

A Tea Party about Nature?

Notes from the Neighbourhood Plan Session on Biodiversity, Resilience and Energy

The Neighbourhood Plan committee's first tea party discussion took place on October 20th in the community room at Wisbey's Yard. According to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), the purpose of a Neighbourhood Plan is to contribute to "sustainable development": development which *meets the needs of the current generation without compromising quality of life for future generations*. So we started by talking about what we thought that meant. Our conversation ranged from whether the popularity of hard paving on driveways is leading to more flooding, to the low impact of using traditional and local building materials, to whether we could or should limit the footprint of new homes on their plots to protect the rural nature of our village.

With the help of our District Councillor, Lisa Redrup, we also talked about how the planning authority makes decisions on this. There are already quite a few planning policies which address issues of sustainability, but these can be overridden if the development is felt to "on balance" have a positive impact. If we identify the issues we want to make part of our NP policy, we can sharpen these definitions and nail down what we consider to be sustainable development for our parish a little bit more firmly.

We then moved on to defining our three topics for the day, Biodiversity, Resilience, and Energy. The first two terms may not be familiar to people, and all three can mean different things to different people. In our discussion, for example, we had definitions of biodiversity which, on the one hand, called for turning the land back to a pre-human state, and on the other, just called for "green infrastructure" (trees, green spaces, protected waterways, healthy habitats of all kinds) to be included in all human developments. It was pointed out that our village, if seen from above, would look like an oasis of biodiversity in a sea of agricultural monoculture (large fields of a single crop type). We are blessed with pockets of woodland, large gardens with mature trees, and many green spaces and verges, homes to hedgehogs, badgers, foxes, bats and other wildlife. But how do we keep our oasis safe and thriving, given calls for growth and the loss of wildlife and habitat across the rest of the countryside?

Energy also sparked an excellent discussion. Neighbourhood Plan policies could look at things like whether (or where) residents would like to see renewable infrastructure like solar farms, as well as building standards which could reduce energy consumption. But we also talked about energy as the human resources we have in a village – energy to make things happen, and to support each other, and how that energy partly comes from an environment we feel proud of and want to care for.

At the end of the session, participants were invited to email us with their top picks for ideas on these topics which they'd like to see included in a plan. So far we have received the following ideas:

- energy developments must require biodiversity improvements to be built in from the start
- explore the potential for local ownership of renewable energy developments and plan for revenues to be reinvested to the benefit of the local community
- imagine the future consequences of heating and more heatwaves and think about additional shade (trees, canopies) over specific sites (playground, side of village hall, bus stops)

- Aim to get protected status for as many as possible of the 'Green Spaces' identified by ACRE in April 2024
- Support the protection and establishment over time of a network of green infrastructure within the parish - e.g. linking the waterways within the village (Wisbey's Yard, Millenium Pond, River Rhee), but also including grass verges (seeking support from Highways where appropriate), public open spaces, private gardens (by encouraging participation from the public).
- Support programmes/activities which enhance biodiversity e.g. retention and protection of existing trees and provision for succession planting, provision of bird and bat boxes at appropriate sites.

To add your ideas or comments, or ask questions, write to the NP Steering committee at hnp@haslingfieldparishcouncil.gov.uk .