



Alsager Town Council Community Consultation Report

31 May 2016

Final Version

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1.0 BACKGROUND

The Localism Act 2012, for the first time, gave communities new powers in the form of ‘community rights’. One of the key ‘rights’ available under the Act is the ‘right to plan’ in the form of Neighbourhood Plans. This means that communities now have the power to set land use planning policy which, once adopted, becomes part of the Local Development Plan and therefore holds legal weight in land use planning decisions.

Where Neighbourhood Plans have been ‘made’ (the legal term for an adopted Neighbourhood Plan), any planning applications that are submitted to the Local Planning Authority must comply with the Neighbourhood Plan Policies in the same way that they must comply with the relevant, adopted Local Plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). Therefore, Neighbourhood Plans are genuinely powerful documents, enshrined in legislation that have real influence over planning decisions, and there are numerous examples to demonstrate this locally and nationally.

Cheshire East is one of the most active areas in the country for Neighbourhood Planning. It is officially (at the time of writing) *the* most active Borough in the North West region with 35 completed or progressing Neighbourhood Plans. Cheshire East Council provides a very comprehensive support service for Neighbourhood Plan groups which has helped to promote and encourage more and more communities to come forward and take on the challenge.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

Cheshire Community Action was appointed by Alsager Town Council in December 2015 to facilitate a consultation exercise in February to March 2016. This involved a community survey and a series of public events, which gave those who live and work in Alsager a chance to share their views on the positive and negative aspects of the town, and to identify any opportunities or threats to the town’s well-being.

The purpose of this report is to present an analysis of the data from the consultation exercise that will help to inform the Town Council’s decision on whether a Neighbourhood Plan would be the best way to address the issues raised.

Cheshire Community Action is a local, independent charity that specialises in community engagement. It is the largest and most experienced provider of Neighbourhood Planning Support external to the Local Authority in Cheshire East and is run on a not-for-profit basis.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

Household Survey

The survey, shown in Appendix A, was sent to all households (one per household) in the Town of Alsager (within the Local Council boundary) between 15-24 February 2016 and was delivered by local volunteers. Those completing the survey as a written hard copy could return their forms to the Alsager Civic Centre which was the designated collection point. The deadline for responses was 31st March 2016 allowing almost 7 weeks to respond.

Online Survey

As well as printing out the survey and delivering copies door-to-door, an online version (an exact equivalent of the hardcopy version) was created so that people could complete the survey using a computer or other device with access to the internet. This online software also provided a central point for all hard copy responses to be entered into - this was also used to accurately carry out data analysis.

Schools

Town Councillors helped with engaging two local schools: Alsager School and Alsager Highfields Primary. The survey was presented to pupils in both schools by a Councillor giving a short brief before encouraging them to complete the survey.

Consultation Launch Event

On 24 February 2016, a launch event was held at Alsager Civic Centre to invite members of the public to hear presentations on what is involved in the Neighbourhood Plan process. This included the legal and legislative basis for Neighbourhood Plans in the Localism Act, what can and can't be done using a Neighbourhood Plan and an example from Bunbury, which was one of the first communities in Cheshire East to complete a Neighbourhood Plan.

As Neighbourhood Planning is still a relatively new process, the launch event gave the public a chance to learn more about what is involved in Neighbourhood Planning and help them understand the opportunities and the limitations of the process. The community survey was also promoted at the event.

Drop-in Events

In addition to the launch event, 3 drop-in events were also held on:

- Wed 2 March, 6-8pm at Excalibur School
- Thu 3 March, 6-8pm at Christ Church Hall
- Sat 5 March, 10-12 noon at Alsager Civic Centre

These events had the purpose of increasing the accessibility of the consultation exercise to help people attend who perhaps could not easily get to the main launch event. The

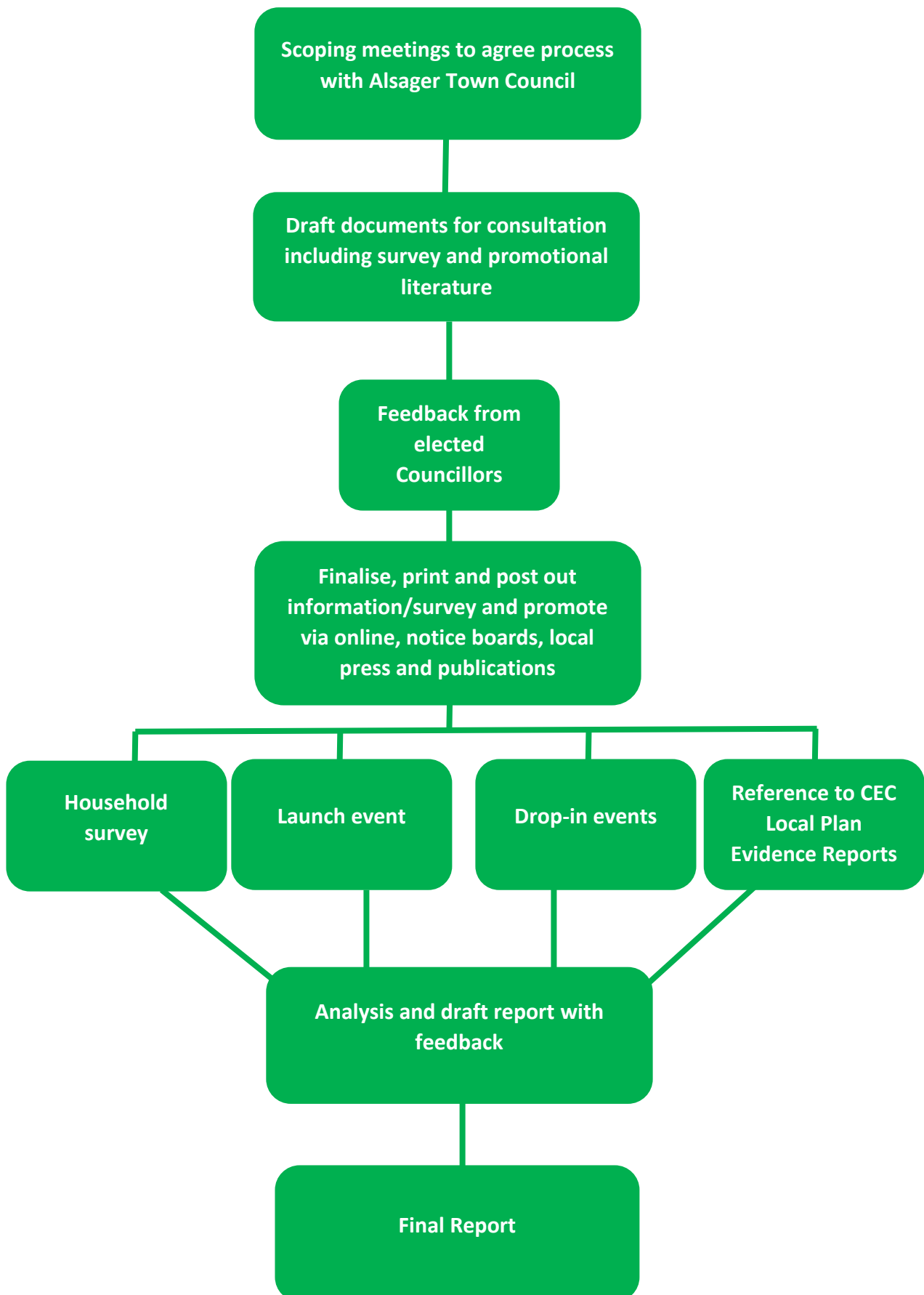
format of these events was deliberately less formal with some simple displays and handouts on Neighbourhood Planning to help create a more engaging and approachable atmosphere to encourage discussion. The survey was also promoted at these drop-in events.

