

A Neighbourhood Planning Surge: how authorities are supporting lots of plans in their areas



June 2015

Introduction

This case study looks at the experiences of eight authorities in supporting high volumes of neighbourhood plans (NPs) coming forward in their areas. It should give you some ideas and options to consider alongside your own plans to provide positive and constructive support to groups preparing neighbourhood plans.

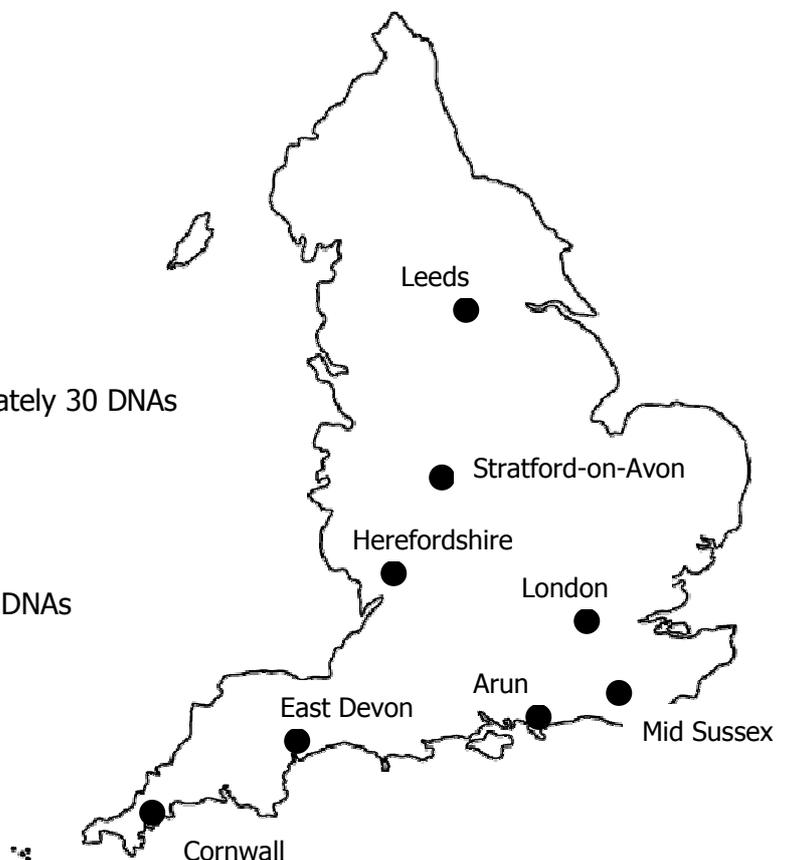
Key things to consider when providing support to a high volume of NPs

- Be prepared and be positive.
- Put resources into day-to-day support.
- Work on getting a wider corporate understanding of Neighbourhood Planning (NP).
- Involve Councillors who can assist in spreading the right message.
- Practices and tools are key.
- The start and the end of the process have the highest resourcing requirements
- Economies of scale are achieved through the use of templates and common protocols.

These seven key considerations are explained in more detail over the following pages.

The case study authorities:

- Arun District Council – 17 Designated Neighbourhood Areas (DNAs)
- Cornwall Council – 71 DNAs
- East Devon District Council – approximately 30 DNAs
- Herefordshire Council – 90 DNAs
- Leeds City Council – 36 DNAs
- Westminster City Council – 21 DNAs
- Mid Sussex District Council – 20 DNAs
- Stratford-on-Avon District Council – 27 DNAs



As an authority, be prepared and be positive

Some of the authorities with the highest number of NPs knew that this was likely because they made a corporate decision at the outset to actively encourage neighbourhood planning. In some cases this was due to convenient timing with the ongoing preparation of the Local Plan providing the opportunity to introduce it into the district planning policy framework. As Mark Bristow, Neighbourhood Planning Officer at Mid Sussex District Council, explains: "We made a deliberate decision to encourage neighbourhood plans and made this a feature of the draft Local Plan."

The authorities' experience has been positive. As Claire Rodway, Neighbourhood Planning Officer at East Devon District Council, reflects:

"The attitude is not that neighbourhood plans are taking away from the Local Plan, rather that neighbourhood planning is doing part of the job of the Local Plan"
Claire Rodway

For others, it was the desire to attain Front Runner status by neighbourhood groups that alerted the authority to likely take-up. Arun District Council encouraged engagement with interested NP groups before the Localism Bill became an Act of Parliament and did have a number of bids for DCLG Front Runner status and funding that were successful. This made it very clear that there was a need to resource the support required by these groups.

