

# Review of 2021

## 1. Introduction

This document is intended to explain what has happened with the Neighbourhood Plan during the course of 2021. It gives some details of the actions of the Droitwich Spa Neighbourhood Plan Working Group; its Management Group and Droitwich Spa Town Council. This is unfortunately needed as the minutes and agendas held on the Droitwich Spa Town Council website do not give the full story and in some cases are misleading.

## 2. Context

Work on a Neighbourhood Plan for Droitwich Spa started in 2016, was suspended by Droitwich Council in 2018 and restarted in 2020. At the beginning of the 2021, the Management Group were creating a Project Definition document having started analysis of the Residents Survey that had been conducted in the last half of 2020. A number of people had volunteered to work on the project, but some topics required more work needing additional people to be involved.

The Council meeting on 14 December 2020 had expressed support for the project and resolved to create a Support Group of Councillors to assist in the development of the Neighbourhood Plan. This gave confidence that Droitwich Council would become fully engaged in the project.

Delays to the submission of a grant application to Locality would delay the whole project. The first tranche of the grant was to be used for publicity and to engage more volunteers to bring it to fruition.

## 3. Summary

The positive atmosphere surrounding the Neighbourhood Plan at the beginning of 2021 has not been reflected in subsequent actions of Droitwich Council. Finally, a written response to a request for information about Council support raised at the full Council meeting in December 2021, was dismissive and indicated that little progress would be forthcoming before October 2023 at the earliest. Our findings are:

- **Communication** Since the appointment of a new Droitwich Council's Neighbourhood Plan representative in May, reports to the Council have excluded input from those working on the project and attempts to make effective contact with the Council have been refused. As the new representative has had little contact since early 2020, the reports have been misleading.
- **Obfuscation** Misleading and inaccurate information has been presented by the new Council's Neighbourhood Plan representative and the Town Clerk during the course of the year. At the Extra-ordinary Council meeting of 13th September a motion to defer activity was adopted, despite the fact that the motion contained information known to be inaccurate at the time. In June a document identifying "contentious" issues was issued to seek corrections, but no response has been received from Droitwich Council.
- **Delays** Despite the above, the Management Group, being keen to progress the Neighbourhood Plan, have constantly sought to work with the Council in a positive way until a response from the Neighbourhood Plan representative made it clear that the Neighbourhood Plan would not be allowed to progress before October 2023. It is felt that restarting at that late date would render all the work that many volunteers previously conducted out-of-date and therefore wasted.

## 4. Conclusion

The Working Group's Management Committee have concluded that deliberate actions by a small number of people within the Town Council have resulted in a situation where it is unlikely that Droitwich Spa will have the legal protection of a Neighbourhood Plan for some years to come. The Droitwich Council's Neighbourhood Plan representative has said that the Council should take the lead on any plan, but we can find no evidence of any strategic planning taking place. A Neighbourhood Plan project supported by Droitwich Council could be an exercise in social cohesion which would improve the reputation of the Council.

## Issues

Droitwich Council has taken a number of actions that do not seem ethical and do not sit comfortably with the Nolan Principles enshrined in the Droitwich Spa Town Council code of conduct.

### Refusal to communicate with the Management Group

Since the appointment of the new Council's Neighbourhood Plan representative in May 2021, he has not met with the Management Group and has not allowed the Management Group to provide input to his reports to the Council.

"Protocol" issues have been cited as reasons for not meeting. There is no mention of such protocols on the Droitwich Council website, and it seems that these have been invented to justify inappropriate actions.

- The Neighbourhood Plan representative has repeatedly demanded project plan information publicly and in emails even though the Project Definition document (which contains more than a timeline) has been provided to him.
- Offers to meet and explain the details of the plan have been refused. This gives a public impression that there was no plan, which is untrue.

### Misinformation about the project plans

Information provided to the Droitwich Council by its Neighbourhood Plan representative and the Town Clerk has been misleading.

- There have been repeated assertions that the development of a Neighbourhood Plan for Droitwich could cost around £100,000. However, a meeting with Wychavon District planning representatives in October 2020 confirmed that the work could be undertaken within the grant funding available from Locality.
- The Project Definition, reports to the Council; prior to May, and subsequent information shared publicly by the Management Group have re-iterated the intention to keep to a budget limited by grant funding of approx. £18,000 and at no cost to Droitwich Council.
- The Project Definition also specified that there would be reviews at the end of each stage of the project at which the financial situation could be re-examined prior to approval of the next phase.

- Droitwich Council has stated that the Neighbourhood Plan could not be progressed until after publication of the current SWDP revisions.
- It has been repeatedly demonstrated that there is no need for this dependency. The government Neighbourhood Plan website makes it clear that Neighbourhood Plan development and local plan revision can run side by side and this can be helpful to the quality of both.
- It was known in early September 2021 that the SWDP revision would not be published until 2023.

