



CHICHESTER CITY COUNCIL

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN UPDATE REPORT JULY 2023

Summary: The current Steering Group Chairman took over the NP project in the summer 2022, it would appear without the benefit of significant NP training, and after the contractor for full planning support to deliver the NP withdrew from the contract in March of 2022 without subsequent replacement. Therefore, although significant work remains to produce an adoptable NP, this is likely to be achievable should the necessary level of training as well as full and thorough planning support throughout the NP process, now be provided.

The level of planning consultant support available to the NP Steering Group therefore requires review at this stage, in order to ensure that work on the NP can continue with a likely outcome of an adopted NP.

Introduction

A report updating Members on the progress and current status of the Chichester City Neighbourhood Plan (NP) was produced in June 2023. Since the report was written, further clarity has been provided to the Planning Adviser on the subject of the level of planning consultant support. A further update is therefore set out below.

NP Timeline

Chichester City Council took a decision to produce a Neighbourhood Plan in July of 2019. A Steering Group was set up in October 2019 by Cllr Richard Plowman who was the lead on the project, and the NP had a public launch with a six-week large scale consultation to establish public interest and ask residents about issues Members were aware local people were concerned with as well as open questions about what residents would like addressed within the Neighbourhood Plan.

The initial consultation attracted in excess of 1600 responses, which established a high level of public interest. The Steering Group therefore began to commission and carry out work to support the production of a NP. This included a study on trees and public open spaces, work on various topics of potential public interest such as highways, the Lavant Road character area, and Carbon Footprint reduction. Work also began on PLACE studies, an in-depth public engagement by Feria Urbanism whereby local residents contribute to a detailed planning-related assessment of their residential areas.

The initial Steering Group therefore had the benefit of the advice of the City Planning Adviser until September 2020 as well as Planning Consultants, Feria Urbanism, to deliver specific projects.

From September 2020, the Planning Adviser stepped away from the NP project, and planning consultants Feria Urbanism stepped in with an agreement to provide full planning support to take the Steering Group through producing a NP and up to the stage of submission of the Plan. This would be for a total inclusive fee of £23,700 for all the work necessary, to be charged incrementally as work progressed.

However, although work on the PLACE studies continued, progress with the rest of the NP stalled and communication between Feria Urbanism and the Steering Group became such that Feria advised that they would no longer be able to deliver on the terms of the contract as

agreed. The contract itself, and the amount remaining unpaid from the total fee, was then permanently cancelled and Feria stepped away from the NP project in March 2022.

By the summer of 2022, a number of original Steering Group members had also stepped back from the project, including the Project Lead, Cllr Richard Plowman. At that time, Ash Pal took over as Chairman of the Steering Group and Project Lead for the NP. When contacted by Ash Pal, Feria agreed to provide work and advice to the Steering Group, however, the original contract to support the NP to the submission of a completed Plan was not reinstated, and any advice or specific work was effectively on a pay-as-you go basis, and upon request.

Therefore, other than the continuation of the PLACE work, there was not substantial planning guidance and assistance available to the new Steering Group Chairman and to the remaining and new Steering Group Members.

Further, it does not appear that there was a meaningful and in-depth handover to Mr Pal upon commencement of his Chairmanship, whereupon significant planning advice, training, and/or detail about Neighbourhood Plans was given, which would have set up a solid understanding of the expected outcome and the processes necessary to achieve it. It is also not clear whether Mr Pal was initially provided with access to all the previous work and background documents upon the commencement of his Chairmanship.

With this background, it becomes clear that the NP process so far has not been a linear four-year process, but that the process effectively stalled and then substantially re-started in summer 2022 without the foundation of any meaningful training in Neighbourhood Planning, and without substantial planning or administrative advice and support.

The Steering Group

Some members of the Steering Group requested that it be clarified that they are not a homogenous group with a unanimously agreed opinion; there is a significant variance of opinion within the Group on many NP-related matters, including how best to progress the Plan and what should be included in it. Therefore, whereas the previous update advised of the opinions of “the Steering Group”, it would be more accurate to say such views are largely reflective of the Chairman of the Steering Group. They are not necessarily an accurate reflection of the opinions of all members or even necessarily a majority of members of the Group, since there is no consensus and matters are rarely voted on or polled amongst members.

The “Ambition Gap”

Members were updated in June about the “Ambition Gap” which the Planning Adviser and the Chairman of the Steering Group had mutually identified as an issue.

The main part of a NP is a set of planning policies, which must be in general conformity with the Local Plan policies, but may be more specific. These policies are used by the Local Planning Authority (LPA), alongside the policies within the Local Plan, to determine applications for planning permission in the NP area.

The Chairman of the Steering Group and another member of the Steering Group expressed that they were very strongly against the idea of producing such a document, which they felt would not be a sufficiently effective influence on local development. It was expressed that producing such a document would result in having a Plan which was “the same as everyone else’s” and “would not address the decline” of the City, which they felt had been ongoing over some years. They strongly felt that there was a lack of ambition in aiming for a NP of this nature and that the NP would not be worth doing if this was the outcome of it.

The Chairman and another Steering Group Member explained that they felt the appropriate amount of ambition was to effect “big ideas” through the NP, including large scale physical re-

structuring of the City, re-allocating existing land uses including privately owned commercial land in active, viable economic use, and protected by Local Plan policy.

However, with the background of the lack of in-depth handover, the lack of any initial detailed NP training, and with the prior withdrawal of full planning consultant support (and the provision of only very limited support on a pay-as-you-go, on-request basis), the Steering Group and its Chairman could not reasonably have been expected to have an in-depth understanding of the limitations of Neighbourhood Plans, or necessarily an appreciation of the value and influence a set of locally specific NP policies can have.

It would therefore be appropriate at this stage to provide the training and planning support which has so far not been made available to the current Steering Group and its Chairman, so that the NP can progress to adoption.

Conclusion

The current Steering Group Chairman took over the NP project in the summer 2022, it would appear without the benefit of significant NP training, and after the contractor for full planning support to deliver the NP withdrew from the contract in March of 2022 without subsequent replacement. Therefore, although significant work remains to produce an adoptable NP, this is likely to be achievable should the necessary level of training as well as full and thorough planning support throughout the NP process, now be provided.

The level of planning consultant support for the NP Steering Group therefore requires review at this stage in order that work on the NP can continue with a likely outcome of an adopted NP.