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## COLLECTIVE COMMUNITY PLANNING – JUNE 2020

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### Progressing Neighbourhood Plans during Covid-19 restrictions

Some plan making activities are currently restricted due to the Covid-19 lockdown restrictions and a different approach may be required. Below we have summarised the activities you will and won't be able to continue with and provided some guidance to help develop your plan further.

#### Professional and Technical Support

##### Collective Community Planning

Our ability to support you has not changed. We continue to work at full capacity from home and the majority of the work we do is desk-based. We are also set up for remote meetings using technology such as Zoom. We are also able to undertake site visits, either individually or together as long as we obey social distancing rules and remain 2m apart. At the moment we are not meeting members of the Steering Group on site, though this may change in the future.

##### Locality

The Neighbourhood Planning team at Locality continue to work, albeit from home, at full capacity and there will be no reduction in their services. This includes the advice service, which continues to operate as normal, arranging technical support, and issuing funding grants.

##### Technical support from AECOM

You may be entitled to technical support, such as design codes or a housing needs assessment, from AECOM. This will also continue to be delivered. However, in light of Government advice to avoid social interaction, face to face meetings between groups receiving support and AECOM staff will not be possible at the moment. AECOM will continue to liaise with groups using other means.

#### Progressing key stages of the plan

##### Plan-making

Most policy writing and evidence gathering for a Neighbourhood Plan is desk-based, so we are still working on these activities from home. To help you move forward we can help you to share the work and findings with your group using online tools, such as your website or through Zoom meetings.

Where there are gaps in evidence, you may need to gather your own, such as identifying community green areas that could be designating as Local Green Spaces. Although this work usually involves a public event or members of the community walking around their area together, this shouldn't be necessary. Our experience so far is that Steering Group members know their community well enough to be able to identify key green spaces, important views and heritage assets from the comfort of their own homes. Google street view can be used to assist, and group members can, either individually or with one other person, check on details during their daily exercise.

To support groups in this task, we have developed a suite of assessment forms that can be completed and used to consider the merits of different areas. We can follow this up and carry out a site visit to check details and bring our experience regarding the assessments.



## Steering Group meetings

The Steering Group should not meet face to face, even if social distancing is possible. It is suggested that other means are found, either simply using the website, phone calls or emails, or meeting virtually using platforms such as Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams or WhatsApp.

- Skype – video conferencing for phones and computers
- Zoom or MS Teams – video conferencing that gives you the ability to see everyone in the meeting at the same time.
- WhatsApp – mobile phone-based text messaging, with a video call function for up to four phones.

We have tended to use Zoom and it's free up to 40 minutes for any one session of three or more people.

## Community engagement

Public engagement cannot be done in person at this time. This is perhaps the main area of concern for groups during the lockdown because of not being able to hold an event in the village hall, at which residents can view displays and chat to members of the group or ourselves. This concern is understandable and essentially centres around being able to consult the community fairly, properly, and (importantly) with due regard to legal requirements. The starting point for this is to look at the Neighbourhood Plan Regulations and guidance.

### Early consultations

Prior to the formal Regulation 14 (pre-submission) consultation, there are no specific regulatory requirements. However, Planning Practice Guidance sets out that:

*“A qualifying body should be inclusive and open in the preparation of its Neighbourhood Plan or Order and ensure that the wider community:*

- *is kept fully informed of what is being proposed*
- *is able to make their views known throughout the process*
- *has opportunities to be actively involved in shaping the emerging Neighbourhood Plan or Order*
- *is made aware of how their views have informed the draft Neighbourhood Plan or Order.”*

This is quite general and does not explicitly require an event at the village hall, which is really just one of many tools, and leaves scope for engaging the community in other ways. Neighbourhood Plans should have due regard to the guidance though. Much of the advice provided below on the Regulation 14 consultation will be applicable to these early consultations.

### Regulation 14 – consultation on the Pre-Submission draft plan

Regulation 14 (the pre-submission stage) sets out that, *“before submitting a plan proposal to the local planning authority, a qualifying body must—*

*(a) publicise, in a manner that is likely to bring it to the attention of people who live, work or carry on business in the neighbourhood area—*

*(i) details of the proposals for a neighbourhood development plan;*



*(ii) details of where and when the proposals for a neighbourhood development plan may be inspected;*

*(iii) details of how to make representations; and*

*(iv) the date by which those representations must be received, being not less than 6 weeks from the date on which the draft proposal is first publicised;*

*(b) consult any consultation body referred to in paragraph 1 of Schedule 1 whose interests the qualifying body considers may be affected by the proposals for a neighbourhood development plan; and*

*(c) send a copy of the proposals for a neighbourhood development plan to the local planning authority.”*

Meeting (a) requires the pre-submission documents to have been publicly available so residents can inspect the proposals and make representations. As well as electronically, this means a physical/hard copy of the plan must be made available in a public place. This is often met during an event at the village hall, where residents can inspect the proposals and have them explained, and even make their representations. Some ideas of how to meet this requirement without having large face to face meetings are given below.

## Publicising the proposals, including dates of the consultation and how to make representations

These details should be on the website first and foremost, but other ways of raising awareness include:

- Emails;
- An advert in local newsletters / magazines;
- Leaflet on parish noticeboard;
- A leaflet through every door;
- Leaflets in other prominent positions around the parish; and
- Posters in windows of local shop, village hall etc

It is also advisable to have the phone number of the clerk or project administrator on the website, and leaflets for those residents without internet access.

## Inspecting the proposals

The parish website can be used to enable residents and others to inspect the proposals (the draft plan). Physical copies of the draft plan must also be made available at public places in the village such as at the village shop, or even in a (waterproof!) container outside the village hall. People could also request to be sent a hard copy of the plan. A summary of the proposals could potentially be posted on the parish noticeboard and elsewhere.

## Surveys and enabling people to make representations

You may want to consider what can be conducted online. You can use some online survey tools such as Survey Monkey and Smart Survey; we use Smart Survey and we can set up the survey and analyse the results very easily using this tool. It is important, however, not to forget those people who do not have internet access. Hard copies of surveys could be available alongside the plan in public buildings, or dropped through people's letter boxes with a leaflet advertising the consultation, or sent to people on request.



## Equality Duty

Parish Councils need to meet the Public Sector Equality Duty, which came into force on 5 April 2011. It is important to consider whether any arrangements might inadvertently discriminate against residents on the basis of any of the protected characteristics, such as age. The reliance on online information and surveys makes it important to think about those who are not so technical or who do not have internet access.

Efforts can be made to guard against this, such as having leaflets on view at key points around the parish and enabling residents to make a phone call and be sent a hard copy of the survey or proposals. It will also be worth monitoring during the consultation, for example whether the completed surveys are from a good cross-section of the community, including in terms of age. If this appears to be an issue, the regulations do allow for the consultation to be extended and for actions to be implemented. It should be noted that most, if not all, consultations are skewed towards the older age groups in that older people are disproportionately more likely to get involved and respond. A more online approach may balance the responses to more closely align with the local population profile.

## What now?

For many of you developing Neighbourhood Plans its so that you can more effectively influence development, which is a current pressure within your community. Time is therefore of the essence. We hope that this guidance note helps to reassure you that you can continue to move forward and although it is not possible to hold large group events, it is still possible to effectively engage the public and critically, meet the planning regulations.

If you have any questions about moving forward with your Neighbourhood Plan during the Covid-19 restrictions please do get in touch.