

How to make effective decisions

Putting the pieces together



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1 Introduction

This resource will focus on how to make effective decisions when developing your neighbourhood plan. It will explain:

- why it is important to have procedures for effective decision making
- what types of decisions need to be made
- approaches to decision making structures
- the function and use of a steering group
- how to establish an effective steering group

This resource complements the [How to project plan](#) and [How to share the workload](#) resources.

If you are new to neighbourhood planning you are encouraged to read the [Locality Roadmap](#) which explains the process of preparing a neighbourhood plan. It will provide useful context to this resource which focuses on the 'how'.

2 Why is it important to have procedures for effective decision making?

There are a number of stages involved in producing a neighbourhood plan and a number of people will be actively engaged in the process. Those involved may have different views on what should be included in the plan or the particular approach to its preparation. It is therefore important that you have open and transparent decision making processes in place. It is also important that the decision making structure is understood and used by your group so that decisions are not repeatedly revisited which may hamper progress and confidence.

Having formal and well-defined decision making processes can help to:

- **Build transparency in the process.** This will enable the wider community to understand how and why decisions have been made and to retain confidence in the plan process
- **Maintain momentum** and deliver the plan in line with the timings detailed in the [project plan](#)
- **Ensure differing opinions are discussed** and a way forward is agreed. This should result in strong and considered decisions



3 What types of decisions need to be made?

Your [project plan](#) will help you to identify the tasks involved in producing a neighbourhood plan and to assign indicative timescales for each. It will also enable you to identify when decisions need to be made, and by whom, in order to progress the plan.

When thinking about the types of decisions that need to be made it is important to remember that it's not just the 'big' decisions at the formal stages of neighbourhood plan production. There are also a number of decisions you need to make about *how* you will produce the neighbourhood plan and *who* will be involved. Such decisions can include:

- **How you will share the workload** e.g. whether you will set up a steering group and working groups – for further information see [How to share the workload](#)
- **How you will appoint people** to official positions e.g. Chair, Vice-Chair and Treasurer
- **Voting arrangements** e.g. whether a majority rules approach will be adopted or the Chair will have the casting vote
- **Approaches to community consultation** such as the when, how and why
- **The issues you will seek to address** in your plan
- **The scope of your plan** e.g. whether to allocate or not allocate sites for housing
- **How to spend money** and whether you need to seek further funding
- **Timescales and target dates** for specific tasks and activities including when you would like to start the pre-submission publicity and consultation

Every decision you make will have a bearing on how successfully your plan progresses. Decisions should therefore be taken in a structured, considered and transparent way. Decisions should not be made without careful consideration, nor in isolation. There needs to be a logical approach to plan production and how the decisions underpinning this have been arrived at. Some decisions may be difficult to make but it is important that a decision is reached in order to progress the plan.

You should also ensure that the community are kept up to date with plan progress as this will help to ensure transparency in your decision making processes. A number of approaches can be adopted including making sure meetings are open to members of the public, details are published in advance and minutes of the meeting are made available on your website. The wider community also need to be informed when key decisions have been made and told the reasons why.

4 What approaches are there to making decisions?

Groups adopt different structures for decision making depending on the nature of the group. For example, the likely complexity of the plan or size of their area and whether they have previously worked together. If your group is well established and you have experience of resolving



differences this will stand you in good stead. However, formal processes and structures are still required in case agreement is proving difficult.

Whatever approach you adopt you need to be open and transparent and formalise your decision making processes. This is necessary in order to ensure the wider community can understand how and why particular decisions have been made. Many neighbourhood forums and parish / town councils adopt a tiered approach. They establish a steering group, which has strategic oversight of the process, and working groups that take responsibility for different aspects of plan production. **Diagram 1** illustrates the relationship between these, details will vary according to the nature of the 'parent' body.

4.1 Neighbourhood forums

Neighbourhood forums must have a written constitution that will govern their decision making. The [How to set up a neighbourhood forum](#) resource offers advice on what should be included within a constitution. For example details of membership, working arrangements and meeting patterns.

