



Setting up a neighbourhood planning steering group – Guidance note

This Guidance Note provides advice on setting up a Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group to undertake some of the tasks involved in preparing a neighbourhood plan.

The Qualifying Body

Neighbourhood Plans must be submitted by a 'Qualifying Body'. In Hart, Town or Parish Councils are the Qualifying Body that will take forward a Neighbourhood Plan. The Qualifying Body have formal responsibility for:

- submitting a request to Hart District Council to agree the neighbourhood planning area;
- submitting the draft Neighbourhood Plan, together with the Basic Conditions Statement and Consultation Statement;
- liaison with Hart District Council on matters relating to the Examination process.

Most Town and Parish Councils will usually establish a Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group that will be responsible for leading the process and developing the plan. This note provides some good practice advice for establishing that Group.

[National Planning Policy Guidance](#) contains the following advice:

Where a parish or town council chooses to produce a neighbourhood plan or Order it should work with other members of the community who are interested in, or affected by, the neighbourhood planning proposals to allow them to play an active role in preparing a neighbourhood plan or Order.

The relationship between any group and the formal functions of the town or parish council should be transparent to the wider public. A parish or town council may choose to establish an advisory committee or sub-committee under section [102\(4\) of the Local Government Act 1972](#) and appoint local people (who need not be parish councillors) to those bodies. Members of such committees or sub-committees would have voting rights under section [13\(3\), \(4\)\(e\) or \(4\)\(h\) of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989](#). The terms of reference for a steering group or other body should be published and the minutes of meetings made available to the public.

The Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group

The primary purpose of the steering group is to allow the town or parish council to delegate the day to day tasks of organising events, editing drafts and producing the

final plan to others, whilst the parish council concentrates on other existing parish matters.

It is important that there are clear **Terms of Reference** (ToR) established for the Steering Group which are approved at a Town or Parish meeting. A suggested template for the ToR is attached at Appendix 1. It is suggested that the ToR should cover the following matters:

Membership and Skills

The ToR should set out Membership of the Steering Group, including the approach to any substitutes. It is important that membership of the Group includes representatives of the wider local community who can bring value to the project. Selection of members should reflect different sectors of the community and the range of skills, knowledge and experience that will be required to develop the Neighbourhood Plan.

Typical membership and representation might therefore include:

- Parish councillors, representing the council's different interests, e.g. planning, environment, leisure, transport, finance and resources etc;
- Local residents;
- Representatives of local community organisations;
- Local business owners.

The more representative the Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group is of the local community, the better the plan is likely to be. However, it is important to recognise that too large a group may be difficult to manage effectively. Additional members of the community with specific skills may be co-opted at a later date if they are likely to bring additional benefits to the project.

The Plan can potentially cover a wide range of topics but does not necessarily require expert or professional advice.

Relevant skills and experience that may be useful (but not essential) to your Steering Group include:

- Project management;
- Planning e.g. general familiarity with the planning system, development plan documents, writing policies etc;
- Community engagement and communication e.g. understanding community engagement processes and methods, leadership, motivation and communication skills;
- Marketing, promotion and consultation e.g. designing leaflets, promotional material, questionnaires and surveys;
- Funding and delivery e.g. sources of funding, grant/funding applications, fund-raising
- Writing, editorial, graphic design e.g. report writing, editing/proofing, design of reports, maps, plans and other graphics Computers and Information Technology e.g. word-processing, spreadsheets, managing website, social media, web-based information;

- Expertise in specific topic areas, e.g: housing, transport or the historic environment.

To maintain progress it will be important to identify a Chairman or facilitator - through which all discussion is directed, someone to produce agendas and someone to take notes. It is important to have clear recommendations at the end of each meeting with action points for members of the Steering Group.

Purpose and Remit

The ToR should clearly set out the purpose of the Steering Group and the range of activities that it can carry out on behalf of the Town or Parish Council. It should also clearly define the points at which the role of the Steering Group are to be reviewed and the range of tasks that the Group is expected to carry out. For example is the Steering Group to lead on preparing the Plan up to Submission to the District Council?

