

LOCKING PARISH

PARISH PLAN OR NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN?

With the proposal to draw up a new plan for the Parish of Locking, there is some debate over whether this should be a Neighbourhood Plan or the parish should create its own Parish Plan, drawing on the inspiration of the 2005 Parish Plan. Since then the parish has seen many changes, not least that it has evolved into five different area and interest groups with some interests in common and some specific to their part of the parish.

There are arguments both ways:

Neighbourhood Plan

PRO:

- A Neighbourhood Plan (NP) is a Central Government concept and there has been a good deal of encouragement for parishes to draw them up. In theory, a NP (once approved) carries legal weight and is a restraint on freelance development in the area it covers.
- Approved NPs make their sponsoring councils eligible for a higher rate of funding from S106 money.
- NPs have to be approved by a referendum of all eligible parishioners. Once so approved, the plan is not open to further challenge from within the parish.
- It allows the parishioners to decide where and what developments there may be with the parish boundaries, and that opinion carries weight when planning decisions are being made.

CON:

- Neighbourhood Plans are focussed on planning matters and do not consider wider issues
- NPs can only be presented by Councils. A council may choose to sub-contract the labour involved, but the plan remains a council document which it is responsible for.
- As matters stand in Locking, the council are not keen on the effort and cost of drawing up an NP. Whether they would agree to a separate group drawing up the plan for them is untested but would be a possibility.
- There are costs involved over and above those of drawing up any plan in the first instance. It is necessary to employ a consultant expert to examine a draft NP and advise on its correctness and suitability. Once past that hurdle, a referendum has to be held, giving every household in the parish a copy of the plan and asking for approval or otherwise.
- While an NP entitles the parish council to a higher rate of S106 type money, it is paid when plans are put into effect and that has already happened with regard to developments in Locking. This means that there is little or no further funds to come from this source.
- At January 2018, national planning laws and regulations are in a state of flux and existing, already approved, NPs are being returned to their originators to be re-written to conform to the new rules which are not yet clear. Advice is that it will be at least some time in 2019 before the national framework settles down.
- Neighbourhood Plans were a product of 2011 legislation by the previous labour government and may well be reduced or abolished under the new national planning regime which may evolve from the present government.

Parish Plan

PRO:

- There are no constraints on what is taken into it. While planning issues will remain an important strand, a PP can take a much wider view of the Parish, its constituent parts, and how we might like it to develop.
- A PP is the product of the group drawing it up. While it will be necessary to stay in step with the Council, the group does not have to be subservient to it nor take directions from it.
- It is not necessary to incur costs beyond any which the group decide should be. In general, the cost of a PP can be kept to substantially less than an NP.
- The 2005 plan is available as a guide to a limited extent and can be useful as a starting point.

CON:

- A parish plan, drawn up without compulsory engagement with the county planners, does not carry legal weight and hence can be disregarded if it is at odds with wider planning issues.
- This means that the parish could be open to a charge of not engaging with wider planning and social issues and therefore open to being dictated to by higher levels of authority.
- It does not bring any financial advantages to the parish
- Either way, there is substantial time and effort required and the potential for costs to arise.

The Middle Way

- I have proposed that we draw up a parish plan ourselves at this stage. This gives us the freedom to pursue any and all issues which affect the parish without being constrained by the laid down requirements of an NP.
- BUT NPs are drawn up to a particular format and we can draw up the part of a PP which deals with planning matters in such way that, once national planning regulations settle down, we can turn the planning part of our PP into an NP simply by putting it through the legal requirements (Examination, referendum, etc) for the change.
- The Parish Council have already approved this approach by majority vote which means we have authority to get on with it. If the consensus of group members is to go direct to an NP now, it will be necessary to go back to the Parish Council and get approval (and support) for this.