Is a Neighbourhood Plan the Best Option?

What are the options?

A neighbourhood plan allows communities to have a real say in the future development of the area. Preparing a plan is not compulsory but does require a significant time investment, so it should be thoroughly thought over before a decision is made on whether to pursue one.

One of the first things to do when looking into neighbourhood planning, is to consider whether a neighbourhood plan is the best option for your area. There are other options available that might be more suitable, depending upon what you want to achieve.

Option	Description	Benefits	Drawbacks
Neighbourhood plan	Statutory document setting out vision for the area and planning policies for the use and development of land. These will be local level policies to support the strategic policies in the Local plan. Led by the Parish Council or Neighbourhood Forum. Legal requirements for production of the plan set out in the regulations. Focus on land use and development policies and proposals. Guide development, rather than stopping development.	Can guide development in the local area which has the support of the community (location, type and design). It will become a statutory plan carrying equal weight to the Local plan and will be used in making decisions on planning applications.	Could take several years to prepare, requires significant time commitment from the community. Need to be approved by referendum – with associated costs and risks.

Option	Description	Benefits	Drawbacks
Parish plan / Community plan	Non-statutory document. Led by steering group of volunteers from the community. Can cover a broad range of issues and benefits e.g. tangible projects and process related 'soft' outcomes such as greater community cohesion. There is no requirement for these plans to include planning issues regarding the use and development of land or buildings.	Sets out clear community aspirations and priorities Average cost £3-10K. Referendum not required.	Not a land use planning document so will not be used in planning decisions.
Village design statement	Contains a description and analysis of the distinctive aspects of a village and outlines design guidance for new development.	Produced by and has the support of the local community. Material consideration in decisions on planning applications. Referendum not required.	No longer promoted by the government or mentioned in national guidance. Less weight in decision making than a neighbourhood plan.
Rely on Local plan	The Local plan will set planning policies to guide development within CWaC.	Statutory plan used in making decisions on planning applications.	The Local Plan relates to the whole of the borough and hence does not provide the level of local detail in policies that could be achieved in Neighbourhood Plans.
Neighbourhood development order	Grants planning permission for specific developments in a neighbourhood area, for example new housing, certain types of household applications, shop fronts or green energy. So applications for planning permission would not be necessary for that specific type of development in a particular area. Can apply to a specific site or wider area.	Can encourage specific types of development and provides the certainty of a grant of planning permission. Can be produced alongside or separately from a neighbourhood plan.	Quite a complex and onerous process. Proposals will be subject to an independent examination and referendum – with associated costs and risks.

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Option	Description	Benefits	Drawbacks
Community right to build order	A Community Right to Build Order can be used to grant outline or full planning permission for specific development such as homes, shops, businesses, affordable housing for rent or sale, community facilities or playgrounds. Can be undertaken by a Parish/Town Council or a community organisation (over half the members of the community organisation must live within the neighbourhood area).	May be useful if a community wants to construct or rebuild community buildings such as a community centre or community-led housing. Put together by local people who can decide on the type, quantity and design of buildings they want, and in the locations they want them. Where the community organisation decides to also undertake the development, then any profit generated by the project must stay within the community.	Quite a complex and onerous process to follow. Proposals will be subject to an independent examination and referendum – with associated costs and risks.

How to decide?

The starting point is to think about the issues you want to deal with and the associated flowcharts should help you to decide which route to take.

Producing a neighbourhood plan, Parish plan or Community plan, Village design statement or setting up a neighbourhood development order or development under Community right to build will require time and resources from the local community. The resources available will need to be considered when deciding which approach to take.

It will be important that your community reach a broad consensus regarding the need for a neighbourhood plan. If a neighbourhood plan is prepared there will be a community referendum at the end of the process. As such, the whole community should be aware and involved in the decision to develop a plan.

The resources required to prepare the neighbourhood plan or other document should also be taken into account. Preparation of a neighbourhood plan must be led by the parish/town council or neighbourhood forum and as such, most of the work will need to be undertaken by volunteers and you will need to be clear that enough people, with the necessary skill, knowledge and experience, are available with enough time and commitment to see the process through. There will also be associated costs, such as consultation and production of documents.

The timescales for preparation of a neighbourhood plan should be considered when deciding which approach to take. It can take at least two years to prepare a neighbourhood plan, so you would need to check whether this would cause problems for what you want to achieve and whether there are alternative ways of achieving your aims more quickly.