Communications

To maximise the exposure of the consultation exercise, the community survey and all events were promoted via the following communication channels:

- Town Council newsletter / magazine: "Alsager in Focus"
- Town Council website: <http://www.alsagertowncouncil.org.uk/about-council/latest-news/alsager-neighbourhood-plan/>
- 'Alsager Civic' and 'Its all about Alsager' facebook pages
- 2x press releases (See Appendices B and C)
- Posters on Notice boards of the Town Council (See Appendix D)

The Consultation Process



4.0 SURVEY RESULTS

Household Survey

Alsager has 5,185 households (Census 2011). One survey was delivered to each household by the Town Council and 310 were completed and returned. This is a response rate of 6%.

Schools

An additional 52 surveys were completed by school pupils from Alsager School (aged 12-18 years) and Alsager Highfields Primary (aged 10-11 years).

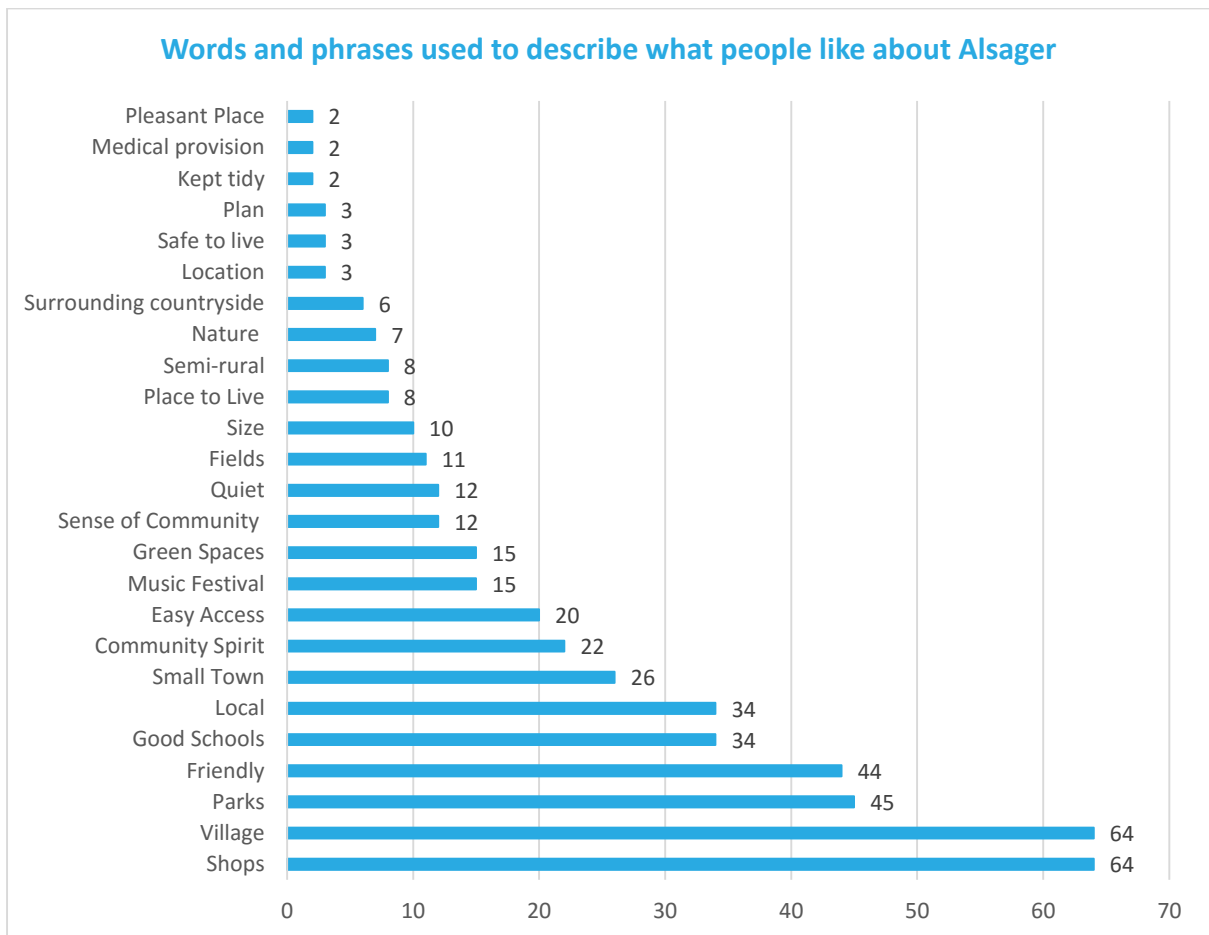
Combining these two results together gives an overall response of 362 surveys.

