

Neighbourhood Plan – Environment Group

Town Hall – Monday 3rd December 2012 - 7pm

1. Present: Nic Best (NB) [chairing], Alan Davison (AD), Eric Fletcher (EF), Stuart Hendy (SH), Peter Scott (PSc), Pat Snowdon (PSn) [notes]
AD is a member of GMDT's Envmt Topic Group and has done a lot of work on the Mitford-Bothal River Corridor and is currently providing expert advice of the GMDT Bluebell (Howburn) Woods project.
2. Apologies: Ian Campbell (IC), Linda Doherty, Maryan Duckworth, John Earl (JE), Wendy Fail (WF). JE is interested in footpath and cycle route networks, access to rail and bus station and wildlife issues.
3. Minutes: were accepted. EF is also attending the Economy Group and several people were receiving the notes of the other Groups. SH expressed a particular interest in the special character of Morpeth to do with the landscape setting and the 'green corridor penetration' into the heart of Morpeth, he noted an overlap with the interests of the Heritage Group in 'Natural Heritage'.
4. NB suggested that the need this meeting was to identify i) what information is wanted ii) what information is available iii) what needs to be done and iv) who can do what.
5. NB had collated the Launch Event event feedback plus subsequent comments under main headings, with non-NP matters identified and marked for referral to other organizations etc. This has been circulated to all Group members. These headings set the framework for the meeting:

i) Trees and Woodland, Green Spaces, Wildlife

NB had separated feedback comments into the three headings but there was debate about whether they should be combined. Everything is interconnected, with a need to take an overview – grassy areas in estates, parks, woodland, green corridors etc. Separating them out into 'silos' would lose this 'interconnectivity'. In particular, reference was made to the 'special relationship' Morpeth has with the rest of the County. We need to maintain the special character of Morpeth, the rural approaches from all directions, the heritage setting etc. What is it that makes Morpeth attractive to visitors? Pleasant to live and/or work in? We need to keep it that way.

Discussion followed on improving/maintain access to wildlife areas and where we could find the best maps. Footpaths were deemed important, including planning alongside future development and improving signage, linking with areas beyond the town such as Pegswood. Who will maintain them? Do we have volunteer groups?

*The meeting agreed that these topics combined as "Green Infrastructure" [ed.*cringe*] was a theme for the Env Topic Group to pursue.*

ii) Flooding: Most of the feedback related to the urgent need to implement the EA flood defence scheme which (hopefully) can be assumed by the NP. [In response to questions about time scale, NB explained that NCC planners' timetable has the Core Strategy being adopted in Summer 2014. The NP has to be aligned with and follow this. So certain projects likely to be undertaken within the next two years have to be assumed for NP purposes e.g. the town centre flood scheme, the SE Northumberland link road. Homes & Communities Agency also intend to bring their proposals for development on St George's to fruition within the next two years. They are currently tendering for developers with a view to working up a MasterPlan for the site, and are keen to work with the NP Groups on this MasterPlan. Reference was made to the need for a new sewage infrastructure to the north of Morpeth.] So – within NP, existing and likely flooding impacts need to be considered beyond the town centre and river corridors. What will be the impact of new building/the link road? Recent weather highlights the need to consider the increase in surface water and how new developments would affect this issue. The Morpeth Flood Action Group should be consulted?

The meeting agreed that 'Flooding & Flood Risk' was a second theme for the Env Topic Group to pursue.

iii) Green Belt: The feedback raised many concerns about the protection/introduction of green belt. The Core Strategy questionnaire referred to boundaries being 'loosely drawn'. NB noted that Green Belt around Morpeth will be a new designation, with both outer and inner boundaries defined in the Core Strategy. He understands that NCC intend to define the inner boundary of the Green Belt in the 'Major Changes' iteration of the Core Strategy consultation scheduled for September, so there should be time for the NP process to lobby and raise awareness. IC had commented that Green Belt was properly a settlement issue and perhaps better considered by the Housing Group, but the meeting confirmed that Env Group should be involved (too).

iv) Access: NB had lumped together comments on footpaths, cyclepaths, traffic congestion and car parking. JE had also submitted comments about the need for footpath and cycle route networks. The meeting agreed – and include bridlepaths - about access along the Wannie Line.

