

Is Neighbourhood Planning the right approach?

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Neighbourhood Planning empowers local communities to influence the future of their area and encourages collaboration in shaping it. However, it is a voluntary process that can be time-consuming, and it is important to note that it is not the route available.
- 1.2. Before getting started, it is worth exploring all the available options, including alternatives to neighbourhood planning, to determine what best suits your needs.
- 1.3. The most suitable approach will depend upon several factors, such as:
 - The development needs of your area;
 - Any specific pressure or policies outlined in the Local Plan; and
 - Your community's aspirations for the area.
- 1.4. If you are considering developing a Neighbourhood Plan, we encourage you to let us know early in the process. You may also find it helpful to review our suite of neighbourhood planning guidance documents which are available at: <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/npresources>.

2. Neighbourhood Plans

- 2.1. A Neighbourhood Plan sets out a positive vision for the future of a local area, supported by planning policies that help bring that vision to life.
- 2.2. These policies should complement and support the strategic policies in the Local Plan (currently the West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041), by guiding development in areas not covered by those strategic policies.
- 2.3. It is important to note that a neighbourhood plan cannot be used to propose less development than is set out in the Local Plan, nor can it override any of its strategic policies. Instead, it should provide additional detail and reflect priorities to help shape future development.
- 2.4. Neighbourhood Plans can:
 - allocate specific sites for development;
 - support the delivery of infrastructure and community facilities;
 - set out design principles; and
 - include other policies to guide development management at a local level.

Who can produce a Neighbourhood Plan?

- 2.5. In West Berkshire, town and parish councils are the designated 'qualifying bodies' responsible for leading the preparation of a neighbourhood plan.
- 2.6. While they can involve others from the community in the process, they must take the lead and ensure all legal obligations are met.
- 2.7. Ultimately, a Neighbourhood Plan must be approved by a community through a referendum. To be successful, the process should be well-organised and supported

by a clear strategy for community engagement. This includes reaching out to those who live, work, or run business within the designated neighbourhood area.

What is the scope and scale of a Neighbourhood Plan?

- 2.8. The scope and complexity of a neighbourhood plan will vary depending on your objectives and what you want the plan to address.
- 2.9. It could be selective – simple, focused, and limited in scope – or comprehensive covering a wide range of issues and involving broader community input. Many plans fall somewhere in between. The approach you choose will depend on your specific circumstances, including the time, energy, and resources (financial and otherwise) you can commit to the process.
- 2.10. The direction of your plan should be shaped by the evidence you gather and the outcomes of community engagement throughout the process.
- 2.11. There are also limits to what a neighbourhood plan can influence. Its policies must relate specifically to the development and use of land, and only affect development that requires a planning application.
- 2.12. A neighbourhood plan must:
 - avoid duplicating existing planning policies;
 - align with the strategic policies of the Development Plan for West Berkshire (<https://www.westberks.gov.uk/current-development-plan>); and
 - confirm to national planning policy.
- 2.13. It cannot address matters such as minerals and waste or highways, which are covered by minerals and waste local plans, or the Local Transport Plan.

What are the benefits of a Neighbourhood Plan?

- 2.14. Creating a neighbourhood plan provides a valuable opportunity to bring together residents and local businesses to set planning priorities based on a shared vision and objectives for the area.
- 2.15. One of the key benefits of a Neighbourhood Plan, compared to other types of community-led plans, is its legal status. Once approved through a local referendum, it becomes part of the statutory development plan – alongside the Local Plan and other formal planning documents. This means that planning decisions must be made in accordance with the Neighbourhood Plan, unless other material considerations suggest otherwise.
- 2.16. In addition, having a ‘made’ Neighbourhood plan entitles you to a greater share of any Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) generated by new development in your area. These funds can be used to support infrastructure projects that help deliver the development priorities set out in your plan.

How long will it take to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan?

- 2.17. While Neighbourhood Planning is a valuable tool, it represents a significant commitment.

