

Policy Writing – Useful Tips

Neighbourhood plans set out policies for development and use of land within the area. They can be as general or as detailed as you like.

They must be generally in line with the council's local plan. This means neighbourhood plans cannot contradict the local plan or undo decisions it has made.

For example, if the local plan says there will be 500 new houses, the neighbourhood plan cannot say there will only be 50 new houses.

Similarly, if a local plan allocates a site or parcel of land for development, the neighbourhood plan cannot stop development taking place there.

Neighbourhood plans must also be in line with national planning policy and other legislation such as European Union laws.

It's good to be clear from the start what you are trying to achieve with the policy. Start with a statement on what the policy aims to achieve.

One of the tests for neighbourhood plans is having regard to national policies. Check what national policy says about the issue you're looking to address.

What evidence supports your policy? What were the results from your public consultation? Are there surveys, data, reports that justify what you're looking to achieve with your policy? Is there sufficient evidence or do you need to generate more?

Apply the SMART test to your draft policies and reasoned justifications. Are they really Specific, able to be Monitored, Appropriate, Realistic and Time-related?

If your writing style results in over-long policies, describe the purpose of a policy and how it is going to work to a member of your group. Make it clear and simple by using as few words as possible. Then quickly write down what you said.

Some over-complicated policies might be better expressed as two policies covering separate issues without repetition, or as a single generic policy that covers separate issues in less detail and at a 'high level'. Also complicated policy wording can often be simplified by:

- Listing criteria in order of priority using numbered 'bullet points'.
- Removal of as many subjective words and phrases as possible.
- Putting the issues and criteria into a chronological order of events; a useful test is to reverse the order of events to see if it improves the meaning.

Try an informal 'Plain English' test on your early draft to make sure a wide range of readers could understand this key document.

Phrasing policies positively is important, ie, use of positive language rather than 'we will not' and 'we don't want' etc. Instead policies could suggest, 'development would be acceptable where ... (and then list a number of criteria).

Avoid using extracts from documents such as the NPPF, Local Plan, Community Strategy etc. Instead you are recommended to use references in the text or footnotes that guide readers to an Annex of your neighbourhood Plan. The Annex should contain sufficient brief details to allow readers to follow-up all the relevant sources.

Where appropriate, use policies that are worded in the singular, rather than the plural, so that they can be read as clearly applying to individual circumstances instead of only to a number of proposals or sites.

Before adding a separate highly specific policy to deal with a particular local issue, consider whether it could be included in another policy with slight modification. Or perhaps it, and other similar policies, could be swept up into a new generic policy that would radically reduce the total number of policies.

Avoid jargon and include a comprehensive glossary in the Neighbourhood Plan.

Your policies should clearly link back to the objectives your Neighbourhood Plan has set out.

Look at the following examples that have now been voted in via a referendum

Upper Eden

<http://www.eden.gov.uk/planning-and-development/eden-local-development-framework/neighbourhood-planning/upper-eden-neighbourhood-plan/>

Thame

<http://www.southoxon.gov.uk/services-and-advice/planning-and-building/planning-policy/neighbourhood-plans/thame-neighbourhood-pl>

St James, Exeter

<http://www.exeterstjamesforum.org/userfiles/PDFs/St%20James%20Draft%20Neighbourhood%20Plan.pdf>