

Final close-out report from the Higham Ferrers Neighbourhood Plan 2011 – 203 (HFNP) Steering Group

Brief summary of the work

- Higham Ferrers Town Council formed a Steering Group in December 2011. Initial work involved issuing a questionnaire to all residents and analysing the responses.
- In April 2013 Nigel Cheetham was appointed Chairman and Philip Toogood as Vice Chairman and Project Manager.
- A number of issues arising from the resident's questionnaire were strictly outside the defined scope of a Neighbourhood Plan (NP). They were nevertheless important to the Community and should not be ignored.
- A decision was taken to produce a Community Plan (CP) to deal with these issues. It would also mean that this CP could be actioned whilst the NP was being progressed.
- The CP was produced and published in August 2013.
- The production of the NP was then developed as a project.
- Under NP regulations the latest planning strategy from East Northants Council would have to form the planning basis for a NP. Unfortunately at the time the latest adopted planning strategy was the East Northamptonshire Local plan 1996 and the North Northamptonshire Core Spatial Strategy 2008 (CSS). The latter document was about to be revised but was unlikely to be done before our NP was finished.
- So we had to use any information that was emerging from the review of this CSS
- To manage the process of producing a NP we decided to treat it as a project and apply project management principles. A Project Plan was produced with a start date of 1 Nov 2013 and a forecast project close of October 2014. The Project Plan was set up using "Project in a Box" which is a suitable software programme for this size and type of project. A Business Case and Project Mandate were also produced together with a Consultation Strategy. The already produced CP became an associated document.
- We developed a "Vision" and "Objectives" for the NP and sought comments and support for these from the Community.
- We held a number of consultation events with the Community and obtained their views on preferred areas for development and draft policies for the Plan to meet the required housing targets up to 2031.
- We also carried out a Character Assessment of existing development in the Town. We decided to do this because it became apparent from the questionnaire and subsequent consultations that the character and history of the town was one of the appreciated benefits and positive aspects of living in Higham Ferrers, which set it apart from adjacent towns. It was also noted that some of the more recent developments had not respected the character of existing development as well as they could.
- The Plan was finally completed and passed all its required stages including a Referendum. The Referendum obtained a 92% support for the Plan from those that voted in the Community, which was a very satisfactory outcome.
- Actual progress was much slower than forecast. The NP was completed and adopted in March 2016 indicating an overrun of 17 months from the original

date of October 2014. However, it is not a race and we agreed, quite rightly I believe, that it is better to do as thorough job as possible and produce a NP that passes all of its tests than dash off a NP as quickly as possible.

Things we missed in our original Project Management Plan

Our consultant planner (James Wilson) proposed that the NP would have 5 main themes:

- a) Development
- b) Services
- c) Design and Environment
- d) Access, Transport and Communications
- e) Town Centre and Employment

As part of the evidence gathering process for these 5 themes we would need to carry out technical studies to support any policies that could emerge. The work required for this had not been included in the Project Plan. A template was devised to assist with the production of the studies but the time required to carry out the work in total was just over 5 months and added 3 months to the programme.

We also decided to have an initial consultation with Statutory Authorities and local stakeholders and this took 6 months to complete and added 6 months to the programme.

A draft NP was then prepared. Before we issued the plan for formal Regulation 14 consultation we decided to have a further round of consultation with the community and to obtain a measure of support or otherwise for the draft policies proposed. This added 6 weeks to the programme.

The decision to prepare a Character Assessment for the Town had not been included in the original time schedule. This work took 2 months to complete but did not add any time to the programme.

We were originally under the impression that we would not need to carry out an SEA and AA Screening but were advised half way through that these must be done. The extra tasks took 6 months to complete and added 3 months to the programme.

Finally we decided to have a trial independent examination of the draft NP by NPIERS before we submitted it for official examination. This added a further 2 weeks to the programme.

The official examination went well and we then submitted the NP formally to East Northants Council as the Planning Authority. From then onwards we had no control over the programme to completion. We had allowed 6 months in the original programme for this but in the event it took nearly 9 months.

Recommendations for future work

To summarise, we suggest any future NP work should:

- 1) Desirably have an up to date approved District Plan in place before commencing the NP work
- 2) Because of the proximity of Higham Ferrers to the outstanding environmental protected areas of the Nene Valley this needs to be given greater weight in terms of consultation with the relevant Statutory Authorities.
- 3) Include a Character Assessment Review. The design and quality of new development is likely to be the only remaining differentiating factor for the future of Higham Ferrers.
- 4) From experience a more optimistic timescale for the production of the NP would need to be adopted from the outset.
- 5) Appreciate that a number of issues the residents are concerned about are really Community Plan issues, which have a bearing on the NP but should be tackled outside the NP process.
- 6) Commence work on the evidence gathering for the work packages earlier and maybe make this a continual normal process within the Council.

Final Comment

The most critical test of the NP still has to come. That will be during the planning of the Higham East part of the Rushden East Sustainable Urban Extension (SUE). This could soon happen even though the actual development may only occur later during the life of the Higham Ferrers NP.

Our Neighbourhood Plan fully recognised Higham has a much older heritage and quite a different history compared with neighbouring Rushden. This strongly influenced the policies that have been prepared in the NP. It would be a lost opportunity if this difference between the two communities were not fully recognised in the planning of this SUE.

To maintain the difference between the two communities a rough line of separation should be planned which should approximate to the old parish boundary line as a varying width green space. This could incorporate predominantly green facilities, existing footpath routes, possibly a new cemetery, playing fields, landscaped areas and greens, or other community facilities but definitely not large and unsightly warehouses.

Separating Higham East in this way would provide the opportunity to create a definite Higham Ferrers feel to new residential developments in the Higham Ferrers part. This new development could then incorporate features like lime tree avenues, raised footways, unusual spaces and buildings using local character materials which reflect the existing heritage aspects of Higham Ferrers.

Hopefully both Higham Ferrers Town Council and East Northants Council will stand by the policies, produced with strong community support, set out in the HFNP when considering proposals for this SUE.