

**Presentation to the RTPI Regional Event
Planning with Communities, 11 February 2020**

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Hello, my name is Alison Eardley and I am a neighbourhood planning consultant. I worked alongside Warnham Parish Council and Horsham District Council in the preparation of the Warnham Neighbourhood Plan, which received a commendation at the South East RTPI awards. I'm here with my colleagues and I'd like to talk about community engagement in neighbourhood planning.

It's been 50 years since Skeffington laid the foundations for 'participatory planning'. Published in 1969, it was the first attempt to set out a systematic approach to community involvement in planning and although it was widely criticised as inadequate at the time, from the early 1970s onwards an increasing number of planners, designers and urban renewers began to aim to work *with* communities rather than *in spite* of them.

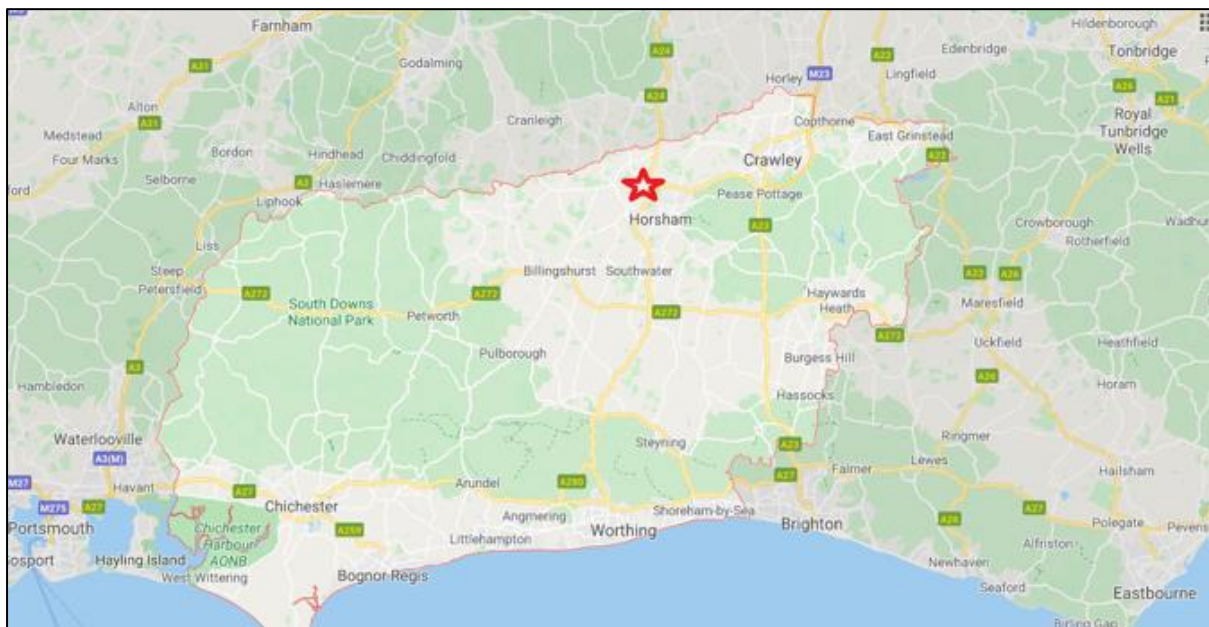
For some decades, communities have been actively involved in shaping the places in which they live at the very local level through Town and Parish community led plans, but these were always limited in scope and it was not until the Localism Act of 2011 that greater powers were introduced for local people to get involved in the real nitty gritty of planning – for instance safeguarding local heritage, landscape, green spaces and providing new

opportunities for leisure and recreation – and also the more controversial side such as deciding on where new homes and employment sites should go.

The influence of Skeffington’s report is clear, with community engagement now embedded in legislation. But to what extent can communities truly be fully engaged in planning? Government has set ambitious targets, particularly related to housing delivery to tackle the housing crisis but to what degree is neighbourhood planning helping to deliver these targets – indeed, is that its role – is it a tool to deliver top-down targets and priorities or is the emphasis on delivering local priorities? Where do the two halves meet?