- The Leader of the Council and its Neighbourhood Plan representative have said that the Neighbourhood Plan work should be held back until completion of the Town Prospectus.
- It was agreed in January that the Neighbourhood Plan Management Group should be party to the work on the Town Prospectus. Since a consultation for fact-finding and to obtain opinions in January the Neighbourhood Plan volunteers have seen nothing on this project.
- Given that a prospectus is an "advertising" document, it is difficult to see how that might influence the Neighbourhood Plan.
- Opinions on the vision of the town, sought in the consultation exercise, might be useful. This duplicated some of the work of the Neighbourhood Plan residents' survey and may have involved fewer people.

## Misinformation generally

A document entitled “Clarification of contentious issues” was published by the Neighbourhood Plan Management Group seeking a response to a range of misinformation presented by the Neighbourhood Plan representative, the leader of the Council and the Town Clerk.

Droitwich Council has issued no response to the document, implying that the content is correct. Therefore there is no justification for the misinformation issued by Droitwich Council.

## Attempted censorship

Since the appointment of the Neighbourhood Plan representative in April 2021, there have been numerous demands from him, and the leader of the Town Council, to remove the Neighbourhood Plan website and Facebook posts claiming that these contain “erroneous information”. This was also reported in Council minutes.

- The Neighbourhood Plan website and Facebook page have been carefully worded to avoid giving false information. Where contentious issues are mentioned, they are supported with evidence.
- On several occasions the removal demands were met with requests to identify specific erroneous statements so that they could be corrected.
- Only one issue (a minor point) was raised and was swiftly corrected. No other factual errors have been identified by the Council.

- It is not surprising that the some of the material posted may be embarrassing but any responsibility for bringing “Droitwich Council into disrepute” should be laid at the door of the councillors and council employees concerned.
- The Council’s Neighbourhood Plan representative has stated that the removal of the website and Facebook page are prerequisites to any meetings between him and the Neighbourhood Plan Management Group.

## Reasons for delay

Despite the positive attitude of Droitwich councillors expressed at the beginning of 2021 (and in the election promises of most councillors), no positive action was taken by the Council, except for those councillors already working on the project. A range of reasons were given for delay that seem to be unjustified.

- The Council state that training is required for councillors. The Neighbourhood Plan group has provided the Council with information, case studies and identified training materials available on the web (including links to Government and Locality material) for more than two years.
- Similarly, Wychavon District Council have run training sessions that anyone can attend. These materials have been sufficient for other councils.
- It has been stated by the Neighbourhood Plan representative that the SWDP revision publication must precede any further work on the Droitwich Neighbourhood Plan. However, government documents clearly state that there is no need for such dependency, that the work on each can inform the other.

- Despite promises to involve the Neighbourhood Plan group in the Town Prospectus, there has been no contact with this group since January 2021.
- By its very title, the prospectus is a publicity document and therefore cannot influence planning decisions and (unlike a Neighbourhood Plan) will have no legal status.

## 2021 Timeline

Jan 2021

Wychavon DC Planning had been asked by the Management Group to review existing materials (sent in November 2020) to help improve the draft Project Definition (sent in January 2021) and the project plan that it contained.

Droitwich Town Council reaffirmed support for the Neighbourhood Plan and the creation of a Support Group. It also confirmed that the Support Group would sign-off any application for Locality Grant funding (c.£18,000 was potentially available).

A Project Definition was prepared . It was far more than a “framework plan”, and includes benefits, milestones dependencies, risks and issues, costs, (revised March 21), with an assumption that Grant funding application would be made in April 2021.

5 March 2021

A detailed analysis of 189 survey responses, (subsequently increased to 206) was completed to give subject topic leaders some additional input and raise awareness. A Project Introduction was published providing information for new volunteers and which included the project approach, structure and organisation.

