

Feasibility Study: Odell Neighbourhood Plan

Summary

This report provides an overview of what's required to produce a Neighbourhood Plan for Odell and to help the Parish Council to decide whether or not to proceed. It would take about 2 years to complete and get approval for Odell's Plan, involving a large amount of work to engage the community, conduct research and collect evidence on the village's needs, then to produce a number of policy documents that make up the Plan. It would then go out for consultation, be reviewed by an independent expert and Odell's residents would be asked to vote on whether they wish to approve the Plan.

There is at least £9,000 of government funding and other support available. However, the bulk of the work would need to be done by local people on a voluntary basis. A working group of at least 5 people, including one or more parish councillors, would be needed to produce the Plan and coordinate all of the related activities in a 'hands-on' way. Typically, a group member would give 10-15 hours of their time per month.

The Plan would give Odell's residents a major voice in the development of the village – whether there should be any significant house building, the sites that would be appropriate and how many homes could be built over the next 5-15 years. With a Plan in place, 25% of the Community Infrastructure Levy paid by developers would come to the Parish Council to be spent on local projects, some of which could be identified in the Plan. The Plan can also cover the green spaces that should be protected and any environmental issues to be addressed.

There are risks in proceeding. For example, are there enough residents with the necessary skills available, willing to form the working group and produce the Plan? Provided that there are, it would be feasible for Odell to produce a Neighbourhood Plan, alongside many other parishes across the Borough whose Plans are already underway.

1. What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

A neighbourhood plan is a document that sets out planning policies for a local area. It's used to decide whether to approve planning applications, including requirements for new buildings (e.g. community facilities) or changes to existing buildings. It can also cover the provision of local services and facilities, the protection of green spaces and environmental matters. It's written by the local community, the people who know and love the area, to ensure the community gets the right types of development, in the right place.

For Odell, the Parish Council is the relevant Qualifying Body and it would therefore lead the Neighbourhood Plan and take responsibility for it. The Parish Council can set up a working group to take forward the task of producing the Plan and consulting with the local community. A Plan would normally cover the needs of a Parish over the next 15 years.

2. Benefits of having a Neighbourhood Plan

There's a 2-minute YouTube video available that briefly outlines what neighbourhood plans are for: - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvAHhrKNVt0>

2.1 Input and Alignment with Bedford Borough's Future Development Plans

Bedford Borough Council has submitted its Local Plan for the period up to 2030, with proposals for housing developments and where they should be located in line with Government targets for new housing. There are no Odell sites designated for housing in that plan, although the village would be affected by major developments in adjacent villages, especially for 500 homes in Sharnbrook, and increases in demand for transport and other infrastructure that Odell residents depend upon. Once the 2030 Local Plan has been approved by Central Government, the Borough Council intends to begin work on its subsequent Local Plan for the period through to 2035. An Odell Neighbourhood Plan would inform Bedford Borough's 2035 Local Plan and ensure that Odell's voice is heard.

2.2 Influence over the location of new housing

By having a Neighbourhood Plan in place, the Parish has greater influence over the location and scale of any housing development. It strengthens the parish's, and the Planning Authority's hands in rejecting planning applications on sites that are not designated for housing in the Plan. They can also better resist aggressive planning applications. The views of local residents will have been aired during the Plan process, providing councillors with a sound understanding of what is likely or not to be acceptable to the Parish as a whole. The sustainability of the Parish can be better assured.

2.3 Community Infrastructure Levy

Bedford Borough charges a Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) of £120 per square metre on new residential buildings in villages like Odell. Where there is no neighbourhood plan, 15% of the CIL goes to the Parish Council, subject to a limit of £100 per household i.e. up to c£13,200 per year in Odell. Once a neighbourhood plan is in place, 25% of any CIL payments go to the Parish Council without an upper limit. Odell would therefore receive £3-5k per house from a typical development of 3/4 bed houses. Odell's Plan could include a wish list of community projects and improvement schemes on which any CIL funds could be spent.

2.4 Designating Green Spaces

The Neighbourhood Plan is an effective way to identify, develop and protect one or more areas of land within the parish. Providing they meet the criteria for green space designation, it would protect them from building development and inappropriate use e.g. it can be a criminal offence to park on, or to damage the grass on a designated village green.

