole of a town or parish; they can cover part of a settlement, or parishes can combine with neighbouring councils to produce a joint plan. One of the first stages in the plan making process is to for the qualifying body to identify the proposed neighbourhood plan area. It is proposed that the Morpeth Neighbourhood Development Plan Area will include all of the adjoining parishes of Mitford, Pegswood, Hepscoth and Hebron as well as the administrative area of the town. The plan area requires the approval of the local planning authority and when finalised a map of the plan area together with a supporting statement outlining the basis for the boundary will be submitted to the County Council.

Neighbourhood development plans are essentially about the use and development of land within the plan area and can deal with a range of social, economic and environmental issues

faced by a local community. They are expected to provide a framework that will shape the development and growth of a local area. This includes setting out policies on where particular types of development will go, and how development should be designed. They should provide local land use policies to guide development in the plan area and they can specifically allocate land for particular types of development.

Although they have to be in general conformity with national and strategic plan policy they are not simply re-stating the council's plan; rather they should reflect the community's views on the development and use of land in their community.

Plans may be comprehensive, dealing with a wide range of issues, or they may be focused on a limited range of issues. The purpose of this report is to set out initial ideas on the scope of the Morpeth Neighbourhood Development Plan. This may be revised or refined as a result of a review of the evidence or community consultation.

Although neighbourhood planning is intended to be a light touch process there are a number of basic conditions that have to be met and regulations that have to be followed. The plan must have regard to national planning policy, now set out in the National Planning Policy Framework. As such the plan must contribute to promoting and achieving sustainable development. The plan must also be in general conformity with the strategic policies set out in the local authority's local development plan. A key issue for the Town Council is that the County Council's Local Development Plan is at an early stage in the plan making process and the timescale for its preparation may ultimately determine the timescale for the preparation of the Neighbourhood Development Plan.

Additionally plans can't be used to prevent development; indeed it is the Government's intention that they promote more development. The Morpeth Neighbourhood Development Plan will need to promote at least that level of development envisaged for the Morpeth area through the County Council's Local Development Plan.

Plans also cannot cover strategic planning matters that are expected to be developed through the County Council's Local Development Plan – major infrastructure, minerals and waste matters and energy.

Only local land use policies form part of the development plan and can be used to determine planning applications; if non planning matters are raised through community consultation it is currently envisaged that the Town Council would consider incorporating them in a refreshed Town Plan where appropriate.

Only when a plan has been checked and supported through independent examination and passed by local referendum can the local planning authority formally adopt the plan as part of the development plan.

## **2. Project Governance**

Although the Town Council is the “qualifying body” for neighbourhood planning purposes it has established a Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group with delegated authority to oversee the process of plan preparation and project manage the exercise. It is made up of members of the Town Council and member representatives of adjoining parishes covered within the agreed Plan Area.

The Steering Group will in turn will be supported by a number of topic groups that will assume responsibility for gathering the necessary evidence to underpin the development of appropriate policies and proposals that have the support of the local community. Although these will be led by and chaired by local Members serving on the Steering Group membership will be open to any interested organisation or individual based or living in the plan area.

A wider reference group – a Stakeholder Community Group comprising of representatives of local community interest groups (civic consultees) - is being established to review and scrutinise the plan making process and ensure effective engagement from a wider range of interest in the neighbourhood planning process.

### **3. Resourcing the Plan**

Part of the Steering Group's responsibilities will include ensuring that the necessary resources are made available to ensure the preparation of a sound plan. This is both in terms of a budget to cover additional staffing and plan preparation costs and ensuring that the necessary skills are identified to support the plan making process. Because there is no fixed format or template for a neighbourhood plan it is difficult to provide an estimate of the costs of plan preparation. Costs will vary according to the size and nature of the plan area and the complexity and size of the proposed scope of the plan. The Town Council at the outset confirmed its willingness to lead and underwrite the funding of the preparation of the neighbourhood plan and an initial budget for the exercise has been identified by the Council. This has enabled the Council to appoint a Neighbourhood Planning Project Coordinator to provide professional planning advice and project management support and provide additional administrative support.

Under the Localism Act the local planning authority, Northumberland County Council has a legal duty to support the neighbourhood planning process. Through the Fronrunner Programme the local authority has been provided with additional financial support to help it meet these responsibilities. The extent of support and advice provided will vary according to the skills and resources of the local planning authority and the needs of the group preparing the plan. The range of support that the LPA might be expected to provide includes:

- Sharing evidence and information on planning issues
- Helping with consultation events
- Providing advice on assessment's and evidence
- Providing advice on national planning and local plan polices with which the Neighbourhood Plan will need to reflect and conform
- Helping communities liaise with external parties where this is required

Planning officers are to attend Steering Group meetings to ensure they provide the Town Council with the necessary technical and professional support, and other specialist officers may also be made available to support the process.

