

Crowhurst Neighbourhood Plan (Communications) meeting with Stephen Hardy 13/2/16

Present: Alan Collins (host), Valerie Grove, Willy Wilson, Ros Day, Dave Howley, Stephen Hardy

Stephen is a recently retired solicitor, currently working for CPRE, Chair of the Robertsbridge Parish Council and has been active in the drawing up of plans for the Robertsbridge NP. He had researched other schemes underway in other Villages and towns in East Sussex and elsewhere in the hope of avoiding problems and learning from their work. He brought us up to date with a number of these developments and some of the problems they'd encountered. He later explained the process they had gone through in Robertsbridge, and the measures they had taken to ensure full consultation and involvement.

Housing number: Sites of less than 6 generally count as windfall and therefore do not come off the total housing allocation for village. However, may be able to argue that if a lot of single houses were built between adoption of core strategy and NP, they should come off total. Not certain though. Rother had an estimate in their plan for 1000 houses extra this way. Would Crowhurst Park's new cabins count?

Seddlescombe had run into considerable difficulties with their NP. They had identified a number of potential sites for development through their call for sites and consulted locally on these to achieve a consensus. A substantial portion of these have been judged inappropriate by Rother District Council. Rather than go ahead with a plan that was not what the community wanted, including the removal of what the villagers designated as "green space", Seddlescombe are re-doing their plan.

A number of other villages (including Ninfield and, I think, Wadhurst) have experienced problems with a particular developer: Rydon Homes who have approached their local authority directly (Wealden), with proposals for development that are unacceptable to their local communities. At this stage it looks as if these developments may be imposed. An FOI question has been asked about the records of the meetings Rydon Homes have had with the Wealden Authority.

Stephen Hardy felt that Rother Planning officers were starting to appreciate the value of NP's and this was being reflected in a more positive and flexible approach. It means that the work they have to do for the Development Site Allocation Document (DSAD) is done by the parish as part of its NP. He explained that Robertsbridge had secured a grant of £8000 towards the NP process, but we were a much smaller Neighbourhood and the technical/consultancy costs would consequently be much less. Neighbourhood Planning Funding comes from DCLG (Department for Communities and Local Government) Unfortunately there were indications that the Government were cutting back on some of their previous commitments relating to the Community Infrastructure Levy. The Government were trying to steer the CIL according to their priorities for certain forms of housing – affordable etc. Worth talking to local housing association (Amicus Horizon for us) early on as will be a requirement for social housing as part of the allocation. They will have their own plans which may not fit with council/villager preferences. Robertsbridge currently do not have a working relationship with their local housing association.

Robertsbridge did call for sites via posters and adverts and writing to specific landowners (eg those in SHLAA doc – Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment). They kept a photo record of where posters were – important for records. Then interviewed owners on 1-1 basis using a checklist so neutral for all sites. No criteria were put up when asking for sites. These applied later. The Battle NP website says Rother assisted by writing to all landowners on SHLAA, but Robertsbridge said they did not get any assistance in the call for sites from Rother.

Then maps of all sites put up at public meeting with places for people to write comments. The owners/developers of the sites were allowed to “pitch” why their sites would be good.

Stephen Hardy assured us that he would be pleased to provide us with further advice, nature of forms used etc. He pointed out that while consulting was central “you had to have some meat to offer” for people to discuss and prioritise. We were very appreciative of this very practical help. There was plenty of publicity of different kinds and 400 attended their exhibition on July 4th last year. This was followed by a Questionnaire not just on Housing but on all peoples’ preferences for the NP, for example Flooding, Amenities, types of housing, pavements.... This was carefully organised with “street champions”, they had an incredible 73% response to a long questionnaire, (follow up, return visits required). This was hand delivered to all houses with the parish newsletter which explained about the NP and the sites (so that even if people had not attended any of the public meetings/events they would have the information to hand) Robertsbridge already had a network of people through their Helping Hands group.

