

Higham Ferrers Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group Annual Report to Council

First to recap í í í í .

the Steering Group(SG) was formed in Dec 2011. Initially the SG was occupied with producing a questionnaire to find out what the residents of Higham felt about their Town. The results of the questionnaire were obtained and analysed during 2012 and then shown to Higham residents at a drop-in day at the Chantry in February 2013. Two other important actions also happened, the first being the appointment of WYG Consultants to produce a Higham Ferrers Transport Study. This study was received in its final form in early 2013. The second was the appointment of James Wilson as Planning Consultant to assist the SG in the preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan (NP).

What has happened since March 2013.

In March James Wilson explained the tasks ahead and indicated the approximate timetable that would be needed to reach the goal of an approved and adopted NP.

I was appointed to the Chair in April and I selected Philip Toogood to be the Vice Chair and Project Manager. James Wilson presented a report which amongst other things highlighted some of the problems that a decision on Rushden Lakes was having on East Northants Council (ENC) producing a new Core Strategy (CS). Our NP needs to align with the CS when prepared. James clarified the key requirements of a NP and the difference between a NP and a Community Plan (CP). A NP is all about development and has to go through a statutory process which takes time whereas a CP can be produced and approved by the Town Council without these statutory processes.

Following the April meeting the SG decided to produce a CP first as we were well advanced with identifying CP issues which had come out of the questionnaire. Once that was launched we could then concentrate on the NP. It would also mean we could start to action some of the issues identified in the CP out of the Questionnaire.

We then commenced producing a CP with a Vision and set of Objectives which would apply to both Plans. A Communication Strategy was also produced and our Project Manager produced a Project Management Plan to guide us in the most effective way of achieving an approved NP. We agreed to officially launch the Community Plan with as much publicity as we could muster and in accordance with our Communication Strategy. The launch date for

the CP was fixed for 21 Sept and the next community consultation event open day was also fixed.

Because there was going to be a heavy work load required of the SG over the next year five Project Teams (PTs) were created:

É Community Facilities

É Economy, Education and Tourism

É Development

É Highways and Traffic

É Communications

The CP launch at Bede House was a successful event achieved some publicity and enabled us to recruit more members for the PTs.

The drop-in day for the NP was on 28 Sept. A consultation leaflet containing our vision and objectives and development options was provided. We received responses from 6% of the residents by the extended closing date of 21 November. This is around the expected level of response for such a consultation.

Analysis of the responses indicated a good measure of support for the Vision and Objectives (69%) and the preferred growth option, by a narrow margin, was for medium growth (Option 2a). This growth would occur within identified sites in the existing town, most already with outline planning permission, and any expansion beyond the existing town area would be within the Higham Ferrers boundary to the east of the A6 bypass north of the John Clark Way roundabout.

A workshop was held in December at the Town Hall for the SG run by ðPlanning Aidö. The object of the workshop was to guide the PTs in the next and crucial stage of preparing the NP which is to produce information and evidence in support of the policies that the Plan proposes. The PTs have been working hard since then in producing this evidence base and to date have completed around 70% of the task.

Meetings have been held with:

Northants County Council Education Authority, ÷The Ferrers Schoolø (an academy)

Rushden Town Council

Northants County Council Highways and their Highways Community Liaison officer

East Northants Council including workshops

Northants County Council Bus Liaison Officer

Northamptonshire Police (Community Speed Watch)

As a SG we have also responded in detail to the Northamptonshire Highways Strategy, the River Nene Catchment Plan and to various planning application consultations and strategy documents issued by East Northants Council and we have obtained information from various

bodies providing information e.g. the Health sector (NHS), English Heritage, English Nature and the Chichele Society.

The PTs in conjunction with the Town Council have also been tackling some of the actions that came out of the CP. It must be understood the SG has no formal powers and depends on other bodies such as the Town Council, the County Council, ENC etc to implement a number of the actions. We have to work closely with the Town Council on many of the issues and actions.

The Community Facilities PT has been improving communications and information about the town. This includes a new website, list of community groups and businesses and launch of the Higham Times to replace the Hecham Chronicle. The desired Community Building is being negotiated by the Town Council but the Community Facilities PT is investigating the potential users and requirements for the facility. More use of the tennis courts has resulted from more advertising. Improvements have been made to the underuse of the site opposite the Henry Chichele School for parking. The search for land for allotments is continuing and will feature as part of the NP policy for future development in Higham together with land for a cemetery. The problem of lack of youth facilities is being undertaken by Council who are investigating funding for a skateboard park and liaising with NAYC regarding a possible youth club for the Town. Contacts have been made with the local Doctors Surgery and the Practice Manager is now a member of the Community Facilities Project Team and the SG now has a member on the Patients Forum

The Economy, Education and Tourism PT has been working on a number of their actions:

There has been an increase in the footfall at the monthly Farmers Market as a result of additional publicity and incentives. A review of shop usage has been undertaken and more information has been obtained and passed on to the Library Service. Meetings have been held and regular contact is made with the various Education bodies and comments are made on planning applications concerning the availability of school places. The issue of dog fouling is being actioned by the Council. More locations for bins and more signage are being investigated. New Town Signs have been installed and the Project Team is investigating making the town approaches more attractive with planting schemes.

The Development PT has been heavily engaged in NP work as development is the main subject of a Neighbourhood Plan. There are a large number of planning and planning related documents, reports, plans, statistics etc to research and consider and meetings to be arranged with landowners and potential developers. The Development PT will continue to work on these NP issues up to the production of the draft NP document in mid 2014

The Highways and Traffic PT has commenced a number of actions out of the CP

A requirement to improve the parking turnover in the Market Square is being investigated by the Town Council. Temporary parking is now available on Market days off Midland Road.

Discussions have been held with NCC Highways and outline plans have been prepared by the Project Team and passed to NCC for detailed design and estimate preparation to increase permanent parking in the Town Centre. Every opportunity is being taken to apply pressure to the Highways Agency to improve Chowns Mill roundabout and the SG has joined forces with the local MP to provide support in his campaign for improvements to this heavily used and difficult to negotiate intersection. The signage for existing car parking at Saffron Road has been reviewed and improvements are now in progress by the Town Council. The Highways and Traffic PT has ideas for improving the provision of safer pedestrian and cycle routes to and from recent developments, local schools and the Town Centre. The PT has also pointed out to Northants County Council Highways representatives the lack of implementation of their own policies and plans of their appointed Consultants in relation to making Higham town centre a safer and more desirable destination, for all residents, whether arriving by car, bicycle, on foot or are disabled.

As Chairman I should like to take this opportunity of thanking all members of the Steering Group for their voluntary dedication in the task of preparing both the Community Plan and the Neighbourhood Plan. For ordinary members of the Community to undertake this work without any possibility of recognition or reward is surely a sign the Community in Higham Ferrers is in good health. I trust that on completion of the Plan the relevant authorities will do all they can to ensure the Vision and Objectives of the Community are fulfilled and the policies are implemented.