

## **Appointment of Planning Consultant for NDP Review**

### **Background**

Work on the review of the NDP has progressed following the successful consultation event in January 2023. Working Groups have been undertaking research into the topics and issues that Hawkhurst residents identified as being important at the visioning event. This phase of work is nearing its conclusion, and the NDP Steering Group now requires professional support to review the evidence gathered to date and identify the most appropriate next steps.

Councillors will be aware that HPC has a budget for the review of the NDP. To date, very little of this budget has been spent. The Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) provides support for neighbourhood plans in the form of grant funding and technical support. Locality manages the support and grant applications on behalf of DLUHC. HPC has already received a grant for the costs associated with the January 2023 consultation event. The NDP Steering Group has worked with the Locum Clerk to submit a second grant application to Locality to fund the required consultancy work. In order for Locality to proceed with its consideration of the grant application, HPC needs to agree the appointment of a consultant.

### **Process**

The NDP Steering Group has used Locality's toolkit for consultant engagement to undertake this piece of work.

In October 2023, it was anticipated that consultant support would be required in 2024. The NDP Steering Group agreed that we should undertake some pre-contractual market contact. This was designed to alert potential consultants to our project and to obtain feedback about the way we would likely structure the engagement. The NDP Steering Group felt that consultants with experience of working in the Southeast (especially this part of Kent ~ East Sussex) might be best suited to our requirements.

Laurence Faulkner (LF), who was then the chairman of the Parish Council finance committee and vice chairman of the NDP Steering Group, took on this task. In total, Laurence identified ten contactable consultants, who appeared to meet the above requirement. Consultants were contacted in November 2023 to seek feedback on a draft brief and to ascertain whether they would potentially be interested in supporting Hawkhurst with its revised NDP.

At its December 2023 meeting, the NDP Steering Group confirmed its intent to progress consultant engagement and to make a formal application for the Locality grant. The Locum Clerk and Laurence Faulkner were consulted to confirm the process to be used for the appointment of a planning consultant, including the grant application. The process was agreed by the Locum Clerk towards the end of December 2023, and an email was sent to the seven consultants still potentially interested, outlining the timescale of the appointment process. Two consultants withdrew at this stage.

The Locum Clerk submitted the grant application in January 2024, and the Invitation to Bid was sent to the five consultancy firms still potentially interested. It should be noted that the Locality grant process sets a cap of £580 per day for consultancy fees, and the firms were invited to submit bids within that cap.

A selection panel comprising the Locum Clerk and two members of the Steering Group (one councillor and one non-councillor) was agreed.

### **Consultant Submissions**

We received one quote for ten days work at a cost of £5500 plus VAT. The submission is from a qualified planning consultant with extensive experience in this field, both technically and geographically. They have worked on over 100 neighbourhood plans, one of which was awarded the Excellence in Planning Award. This includes experience of working on neighbourhood plan reviews as well as initial plans. In addition, the consultant has particular experience of working within the Tunbridge Wells borough and has a good working relationship with TWBC planning officers. Their submission is comprehensive and addresses all the tasks outlined in the Invitation to Bid, namely:

1. To advise & assist in the successful completion of Phase 3 of the project.
2. To ensure the veracity of the Plan is underpinned by an appropriate alignment of evidence, community feedback, vision, objectives and policies.

3. To recommend whether any further bespoke survey/assessment is to be undertaken.
4. To ensure the Plan's objectives are expressed in a way that gives finer grain & specificity in the application of the Local Plan's policies to Hawkhurst.
5. To ensure that the wording of the Plan is conducive to achieving the Plan's objectives, by minimizing ambiguous statements and highlighting any risk of unintended consequences associated with policies or their wording.
6. To ensure that the basic conditions are fulfilled, that the basic conditions statement properly represents this and that the Plan is appropriate to proceed to Regulation 14 consultation and to submission.

### **Current Position**

HPC's financial regulations require three quotes to be obtained for this level of expenditure. Therefore, the next steps of the selection process (contacting references and undertaking the selection interview) have been deferred to allow for the matter to be discussed at Full Council.

As can be seen from the process outlined above, every effort has been made to obtain more than three quotes for this highly specialised area of work. One quote has been received from a very experienced consultant who could provide the necessary support to enable the NDP Steering Group to complete the review of Hawkhurst's NDP.

**Therefore, the NDP Steering Group is asking the Parish Council to agree to proceed on the basis of one quote for the engagement of a Planning Consultant, releasing the funds so that the Locum Clerk can issue a contract subsequent to the successful completion of the selection interview and the receipt of satisfactory references.**