Today, I propose to share our experiences of developing the Neighbourhood Plan for Warnham – a collaboration between the local community and the local authority and supported by external consultants - focussing in particular on how we successfully engaged the local community.

I then want to discuss some of the challenges we faced and how we overcame them. Finally, I want to touch on the wider implications for community involvement in planning, particularly addressing the relationship between “local” vs “strategic”.



For those of you who aren’t sure, Warnham is a small rural parish in West Sussex, located just south west of Crawley, within Horsham district.



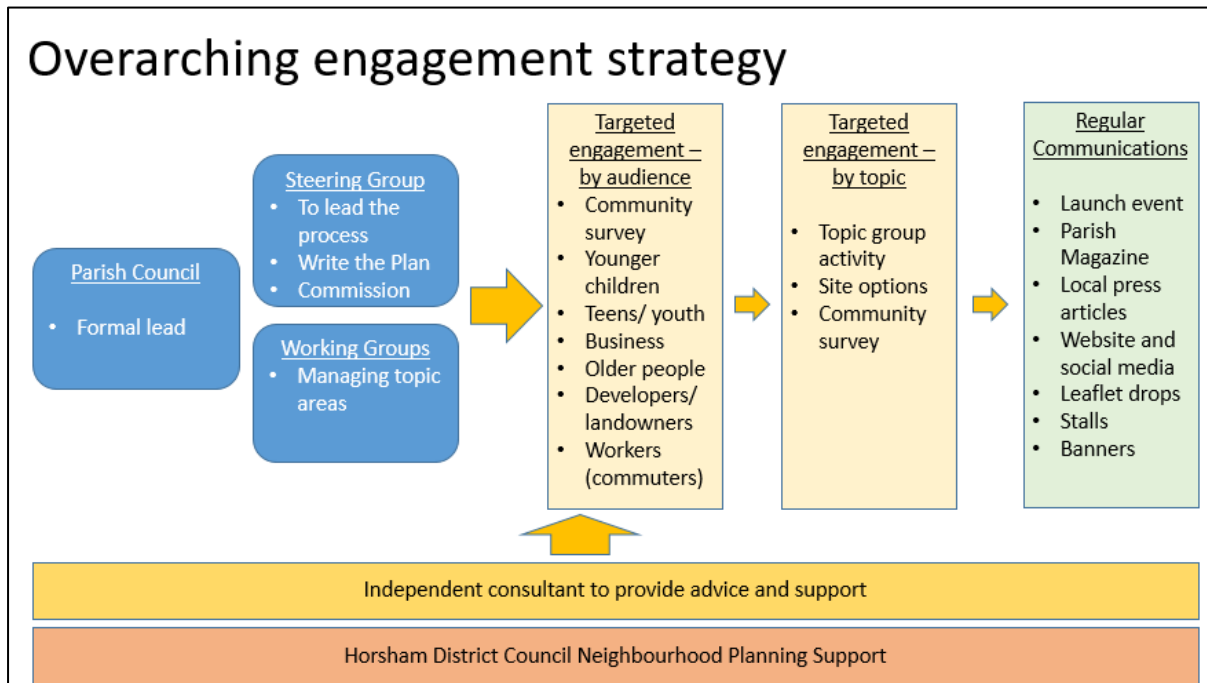
It has a population of just over 2,000 people, most of whom live in the village of Warnham itself, with the smaller hamlet of Kingsfold to the north. It's a thriving community with a primary school, a number of leisure facilities and many active local organisations.

It is not without its challenges though: an initial review of evidence relating to the parish revealed that Warnham has experienced strong growth in its older population and the needs of this growing sector need to be considered and catered for in terms of housing and facilities, particularly given the rurality of the area. In addition, fewer young people and families have been moving into Warnham, largely because the prevalence of larger houses makes average prices high. If this decline is not addressed, it could have serious knock on effects on the viability of the primary school for instance.

A further challenge, not uncommon in rural areas, is the reliance of residents on cars to get to work and to access facilities not available within the village. This, coupled with many existing dwellings requiring on street parking, causes congestion.

