

SWAB Neighbourhood Plan – Closing Statement

What is a Neighbourhood Plan:

The right for communities to prepare their own Neighbourhood Plan was granted under the Localism Act 2011. **Neighbourhood planning is a way for communities** to shape development and growth in their areas. The Neighbourhood Plan once adopted or 'made' will have the same legal weight as the district's Local Plan and will form part of the statutory development plan. The plan will be used by Horsham District Council planning officers to assist with determining planning applications.

There are many advantages in producing a neighbourhood plan. It is community-led, 'bottom up' process relying on the goodwill of the many volunteers who give up their valuable free time to assist in the development of a plan for the local community. Horsham District Council has a duty to support Neighbourhood Planning and is legally required to provide advice and assistance to 'Qualifying Bodies' producing a Neighbourhood Plan.

A neighbourhood plan must adhere to certain rules in order to be compliant with the Regulations. The plan must meet a number of 'Basic Conditions' in order to pass Examination. This means the neighbourhood plan must:

- be in general conformity with the District Council's Local Plan;
- have regard to national planning policy;
- the plan cannot be in conflict with European legislation which primarily concerns the protection of many of our most valuable environmental assets and landscapes; and
- meet human rights obligations.

Neighbourhood plans are required to undertake two rounds of formal consultation; the plan will be assessed by an independent examiner and it must pass a referendum in order for it to be 'made'.

A neighbourhood plan is usually prepared where a parish or town council exists. In the case of Steyning, Wiston, Ashurst and Bramber (collectively known as SWAB), they came together to form a cluster for the purposes of producing a Neighbourhood Plan.

Brief History of SWAB:

The parishes of Steyning, Bramber, Ashurst and Wiston decided to work together on a Neighbourhood Plan and work began in the summer of 2014. There was a common desire from all parishes to deliver sustainable development led by the community. A Steering Group was formed in Sept/ Oct, and subsequently six Focus Groups, involving over 70 volunteers, who were all local residents. In accordance with the national approach to neighbourhood plan production at that time a 'light touch approach' was appropriate and Neighbourhood Plan groups had a relatively good degree of freedom in shaping their plans so long as they adhered to the Basic Conditions

However on 13th October 2016, the High Court quashed the Henfield Neighbourhood Plan following a Judicial Review requested by housing developers, Stonegate Homes Ltd and Littleworth Properties Ltd. This defeat cost HDC £29,000 plus costs and the Leader of HDC, Cllr Ray Dawe, said in response to the decision *"We will also review what other measures may need to be put in place to ensure that the chances of such circumstances occurring against other neighbourhood plans are minimised"*.

It was becoming increasingly evident that neighbourhood plans across the country were coming under increasing scrutiny from the development industry. The threat of legal challenge from 3rd parties was real and as a result, the 'light touch' favoured by central government was replaced by the requirement to have a comprehensive, robust evidence base to support neighbourhood plans.

Horsham District Council acknowledged this change in the planning landscape and revised its offer of support accordingly. The district council is now looking for a more collaborative approach and intends to become more directly involved with qualifying bodies in preparing neighbourhood plans by supporting groups with technical advice, providing templates for key areas of work, and putting forward examples of best practice.

In June 2017, it had become evident that while there was a desire to continue with a neighbourhood plan, the changing requirements and evolving legislation resulted in the need for each individual parish to review and re-evaluate its role in SWAB. The parish councils took the decision to move forward separately as individual parishes as the best way to represent the wishes of their community. Each Parish Council is now working to determine the viability of producing Neighbourhood Plans for their respective Parishes. This will depend on the availability of appropriate and enthusiastic participants from both Parish Councils and residents, and the required amount of funds to complete the project.

The extensive work undertaken by SWAB to date will not be lost and there will be a thorough review process with the assistance of the district council officers to disseminate key parts of the evidence base.

What has been accomplished so far:

- Hundreds of hours of volunteer time dedicated to giving local residents increased control over future local land use, including 25 meetings of the Steering Group and numerous focus group meetings (e.g. Housing – 16 meetings).
- Public survey issued in January 2015, and 844 responses received. Responses provided a basis for a broad understanding the range of opinions and suggestions at the outset of the project.
- Vision statement produced January 2015.
- Youth survey issued by Steyning Grammar School pupils in July 2015. Of nearly 300 responses, 96 were received from young people in the SWAB parishes. This data was analysed & forwarded to the SWAB Team.
- Call for sites issued in Spring 2015 which, unusually for neighbourhood plans, has remained open throughout the project so far to ensure we were able to consider all potential development sites & local green spaces. This gleaned 35 potential development sites in the SWAB area (16 in in Steyning, 9 in Wiston, 3 in Ashurst and 7 in Bramber), all of which were assessed using 10 – 15 objective criteria devised by the Housing focus group.
- The Stage One report produced in October 2015.
- In December 2015 the SWAB Steering Group made their final selection for recommended potential new housing sites, and recommended newly designated local green spaces.
- An informal public consultation exercise held over two weekends in January 2016 on the proposed sites and local open spaces. Over 700 residents attended. In the summary feedback, over two-thirds of residents who expressed a view broadly supported these recommendations.
- The SWAB team took note of the comments/feedback received and worked on some constructive suggestions to include in the plan. From Spring 2016 the key focus of the work was primarily to prepare the content and policies for the ‘Pre-submission Document’ (the draft NP), under the guidance of our consultants.

Transparency

SWAB has taken reasonable measures to ensure transparency is upheld throughout the process. A parish or town council may choose to establish an advisory committee or sub-committee under [section 102\(4\) of the Local Government Act 1972](#) and appoint local people (who need not be parish councillors) to those bodies. The steering group is required to report back to the Parish Council(s) at regular intervals and minutes of all steering group minutes can be found at www.swabneighbourhoodplan.org

The SWAB group has also undertaken a number of public events to engage with the wider community and has encouraged view points from all parts of the community.

Thanks

All members of the SWAB Steering Group since 2014 wish to publicly acknowledge and thank the many volunteers who came forward to assist with the plan, as well as all those residents who completed surveys and attended public events. While SWAB has decided to de-cluster, each parish will take time to review and learn from its experience and over the coming weeks and months decide whether or not to continue with its own neighbourhood plan.