



FELMERSHAM & RADWELL PARISH COUNCIL

THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS

OVERVIEW

Overview

Neighbourhood plans are by their very essence community prepared and led plans. Consultants can be appointed to offer hands on and often detailed support whenever required. However, it is understood that the most cost-efficient and community orientated approach to the production of plans is to ensure the recruitment of as many willing and appropriately qualified volunteers locally as possible.

Some of the most successful plans have had a wide number of volunteers working on the project offering a combination of skills, enthusiasm or simply outright commitment to help their neighbourhoods achieve their strategy. Especially in instances where a plan has access to specialist support, a detailed knowledge of the planning system helps but is not essential. A wide range of other transferable skills will also be of great use.

The advice in this report is not exhaustive – much of what is set out below is indicative only, as different groups will have different blends of skills and different plans will require different levels of volunteer commitment. It does, however, seek to provide a starting point for consideration.

PERSONAL QUALITIES

There are several qualities that a neighbourhood plan volunteer should have and various other things they must bear in mind when undertaking the work:

- As far as possible they must be realistic in terms of what they can give. There is no point in offering unlimited time if they have other commitments. Offering a lot of time is fine; offering a little time is also fine.
- They must be committed. Neighbourhood plan making can be a slog – there is no escaping this! But it can also be very rewarding. The motivations for getting involved have to be the right ones, that is with a view to dedicating time to furthering your community.

- They must take the process seriously and realise their responsibilities. Producing a neighbourhood plan can be a serious business as the final product represents a document with real statutory weight. Making the plan should be rewarding, and can often be fun, but it should also be a process that is tightly managed with those volunteering towards it realising their responsibility to the community.
- They must be objective as far as is possible. As neighbourhood plan making is about gathering and accurately responding to evidence and representing the will of the community, personal agendas must be left at the door (albeit not at the expense of the volunteer's passion for their community!).
- They must accept that a lot of background work is needed that will often go unrecognised. A small percentage of what is written will go in the plan. A fraction of the time committed to the plan will be in the public eye. The recognition comes at key stages and at the end of the process when, as a team, the volunteers working on the plan can point to a successful outcome and say 'we did this!'
- They must be prepared to work as a team. Neighbourhood plans should be closely project managed and each volunteer must work to the specific programme. Otherwise the process can rapidly become unmanageable. A proper management structure will help with this.
- The key message is 'remember why you got involved and remember what you hope to achieve'.

SKILLS

As set out above, a range of skills and traits are required to produce a neighbourhood plan. Some technical, some transferable, some attributable purely to the sorts of personalities working on the plan. Wherever possible, the following skills should be present on the Steering Group (in no particular order of importance):

- Preferably an understanding of the planning system and what it can and cannot achieve.
- The ability to analyse and assess often complex information.
- The ability to promote and publicise.
- Strong communication skills, including clear written skills.
- The ability to manage and organise.
- An organised approach to working.
- Good information technology skills, including the establishment and maintenance of websites, use of social media and knowledge of applications such as excel, PowerPoint and publisher.
- Good negotiators and strong advocates for what the plan is seeking to achieve.
- Motivational skills, allowing the group to help get the most out of volunteers.
- Clear and objective decision making skills.

POTENTIAL VOLUNTEER ROLES

Whilst it is often too simplistic to say 'one person will do this and another will do this' and to attribute every task at the very outset of the process, it is often useful to identify the type of individual required to manage aspects of the process, as well as the types of input that will be required further down the line. Some of the 'job roles' set out below deliberately include tasks that have been identified elsewhere – this demonstrates that these roles are indicative only and not fixed. It is not, however, suggested that all of the tasks and responsibilities identified below are covered by members of the team. Often one individual can perform several roles, as there is usually overlap between various stages and threads that run through the process.