In previous research carried out by CCA, it found that comparable community surveys for Parish Plans achieved an average (mean) response rate across Cheshire East of 46% (CCA Community Led Planning Local Area Partnership Reports, Feb 2013). In this context, the response in Alsager is fairly low compared to other similar surveys in the Borough.

The survey was deliberately made up of open-ended questions to minimise the influence on people's responses. The software used to collate the responses enables an analysis of the most commonly used words and phrases. The following results analysis therefore, sets out a 'word cloud' and chart to illustrate this for each question.

Q1: What do you like about Alsager?



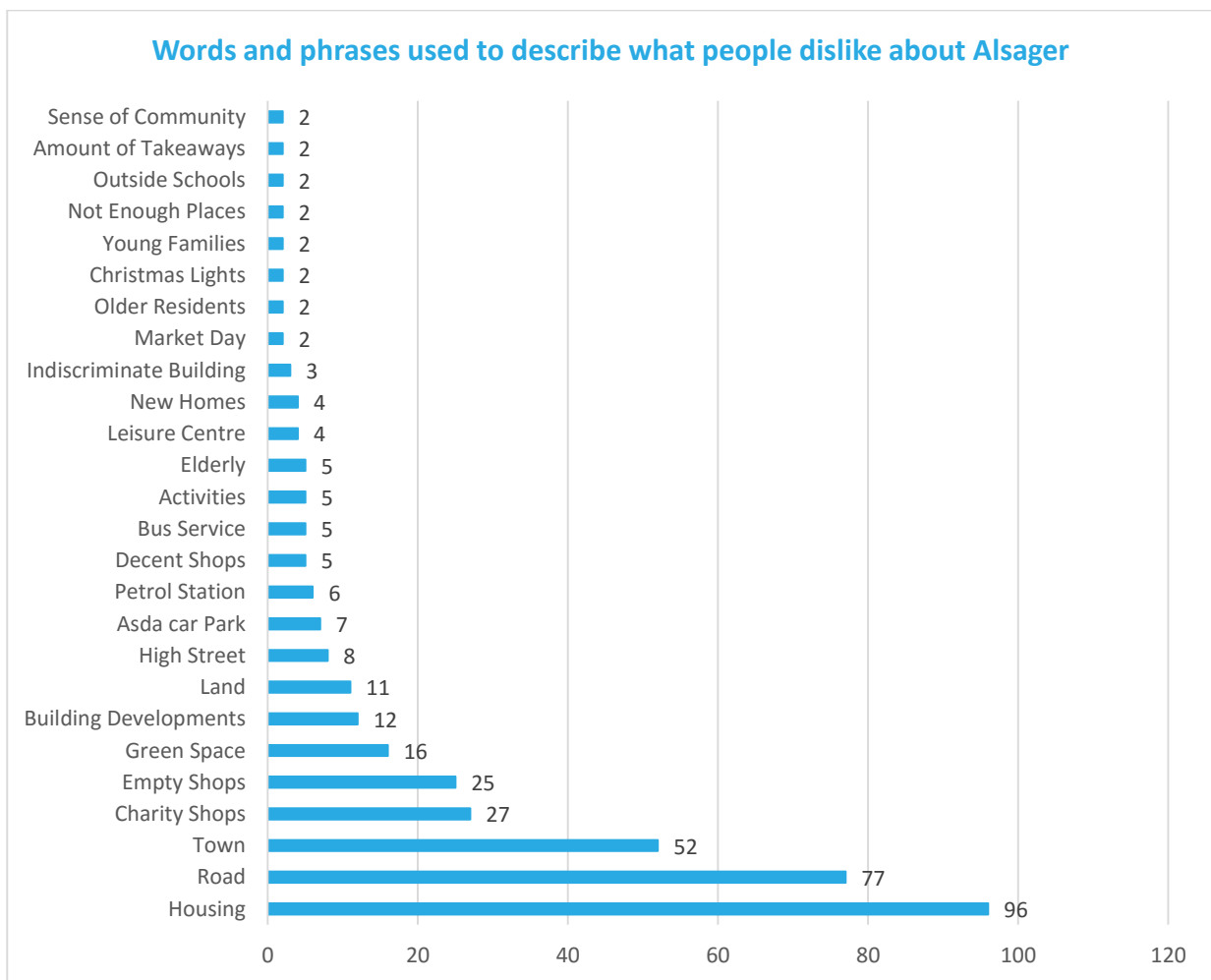


From the word and phrase analysis above, it is clear that local people value the town centre offer of shops. Many respondents referred to Alsager as a village as opposed to a town. Overwhelmingly, most respondents had very positive comments about how friendly Alsager is and referred to the many thriving community groups, sports and cultural activities available including the music festival, as well as the excellent schools in the area.

Proximity to the M6 motorway and its general accessibility by road and rail were major draws for people. Proximity to the surrounding countryside and the 'slower pace of life' came up frequently as important factors that people valued.

Q2: What do you dislike about Alsager?