The following are examples of activities that the Steering Group might be involved in:

- Acting as a focal point for the Neighbourhood Plan for people living or working in the Neighbourhood Area;
- Prepare and agree a project plan;
- Provide a forum for discussion and debate;
- Motivate the whole community to be involved throughout the plan;
- Set up sub-groups to focus on particular themes;
- Engage with key stakeholders including the District Council;
- Liaise with any appointed consultants;
- Identify ways of involving the whole community and gather the views and opinions of as many individuals, groups and organisations in the community as possible in order to meet the requirements for consultation and engagement;
- Determine the types of survey and information gathering to be used;
- Prioritise actions, using the findings from the consultation process and information from other sources;
- Draft, and undertake consultation on the Neighbourhood Development Plan having regard to the legislative requirements and national guidance;
- work positively with the district council to ensure the plan is in conformity with the strategic policies of the adopted development plan;
- Undertake and produce supporting material such as consultation reports and environmental assessments; and,
- Report back to and receive endorsement from the town and parish council on progress, issues arising and outcomes throughout the process.

The ToR should also cover any financial issues, for example, use of any grant funding obtained to support the Plan, and responsibility for appointing any consultants needed to support the plan preparation process.

Decision Making

The Terms of Reference should clearly set out how decisions will be made and the relationship with the Town or Parish Council. Matters to consider are:

- Which decisions can be made by the Steering Group and which must be referred back to the Town or Parish Council
- Will decisions by the Steering Group be made by a simple majority vote? Will the Chairman have the casting vote?

Conflicts of Interest

Steering Group members should declare an interest where there is a potential financial or pecuniary benefit to themselves, or their company/organisation arising from the decisions or recommendations of the group.

Data Protection

The ToR should set out how the requirements of the Data Protection Act are to be met having regard to both the relationship with the Town or Parish Council and also the need to provide the District Council with a list of consultees at the Submission stage of the process. It should be clear who is responsible for overall data control for the neighbourhood plan process.

Freedom of Information Act/Environmental Information Regulations

Transparency in decision making at all stages of the neighbourhood plan processes is essential. The ToR should therefore make it absolutely clear that there is an expectation that any material that is used (either positively or negatively) or collected to inform the neighbourhood plan (in particular consultation material) must be available for public inspection in accordance with the Freedom of Information Act/Environmental Information Regulations

Further Information

Further information on Neighbourhood Plans can be found from links on the Councils website at <http://www.hart.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning>

Or contact the Planning Policy Team planningpolicy@hart.gov.uk

Appendix 1 – Draft template for neighbourhood planning steering group terms of reference

[Name] Neighbourhood Planning Steering Group

Established [date]

Membership

Number of members, breakdown of membership, role of substitutes.

If membership is known can include details such as name and organisation.

Set out the individual responsibilities of members (attending meetings, representing all sectors of the community etc)

Role of the Steering Group

Set out the areas of responsibility which are being delegated to the Steering Group.

Set out the stages of the neighbourhood plan process that the Steering Group will be responsible for leading on – for example, to Pre-Submission or to Submission.

Set out the different roles and responsibilities e.g., Chairman, Secretary.

Decision Making

Set out how any decisions will be resolved and made.

Set out the expectations for reporting back to the town or parish council and the decisions which will need to be referred back to them.

Financial Issues

Set out the budgetary responsibilities that the Group will have.

Conflicts of Interest

Set out the requirements in relation to conflicts of interest.

Data protection

Set out responsibilities in relation to meeting the Data Protection Act. This should be prepared in liaison with the town or parish council.

Freedom of Information Act/Environmental Information Regulations

Set out how the collection of data, including responses to consultations will be made available for public inspection, if required.

Steering Group Review

Set out clearly the circumstances which might trigger a review of the tasks delegated to the Steering Group or a review of the Terms of Reference.