PREPARING AN EVIDENCE BASE

3.1 Familiarise yourselves with Sustainability Appraisal

There is a legal requirement to undertake a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) for all planning documents that are to become part of the adopted development plan for an area. Separate reports, in addition to the Neighbourhood Plan itself, will need to be prepared and consulted upon.

The local authority will have to prepare SA Reports for its own planning documents so it will be useful to look at them. Much of the information in those SA Reports can be used in the Neighbourhood Plan SA Report.

It is important that the SA is started when work begins on the plan. It needn't be complicated or expensive; Levett-Therivel and URS has produced a DIY guide to Sustainability Appraisals In fact, the steps in the production of a SA run alongside most of the stages of producing a Neighbourhood Plan as follows:

• Identify the policy context (covered by 2.6)
• Identify the characteristics of your neighbourhood (covered by 3.3 to 3.5)
• Identify possible things to include in the plan (covered by 3.6, 4.1 and 4.2)
• Prepare an SA Scoping Report and consult on it (see 4.3)
• Assess the environmental impacts of options and choose preferred options (covered by 4.4)
• Fine tune the plan to minimise its impacts (see 5.1)
• Prepare the final SA Report (see 5.3)

If the steering group undertakes the sustainability appraisal, it is advisable to seek advice throughout the process from someone with SA experience to ensure that it fulfils the legal requirement.

Local group to decide how to meet the requirement for a Sustainability Appraisal
Possible help needed: advice and support with the SA, examples of SA, training

3.2 Familiarise yourselves with Equality Impact Assessment

There is a legal duty to undertake an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) on the development of policies and the delivery of services to assess the impact on people in respect of disability, gender and racial equality. A separate report will need to be prepared and consulted upon, alongside the policy and service proposals in the Neighbourhood Plan. The local authority might have a template for EIA.

It is important that the EIA is started when work begins on the plan. The Equality and Human Rights Commission has produced EIA Guidance It should be possible to integrate the steps in the preparation of the EIA into your SA process (above) as both are looking at impacts, albeit different types.

The suggested steps in the production of an EIA for the Neighbourhood Plan are as follows:
• Identify which aspects are likely to be relevant to equality, and to which protected groups they relate (covered by 2.7)

- Identify evidence that is already available and gaps in data or research that need to be filled (covered by 3.3)
- Identify who will need to be involved in the development of the policy and service delivery (covered by 3.5)
- Draft proposals (covered by 3.6, 4.1 and 4.2)
- Assess the likely impact, and any opportunities to promote equality (covered by 4.4)
- Prepare the EIA Report (see 5.4)

Those responsible for developing the policies and service delivery should be the ones who undertake the equality impact assessments but it is recommended that they seek advice throughout the process from someone with EIA experience to ensure that the legal duty is met.

Local group to decide how to meet the requirement for EIA
Possible help needed: advice and support with the EIA, examples of EIA, training

3.3 Create a profile of your community

The steering group will need to gather factual and statistical information about the community in the neighbourhood area, paying particular attention to topics and themes identified as the focus of the neighbourhood plan (2.7). The profile will build up a social portrait of the community which will help in understanding current and potential future needs. Some local authorities have parish and neighbourhood level information on their websites: other sources are ONS Neighbourhood Statistics, summary statistics on Nomis website and a parish profile on the Rural Evidence Project website (access to parish profiles via your RCCE Community Engagement Officer)

Information about human population, human health, employment and jobs, education and skills and groups of people with specific needs will help describe the 'baseline environment' as required by the Sustainability Appraisal.

In addition, information from local authority consultations (such as the place survey) will be useful for the Equality Impact Assessment. The most important and appropriate data for EIA is likely to be service level data which will provide information about who uses different services and their experiences. Part of this stage is to identify any gaps in data and research that would help with your EIA.

Local group to prepare a community profile
Possible help needed: advice on sources of information, provision of statistical data

3.4 Audit existing infrastructure and designations

The steering group will need to do a 'stock take' of the area's physical assets and take note of the various land use designations that apply to the neighbourhood area to help understand the constraints and opportunities available for development and for conservation. Many local authorities will already have a vast amount of detailed evidence and so it makes sense to try and use existing information wherever possible.

