



Alton Neighbourhood Plan **Frequently Asked Questions**

4th April 2023

1) What is a Neighbourhood Plan?

Created as a result of the Localism Act in 2011, Neighbourhood Plans empower communities to get involved in the decision-making process when it comes to housing and infrastructure in their local region. They focus on a local area rather than the district as a whole, are produced by communities and they establish a vision for an area, include planning policies for the development and use of land within the neighbourhood and they can allocate sites for development. They are about local rather than strategic issues. Once adopted, they will form part of the overall development plan for the district and will be used to assist in the determination of all planning applications in that area.

Critically, Neighbourhood plans, once adopted, have significant weight in making decisions on planning applications.

2) Don't we already have a Neighbourhood Plan in Alton?

Yes, we do. There was a huge community effort in 2013 and 2014 when the original Alton Neighbourhood Plan (ANP1) was being written and the support from local people was crucial to the drafting of the policies and action points contained within it. The plan has been fundamental in shaping the Town. No speculative greenfield development has been approved in Alton as a result of the Plan and many of the policies and actions in the plan have resulted in investment in infrastructure such as the Anstey Road/Anstey Lane junction upgrade; the new Butts Bridge, a new Sports Centre, and extensions to local schools. The Plan has successfully protected all value area of Local Green Space and added new green spaces such as the land at Barley Fields and the Lower Meadow at Will Hall Farm, and safeguarded the future of the Alton Community Hospital site.

3) What about the Plan that was consulted upon in 2021?

We consulted upon a modification to the original Neighbourhood Plan in February 2021 to ensure it remained up to date in the eyes of planning inspectors. The modification solely considered the site allocations for housing contained within the original plan which had been built and replacing them with two other brownfield development sites, namely the former Molson Coors Brewery Site and the former Police Station and Magistrates Court Site. This modification to the Plan gave further extended legal protection against speculative greenfield development and demonstrates to both planners and developers that our housing allocations are up to date and therefore enables us to robustly defend any inappropriate proposed housing which comes forward.

The validity of this modified plan extends until November 2023. You can view the current plan under the "Original Neighbourhood Plan Modification" tab on the Neighbourhood Plan page of the Town Council website

4) So why do we need a new one?

Because there is still more work to do to shape the development of our Town. With delays to the emerging Local Development Plan, which is the plan put in place covering all of East Hampshire (outside of the South Downs National Park), and knowing that Alton (which is the largest town with the District) has to take its fair share of new homes and that developers are keen to build houses in our community, it is important that we keep the plan up to date.

Since the original Neighbourhood Plan, there have been a number of policy areas which residents and local community groups have told us are important to them and should therefore be included in any new plan, including promoting sustainable living, mitigating the effects of climate change and active travel. There is also a stronger emphasis on aesthetics and ensuring that new developments respect the surrounding landscape as well as being designed to reflect local character and design preferences, thereby creating high-quality places.

We also want a clear understanding of the overall picture in Alton in 2023 which will be critical in determining the level of future housing which will be acceptable for Alton; that means reviewing everything from the Hampshire County Council School Places plan to the District Council Recreation and Leisure strategy, engaging with key stakeholders from healthcare providers, the Police and highways authority to the managers of community facilities and local businesses as well as local groups and organisations. We want to work from the bottom up, so we have an evidential basis to determine the acceptable level of housing for the town, rather than relying upon figures passed down from central government. Once all of the evidence basis has been compiled, we will then be in a position to present the results and consult on the subsequent policies in the draft plan.

5) How can I get involved in the Alton Neighbourhood Plan?

We will be undertaking three periods of public engagement. The first being a kick-off drop in session on the 19th and 20th May at the Alton Assembly Rooms. We will have a large scale map of the town and information boards on a number of proposed policy areas for you to input and give us your initial thoughts.

Once we have evaluated all of the outcomes from these sessions, we will then start to work on a first draft of the plan which we will then pass back to the community for comment and critique in September. This second opportunity to be involved will take the form of a combination of targeted focus group sessions, in-person drop in sessions, on-line surveys and community outreach work.

