

Should Child Okeford make a Neighbourhood Plan?

An evidence-based recommendation to Child Okeford Parish Council by Cllr Tim Cotton and Cllr Barbara Ireland.

Summary, conclusions and recommendations

This report was commissioned by Child Okeford Parish Council following a Neighbourhood Plan Discovery meeting on 20th September 2023. Its purpose is to make a recommendation to the council on whether to develop a Neighbourhood Plan for Child Okeford. To do this, we have examined the feasibility of developing a plan, its value in the light of current planning policies and the impact developing a plan would have for the village.

Feasibility

We found that we have a good degree of interest within the village in creating a Neighbourhood Plan and this gives us encouragement to believe there would be sufficient numbers to act as volunteers in leafletting and distribution of surveys.

But so far, we do not have sufficient numbers to join working groups or to lead the project. Further work would be required to find people with relevant experience and who are able to offer engagement at the level required.

Grant funding is available so that at least initially cost need not be a detrimental factor.

Value

We found that the current government remains committed to Neighbourhood Plans and have taken steps to strengthen their power. However, a Labour Government, if elected, is likely to place greater emphasis on increasing housing supply and to move to a position where planning permission is only refused where it contradicts an adopted Local Plan. Under a future Labour Government, it is also probable that where there is no adopted Local Plan, there will be a presumption in favour of development. This is the opposite to the current position where the Neighbourhood Plan takes precedence.

The case of Pimperne Parish Council demonstrates that even where there is a current made Neighbourhood Plan, it will not necessarily be effective in preventing unwanted development.

We could not conclude that a Neighbourhood Plan will guarantee protection against unwanted development and there is a risk that any protection that does exist will diminish if Labour is elected as the next government.

Impact

We found that a Neighbourhood Plan could be a useful policy instrument to have during the period when Dorset Council has no Local Plan, which is now. However, our Neighbourhood Plan will not be completed until after Dorset's Local Plan is scheduled to be adopted in December 2026. To be useful after that date, the Neighbourhood Plan will need to be consistent with the Local Plan and is unlikely to be able to over-ride housing needs identified in the Local Plan.

We estimated that our Neighbourhood Plan would need to identify sites to build up to 40 new houses, in addition to those already granted planning permission. Given the geography of the village, there

are no obvious sites which would receive widespread agreement. The need to identify the sites could therefore contribute to a reduction in community cohesion.

Overall Conclusion

We started by concluding that there are two main benefits to be expected from making a Neighbourhood Plan:

- Firstly, the ability to influence planning decisions in the village and greater power to stop unwanted development.
- Secondly, the ability to influence the character and features of any development that is permitted.

Reviewing the evidence, we found that the protection against unwanted development may be less than expected and that a future Labour Government may reduce the protection offered by a Neighbourhood Plan further.

This means that the main benefit of making a Neighbourhood Plan could be reduced to the ability to influence the character and features of new development. Whilst this is a worthwhile power in its own right, we concluded that it is not enough to justify the time and effort required to make the Neighbourhood Plan and to risk a reduction in community cohesion.

Recommendation

Our recommendation to Child Okeford Parish Council is therefore:

1. Not to proceed with a Neighbourhood Plan at this stage.
2. To review the position again after the adoption of the Local Plan and after the next election when we may have a better understanding of where Neighbourhood Plans feature in government policy.
3. To consider reviewing and updating the Village Design Statement to make it more effective as a Supplementary Planning Document.

Background

Neighbourhood planning was introduced in the Localism Act 2011. It is considered by some to be an important and powerful tool that gives communities statutory powers to shape how their communities develop.

What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

In very simple terms, a neighbourhood plan is:

1. A document that sets out planning policies for the neighbourhood area – planning policies are used to decide whether to approve planning applications.
2. Written by the local community, the people who know and love the area, rather than the local planning authority.
3. A powerful tool to ensure the community gets the right types of development, in the right place.

Benefits of a Neighbourhood Plan

We found that the benefits of a Neighbourhood Plan are:

1. To provide a forum for the community to state the amount, type, style and location of future development in the village.
2. To enable the community to have an official voice in the planning process by creating a document which must be considered before planning permission is granted.
3. But a Neighbourhood Plan is NOT a mechanism to stop further development in the village or to provide a veto against development which arouses opposition.

