

Note on call with Tom McCullaugh – Community First Oxfordshire – 7 Nov 2025

The primary challenges facing this neighbourhood plan development fall into three key areas: planning hurdles related to legal requirements and scope, significant financial burdens due to lack of funding, and resource limitations concerning people and time.

Planning Challenges

The development of the neighbourhood plan faces several critical planning and legal challenges:

- **Official Sanction and Legal Body:** The plan requires official sanction from the Town Council. The Town Council must be the "legal body" that takes on the plan. If the Town Council refuses to proceed, the process cannot happen within a parished area, as the parish is the qualifying body
- **Designating the Area:** The neighbourhood plan area has not yet been designated. The first formal stage involves the Town Council writing a letter to West Oxfordshire District Council (WODC) requesting designation (usually matching the parish boundaries). This requires a formal Town Council process, voting, and waiting for WODC's time scale to sign it off
- **Scope Limitations (Strategic Allocations):** The neighbourhood plan is limited in what it can achieve regarding major development sites. It cannot remove an allocation or emerging allocation (a strategic designation) from the local plan. If the proposed development site on the west side appears in the WODC local plan, the neighborhood plan must "work with it" and influence what the potential development looks like, rather than attempting to avoid it completely
- **Conformity and Community Consensus:** The plan must ultimately be consistent with West Oxfordshire policy and the national planning and policy framework. Additionally, the policies must reflect what the community wants as expressed through the consultation process. This can create a delicate balance if the steering group's vision (e.g., attracting high-tech industries) conflicts with traditional community desires (e.g., retaining low-key economic activity)
- **External Development Pressure:** WODC has an issue with its five-year land supply, which creates a presumption in favour of development. The Town Council selected the current allocated site from seven potential places put up by landowners

Financial Challenges

The financial outlook for the plan development is challenging due to a complete lack of external funding

- **No Government Funding:** There is no longer any government funding available for neighbourhood plans. Historically, there was £10,000 of normal funding and £8,000 for technical work, but this funding was pulled
- **No Local Authority Support:** West Oxfordshire does not offer any financial support for neighbourhood planning
- **Consultancy Costs:** Using consultants, such as Community First, means the costs would have to be borne by the Town Council. Core fees for hands-on support, including design code support, are estimated to be around £20,000

- **Additional Specialist Fees:** The £20,000 estimate covers core fees and design code support but excludes costs for other specialists the group might wish to hire, such as landscape character specialists.

The costs would be lower if the community did more work themselves, but this introduces the challenge of expertise

Resource Challenges

The ability to commit sufficient time, people, and effort is a core challenge, often cited as the reason similar plans have stalled

- **Difficulty in Recruiting and Retaining Volunteers:** The issue of resources, specifically getting people around the table to look at documents, is highlighted as a cause of delays in other neighbourhood plan reviews. I noted that the Town Council discussed the plan two or three years ago but "nothing got done," possibly because developing the plan is "a bit of a job"
- **Steering Group Requirement:** A decent steering group, ideally with "perhaps half a dozen people involved," is necessary to move the process forward
- **Extended Time Scales:** The process is lengthy, requiring approximately two and a half to three years. This duration is due to the mandatory statutory consultation periods (including two full consultations) required for neighbourhood plans, which function like mini local plans. Even with high input from town counsellors, the quickest completion time is suggested to be two years
- **Added Time for Design Work:** Undertaking important work like creating a design code (which involves a character assessment and separate design code development) adds significant time, potentially around six months
- **Expertise vs. Cost:** Although reducing reliance on consultants saves costs, it directly raises the "issue of expertise" for the volunteer group

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