Activities Amount of Takeaways **Decent Shops** Sense of
 Community **Asda car Park** Christmas Lights **Land**
Petrol Station Market Day **Green Space**
Charity Shops Elderly **Housing**
 Leisure Centre **Town** Indiscriminate Building
Empty Shops Older Residents **Bus Service**
Building Developments New Homes
Road Young Families **High Street** Outside Schools



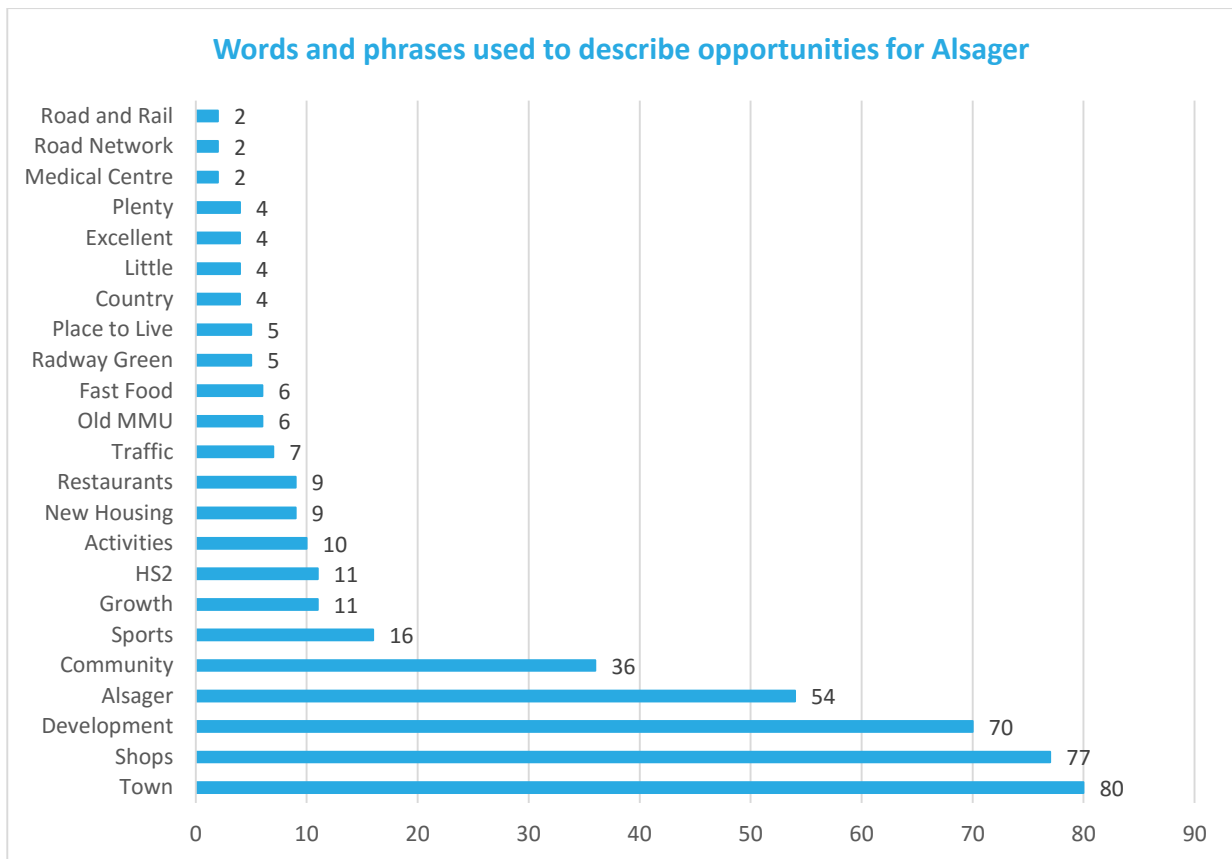
Although when asking people what they liked about Alsager the town centre shops came up regularly, when asked what they disliked, many respondents talked about their concern for: 'empty shops', 'too many charity shops' and 'takeaways'.

There was an overwhelming resistance to any housing development from most respondents referring to problems with local infrastructure capacity and traffic congestion. There was a wide disapproval of building on 'green fields' and many respondents disliked the fact that more housing was being built without giving a reason for this.

A minority of respondents took a more positive view of housing development and talked about how this could help to revive the town centre shopping offer. There were mixed views on having a big supermarket in the town centre i.e. some disapproval of a large supermarket in the centre, whereas others disapproved only of the brand of supermarket as opposed to the principle of having one. Some respondents wanted more supermarkets so the views of this were fairly inconclusive from the results. Many wanted to see more independent shops and several respondents mentioned that they travel to Sandbach to do their shopping.

Q3: What opportunities are there for the future of Alsager?

New Housing Fast Food Road Network Traffic
Old MMU Maintain HS2 Little Sports Country
Alsager Place to Live Shops
Radway Green Town Development
Community Excellent Growth Plenty
Activities Medical Centre Restaurants Road and Rail



