

APPENDIX A: NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN FEASIBILITY WORKING GROUP – INTERIM REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considered by the Planning & Environment Committee on 4 June 2025 (Minute #49)

1. Introduction

At its meeting of 5 February 2025 (*Minute #382 of 2024/25 refers*), the Planning & Environment Committee resolved to form a Working Group to consider the feasibility of producing a Neighbourhood Plan (NP) for Felixstowe. This report presents the Group's interim conclusions and recommendations following its final meeting on 28 May 2025.

2. Background

The Neighbourhood Plan Feasibility Working Group met on five occasions between February and May 2025 to examine the process, potential benefits, and practical implications of undertaking a NP. The Group reviewed case studies, received input from planning professionals, consulted with town councils that had completed or are currently engaged in Neighbourhood Plans—including learning from Lowestoft and Kesgrave—and engaged with East Suffolk Council officers to understand the opportunities and challenges involved.

Neighbourhood Plans are community-led frameworks that help shape development in a local area. Whilst they must conform to the overarching Local Plan and national policy, they can provide an important mechanism for influencing future growth, design, infrastructure, and local priorities.

3. Key Observations

The Working Group identified several potential benefits in preparing a Neighbourhood Plan for Felixstowe, including:

- Greater influence over the design, density, and character of new development;
- Enhanced protection of valued green spaces and community assets;
- Opportunities to reflect the distinct needs of different areas within the town;
- The ability to develop locally specific policies and planning priorities;
- Increased weight in planning decisions and consultation processes.

However, the Group also recognised a number of considerations:

- A Neighbourhood Plan typically requires a 3–4 year commitment, with strong Member and community leadership, dedicated officer support, and robust resourcing;

- While funding is available (including a £10,000 government grant and up to £8,000 in technical support), additional direct costs are estimated between £12,000–£20,000, excluding officer time and significant Member involvement;
- The East Suffolk Local Plan Review (due to begin in late 2025) may result in new planning policies that affect the scope or relevance of a NP;
- Consultant support would be essential in drafting policies, but leadership, vision, and consistent commitment from within the Town Council and wider community are critical to success;
- A Service Level Agreement with East Suffolk Council would provide structure and guidance, but the Council would need to drive the vision and community engagement aspects.

The Group acknowledged several factors that currently complicate the decision to commence the NP process:

- **Forthcoming Local Plan Review:** East Suffolk Council's review is due to begin in September 2025 and may run to 2029. The outcomes could significantly alter the strategic planning context and affect the relevance or scope of any emerging NP;
- **Unitary Authority Proposals:** Proposed local government reorganisation, the form and implications of which remain uncertain, could change the nature of responsibilities, resources, and community expectations for town and parish councils;
- **Capacity and Leadership:** Given ongoing service pressures and the potential for increased responsibilities at town level, the Council would need to be assured of its capacity to lead the NP process. A dedicated project lead or "champion", supported by a committed steering group, would be essential;
- **Election Cycle:** With elections due in 2027, there is a risk that political changes could disrupt continuity, particularly if no structures are in place to sustain momentum.

4. Recommendations of the Working Group

After detailed consideration, the Working Group recommends that Felixstowe Town Council should, *in principle*, support the development of a Neighbourhood Plan for the town, subject to the following conditions:

- Establishing a clear ambition for what the Plan is intended to achieve;
- Identifying a dedicated Steering Group and a local champion to lead the process;
- Allocating appropriate resources, including officer time and budget provision;
- Commissioning professional planning consultancy support; and

- Reassessing priorities in light of the forthcoming Local Plan Review and any confirmed changes to local government structures in Suffolk.

The Working Group recommends reconvening in Autumn 2025 to reconsider the position, once greater clarity is available regarding unitary reorganisation and Local Plan timescales.

In the interim, the Council may wish to begin exploring potential themes and objectives for a future Plan, including:

- Holding informal workshops to gauge Councillor priorities;
- Undertaking a light-touch community consultation to assess local appetite and focus areas;
- Reviewing existing policy gaps or opportunities where a NP might add value.

5. Recommendation to Committee

It is recommended that the Planning & Environment Committee:

- Notes the findings of the Neighbourhood Plan Feasibility Working Group;
- Endorses the Group's recommendation to support, *in principle*, the development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Felixstowe, subject to the conditions outlined in Section 4;
- Agrees that the Working Group should reconvene in Autumn 2025 to review progress and reassess readiness in light of local and regional developments; and
- Supports light-touch preparatory work over the coming months to explore potential themes and gauge community interest.