

issues and challenges from a neighbourhood plan front runner

Susie Mullins and Samer Bagaen track the evolution of the Neighbourhood Development Plan for Ringmer, near Lewes in East Sussex, identifying the stakeholders involved and key issues that have arisen thus far in the plan's production

Communities in England, through a new generation of community-led plans called Neighbourhood (Development) Plans (NDPs), will be making decisions about how their local areas respond to local needs, priorities and options for growth. How effective this will be remains to be seen, and the success of the new approach will be dependent on a range of issues that have influenced old-style community plans – such as how an overall consensus is reached, how community leaders draw out the issues to be addressed, and whether a community is cohesive enough to address the process in the first place.

A case study – Ringmer

In developing its vision for neighbourhood planning, in February 2011 the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) invited local authorities in England to apply to become neighbourhood planning Vanguards (later called Front Runners), the purpose of which was to pilot detailed practice in delivering NDPs. DCLG would then use the experience from these Front Runner projects to formulate secondary legislation and guidance.

Under the 'first wave' Front Runner scheme, a fund of £20,000 towards the cost of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan was granted to the sponsoring local authority, and a link officer from DCLG was appointed to oversee the process. Following interest expressed by Ringmer Parish Council, a bid

for Front Runner status was submitted on 14 February 2011 by Lewes District Council (LDC) and the South Downs National Park Authority in association with Ringmer Parish Council (RPC). The submission noted that the Parish Council had several energetic councillors with a range of skills and experience, bringing social capital to the group – including a retired architect and a professor at a local university.

In March 2011, Ringmer Parish Council became one of the 17 'first wave' DCLG neighbourhood planning Front Runners. The NDP is being taken forward by the Parish Council's Planning Committee, which in turn has delegated authority to two 'principal' people on the Parish Council (Principal Parish Councillors) to deal with the NDP on behalf of RPC.

Case study profile

The rural parish of Ringmer is located two miles to the north east of the county town of Lewes in East Sussex (see the map overleaf). The nearest large urban area is the city of Brighton and Hove to the south west of the parish.

Most of the parish's population of 4,624 people (2011 mid-year estimate) live in the main village around Ringmer Green or in the secondary settlement of Broyleside, 1 kilometre to the east. The parish includes elements of two distinct landscape character areas: the South Downs, and

the Low Weald. In 2011 22% of Ringmer residents were aged 65 and older, compared with 24% of residents in the LDC area. The proportion of residents aged over 85 was 5% (proportion in the LDC area, 4%) – more than twice the national average of 2%. The estimated number of households in Ringmer parish in 2011 was 2,015, and 79% of Ringmer households were owner-occupiers, the remainder being evenly divided between those renting from the council or a housing association and those renting privately.

Local authority and planning context

The current development plan comprises saved policies from the 2003 Lewes District Local Plan, and LDC is currently progressing its Core Strategy. Broad locations for development and strategic sites were identified in its Emerging Core Strategy (ECS) document, published for consultation in November

2011. The proposed submission document is scheduled to be published in October 2012. A district-wide Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) identified a number of sites for housing on the edge of Ringmer. The LDC Emerging Core Strategy identified land in the SHLAA as potential locations for development, and these sites were consulted upon at the end of 2011.

DCLG link officers

The principal role of the DCLG link officers in the Front Runner scheme was to help inform the development of DCLG policy on neighbourhood planning. In the case of Ringmer, the two DCLG link officers allocated to Ringmer Parish Council noted at the first meeting on 12 May 2011 that: 'The NDP would need to be flexible and responsive; neighbourhoods have different agendas and therefore each NDP would be unique; the NDP



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 The boundaries of Lewes District Council and Ringmer parish

would need to be prepared under the current legislation though it could transfer to new legislation at a later stage; the local authority is expected to provide procedural advice; the wider community should be engaged with NDP as soon as possible; no right way as to the method of plan-making – failure is ‘localism in action’; no time frame put on the plan-making process.’

This lack of time frame for the Ringmer NDP has not been an issue in view of the fact that LDC does not yet have an adopted Core Strategy. However, once it is adopted, a lack of a time frame could be a disadvantage, creating a policy vacuum and a period of uncertainty. An extreme case of this can be seen in nearby Mid Sussex, where the District Council is proposing that a substantial number of homes will be delivered through NDPs. The lack of a time frame here will make it impossible to bring certainty to housing delivery and the District Council’s five-year housing land supply.

The neighbourhood planning process in Ringmer

Research undertaken by the authors has revealed three key issues in the neighbourhood planning process that have emerged during stakeholder meetings, public meetings and exhibitions run by RPC. The minor issues have some potential to impact on the process, while the major issues have the potential to become show-stoppers.

Issue 1 – Funding to carry out an NDP

LDC obtained the grant of £20,000 when Ringmer became a Front Runner under DCLG guidance. Only local planning authorities are eligible to apply for grants under the Front Runner scheme. In its bid to DCLG, LDC stated that the grant would fund the referendum and the examination of the NDP.¹ LDC therefore holds the grant money to pay for the referendum and examination as set out in the bid. However, DCLG guidelines also state that grants can be used to help local planning authorities gain insight into how the provisions for neighbourhood planning are likely to work in practice, which suggests that they can also be used in any way in pursuit of this objective and that they are not necessarily ‘ring-fenced’.

