

Watton Town Meeting Neighbourhood Plan Report.

In 2017 the Town Council resolved to embark on the compilation of a Neighbourhood Plan. New legislation had created a framework which allowed parish and town councils to formulate a document that would contribute to the decision making process on planning issues within their locale. Such documents would not override any district plan but would sit alongside them and would be taken into consideration in planning terms.

The Town Council felt that there were a number of advantages to the process, increased payments for local infrastructure should Central Government make recent changes introducing the Community infrastructure Levy mandatory or Breckland District council decide to adopt the new process was one. The opportunity to have some input into planning decisions made in the town was considered extremely important. Furthermore the process also provided an platform for the council to establish the views of local residents and businesses on what they regarded as priorities for the town. Funding, advice and practical support was available from Central government and further support was available from Breckland District Council to facilitate work on the plan.

A Neighbourhood working group was established consisting of councillors and members of the public. Terms of reference were set for the group and plans were made for public involvement. A consultant was engaged to provide professional services. Public involvement was initially sought by means of open meetings held at various local venues. These meetings were held during weekday afternoons and evenings and on weekends to facilitate public attendance. Outreach sessions were also held where members of the working group attended local clubs and societies to explain the process and seek views. Seminars were held with students at Wayland Academy to involve younger participants.

During the public consultation process it was evident that there were concerns regarding the balance of land use within the town. The assistance of Locality (the arm of central government support) was sought and a company called AECOM carried out a site assessment study as part of that support. This examined such issues as the lack of public open space within the area. The report submitted is available on file at the council offices.

A commercial group set up locally involving retailers and business operators agreed to support the process and provided representatives to join the working group. Following the priorities established by public consultations a questionnaire was compiled, this was distributed to households for return to either the council offices or local collection points and made available online.

Members of the public also came forward to assist in a comprehensive examination of areas of the town to establish what additional protections might be useful. Following training, site appraisals were carried out around the town and areas of particular significance were identified. The report compiled is available on file at the council offices.

Following concerns over health and safety issues and the future viability of the market, assistance was again sought from Locality as part of central government support and AECOM carried out a survey of the High Street and the market provision. A report was provided examining issues surrounding the market and suggestions of possible solutions. This report is available on file at the council offices.

Work was carried out collating the responses to the questionnaire, this further informed the process of formulating both policies and priorities to be included in the plan. During this time Central government issued a white paper on changes to the planning process and Breckland District councils revised District Plan was adopted. The impact of content of these documents were taken into consideration during this work. AECOM also carried out work on a design code for the town centre as part of central government support. This document is available on file at the council offices.

As the draft document was approaching completion the outbreak of the COVID pandemic interrupted work. Meetings of the working group were curtailed. Notwithstanding this, the council's consultant finalised the draft plan and handed over this work and his role to Places4People (P4P) a specialist planning consultancy to facilitate the next stage of the plan.

P4P submitted a review of the draft plan and the working group independently examined the document and discussed the revisions by the use of the virtual meeting platform Zoom during the lockdown. The outcome of discussions have been incorporated into the plan and further meetings of the working group will be held in order to finalise the draft document ready for public consultations with the assistance of P4P. The format of these meetings will be dictated by the progress of the Governments roll out of the roadmap to normality from the impact of the pandemic.

How public consultations on the draft plan will be carried out has not yet been established as this process will be heavily impacted by the need for public safety. While much can be done online, the council is aware that digital services are not appropriate for everyone. A balance will need to be found that will allow work to proceed with sufficient public engagement for an informed outcome. The working group will by necessity be flexible in it's approach in response to central government decisions in respect of the current pandemic.

It should be noted that at the initial public meeting when the neighbourhood plan was launched, sewage over flow and flooding were raised as particular areas of concern. Resulting from this a separate group was created under the umbrella of the working group to examine these issues and feedback to it. An immense amount of work was carried out by the team which was called The Watton Drainage group. They acquired specialist knowledge of the subject and a detailed understanding of drainage issues around the town. The expertise and knowledge of the group has become recognised by all stakeholders involved in dealing with flooding and drainage matters. They work with the National Flood Forum and the Town Council seek their input on relevant planning applications submitted to Breckland District Council. It was subsequently established that Saham Toney and Saham Hills had similar concerns over flooding. The Watton group consequently expanded and became an independent group no longer under the remit of the Neighbourhood plan working group but still retained it's representation. Having established that drainage issues require continued review, the group now named the Watton and Saham Flood Action Group will continue with its work after the Neighbourhood plan process is complete.

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