The parish council viewed neighbourhood planning as an opportunity to tackle proactively some of these challenges, while at the same time ensuring that the rural beauty of the parish was not compromised. It recognised, however, that some of the things required to

effect change, could potentially be difficult to broach with the community, therefore it was of paramount importance that local people understood and engaged with the planning process, especially what can and cannot be achieved.



Very early on, the parish council engaged consultants to help them navigate the neighbourhood planning process. One of the initial tasks was to put together an Engagement and Communications Strategy, which would help the steering group identify how best to engage people – both by target audience and by topic, underpinned by regular communications about the process, how feedback was being used, and progress made.

A series of Launch Events were held to introduce neighbourhood planning, and to gather initial views on a series of overarching topics. These were extremely well attended and the information gathered informed a further set of targeted discussions with groups and individuals including parent and toddler groups, seniors, the Women’s Institute, parents and commuters. In parallel, a questionnaire was sent out to approximately 100 businesses operating in the Parish to gain their input on what they felt was important to support them and their work.

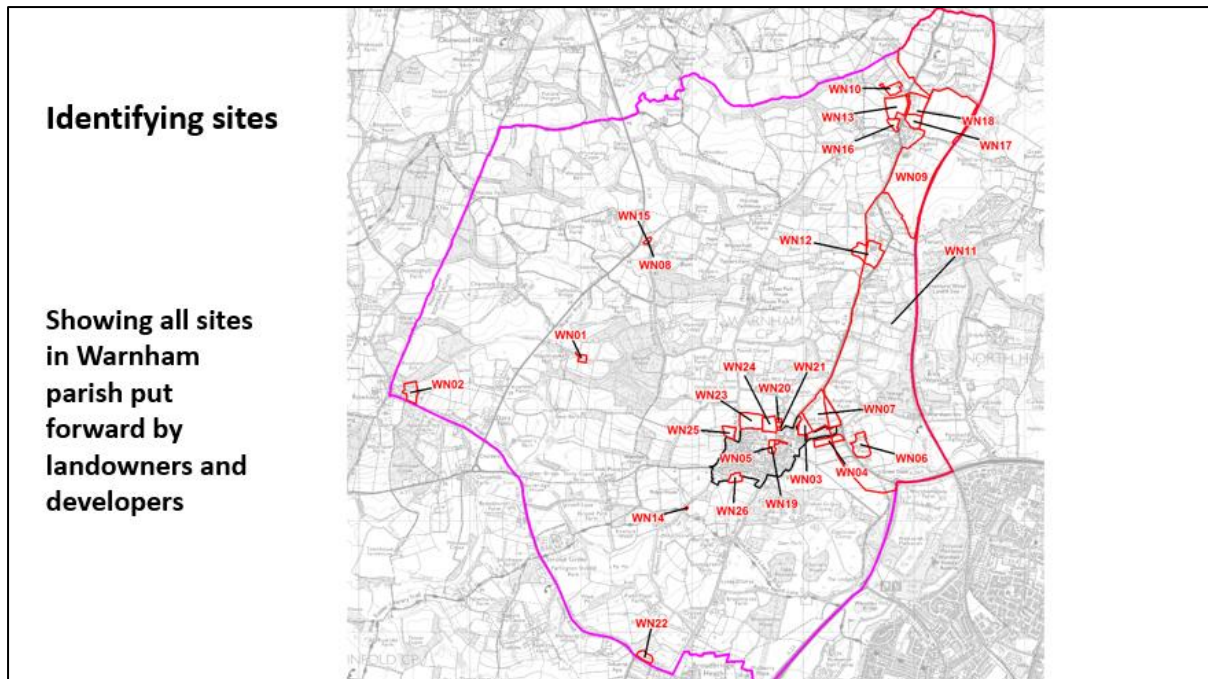
Engagement activities



This wealth of information enabled the Steering Group to put together a draft vision for the Parish, which was then tested via a parish-wide survey, supported by further drop-in events which delved deeper into the topic areas. It received a very good response and enabled the group to crystallise the vision and set out a series of specific objectives that would ultimately be delivered by the policies in the Plan.

