

A Short History of Marple's Neighbourhood Plan

Presentation to Marple Civic Society (via Zoom)

Tuesday June 23rd 2020

1 What Is Neighbourhood Planning?

In 2010 the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government introduced a new statutory power for communities to produce a land-use planning document for their area, known as a Neighbourhood Plan (NP).

This became law in 2011 as the Localism Act and has since been updated in 2017 as the Neighbourhood Planning Act.

The motivation for Neighbourhood Planning was the general feeling that for too long local communities had been excluded from the planning process and that decisions affecting people were in the hands of remote, faceless organisations.

Neighbourhood Planning was put forward as a solution to develop a planning system 'rooted in civic engagement and collaborative democracy'. It's designed to allow local people to become more involved in decision-making that affects where they live.

The NP forms part of the statutory development framework against which future planning decisions are assessed. That statutory framework is quite complex. At the national level there is the NPPF – National Planning Policy Framework – that sets out the Government's economic, environmental and social planning policies, specifically for England.

Then we sit within the Greater Manchester plan – the GM Spatial Framework, the third draft of which will be coming out for public consultation later this year – and, finally, we sit within the Stockport Local Plan, which, hopefully, will consult alongside the GMSF in October/November. This all forms a multi-dimensional matrix in continuous flux. Fortunately we don't have to wait for them to complete and our policies, providing they are clear and robust, will be enforceable and effective.

The early plan adopters, starting 2011-12, were largely located in the south of England and tended to be smaller communities of less than 2000 people. Whilst there were some initial guidelines and frameworks it was very much a case of evolving the process through experience. The early expectation was that the process would be manageable for local volunteers both in terms of workload and technical skills.

Subsequent legal challenges to Plans have increased the technical requirements, and consequently the effort required, in order to make them sufficiently robust to be enforceable.

I did a quick study a year or so ago of the 600 plus plans approved at that time. The overwhelming majority of them were small village communities – less than 10% were towns of similar size to Marple. Even so, the average time taken to get to approval was about 2.5 years. The initiative was still weighted towards the south of England and there were less than 10 plans in the whole of Greater Manchester, of which four are now in Stockport.

2 Origins of the Marple Plan

Marple Civic Society ran a week of drop-ins at the Library in the summer of 2016. A series of information boards and Society members set out the basics of the Neighbourhood Planning process. Some 500 or so Marple residents ‘dropped in’ during the week which concluded with a ‘standing room only’ public meeting on the Saturday morning at which there was substantial enthusiasm for engaging with the process.

The first steps involved forming a pro-tem committee of volunteers, developing a Constitution, conducting an initial AGM to formally elect the Forum committee and establish a membership, and registering the process with SMBC.

By the end of the year we were meeting regularly on a monthly basis – and the committee had continued to meet monthly, with a couple of exceptions, throughout the process.

In 2017 through a process of engagement and consultation with a cross-section of Marple residents and organisations we developed our initial Vision and Aims statements, and set up six Topic Groups each populated by volunteer Marple residents.

The six topic groups covered:

- The Town Centre
- Getting Around
- Housing
- Community Spaces
- Heritage and Tourism
- Employment

2018 focussed on the detailed engagement and evidence gathering and in 2019 we began the process of drafting policies.

This part of the process was, and continues to be, a significant challenge.

Neighbourhood Plans are specifically designed for matters of land-use. However, almost all communities have ambitions that push or exceed the scope of the plan, and this ambition is to be actively encouraged. But it brings with it the puzzle of what can be achieved through the plan and what has to be pursued by other means.

Furthermore, planning policy wording is a specific technical skill and, even though we have some experienced planners on our team, policy drafting is arduous and time consuming.

3 Current Status

In November of 2019 we invested in two days of consultancy to review our draft. That was useful in the sense that we got a lot of constructive criticism but not so helpful in that the drafting of robust policies to achieve our aims would have meant further investment.

It's perhaps worth reflecting here that the budget for the entire process comes in two tranches; an initial allocation of £9,000 with a further allowance of up to £7,000 for plans that make housing allocations or contain design codes. This funding may be adequate for smaller communities but it's barely adequate for a larger community encompassing a larger scope.

A couple of concluding comments – firstly, the Neighbourhood Plan, once finally approved, will only be one aspect of our deliverable. We have seen our working relationship with Stockport Council improve measurably and early teething problems with collaboration have now greatly eased and a genuine sense of teamwork has developed. This is essential on two counts – 1) our Plan will be far more effective with the full support of the council, and 2) a strong relationship will be necessary for us to capitalise on the other Community Projects that are a key part of the whole process.

A final comment is that over the last few months in these exceptional and still hugely challenging times we have seen many examples of Marple at it's best. We have seen the wonderful strength and kindness that is the definition of a community. This experience has been common across tens of thousands of communities throughout the country.

It is an opportunity for Community groups to come together to speak with a shared, powerful voice on behalf of their respective communities as they work to support all their residents through the course of the pandemic and it's aftermath.