We found that a Neighbourhood Plan enables a community to understand its housing needs and to decide together how they should be met. This is because:

- The plan requires extensive research, which can provide an evidence-based understanding of the community's needs.
- Before it can be 'made', the Neighbourhood Plan requires two consultation phases and to be endorsed by a village Referendum.

We found that a Neighbourhood Plan could enable a community to specify where it would like to see development take place and to ensure that it meets the needs of the local community. This is because:

- The plan must include designated areas which the community agrees are suitable for the number and type of housing, or shops/ commercial premises the village requires.

We found that a Neighbourhood Plan could enable the village to influence how new buildings look so that they can complement the existing housing stock. This is because:

- The plan enables the village to set out the architectural styles and features that are deemed compatible with, or desirable alongside, the village's existing housing stock and position in the landscape.

We found that a Neighbourhood Plan enables a village to take back some control over its growth and development. This is because:

- It is an official planning document against which planning applications will be considered before planning permission is granted.

- Subject to relevant conditions being fulfilled, it provides protection against the presumption of sustainable development for a period of two years after the plan has been made.

Costs of Making a Neighbourhood Plan

While the benefits of a neighbourhood plan are significant, it's important to consider the costs associated with its creation. These costs are not strictly financial but also include time and resources. We found that there are three main costs to making a Neighbourhood Plan:

- Financial: we found that the cost of making a Neighbourhood Plan is likely to be at least £10,000. The majority of the expense is the cost of engaging a Planning Consultant and there will be additional expenses incurred in carrying out surveys, publicising and holding public meetings and consultations. There is grant funding available to cover the expenses.
- Time: the average time it has taken to make the 32 Neighbourhood Plans made so far in Dorset is 4.95 years, with some taking as little as 3 years and others taking 7 years. We do not have data on the amount of actual time required, which in any event will vary from village to village and plan to plan. However, this is not a project that can simply be handed to a paid-for consultant and would require a very significant expenditure of time and effort by volunteers.
- Community cohesion: making a neighbourhood plan could bring a community together but it also has the potential to create discord between different parts of the community. This 'risk' arises from the need to make decisions which may adversely affect some more than others, for example the requirement to nominate areas of the village designated for new buildings. We heard how in some villages, the requirement to specify areas for new development created significant tensions within the community.

Conclusions

We found that there are two main benefits to expected from making a Neighbourhood Plan:

- Firstly, the ability to influence planning decisions in the village and greater power to stop unwanted development.
- Secondly, the ability to influence the character and features of any development that is permitted.

The costs are mainly in terms of personnel and time, and a potential risk to community cohesion, arising from the need to identify sites designated for new building, which will affect different parts of the village differently.

What is involved in making a Neighbourhood Plan?

Process of Making a Neighbourhood Plan

We found that the plan has to be prepared by a qualifying body, i.e. a Parish Council, but that the Council can form a sub-committee or recruit a working group to carry out the work. It is also probably essential to engage a planning consultant, for which there are grants available.

There are nine steps involved in the process of creating a Neighbourhood Plan, which are:

1. Parish Council applies for Neighbourhood Area
2. Parish Council prepares Draft Plan
3. Local Consultation (Reg 14) (6 weeks)
4. Parish Council finalise Plan and submit to Dorset Council
5. Consultation by Dorset Council (Reg 16) (6 weeks)
6. Review by Independent Examiner

7. Dorset Council considers independent examiner's report
8. Dorset Council organizes a village referendum (requires a simple majority of voters)
9. Dorset Council 'makes' plan.

Activities and resources needed

We found that timescales for start to end of process vary widely but average around 5 years.

People

The most resource heavy period is generally during the middle two to four years when intensive work is required on the housing requirements, call for sites, identification of green spaces/views/ important village features and consensus on what these should be.

We found we would need:

- Leader from village – relevant background, enough time and enthusiasm to lead project
- Professional adviser -paid via grant, probably in annual stages
- Possibly technical support via grant later in programme
- Volunteers, - sufficient to spread work and willing to be objective in working together to achieve a consensus

We found we will also need responses from residents at several stages to understand priorities. This would need questionnaires that reach every household so some at least would have to be paper.

Working Groups

We found that the following areas will need to be covered within a Neighbourhood Plan, and that each may require a separate working group. It is likely that members will take part in more than one working group, but as a minimum we would need 12 engaged people spread across the different groups.

