

The Neighbourhood Plan, An Update

It has now been about 6 months since the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group was set up and began its work, so now seems like a good time to update you all on where we are and what remains to be done.

I think I speak for many of us on the steering group (at least, the non-councillors) when I say that we did not particularly expect to become members of the group, when we attended the open meeting on the 26th September 2017, nor to experience a very steep learning curve in the first month or so! While we had a vague idea of what such a plan was, the details of what it could/should contain, what it can and cannot achieve, and the fairly involved process that it has to go through, were all new to us. We are very grateful to have had the ongoing support of Martin Small, the consultant who was hired by the Town Council, who has attended our meetings and explained everything clearly and concisely to us. Without his help, we would, I fear, be much further behind. He has also produced a “sample plan” for us. The steering group’s job is, basically, to take this sample (which is based on Martin’s research into our town) and modify it where we feel it does not accurately capture the town’s aspirations, especially in light of the recent survey results and focus group meetings.

The initial hope was for the work of the steering group to have been finished before Easter. That was, in hindsight, probably an over-ambitious target. Many other communities have taken two or more years to get a plan written, and it is better to do it right than rush and then regret later.

So, what have we done so far?

One of the first things we did was to compose a survey to gather up the thoughts and ideas of the people who live in or use our town. We trialed this in paper form at the Santa’s Grotto event before Christmas and then refined it and put it up online. As I write this we have just over 350 responses, which is already a good number, however we need more. The survey will be available until the middle of May so if you have not filled it in yet, please do take a few minutes to do so. The online version can be accessed at tinyurl.com/HRNPS and, if you cannot do it online, paper versions are available at the library, the town council offices (Peel Street), and in Jewels in Bedford Square. We would particularly like to encourage all sectors of our community to respond so that the results are reflective of the ethnic breakdown of the town.

Alongside the survey, the work has been broken down into 6 areas and working groups, each under the leadership of a member of the steering group. These groups are (in no particular order): Open Spaces; Business and Employment; Education; Housing; Town Centre; and Heritage.

One of the difficult things for us has been to get enough volunteers to help with the work of these groups. Each group leader has been trying to contact people who would appear to have an interest in their area, but with very mixed success. We invite anyone who feels they have time to give and wants to be involved to either send an email to townplan@houghtonregis.org.uk letting us know which area or areas interest you or to call the town council office (01582 708540) and let them know. The relevant group leader will then contact you with more information about how you can join in the work.

These working groups will be reporting back to the steering group over the next 2 months with their suggestions for what the plan needs to say. The full steering group will then need to combine these into a single coherent whole, likely a difficult task! After all, it is quite possible that the amount of

space needed to accommodate all of our aspirations will be significantly more than is available in the town.

Once the various aspirations have been harmonized, the revised draft will go back to Martin Small, who has offered to edit it so that it reads like a single document and not a hodgepodge of writing styles. This draft document will then be presented to the town council's Planning Committee, which has oversight over the project. At that time (assuming they do not send it back for further revisions) the work of the steering group will be over. The process, however, is far from done! The Planning Committee will present it to the full Town Council. If they accept it then there is a formal process wherein it is submitted for review and comment to Central Beds Council, then certain other statutory parties. If it passes all of that (possibly with some required tweaks) it will finally go out to a town referendum where you will all get a final vote on its adoption.

If anyone has any questions about exactly what a neighbourhood plan is or what it can do for us, please just ask! You can use the email address above or call the town council office and they will gladly pass on your questions to the Steering Group and we will get back to you as quickly as we can.

Finally, let me, as chair of the Steering Group, express my deepest appreciation to all the members of the group and all the others who have worked with us to this point on the working groups. Thank you all for the time and effort you are putting in, I believe it will be well worth it and that it will give us all a much bigger say in the future of our town.

David Gibbons

Chair, Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.