

The Ripon City Plan – In My View Part 1

One of my roles as City Development Manager is to work with the City Plan Committee to support the production of a Neighbourhood Plan - the Ripon City Plan. So, as part of the team I want to bust some of the myths that appear to exist.

Neighbourhood Plans are a cornerstone of the coalition government's localism policy. It is a fundamentally different approach because the people that live in an area get to vote on a plan for how that place is developed - planning by democracy.

At the moment, public participation in planning is limited. Harrogate Borough Council, as the local planning authority produce a local plan for the whole district which outlines amongst other things, land for new houses and new business premises and policies to support the tourism industry and town centres. Whilst the document is subject to consultation, few people get involved.

A Neighbourhood Plan for Ripon is an opportunity for the people that live here to have a greater say. The Neighbourhood Plan cannot contradict the Harrogate Local Plan; it can't be used to stop proposed development, but it can enhance the existing planning policies to ensure that the future needs of the City are met.

This was the reason that a number of organisations (City Council, Chamber of Trade, Greater Ripon Improvement Partnership, Civic Society, and the Chapter of Cathedral) joined forces to propose a Neighbourhood Plan to address some of the City's issues and enable the local community to have a greater say in its future.

The City Plan is being put together by the Committee which is formed of representatives from each of the aforementioned organisations. Many of these individuals are involved because they have a background in either planning or development, they are passionate about making the City a better place and are willing to commit their time to putting together a Plan for the City for others to consider. As the Chairman of the Committee, Cllr Mick Stanley, has stated many times, "this is a plan for Ripon, which the people of Ripon will vote upon and it is not a City Council Plan."

In developing a Neighbourhood Plan there are many things to consider, especially in our City, where such a wide range of issues could be addressed. However, the starting point for all is defining and agreeing the boundaries of the "Neighbourhood".

Whilst a number of options were considered, it was ultimately agreed, through consultation, that the "Neighbourhood" was the whole of the Ripon Parish. This is important for two reasons; firstly, this defines the area in which the Neighbourhood Plan's proposals and policies will apply and secondly it also determines who will vote in the referendum. So, whilst residents of many of the surrounding parishes have a view about the City, which we welcome, they unfortunately will not be able to participate in the ballot.

The community consultation, which took place between April and June last year, saw flyers and information distributed to every household. The responses to our question "How could Ripon be better for you?" set the challenge for the City Plan Committee by identifying the key issues. Since then, we have been working through all of the main issues and meeting with a series of experts and professionals, to discuss the range of potential solutions that are available. This is the necessary

background work that will enable the draft Ripon City Plan to be produced for consultation later this year.

From this coming consultation it is important that we understand what you, the residents of Ripon think of our draft proposals because ultimately, in the future you will be deciding, through the referendum, whether the City Plan is adopted or not.

However, it is also important to recognise that a Neighbourhood Plan alone cannot address all of the problems which the City faces. It is predominantly a document which sets out policies for the use of land and allocates sites for development, and whilst these are important there are a range of other matters, such as environmental projects and traffic matters which people have highlighted as needing to be addressed but which cannot be part of the Neighbourhood Plan.

The City Development Initiative provides the ideal mechanism for delivering these other identified improvements which complement but cannot be delivered by the Neighbourhood Plan. Together these two initiatives can form firm foundations for the improvements needed in the City and this is what we are working towards.

Many communities across the country are getting to grips with Neighbourhood Plans with currently around a thousand at some stage of preparation. However, they are also still a relatively new concept with only six having been to a referendum. Interestingly, every one of these has been supported by an overwhelming majority of people because the plan addresses what the community want.

Neighbourhood Plans look set to become a very powerful tool for communities in the future and here in Ripon could allow us to have a greater influence in the future of the City. In the second part next week I'll look at some of the challenges that the Ripon City Plan is seeking to address and some of the potential solutions that we are proposing.