2.5 What Neighbourhood Plans Can't Cover

There are several matters that are outside the scope of a neighbourhood plan. For example, highways matters including speed limits and parking controls are generally excluded. However, the Plan could indirectly address such issues. On the list of community projects to which CIL funding would be allocated there could be a scheme for additional off-street parking that may then facilitate parking restrictions on through routes, or a scheme to introduce average speed cameras. Where specific sites have been identified for housing development, there could be a stated requirement for road or junction improvements to facilitate access to the site. To help sustain use of local facilities such as the village hall and the pub as we progress toward the widespread use of electric vehicles, CIL payments could be allocated to public charging points in the village.

3. Outline of the task, resources and timescales

A detailed 65-page roadmap guide is available to guide those producing a Neighbourhood Plan - <https://neighbourhoodplanning.org/toolkits-and-guidance/create-neighbourhood-plan-step-by-step-roadmap-guide/>. The key points are summarised below: -

3.1 Working Group

A neighbourhood plan is usually developed by a working group (or a steering group), which would be accountable to the Parish Council. Membership of the group should include one or more Parish Councillors, together with a number of volunteers from the community. One or more Borough Councillors can also join. Terms of Reference should be established at the outset. The core skills required would include: - research and data gathering, website administration (day-to-day), report writing, project management, briefing and managing experts providing technical support, marketing/communications skills including desktop publishing, data analysis and reporting. The working group would manage the whole process of producing the Plan, including between one and thirty policy documents that cover the details of the Plan. One of its first steps would be to apply to the Borough Council for official recognition that the Parish Council is the appropriate body to produce Odell's Neighbourhood Plan. This is known as Neighbourhood Area designation and it's an essential step before we can apply for Government funding.

3.2 Resources

The bulk of the work on a neighbourhood plan would need to be done by local people on a voluntary basis. An average of approximately 10-15 hours per month per member would enable the work to progress without delay. Advice, guidance and support would be available to the working group from Bedford Borough (Sonia Gallaher is the planning officer supporting neighbourhood plans (sonia.gallaher@bedford.gov.uk 01234 718570) and from the Bedford Rural Communities Charity (BRCC). Jemma McLean would be our BRCC contact (jemmam@bedsrcc.org.uk 01234 834932). She has offered to meet with the Parish Council.

There is Government-funded support available including for training, expert input and advice, direct costs incurred in producing the Plan etc. A representative of the Parish Council would need to apply for this support, with funds held by the Parish Council. The two types of support are:

- Grant funding of up to £9,000 including VAT. This is an overall limit to cover expenditure in one or more financial years. If we were allocating sites for housing or proposing a design code, we may be eligible for additional funding of up to a further £8,000.
- Technical Support is additionally available for work on the allocation of sites for housing, preparing design codes or preparing a Neighbourhood Development Order. A specialist advisor from a Government list of providers would give that support.

Funding applications must be made for at least £1,000 at a time to be spent in a specific financial year. If we were to apply for and secure a 2019/20 grant, then further grants can be requested in subsequent years up to the overall limit of £9,000. For VAT registered organisations, the grant is reduced by the amount of VAT that can be reclaimed. For each

grant, an end of grant monitoring report must be submitted and unspent funding returned before applying for a subsequent grant.

The application process starts with an online Expression of Interest form, which takes about 30 minutes to complete and submit. Within a working day, the applicant receives an e-mail with a link to the actual application form which has to be completed within 15 days. The application needs to explain why the funding is needed and what it would be spent on. There is a 21-page set of 'guidance notes' providing detailed information. The application will be approved, partly approved or rejected within 15 working days for a grant application and within 20 working days for a combined application for a grant and technical support. There is a due diligence process that follows a successful application, including checks on the Parish Council bank account details, signatories and project insurance, which takes a further 20 working days.

Support may also be available from other organisations, including Locality, Planning Aid, Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), National Association of Local Councils (NALC) and the Design Council CABE.

3.3 Population, Households and Related Data

Each of the policies included in the Plan would need to be evidence-based using factual information available from a number of sources or from local surveys carried out by the working group. Detailed data from the 2011 census and other official sources is available from NOMIS (<https://www.nomisweb.co.uk>). The census says there were 287 residents, with a median age of 49 years, and 132 'household spaces' in Odell. See Annex 1. Odell is amongst the 30% least deprived neighbourhoods in country. Data on the level of deprivation in Odell can be found at the following website:

<http://dclgapps.communities.gov.uk/imd/idmap.html>.