Put resources into day-to-day support

All of the case study authorities have appointed a dedicated NP officer to provide the bulk of support for NP groups. East Devon District Council initially added this to the role of a policy officer, but the workload this created meant that this became unworkable. The Council decided to use DCLG funding from designated NP areas to fund a dedicated officer resource - the number that had been designated meant there was enough funding available to cover this cost. As Claire Rodway notes: "This money could have been spent anywhere in the Council but I was able to make the case that this should be spent on a two-year post."

This arrangement has enabled the dedicated officer to set up a range of systems that enable the authority to deal with the large number of NPs efficiently. For many of the authorities that have set up and refined these systems, the impact of a number of new NP areas being designated and starting to prepare NPs is relatively limited in terms of resource requirements.

One benefit of having a dedicated officer, that is commonly acknowledged by the case study authorities, is that they can act as the conduit to engage with wider council services. This is particularly important in unitary authorities which have key functions commonly called upon by NPs,

such as highways and education. Those departments were felt more likely to engage positively if they had a single, in-house point of contact, rather than direct requests from a number of NP volunteers.

For Tom Kimber, Principal Policy Officer at the London Borough of Westminster, the benefit of being able to meet with neighbourhood groups on a regular basis is important in unparished areas. "We have had a number of overlapping neighbourhood area designation proposals submitted and several applications from competing neighbourhood forums to take forward a neighbourhood plan in the same area. It is vital that we try to bring these groups together to address their differences."

There is also the need for wider practical support. Mark Bristow considers it very important for NP groups to have access to mapping of environmental constraints and other planning considerations. There is therefore a need to have a geographical information systems (GIS) officer able to prepare these bespoke maps for groups.

Economies of scale are achieved through the use of templates and common protocols

Most of the authorities now have a wide range of templates and protocols for supporting NPs. Several have set up service level agreements (SLAs) or equivalents with the neighbour groups. Herefordshire Council uses these to clarify what the authority both *will* and *will not* provide. Sam Banks, Neighbourhood Planning Team Leader, notes that: "The most common issue that the SLA has to make clear is that the Council will not be writing the policies for an NP." Most of the authorities make the SLA an optional agreement to enter into, rather than requiring it of an NP group.

Many of the case study authorities have prepared templates and guidance notes that can be used by NP groups to understand and address common matters. Shropshire Council has 35 of these, for example on how to put together a steering group and how to choose housing sites. It also has templates for things such as applying for Neighbourhood Area designation and checklists for undertaking consultation at Regulation 14 (Pre-Submission) and Regulation 16 (Submission) stage.

This highlights the importance of the authority website in providing access to information. Most of the authorities focus attention on ensuring that the neighbourhood plan pages of their websites are updated regularly and provide the necessary range of information. Most observe that this saves a lot of time and effort because NP groups soon know that this should be their first port of call when seeking help. Claire Rodway explains that: "Some of the website content is written by officers whereas some is links to generic guidance; but we try, where possible, to address East Devon-specific issues."

Some authorities – particularly those covering a large geographical area – have used meetings and workshops as a way of spreading information and understanding. Herefordshire Council run annual

update meetings to keep NP groups up to speed with what is happening both nationally and locally. This is supplemented by quarterly newsletters to keep groups abreast of news and good practice. They also run workshops covering specific topics, e.g. archaeology, strategic housing, etc; and bring in officers with specialist knowledge in those areas to facilitate them.

East Devon District Council has also brought a collection of 10 NP groups together. These groups, all within Blackdown Hills AONB, were each applying for neighbourhood area designation at the same time. Claire Rodway persuaded them to be supported jointly as the issues affecting them were all the same. This helped the groups as they all wanted technical support and were being quoted a large sum per plan by a consultant. The District Council assisted the groups in preparing a brief for all ten plans to be jointly supported by a single consultancy contract, thereby saving the groups a lot of money and reducing the time inputs of the authority.

Email is also used to communicate with multiple groups. Stratford-on-Avon District Council Neighbourhood Planning Officer, Matthew Neal, has set up an NP group email which includes two email addresses for each NP group. This email group is used to pass on news and key documents. Donna Moles, Development Plan Process Manager at Arun District Council, has gone one step further: setting up a number of email template responses to common questions which go out en masse to groups when they reach the relevant stage.



Stratford Upon Avon

Donna considers that a key cost-saving measure is establishing clear indicative timescales for the statutory processes, i.e. Regulation 14 consultation onwards. This has helped Arun District Council to hold a number of joint referendums and to undertake Regulation 16 consultations, which are the responsibility of the Council, jointly. This, combined with the pressure of developers putting in

speculative applications, has helped to spur groups on to reach these milestones within their stated timetables. This creates more certainty on when the Council will be required to undertake their statutory duties.