Once this phase is completed, the results will be used to refine the draft and prepare the final version which will then be formally consulted on. This is called a Regulation 14 consultation which has to follow a process laid down by statute and it is currently anticipated to be carried out in December 2023 and January 2024. The timing of this may alter slightly depending on progress on the emerging Local Plan.

6) What is the timescale for writing and delivering the Plan?

We are proceeding with a really ambitious timetable which will see the plan written by the end of this year ready for the Regulation 14 consultation. Once that process is completed the draft plan is reviewed once more before being placed before Alton Town Council for approval. Once it has been approved, it will then be passed to the Local Planning Authority (EHDC) for a further period of statutory consultation before being sent for independent examination. If the examiner is satisfied that the Plan is suitable for approval it will then be passed back to the community to be approved at a referendum. Only once all of these steps have been completed is the plan “made”. As you can see there is a lot of work involved!

7) Does the Neighbourhood Plan really make a difference, surely developers will just put houses where they want?

A Neighbourhood Plan with site allocations for housing effectively confirms to developers that the Town will accept its fair share of housing and says ‘we welcome your investment in

our community, but we want you to respect our place and only build appropriately designed housing in the areas we have identified supported by investment in our infrastructure which actually improves where we live.

An up to date Neighbourhood Plan is therefore a vital policy tool for planning officers when looking at determining planning applications, it helps develop strategies for utilizing financial contributions from developers (CIL) for the delivery of all types of infrastructure projects from highways to healthcare, and many speculative developers will be put off from making applications in Alton knowing that there is a current plan in place which will be able to robustly defend against such applications.

8) You have said what a Neighbourhood Plan can do, but what can't it do?

This is a great question as policies contained within the Plan can only relate to the use and development of land within the defined Neighbourhood area. The plan can safeguard the existing spaces for particular uses, for example we can have a policy which protects our existing sports grounds, community hospital and allotments. What the policies in the Plan cannot do is to insist upon, say, particular sports being played at Anstey Park or Jubilee, nor can it compel healthcare providers to extend existing services at the Community Hospital. What the plan can do though is provide action points (as opposed to policies) which signpost infrastructure and service providers that Altonians want to see in their vision for the community. This can also demonstrate to developers what sort of investment is required in Alton to ensure we have sufficient community facilities, local transport and access to services. It also sets out what local people expect in terms of standards of design and climate change mitigation, how new developments should be laid out and what the real level of local housing need is.

9) Haven't we already taken lots of new houses in the last 5 years?

Absolutely we have and the local community has been incredibly welcoming to residents and families moving into the new developments in Alton. Because of the current policy which restricts the amount of housing which can be placed in the South Downs National Park (a designation which covers over half of the district) and with Alton being the largest settlement in East Hampshire, realistically we will have to accept a level of new housing going forward. But the Neighbourhood Plan process ensures that the community selects the most appropriate sites to deliver new housing, and screens out sites which are unsustainable or undeliverable, seeking to ensure that any new developments coming forward are well designed, have minimal impact on the environment and seek to improve the local area rather than detracting from it.

10) Why do we have a lot of housing for older people?

There have been a number of new developments for older people in the Town in recent years, most of them re-purposing disused brownfield sites. The reality is that we are an ageing population and housing specifically designed for older residents are attractive to local people, who want to live in a like minded community with more on-site facilities than can be found in non-age restricted developments. With a good percentage of residents coming from Alton itself or the outlying villages, their downsizing brings more family housing stock to the market.

However, as a number of residents have raised concern in recent years when such planning applications have been received, as part of the Alton Neighbourhood Plan review, we have secured a technical support package from AECOM who will be looking at the genuine housing need in Alton and specifically will be considering the need for older persons specialist accommodation to understand if there should be a policy relating to this in the Plan.

11) Can't we just say no to more housing?

A Neighbourhood Plan can guide development to be more appropriate to local context and help decide where it goes within the area. A Neighbourhood Plan cannot stop development and it is not a tool for residents to oppose proposals for new developments close to them.

The Neighbourhood Plan process looks objectively at the most appropriate sites for new housing and screens out those which would be detrimental to Alton in planning terms. There are still parameters set by national, regional and local planning policies and Neighbourhood plans will have to have regard to national planning policy and should be in general conformity with the strategic policies contained within the local development plan.