



Report of the Co-Chairs, June 2024

Introduction

This year we have again decided to hold the AGM as a face-to-face meeting, together with a Forum meeting. We chose this as it allows better discussion, and have combined it with an option to vote remotely for those that can't attend in person.

The AGM allows the Chair's Report to be presented, and provides an opportunity to ask questions. We expect (hope!) the formal business part will be straightforward, and then to discuss the status of our draft Neighbourhood Plan at the Forum meeting.

Certain parts of the AGM are mandated by our constitution, and we are following those as required. An opportunity has also been given for any other formal motions to be considered in the agenda. The AGM provides an opportunity to summarise and take stock of the past year.

Summary

The key points are given here as bullets, with further explanation in later sections.

- The project has moved from gaining designation from RBWM (2020-22), through recruitment of support and volunteers (2022-3), to drafting of policies (2023-4)
- We have formed topic groups to develop policies on the areas of interest
- We have run Management Committee meetings and a forum meeting
- We have put together a draft plan with policies
- We have used consultants to provide input to the Design, Housing, Biodiversity and other sections and to review our completed draft
- We have continued to engage on selected topics via our website and social media
- We attended Maidenhead Festival and had a High St gazebo outing based on Heritage listing

Topic groups

The art of writing clear and effective planning policies is not to be underestimated, and we have been fortunate to have topic group leaders and members able to rise to the challenge. Each group has made significant progress to decide the scope of what a Neighbourhood Plan can do, and either to use professional help or to learn skills itself leading to draft policies.

- The Housing group commissioned a professional Housing Needs Assessment from AECOM
- The Design group is working with consultants to produce an Area-by-Area Design Code
- The Getting Around group analysed ONS statistics and researched public transport provision

- The Biodiversity group engaged consultants to provide biodiversity policy drafts
- The Built Heritage group is producing a Local Heritage Asset List
- The Climate group has drafted ambitious policies on a fast-moving and fought-over topic

It can be seen that a range of approaches has been needed, and the type of work has been different in each topic group, but each is on track to deliver policies and evidence.

Running of the Forum in 2023-2024

With designation in place and policy ideas gathered, Topic groups were formed and policy development started.

Almost all the work of the Forum has been done in the Topic Groups and the Management meetings. It has taken most of the year to get a draft plan together, and with most of our active Forum members participating in topic groups there was not a clear rationale to hold regular whole Forum meetings.

We have met about every 3 months with the RBWM Planning policy team, which has been useful and positive. We expect to share a draft Neighbourhood plan with the Planning policy team in June, which will step up the level of engagement. The Borough has a duty to support Neighbourhood Planning.

Putting together a draft plan

From our public workshop to find out Community views on planning on 30-Mar-2023, and the parallel web-based exercise, we gathered about 150 ideas. We can only take forward ideas that are within our remit, and the after first two rounds of filtering (Is it within scope of planning? and Does it fit with existing National and Borough policy?) nearly 100 ideas remained. The results were made available on our website so contributors could see how their ideas had fared.

The ideas were then sorted into the relevant Topic groups, to see if they could become policy.

After hard work by the topic groups, we had an early if rather rough draft by early March 2024. We took two further steps to obtain and refine the content. For Biodiversity, consultants Bioregional were asked to draft those policies. For all the other sections of the draft, consultants ONeillHomer, who have extensive experience of Neighbourhood Planning, were asked to review the content and recommend possible updates.

We then looked at both consultants' recommendations, and selected those which we believe would be desirable and effective in Maidenhead (about 2/3). In some cases we felt the recommendations would have resulted in weaker policy than our own draft, so retained our original wording.

Significant work remains before the policies are ready for the "Regulation 14" consultation, where our draft Neighbourhood Plan is made available for a 6 week formal public consultation. The main areas of work are resolving issues, checks for consistency, mapping, ensuring a sound evidence base and preparation of the Local Heritage Asset List.

Ongoing community engagement

Our main line of communication with our members and supporters continues to be our email database which has now reached 500 people (2023 = 450). MailChimp analytics show the "Open Rate" for our emails is around 60% against an average in the sector of 38%.

Our Facebook Page now has over 1000 Followers (was 200 in 2020), mainly driven by the posts we share on the Maidenhead Future discussion group, which we administer. The overlap between MailChimp and Facebook is unknown.

Way forward and next steps

The bullet points below give a summary of key steps:

At our 2022 AGM we promised “Full speed ahead” if designated. The key steps were:

- Find out local people’s priorities for planning policies – first iteration done, Mar 2023
- A filtered list of policy topic candidates – done, May 2023
- Form topic groups to develop policies – done
- Find out what MNF can realistically resource – topic groups all running
- Refine the policies and associated Evidence base – in progress
- Produce a draft “Regulation 14” Neighbourhood Plan to be consulted on

We also need to communicate and engage with the wider public, subject to the restrictions of having no current funding and no clear date for when the next round of funding will be available to us.

Funding & support

As in previous years, funding in 2023-2024 was from a central government grant administered by its agent, Groundwork UK on behalf of Locality. The grant received and details of the expenditure are given in the accounts. We spent about 70% of the grant, with the largest amounts being spent on engaging consultants ONeillHomer and Bioregional. Other spend included room hire, print and production of banners for public information and insurance. A requirement of the grant was that all unused funding was to be returned to Groundwork UK at the end of the financial year (31st March 2024), which has been done.

Applying for, and obtaining, the grant continues to be a challenging process. Although the grant was intended to cover the period April 2023 to March 2024, the grant application process did not open until 25-Jul-2023, and there was no advance notice of what this date would be. We actually obtained the grant on 26-Oct-2023, leaving 5 months to usefully spend a year’s grant. The Management committee and Topic group leaders worked hard and made good use of the funds.

The Grant has to be administered by an accountable body, which must be incorporated – MNF is not. Maidenhead Waterways, which is incorporated, has kindly continued to administer the grant for us and we very much appreciate their support.

Funding cannot be carried over, so once again we need to start the process of applying for a grant from Locality for the financial year 2024-2025 and have no money in the meantime. At the time of writing the grant process has recently been opened and we will make an application shortly.

Management Committee

Over the year 2023-2024 the Management Committee, whom we warmly thank for all their hard work, has been:

- Andrew Ingram and Ian Rose (Co-Chairs)

- Sue Ingram (Secretary)
- Nicola Stingelin (Treasurer)
- Martin McNamee
- Mark Fessey
- Andy Woodcock
- Richard Davenport
- Mick Jarvis
- Donna Stimson (Sep 2023 onwards)
- Judith Littlewood (Oct 2023 onwards)

Ian Rose and Andrew Ingram

Co-Chairs

Maidenhead Neighbourhood Forum