

Neighbourhood Plan Update (Executive Decision)

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Purpose of the Report

The purpose of this report is to update Members on the Queen Camel Neighbourhood Plan, review the process and key lessons and report on the progress of other Neighbourhood Plans that are underway in Area East.

Public Interest

The Localism Act 2011 provides the legal framework for communities to take more control over land use planning by producing local planning policies and site specific local orders in order to increase the prospects of achieving wanted growth and development.

Recommendation

That Area East Committee note and comment on the report

That the remaining £15,264 of the funds secured from DCLG towards the Queen Camel Frontrunner, be retained and used for supporting Neighbourhood Plans.

Background

The Localism Act, which received Royal Assent on 15th November 2011, introduced new rights and powers to allow local communities to shape new development by preparing neighbourhood plans.

Neighbourhood planning can be taken forward by two types of body - town and parish councils or 'neighbourhood forums' however; forums can only be the accountable body in areas without a Parish or Town Council.

Parish and Town Councils can use new neighbourhood planning powers to establish general planning policies for the development and use of land in a neighbourhood. These are described legally as 'neighbourhood development plans.'

In Area East, three Neighbourhood Plan areas have been designated, Queen Camel, Wincanton and Castle Cary/Ansford.

Members will recall that SSDC was awarded a grant of £20,000 from DCLG through the Vanguard Scheme for the Queen Camel Neighbourhood Plan. The Vanguard programme was designed to generate good practice and to help Local Authorities and communities understand how the legislation could be applied.

Queen Camel Neighbourhood Plan

Queen Camel was chosen from a number of towns and parishes interested in producing a plan on the basis that the community had a good track record of community led planning with a locally adopted 'development plan' which had identified needs that had land use implications namely, affordable housing, a new school and improved community facilities.

The Parish Council established a local steering group to work on the plan with support from Area Development and Spatial Planning. Other services have provided support and guidance on specialist or technical elements of the plan. The Steering group included representatives from local organisations including the school governors and officers from the SCC Education Planning Team also attended the meetings to provide updates on the provision of a new school.

The local group was very comfortable with the community engagement and consultation stages of the process and decided to use a well-established consultation tool called 'Planning for Real'©. This approach involved making a large scale map of the parish and used flags to suggest issues and solutions. It enabled the group to test the suggestions on sites for development alongside developing the existing evidence base and gathering information about other local issues without the need for a household survey. A total of 7 events were held including two special sessions with young people who had not been well represented at the village events.

The results of the Planning for Real consultations were presented at the Annual Parish Meeting in June 2012. Work then began on carrying out an appraisal of all land identified as potential development opportunities. Archaeology was identified as a priority area for further investigation on a number of potential development locations. This work, along with the SCC negotiations on land for the new school and work to establish the CLT to move forward on the housing scheme delayed the progress on the Neighbourhood Plan.

In June 2013, an application was made to Locality for technical support from Planning Aid to provide help translate the data and consultation responses into draft policy intentions and planning policies. The steering group was allocated a fixed period of time with planning consultant, Liz Beth. During the drafting process South Somerset District Council (SSDC) planning officers gave feedback on the wording of the proposed policies; and carried out Strategic Environmental Assessment / Sustainability Appraisal (SEA/SA) screening. This concluded that a SEA/SA was not required. A draft plan was presented to Queen Camel Parish Council at a workshop in December 2014. Further minor changes were suggested and incorporated. A copy of the draft plan is available on the Queen Camel website www.queen-camel.co.uk/front-runnerparish-plan

The next main stages of the plan are:-

- Six week local consultation on the draft document
- Review and update the draft, addressing consultation responses
- Submission to SSDC
- Six week formal consultation
- Examination (To determine conformity with the Local Plan etc)
- Referendum (If deemed to be sound by examiner)

Membership of the Parish Council changed significantly at the election in May 2015 when six people, including key members of the Fronrunner Steering Group, did not stand for re

election. After a period of taking stock and induction of new members, the parish council held a workshop to revisit the Neighbourhood Plan. Concerns were expressed by the new council. After a further, more detailed workshop, the decision was made to pause, shelve the plan, return to primary research and work towards an update of the Community Plan. At this time, SSDC Spatial Planners reviewed the draft plan and concluded the following:-

- The key objectives of the NP have already been successfully delivered, e.g. affordable housing and a new school with community facilities.
- Since work began on the NP the South Somerset Local Plan 2006-2028 has been adopted (March 2015). Therefore, whilst SSDC recognises that a significant amount of hard work and dedication has gone into producing the draft NP, the proposed 19 policies mainly replicate the policies in the South Somerset Local Plan and/or national planning policy. As such, SSDC maintains that the vast majority of what is being sought by the NP –affordable homes, new employment development, and housing for older people – can be achieved through the use of the South Somerset Local Plan.

Despite the disappointment of not getting to the end of the process, the Queen Camel Frontrunner has contributed to the delivery of significant development in the parish with the affordable housing scheme completed and a new school facility nearly completed. The process also secured enhanced facilities for community use as part of the new school.

One of the concerns raised by the Parish Council was regarding the content of the indicative plan for the existing school site. The plan was developed in discussion with the landowners, SCC. It was hoped that this would help safeguard the future use of the land for the community. This remains a significant issue and a potential project which has land use implications. The draft Neighbourhood Plan includes an indicative master plan for the site and although it is hoped that this will influence decisions about the future, it has no legal status.