15 April 2021

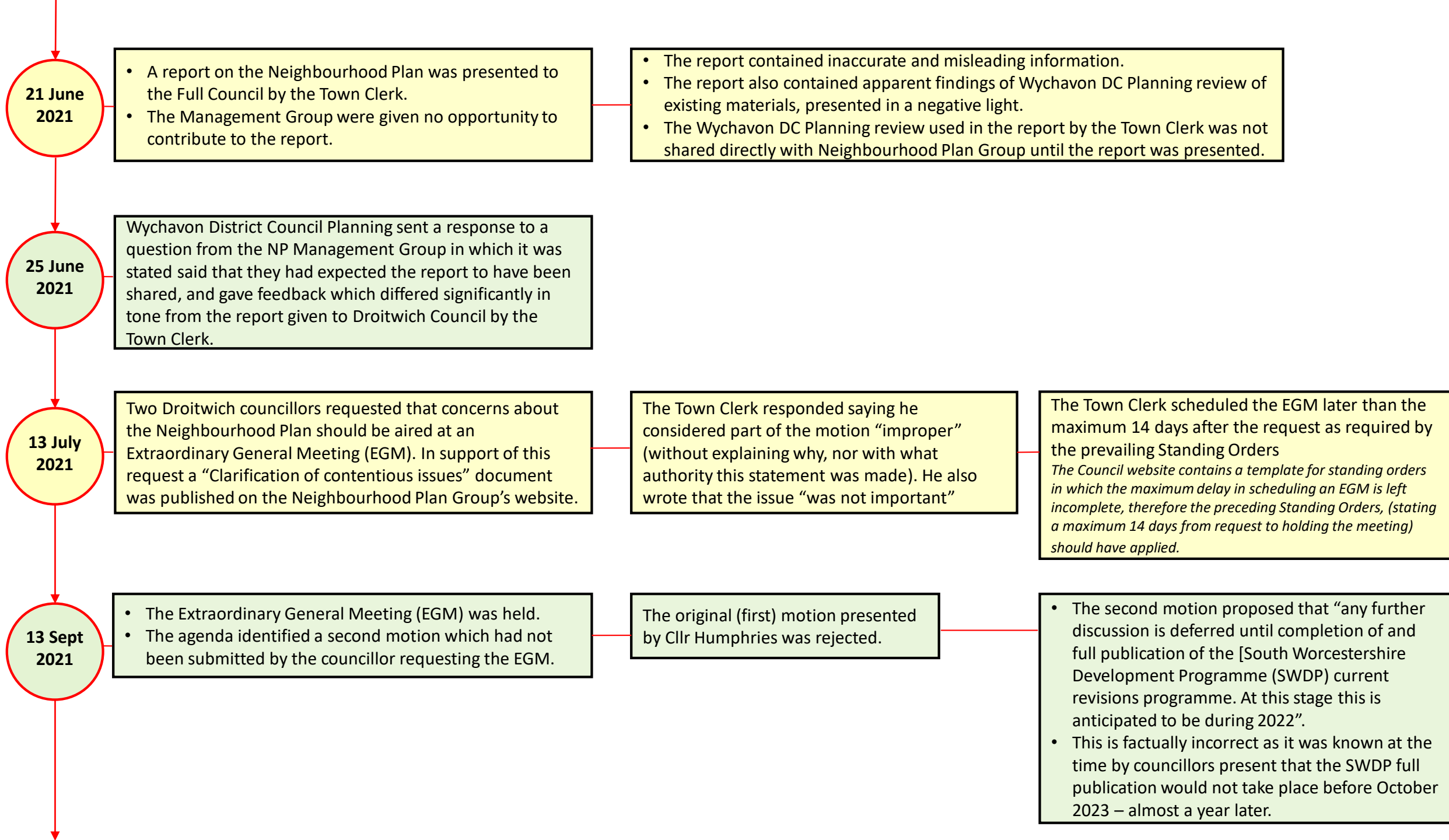
The Neighbourhood Plan Group submitted a report to Droitwich Council expressing concern at the lack of action in setting up the Support Group.

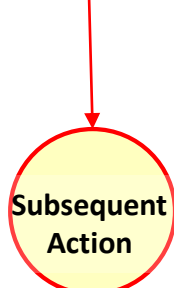
4 May 2021

- Cllr. A Humphries was replaced as Droitwich Council's Neighbourhood Plan Representative. No cogent reason was given.
- Allegations that no Neighbourhood Plan reports had been submitted to the previous three Council meetings were made at the meeting and repeated in writing by the new Neighbourhood Plan representative immediately after. However, Council minutes show that reports had been provided.

Since this date, the Council's Neighbourhood Plan representative has not met with the Management Group and has not allowed the Management Group to provide input to his reports to Droitwich Council.

- The Neighbourhood Plan representative has repeatedly demanded project plan information publicly and in emails even though a plan (and many more details) is contained within the Project Definition document which has been provided to him.
- Offers to meet to explain the details of the plan have been refused.
- The above thereby gives an untrue public impression that there is no plan.





**Subsequent  
Action**

- Several attempts were made to speak further to the Leader of the Council. He rejected them saying that to do so would be contrary to “protocol”.
- We can find no protocol or other documentation that seems relevant, and the Leader of the Council did not respond to queries on this subject.

- Similar attempts were made to talk to the Council’s Neighbourhood Plan representative. He responded implying that a Neighbourhood Plan might not be needed as the SWDP policies could be sufficiently robust.
- The SWDP policies do not contain detail that reflects local needs and interests. For example: The SWDP designates the southern side of Netherwich Basin for development with residential and commercial property. But many believe that this site should form a gateway into the town, providing an attractive waterfront area which would also rejuvenate the Friar Street area (while still complying with the SWDP policy).

- The Council’s Neighbourhood Plan representative said that “once the revised version [of the SWDP] is made public” the Management Group could prepare a report of the gaps that might justify preparation of a Neighbourhood Plan to be reviewed “by a professional” [not identified] and possibly considered by Droitwich Council
- He, again implied a cost to Droitwich Council when project plans show none.
- He refuses to meet unless the website and social media items are removed.