4.2 Parish and town councils

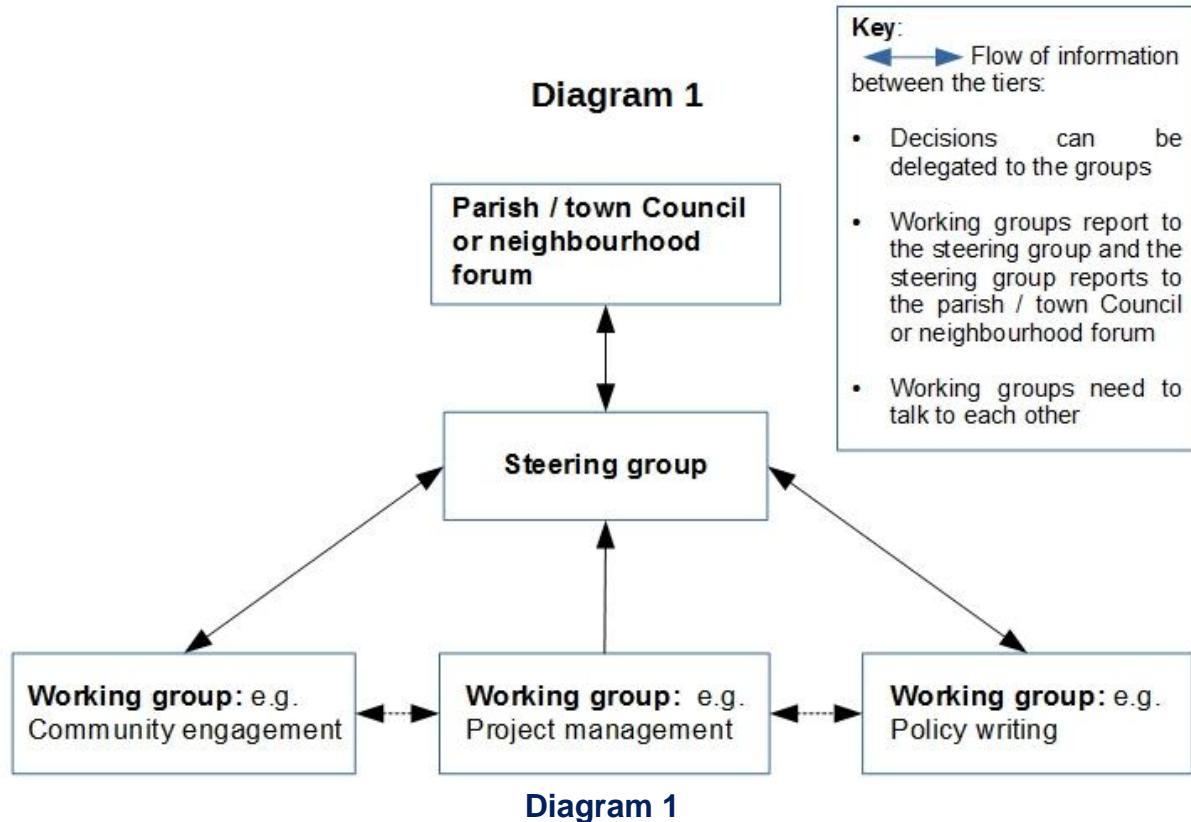
Town and parish councils have existing decision making structures in place as they are governed by [legislation](#) which lays down the rules of their meetings, powers and constitution. The [Government's planning guidance](#) states that parish and town councils should involve the wider community in the production of the plan. Many parish and town councils have done this by forming sub-groups, or steering and advisory group, which focuses on a plan's development.

Where a parish or town council decides to work in this way, the Government's planning guidance is clear that the relationship between any group and the formal functions of the town or parish council should be transparent to the wider public. For example it should be clear whether a steering group or other body is a formal sub-committee of the parish or town council (as defined by the [legislation](#)).

It is recommended that terms of reference are produced in order to structure the decision-making processes. They can be used to set out the objectives of the group, frequency of meetings, code of conduct, working arrangements and governance arrangements. The terms of reference for a steering group or other body should be published and the minutes of meetings made available to the public.

Working relationships and decision making processes between parish councils on [multi-parish](#) neighbourhood plans may need special consideration. You are advised to speak to your local [Association of Local Councils](#) for further advice.





5 Why have a steering group?

A steering group (names vary) oversees the production of the plan and takes responsibility for making recommendations (to the parish / town council or neighbourhood forum) or decisions (depending on the decision-making powers they have been given) on what the plan should include and say.

It is essentially strategic in nature and many steering groups devolve some power to working groups to undertake different stages of plan production (see [How to share the workload](#)). There isn't always a need to set up working groups particularly if the plan is dealing with only a few matters. It is for each group to decide themselves what works best for them.

6 How to establish an effective steering group

Many of the guiding principles for establishing working groups apply equally to a steering group (see [How to share the workload](#)). However, the following deserve special consideration:

- **A confident and experienced Chair** is likely to be the steering group's greatest asset.



- **Effective communication** between the various tiers (Diagram 1) is essential. This can be achieved by a member of each working group (if set up) being represented on a steering group. Similarly effective communication procedures should be put in place between the steering group and wider parish/town council or neighbourhood forum.
- Consider carefully **how big your steering group should be**: Ensure a steering group is a manageable size to ensure meetings can be effectively run and decisions made without relying on the views of just a few individuals.
- The potential and particular contribution than can be made by **local Councillors** should be considered. The Planning Advisory Service (PAS) has produced a note that covers ward, district and parish Councillors' roles in the neighbourhood plan process.
- It is likely that the formation of a steering group will precede the creation of all or some of the working groups; therefore the **membership of a steering group should be kept under regular review** so as to keep the skills coverage effective and the number of members manageable.
- In order to maintain momentum it is good practice for a steering group to **produce an action plan at each meeting** and agree on what is to be completed by the next meeting both by steering group members and the respective working groups (where these are set up) (see How to project plan).
- You may wish to **map where members of your steering group live and / or work** to assess coverage across the neighbourhood area. If you identify a lack of members from a particular area you may wish to give this factor more weight when filling or reviewing membership of a steering group.
- **Be open about membership of a steering group** to help with full community accountability. This could be done by detailing membership on your website.

Roseland neighbourhood planning group explain their experiences and approach of running a steering group in this case study. Herefordshire Council has produced a more detailed note on setting up steering groups.

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