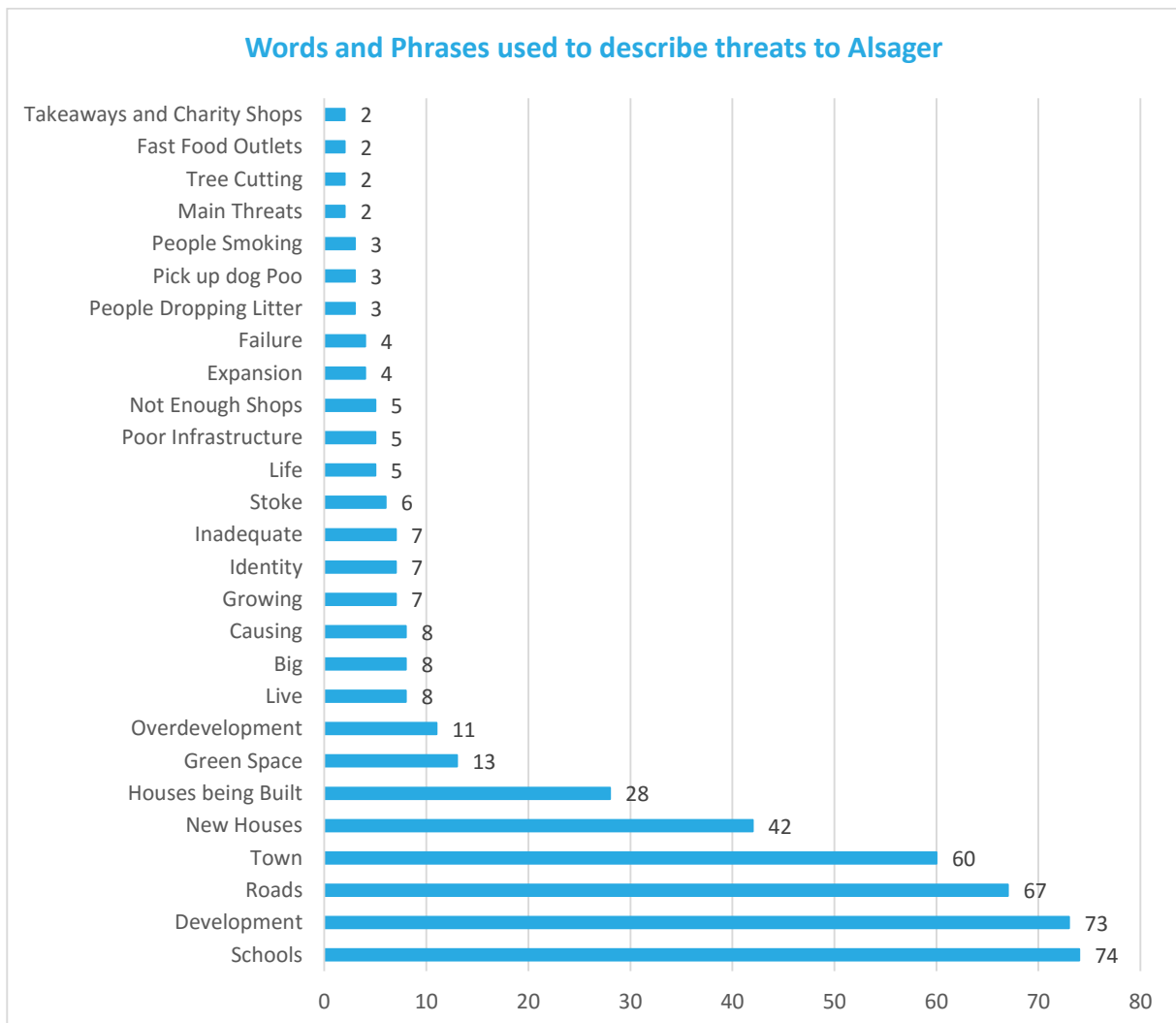
Opportunities described by respondents included enhancing the Town Centre and the range of shops. Some suggested pedestrianisation as an option. The majority of respondents supported increased employment and business growth within Alsager to help reduce commuting out of the area.

HS2 was seen as having a potentially positive effect on the local economy that would help enhance Alsager's accessibility even further. Many felt that gaining some contribution to improving local infrastructure from the new developments was an opportunity. The 'Old MMU' and 'Radway Green' sites were mentioned several times and there is a strong desire to influence how these sites are developed.

'Development of sports facilities' was seen as a popular opportunity area to explore. Unfortunately many of the respondents could not see any opportunities for Alsager and displayed a general despondency in their answers about the future of the town. When looking to attract new business investment in the town, good schools were also seen as a key asset for the area.

Q4: What threats are there to the future of Alsager?

Inadequate Fast Food Outlets Growing Main Threats Big
 Pick up dog Poo Overdevelopment Failure
 Houses being Built Not Enough shops
 Town Life Development stoke
 Schools Poor Infrastructure Roads
 Expansion New Houses People Dropping Litter
 Green Space People Smoking Live Tree Cutting
 Causing Takeaways and Charity Shops Identity Money



Fear of new development dominates the responses to this question in terms of threats. The main 'threat' was consistently cited as the mis-match of infrastructure development with housing development including concerns about drainage and flooding. Many were also concerned about the effect on schools and other services like libraries, doctor's surgeries and traffic congestion on the roads.

In contrast to this, several respondents displayed concern for the "bigoted attitudes" and "inward looking" nature of the Town as a key threat. As would be expected, this demonstrates a divide in opinion about development and the future of the Town. A minority of respondents were concerned that there was not enough development, especially of affordable housing for local people.

A small number of respondents feared Alsager becoming a 'suburb' of Stoke-on-Trent or becoming a dormitory settlement for people commuting out of the Town. Other threats included: loss of green space, people shopping elsewhere, young people leaving, more empty shops and changing the 'village feel'.