It is suggested that individuals put themselves forward or are identified to perform the following types of roles. It is recommended that the 'KEY ROLES' are filled by individuals who are highly likely to be available at most key stages until the very end of the process:

KEY ROLE - Plan Lead/Chairperson:

This person must be one of the strongest advocates for the plan. Ideally they should be 99% certain to be there at the very end of the process and must be fully committed to achieving a positive outcome for the community. The plan lead would benefit from being a good communicator and:

- Stand as the public facing figurehead and constantly seek to promote what the plan is seeking to achieve;
- Attend and likely chair all steering group meetings;
- Motivate volunteers and the community alike to back the plan;
- Remain impartial and arbitrate between potential differing views on the Steering Group or indeed within the community;
- Liaise directly with any consultants or external support;
- Publish, or at least put their name to, any external publicity, press releases, consultation leaflets etc;
- Provide the link between the Steering Group and the Parish Council, reporting on progress and issues at Parish Council meetings.
- Circulate agendas, minutes and any other information to the wider team.

KEY ROLE - Project Manager:

As with the plan lead, this person must ideally be able to demonstrate that they will be there throughout the process. They must be organised, able to motivate and able to manage resources (both time and money) and:

- Take ownership of the project plan and ensure it is monitored and updated as often as necessary;
- Attend and often provide the structure for all Steering Group meetings;
- Ideally have a good knowledge of the process as a whole as well as an understanding of what the eventual output will look like and contain;

- Help set the agenda for regular Steering Group meetings at which they will monitor completed tasks and identify the next set of tasks moving forward;
- Help coordinate the actions of the Steering Group and the input of any working groups that may operate below Steering Group level;
- Liaise directly with any consultants or external support, and act as the link between them and the wider team;
- Ideally they will be able to provide their own input at various stages of the process as a fully involved member of the working group. From experience, the best project managers do more than manage and provide the extra capacity whenever it is needed.
- Circulate agendas, minutes and any other information to the wider team.

KEY ROLE - Consultation Lead

The consultation lead should be good at promotion and good at organising events and mail shots. Consultation is one area that will likely require the greatest use of 'casual' volunteer support (people manning stalls or dropping leaflets) so the lead should be a good organiser and potential recruiter of volunteers and:

- Take ownership of the plan's consultation strategy/programme and help coordinate every stage in the consultation process;
- Attend all Steering Group meetings;
- Lead discussion around items relating to consultation at Steering Group meetings;
- Be creative, and identify the most effective way in which to engage and consult with the community and often spot new opportunities to get the word out as and when they arrive;
- Lead on the correlation of consultation responses (often using volunteer support);
- Have good communication skills;
- Liaise with the I.T. support for the plan.

KEY ROLE – I.T. Support

Constant and continual use of I.T. is key. It plays an essential role in consulting, informing and updating. Most neighbourhood plans make varied use of social media and the maintenance of an e-mail database and an up-to-date website is essential – indeed the website will be one of your key means of fulfilling your statutory duty to consult later on in the plan process and will be the most important platform to give people wide access to your draft plans and all supporting information. The role must:

- Take ownership of the plans social media and website outlets and continually manage the uploading and updating of information on the website;
- Ideally attend all Steering Group meetings;
- Ideally provide support around the production of leaflets and other materials;
- Manage any electronic mail-outs and online consultation events.
- Ideally your I.T. lead will also be able to produce basic electronic maps or use software such as Parish Online.

Other Roles:

As well as the four key roles described above that will run as a thread through the plan process, various other roles will require filling at various stages of the programme. These include (non-exhaustive):

- Researchers, to analyse evidence and produce reports on findings and recommendations;
- People to attend key meetings at various stages of the project;
- Community advocates to help support the consultation programme;
- Distributors and collectors of surveys and leaflets;
- Minute takers;
- Clerical assistance, managing budgets and invoices;
- Work in the field, assessing potential development sites etc; and
- Data inputters to help with survey responses etc.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT

Lastly, the support of professional consultants skilled in planning and consultation is available. If any tasks are identified throughout the plan process where professional support may be beneficial, it is important that you call on it when needed. This will often allow you to progress certain tasks quickly and with certainty.

It is also important to identify from the outset what support your Local Planning Authority can provide. Often they will be able to assist around areas such as printing, map production and other aspects of consultation. They may even be able to offer support facilitating local events.