Practices and tools are key

As recognised above, the use of templates was the most commonly cited example of a resource created by authorities that provided value in terms of making more efficient use of limited resources. This was particularly felt to be the case on matters such as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA).

Other in-house tools were felt to be valuable to officers as well. All the case study authorities use spreadsheet-based programmes to keep abreast of what stage all the NPs are at in their areas. This is felt to be particularly important as the plans near the formal consultation stages; this being when the onus shifts increasingly to the authority to advance the plan to the next stage.

Tom Kimber has found that there are plenty of resources already out there. "Many of the guides prepared by Locality and others are very good so we point people to those first."

Ian Mackay, Neighbourhood Planning Manager at Leeds City Council, feels that authorities have the opportunity to relieve some of the burden on them by getting groups to undertake an early skills audit. Ian tells his NP groups:

"It's not just about what the council can do for you and the funding you can get; firstly think about what skills you have yourself and what you can do for yourself."

Ian Mackay

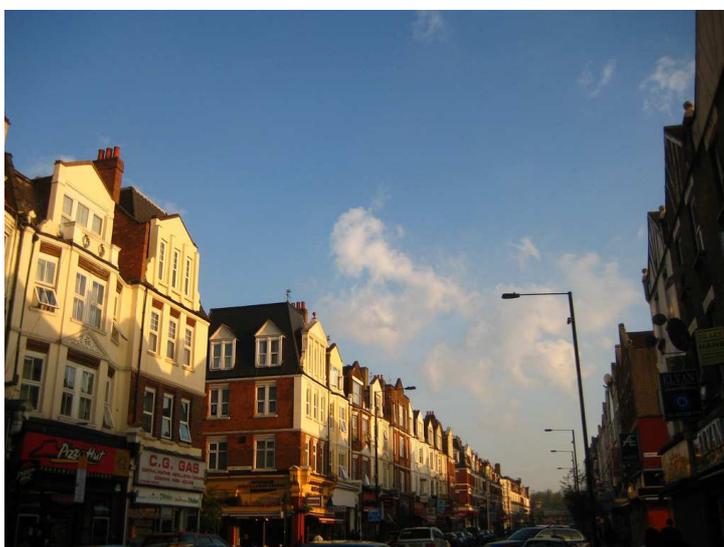
This, he feels, has the added benefit of helping people to get to know each other better.

Whilst tools are vital, Sarah Arden, Neighbourhood Planning lead at Cornwall Council, also feels that there is no substitute for having a visible presence. "We then use that time to remind people they are able to pick up the phone and talk to us if they have a problem." This partly reflects the geography in Cornwall; a very large county where many communities feel remote from the Council's offices in Truro.

The start and the end of the process has the highest resourcing requirements on a local authority

There are two main parts of the process that are consistently identified as requiring greater levels of resourcing by the authority. The first is at the start of the process, helping groups to set themselves up and sending them on their way. Most authorities ensure that an officer attends at least the initial NP group meeting, and it was felt that this was an important requirement, as much to make clear what support the authority could provide as helping the groups to start the process.

Ian Mackay (Leeds City Council) felt that this was particularly the case when dealing with non-parished area designations, a point endorsed by Tom Kimber. However, this takes up a lot of officer time, with most of it spent attending meetings. But this time is needed in order to get these NPs off to a good start. Part of this has been around managing expectations, including with councillors who are often more sensitive about the appropriate plan boundaries.



Manor House Neighbourhood, Leeds

This is not to say that NP officers do not attend other meetings, but this has to be considered carefully. Ian Mackay makes clear that he or other officers will only attend meetings where they have a critical role to play. He notes that he has had to become more strict about this recently; this follows on from his early days when he attended numerous meetings where there was little value in doing so. He also says that he will attend meetings for a set period of time, for example 45 minutes, which invites groups to “make the best use of my time that you can.”

For Tom Kimber – working in an authority with unparished areas – most of his work has been on getting NP areas and forums designated. The approach of Westminster City Council has been to get the neighbourhood area designated first before considering the neighbourhood forum application.

Although, ultimately, the qualifying body can ask for both to be decided at the same time. Whilst the perception by some has been that this has been a cause of delay, Tom feels that the principle is a sound one. "Get the geography right first and that makes it easier to assess competing forum applications."

The second stage is towards the end, once a first draft of the NP has been prepared by the group. Sarah Arden (Cornwall Council) was not surprised by this. "Trying to express what people want in a document is very difficult. Often this raises a lot of non-planning matters or requirements of policies that are unrealistic." It requires a lot of time to explain to communities and there is no template that can do this on a case by case basis. For the non-planning matters, Sarah says that more time is then spent putting groups in touch with other departments that are better equipped to deal with an issue.

