

NOTE TO BLETSOE PARISH COUNCIL

SUBJECT: BLETSOE NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Next Steps

Bedford Borough Council has decided, following a screening assessment of the draft Bletsoe Neighbourhood Plan, that a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is required. It has been ascertained, from the appointed planning consultant, that the cost of the full SEA would be £6,000 and Bletsoe Parish Council does not have the resource to cover this level of cost. This fee does not allow for any meetings, public engagement and consultation, publicity, or printing of documents.

The remaining stages for the Bletsoe Neighbourhood Plan can be summarised as follows:

STEP 1		PREPARING DRAFT NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN
1a	PCS	Production of Strategic Environmental Assessment as required by Local Planning Authority (LPA) and update draft Neighbourhood Plan
1b	PC	Forum approves draft Neighbourhood Plan
1c	SG/PCS/BBC	Meet Bedford Borough Council (BBC) to discuss timetable moving forward
STEP 2		CONSULTATION AND SUBMISSION
2a	PC/PCS	Reg 14 Consultation on Pre-Submission Plan (minimum 6 weeks)
2b	SG/CS/PCS	Consider responses to consultation (ongoing)
2c	SG/CS	Produce log of consultation responses (ongoing)
2d	PCS	Relevant amendments to Plan/Proposals Map
2e	PCS	Relevant amendments to Basic Conditions Statement
2f	PCS	Relevant amendments to Consultation Statement
2g	PC	Parish Council approve Plan/accompanying documents for submission
2h	SG/PCS/BBC	Meet with BBC to discuss changes to the Plan
2i	PC	Submission of Plan to LPA
2j	SG/PCS/BBC	Meet BBC to confirm appointment of examination and referendum timetable
2k	BBC	BBC legal compliance check
2l	BBC	Reg 16 LPA led publicity period (minimum 6 weeks)
STEP 3		INDEPENDENT EXAMINATION
3a	SG/PCS	Identify lead contact for information on submissions/evidence
3b	PCS	Respond to Examiner information requests
3c	BBC/External	EXAMINATION
3d	BBC	Examination outcome reported
STEP 4		REFERENDUM AND ADOPTION
4a	SG	Community consultation event (pre referendum promotion/information event)
4b	BBC	Consider Plan following Examiners Report
4c	BBC	REFERENDUM
4d	BBC	BBC make plan

SG	Steering Group
PC	Parish Council
CS	Consultant Support (Consultation, Specialist Studies/Surveys etc)
PCS	Planning Consultant Support
BBC	Bedford Borough Council

Production of Strategic Environmental Assessment

Bletsoe Parish Council, at its meeting on 6 November 2017, decided to proceed to apply for an additional grant to enable a full SEA to be prepared. A grant application was, therefore, submitted and acknowledged on 1 December 2017. The grant provider, Locality, has subsequently contacted the Parish Council and confirmed that further external support is available where the criteria for "complexity" is met; as the Bletsoe Neighbourhood Plan proposes to allocate three sites for housing, it should fall within the criteria for complexity and thus either (i) additional grant funding of up to £6,000 is available or, alternatively (ii) access to technical support packages are available - this includes a package specifically for the preparation of an SEA.

Locality have specifically requested the Parish Council to consider the options and either:

- (a) Request Locality to assess the grant application that has been submitted. Applications for grant for 2017/2018 can be submitted until 31 January 2018 but expenditure through a grant must be completed by 31 March 2018 - Woods Hardwick have confirmed that the work could be delivered before 31 March 2018.
- (b) The grant application is withdrawn and Bletsoe Parish Council submit a new application by 31 January 2018 for the SEA technical support package.

This is a difficult decision because the Parish Council may have a strong preference, based on past performance, to apply for the technical support package. There are good reasons why, on balance, it may be preferable for Bletsoe Parish Council to commission the SEA from its appointed planning consultant, Woods Hardwick Limited. Firstly, they have been actively involved with the emerging plan and have prepared the draft Neighbourhood Plan and associated documents; they now have a good knowledge of the local area. Secondly, Woods Hardwick Limited have also already been liaising with the Local Planning Authority and Historic England in respect of the scope of the SEA and this has enabled a quotation for this additional work to be provided. The quotation totals £6,000 plus VAT and this level of grant is available and, if approved, can be applied for to enable the final stages of the Neighbourhood Plan to be concluded and thus enable the Plan to be progressed to LPA submission stage. Finally, Woods Hardwick Limited will be required to review the SEA in any event to enable the draft Neighbourhood Plan, and other supporting documents, to be updated to reflect the outcome of the SEA. This would be built into their quotation and there is, therefore, a risk that there would be additional cost implications if the SEA is prepared by an alternative party.

Parish Council Budget 2018/2019

Whilst a number of the stages identified in the table above are cost neutral to the Parish Council, in so far as they require a commitment from Bedford Borough Council, or are covered by the existing commission with Woods Hardwick Limited, it is inevitable that further costs will be incurred to enable the draft Neighbourhood Plan to be progressed to LPA submission stage. There is, for example, a requirement to consult on the draft neighbourhood plan, which could potentially include a formal drop-in type event, and there will be further meetings, publicity and printing costs that are not covered in existing consultancy rates.

Assuming the Parish Council opts to pursue the grant application, as submitted, and appoints Woods Hardwick Limited to undertake the SEA, it is considered that the sum of £2,000 would cover planning consultant "expenses", arrangements for consultation on the draft plan, including printing costs, and any further essential consultant costs. This budget would need to be carefully managed.

Recommendations

- (1). That, for the reasons outlined, the Parish Council reaffirm its decision to apply for grant funding to enable Woods Hardwick to be appointed to undertake the Strategic Environmental Assessment and to notify the grant organisation, Locality, accordingly.**

Suggested Response:

"Bletsoe Parish Council has carefully considered the matter and the options available and has agreed to submit the application for grant funding of £6,000 to enable the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) to be commissioned from its appointed planning consultant, Woods Hardwick Limited. Woods Hardwick have been actively involved so far, have prepared the draft Neighbourhood Plan and associated documents and they now have a good knowledge of the local area. Woods Hardwick Limited have also been liaising with the Local Planning Authority and Historic England in respect of the scope of the SEA and this will enable them to hit the ground running and complete the work by 31 March 2018. They have indicated a consultancy day rate of £500 which is in accordance with the grant criteria. The quotation totals £6,000 plus VAT and this level of grant is available. I do hope that the grant application, submitted on 1 December 2017, will be successful".

- (2). That, if the grant funding application is declined, a further application be made for the SEA Technical Support Package.**
- (3). That, on the basis of (1) above, a budget of £2,000 be established in 2018/2019 for the Neighbourhood Planning initiative.**