



THURLEIGH NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

BREATHING NEW LIFE INTO THURLEIGH

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

November 2014

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INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This Strategy has been prepared to help guide the process of community and stakeholder engagement needed to produce an informed and relevant community-led Neighbourhood Development Plan for Thurleigh. It sets out a range of activities and actions that can be taken to draw information from the community in and around Thurleigh and its environs. Effective engagement with local residents, community groups, businesses, and service providers in Thurleigh and adjoining areas is a crucial aspect in creating a credible plan.
- 1.2 The Localism Act 2011 introduced statutory Neighbourhood Planning in England. It enables communities to draw up a Neighbourhood Plan for their area and it is intended to give communities more say in the development of their local area (within certain limits and parameters). These plans will, therefore, help shape the future of the places where people live and work. Neighbourhood planning allows people to get the right type of development for their community, but the plans must still meet the needs of the wider area. This means that Neighbourhood Plans must take into account the local Council's assessment of housing and other development in the area.
- 1.3 Neighbourhood planning is an inclusive approach to considering how land should best be used or developed to meet community needs. It extends beyond traditional 'land-use' planning activity which tends to focus on regulation and control of development. Neighbourhood planning allows greater scope for plan makers, acting with the community, relevant agencies and service providers to promote and manage change in an area. This is why extensive, appropriate and well planned engagement must take place at all stages of the plan-making process.
- 1.4 As with all plan-making, the project requires leadership. The Localism Act has given that leadership role to Parish and Town Councils. This carries significant responsibility in terms of producing a Plan that is representative of the community. The way in which the process is led and implemented will need to secure confidence from the community in the Thurleigh area and those organisations and businesses that serve its needs. Confidence in the process and support for the outcomes will be more certain by starting this process in a demonstrably transparent way and continuing in that way through all stages of plan preparation.
- 1.5 This can be achieved by:
 - showing a willingness to openly encourage opinions and suggestions from all individuals and organisations within the community whether or not these present potentially conflicting, challenging or critical views of the Plan or the process;

- making every effort to understand all views expressed from all individuals and groups and respond clearly on all matters raised in a timely manner;
- demonstrating, in a form that is readily accessible and easily understood by the whole community, how the Neighbourhood Plan reflects the views and opinions expressed during each stage of engagement and, where those views cannot legitimately be taken into account, explaining why that is the case; and
- presenting a reasonable, realistic, evidence based and cogently argued case to support the Plan at each stage of its preparation.

1.6 The Community Engagement Strategy is a way of explaining the steps that should be taken, from the start to the end of the process. The Strategy has been prepared to demonstrate from the start that this is a process that **needs** effective community involvement and that the community knows this. The established Steering Group is committed to effective community engagement at all stages of the process.

1.7 The remainder of the document provides some background to community-led planning and the emerging relationship with statutory spatial planning at the local level; describes the processes and methods that may be employed in community engagement activity; and presents a set of commitments to the community about how the Steering Group will seek to inform, communicate with and involve them throughout the project.

1.8 Effective project planning is important to successful neighbourhood planning; this should identify the key stages, actions, an indicative timetable, the allocation of responsibilities for key tasks and the assignment of available resources. A Project Plan has been prepared to effectively organise resource and activity in pursuance of an effective Neighbourhood Plan for Thurleigh. It sets out, in particular, details of the proposed programme of community engagement activity and various actions needed to deliver that programme. The Project Plan will evolve as the project develops over time.

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COMMUNITY-LED NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANS

- 2.1 In general, previous community-led planning activities have tended to look at ways in which the community can *influence* service delivery to meet their needs and they have often been seen as aspirational. Neighbourhood Plans, whilst still being led by the community, will differ in two key aspects:
- **spatial:** they can show where development can or should take place to meet defined community needs based on an understanding of the ability of the private sector and other service delivery partners to provide that development; and
 - **statutory:** they will be prepared from the outset in the knowledge that, provided certain steps are taken during their preparation, they will have clear legal status. This means that the Plan will be used to make decisions on planning matters coming forward in Thurleigh and its adjoining parishes (in relation to development proposals that may have a potential impact upon the area and its community).
- 2.2 In the past all statutory spatial plans have been prepared by the local planning authority, Bedford Borough Council. These plans are collectively known in legal terms as ‘the development plan’ and will remain in place. These plans were prepared *in consultation with* local communities. Neighbourhood Plans will be prepared *by* the community.
- 2.3 The Localism Act provides the opportunity to actually prepare the plan that shapes how a local area looks. The Plan can say what type of development is to be encouraged, how much development should take place (subject to generally conforming with higher level strategic plans), where and when that development should take place, and what should be protected in the long term. This will be done by establishing what the community says it most expects the area to look like over the coming years and the Plan will then look to establish how relevant delivery organisations in the private, public, community and voluntary sector are able to meet those expectations.
- 2.4 Preparation of plans within a statutory framework will need to follow certain steps. These are normally prescribed in national regulations, policy and guidance from the Government. These regulations will need to be followed at appropriate stages in the process and the Borough Council will provide guidance to ensure compliance.

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PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- 3.1 The Community Engagement Strategy sets out a framework to show how the task of securing participation and involvement will be approached at all stages of the project. Community and stakeholder participation in any planned activity can take place on a number of different levels; these range from providing information to empowering individuals and groups to take decisions on relevant matters (and for those responsible for implementing plans to stand by those decisions).
- 3.2 The objective of the Community Engagement Strategy is to ensure effective communication and engagement with the Thurleigh community at all stages of the Neighbourhood Planning process to ensure that the final Plan incorporates sound community policies.
- 3.3 Effective community participation in plan-making is most likely to happen if the following processes and activities are planned to be included from the start of the project:
- **Inform:** Provide information about processes, events, issues and proposals;
 - **Consult:** Obtain feedback and analysis on options and proposals;
 - **Involve:** Work directly with the community throughout the process to ensure that their issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered;
 - **Collaborate:** Create partnership with the community in each aspect of decision making including the development of options and the analysis of alternatives;
 - **Empower:** Final decisions on all matters lie with the community.

Each step is normally dependent upon previous activity having been carried out, that is: successful consultation would normally follow earlier dissemination of information, and so on.

- 3.4 The purpose of encouraging continuous participation and engagement in preparing a locally based spatial plan is fundamentally to ensure that relevant issues identified by the community are covered in the plan.

- 3.5 The process of policy development at the local or neighbourhood level should respect and respond to locally expressed needs. This gives focus and purpose to the process of plan-making. Participation and engagement is an important component in achieving a good level of local understanding and an acceptance of the aims, objectives and outcomes expected of the plan. This process should, however, be carried out at an appropriate time and in a meaningful way showing those involved that their input is valued and that it can influence outcomes. This is what is meant by community 'buy-in'.
- 3.6 The length of time needed will vary depending on the chosen method, the time of year and the level of response required. Best practice, however, suggests a period of up to 6 - 12 weeks for consultation events. Things to consider when organising events include:
- thinking about the time of year - what else is happening. Try to avoid major holiday times, such as Christmas or school holidays;
 - are there any other local events planned which might clash with an event or could they be used to complement the event;
 - being clear about when decisions will need to be taken during the process and planning back from that;
 - being prepared to offer a range of dates and time of day/evening for events to ensure that all groups can take part;
 - building in sufficient time for analysing what has been learnt and for feedback and evaluation.
- 3.7 Engagement activities seek to create opportunities to bring together the views of the community and other stakeholders who will have an interest in how the area might be protected, change or grow over time. The intention ultimately would be to develop a shared view about the range of issues affecting the local area. From this activity a Neighbourhood Plan can be developed that presents a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach and showing how development required to address these matters can be delivered.
- 3.8 Underlying any successful form of engagement is a commitment to listen and, equally importantly, to respond. For engagement to be effective the methods used must be fit for purpose. The consultation process should be relevant; focussed; proportionate and clear in its overall aims. In every case communication about outcomes will be a key factor in securing continued community involvement.
- 3.9 It is also important to recognise the mix of people in the community to ensure that everyone has the chance to engage in this process. Grouping residents and businesses into stakeholder groups will help identify what methods are needed to ensure that their views are obtained.

