

Neighbourhood Planning in the Diocese of Chelmsford

There was a workshop on Neighbourhood Planning at the “Love the Estate you’re in” Conference in Brentwood in January 2015. The aim was to encourage people in the Diocese of Chelmsford to get involved in planning in their neighbourhoods, especially the Estates.



Carpenters Estate in Stratford E15, where residents are in the process of drawing up a Neighbourhood Plan

Towns in Essex, like Great Dunmow and Saffron Walden, are producing Neighbourhood Plans, but the Estates in our Diocese also need to grasp this opportunity to influence the future development of their communities. At present, the only Estate in the Diocese where residents are in the process of producing a Neighbourhood Plan is the Carpenters Estate in Stratford E15 (as far as I know). The Vicar of St. John’s, Stratford, Rev. Dave Richards, is part of the steering group working with local residents. He spoke at the Conference about the benefits to the community in terms of taking control of the future planning in the area.

What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

A Neighbourhood Plan is a community-led framework for guiding the future development, regeneration and conservation of an area. It may contain a vision, aims, planning policies, proposals for improving the area or providing new facilities, or allocation of key sites for specific kinds of development. It may deal with a wide range of social, economic and environmental issues (such as housing, employment, heritage and transport) or it may focus on one or two issues only. This is for those producing the plan to decide.

A Neighbourhood Plan will be part of the statutory development plan for the area. This statutory status gives Neighbourhood Plans far more weight than some other local documents, such as parish plans, community plans and village design statements. Where there is a town or parish council, this is the qualifying body for producing a Neighbourhood Plan. If there is no town or parish council (eg in London Boroughs) then a neighbourhood forum must be formed to lead the plan-making process. Meeting all the requirements can be expensive and the Department for Communities and Local Government has made money available for support and grants. A group producing a Neighbourhood Plan will usually use some of the grant received to pay a consultant to help with the task.

The 1st issue is that the group producing the plan needs to define the geographical area. Once the process gets going and the map has been approved, the local planning authority is legally required to provide support and advice. The advice is necessary because the Neighbourhood Plan is the bottom rung of the strategic planning ladder and it has to comply with existing legislation and take account of policy at the higher levels. It should not promote less development (such as new housing allocations) than that identified in the strategic development plan for the area. It can allow more growth. Also, it can specify policies and guidance on new development and where it’s located. Neighbourhood Plans can be a powerful tool in shaping the way a neighbourhood develops. The timeframe of the plan can be 10, 15 or even 20 years.

The foundation of a good Neighbourhood Plan will be a programme of community engagement and an evidence base (eg information from the census about people living in the area). These two factors make sure the plan is based on a proper understanding of the area and of the views, wants and needs of local people.

Once a Neighbourhood Plan has been completed, it will have to be submitted to the local authority and then there will be an independent examination. After any necessary modifications have been made, there is a Neighbourhood Referendum. A simple majority of votes (over 50% of those voting) in favour of the Neighbourhood Plan is sufficient for it to succeed.

For more information on Neighbourhood Plans go to www.locality.org.uk

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