People were also able to fill in online although not many did. Survey anonymous but residents asked to fill in postcode so types of responses per area could be looked at. Survey created and analysed by paid consultant (although there were issues with some of the initial analysis)

Factors to consider in acceptance or rejection of sites

1. Archaeological/historical sites
2. Public footpaths and the views from them
3. Access to mains sewerage (developers unlikely to install septic tanks)?
4. Rural 'gateway' and potential obstruction of views in AONBs
5. TPOs (tree Preservation orders) / listed buildings. Heritage assets
6. RAMSAR Convention (The Convention on Wetlands of International Importance is the intergovernmental treaty that provides the framework for the conservation and wise use of wetlands and their resources). <http://www.ramsar.org/>
7. Development needs to be sustainable so near development boundary and village “centre/resources” .

Also be wary of undeclared vested interests if pressure builds on particular sites. E.g. landowner/developer have undisclosed formal/informal agreement or deal pending. Tried to keep transparent when looking at sites if anybody on committee had an interest in a particular site – they would not be involved in the final decision for it.

We should value Crowhurst’s aspirations, history, heritage, and strengths, and what people most value should be explored and should inform the whole process, including the final application.

Some developers were already interested in certain areas of Robertsbridge (from SHLAA). Several saw benefits in working with NP group to avoid issues.

Robertsbridge did not give incentives to return surveys – were anonymous and to avoid possible “corruption” by incentive being offered by a site-owner/developer. Did do party for volunteers. Can also give an “honorarium” to people who have given a lot of support/assistance.

Other activities were important in the process: a lot of issues were dealt with by different sub groups for Infrastructure, Environment, Housing, Economy, and Amenities. All reported back to a central point, this shared the burden of work, and encouraged participation and ownership. Research was accessed through different sources of publicly held data: 2008 Housing Needs Survey, the Census, Local Authority demographics. Data was fed in on footpaths, pavements, parking problems, flooding and “run off”, amenities and other local concerns. Infrastructure requirements need to be met. Proposals must be evidence based.

Robertsbridge used paid consultants for planning expertise , web site and surveys. If using local expertise, everybody must be called a ‘volunteer’ to avoid legal challenge (public liability insurance etc.) even if paid an ‘honorarium’. All volunteers in Robertsbridge were rewarded with a big party.

Val to investigate domain name registration costs and website set-up. Will need community forum page and possibly separate pages for NP working groups (e.g. Housing / environment / transport / education etc). Possibility of free hosting by Hugo Fox.
<http://www.hugofox.com/community/>

Robertsbridge had a formal communication and engagement strategy, written via consultant. Important that engagement seen to be full when plan is examined.

Sites need to comply with Local Development Plan/National Policy Framework. They also have to be deliverable ie if a site needs access across someone else’s land and that permission is not given, the site is not deliverable. For our village, need to check legislation about utility access, particularly septic tanks. May be more difficult to develop where no mains sewerage (may explain why the development boundary only covers areas south of railway line/village hall.)?

Much useful information on line. Can see what other people have done. Urged us to find a parish of similar size with similar housing allocation – Robertsbridge is quite a bit larger which changes needs. Maybe look at parishes in Arun or Mid-Sussex.

Other useful references in relation to above

CPRE – Stephen Hardy happy to be liaison point <http://www.cpre.org.uk/>

DCLG- Dept. for communities and local government monthly notes
<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-communities-and-local-government/about>

LGA – Local Government Association Guide to Neighbourhood Plans <http://www.local.gov.uk/home>
then search neighbourhood plans for various guides

Rural community council of Essex Neighbourhood Planning Guide

http://www.essexrcc.org.uk/our_work_with_communities/Community_Led_Planning/Information_packs/Neighbourhood_Planning_Guide.aspx

Hereford District Council Guidance Notes. <https://www.herefordshire.gov.uk/planning-and-building-control/neighbourhood-planning/neighbourhood-development-plan-guidance>