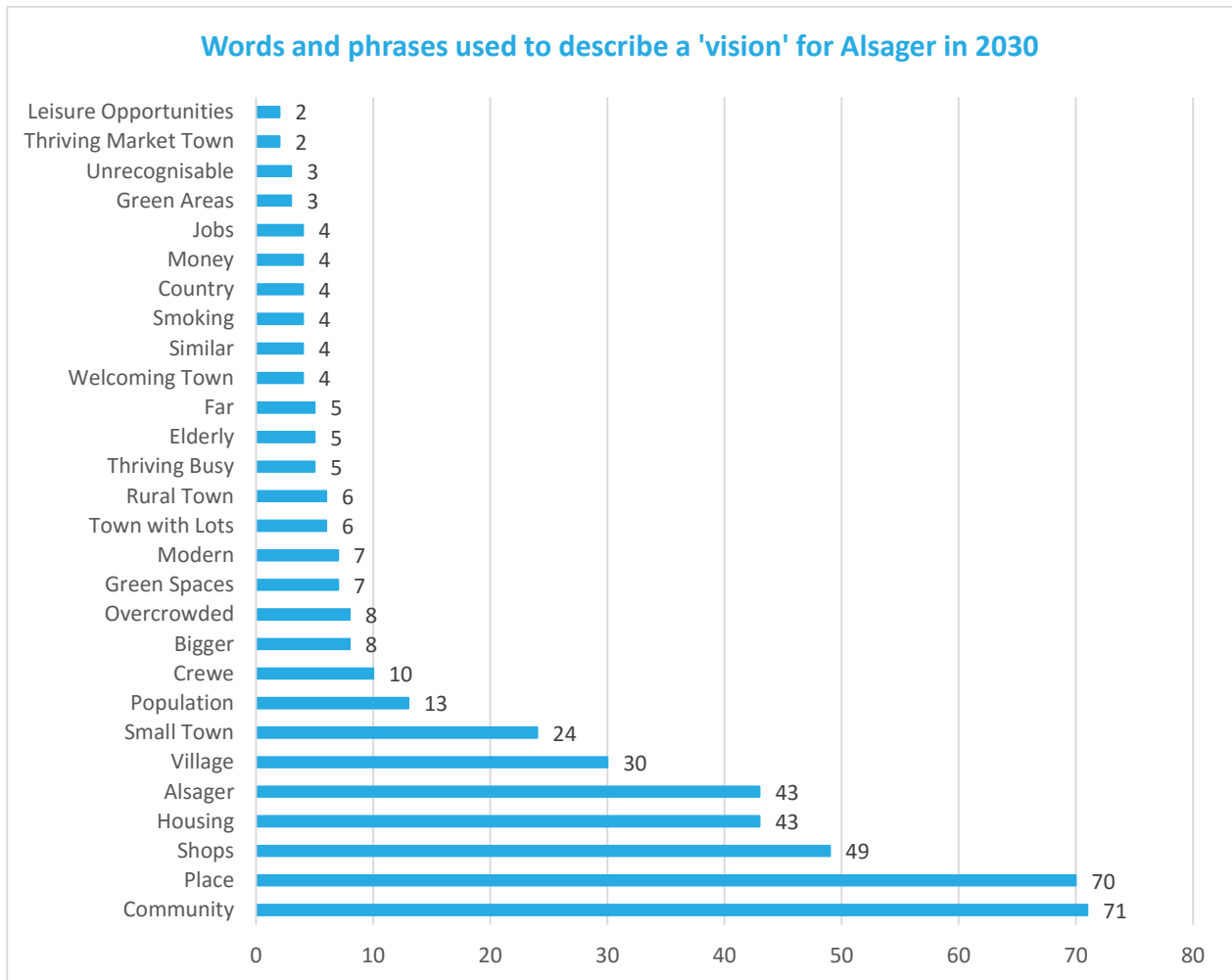
Finally there was some dissent towards Local Government whether that be the Local Authority or the Town Council. One respondent said:

'This is not legal and would not meet referendum rules.'

The community consultation is not a referendum – this comes at the end of a Neighbourhood Plan process (should Alsager chose to do one). This demonstrates some misunderstanding about the purpose of the community consultation.

Q5: What type of a place would you like Alsager to be by 2030? Please complete this sentence: 'By 2030 Alsager will be...'

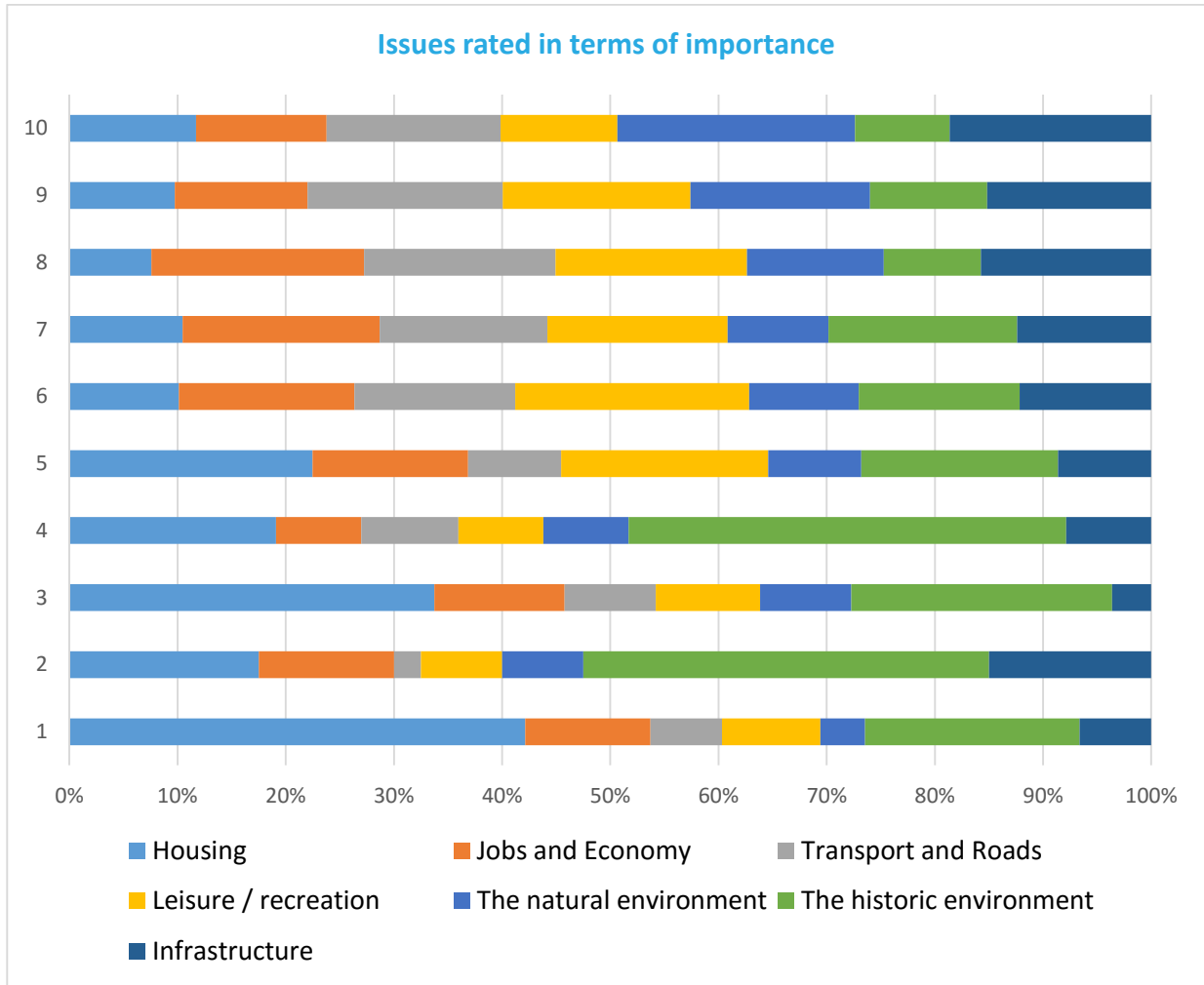
Town with Lots Thriving Market Town Green
Spaces Green
Areas Bigger Money Population Smoking Village
Welcoming Town Housing Elderly Place
Thriving Busy Community Far
Shops Similar Alsager Country
Small Town Jobs Crewe Unrecognisable
Overcrowded Leisure Opportunities Modern Rural Town



