

Minutes of a Meeting of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group held in the East Dean and Friston Village (Small) Hall on Tuesday 05 December 2023 starting at 7.30 pm.

NPSG Members Present: Cllr Michael Bustard (Chairman), Lesley Durso, Cllr Grant Fowler, Maria Stack, Tim Pontin, Jonathan Timberlake and Cllr David White

In attendance: Alison Eardley (Planning Consultant); Katrina Larkin (Deputy Clerk)

No members of the public were present

1. **Apologies:** - none
2. **Minutes of the previous meeting:** - the minutes of the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group meeting held on 31 October 2023 were confirmed as a correct record and signed by the Chair
3. **Development Plan Programme Update**

The Group discussed the programme last updated on 30 October 2023, and the following actions were agreed:

 - **Project Startup**
 - a catch up meeting with the SDNPA should be held ideally before Christmas, or early in the new year **ACTION: AE/MB**
 - regular social media updates should be issued by the Group and the Residents' Association, and copies placed in a Community Engagement folder in Dropbox. An article should be placed in the January parish magazine, publicising the draft Vision Statement, advertising the Open Evening, and inviting residents to send in photos of their favourite (publicly accessible) local views, with a small prize for the winning entry, e.g. a £15 voucher for the National Trust shop **ACTION: KL/LD/SA; AE would provide wording to cover copyright issues.**
 - **Prepare Input documentation**
 - The majority of items were already in preparation
 - Non-listed heritage items were being entered into a schedule by JT
 - Non-policy actions identified from feedback gained from survey/events were being entered into a schedule by MB
 - Draft vision and objectives – the draft Vision was nearly agreed (see paragraph 4 below) and MB would then draft a list of Objectives.
 - Additional input item – 'Getting around' – the group should identify where there were problems or challenges to be addressed. These would not be policy actions but would be linked to policy actions e.g. all developments must have appropriate infrastructure.

- Additional input item – ‘Tourism’ – the Group would consider the need for better signage, especially of paths, and address safety concerns. A fresh attempt would be made to get feedback from the National Trust: MB had this in hand; LD would also work on it
- **Community Survey Production**
 - The process should be open to feedback at each stage. The timeframe should be published, both by the council and by the Residents’ Association, with background information on the terminology used in the process, further explanation of what a Neighbourhood Plan was, etc. as residents were still not sure what was involved. **ACTION: AE/LD/KL**
 - The Open Evening on Monday 29th January 2024 in the Main Hall would be fronted by LD, who would be authorised to spend NP funds on equipment for the presentation. The village hall technical team would attend. By then the input documentation should be ready, including the interim report from AECOM on Design. After the Open Evening two weeks should be allowed for public comment and potential revision, following which a draft should be offered to the parish council for approval, either in April or May
- **Prepare Draft Neighbourhood Plan**
 - With all the above in place, it should be possible to have the first draft ready for the next stage – Review - by the end of May 2024.
- **Review**
 - The SDNPA would be asked to advise whether they would be prepared to screen the application in two stages – one informal and the next formal – or whether one stage must suffice. The formal screening stage would normally take 8 weeks.
 - The timetable beyond this point would be largely out of the control of the parish

Members thanked Mr Pontin for his work on the Programme. An update would now be prepared and placed in Dropbox.

4. **Draft Vision and Objectives**

The Group considered the draft Vision statements circulated in Report 4, and the following composite version was agreed:

Building upon the open and friendly village atmosphere and sensitively preserving the rural and built character of the Parish, our vision for East Dean, Friston, Crowlink and Birling Gap sees this parish continuing to be a thriving and sustainable place to live, work and visit, where everyone can play a full part in their community.

The mitigation of and need to adapt to climate change is a central strand of the vision. We aim to support householders in protecting and enhancing our natural environment, whilst promoting healthy living and connectivity for the benefit of all.

Any additional development within the Parish should reflect the priority to provide homes on smaller plots, suitable for downsizing for existing residents as well as for attracting and retaining younger people, and contributing to net zero environmental targets wherever possible.

