

CHIGWELL PARISH COUNCIL
OFFICER REPORT TO FULL COUNCIL- NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

Date: Thursday 22 October 2026

Executive Summary

At its meeting of the Finance and Governance Committee, Members requested further information regarding the potential development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Chigwell. This report provides an overview of the purpose of a Neighbourhood Plan, the statutory process involved, governance arrangements, anticipated costs, timescales, resource implications and the potential benefits for the community.

A Neighbourhood Plan represents one of the most significant strategic projects a parish council can undertake. Once adopted, it becomes part of the statutory development plan and must be considered when planning applications are determined. It provides an opportunity for residents, businesses, community groups and elected Members to influence how Chigwell develops over future decades and to help ensure future development reflects local priorities and the character of the parish.

Preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan is, however, a substantial undertaking. It requires long-term commitment from Members, volunteers and community stakeholders and should be viewed as a community-led project supported by the Parish Council, rather than an officer-led exercise. Experience from other councils suggests that preparation can take between two and four years and may incur costs exceeding £40,000 depending on the level of technical support and evidence required.

Should Council wish to proceed, officers recommend that consideration be given to making an initial budget provision of £20,000 within the 2027/28 financial year to enable the project to commence.

Background

Neighbourhood Planning was introduced through the Localism Act 2011 and enables local communities to prepare planning policies specifically for their area.

Unlike representations made on individual planning applications, a Neighbourhood Plan establishes a long-term vision for the future of a community. Once approved through independent examination and a local referendum, the Plan forms part of the statutory development framework and must be considered alongside national planning policy and the Epping Forest District Local Plan when planning decisions are made.

It is important that Members understand what a Neighbourhood Plan can and cannot achieve.

A Neighbourhood Plan can:

- Shape how future development should look.

- Influence the design, form and character of new development.
- Help identify and protect valued green spaces.
- Support community facilities and infrastructure improvements.
- Influence local transport and connectivity policies.
- Establish planning policies that reflect local priorities.

A Neighbourhood Plan cannot:

- Prevent development required by national or district planning policy.
- Override the Epping Forest District Local Plan.
- Reduce housing allocations established through strategic planning policies.
- Introduce policies that conflict with national planning legislation.

The purpose of a Neighbourhood Plan is therefore not to stop development but to help ensure that future development reflects the needs, aspirations and character of the local community.

Why Chigwell May Wish to Consider a Neighbourhood Plan

Chigwell continues to experience development pressures arising from its location, transport links, economic attractiveness and desirability as a place to live and work.

The preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan would provide residents and stakeholders with an opportunity to consider:

- How Chigwell should develop over the next 10 to 20 years.
- Which areas should remain protected.
- The design standards expected from future development.
- Protection of locally important green spaces and heritage assets.
- Future infrastructure requirements.
- Community priorities and aspirations.
- Environmental and biodiversity objectives.

The process offers one of the few opportunities available to residents to directly influence planning policy within their own community.

Governance Arrangements

Should Council wish to proceed, it is recommended that a Chigwell Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group be established.

The Steering Group would oversee development of the Plan and act as the principal body responsible for community engagement, evidence gathering and policy development.

The Steering Group could comprise:

Elected Members

- Parish Councillors appointed by Full Council.

Community Representatives

- Residents.
- Resident associations.
- Community groups.
- Local businesses.
- Youth representatives where appropriate.
- Environmental and heritage interests.
- Other stakeholders with an interest in the future development of the parish.

Professional Advisers

Where specialist assistance is required:

- Planning consultants.
- Urban design specialists.
- Heritage advisers.
- Environmental consultants.

The Steering Group should elect a Chair and Vice-Chair and operate in accordance with Terms of Reference approved by Full Council.

Decision-Making and Delegated Authority

Whilst the Steering Group would lead the development of the Plan, it is recommended that significant decisions remain subject to approval by Full Council.

The Steering Group should therefore operate primarily in an advisory and project management capacity.

Full Council would retain authority over:

- Budget approval.
- Appointment of consultants.
- Adoption of key policy positions.
- Submission of draft plans.
- Formal responses and representations.

This approach maintains democratic accountability whilst allowing the Steering Group to manage the project effectively on a day-to-day basis.

Role of Parish Council Officers

Neighbourhood Plans are intended to be community-led projects.

The role of officers should therefore be limited to:

- Governance advice.
- Legislative guidance.
- Financial administration.
- Procurement support.
- Committee administration.
- Liaison with Epping Forest District Council.
- Liaison with consultants and external organisations.

Officers should not be responsible for determining the strategic vision of the Plan or drafting planning policies without the direction of Members and the wider community.

Responsibility for shaping the Plan should properly rest with elected Members and local stakeholders.

Skills, Experience and Commitment

It is important that Members understand that successful Neighbourhood Plans do not depend upon participants possessing formal planning qualifications.

What is required is a willingness to commit time, energy and enthusiasm to a project that may span several years.

The most successful projects often benefit from individuals with experience or interest in:

- Planning and development.
- Architecture and design.
- Community engagement.
- Business and commerce.
- Project management.
- Environmental matters.
- Heritage and conservation.
- Governance and public administration.

No specific qualifications are required. However, members of a Steering Group would be expected to:

- Attend regular meetings.
- Review consultation documents and technical reports.
- Participate in engagement events.
- Gather community feedback.
- Consider differing viewpoints objectively.
- Work collaboratively with residents and stakeholders.
- Maintain commitment throughout the lifespan of the project.