It was also emphasized that a unified 'traffic impact model' for the plan area was essential for the NP, rather than the piecemeal modeling developers do for individual developments – though this might not be work for the Env Topic Group. PSc is a former

highways engineer and AD said he might be able to identify some academics with appropriate interests and skills.

The meeting agreed that “footpaths, cycle routes etc” were a third theme for the Env Topic Group to pursue.

v) Energy: A few comments addressed energy matters either relating to on-shore wind turbines or looking at minimizing carbon emissions. We need expert advice in this area, both on technologies and on whether this is appropriate for planning policy specifically for the NP area (as opposed to the Core Strategy). Eg Can we promote LED street-lighting? Can policy insist on the use of particular materials? Can we use Morpeth’s special heritage to insist on sympathetic materials/ designs for all developments?

vi) Sustainability: There were also a couple of comments relating to sustainability mentioning the Transition Towns concept. This is to do with making communities more self-sufficient and self-reliant, with a particular concern regarding ‘peak oil’ and ‘food and fuel security’. NB noted that there were ‘Transition Town’ groups in Alnwick, Hexham, South Tyneside and Durham City that we could approach for more info, and that some members of the GMDT Env Topic Group were interested in the idea. However, it is not clear what planning measures might be relevant.

The meeting agreed that “Energy & Sustainability’ was a fourth theme for the Env Topic Group to pursue.

vii) Quality of environment: A couple of comments highlighted the ‘quality of environment’ in Morpeth and the plan area – valuing it but not really defining it. This struck a chord with the meeting, tying in with earlier discussion about interconnectivity and the ‘special character of Morpeth. However it was hard to define and probably different things to different people. What to people value? What makes Morpeth a ‘nice place’ to live, work or visit?

NB tried (but failed) to draw a comparison with ‘tranquillity’ as valued and mapped by CPRE [though the special character of Morpeth is not tranquillity!]. CPRE talked to people visiting the Northumberland National Park (and the West Durham Coalfield) asking them what contributed and detracted from making them feel ‘tranquil’. Negative to tranquillity included: noise pollution, light pollution, traffic pollution, crowds; positive contributors were woodland, birdsong, running water, open landscapes. (CPRE Report is available from NB). However the meeting agreed that surveying people about ‘what makes Morpeth special’ in the same sort of way would be neither practical nor particularly helpful – but

The meeting agreed that 'Quality of Environment' or 'special character of Morpeth area' would make suitable overarching theme for the whole Neighbourhood Plan.

6. Schedule: NB re-outlined the various stages that the overall Plan will be going through. By May (after the local elections), a 'Issues & Options' consultation would be produced – with the Env Group writing the 'Environment chapter' – which would summarise what we currently have in the plan area, known proposals, threats and opportunities, and range of alternative visions for the future of Morpeth (in the next 15-20 years). Following feedback from this consultation, the four topic Groups will work on policy and any appropriate designations, informed by the crosscutting themes. This will feed into a final draft Plan which will be consulted on again, then examined to ensure it is 'aligned' with the county Core Strategy – and finally it will be put to a referendum of all electors in the plan area. And if it is accepted – then it will be adopted as planning policy alongside the Core Strategy.

7: To do

- i) Map of footpaths etc: these should be readily available from NCC. **EF** to speak to **WF** (who used to work in this area at NCC) about getting these..
- ii) **AD** offered to provide woodland and wildlife maps of the river corridor (Mitford to Bothal) which he has been working on for GMDT
- iii) **AD** will also provide a PDF map of the proposed North Bypass (currently at planning application stage – full details available from NCC, and possibly MTC).
- iv) **NB** will circulate a PDF map of the plan area (Morpeth Town, Hebron, Mitford, Hepscott, Pegswood, and Tranwell Woods – but not Clifton and Glorum) and try to get a high resolution PDF and one or more large (A2, A1) hard copies.
- v) **All** to identify resource people to talk to about the four identified themes
- vi) **All** to identify people who might help with traffic modelling

Next meeting: Town Hall - 7pm - Monday January 14th