

## Neighbourhood Planning – A useful and feasible option for Downham Market?

This document provides a basis for discussion by the Town Council working group looking at the feasibility of a Neighbourhood Planning exercise for Downham Market. It is arranged in sections:

1. What is a Neighbourhood Plan?
2. What planning documents already influence development in Downham Market?
3. What needs of the town are not covered by these existing plans?
4. Is a Neighbourhood Plan the best or easiest way to get these needs met?
5. Feasible next steps for the Town Council

This document draws no conclusions but it is hoped that after discussion the working group will be able to frame their own recommendations for the council.

### 1. What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

Neighbourhood planning has been introduced by central government as a way of giving communities more power and choice about

- Where new homes, shops and offices should be built
- What those new buildings should look like, and
- Granting planning permission for the buildings the community wants to see go ahead
- Local green space

Neighbourhood plans are optional and if produced need only include those aspects and areas considered appropriate by the local community. At the CPRE/NALC sessions run in February 2012 it was suggested that they would be particularly suitable for towns/parishes expected to grow in the future. Once a plan has been prepared, checked by an independent examiner and approved by a majority in a local referendum, it must be brought into force as a part of the local planning authority statutory development plan.

### 2. What planning documents already influence development in Downham Market?

There are several documents used by BCKLWN to determine the form of development in the town. Many aspects of these have been subject to consultation and so they already embody community views at the time of drafting. They include:

- Conservation Area Character Statement (1975 – awaiting update by BCKLWN)
- Town Design Statement ‘Downham Market by Design’ (2007) along with the separate ‘Guidelines for Developers’ (2008). Work done preceded the introduction of issues around sustainability as legitimate factors when determining planning applications. The TDS has the status of ‘material considerations’ but is not a ‘supplementary planning document’ when planning applications are considered.
- Local Development Framework that includes a vision and policy for Downham Market within the Core Strategy (2011) (extracts included in boxes below).

The role of Downham Market will continue as a main town providing and supporting employment and essential services for the southern part of the borough.

The provision of new housing will be carefully balanced with the need to provide additional services and local facilities both to meet the needs of the future population and also to redress present inadequacies within the existing level of services within the town.

Focus in the town centre will be on:

- Maintaining and enhancing a strong local convenience and service offer;
- Accommodating a balanced diversity of uses to strengthen the evening economy;
- Improving the local arts and culture offer;
- Promoting the town’s role as a wider visitor centre.

Seek to respect and enhance the built, historic and natural environment in the town.

Maintain the landscape and the quality of open space in Downham Market.

In addition opportunities will be investigated to develop a leisure and tourism attraction within the proposed employment site adjacent the Relief Channel.

Pedestrian and cycling links will be improved throughout the urban area to enhance accessibility to the town centre, the railway station and employment areas.

In addition to an over-arching approach to seek improvements to the King's Lynn / Cambridge / London rail-link and the A10, public transport links to King's Lynn, Ely and Cambridge and the surrounding villages will be improved.

Seek to enhance green infrastructure in the town in accordance with the Green Infrastructure Strategy, in particular enhancing the Wissey Valley Landscape Project, Cock Drove and Kingston Plantation

### **3. What needs of the town are not covered by these existing plans?**

This list may be incomplete but a useful prompt for discussion. It includes things that have changed since the above plans and policies were drafted and issues that have recently been highlighted in the town.

- The town council contributed to the vision presented within the LDF but doesn't have a more detailed vision statement of its own for the town. It may be appropriate to consider this, particularly in the light of the recently adopted Sustainable Development Policy, the need for a Section 206 'wish list', and the clear statement in the LDF that further development in the town should not precede necessary infrastructure development.
- Similarly, the Town Design Statement could be revisited in the light of the Sustainable Development Policy, recent housing development and new developments now anticipated.
- The economic situation has reduced the Borough or other statutory resource available for the development that is needed in parallel with the spatial aspects of the vision for the town's future – eg. arts/culture development, visitor promotion, waterway amenity development, public transport enhancement, increased employment.
- Changes to local health and social services, coupled with the distinctive demographics of the town, are a current concern.
- The town centre economy is not vibrant and the number of empty shops has increased this year. A number of people are keen to see a 'Town Team' as suggested by Mary Portas. Her recommendations and suggestions for the scope of a Town Team included market operations, business rate concessions, accessibility, changes of use, flexible rents, community use of vacant High Street properties. She also suggested that High Streets should be a distinct area within Neighbourhood plans.
- There remain unresolved boundary issues for Downham Market. These affect the town's influence over Kingston Plantation and the waterways to the west.

### **4. Is a Neighbourhood Plan the best or easiest way to get these needs met?**

Most of the issues above have some interface with the planning system – but they have wider aspects as well. Unless the important issues are considered comprehensively, the scope for defining specific beneficial planning rules will not be identified. However,

### **5. Feasible next steps for the Town Council**

- Revisit the LDF vision for the town in the context of economic changes and SD policy and add detail where appropriate. Possibly consult others then adopt this as the town's own vision.
- Identify areas for further work and differentiate between those where the council needs to take the lead, and those where the council will support and encourage other initiatives.
- Keep open the option of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan that would ensure that the planning system will reinforce the Council's vision for the town. In the meantime, access the help available for Neighbourhood Planning and identify the easiest route to assembling a Neighbourhood Plan that incorporates material yet to be generated by new or updated initiatives (such as a Town Team or revisiting the Town Design Statement).

- Oversee this follow-up work through this working group and report to both the Planning and Community Development Standing Committees.

### **Resources available**

1. Planning Help website, maintained by CPRE – accessible practical advice  
<http://www.planninghelp.org.uk/improve-where-you-live/shape-your-local-area/neighbourhood-plans>
2. Web-based information from Central Government including case studies and FAQ  
<http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/neighbourhoodplanningvanguards/>
3. Mary Portas review into the state of our High Streets  
[http://www.maryportas.com/wp-content/uploads/The\\_Portas\\_Review.pdf](http://www.maryportas.com/wp-content/uploads/The_Portas_Review.pdf)
4. Updates on progress of a number of Town Teams, as well as other information to help market towns <http://towns.org.uk/>
5. Organisations that can help (taken from 2 above)

<p><b>The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment</b></p> <p>Contact name: Sebastian Knox Tel: 020 7613 8587 Email: <a href="mailto:sebastian.knox@princes-foundation.org">sebastian.knox@princes-foundation.org</a> Website: <a href="http://www.princes-foundation.org/our-work/supporting-communities-and-neighbourhoods-planning">http://www.princes-foundation.org/our-work/supporting-communities-and-neighbourhoods-planning</a></p>	<p><b>Locality</b></p> <p>The Building Community Consortium Contact name: David Chapman Tel: 0845 458 8336 Email: <a href="mailto:neighbourhoodplanning@locality.org.uk">neighbourhoodplanning@locality.org.uk</a> Website: <a href="http://www.buildingcommunity.org.uk">www.buildingcommunity.org.uk</a></p>
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