Members should note that maintaining engagement and momentum over a prolonged period is often one of the greatest challenges faced by Neighbourhood Plan projects.

Training Opportunities

To support Members' understanding of the Neighbourhood Planning process, officers have identified a relevant training opportunity delivered by CouncilWise.

The course, Neighbourhood Planning and How It Fits, will take place on 20 November 2026 in Great Dunmow and will be delivered by planning consultant Matt Cooke. The cost is £72 per delegate.

Whilst attendance is not essential, officers consider the course to be a worthwhile investment for any Member who may wish to participate in a future Steering Group or develop a greater understanding of the neighbourhood planning process. Members interested in attending are requested to notify the Clerk so that attendance arrangements can be considered.

The Neighbourhood Plan Process

The preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan typically comprises the following stages.

Stage 1 - Council Resolution

- Council resolves to proceed.
- Initial budget approved.
- Steering Group established.
- Terms of Reference adopted.

Indicative Duration: 1 to 2 months

Stage 2 - Designation of Neighbourhood Area

- Application submitted to Epping Forest District Council.
- Public consultation undertaken.
- Area formally designated.

Indicative Duration: 2 to 4 months

Stage 3 - Evidence Gathering

This stage may include:

- Housing needs assessments.
- Character assessments.
- Heritage reviews.
- Green space assessments.
- Traffic and transport studies.
- Environmental assessments.
- Community surveys.

Indicative Duration: 6 to 12 months

Stage 4 - Community Engagement

This stage is critical and may involve:

- Public exhibitions.
- Workshops.
- Surveys.
- Meetings with businesses.
- Meetings with community groups.
- Youth engagement activities.

Indicative Duration: Throughout the project.

Stage 5 - Policy Development

Using the evidence gathered, the Steering Group develops:

- A Vision.
- Strategic Objectives.
- Planning Policies.
- Community Priorities.

Indicative Duration: 6 to 12 months

Stage 6 - Regulation 14 Consultation

Formal consultation on the draft Plan.

Responses are reviewed and amendments made where appropriate.

Indicative Duration: 2 to 3 months

Stage 7 - Submission to Epping Forest District Council

The draft Plan is formally submitted and subject to further consultation.

Indicative Duration: 3 to 6 months

Stage 8 - Independent Examination

An independent examiner determines whether the Plan complies with legislation and planning policy.

Indicative Duration: 3 to 6 months

Stage 9 - Referendum

Residents vote on whether the Neighbourhood Plan should be adopted.

A simple majority is required for the Plan to proceed.

Indicative Duration: 2 to 4 months

Stage 10 - Adoption

Following a successful referendum, Epping Forest District Council formally adopts the Plan.

The Plan then becomes part of the statutory development plan.

Project Timescale

Based on the experience of comparable councils, it would be reasonable to anticipate a project duration of between two and four years.

A realistic timetable may therefore be:

- **2027** - Project commencement and evidence gathering.
- **2028** - Community engagement and policy development.
- **2029** - Consultation and submission.
- **2030** - Examination, referendum and adoption.

This timetable is indicative only and may be affected by consultation outcomes, elections, staffing capacity and external regulatory requirements.

Financial Implications

Preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan is likely to involve a significant financial commitment.

Indicative areas of expenditure may include:

- Planning consultancy support.
- Evidence gathering and technical assessments.
- Specialist studies.
- Community consultation activities.
- Venue hire and public events.
- Printing, publications and communications.

Based on information obtained from comparable projects, Members should anticipate that costs over the lifetime of the project could exceed £40,000, although overall expenditure will depend upon local circumstances, the scope of evidence required, and the level of external support commissioned.

Whilst grant funding opportunities may become available, Members should not rely solely upon external funding when considering whether to proceed.

Officer Assessment

The preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan would provide a valuable opportunity for Chigwell residents and stakeholders to influence future planning policies and establish a long-term vision for the parish.

However, Members should recognise that a Neighbourhood Plan is not simply a planning exercise but a significant corporate project requiring sustained commitment, active community participation, robust governance arrangements and appropriate financial resources.

The success of the project will depend not only on the availability of funding but also on the willingness of Councillors, residents and community stakeholders to remain engaged throughout a process likely to span several years.

Whilst there are clear benefits in shaping future development and promoting locally specific planning policies, these benefits must be balanced against the considerable time, cost and resource commitment required. Members are therefore invited to consider whether sufficient organisational capacity and community support exists to justify progressing to the next stage of the process.

Recommendations

That Full Council:

1. **NOTE** the contents of this report.
2. **CONSIDER** whether it wishes to progress a Neighbourhood Plan for Chigwell.
3. **AGREE IN PRINCIPLE**, should it wish to proceed, to establish a Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group comprising Councillors and community representatives.
4. **REQUEST** the Clerk to prepare draft Terms of Reference for consideration by Full Council should Members decide to proceed.
5. **NOTE** the anticipated project duration of between two and four years.
6. **NOTE** the potential project costs, which may exceed £40,000 over the lifetime of the project.
7. **CONSIDER** making an initial budget provision of £20,000 within the 2027/28 financial year to support project commencement.
8. **AUTHORISE** the Clerk to engage with Epping Forest District Council, neighbouring councils with adopted Neighbourhood Plans and relevant planning consultants to develop a detailed implementation plan for future consideration by Full Council.
9. **NOTE** the CouncilWise Neighbourhood Planning training opportunity scheduled for 20 November 2026 and indicate whether any Members wish to attend.

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Clerk and Proper Officer

Chigwell Parish Council