- Housing supply
- Employment and business development
- Transport and traffic
- Environment including open/green spaces
- Community facilities

Conclusion

We had over 30 people attend the public Discovery meeting in September to hear more about the Neighbourhood Plan, which indicates that there may be sufficient numbers of people available in the village to act as volunteers. Currently we do not have anyone with the relevant experience, time and enthusiasm who has offered to lead the development of the plan, but we do have some possible candidates within the village who would be suitable if they could be persuaded.

Grant applications

We can make applications for grants (which effectively last one year) at several stages in the process, for instance before the pre-submission stage when there is a six-week consultation. The total for the basic grant is £10,000 and this can be divided between stages and years in any amounts of between £1,000 and £10,000. Costs above £10,000 may require additional funding from the Parish Council or other fundraising.

The application for a grant can be a significant piece of work in its own right and will need to be carried out more than once to fund each stage of the process. We found we are able to apply for an initial

grant without but it does look as though we can apply for a grant without having done a lot of background work on housing/development needs, on the basis that we need support to do that. However, we do need to have identified where our resources are coming from though and the level of expertise that they have.

Conclusion

It seems that grant funding is available to pay for most of the cost of making a Neighbourhood Plan but we cannot rely on grant funding to pay the whole cost. Grant funding should be available to get us started but we will have to make some initial planning first. Additionally, because unspent grant funding has to be repaid at the end of the fiscal year, the timing of an application may be important.

Estimate of housing need

A Neighbourhood Plan is required to assess the number of new homes that are required to be built and to allocate areas which would be suitable for development. We considered how many new houses our Neighbourhood Plan may need to plan for.

North Dorset's five-year housing land supply calculation shows a housing requirement of 373 new homes per year plus 5% buffer, making 392 new homes each year or 1,958 homes over the five-year period to March 2028.

The total number of new homes identified as deliverable is 2,247 showing that North Dorset has an acceptable 5-year land supply.

Within the group 'Stalbridge, the villages and the countryside', which includes Child Okeford, there are 662 homes with planning permission identified as deliverable to March 2028, of which 30 are in Child Okeford, and 26 of which are on the land off Haywards Lane where building is just starting.

While the land supply target has been met until late 2028, there is a relatively small number of houses provided by Child Okeford compared to the size of the village. If say, we commenced a Neighbourhood Plan this year and it took five years to complete, the earliest period it could cover is 2029 to 2034 based on needing to remake it every 5 years, so we are looking at the next land supply period.

Assuming deliverable homes remains at 392 per year, that the ratio between major towns and the rest remains the same and that Stalbridge joins the 'major towns' group, we allocated 35% of the rest to Stalbridge giving about 85 homes per year for the remaining large villages to find

If Child Okeford were asked to provide 5% of these it would be about 20 new homes, and about 40 new homes if we provide 10% of the requirement. Child Okeford is much more restricted in where new homes can go due our geography between the hill and the river but 40 new homes seem a reasonable upper level of new homes. The challenge will be to identify space for them in a manner consistent with the homes already here, for example no high density infill in an area which is currently low density.

Conclusion

We found that if we were to commence a Neighbourhood Plan now, it would cover a period beyond Dorset's current housing supply and therefore to be consistent with local plans, we will need to find spaces to allocate to new development. We estimated that our Neighbourhood Plan would have to find sites for up to 40 new houses, in addition to those already granted planning permission.

Value of a Neighbourhood Plan

National Planning Policy

The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) was updated in December 2023 and one of its effects was to strengthen the power of Neighbourhood Plans. These include:

- **Enhanced Protections:** Neighbourhoods that develop their own plans now receive bolstered protections against speculative development. This means that local communities have more say in shaping their immediate environment and can better safeguard their unique character and interests.
- **Extended Protection Period:** Previously, if a local authority had a three-year housing land supply, development contrary to a neighbourhood plan would typically be refused for the first two years after the plan's creation. However, the revised NPPF extends this protection period to five years.
- **Integration into Development Plans:** Neighbourhood plans that become part of the development plan two years or less before a decision is made now hold greater weight. Additionally, if a neighbourhood plan contains policies and allocations to meet its identified housing requirement, it will be considered more favourably in planning decisions.

Conclusion

Recent government policy has re-affirmed its support for Neighbourhood Plans and given them greater strength.