5. **Neighbourhood Plan Task List**

a) The Group reviewed and updated all sections of the Task List, and the following actions were agreed:

- **Section1: Introduction** – AE had this in hand
- **Section 2: About East Dean and Friston** - AE to draft a summary of the challenges and opportunities facing the area, for the next meeting
- **Section 3: Vision and Objectives for EDF** – in addition to work by MB, MS to consider any overarching principles for the plan; AE to contribute examples; KL to provide information on Future Proofing Homes and challenges facing coastal communities
- **Section 4: Spatial Strategy** – AE had this in hand
- **Section 5: Housing** - the AECOM Housing Needs Assessment was in progress with guidance from LD. Census data would be summarised by AE. Data on homes being enlarged or split would be summarised by KL.
- **Section 6: Design Guidance and codes** – the AECOM assessment was in progress. It was noted that community scale energy could now be supplied by contract with a provider in another part of the country, but local subscribers [this would need to be an action rather than a policy]. It was also noted that the building regulations already contained some provisions for low energy and sustainability for extensions and new builds, and that there was a continual up-slide in the regulations. Cooling in summer was equally as important as energy efficiency in winter. A question was raised as to whether planning permission would be needed for solar panels **ACTION: KL to check.** Regarding the possibility of having a local museum or heritage centre, it was noted that there was little scope for this on parish property but that the National Trust had a similar facility at Birling Gap. MB would discuss this and tourism generally with the Trust.
- **Section 7: Local economy, employment, tourism** – MB was leading on this section
- **Section 8: Environment, local Green Space, local views** – work on this section was well advanced thanks to the input of JT.
- **Section 9: Getting around** – LD would take this over from JT, to consider walking routes in particular. MS would continue to work on cycling routes. It was noted that Friston Forest was an attractive biking area but not easy to access without going on unsafe roads. Once in, the gates were not currently cycle-friendly and should be upgraded. Ideally, charging points should also be supplied for electric bikes, together with water points and other bike-related facilities in a handy hub: some villages along the South Downs Way already had these. A project to provide one locally should go in the action list appended to the NP.
- **Section10: Community Facilities** – there were a number of suggestions for new local facilities, including improved disabled access to existing facilities;

public toilets; an outdoor gym; shared office space for home workers; facilities for younger people; and a gathering place accessible at no cost and as a drop-in centre. Existing facilities such as the Bowls Club and the Downlands shopping precinct could also do with an upgrade: the shop units were too small and the precinct too drab. It was agreed that MB and DW should discuss the potential for improvements with the Chair of the parish council. AE advised that many of these ideas could not be Plan policies, and instead the Group should look for feasible policies that could unlock future potential for other projects, and list the desired projects as Local Aspirations in the annex to the Plan. In the meantime, MB would go through the survey results and pick out any community aspirations that were not planning policy related but which could be collected for inclusion in the document.

- **AE would revise and reissue the Task List.**

- b) **Section 9: Getting Around** – maps at three different scales were provided at the meeting, and taken by LD and MS who would work jointly on this strand of the Plan and report to the next meeting
- c) **Black Robin Farm** – the Group considered Report 5 on the planning application to change the use of this former dairy farm to a cultural and educational centre. Advice would be offered to the parish council at their meeting on 7 December 2023, to assist the council in sending a comment on the application to the SDNPA's Major Projects Team. A record of the commentary and advice passed to the parish council is appended to these minutes.

6. **Any Other Business**

The following matters were raised:

- Group membership – a fresh request should be placed in the parish magazine for an additional member to join the Group
- Open evening on 29th January 2024 – the parish council and all village organisations should be invited to this event. Necessary expenses would be reimbursed from the project funds
- A housing inventory would be provided by AE from census information
- Butchers Hole car park tourist numbers should be obtained from ESCC – KL to enquire
- Dropbox – AE and TP would assist members with access to this Group facility

7. **Dates of future meetings**

- **Steering Group meeting - Tuesday 23rd January 2024** at 7.30pm in the Small Hall of the Village Hall
- **Open Evening – Monday 29th January 2024** at 7.30 pm in the Main hall of the Village Hall
- **Steering Group Meeting – Tuesday 12th March 2024** at 7.30pm in the Small Hall of the Village Hall

There being no further business the meeting closed at 9.21 pm

Signed..... Chairman

Date.....