Importantly, the community feedback underpinned a general acceptance that the Plan should consider housing needs – in particular for young families and older residents – as shown in the initial evidence review.

But there was a strong reluctance to deliver more housing than required – the residents of Warnham were strongly protective of the rural nature of the parish and were keen to ensure that only the minimum number of houses should be built to support the necessary provision of affordable homes.



The need for new homes was backed up at the district level whose Planning Framework outlined that 1,500 homes would be expected to be delivered by Neighbourhood Plans. This number was not broken down by individual parish, however, so the Steering Group commissioned a Local Housing Needs Assessment to give a clearer indication of the likely numbers and also the types of homes that would be required in Warnham itself.

A local call for sites was launched which, when added to those already contained in Horsham's site list, led to a long list of 31 sites. Working with Horsham, a comprehensive assessment framework was devised, taking the criteria from the local authority and adding some local criteria that had been identified from the feedback to date – and all sites were assessed. The findings were explained in full to the community at a series of local meetings – which also provided an opportunity to share with people how the information gathered to date was being used to develop potential policies and again gain feedback on this.

Overwhelming support was for housing sites in and around the village itself, which was felt to be the most sustainable location, and two sites were selected to deliver at least 50 homes.

Outcomes

The local community

- Retained the football pitch
- Additional footpaths and cycling connections in the parish
- Provision of housing to meet identified local need
- Detail of priority investment projects

The economy

- Support for additional public car parking at the railway station
- Retention of existing employment sites
- Support for roll-out of wifi
- Conversion of redundant farm buildings to B1 / B8 use

The environment

- Development steered to most sustainable location
- Development to be in keeping with local character and context
- Identification of potential Local Listing heritage assets
- Safeguarding the natural environment and biodiversity from impacts of development

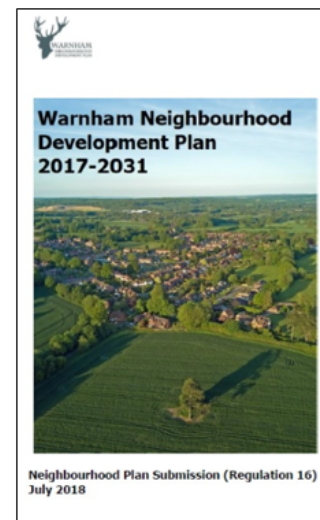


In total, some 60 events and supporting articles were undertaken during the plan period, which led to the development of a Plan which has achieved the following outcomes. 34% of the electorate turned out to vote with 77% of the community voting in favour of the plan.

What the Examiner said:

“...the Steering Group went to considerable effort to ensure that everyone in the parish had an opportunity to input their views. It is also clear that the Steering Group has been provided with helpful advice from Horsham District Council to ensure that it has established a sound and robust evidence base, particularly following the call for sites for proposed residential development within the WNDP over the life of the Plan. Moreover, the Parish Council has acted on that advice in the preparation of the WNDP.”

Jeremy Edge BSc FRICS MRTPI

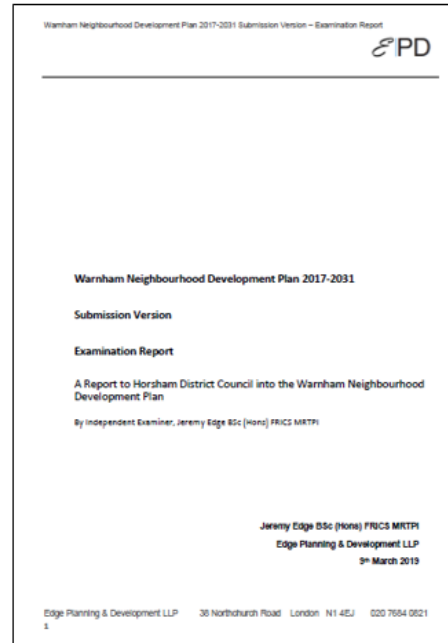


The Examiner had a lot of positive feedback about our approach to engagement including how the sites had been selected.

The Examiner acknowledged:

“the sites had been subject to careful and critical assessment of a standard not commonly found in the evidence base for neighbourhood plans.”

