

How we used a neighbourhood plan to make schemes deliver net green benefits

27 June 2019 by Colin Marrs

Pioneering environmental approaches are at the heart of a plan for Lewes in the South Downs National Park, writes Colin Marrs.



Consultation: Lewes Town Council clerk Steven Brigden (fourth from the right) explained policies to members of the local community while the steering group's Kirsten Firth (fourth from the left) helped to inform residents about ecosystems

Project: Incorporating a "natural capital" approach in the neighbourhood plan for Lewes, East Sussex

Organisations involved: Lewes Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group, Lewes Town Council, South Downs National Park Authority, Feria Urbanism

In May, a neighbourhood plan for the Sussex town of Lewes passed its referendum with a 92 per cent vote in favour. The plan has taken what its promoters call a pioneering approach to neighbourhood planning by embedding policies that require development of sites to deliver net environmental benefits. So, what do these approaches involve? And what were the challenges in incorporating them into the plan?

Key lessons

- Publishing a plan is not enough on its own. "Publication is when the hard work starts – the job then is to champion it and make sure it is not overlooked in planning reports and decisions," says Richard Eastham, a director at consultancy Feria Urbanism.
- Incorporating strong environmental policies in a plan can be expensive. Lewes Town Council clerk Steve Brigden says: "We were lucky we could afford the cost of employing

The natural environment is an important consideration for the residents of Lewes. It is the largest town within a national park boundary and development at its edges is also heavily constrained by the neighbouring flood plain and a number of sites of special scientific interest. "The town has a strong connection to nature," according to Kirsten Firth, a member of the neighbourhood plan's steering group. "People are still particularly conscious of the need to be resilient because of floods in 2000."

The town council, which has a number of Green Party members, quickly decided that it would place an approach addressing environmental issues at the centre of the plan. At the end of 2015, it invited several consultancies to put forward proposals on how they could help. In early 2016, design studio Fera Urbanism was selected to help the group develop the proposals.

consultants, which came to around £100,000."

- Big plans require big commitments. "It took an awful lot of work," says South Downs National Park Authority planning policy manager Lucy Howard. "It was a long process and it wasn't always straightforward, but the community put the hours in and have a locally-specific neighbourhood plan that they should be proud of."

Richard Eastham, a director at the consultancy, says the major challenge was to align the aims of different interests on the steering group. "Individuals on the group all had a particular angle – some were interested in ecosystems, others in affordable housing, some in cycling networks and some in the industrial development side," he recalls. "The energy of each of those individuals was fantastic but also ran up against the priorities of others at times."

Early on, a decision was taken to put the environmental enhancement policies in the first two chapters of the document. Eastham says: "We made sure the policies on the environment were front and centre and came early on in the running order, making sure that everything else flowed from it."

The first policy deals with natural capital, defined as the basic natural elements making up the environment, including rock types, the soil, water and vegetation. The policy requires proposals for more than five homes to include a detailed assessment of the site's existing natural capital and requires scheme plans to demonstrate a net gain.

The second policy requires proposals to provide an uplift in "ecosystems services", defined as the benefits people receive from natural capital – such as fresh water, food, fuel and even natural beauty and spiritual value. "Many neighbourhood plans have proposals on protecting green spaces and other natural assets, but we wanted to go further and require actual improvements in standards," says Firth.

Other related policies in the plan include the protection of 60 green spaces. Developers of sites by the River Ouse, which runs through the town, will be required to help create a river walkway to allow residents and visitors to better enjoy the location. "At the moment, buildings in the town turn their back on the river," says Firth.

Some were still sceptical about the priority being given to green policies, she adds. "There were some hotly contested debates – some were worried that the policies could reduce the viability of providing much-needed affordable housing," says Firth. "However, most of the housing sites in the plan are brownfield and it was therefore quite easy to enhance the biodiversity. When we realised the requirements would not overburden developments, it was a light bulb moment."

At the same time as the Lewes plan was progressing, the South Downs National Park Authority was working on similar proposals for its emerging local plan – set to be adopted in July. "We worked quite closely on our plans," says Lucy Howard, planning policy manager at the national park authority. "In particular, we did a lot of brainstorming on incorporating the academic theory of

ecosystems into practical policies. Nobody had really done anything quite like this before elsewhere in the country for us to draw on."

However, explaining the policies, their impact and importance to members of the public proved difficult, according to Lewes Town Council clerk Steve Brigden. "An example I give to people is that a retired hydrogeologist found that the reasons that streams running off the chalk into the town stop flowing in the winter is because of increased abstraction for public use," he says. "If ecosystems concepts had been around in the 1950s, 60s or 70s, planning decisions would have taken account of these things."

In addition, the steering group instituted a trail through the town, allowing residents and visitors to learn about the role of ecosystems. The trail has been named after Colin Tingle, a driving force behind the eco-policies, who passed away during the process of drawing them up. Brigden says: "The approach was worth taking but it is hard work and takes a long time."