3.10 Typical stakeholder groups include:

- Schoolchildren (aged 5-16)
- Young people (aged 16-30)
- Older groups
- Commuters (people living in the community but working outside)
- Housing estate representatives
- Community groups and societies
- Single parent families
- People with physical needs
- People with learning needs
- Faith groups
- People employed in the community
- Local businesses
- Black and minority ethnic groups
- Travellers and gypsies
- Families
- Migrant workers
- Voluntary bodies acting in the area
- Farmers
- Visitors/tourists
- Landowners

3.11 Other bodies may also need to be consulted as their interests may be affected by the Neighbourhood Plan. This would include Bedford Borough Council, The Environment Agency, English Heritage, Natural England, Police, The Highways Agency and adjoining Parishes.

3.12 In dealing with the preparation of statutory spatial plans it is important to remember that democratic accountability remains at the heart of decision making on planning matters. For this reason it is unlikely that either the current or emerging planning system would enable significant community empowerment such that decisions about statutory planning matters could be taken without reference to elected bodies. Nevertheless, it is the intention of this project to promote and encourage appropriate collaboration with the community and stakeholders to produce a plan based on their knowledge, needs, aspirations and commitment to the area. And, subject to the outcome of community engagement events, there is no reason why the project could not develop to look at opportunities for further community empowerment.

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METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

- 4.1 Community engagement can take place in many different ways. The methods used should reflect the objectives of the exercise and can be as specific or as wide-ranging as is necessary. It can involve simply telling people that something is happening, or asking people what they think about a particular matter. It can also mean asking people what they think the issues are that need to be addressed. This normally takes place at the start of a process of responsive and inclusive spatial plan-making.
- 4.2 There are a range of methods that are particularly suited to neighbourhood planning and these are outlined below. This list should not, however, be regarded as exhaustive:
- Written correspondence;
 - Newsletters;
 - Self-completing questionnaires;
 - Public meetings;
 - Focus groups;
 - Stakeholder meetings/seminars;
 - Exhibitions;
 - Ward Councillor contact;
 - In depth interviews/face to face;
 - Telephone surveys;
 - Questionnaires - "open" questions;
 - Forums - area, local etc;
 - Community meetings;
 - Workshop or group events;
 - Open day events;
 - Road shows;
 - Photo surveys;
 - Media coverage;
 - Social Media - Facebook/Twitter;
 - Planning for Real Events
 - Website
 - Village Notices
- 4.3 Several methods will more than likely have to be used to get the whole community involved and this should be encouraged.

4.4 The following typical questions may be relevant to consider before embarking on a chosen method:

- What is the purpose - what is it trying to find out?
- From whom is the information required?
- How would stakeholders prefer to respond?
- What information do stakeholders need before they can respond?
- Is more than a simple exchange of information required?
- How will the information be recorded?
- What resources are needed and what resources are available?
- How much time is needed and how much time is available?

4.5 Consideration also needs to be given to using different venues to help reach the whole community. This can potentially include using other planned events, meetings are gatherings where people will already be in attendance. Possible venues include:

- Community Centres
- Village Halls
- Schools
- Public Houses
- Churches
- Supermarkets
- Libraries/other public buildings
- On the street
- Community/festival events
- Clubs/society meeting rooms.

4.6 Participation and engagement can, therefore, take place at an individual level; with self-forming groups having a shared interest; or through pre-arranged facilitated group discussion. Where groups form or are created as a result of the project, given sufficient support, these can usefully evolve to the extent that collaboration takes place on specific matters. In effect, the level of participation can extend beyond simply knowing about or commenting on an issue that may benefit from a policy response; it can move towards actively engaging, influencing and agreeing how that issue will be resolved. Direct community involvement in the emerging Thurleigh Neighbourhood Plan is, for example, possible through membership of a Topic Group or participation in planned workshops.

4.7 The techniques used will vary depending upon the stage of plan-making. Using the processes identified at section 3.3 above, the first stage of engagement must be to **inform** the community about planned activities. This should be the start of a continuous process of information sharing and relationship building and should allow appropriate messages to get to the right people at the right time.

4.8 Techniques could include:

- **written correspondence:** letters, leaflets and newsletters giving information to individuals, groups and organisations; posters displayed in the local area.
- **media coverage:** this could involve drafting press releases, advertisements about events and maintaining dialogue as necessary to secure media coverage to maintain a public profile throughout the life of the project.
- **public exhibitions:** mainly in the form of informal drop-in sessions where information can be provided and initial opinions gathered.
- **face-to-face meetings:** planned discussions with local groups and people in the community.

