

Maintaining harmony between travellers, settled residents and local businesses

The story of the Hovefields and Honiley Neighbourhood Plan

The proposal to form a Neighbourhood Forum and to develop a Neighbourhood Plan in Hovefields and Honiley was first suggested in the summer of 2015. It's an area that has a troubled history with several years of conflict between settled residents and the gypsy and traveller community. However, one local resident, Dave Walsh, set about mobilising the entire community, including local businesses – to help create a shared vision of the area, which all sides could sign up to.

About the area

Hovefields and Honiley is a cluster of settlements within the Fairmead Plotland, just to the north of the A127 between the towns of Basildon and Wickford. It is a small area that comprises 20 settled residential plots, 11 established traveller plots, 4 business plots and a number of unapproved gypsy/traveller developments. The area is prone to intermittent flooding during extreme periods of rain.

Over the last 12 to 14 years there has been a considerable amount of conflict between the settled residents, the gypsy and traveller community and Basildon District Council. The issue has largely been about unapproved developments, which has created many problems including drainage systems and ditches being destroyed; roads falling into disrepair and unable to cope; and the natural environment covered over with tarmac and concrete.

When Basildon Council took direct action, the occupants of the land were forcibly removed, the developments destroyed and the hard standings bulldozed and mounded around the periphery of the pitches.

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Thankfully the conflict has now passed and the community has made a concerted effort to move forward. However the underlying issues haven't been resolved. The large volume of hard core used to build the unauthorized developments remains; drainage systems have not been repaired and ditch lines have not been reinstated, frequently resulting in septic tank and cesspit overflows after heavy rain.

"We are enormously proud of what has been achieved. We have successfully designated our neighbourhood area and set up our neighbourhood forum, which includes residents from all parts of our community."

DAVE WALSH, CHAIR, HOVEFIELDS AND HONILEY NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM

Why do a Neighbourhood Plan?

The latest draft Basildon Local Development Plan proposes a further 22 pitches for the Gypsy and Traveller community. However it doesn't propose any additional housing for Hovefield and Honiley's settled residents, which they fear removes any hope of bringing developer contributions into the area to improve infrastructure and repair the damage wrought by unauthorised developments. They view the Council's proposals as not only disproportionate but potentially damaging to the community's hard-fought for harmony, whilst achieving very little by way of improvements to the local area.

Residents decided to take action, therefore, and explore whether neighbourhood planning could be the way to ensure everyone's needs could be met, including settled residents, the Gypsy and traveller community, local businesses and even Basildon District Council themselves.

The journey so far

Local resident and Chair of the Hovefields and Honiley Neighbourhood Forum, Dave Walsh, went around to every house in the area to tell them about neighbourhood planning. Almost everyone he spoke to was interested and signed up to be involved. Since the summer of 2015 a lot has been achieved. Dave said:

"We are enormously proud of what has been achieved. We have successfully designated our neighbourhood area and recently set up our neighbourhood forum, which includes residents from all parts of our community. There is a lot of work to do still and we know that Basildon Council is learning with us. However we all committed to making our vision for the area, a reality"

Our vision

It is the vision of our forum to build a balanced, healthy and cohesive community; where a diverse community can live and work together safely, in harmony and with mutual respect for each other. We intend to deliver a wide choice of homes, widening opportunities for home ownership. Our objective is to create a community that has:

- A healthy and safe environment for families, adults and children to live in
- Mains services for gas, foul water drainage, storm water drainage and electricity to all properties.
- A road network that has been upgraded to Highways Standards.
- Road links between Honiley Avenue with Hovefields Drive and Hovefields Avenue with Upper Park Road allowing our residents easy access to community services (shops, doctor's surgeries, public transportation etc.).
- Walking and cycle routes throughout our community with links through our local public park and along public highways to ease our residents access to community services.
- A bus route through our community for optimisation of public transportation links.
- Areas of open space.
- A continuing strategic approach to any development proposed preventing any further uncontrolled development.

"The priorities for the area are improved drainage and mains sewage. We need new homes to be built in order to bring developer contributions into the area. A neighbourhood plan is our answer".

DAVE WALSH, CHAIR, HOVEFIELDS AND HONILEY NEIGHBOURHOOD FORUM

Next steps

In order to realise the vision for Hovefields and Honiley it is recognised that there will need to be an allocation of housing in the neighbourhood plan area, with sufficient number of dwellings to ensure provision of the desired mains services for existing properties – as well as additional traveller pitches. This will not be easy and residents are aware that further negotiations around their vision and aspirations may be required. However all are committed to the process and are taking the next steps to move things forward. This includes:

- Securing the right type of support for neighbourhood forum members to steer them through the process;
- Dealing with local aspirations for more development, that may not conform with
- Basildon Council policies for the plotlands;
- Liaising with utility providers and developers to ensure feasibility of proposals.