In terms of a future 'vision for Alsager there was mixed response to this. Many reiterated their negative fears for the future as opposed to citing how they would like the Town to develop. Several respondents feared it becoming more of a 'dormitory' Town where people travel out more for work and entertainment. The majority of people wanted to see the local shops and infrastructure improved significantly. Retaining and enhancing the 'sense of community' and the friendly nature of the Town was important to people.

Most people want to see Alsager as a busy, thriving Town with more jobs with a growing, prosperous economy. Leisure opportunities, safety, health and good transport links by rail and road, facilities and activities for young people and serving all age groups were all important to people who responded.

Q6: On a scale of 1-10, how important are the following issues to you? 1 = least important, 10 = most important



Question 6 was an opportunity for people to tell us how important they felt certain issues are in relation to land use. Infrastructure and natural environment scored the highest which tallies with the comments that people had made.

5.0 CHESHIRE EAST LOCAL PLAN – PROPOSED CHANGES VERSION – EVIDENCE REPORTS

Alsager Town Report, March 2016

Cheshire East Council have recently published a detailed evidence report to support the Local Plan - Proposed Changes Version which has been submitted to the Planning Inspectorate. This looks in detail at strategic sites and compiles 150 pages of evidence. Link to document on this web page:

<http://cheshireeast-consult.limehouse.co.uk/portal/planning/cs/lpspcv>

Cheshire East's Strategy for Alsager over the Local Plan period (up to 2030) is:

“The focus for Alsager over the Local Plan Strategy period is to boost economic growth in the town, increase job density and reduce overall out-commuting. The position of Alsager, adjacent to the M6, makes it an attractive location for future investment, with the future regeneration of Radway Green employment area expected to enhance to the town's employment role in line with the conclusions of the Settlement Hierarchy [BE 046].”

Cheshire East's Strategy for Alsager (in this report) would address some of the concerns cited from the community consultation.

Alsager Traffic Study, Technical Note, March 2015

Cheshire East Council have commissioned a detailed study of traffic impact from planned and speculative new development in Alsager. Link to document on this web page:

<http://cheshireeast-consult.limehouse.co.uk/portal/planning/cs/lpspcv>

The overview of the report says:

“The emerging Cheshire East Local Plan provides for over 1,000 new homes in the town of Alsager, plus over 35 hectares of employment land and other land uses by 2030. In addition, a number of speculative planning applications have been submitted within the town, taking the potential number of additional homes in Alsager to over 2,000 during the Local Plan period. In response, Cheshire East Highways (CEH) had commissioned a Traffic Study to provide an assessment of the impact of this potential development on the highway infrastructure within Alsager.”

Traffic congestion was a major concern of respondents to the survey, so it is worth the Town Council being aware of this document and liaising with Cheshire East Council to see where highways issues can be tackled through developer contributions.

6.0 OBSERVATIONS and OPTIONS

CCA was asked to carry out the community consultation in Alsager and to analyse the data that came back. CCA made some observations during the process that may help with the Town Council's decision on whether to produce a Neighbourhood Plan or not. Ultimately the Town Council will have to decide if a Neighbourhood Plan would be the best way to tackle the issues that are important to the community.

Observations

1. The low response rate

Despite communicating with local people through multiple press releases, a web page, multiple events in different locations, household and online surveys and notice boards, there was still a very low response from the community. There can be many different reasons for this but from the responses given, this survey could indicate that residents feel that there has been a lack of meaningful engagement with local people for some time in Alsager. Many respondents had negative attitudes towards local government (Town Council and Borough). This can take considerable time to turn around but, we do see many communities change, with less apathy for consultation once they feel like their views have been addressed. Ultimately a community consultation or survey is exactly that, and the level of engagement, albeit relatively low, does give the Town Council a 'sense' of what a small section of local residents see as important for Alsager.

2. Relationship with local groups and effective communication

Several attendees at drop-in events had reported some misinformation from various sources. Technical and legal processes such as Neighbourhood Planning can be a challenge to communicate the right messages to help people understand them. It is important for small towns in Cheshire to provide strong leadership when it comes to community engagement and to be seen to be 'listening' to what its constituents are saying. Unfortunately some negative attitudes did prevail throughout this process (voiced very strongly at the Launch event) and this will discourage people to come forward and support the Town Council. The Town Council needs to provide stronger leadership and increase communication about the positive work that it does for the Town.

3. Misunderstanding of the consultation, the Neighbourhood Plan Process and the role of Alsager Town Council and Cheshire East Council

It is not uncommon for residents to be suspicious of consultations but there were several comments made at events and on survey forms which told us that many people did not understand the purpose of the exercise. Land use planning is a technical and legal discipline and several people had picked up that a referendum is part of the process. Several respondents thought that the consultation *was* the referendum which is not the case – it comes towards the end of the process. A small number of participants at events and survey

respondents did not understand that a Neighbourhood Plan has not started in Alsager which again highlights the difficulty in communicating and engaging with communities on land use issues.

