

Neighbourhood Plan
Notes of First Housing Topic Group
Morpeth Town Hall, 13th November 2012

PRESENT:

David Parker
Ken Brown
Tim Nichol
Kath Wilkins
Peter Scott
Simon Cox
Jo Gooding
Paul Thompson
Christine Ord

Joan Tebbutt
Ian Campbell
Alan Sambrook
James Mee
Hugh Edmunson
Sue Paxton-Browne
Martin Laidler
Jane Akhurst
Colin Thomson

Eighteen people attended this meeting. They came from all parts of Morpeth, Hebron and Pegswood. A number of others had been unable to come on this occasion but are welcome to join in. The meeting was chaired by Morpeth Town Councillor David Parker. He asked for a volunteer to take notes that would be placed on the website. Joan Tebbutt volunteered.

Cllr Parker stated that the Neighbourhood Plan (NP) process, which is to include the areas covered by the five Parish Councils of Hebron, Hepscott, Mitford, Morpeth and Pegswood, is on ongoing process that would take 18 months to 2 years to complete. About 80 people are actively involved and up to 200 have asked to be kept informed. It is hoped that all attendees will contribute to the process rather than simply observe.

Everyone introduced themselves and explained why they were interested in this Topic Group and what they could contribute. This included past and present professional experience in planning and policy, business development, project management and various roles related to housing provision. It also included other members of the public present for a variety of related interests covering:

- the provision of mixed housing, including genuinely affordable housing, specialist housing for the elderly and people with disabilities i.e. homes for everyone;
- the development of appropriate infrastructure, employment opportunities, and green spaces;
- the protection of Morpeth's character;
- the promotion of Morpeth as a working town rather than as a commuter town;

- recognising that while growth is inevitable, co-ordinated development is necessary;
- the NP is our best opportunity to have a voice in how that happens.
- It is important not to approve development that does not take into account the limitations of existing infrastructure e.g. building on Morpeth's periphery adds to flooding risk in the centre.

It was evident that we all came from a range of backgrounds and with a range of expectations, so Cllr Parker then talked about the NP process, what we can expect from it and the constraints within which we have to work.

Neighbourhood Planning is a new concept in England and was enshrined in the Localism Act. It enables the community within town and parish council areas to be proactive as well as reactive in relation to planning. It enables people to come up with a shared vision; a collective plan for where they live. The result should be a holistic view of where new homes, shops, offices, schools, green spaces etc should be and what new buildings should look like. Morpeth has been approved as a frontrunner to develop good practice. Since Morpeth is not just a place where people live, but a service centre catering for areas round about, the NP area identified includes 4 surrounding parishes. The Local Planning Authority, Northumberland County Council (NCC), has to support us in the preparation of the NP and Morpeth Town Council (MTC) has appointed Ian Campbell as a consultant for the process. At the end of the process there has to be a referendum to decide whether or not the NP is accepted. Once the NP is in place, it must be taken into account in deciding upon any future proposals and should influence decisions over the next 15 to 20 years.

We have to work within a framework however, and that means there are some constraints on what we can do. Although the NP is community led, it is not prepared in a vacuum. It must comply with the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and resonate with NCC's developing Local Development Framework (LDF). The hope is that we can influence the LDF as it progresses. NCC has to examine the completed NP and refer it for examination. Whilst the LDF will decide how many homes have to be built in Northumberland, we can decide where they go. We can exceed the NCC figure, but not go below it.

One suggestion repeatedly raised was whether we can make statements about whether the word “affordable” actually means a home of adequate quality and space to provide a home that can be heated etc. at an affordable cost. It was explained that we are unable to make statements about that, as planning legislation can only be used for certain things. We can look at the appearance of homes, but building regulations and the Code for Sustainable Homes are not part of planning legislation. Whilst we may agree that such issues warrant consideration by developers, inclusion of such suggestions in the NP could lead to it not being accepted as they are beyond our remit.

The Steering Group for the NP has set up 4 Topic Groups on Housing, the Economy, the Environment and Heritage. Each group must take into account cross cutting issues such as infrastructure, education, sports and leisure and transport.

Each Topic group has to scope out the available evidence; identify gaps that may need further research; identify key players to engage with e.g. landowners and developers. They should research their topic and understand the role of existing plans and their relevance to the emerging NP. The four parishes adjoining Morpeth have parish panels to ensure the needs of their communities are taken into account in the final NP. The task over the next 6 months is to prepare an issues and options report that should go out for public consultation early summer 2013. To achieve this, the scoping exercise must be completed by Christmas 2012; research pursued in the early part of the 2013 and the report, which must be evidence based, must be prepared by April 2013. Communication is important. Notes of each meeting will be put on the website so it can be viewed by the Steering Group and by members of the public, who can make comments or join in with any Topic Group, should they so wish.

Resources were then discussed. It was explained that some Newcastle University planning students are available to assist. There is also The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment and Planning Aid could be helpful re community engagement. There are a lot of background documents. We do not need to reinvent the wheel as a lot of work has already been done and we must fit in with national and local policy. We will all collectively be responsible for the document ultimately produced.

Morpeth is classified as a Tier 1 settlement where growth is anticipated. Pegswood is a Tier 2 settlement and a certain amount of development should take place there. That is the reality and we have to accept it. One important document therefore is the Strategic Housing Land Assessment (SHLA), which identifies potential sites, without stating that they will actually be developed.

It was pointed out that forecasting re housing needs is highly aggregated.

Many of the documents needed are on the NCC website. A list of the most important 6 was requested, with a possible other 20 if people wish to look into them. Cllr Parker said that a list of links to various documents would be circulated. One document suggested was the David Lock report produced for NCC about Options for Sustainable development in Morpeth.

There was some discussion about the Morpeth Northern Bypass. This will be complete by 2015. The Castle Morpeth Local District Plan envisaged development on the St George's Hospital and Northgate Hospital sites and most of this would be enabled by the bypass. The bypass will form the northern settlement boundary of Morpeth.

The Green Belt around Morpeth has not yet been precisely defined as it is part of the emerging LDF. Some of us have already tried to influence this through the recent consultation. Hopefully, working in parallel with NCC through the development of the NP will influence the LDF.

Tasks allocated:

- Ian will prepare an update on the Core Strategy for the LDF.
- He will also prepare a list of useful acronyms and a list of people who could be usefully engaged.
- Hugh will provide a map of the SHLA; the compendium of land that may be available for housing.
- Martin will provide a summary of the Strategic Housing Management Assessment (SHMA) and the Housing Needs Survey.
- Joan will do a summary of the Lock Report.
- Cllr Parker to send out links to various documents.

Ian pointed out that we will not just be looking at documents, but having workshops and walkabouts.

The next meeting will be held in Morpeth Town Hall on 11th December. Further meetings are scheduled for 8th January, 12th February, 12th March and 10th April.