Annex to Black Robin Farm report for East Dean and Friston Parish Council – 7th December 2023

1. The Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group considered this planning application at their meeting on 5 December 2023, bearing in mind its implications for development in the parish, as the project would be a major one close to the parish boundary.
2. The Group identified significant causes for concern:
 - Parking – the project plan estimates that the proposed cultural and educational centre would attract 100,000 visitors per year. Most of them would be seasonal, so as a working guideline the Group estimates that 600 visitors per day would seek to access the site in the tourist season. The on-site car park would make provision for only about 30 cars, exclusive of 5% disabled parking. The Workplace and Visitor Travel Plan suggests that visitors should be signposted to the car park at Birling Gap and the main ‘Horsefield’ car park in East Dean, but both sites are already under severe pressure in the tourist season. Cars already resort to parking on both verges of the Birling Gap Road, which is single track in parts. The road is also used by pedestrians to access the coast. The result is a significant safety hazard, as walkers have to mingle with clogged vehicles. It is likely that visitors coming to Black Robin Farm by car will want to access the site’s own car park first, to see if there are spaces – which there probably won’t be – and this will give rise to another problem: they will have to turn around and exit via the single lane access track which runs for the last 300 metres to the site from the main road. The site could be permanently gridlocked in season. It is very unsatisfactory that East Sussex Highways has not been provided with sufficient information to enable them to give a definitive comment on the proposals. The NPSG could foresee it becoming necessary to make the Birling Gap Road one way, given the likely traffic effects noted above.
 - Lack of detail about tourist movements and non-vehicular access - The project plan mentions the creation of new paths or cycle ways to access Black Robin Farm. These would clearly be vital, but again there is no information about where they would start or finish. There has been no formal consultation with the parish of East Dean and Friston, yet this parish would necessarily be involved in incorporating any new paths or tracks into its own existing network of paths and infrastructure. The parish would be very heavily impacted, and whilst it is not a statutory consultee for this application its views must be highly relevant, and it is appreciated that the SDNPA Major Projects Team has agreed to accept a response from the parish after the published deadline.
 - Lack of Environmental Impact Assessment – it is astonishing that the SDNPA has apparently waived the requirement for an EIA to accompany the application. This seems to be at odds with the decision to call in the application in the first place. It is noteworthy, and equally concerning, that Natural England has also been unable to give a definitive comment on the proposals due to lack of information in the application. Yet there clearly would be an impact: to give one example, the new facility would apparently be operational overnight, but there is as yet no assessment of how this would dovetail with the SDNPA’s Dark Skies policy.

- Lack of community response to the application – for such a major project it is remarkable that until recent days there has been very little response to the publication of the application on the SDNPA website. It is only now beginning to filter into the public domain. More time needs to be allowed for public comment.
3. Overall, the Group accepts that the overall project may be of benefit, though the business plan is not yet fully fleshed out, e.g. there are proposed to be 45 staff, 22 of whom will be based on site, but it is not clear how they will be paid for with a footfall of 600 visitors per day in season. The Group would also respectfully ask whether the Towner is the most appropriate body to run a facility in the National Park. Even so, accepting the potential merits of the proposal, the serious issues raised above must be addressed, or it will not benefit the landscape or the wider community but rather will impact severely on them. It is noted that the project has been offered £11 million of government funding from the Levelling Up fund, towards a total project cost of approx. £20 million, and that the government funding needs to be accepted and indeed spent by the end of March 2024. This has put intolerable and unrealistic pressure on both Eastbourne Borough Council and the South Downs National Park Authority, and it is reasonable to say that this undue pressure has given rise to the gaps in the application business plan, the gaps in the consultation process, and the corresponding gaps in community responses.
 4. The SDNPA has rightly called in this application for determination by themselves rather than by Eastbourne Borough Council, as it is a major project which would have a significant impact on the purposes of the Park. It will meet one of the primary purposes of the Park, which is to promote opportunities for the understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public, but the Park has a second purpose which is to conserve and enhance the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the area, and Section 61 of the Environment Act 1995 specifies that if there is a conflict between those two things it is the conservation purpose that should prevail. In this application, farmland is to be subjected to a radical change of use which is bound to have an environmental and social impact, which will fall most heavily on East Dean and Friston.
 5. The NPSG recommends that the parish council should object to the rushing through of this application without full information and consideration being given to it by all parties.