Jeremy Edge BSc FRICS MRTPI



But whilst on paper the process seems fairly smooth and well-executed, it wasn't all plain sailing.

Challenges and how we overcame them

- Some groups were harder to engage than others
- Agreeing on a housing numbers and sites
- Delays in the planning process led to local apathy and disenchantment
- Landowner and developer tactics
- Affordability of housing
- Transport planning
- Sustainable design



Some of these challenges will be familiar to those who have been working on neighbourhood plans. We recognised the need to go to those groups and individuals, rather than simply expecting them to come to us. So we had volunteers at the bus stops talking to school children on their way to and from school, we phoned business who might not have the time to fill in a survey, we held events at the local pubs and we piggy backed onto existing activities in the parish that were already attracting a ready audience. It can be an

intensive exercise, but was worth it to give those people as full an opportunity to take part as possible.

The sheer length of time it took to get the plan in place was also problematic, largely due to the changing goalposts at the national level. Horsham Council were proactive in terms of the support they gave and delivered training conferences, health-checks prior to the first round of formal consultation and set up an online information sharing forum between the district and the parishes. We also maintained regular communications locally so that even when little progress was being made, people at least were informed of this and the reasons why.

Other challenges included being bound by the national definitions of affordability, in an area where for instance, even 'affordable' is still out of reach of the people we are trying to target in the Plan – it will be interesting to see to what extent the Lewes Low Cost housing model counters this and to what extent that might be rolled out elsewhere.

The lack of co-ordination between spatial and land-use planning and transport planning as well as the limits in national policy to achieving wholly sustainable design; all things that concerned local people greatly but which we had to temper expectations to avoid disappointment. Dealing with sometimes aggressive developers and the need to have a robust evidence base to clearly and adequately explain to them -and ultimately the examiner and the community - how sites have been assessed and why decisions have been taken in the way they have.

The second point here was one of the most challenging in the entire exercise. As mentioned there was a general acceptance of the need for more homes but a real reluctance to introduce too many, which people felt would irreversibly change the rural nature of the parish and bring with it issues such as further traffic. There were already roughly 5,000 homes being built on strategic sites nearby, and therefore many people could not understand why more were needed in Warnham.

The parish had previously undertaken a housing needs study, but this was felt – rightly - to be inadequate by Horsham DC because it provided a mere snapshot of need as opposed to

taking into account projected trends on population growth, inward and outward migration and economic factors, for instance.

Therefore we commissioned a Housing Needs Assessment based on the government guidance, using the Locality technical support. This study used four datasets to calculate housing need, producing possible targets ranging from 18 to 206 homes required over the Plan period. Normally, an average of these figures is taken to provide a final unconstrained 'target' figure, this was not felt to adequately take into account the views of local people or local policy. The parish council emphasised that "To produce a Neighbourhood Plan most likely to gain popular support at Referendum, the Parish Council encourage the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group to develop the plan based on the lower range of housing growth."

So we revisited the figures applying weightings to the datasets to determine a need of approximately 50 dwellings over the plan period, which would satisfy the growing needs of the local community, while still contributing the wider strategic housing need.

Horsham had expressed concern about this approach, particularly because of emerging changes to the way housing need would be calculated in the future, which would increase the district-wide number, and we therefore found a compromise by setting an aim within the plan to review the neighbourhood plan once the Horsham Local Plan Review had been completed.

After the exercise was completed, the three partners involved – the parish, the district and myself as the external consultant, discussed what we thought had gone well and what we could usefully share with other groups. Here are some of the factors raised by the parish council.

Advice for other neighbourhood planning groups

- Fully understand the extent and processes of neighbourhood planning
- Develop a robust Terms of Reference
- Maintain close liaison with local authority
- Need for continuity and commitment from volunteers
- Apply for grants and technical support
- Develop and share a vision and objectives at early stage
- Take networking opportunities



And here are some from the Planning authority and consultant perspective

Additional learning points

Horsham District Council

- Use social media
- Provide templates and guidance notes
- Have dedicated officer support
- Deliver seminars to disseminate key messages
- Undertake informal 'Health checks'
- Advocate technical support

Independent Planning consultant

- Be an independent 'critical friend'
- Advise using RTPI Code of Professional Conduct
- Share best practice from other areas
- Offer hands on support
- Provide mediation between stakeholders



I said I wanted to touch on the wider implications for community involvement in planning, particularly the relationship between “local” vs “strategic”. This has been relevant in Warnham, with much discussion about the number of homes that should be allocated locally – with the local community perspective being quite different to the top-down strategic perspective.