Local Policy

We considered how a Neighbourhood Plan fits with the Local Plan.

Originally scheduled for adoption in 2024, Dorset Council is in the process of updating its Local Plan and has delayed adoption until Spring 2026. The draft Local Plan is scheduled to be published in December 2024.

The relationship between a Local Plan and a Neighbourhood Plan is summarised below.

Local Plans

Local Plans are principal planning documents prepared by the District Council for a specific area. They outline strategic priorities such as housing targets, job requirements, and infrastructure needs. Local Plans must contribute to sustainable development and align with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

Neighbourhood Plans

Neighbourhood Plans empower communities to shape their local areas. Led by the Parish Council or a Neighbourhood Forum, they involve community input. Neighbourhood Plans can set planning policies used by the local authority in deciding planning applications.

Conformity and Alignment

Neighbourhood Plans must be in general conformity with the strategic policies of the Local Plan. Crucially, a Neighbourhood Plan cannot propose less growth than required by the Local Plan. While they don't need to be identical, Neighbourhood Plans should align with the wider local area's priorities without undermining them.

Decision-Making Precedence

Once a Neighbourhood Plan passes a local referendum, it becomes a binding document for planning decisions. The NPPF states that Neighbourhood Plan policies take precedence over existing non-strategic policies in the Local Plan.

Presumption in Favor of Sustainable Development

When no Local Plan exists or certain policies are outdated, the presumption in favour of sustainable development applies. Neighbourhood Plans play a crucial role in guiding development when Local Plans are absent or inadequate.

In summary, while Local Plans provide the overall framework, Neighbourhood Plans have a specific role in shaping local development and take precedence over non-strategic Local Plan policies.

Conclusion

We concluded that a Neighbourhood Plan would be a useful policy instrument to have during the period that Dorset Council has no Local Plan. However, this option is unlikely to be of use to us if the Local Plan is adopted at its new scheduled date of Spring 2026 because it will take longer than 2 ¼ years to make.

A Neighbourhood Plan may be a useful instrument to have provided it is in general conformity with the Local Plan, the draft of which is due to be published in December 2024.

Local Experience

Pimperne Parish

We attach some significance to the recent experience of Pimperne. Pimperne's Neighbourhood Plan was made on 25 January 2019 and was reviewed and made again on 1 November 2022. The plan was to cover the period 2016 to 2031.

In September 2020 an application was submitted to build 150 houses, a primary school and shops on land north and east of Blandford Forum, on the Pimperne side of the Blandford bypass and on the north side of the A354. This is a greenfield site which directly borders Pimperne, which formerly was within the parish's former boundary and which to all outward appearance is part of Pimperne. In addition, the application included an outline application to build a further 340 houses on the south side of the A354, around 150 of which are directly located within the boundary of Pimperne Parish, and within the Neighbourhood Area covered by Pimperne's Neighbourhood Plan.

Pimperne Parish Council strongly objected to the application stating that "the amount and location of the development that is clearly contrary to the adopted Local Plan and made Pimperne Neighbourhood Plan. This clearly flies in the face of the Government statement that 'the planning system should be genuinely plan-led'". They further observed "The inclusion of the area of land within Pimperne Parish, which according to the masterplan would accommodate in excess of 150 dwellings ... is simply not justified ... [as it] far exceeds the housing target for the parish (confirmed through the examination as 39 dwellings for the period 2015 – 2031) for which more than sufficient provision has already been made".

A meeting of the Northern Area Planning Committee of Dorset Council was held on 24 October 2023, where Pimperne Parish Council voiced its objection to the application and highlighted the effort that had gone into their Neighbourhood Plan. Prior to the vote the Chair of the committee reminded members of the committee that the proposal was contrary to the Pimperne Neighbourhood Plan and that Dorset Council currently has a 5-year housing land supply and that members should consider whether material considerations in its favour outweigh being contrary to the neighbourhood plan.

Nevertheless, the Committee voted to approve the application.

Speaking to local press after the decision, chair of Pimperne Parish Council, Peter Slocombe, said it was “a sad day for local democracy” and that “this decision sends a clear message to Dorset villages that it is hardly worth creating these plans”.

Conclusion

It would be wrong to base a decision on one negative experience of Neighbourhood Plans. The land concerned in the Pimperne application is geographically as close to Blandford Forum as it is to Pimperne, and there were many people who were in support of the application.

