

# Chairing the Neighbourhood Planning Advisory Group – Jane Lang

## **What the Group Does**

The essence of Community Planning is to work together to improve services where change is most needed, by engaging the community in the process, and taking an Outcomes approach to achieving alignment of services, so that activities can be better coordinated across the public, community and voluntary sectors, to their mutual benefit.

Uppingham's Neighbourhood Plan is under review, and that process was brought under the umbrella of the Town Council in 2016, as detailed in the Town Clerk's paper of May 2018, in order to benefit from its Governance structure and to provide administrative support. The Neighbourhood Planning Committee (now re-formulated as an Advisory Group - NPAG) was set up to deliver the review. NPAG consists of representatives from local stakeholder groups, many of whom were involved in the drafting of the first Plan, and a number of members of Uppingham Town Council. It is currently chaired by Councillor Dave Casewell.

## **The Group's Strategy**

The Group is yet to formulate a strategy or formally identify outcomes, and it has not notified Rutland County Council that it has begun its review. Having identified the need for new evidence for the Refresh, in December 2018 an evidence report from OPUN was delivered, for which funds were provided by the Town Council. NPAG has disagreed over who should be its Chair for over a year, culminating in a Motion of No Confidence in the Chair on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 2019, which was amended to a proposal for candidates for the position of Chair to submit a bid which will be considered by Full Council. It had a single debate about kicking off the review process by holding a Launch Event in December 2018. This proposal has not yet been supported by Full Council. NPAG is therefore yet to commence community engagement activity.

## **Organisation**

NPAG meets quarterly, and the meetings generate Agendas and Minutes usually drawn up by the Town Clerk, who also maintains a work plan for the Council which is not published to NPAG. An underlying concern of the whole group is the large volume of writing which needs to be undertaken to produce a draft final document, and who will be responsible for doing this work. There is no defined work plan for the Group, showing how it will achieve its outcomes, though this was discussed at the January 2018 meeting, alongside the need to nominate task groups.

## **Roles and Responsibilities**

The role of the voluntary organisations in the delivery of the plan is not defined, beyond the attendance of members of the Group at meetings, where they are asked for their opinion on matters on the Agenda. This information is then taken to Full Council for approval. Since the Terms of Reference of NPAG were changed by Full Council, all decision-making responsibility is currently at Full Council level.

## **The Chair's Role**

The role of the Chair is to lead the delivery of the Group's strategy on the Neighbourhood Plan, to organise agendas and chair meetings to that end, and to represent NPAG at Full Council and externally.

The Chair is responsible for ensuring that the Plan is delivered on time and that it meets the Outcomes set for it by the group. In order to do that she/he needs to ensure the Group has a set of working documents which assist NPAG to work through the process of reviewing the plan, and documents which provide evidence for decisions made on changes to the Plan.

## **What the Chair needs to do now**

If a timetable had been set for the Neighbourhood Planning Review process in Uppingham, it would by now be very far adrift from it. The group has responded to external consultation requests. The OPUN report satisfies the need for hard evidence on planning matters. These are important elements. However they should not be the only drivers of the content of the plan. There has been no engagement with the people of Uppingham to find out what they want, which is a fundamental element of any Community Planning activity. In addition, developers who had been

excited by the futuristic thinking in the original plan are now becoming impatient with the lack of progress, because they cannot identify how they should engage with the Community and the Town Council, or put together a business case for why staying involved is likely to be worthwhile in terms of new business.

In short, the good work achieved on the original Plan is in danger of being squandered. This is because another fundamental aspect of Community Planning, the definition of roles and responsibilities, far from being settled, is a source of ongoing contention between the Town Council and Community Stakeholders.

NPAG needs a Chair who wishes to achieve a quality process for reviewing the Neighbourhood Plan, one who understands how to set and agree work plans for the whole group to participate in, and how to work with the various representatives to ensure the outcomes of the revised plan align with their own group's objectives so far as practicable, and that any conflicts are resolved.

The lack of a work plan means there is no defined list of activities, and no timescales attached to the activities which have already been started. A good quality Neighbourhood Plan will be achieved by starting from 'now', to define the outcomes, aims, objectives, activities, scope, resourcing requirements, estimated timetable for a work plan, and a resultant risk register.

Alternatively, if we attempt to align with the timescales of Rutland County Council (thereby using a defined end date and driving the work plan from the back end) we should be completing our plan in the first half of 2020. That is approximately 9 months away, which at the current rate is 3 NPAG meetings time. Clearly this is not achievable without taking out critical work streams, or choosing a different end date to work backwards from. For these reasons it should not be the place to start from if we are intending to achieve a good quality refresh.

The relationship of stakeholder groups with the Council members is under pressure. Those stakeholders feel a sense of ownership for the Neighbourhood Plan, and are keen to ensure a quality review process. The wide held and deep frustration amongst those who speak on behalf of sizeable and intersecting groups in the Town must be eased. It is important that the Chair inspires their confidence, represents and champions their views at Town Council meetings, and instigates activities which ensure community engagement takes place as a matter of urgency.

The Council's own aims and objectives for the review of the Neighbourhood Plan need to be defined as part of the alignment of Outcomes. The Chair needs to work with the Council to identify its aims and objectives for the public assets it owns or runs in partnership, and how it wants to use the funds it controls, in the period up to 2036. It is unclear whether its plans currently align with those of the community groups or the wider community.

## **Why I think I would be a good choice for Chair of NPAG**

I have a good understanding of the original Plan, as I was one of the people most involved in its drafting, with a very good record of attendance, participation, and input that was adopted in the review meetings, over several years.

I have good Project Management (PM) skills. In my view a PM process is needed above and beyond the NPAG Agendas and Minutes, due to the many different facets of the review, and the large number of organisations involved. Currently we have no way of seeing, beyond Full Council Minutes (which are not working documents) whether actions instigated months or years ago (such as the decision to set up Task Groups) have been completed, and if not why not, or where decisions taken in NPAG meetings, such as the proposal for a Launch Event, are affected by Full Council decisions. We suffer from not having visibility of milestones such as upcoming Full Council meetings, so we are not driving activities in either NPAG or the community groups which put us in a position to report progress at those meetings. All this can be fixed through PM practices.

I would very much like to see the Review set out some new aims for the town, over and above those identified in the original Neighbourhood Plan, which is now coming up to three and a half years old. Change is being forced upon us by technology, climate change, and business and economic factors, including transport and retail, at a fast pace. We must respond in a way that protects the interests of the Town as they are identified by the Community, and enables the Town Council to be a champion for the Neighbourhood Plan on behalf of the Community. I believe that through much listening, encouraging, and sometimes challenging, I can achieve that.