In 2017, the government published its White Paper, “Fixing our Broken Housing Market”, which set an ambitious target of 300k new homes per year to tackle what it called the housing crisis. It’s also introduced the standardised methodology for calculating housing need and the ability for local authorities to set parish housing targets for neighbourhood plans. Many districts, including Horsham, now have a significant uplift in proposed housing numbers – which will need to be delivered either through strategic sites or via neighbourhood plans. But as can be seen on the slide, by 2018, over 60% of neighbourhood plans contained no site allocations, instead, focussing on safeguarding policies – of infrastructure, green space and heritage assets for instance.

Is neighbourhood planning the answer?

“Our research shows 60 per cent of [neighbourhood] plans do not contain a housing figure or site allocations, which suggest that local communities are placing greater emphasis on other planning issues such as the protection of local infrastructure, services and green spaces.”

*“[there is a] propensity for local political motives to use the planning system contrary to national objectives. A change to the Standard Methodology to **require** the alignment of housing requirements with economic growth strategies would help to address this problem.”*

Research by [Lichfields](#), 2018

What will the new methodology mean for neighbourhood planning? How will neighbourhood planning groups balance the top-down push for housing versus the promise of Localism as a tool to enable communities to be more in control of their future growth? It’s interesting to note that there was a spike in the number of both strategic plans and neighbourhood plans submitted for examination in January 2019 just ahead of the NPPF changes.

As we start to see more and more ‘made’ plans being updated, will those groups need to find additional sites for housing despite having undergone robust engagement as to what is both accepted by the community and is sustainable.

Warnham parish has not escaped this challenge, with the emerging Horsham Local Plan Review consulting on allocating a further 50 or so homes within the neighbourhood area. Warnham's Neighbourhood Plan was well received, partly on account of the parishioners being told that the housing allocated in the plan was *it* until 2031. Now before the proverbial ink is dry on the made plan (8 months ago) the housing total has been arbitrarily doubled. This is not likely to go down well.

If we want to avoid feelings of disenfranchisement in the planning system, we need to find a way of further fine-tuning the role and relative influence of communities in planning.

That might include:

- Finding ways to involve people more fully in local planning more generally – e.g. fully aligning neighbourhood and local plans
- At the same time, more closely aligned spatial and transport planning, which is one of the areas that most frustrates communities in the current process.
- Revisiting the definition of 'affordable housing' and how neighbourhood plans might influence this – perhaps linking to average local household incomes as proposed in the Lewes Neighbourhood Plan (previous speaker). Just last week, government has issued a new consultation on its proposed First Homes policy, which seeks to offer discounted homes for local people. It will be interesting to see how this pans out.
- And upping our game in terms of sustainable design and how communities can have a much greater influence over this – particularly important in the light of the climate crisis and the fact that many parishes and districts are setting their own targets for sustainable living that go above and beyond what might be expected through current building regulations.

“...is it not time for another Skeffington? Should we not be renewing our efforts? It is probably true that, in planning, we are better than most other sectors in this matter. But we are definitely not good enough.”

Former Chief Planning Inspector, Chris Shepley, 2018

So perhaps it is time for a new Skeffington Report – to consider these issues and to set out a renewed relationship between top-down and bottom-up that is flexible enough to enable communities to truly shape their areas, while being strategic enough to deliver what is needed as a country.

For more information

- Warnham Parish Council: <https://warnham.org.uk/planning>
- Horsham Neighbourhood Planning: <https://www.horsham.gov.uk/planning/neighbourhood-planning>
- Alison Eardley Consulting: www.yourfriendlyplanner.co.uk