4.9 Additional techniques may also be appropriate at the stage when there is a need to **consult** the community in order to gather views about what should be included in the plan. This could include:

- **community profiling:** creating a shared picture with the community of the physical, human, social, economic and community characteristics, assets and issues found in an area. Participatory community profiling has been used successfully to inform plan-making in many areas.
- **organised discussion groups:** such as focus groups which allow small group discussions that give in-depth consideration to relevant local issues surrounding specific topics.
- **surveys:** such as resident opinion polls and questionnaire based surveys where responses to questions about specific issues are gathered in writing. These can take the form of door-to-door or street interviews; postal questionnaires; web-based, electronic and social media hosted surveys; and telephone interviews.

4.10 Moving towards a position where there is a need to **involve** the community, this will need further intensive dialogue with the community and there will be a need to establish mechanisms to give a voice to those who wish to comment on or contribute towards plan-making, and to seek to engage with those who are often more difficult to reach. Techniques that are used during the inform and consult stages with the community (identified above) will be relevant but there will be other potential techniques that are relevant at the involve stage.

4.11 These additional activities include:

- **networking:** which is about identifying and talking to a range of different individuals and interest groups in the community and developing and nurturing relationships with those people.

- **public events:** such as 'Open House' events which involve the use of a local venue as a drop-in centre, allowing people to gather information and share their views. Interactive displays and project leadership presence offers further opportunities to gather comments and information. It also gives an opportunity to develop personal relationships with people and groups who may be keen to increase their involvement with the process.
- **Planning for Real:** formal hosted events where the community can be directly involved in producing a model of the neighbourhood through which the merit of development opportunities can be explored. This may be useful in looking at any specific proposals that come forward from the process and at issues related to potential land allocations for particular uses.

4.12 As the project develops there will be a need to explore opportunities to **collaborate** with the community. This level of participation is generally resource intensive for both the lead plan-making body and the community and is likely to involve only a few dedicated groups or individuals. An initial step in reaching a stage where collaboration is more likely to occur would be the creation of a stakeholder group where various voices in the community can take part in planned activities intended to help in forming a shared vision for the area.

4.13 It is intended that this Community Engagement Strategy will focus action on ensuring as much public participation and community engagement as possible is achieved. In designing each event there will be a need to ensure that involvement is encouraged by embedding all of the following key features in the process:

- **awareness raising:** to secure maximum participation;
- **timely engagement:** when involvement can make a difference;
- **inclusive engagement:** everyone has a voice but none dominate;
- **feedback:** to show how participation makes a difference.

5

OUR COMMITMENT

5.1 Thurleigh Parish Council as the lead organisation in the Neighbourhood Plan project, through a wider Steering Group, have agreed to adopt a set of key commitments on community and stakeholder engagement revolving around transparency and inclusivity, but subject to proportionality. These are presented as an agreed set of actions and approaches to engagement that will be offered to the community as part of this project:

- Undertake a Launch Event Programme to raise awareness of the Thurleigh Neighbourhood Plan and plan making process and to encourage engagement in the process.
- Undertake formal 6 week consultations on an Issues and Options Consultation Report and a Draft Thurleigh Neighbourhood Plan.
- A website will be provided for information sharing prior to the launch of the project and will be maintained throughout the plan making process.
- Press releases will be issued giving activity updates or information will be provided through local newsletters.
- All information collected to inform plan making will be openly available.
- Local exhibitions and displays will be provided in accessible locations to support events and give information throughout the period of all publicised consultation events.
- Communication will take place in a form best suited to each person or group as expressed by them.
- An open agreement to meet individuals and groups during the project whatever their views and opinions as resources reasonably allow.
- Respond within a reasonable time to written representations that seek information or clarification.
- Explore all opportunities to involve anyone in the community in preparing the plan at all stages of the project.
- Where comments and suggestions are made that are not directly relevant to the Neighbourhood Plan, these will be recorded and forwarded to the appropriate person or organisation for action.

5.2 In return it would be reasonable to expect that anyone seeking to participate by providing information, opinions or analysis of proposals at any stage of the project is prepared to do so in writing to ensure that all comments can be properly noted as a true record of their views. There will in any event be a requirement, at the stages in the process where statutory guidance has to be followed, to publish comments made about the Neighbourhood Plan.