

Neighbourhood Plan Presentation

Introduction

Good evening everybody. I am Chair of Colmworth Parish Council and Secretary of the Colmworth Neighbourhood Plan Committee.

Colmworth 'call for sites' survey

Following the consultation for Local Plan 2032, in July 2014, Colmworth Parish Council decided that we should be pro-active and have some control over our destiny. To test opinion regarding sites offered under the 'call for sites', we produced a simple survey, which was circulated to around 170 households in the Parish. The survey comprised maps of the 7 locations and a reply form inviting a yes/no response for each site and space for any other comments.

Basic information regarding the sites was provided including plot area and an estimated number of potential new homes that could be accommodated. The total number of dwellings for the 7 sites added up to approximately 150, which would nearly double the number of homes in the Parish!

In September 2014, a public meeting was called to present the results, and encourage residents to give feedback. Although the majority of residents had voted against new homes at all 7 sites, nearly 50% supported two of the locations and it was clear that there was some support for small scale development. It was agreed that we should consider a neighbourhood plan.

Starting a Neighbourhood Plan

Two of the councillors volunteered to start the project by writing an article in the parish magazine and by distributing a newsletter to every home. Residents were invited to form a neighbourhood plan committee, create a constitution and elect officers.

A constitution may seem unnecessarily bureaucratic, but it is really important. It defines the legal status of the committee, as a sub-committee of the Parish Council, and includes procedures for carrying out its business.

Time Plan

With any plan, you need to manage the time scale and set target dates for each stage. We used Gantt Project software, which is available, free, from the internet. This can be easily adjusted to accommodate additional processes and changes in timescale. Reports and charts can be produced in .pdf format for distribution to all involved.

As the neighbourhood plan is intended to be driven by the people, regular consultations are essential and any feedback consolidated before moving on to the next stage. This can take longer than you might expect and our time plan has stretched to around 2 years.

Consultation

What are the three most important priorities for a neighbourhood plan?

consultation, consultation and consultation!

You need to talk to the people and incorporate feedback in your policies. We have also had several meetings with Bedford Borough Council Planning Dept to clarify policy issues.

Don't forget the land owners – we have talked to their agents to ascertain what vision they had, if any, for the development of their land. You may be surprised by what you learn – we found the agents to be very knowledgeable and helpful.

Also consider potential partners who may be able to assist you with a development. We had a very positive meeting with a local housing association, BPHA and we are planning a follow-up visit to see some affordable and open market new homes that they are building.

Special Interests

Engaging special interest groups is a good way of getting more people actively involved in the process. In Colmworth, we have sparse population, lots of countryside, many paths and bridleways and around 30 horses. We have concerns about the safety of horse riders because our roads are narrow and winding. To address the issues of developing safe circular routes for walkers and riders, a 'rights of way' sub-group was formed.

Surveys

Neighbourhood plans have to be driven by the needs and wishes of the residents but a framework is needed to allow people to provide feedback. So we decided to carry out 4 surveys,

- First, a neighbourhood plan survey, to encourage residents to describe what type of development they would like,
- Second, a housing needs survey for residents that require alternative accommodation,
- Third, a survey to address the needs of young people and finally a questionnaire for local businesses.

Survey design and analysis

We felt that we needed advice in designing the survey questions and it was desirable that the neighbourhood plan and housing needs surveys should be analysed by a third party to assure people that personal information would be kept confidential. In March 2015, we appointed BRCC and commenced design of the survey forms and explanatory notes. BRCC also transposed the neighbourhood plan survey to make it available for completion on-line, using Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey was also used to analyse the written forms, which were returned to BRCC by Freepost. Committee members chased residents to encourage a good response and in the end over 40% of households participated in the neighbourhood plan survey.

The housing needs survey was completed by only 10 households because it was restricted to those who currently lived in the Parish and planned to move in the coming 10 years. In essence we were trying to ascertain the need for affordable housing, whether older residents were seeking a smaller property and if families were looking for larger homes.

Amazingly, we found 60 companies in our parish and the business survey was devised, distributed and analysed, by a member of the Neighbourhood Plan Committee, to discover how local businesses depend upon the community, for example, to provide suitable housing for employees. We were also interested to know if businesses needed improved infrastructure, or services, to support growth.

We have around 80 young people under 18 years of age and, although we have a recreation ground with football nets, good quality play equipment and a country park, there are few amenities for young people. The survey was designed to ascertain how much they depended upon local facilities and what additional amenities would be valued by young people.

More consultation

The results of the surveys were printed and circulated to all households and a public meeting for all residents was held on 5 September 2015. The results of the surveys and proposed Vision Statement and Objectives were presented followed by questions and discussion. As expected, there was lively debate and considerable controversy with a vocal minority opposed to any development.

Summary

To summarise

- It is vital that you communicate with, and consult, the people at every stage and incorporate their feedback – If you fail to engage with the community and win their hearts and minds, the neighbourhood plan is likely to fail when it goes to referendum.
- Don't forget to speak to land owners, the Borough Council Planning Dept, housing associations and other potential partners.
- Even if you have no planning experience don't be discouraged from doing a neighbourhood plan. There are several excellent advisory bodies such as Locality and Planning Aid, who provide very good information on every aspect of the process.
- Expect conflict and passionate debate – you will not satisfy all of the people but, in order to succeed, you must win the support of the majority.

David Michell

13 February 2016