In Ringmer, the NDP process to date has drawn on RPC’s own financial resources. LDC suggested that RPC should contact Action in Rural Sussex, who may have ideas for recouping costs, and suggested that developers may contribute towards NDP costs – although there are national housebuilders with land interests in Ringmer, none has come forward offering financial or practical help. LDC also suggested that the New Homes Bonus may generate money for parish councils which could be invested into neighbourhood planning. The New Homes Bonus is not ring-fenced, and therefore there are no guarantees that this money will be passed on to the

community for an NDP. However, Lewes District Council has invested £70,000 of New Homes Bonus money to support neighbourhood planning in the Lewes district, which includes financing a full-time Neighbourhood Plans planning officer.

A Rural Services Network paper, *Neighbourhood Planning: What Do Rural Communities Think?*,² published in December 2011, found that the cost of undertaking an NDP was the issue most often mentioned by the rural communities it contacted. Ringmer has been able to support NDP preparation financially but will be financially worse off at the end of the process.

‘Although the NDP process is intended to be ‘light touch’ it is still a complex plan-making system. Funding will therefore need to be found within existing local authority budgets to support what is a labour-intensive process’

The position regarding direct financial assistance for local planning authorities to support neighbourhood planning is not clear. Apart from the grants that have been made available for the Front Runners, no direct financial assistance has yet to be announced for local planning authorities. The DCLG’s *Neighbourhood Plans and Community Right to Build: Impact Assessment*³ states that the cost of preparing an NDP will be met partly by the local authority and partly by the promoters of the NDP, although, as identified above, this has not been the experience in Ringmer. The *Impact Assessment* also states that there will be no duty on the local authority to provide financial assistance but it may do if it so chooses.

One of the lessons offered by the Ringmer experience is that significant guidance has been required, particularly on procedural issues, to ensure that the plan is being prepared in the correct manner and that it will withstand scrutiny and challenge later on in the process. This should not be viewed as a criticism of RPC, as although the NDP process is intended to be ‘light touch’ it is still a complex plan-making system. Funding will therefore need to be found within existing local authority budgets to support what is a labour-intensive process.

Issue 2 – early public participation

The DCLG’s *Plain English Guide to the Localism Act*⁴ puts it succinctly when it states that ‘until now, many people have found that their good ideas have been overlooked and they have little

opportunity to get on and tackle problems in the way they want'. A number of NGOs such as Localis⁵ have published papers on effective community consultation in the wake of the emergence of the localism agenda. The message is that early engagement leads to better outcomes, and this is the ethos behind NDPs.

In the Ringmer NDP, public engagement came late in the process, some seven months after RPC received notification of its successful bid, five months after the inception meeting at which two key members of RPC set out the priorities for the plan, and three months after the key principles for the plan had been formulated. Extensive work on the NDP was carried out by two key members in the period leading up to the public engagement, but there had been no opportunities for the community to engage in 'brainstorming' to gauge what issues were relevant to individuals and the community as a whole.

At an informal meeting for introductions between representatives from RPC and LDC, held on 4 May 2011, it was made clear that RPC had delegated authority from the whole Parish Council to the two



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In Ringmer, public engagement came late in the NDP process

Principal Parish Councillors (PPCs), who would be dealing with the NDP. The PPCs assured LDC that RPC was representative of the village and that there would be interaction between the PPCs and RPC. The primary evidence collected as part of our own investigation indicates that the PPCs were clear from this first meeting, despite no community participation having taken place, about the aims and priorities of the NDP.

This set the scene for the inception meeting for all stakeholders (PPCs, LDC, DCLG link officers, the

South Downs National Park Authority, and the then district councillor for Ringmer and Ouse Valley ward) on 12 May 2011, where the PPCs set out the principal focus for the Ringmer NDP – allocate land for business use; improve the capacity and quality of existing sites; find new business sites; maintain and encourage re-use of redundant buildings; new housing to retain village feel; reduce the need to commute; find new provision for affordable housing; and no allocation of strategic sites prior to the adoption of the NDP.

Concerns were articulated within LDC about the legitimacy of the emerging plan, and this was relayed to the PPCs. However, other stakeholders in the process did not insist that community participation be included in the early plan-making process. Without this early engagement, the Ringmer NDP ran the risk of mirroring the token action that had previously been criticised by the Government as being 'an unimaginative add-on to the planning system'.⁶ A stakeholder meeting on 22 December 2011 was attended by the LDC's lead member for planning in view of the concern that had been raised about the lack of public engagement. LDC strongly made the point that without a more inclusive approach, concerns about the legitimacy of the plan process would be raised at examination.