The audit of infrastructure can be carried out by a mixture of desk top research and walks through the area to photograph assets, note them on a map and also make a record of their condition. Assets may include community centres/village halls, churches, recreation grounds, play areas, sports facilities, allotments, health facilities, housing stock, footpath networks, highways infrastructure, employment sites. The audit may also include often unseen infrastructure such as energy generation

and broadband.

The local authority should be able to provide maps showing for example the following;
- Development boundaries
- Conservation areas
- Listed buildings
- Tree preservation orders (and protected groups of trees)
- Protected lanes
- Flood plains
- Open spaces such as allotments, churchyards, recreation space
- Sites of special interest or importance

Statutory Environmental Bodies can provide local level historic and natural environment data / maps. See page 4 of their publication.

Information about landscape, nature conservation, physical assets and heritage, will help describe the 'baseline environment' as required by the Sustainability Appraisal. You may also need to look at air and climate, water and soil; the DIY SA includes a list of suggested questions to ask your planning officer on this subject.

Local group to prepare an infrastructure audit
Possible help needed: provision of maps, advice on sources of information, facilitation of interactive audit activities

3.5 Carry out surveys and needs assessments

This stage is about engaging with residents, community groups and businesses to ascertain their views and opinions about the area, as well as their needs and aspirations for the future. The questions that are asked in these surveys will be influenced by the factual information gathered in 3.3 and 3.4.

A variety of techniques and approaches should be used to maximise opportunities for involvement. These could include:
- Questionnaires (hard copy or web based)
- Interviews
- Workshops
- Exhibitions
- Focus groups or discussion meetings
- Tailored techniques to suit particular circumstances.

The steering group will need to decide which methods to use to engage different sections of the community or to cover particular topics / themes in more depth. Landowners should be invited to comment on site specific issues. Relevant organisations and protected groups should be invited to comment on matters where they have a particular interest.

For each community involvement exercise, the steering group must gather basic demographic data to show some information about who took part. In addition, the steering group should continue to gather the contact details of anyone interested in the Neighbourhood Plan so they can be kept informed and invited to comment at later stages.

When selecting and designing methods to gather information, the steering group must also consider how responses will be processed and the costs involved. Detailed guidance on collecting

information and undertaking surveys is contained in the RCCE Information Pack "Involving the Community in your Project", including advice on questionnaire design, use of maps and models, and running workshops.

Local group to prepare a programme of community involvement and carry out the surveys and needs assessments
Possible help needed: advice on community involvement methods, facilitation of meetings and workshops, advice and comments on questionnaires, examples from other types of community led plan, contacts for support with processing

3.6 Summarise findings and consider how to tackle the issues

The steering group will need to organise all the evidence it has gathered and consider the options that need to be explored further. There will be factual information about the area which may not match with people's perceptions. There will be some topics on which there is broad agreement and some topics where opinion is polarised. The steering group will need to analyse all the information and summarise the main strengths, problems, constraints and opportunities for the neighbourhood area. It will be helpful to keep a list and copy of all the sources of evidence to demonstrate how it leads to the conclusions drawn; this will be particularly important at the Independent Examination (5.8)

The steering group should list all the possible options to tackle each issue; everything from 'do nothing' through to 'do something quite radical'. For some topics, the steering group may need to meet with others to find out what options are available to tackle particular issues. It is an important part of the SA that all the possible options are included, even those that appear not to be financially or technically feasible, or that may provoke a negative reaction. It is essential that all potential sites for development are identified at this stage; the neighbourhood area may be earmarked for growth in a strategic plan or the evidence may indicate a need or desire for development of some kind. Later stages in the process (4.4) will assess the impact of the options and show which of them will be taken forward as the preferred option, and which will be rejected.

The steering group may find that some of the information it gathers is not planning related i.e. it is about service delivery, operational matters or enforcement rather than land use, character and infrastructure. Whilst these may not be issues for the Neighbourhood Plan to address, they will still be important issues for the community. Options to tackle these issues should be explored (4.2 and 4.4) and the preferred action included in an appendix to the final neighbourhood plan (5.3).

Local group to analyse findings and consider all options available
Possible help needed: advice on summarising findings and issues relevant to Neighbourhood Planning, advice on the different options available to tackle the identified issues, assistance with SA