

Neighbourhood Planning support: Hartlepool Rural Plan

Background

The Hartlepool Rural Plan Working Group represents the communities living within the proposed Hartlepool Rural Plan area; this encompasses the five Parishes of Dalton Piercy, Elwick, Greatham, Hart and Newton Bewley, with the addition of Greatham Creek and Queens Meadow Wildlife Site, and the exclusion of the urban areas of South Fens, Wynyard and Kingfisher Close.

The five Parishes are long standing and are well established in serving their local communities. They have previously collaborated on projects focussing on rural issues (for example the Parishes' commitment to the Hartlepool Rural Forum, and more recently, responding to the Ward Boundary Commission's Electoral Review) and have a clear sense of community identity and interest. They have historically had aspirations to produce a Neighbourhood Plan, and in May 2011 became a third wave Front Runner.

How did Planning Aid England help?

The group had already carried out an initial rural plan survey to capture key information and to form one evidence base which would sit alongside other evidence for the Neighbourhood Plan. They had collected a lot of information – the challenge was what to do with it from a Neighbourhood Plan point of view. Planning Aid England (PAE) held a workshop for members of the Rural Plan working group encompassing members of the five parishes in December 2012. Getting together in this way (with PAE volunteers and members from Hartlepool Council) was essential to help group members understand how different issues affected different parishes in the rural plan. The interactive way of working really let the group see the tasks lying ahead and start working as one group on the Neighbourhood Plan.

During the workshop the group focused on the findings from the survey data and discussed planning issues under three broad headings: housing, environment and transport. The idea was to see how the issues emerging from the rural plan survey data would be addressed by policies, site allocations or other means in a neighbourhood plan.

PAE will set up and deliver further workshop style learning and support events that will support the next stages of the work and help the group move forward, including support on site assessment, policy writing and evidence bases.



What difference did PAE's support make?

Chris Banks, Chairman of the Hartlepool Rural Planning Group, said: "Although we have received tremendous support in administrative terms from our local authority, we are conscious that we are amateurs (however keen) in the planning process and need substantial support from professional bodies such as Planning Aid England (PAE). Selection of the rural hinterland of Hartlepool as our plan area makes matters quite complicated and leaves us in greater need of professional assistance than most. Consequently, PAE has been of immeasurable support in getting to our current stage.

I have often described the process of neighbourhood planning as "wading through treacle". As Front Runners we have started a unique process which no one has experienced before. We have spent a substantial amount of time engaging local communities in the process because we are quite determined that this is a "bottom up" process. Our Neighbourhood Plan will be a genuine reflection of the wishes of our parishes.

Ultimately, it will only be successful if we continue to receive appropriate levels of professional support. Frankly, we are very willing amateurs who need to be able to turn to professionals to help us deliver the goods. Continuity of professional advice is crucial to the success of the project."

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PAE volunteers have also noted the importance of helping communities navigate their way through the process: "I recently attended a Frontrunner meeting at Bellingham and Wark and received a lot of very positive feedback from the parish councillors about PAE's presentation to them about the Neighbourhood Development Plan. One Councillor commented that it was the first time that any of it had made any sense! PAE offers clear and impartial advice, and I enjoy being able to help people feel their way through the maze, but also to engage with the enthusiasm there is in communities to make a real impact in the planning of their areas." (Jenny Ludman MRTPI, PAE volunteer)

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Planning Aid England provides free and independent advice on neighbourhood planning. Call: 0203 206 1880 or Email: info@planningaid.rtpi.org.uk