LDC's bid to DCLG for Ringmer to become a Front Runner stated that although Ringmer would need to address a number of complex and, in some cases, emotive issues, it was not considered that these issues would be unresolvable, as one of the strengths of the Parish Council was in community engagement. It is therefore a shame that public participation has been absent from much of the Ringmer NDP process. Concern over the lack of early participation with the wider community had been raised by LDC, DCLG, and the South Downs National Park Authority, but these concerns had not changed the course of the NDP process.

Issue 3 – the relationship between the Ringmer NDP and the Lewes District Council Emerging Core Strategy

A fundamental principle of NDPs is that they must be in accordance with the local authority's Local Plan/Core Strategy and in line with national policy. It is therefore important from the start to manage the expectations of the community as to what the NDP can address, lest they simply see an NDP as a tool to prevent development in their area.

Strategic sites and broad locations for development had been identified within the Lewes District Emerging Core Strategy, based on evidence findings which included land identified in the SHLAA. Policy directions in the Core Strategy had also been identified relating to employment, infrastructure and transport, which were important

as they give policy directions for neighbourhood planning and local policy context, including the newly published National Planning Policy Framework.

The relationship between LDC and RPC was put under strain, as options within the Core Strategy for development in Ringmer were in conflict with the Parish Council's ideas for development within the village. The RPC view was that Ringmer had expanded considerably in the past and further open-market housing was not needed. LDC officers met with all the members of RPC in July 2011, to give an overview of the Emerging Core Strategy. It was at this meeting that RPC made it clear that if LDC included strategic sites in Ringmer, the NDP may be abandoned as their time would be taken up 'fire fighting the Core Strategy'.

'Without a more inclusive approach, concerns about the legitimacy of the plan process would be raised at examination'

The Emerging Core Strategy, which was made available for public consultation in late 2011, was subsequently altered so that 'strategic sites' in Ringmer were changed to 'broad locations for development' which were open for discussion. In addition, employment sites for office use in Ringmer would be allocated only where all options to deliver the shortfall in Lewes had been exhausted. However, the fundamental question of how many new homes Ringmer will accommodate will still be for the Core Strategy to decide. A nearby local authority, Mid Sussex District Council, as noted above, has taken a more hands-off approach to meeting all its housing need with strategic sites by setting out that NDPs will identify where all new housing will go. It is not yet clear whether this approach will be accepted for the Core Strategy at the examination in public.

The absence of an adopted Core Strategy at LDC has created theoretical opportunities for RPC to determine how Ringmer will develop. However, the realities are that the Emerging Core Strategy is deciding the potential number of homes that Ringmer can accommodate, based on evidence from the SHLAA as well as other background evidence. In this case, LDC and RPC have different expectations of what Ringmer can reasonably support in the way of new housing development.

Conclusions

The research reported here is timely given the current stage of the development of neighbourhood planning. Since the allocation of the first 17

Vanguard schemes, the Government has allocated £20,000 to each of the 126 successful bids for applications to become Front Runner schemes in three subsequent waves and a further 108 fifth-wave schemes were announced by DCLG in March 2012. As of the beginning of July 2012, only one NDP has gone through to an examination and none to a referendum.

The Dawlish Parish Neighbourhood Plan, one of the original 17 Front Runners, was examined in April 2010 by an independent inspector, who found plan unsound on technicalities in that there was no Local Plan in place and there was no clear audit trail on judgements made by steering group. However, the Dawlish Neighbourhood Plan was successful in raising the profile of community aspirations.

In time, the wide range of experience among the Front Runners will help to further our understanding of the potential of an NDP, and will help in the development of good practice models to follow for successful NDP organisation, preparation and subsequent examination.

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Notes

- 1 An estimated breakdown of the potential costs of drawing up a Neighbourhood Plan was set out in the DCLG's *Impact Assessment*, with potential overall costs from £20,000 to £86,000, allowing £5,000 for consultation costs, £5,000 for examination costs and £7,000 for a referendum (a base cost of £17,000). The March 2012 estimate allows £5,000-£10,000 for consultation costs and £5,000-£8000 for examination costs. The referendum is costed at £1.8 per head
- 2 See *Neighbourhood Planning: What Do Rural Communities Think?* Analysis of Rural Services Network Call for Evidence. Brian Wilson Associates for Rural Services Network, Dec. 2011. www.rsnonline.org.uk/images/files/neighbourhoodplanningdec11.pdf
- 3 *Neighbourhood Plans and Community Right to Build: Impact Assessment*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Mar. 2012. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1829678.pdf
- 4 *Plain English Guide to the Localism Act*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Nov. 2011. www.communities.gov.uk/documents/localgovernment/pdf/1896534.pdf
- 5 C. Balch (edited by R. Carr): *Power to the People: The Future of Planning in a Localist Landscape*. Localis, Sept. 2011. www.localis.org.uk/article/888/Power-to-the-People.htm
- 6 G. Clark: 'Participation in planning'. Speech by the Minister for Decentralisation and Cities to the TCPA Annual Conference, Nov. 2010. www.communities.gov.uk/speeches/newsroom/participationplanning (also published as G. Clark: 'Participation in planning'. *Town & Country Planning*, 2010, Vol. 79, Dec., 523-6)