Environmental data is available from the Environment Agency <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/consulting-on-neighbourhood-plans-and-development-orders>, including information on flood risks which can help to identify sites that are suitable or not for housing and for other uses. Other useful sources of information include: - Natural England and the Magic map www.magic.defra.gov.uk; Bedford Borough's Historic Environment Record; Heritage England. These useful sources would provide evidence to support each of the policies included in the Plan.

3.4 Coordinating with Adjacent Parishes

Both Sharnbrook and Harrold are producing their own neighbourhood plans. We would be able to coordinate and, where appropriate, could align our Plan and policies with those of our neighbours, and they could align with ours. As part of the feasibility study, we have been in touch with the chair of Harrold's Plan committee (Councillor Sebastian Reger - 01234 721545), and briefly met other members of their committee. They would welcome cooperation with Odell on our respective plans, should we decide to go ahead. They are about two thirds of the way towards completing their plan which includes four substantial sites that could be used to meet their allocation of 25-50 homes in the Bedford Local Plan 2030.

Sharnbrook has been allocated 500 additional homes in the Bedford Local Plan 2030, which would be a 53% increase in the size of the village which had 947 'household spaces' in the 2011 census. This would have a direct impact on Odell residents, generating additional traffic through our village, and a secondary effect by increasing congestion on the roads to and through Bedford, which are already over capacity during weekday peak periods.

Alison Fowler has also been in touch with a previous chair of the Pavenham Local Plan steering group (Hugh Josty) with 12 members. Like Odell, they don't have a housing allocation in the Borough's Local Plan 2030. However, there was support in the village to produce a plan as it would enable them to protect their green spaces and give themselves more control of housing developments.

3.5 Submission of the Plan to the Local Planning Authority and Local Referendum

Once all of the research and local consultations have taken place, the policy documents produced and the overall Plan completed it then has to be 'Examined' by the Local Planning Authority. An expert, agreed by Odell and the Borough, is brought in to do this. This is to ensure the Odell Plan is consistent with the Borough's Local Plan 2030 and all of its policies have sufficient evidence to support them. It would then be put out to public consultation within the parish and by Bedford Borough Council – the relevant Local Planning Authority for Odell. A referendum has to take place so that Odell residents can decide whether to approve the Plan. A simple majority of those voting in a secret ballot is required to approve the Plan. If it gets majority approval, the Borough would then formally bring the Neighbourhood Plan into force and it would be deemed to have been 'Made'.

3.6 Timescales

It is likely to take 18-24 months to produce and secure approval for a Neighbourhood Plan, assuming there are no breaks in the process and sufficient resource is available to progress the work in a timely way. None of Bedford Borough's neighbourhood plans have yet been completed, although several are now close to completion. The main milestones in producing the Neighbourhood Plan would include: -

- Parish Council decision on whether to produce a Neighbourhood Plan
- Working Group set up
- Apply to Bedford Borough for Neighbourhood Area designation – public consultation not required
- Working Group Terms of Reference produced and agreed (by the Parish Council)
- Insurance requirements assessed and put in place, including cover for working group members and activities
- Local Planning Authority screening opinion – complete screening template for Strategic Environmental Assessment and use of a consultant for a Habitats Regulation Assessment
- Determine whether the Local Planning Authority requires an Environmental Impact Assessment (EPA). For Odell's Plan this would seem unlikely to be required.
- Specialist support requirements identified (scope of work)
- Obtain quotes on providers' headed notepaper for specialist support
- Estimate other project costs – website, printing, distribution, hire of village hall etc.
- Prepare detailed budget breakdown for professional fees and direct project costs

- Government funding and technical support requested
- Diagnostic call with assessors (for technical support)
- Government funding and/or support awarded
- Set up website
- Local housing needs assessment – inc. elderly housing, self-build / custom build sites
- Identify and assess sites for housing – local call for sites?
- Identify and assess local green spaces
- Identify and assess environmental issues
- Identify ‘non-land use issues’ to be included in the Plan
- Vision defined and Objectives set for Odell’s Neighbourhood Plan
- Specific issues and policy areas identified and outlined – one for each objective
- Review conservation area and consider possible changes to its boundaries
- Evidence obtained to support each policy e.g. housing needs survey
- Maps produced to support relevant policy areas
- Consultation completed with the bodies responsible for electricity, water etc.
- Basic Conditions Statement produced
- First draft of Neighbourhood Plan produced
- Six-week pre-submission public consultation
- All consultation responses registered, considered and responded to
- Draft Plan updated in response to consultation – as required, depending on responses received
- Consider further six-week public consultation if there are substantial changes to the draft Plan
- Carry out Health Check on Neighbourhood Plan before submission to Bedford Borough Council
- Submit Plan to Bedford Borough Council; agree independent Examiner to review it
- Six-week public consultation, with responses sent to the independent Examiner
- Hearing held by Examiner, only if there are differences of opinion on Plan’s content between the Parish and Borough
- Referendum of residents – arranged by Bedford Borough, taking 8 weeks overall
- Neighbourhood Plan takes effect, if referendum vote is in favour (the Plan is Made)

