Local planning authority area: Vale of White Horse, Oxfordshire

Parish/neighbourhood in the plan area: Drayton

What were the motivations behind developing the neighbourhood plan?

Drayton is a village of about 1000 homes located near Abingdon in south Oxfordshire. By 2011, it was clear that Drayton would not be immune to pressure for new house building. Indeed, the owners of neighbouring farmland had indicated a willingness to make it available for development. This caused some alarm. But instead of outright opposition, the community realised this could be an opportunity to improve the village. The Localism Act 2011 showed how a neighbourhood plan can enable local people to secure the right type of development for their community, while still meeting the needs of the wider area.

The vision set out in the final plan indicates what we set out to do: ‘The Drayton Neighbourhood Plan intends the village to be home to a thriving working community that is strongly linked to its environment and to its neighbours, a place that has its own identity and in which any future development adds to the character of the village and to the quality of life of Drayton’s residents’.
How the local planning authority assisted us:

The district council helped us a great deal. One of their senior planning officers was assigned to assist us. She attended quite a few of our steering group meetings, but her real contribution was in giving us a very detailed critique of the early drafts of the neighbourhood plan documentation – the plan itself, the sustainability appraisal, and the associated appendices. We could only afford to pay for very limited professional consultancy time, so most of the plan was written by steering group members. We were not conversant with ‘planning-speak’, and the planning officer showed us how policies should be framed and phrased in order to fit with the local plan, and meet with the approval of the independent examiner.

Who else helped, and how?

To achieve the vision for the plan, five working groups - Look and Feel, Transport, Work and Play, Sustainability and Housing - were set up. Each developed a set of objectives. Proposals were then developed as to how best to achieve these objectives and - in doing so - attain the plan’s overall vision. Following this work, individual policies were prepared. Of these, housing, unsurprisingly, required the most attention.

We attended several workshops run by various bodies, including Community First Oxfordshire (CFO - formerly Oxfordshire Rural Community Council) and Oxford Brookes University. Two were run by the Design Council, one in London, one in Swindon. We paid CFO for professional help with, amongst other things, the methodology of site selection and assessment. CFO also analysed the results of our village questionnaire. A Heritage England workshop in Oxford helped with preparation of the village design guide.
What local issues did the plan process identify?

The primary purpose of this plan is to ensure that any housing development meets the needs of Drayton’s existing and future inhabitants, fits into the overall character of the village, and contributes to its long-term viability.

Housing development in Drayton over the past 80 years has not paid sufficient attention to the historical character and the overall look and cohesion of the village. Ribbon development has been allowed to extend the village ever closer to the boundaries of neighbouring towns and villages.

A housing needs survey was undertaken in 2012 and revealed a need for more affordable housing for first time buyers, for people who wished to live nearer to family members, for young people who wanted to stay and to enable those nearing retirement to downsize and remain in the village.

It was agreed that a housing strategy should therefore address both the needs of existing residents and future inhabitants; be proportionate in scale to the existing village; contribute to improving the village’s amenities and environment; be well designed and enhance the character of the village; and meet the energy conservation criteria set out in the district council’s local plan.

Three sites were eventually included in the plan, comprising 255 new dwellings. This reflects a planned growth of the village of about 25% over the next 15 years. The plan required developers to meet the minimum requirement for affordable housing set out in the local plan and for these homes to be indistinguishable from the rest of the development.

Following the community consultation, it was agreed that each site should:

- preserve the historic character of the village
- have low impact on traffic flows
- have minimal impact on surrounding rural landscape
- have low impact on neighbours and green space in the village
- offer easy pedestrian access to amenities
- be subject to low traffic noise
- be within the existing built-up area of the village
- not be located on areas of ecological or archaeological significance

A referendum was held in March 2015 resulting in an overwhelming ‘yes’ vote: 643 voting ‘yes’ against 42 voting ‘no’. Drayton’s Neighbourhood Plan was then formally adopted and the implementation process began.

What challenges were faced in its production?

Some of the biggest challenges were:

- Drawing together everyone’s ideas and converting them into coherent policies.
- Writing the plan in acceptable form as an ‘official’ planning document.
- Dealing with the inevitable resistance to decisions about location of allocated housing sites by some of the existing residents most affected.
How were challenges overcome and how were these solutions identified?

A senior planning officer from the district council gave us advice on putting together the document, which helped us overcome the challenge posed by the group’s unfamiliarity with planning terminology and conventions.

There was also a continual programme of community engagement:

- An exhibition at the Jubilee Picnic in July 2012, attended by 150 residents.
- Drayton2020 launch event curry night held in September 2012, attended by 200 residents.
- Village walkabouts on the weekend following the curry night. These were hosted by members of the Drayton2020 Steering Group who again encouraged residents to express their views.
- A pizza evening for young people in March 2013 to talk about housing in the village. This attracted 26 participants, primarily teenagers from within the parish.
- A mid-term consultation event in May 2013 to seek feedback on the site selection criteria proposed for the parish and on possible sites suggested for development by landowners. This event was attended by 110 people.
- A chilli night consultation event in 2013, followed by an exhibition. The aim was to present the results of the site selection discussions. This was attended by 90 residents and 40 visited the exhibition.
- Meetings with landowners who had indicated their intentions to submit significant planning applications were held on several occasions, starting in February 2013.

How has the community benefited from developing a neighbourhood plan?

In 2014, after the consultation was over, a developer suddenly proposed to build a further 28 houses on a fourth site. The group declined to meet the developer. A planning application was duly submitted in 2015 and council officers recommended it be approved. Drayton’s community succeeded in getting the application refused, only because they had a neighbourhood plan. Planning applications for neighbouring villages were agreed on that same evening, despite their parish council putting forward a well-argued case against.

Main contact at the neighbourhood plan group:

Richard Williams
Email: richardwilliams09@btinternet.com

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Janet Manning, Steve Daniels and Motacilla.