The local authority is also responsible for organising and funding the final stages of the plan-making process. Following submission of the Town Council's final plan to the local planning authority an examination will be undertaken by an independent examiner appointed by the local authority.

This examination, normally by written representations, is to ensure that the plan meets the necessary standards and is in general conformity with national and local planning policy. If the plan is found to be satisfactory then the local authority will arrange for the referendum to take place. If more than 50% of those voting in the referendum vote “yes”, then the County Council will adopt the plan (as part of the statutory development plan).

The County Council will assist in ensuring compliance with legislation and in particular can provide advice on meeting obligations concerning the assessment of environmental effects and Sustainability Appraisal, although the process of appraisal will be procured or undertaken by the Town Council.

The Steering Group has also support from other organisations including Cabe, Planning Aid and Newcastle University. This will provide additional technical and project management support and support on community engagement. Additionally it is recognised that within the local community there will be individuals with a range of skills that will wish to actively support the neighbourhood planning process on a voluntary basis. It is envisaged that such individuals will largely become involved through membership of the proposed Thematic Groups

#### **4. Preparing a Neighbourhood Development Plan for Morpeth**

##### Planning context

The development plan context for the preparation of a neighbourhood plan for Morpeth is complex and becoming increasingly outdated. The existing development plan for Morpeth is the Regional Spatial Strategy for the North East (2008), which is facing imminent abolition; the saved policy of the Northumberland Joint Structure Plan (2005) which is relevant to this exercise as it relates to the northwards extension of the Green Belt around Morpeth; and the saved policies of the Castle Morpeth District Local Plan (1999).

There is a Morpeth chapter within the District Local Plan; policy T1 and MT1 support the provision of the Morpeth Northern Bypass section of the A1- South East Northumberland Strategic Link Road. Additional funding for this highway scheme has recently been secured from DfT, and the County Council is currently securing final approvals and preparing detailed designs for its delivery by 2015. Its construction is of fundamental importance to delivering a strategy for growth for Morpeth. It will unlock the current access constraints to land in the north of Morpeth, principally the St. Georges Hospital site, and to additionally relieve congestion in the town centre.

The Local Plan also includes an allocation for the development of up to 150 dwellings at the St. George’s Hospital that has not yet been implemented; it remains the only outstanding housing allocation in the town.

South East Northumberland achieved Growth Point status in July 2008; it represented a commitment on behalf of the County Council (and predecessor local authorities) to increased housing provision and accelerated housing delivery. With increased certainty surrounding the delivery of the Morpeth Northern Bypass the scale of development that might be accommodated on the St George’s Hospital site is likely to be a key issue for the Neighbourhood Plan.

The limited availability of allocated housing sites is leading to the current pressure on land surrounding the town from developers. The Town Council however consider that a plan led approach is seen as preferable to guide and manage growth, rather than one that is determined by a series of developer-led applications.

The County Council has recently consulted on its Issues and Options Consultation Document for the county wide Local Development Plan which will replace the former District Plan. This sets out the broad scale of development that Morpeth and its adjoining communities might be expected to accommodate. The need to be in general conformity with the emerging Northumberland Local Development Plan is a key issue in neighbourhood plan-making process.

#### Plan Area

Within the original bid to DCLG the Town Council set an initial plan area based on their administrative boundary in order to meet the submission eligibility criteria. However recognising that the administrative boundary is set tightly around the built-up area (and in fact excludes some parts of the town) and that there are strong functional relationships with adjoining communities the Town Council has invited the adjoining parishes of Hepscott, Mitford, Pegswood and Hebron to participate in the neighbourhood planning exercise and to join the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.

#### Plan Scope

The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group is currently considering the scope of the proposed neighbourhood plan, but some of the key questions that will need to be addressed as part of the neighbourhood plan process are:

*What is our vision for the development of Morpeth and its adjoining communities over the next 10/20 years and what are our objectives for its future development? (NB What is the proposed timescale of the Plan)*

*What types of development should the plan be considering?*

*Where should development be taking place, having regard to constraints and opportunities?*

*What are the implications of proposed development and development patterns in terms of physical and community infrastructure and services; and how can any harmful aspects of development be satisfactorily mitigated?*

The key issues for the plan are likely to be housing; the local economy; heritage; and the local environment. Housing and the local economy are likely to be the drivers of development and heritage interests and the local environment can be considered to be its defining assets that will inform and influence development proposals and development patterns. Matters such as physical and community infrastructure; transport; education; and sports and leisure are more cross cutting themes. Infrastructure capacity can act as constraints on development; however largely these matters need to be considered in response to the proposed distribution, and quantum of, development.

The Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group has agreed to establish a series of topic groups to assist with the preparation of the plan. These groups will gather evidence and consult with appropriate bodies within their respective areas of interest. They will help to identify key issues facing the town and its adjoining communities both now and in the future, and set out options that are available to address these matters.

The role of the **housing** group will be to understand the characteristics of the local housing market both in terms of the existing housing stock and the size and characteristics of existing households; considering future housing requirements and housing needs, including the provision of affordable housing and identifying appropriate locations and sites for meeting these housing needs and requirements.

The role of the **local economy** group will be to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the local economy; to consider potential “economic drivers” and consider future employment land requirements and identify future employment sites and consider how these might be delivered. It will also need to consider the role of the town centre, having regard to its visitor/tourist potential and heritage interest, and identify any spatial implications.

The role of the **heritage** group will be to establish the nature and extent of the heritage interest within the town and how this will inform and influence the future development of the town, its built environment and public realm.

The role of the **local environment** group will be to establish the nature and extent of natural heritage interests and how the need to protect and enhance the natural environment will inform and influence the future pattern of development. It will also need to consider how the connectivity and “multifunctionality” of the green infrastructure network can be developed and enhanced in association with future development patterns; and how flood risk minimisation will influence development patterns

It will be necessary to establish that any infrastructure constraints arising as a result of proposed future development patterns can be satisfactorily addressed, and delivered in a timely fashion. This applies to community infrastructure as well as physical infrastructure (*need to liaise with the planning authority in terms of the Infrastructure Delivery Plan and emerging proposals for CIL*).

The role of the transport themed group will be to identify how the current highway and transport network might constrain future development; and identify the transport implications of any proposed development and consider how these can be satisfactorily addressed

The role of the education group will be to understand the current pattern of education provision in the town and current issues relating to location; school capacities; building condition; and consider the need to identify and allocate any new school sites within the plan; and consider how they would be funded and who would provide the schools.

The role of the sports and leisure group will be to consider the current patterns of provision and known deficiencies in terms of quantity and quality of provisions; and consider the need to identify and allocate sites for future provision.

To ensure that the adjoining parishes are effectively engaged in the plan making process it is proposed that Parish Panels also be established. These will identify local issues that need to be considered through the neighbourhood planning process and also input into other Topic Groups to ensure that such local issues are effectively addressed.

Although the Steering Group is to lead on the preparation of the Neighbourhood Plan and is committed to ensuring it reflects community priorities it will equally be necessary at all times to liaise with the appropriate authorities, agencies and service providers; the Steering Group is committed to adopting a collaborative approach at all stages in the plan making process.

## **5. Community Engagement**

Current development plans are prepared in consultation with local communities; neighbourhood plans by contrast are prepared by the local community. Effective engagement with local residents, community groups, businesses and service providers in the plan area is essential in creating a credible plan. A Draft Engagement Strategy, with an associated Action Plan, has been prepared to ensure that appropriate and well planned engagement takes place at all stages in the plan making process. The need for continuous participation and engagement is to ensure that relevant issues identified by the local community are covered in the plan. The process of policy development at the local level should respect and respond to locally expressed needs.

For engagement to be effective the methods used must be fit for purpose. As well as formal consultation events there will be a need for regular ongoing communication with the local community through newsletters, press releases and the use of some form of dedicate website to provide for information sharing. The possibility of using “citizen’s panels” and “planning for real” exercises will be explored.

As part of the plan making process a consultation statement must be produced and submitted to the local planning authority along with the final plan. This must identify who was consulted; identify how they were consulted; identify the issues raised through consultation and how these matters were addressed. To be effective engagement must be seen to be transparent and inclusive, but also proportionate.

## **6. Preparing an Evidence Base**

The Steering Group and respective Topic and Themed Groups will be responsible for assembling the necessary up to date evidence to support and underpin the plan’s policies and proposals and to ensure that the plan is considered sound through the examination process. The amount of evidence that needs to be produced will depend on the scale and ambitions of the plan. As it is currently envisaged to be a comprehensive plan for Morpeth an extensive evidence base is likely to be required. Some local evidence may be available to the Town Council through the Town Plan exercise. It will also be possible for the Steering Group to share the extensive and up to date evidence base commissioned to support the County Council’s emerging Local Development Plan. This will include evidence on housing markets and housing needs; employment land and the local economy; town centre and retail requirements, and landscape and green infrastructure. Sharing an evidence base presents a significant opportunity in terms of cost efficiencies in plan preparation and strengthens the possibility of ensuring general conformity with the emerging Local Development Plan.

Additional evidence is likely to be received through the community consultation process.

At this stage it is not known whether additional evidence or primary research will need to be commissioned to support the plan-making exercise though this possibility cannot be ruled out.

*This draft Scoping Paper will be revised as a result of further discussions within the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, with the local community, with the County Council and other agencies, authorities and service providers*

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**IHC**

**20 Sep. 12**