4. **Risks and Their Mitigation**

The main implementation risk is the whether there are sufficient people with the necessary skills willing to join the working group and contribute 10-15 hour per month each of their time. There can and probably should be some changes in the working group’s participants over the 2-year period; the types of expertise required will vary as the work progresses. Nevertheless, there would need to be at least a few group participants that are able to contribute throughout, with the tenacity needed to complete the Plan. To mitigate this risk, it is strongly recommended that potential working group members are identified at the outset. Soon after a Parish Council decision to proceed, there should be a launch event and other targeted activities to identify and encourage potential group members to offer their services. If sufficient people don’t come forward the Parish Council should then reconsider.

There’s likely to be a divergence of views amongst village residents and, if not handled well, this could become divisive and may undermine the potential benefits offered by a Plan. This

can be mitigated by well-managed communications, holding some local consultation events where people's views can be obtained and the benefits of the Plan can be shared with Odell's residents.

The Plan will have an end date and its policies will remain in force until the Plan is replaced, typically for at least 5 years. If there are external changes affecting the Plan, such as a new Bedford Local Plan, Odell's Plan may need to be updated and re-approved. This should be mitigated by confirming that the Plan aligns with the Borough's Local Plan 2035 and by keeping the number of policies within the Plan to the necessary minimum.

These implementation risks would need to be balanced against the risks of not having a Plan. Should speculative developers identify one or more sites in Odell, then the village would be less able to have the influence it wishes on what is built and where it is located. Odell has several green spaces and areas of particular environmental interest. The Plan would enable these to be identified and, where appropriate, protected.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Overall Conclusions

Producing a Neighbourhood Plan is a lengthy process that would take approximately 2 years to complete, depending on the scope and the number of policies to be covered. The work would be led by local people and overseen by the Parish Council, with some support from the Borough Council and BRCC. Government funding and technical support is also available for certain activities. Many other parishes and communities have already started to produce their own neighbourhood plans so there are plenty of examples and precedents that would assist and inform Odell in its work, should it decide to go ahead.

5.2 Benefits

Although there are no immediate proposals for large-scale housing developments in the Parish, should any proposals be brought forward by the Borough or by developers then the existence of a Neighbourhood Plan would enable the Parish Council and the Local Planning Authority to resist inappropriate development that's outside the areas designated for it within the Plan. With a Plan in place, any developments within the Parish where a Community Infrastructure Levy is payable would result in the Parish receiving a higher proportion (25%, instead of 15%) and the usual limit of £100 per existing household would not apply. This funding could be used for projects already identified. The Plan could also cover related policy areas including; a review of green spaces in the Parish and suitable measures to protect them from development; various infrastructure issues; wider policies to protect and enhance the natural environment; ensuring relevant services are available to local people; and, to assure the sustainability of the community and its buildings.

5.3 Recommendations

Provided that a small working group can be formed with relevant skills then it would be feasible to produce a Plan for Odell. The group would comprise, as a minimum, 3 volunteers plus two Parish Councillors each willing to contribute their time. Should the Parish Council be minded to go ahead with a Neighbourhood Plan, it is recommended that it should hold an initial launch event and set out to form a working group of local volunteers who are

willing to give some of their time. If this can be achieved, then the Parish Council should apply to the Borough for Neighbourhood Area designation and the process can begin.

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Odell Parish

Local Area Report

Summary

This report covers the characteristics of people and households in Odell Parish in Bedford (GSS code E04011902). Figures are sourced from the 2011 Census key statistics.

There were 287 usual residents as at Census day 2011. Of these, 100% lived in households and 0% lived in communal establishments. The average (mean) age of residents was 46.8 years.

In total there were 132 household spaces. Of these, 127 (96.2%) had at least one usual resident and 5 (3.8%) had no usual residents.