- 2.18. When carried out properly and in line with statutory requirements, the process can take anywhere from 18 months to four years – from initial steps to the plan being formally ‘made’.

3. What are the other options?

- 3.1. Producing a Neighbourhood Plan is a major undertaking, and it is important to explore all available options before committing to this route.

Neighbourhood Development Orders

- 3.2. These orders allow planning permission to be granted for specific types of development within a defined area. For example, certain building works, changes in land or building use, or engineering operations may proceed without a formal planning application – provided they comply with existing policies and regulations.

Community Right to Build Orders

- 3.3. These orders allow planning permission to be granted for specific types of development within a defined area. For example, certain building works, changes in land or building use, or engineering operations may proceed without a formal planning application – provided they comply with existing policies and regulations.

Parish Plans

- 3.4. Parish Plans take a broader view of community life. They help identify current and future issues and propose solutions, which may involve external support. While they can include planning-related topics like land use and design, they often cover wider concerns such as local services, leisure, and transport.
- 3.5. Parish Plans are non-statutory, meaning they don't require formal adoption and cannot allocate development sites or influence planning decisions directly. However, they are relatively quick to prepare and can serve as a useful foundation for a Neighbourhood Plan.

Village Design Statements

- 3.6. Focused specifically on design, these statements describe the unique visual characteristics of a village and offer guidance – often illustrated with photos and diagrams – on how to maintain and enhance its appearance.
- 3.7. They do not determine what development can occur or where, nor do they address infrastructure or services. Instead, they provide helpful design advice for developers and residents and can be used to support comments on planning applications. A Village Design Statement can stand alone or be incorporated into a Neighbourhood Plan.

Do nothing / rely on the Local Plan

- 3.8. Creating a community-led plan is entirely optional. The Local Plan (currently the West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041) contains strategic and non-strategic policies that guide development across the county. In some rural areas, existing policies may be sufficient to manage development pressures. If you feel the Local Plan adequately addresses the needs of your parish, you may decide not to pursue a separate community-led plan.

4. Which option is best for your community?

- 4.1. Before deciding on the most suitable approach, it is important to consider which option best meets the needs of your parish and community
- 4.2. To help us understand your aims and motivations, please complete the following questions and return them by email to the Planning Policy Team at West Berkshire Council (planningpolicy@westberks.gov.uk):

Purpose & suitability

1. Why is a neighbourhood plan needed?
2. Have you reviewed the Neighbourhood Planning guidance documents on our website (available to view at: <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/npresources>)?
3. What are the key planning issues in your area? *(It may be helpful to reflect on the current and future challenges facing your community or area. Consider the aspirations of local residents and businesses, and think about the planning issues or development needs that relate to these goals. What changes or improvements are needed to support your community's vision for the future?)*
4. What way(s) would a neighbourhood plan help your community deliver the priorities set out within the West Berkshire Local Plan Review 2023-2041 (available to view at: <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/local-plan-review>)?
5. Are there any specific outcomes you are looking to achieve through the neighbourhood planning process?
6. Are there any specific proposals you are seeking planning permission for?
7. Are you seeking to allocate a site for development, or be more permissive towards development in your area?

Neighbourhood area

8. What area would your proposed neighbourhood plan cover (eg. one parish or a smaller/ larger area)?
9. If you want the neighbourhood plan to cover more than one parish area, is there support from other the other parish council(s)?

Community engagement & support

10. Is there broad community interest and willingness to participate?
11. What community engagement or publicity (if any) have you carried out or plan to carry out?
12. Is there commitment from the parish / town council(s)?

Funding & costs

13. Have you estimated the likely costs (consultants, events, printing, etc)?
14. Have you considered how the plan will be funded?

Timeline & Commitment

15. Are you aware that the process may take 18 months to 4 years, and possibly longer?
16. Are you prepared to maintain momentum over the long term?