If the process remains stalled, the parish council will not benefit from the enhanced (25% rather than 15%) local allocation of Community Infrastructure Levy that may be secured through future development.

Lessons learned from supporting the process are detailed in Appendix A.

Castle Cary Neighbourhood Plan

A small but highly skilled group (which includes two representatives of the Town Council) is working on the plan. They typically meet monthly but this year they have been meeting weekly. Work on a NDP for Castle Cary is progressing well.

Document drafting is underway covering the following themes:

Employment + enterprise
Housing
Town Centre
Transport
Social/community infrastructure
Conservation + Heritage
Green infrastructure + open spaces
Tourism
Education

There has been good participation at consultation events to inform and refine the drafting of the plan. These events have been tailored to attract a good cross section of the community, the most recent of which held at the secondary and primary schools to target parents provided particularly useful feedback. The group is working towards having a draft document completed by the end of this month. They will share this with Ward Members and obtain consultant advice ahead of consulting more widely on the draft document.

Wincanton Neighbourhood Plan

The Town Council applied for Wincanton to become a Neighbourhood Plan area in March 2013. A steering group led by the Town Council has met monthly to take the plan forward. A Project Manager has been employed to support the local group to assess all existing data and test a number of priorities at an open event. This preliminary work will help to ensure that the plan will be a targeted piece of work focusing on establishing a broad direction of growth for housing, a better idea of the actual need for employment land and some specific policies to help influence the type of housing built. The group is engaging with all local landowners and developers to get a clear picture of local aspiration for both housing and employment.

Wincanton Town Council has successfully applied for £8,000 of Government funds from 'Locality' to employ a planning consultant to support the technical elements of work. This work will include a place-check assessment of land identified in the SHLAA and support to help the group draft policies that will influence the type of development coming forward. The group is aiming to have draft policies ready for consultation by the end of March 2016.

Financial Implications

The original funding awarded to SSDC by DCLG was towards trialling the whole process, including the examination and the referendum. £15,264 remains from the original DCLG award of £20,000.

Supporting the Neighbourhood Plan has had significant resource implications for SSDC. It is estimated that 79 days of Area Development Officer time has been spent alongside advice and guidance from spatial planning officers, conservation and housing.

Corporate Priority Implications

Assisting Queen Camel to complete their Neighbourhood Development Plan and use the lessons from this pilot scheme to help other communities to develop their plans in the future is an action under Focus Four: Health & Communities

Appendix A – Lessons from the Queen Camel Frontrunner

Supporting Queen Camel Parish Council through the Vanguard/Frontrunner programme has been a useful exercise which has helped us learn a number of lessons.

Make sure that a Neighbourhood Plan the right tool for the job.

It has been possible to deliver the 20 units of affordable housing and a new school, within the existing policies of the SSDC Local Plan and SCC which could lead to the conclusion that a Neighbourhood Plan was not needed.

The process has helped to reinforce the priority of the work in Queen Camel and keep agencies engaged. The consultation responses have influenced the scale and design of the affordable housing scheme and the design and inclusion of additional community facilities at the school.

Writing policy is a technical piece of work that requires input from planning specialists.

The Neighbourhood Plan process has to be locally driven but the Plan itself is a technical document which needs to broadly conform to other local policies and needs to be written in way that can be applied in the planning environment. Very few communities will have the local skills and expertise in this area and will therefore have to buy in some specialist support.

The rules keep changing.

Government policy is constantly changing which makes it very difficult for local groups to keep up. For example, a policy written to try to improve the energy efficiency of any new housing to reduce running costs in an area that is 'off gas' could not proceed due to the abolition of the energy codes for sustainable construction.

Projects do not stand still and wait for the plan.

It is very difficult to write a plan and deliver the projects at the same time. The delivery of a housing scheme and a new school became possible because of time limited funding opportunities. The community and agencies reacted to these opportunities which led to several delays in the neighbourhood plan process.

It is essential to have a dedicated local individual coordinating the process.

Getting the right people involved in the steering group is essential but keeping them involved is very difficult and requires someone driving the process. This role was taken on by a Parish Councillor who had been involved in the original Community Plan and Development Plan. This is a challenging role which requires good organisation, and good facilitation skills.

It is important to manage expectations about scope of influence.

Officers from SCC attended meeting of the Steering Group and provided updates at various stages of the new school development. When the NP process began it was hoped that the site identification and planning could have been achieved as part of the Neighbourhood Plans and options were presented and tested during the Planning for Real sessions.

Securing a site for the new school was dealt with by SCC without local input or reference to the preferred local solution which damaged the local perception of the value of the process.

Effective tools for community engagement

Public engagement is something that we already have a lot of experience of and do well. The use of the Planning for Real method was quite expensive in the first instance but proved to be a very effective way to engage. It is a very inclusive approach which can involve a wide range of people in the various stages.

Community Capacity – Finite local resources

A number of the local steering group members were also instrumental in establishing the Community Land Trust to develop the local housing scheme. Taking advantage of funding opportunities and moving to deliver the above projects stretched the local resources. This inevitably delayed the progress of the plan.

Implications of change in leadership

The draft plan was presented informally to Queen Camel Parish Council in December 2014 and was supported apart from some suggested minor amendments. A number of local issues put the next formal stage of the plan process back and in May 2015, six Parish Councillors decided not to stand for election. This has been the main factor in the process stalling at this late stage.