

Bucklesham Parish Council

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Report on Neighbourhood Plans

By Ruth Johnson, Clerk

For Bucklesham Parish Council meeting on 10th January 2024

Purpose of Report

East Suffolk Council held an event offering training and advice on Neighbourhood Plans. This was held on Thursday 23rd November at High Lodge, Hinton. There was an opportunity to discuss Neighbourhood Plans and to hear presentations from those who could offer their experience of the process.

ESC promoted the session for those who are looking to produce a Neighbourhood Plan, going through the process or just wanted to learn more. As there are many new Councillors on the Council, I felt you may benefit from some information in order to reconsider whether Bucklesham would benefit from a Neighbourhood Plan.

Background

In the past, the Parish Council has considered creating a Neighbourhood Plan and this has been debated on several occasions over the last few years at Parish Council meetings. After careful consideration, and lengthy debate, the PC concluded that it was not in the best interests of the village to implement one.

Twelve years ago, the Parish Council was encouraged to develop the NP's forerunner, the Parish Plan. It was considered to be a document we could use to canvas the needs and opinions of the village for future development and we were assured that it would be a legal document that could not be ignored. We spent many hours of our time surveying the village, collecting and collating the results, compiling them into a very lengthy document. The time of the team of volunteers all came for free, but the whole process of the Parish Plan did cost the Parish Council £3,500.

In every opportunity we had following the completion of the plan, the Parish Council's views and opinions were ignored by the planning department. On several occasions when faced with development proposals within the village we cited the Parish Plan, only to be told that it carried no weight. In fact, I can find no occasion when we objected to a development where our objections were accepted. Furthermore, on some occasions when we have supported planning proposals, they have subsequently been refused.

The Neighbourhood Plan supersedes the Parish Plan. We have been continually encouraged by District Council to implement one. We were previously advised by the Local Council Advisory Service that the NP could cost the village in the region of £15,000. However neighbouring Parishes report that they have actually cost between £25,000-£30,000 once complete. Although grants are available to cover most of this cost, they would have to be applied for by us.

The Benefits

The village would benefit financially with CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) being increased to 25% from the current 15% if we had a NP. However, the difference between the increase in CIL and the cost to the Parish Council of the NP might not make it a financially beneficial proposal. I have spoken to Judi Hallet, Clerk of Ufford Parish Council, as they are currently half way through their NP. They estimate costs of around £3,000 that they could not obtain a grant for.

Experience of Others

The previous decision by the Parish Council not to implement an NP was taken for all the above reasons, and following the negative experience of several neighbouring Parish Councils. Bealings, for example, spent thousands of pounds of villagers' precept, and hours of their own time voluntarily implementing their own NP, only for it to have been ignored again by the planning authorities. Wickham Market have had a similar experience, as had Rendlesham. The East Anglian Daily Times archives are full of similar stories of Parish Councils who were assured that this plan would carry weight, only to find that they have been ignored and they are not at all able to control the scale and locations of any development. In more recent times, there is evidence of Planning Inspectors and Officers abiding by the content of NPs however, Central Government are offering District Councils incentives to develop within villages. Therefore, it is increasingly difficult for villages such as ours, even with an NP, to have their voices heard.

Moving Forward

If the Parish Council wishes to reconsider developing a Neighbourhood Plan there will be many things to think about. The Suffolk Association of Local Councils (SALC) advise that NPs are more favourable if they are community lead (volunteers from the village) rather than merely compiled by the PC. This is a lengthy and arduous process but I would obviously be willing to support any of the residents who wished to take the role on.

- Firstly, there needs to be an identification of exactly what the village want in the NP. It is not merely about future planning. It can be about improved infrastructure, protection of environment, village status etc.
- This need would have to be identified with proof of lengthy consultation of all villagers, all village groups and all neighbouring parishes by way of surveys, exhibitions, open meetings and forums etc.

- All views would have to be collated and presented in an open exhibition for all to see.
- Policies would then need to be drawn up and Statement of Proposals.
- There then would follow the District Council Inspection, verification process and any necessary alterations. At this point if the process has not been completed satisfactorily, they can dismiss the plan altogether.
- The NP is then published and again lengthy consultation follows requiring evidence again of such consultation of all villagers, all village groups and all neighbouring parishes.
- A referendum is then organised for all villagers to have their say on the plan. It needs to be agreed upon by at least 50% of the voting population.

Then and only then will it be adopted by the District Council, which means they will only commit to 'take it into consideration' when deciding upon planning.

The process can usually take between 2-3 years and will need to be updated every 5 years. It has been known to take 7-8 years to complete and this is not unusual. It is possible to compile the NP on our own, however, most parishes use a Consultant. They give you a price for all the work up front and we have to get the grant from Locality (i.e. the Government).

Judi is available to answer questions and offer advice on the project if you would like. She has offered to do this in person or via Zoom if that suits. Their NP is being developed by a group of village volunteers and Judi is doing the admin. They are paying her an extra 3 hours a week to do this which cannot be covered from their Grant and has to come out of their Precept. This has proved a large expense from the Precept.

I hope this information has been helpful. If there is anything else you would like to know, please just ask.

Ruth Johnson

5th January 2024