"Trying to express what people want in a document is very difficult. Often this raises a lot of non-planning matters or requirements of policies that are unrealistic."

Sarah Arden

Either way, the need to bring policy officers in from a range of departments can be challenging. As part of the later stages of the plan, several of the authorities reflected that SEA and Habitats Regulations Assessment (HRA) are time consuming. In many rural authorities where sensitive environmental areas are widespread, almost all NPs are requiring both to be undertaken.

For some authorities, the internal processes for signing off the final stages from submission (Regulation 16) onwards are quite time consuming. This is dependent on the amount of delegated power. Some authorities require sign-off for certain straightforward matters such as the technical compliance check through the committee process and then the Portfolio Holder as well. It is important to be aware of these timescales so that that groups can be well appraised of this when setting or reviewing their plan preparation timetables.

There is value in getting a wider corporate understanding of Neighbourhood Planning

The need to involve other departments at various stages of the NP process is a common theme. This was particularly felt in unitary authorities, which had a larger number of in-house teams that could reasonably be expected to provide inputs. More generally, the additional burden on electoral services teams was one commonly identified issue. Arun District Council has run a number of joint referendums, and Donna Moles felt this was more of a funding issue than one of resources; albeit this is largely covered by the DCLG funding received for this.

Several authorities are putting in place wider corporate structures so that intra-authority working on NPs is more efficient. Cornwall Council has an Officer Working Group which meets to share experiences and issues. For example, if an NP officer has spoken to the transport department about a particular issue, then they can share how that was dealt with.

These structures are also bringing in other stakeholders from outside the authority. In Leeds, the City Council has set up an NP Steering Group. This is chaired by the Chief Planning Officer from the Council, and is attended by senior officers from other City Council departments, as well as Planning Aid England, the Civic Trust, several parish councils and Leeds Beckett University. Ian Mackay feels that this helps to manage the non-planning issues as well as planning matters.



Leeds City Council

Councillors can assist in spreading the right message

A lot of NPs across the case study authorities have councillors that are active in their preparation, with many sitting on NP Steering Groups or leading working parties. Often communities are encouraged to take NPs forward by their local councillors. Sarah Arden (Cornwall Council) feels this is valuable, provided there is sufficient interest in the particular community to take an NP forward or that it would provide value to that local community. "Many rural communities in Cornwall are likely to have little or no growth so it is difficult to necessarily see what a Neighbourhood Plan could add."

In Cornwall, it has been beneficial that the Portfolio Holder for Planning is particularly supportive because the message comes 'from the top'. Indeed, she attends meetings with NP groups and talks about it from the Cornwall Council perspective. East Devon District Council has recently made a senior district councillor a Neighbourhood Planning 'champion'. The intention is for them to raise the profile

of NPs and to promote them corporately within East Devon District Council. The champion will therefore seek to raise the issue of NPs at all meetings they attend.

A key to this is ensuring that councillors have a good understanding of NP. Matthew Neal at Stratford-upon-Avon District Council has given presentations and held seminars with councillors on what their roles could be and what the NP processes are.

Top tips

- Don't be afraid to speak up at meetings to tell NP groups not to waste time on things that ultimately will not matter.
- In unparished areas, it's important to take the time needed to consider applications carefully – it's vital to get the neighbourhood area correct for the areas and have a neighbourhood forum that best represents the area.
- Bring NP information and data together in a single place – usually the local authority website, but also potentially a Knowledge Hub.
- Manage expectations: make it clear what you can and can't do.
- Project management is key - have good records to understand where every NP group is in the process.
- Set up clear communication channels – having just one point of contact at the authority helps.
- Impress on NP groups the importance of early communication. If they go silent then you don't know what is happening.
- Do the mapping work for NP groups at the outset; this will also be needed for the Local Plan and decision making on planning applications
- In non-parished areas, you will never get everyone to agree about the neighbourhood area boundary – encourage councillors to look at the issues spatially rather than by boundaries

Annex

Below are links to the websites of the respective local authorities and their neighbourhood planning resources:

- Arun District Council – <http://www.arun.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning>
- Cornwall Council – <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/environment-and-planning/planning/neighbourhood-planning-toolkit/>
- East Devon District Council – <http://eastdevon.gov.uk/planning/neighbourhood-and-community-plans/neighbourhood-plans/>
- Herefordshire Council – <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning>
- Leeds City Council – <http://www.leeds.gov.uk/council/Pages/Neighbourhood-planning.aspx>
- London Borough of Westminster – <https://www.westminster.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning>
- Mid Sussex District Council – <http://www.midsussex.gov.uk/neighbourhoodplans>
- Stratford-on-Avon District Council – <https://www.stratford.gov.uk/planning/neighbourhood-plans.cfm>

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