Nevertheless, the Northern Area Planning Committee chose to disregard Pimperne’s Neighbourhood Plan even though the development was clearly in contradiction to the Neighbourhood Plan and the application was submitted within the two-year (as was then) protection period supposedly provided by a Neighbourhood Plan.

Political Background

Neighbourhood Plans were introduced by the Conservative / Lib Dem coalition government of 2010-2015 as part of the Localism Act 2011 which was introduced by a Conservative Secretary of State, Eric Pickles. Another Conservative, Michael Gove, was responsible for the NPPF 2023 which bolstered the powers of Neighbourhood Plans giving greater power to local communities.

Current polling indicates that there is a reasonable likelihood that the Labour Party will form the next government following a general election which is expected to be held in November 2024.

The Labour Party has expressed its commitment to increase quickly the number of new homes being built. In a speech in October 2023, Keir Starmer set out the following expectations of a Labour Government:

- Upon entering office, the Secretary of State will publish a written ministerial statement and write to all chief planning officers to instruct local planning authorities to approve planning applications in areas which do not have a local plan and fail other key policy tests, such as the housing delivery test.
- This statement will also signpost changes to the National Planning Policy Framework, which will reverse concessions the government made to Tory backbenchers in December 2022, reinstate and enforce compulsory local targets.
- As well as clearing the backlog, Labour will reform the system to accelerate planning permissions while strengthening local consent on ‘how’ developments can best support local communities, not ‘if’ the homes that people need are built at all. This will put the local plan front and centre in the planning system and create a genuinely plan-led system.
- Labour will strengthen the presumption in favour of developments that are aligned to local plans, with a lighter touch process for approval in line with plans and, where criteria are met, a strong community right to appeal against off-plan and speculative development.

Conclusion

It is a reasonable likelihood that there will be a change in planning policy if the Labour Party is in government in 2025. Their statements indicate that the main policy instrument will be the Local Plan and that there will be a presumption in favour of development which meets the Local Plan. If there is no Local Plan, there may be a presumption in favour of a development, rather than as now a presumption in favour of a Neighbourhood Plan.

If Neighbourhood Plans remain part of official planning policy after a Labour government, it seems does seem likely that there will be reform to their powers with the most likely area for change a reduction of the weight given to Neighbourhood Plans where a planning application conforms to the Local Plan.

Alternatives

There are alternative means to influencing local planning policy. These were summarised for us by Philip Reese, Planning Policy Officer for Dorset Council:

- Lobbying to influence Dorset Council's Local Plan
- Commenting on individual planning applications
- Applying for a Neighbourhood Development Order (to grant planning permission for a specific type of development in a particular area)
- Delivering actions in existing plans, such as our Village Design Statement
- Carrying out a Conservation Area appraisal or identify local Heritage Assets
- Developing and delivering a Community Project, i.e. a new community development

Village Design Statement

What are Village and Town Design Statements (V/TDS)?

According to Dorset Council, V/TDS are community-led planning initiatives that empower local communities to identify what is special and worth preserving in their villages or towns. These statements describe the character, features, and unique qualities of a settlement, including its buildings, spaces, and materials. They provide guidelines for assessing planning applications, helping developers understand local views and perceptions early in the design process.

Why were V/TDS Relevant?

V/TDS cannot allocate land or determine where development should occur, but they guide how development respects local identity. They serve as evidence-based studies, reflecting community input and helping planning officers understand residents' feelings and preferences.

Current Relevance

When the Localism Act 2011 was enacted, Neighbourhood Plans were viewed as providing greater influence over planning applications than a Village Design Statement. This led to the suspension of Village Design Statements then in production, such as that being undertaken by Pimperne Parish Council.

Although a VDS does not confer the same powers as a Neighbourhood Plan, they remain valid as Supplementary Planning Documents and can influence planning decisions. However, their relevance diminishes over time so they need to be updated periodically.

Child Okeford's Village Design Statement was adopted as a Supplementary Planning Document in November 2007, and is now over 16 years old. Although it is still listed as a Supplementary Planning Document, it carries little weight in planning decisions now.

Potentially, if Child Okeford's VDS were updated, its relevance to planning applications could be improved. So that, while it cannot be used to determine where development should occur, it could affect the character and features of that development.

Cllr Tim Cotton and Cllr Barbara Ireland

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