Many blamed the Town Council for not “stopping” certain developments at planning application stage without understanding that Town and Parish Councils do not possess this power. All planning applications are determined by the Local Planning Authority in Cheshire East or by the Secretary of State in Appeal. Again this highlighted an issue in the relationship between Alsager Town Council and its community in terms of understanding its role.

Options

1. **Do not produce a Neighbourhood Plan in Alsager** – this does not mean ‘do nothing’. The Town Council has already made representations to the Cheshire East Local Plan – Proposed Changes Version consultation. There are many issues that came out of the consultation that are not only dealt with via the Local Plan but are better placed in the Local Plan. By getting professional advice and focussing on the Local Plan policies, the Town Council could work closely with the Spatial Planning team at Cheshire East to address community concerns. This could be the most viable and least costly option. The disadvantage to talking this route is that the Town Council will not have as much control over this process.
2. **Do a Neighbourhood Plan straight away** – The Town Council does have the ‘right’ and the power to produce a Neighbourhood Plan. The main advantages to this is having control over local planning policy (subject to national and local policy conformity as with all planning policy). However, this could be costly and judging from the feedback from the consultation it may be a struggle to find enough skilled volunteers to take the process forward. Also many of the concerns from the community will not be solved via a Neighbourhood Plan e.g. many people were concerned about the loss of independent shops which is something planning can help create the right conditions to remedy, but cannot directly influence. Highways were a common concern and also an area that Neighbourhood Plans have limited power to influence as it is often a more strategic issue to be dealt with via the Local Highways Authority.
3. **Do a Neighbourhood Plan in a year or two following extensive engagement** – another approach would be to find some common concerns locally from the survey work, and through further engagement with local people, put them into a simple action plan and deal with them as ‘quick wins’, then widely publicise the positive outcomes. Find things that *can* be influenced by the Town Council and encourage the Town Councillors to be more ‘visible’ in the community. E.g. Work with local, trusted partners and give out small seed corn grants to good causes and publicise it widely. This process alone will generate more meaningful engagement and unearth a different set of ideas, skills and competencies from within the community and generate a new interest in civic pride. This would help counteract the very negative attitudes that currently prevail and dominate.

Find the positive 'assets' for Alsager – many respondents talked about the schools, the industrial heritage and the excellent sports and community groups within Alsager. These all appeared to be things that people are already proud of in Alsager so work with this. If this is done right, the Town Council will start to forge new partnerships and gain more trust from the community which may be a better time to consider starting a Neighbourhood Plan.

7.0 Thanks

Cheshire Community Action would like to thank Alsager Town Council for commissioning the work, and for their cooperation throughout the exercise.

We would also like to thank the residents of Alsager for taking the time to complete the surveys.

APPENDIX A: HOUSEHOLD SURVEY QUESTIONS



Alsager Neighbourhood Plan Survey

If possible, please complete this survey online by visiting: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/alsagernp

A Neighbourhood Plan is a document produced by the community that enables it to set its own land-use planning policies.

Once adopted, a Neighbourhood Plan becomes part of the Local Authority Development Plan and is used in determining planning applications alongside the National Planning Policy Framework and the relevant Local Plan.

Alsager Town Council is considering producing a Neighbourhood Plan but first it would like feedback from local residents and businesses on what is important to the Town. From this input the Town Council can then decide whether a Neighbourhood Plan is the most appropriate way forward to help meet these priorities.

1. What do you like about Alsager?

2. What do you dislike about Alsager?

3. What opportunities are there for the future of Alsager?

4. What threats are there to the future of Alsager?

5. What type of a place would you like Alsager to be by 2030?

Please complete this sentence: 'By 2030 Alsager will be...'

6. On a scale of 1-10, how important are the following issues to you?

1 = Least important, 10 = Most important

Housing

Jobs and economy

Transport and roads

Leisure/recreation

The natural environment

The historic environment

Infrastructure

7. If you would like to volunteer to help with the Neighbourhood Plan, please give your contact details below:

.....
....

APPENDIX B: PRESS RELEASE 1 (16th Feb 2016)



Alsager Neighbourhood Plan – Have Your Say!

Alsager Town Council is launching its preliminary consultation to ask local residents and businesses what their priorities are for the Town.

The Town Council will take on board the views of local people before making its decision on whether to proceed with a Neighbourhood Plan which, is a community led plan that enables it to set its own land-use planning policies.

Once adopted, a Neighbourhood Plan becomes part of the Local Authority Development Plan and is used in determining planning applications alongside the National Planning Policy Framework and the relevant Local Plan.

There is a short survey which you can complete online by visiting:
www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/alsagernp

There will be several events held in late February and early March where there will be presentations on what exactly a Neighbourhood Plan is, what it involves, and what the benefits, opportunities and challenges are if Alsager decides to produce one. You will also have the chance to ask questions and tell us what you think is important for the future of Alsager.

Neighbourhood Plan Consultation Launch Event

Alsager Civic

Wednesday 24th February 2016, 6-8pm

Neighbourhood Plan Drop-in event

Excalibur School

Wednesday 2nd March 2016, 6-8pm

Neighbourhood Plan Drop-in event

Christ Church Hall

Thursday 3rd March 2016, 7-9pm

Neighbourhood Plan Drop-in event

Alsager Civic

Saturday 5th March 2016, 10-12 Noon

For further information please visit: alsagertowncouncil.org.uk

or email: john.heselwood@cheshireaction.org.uk

Ends



Don't miss your chance to have your say on the Alsager Neighbourhood Plan Consultation!

Alsager Town Council's preliminary Neighbourhood Plan consultation is still open for responses. The Town Council is keen for as many local people and businesses as possible to share their views about the future of the town.

The Town Council is collecting survey responses before making its decision on whether to proceed with a Neighbourhood Plan which, is a community led plan that enables it to set its own land-use planning policies.

Once adopted, a Neighbourhood Plan becomes part of the Local Authority Development Plan and is used in determining planning applications alongside the National Planning Policy Framework and the relevant Local Plan.

Chairman of the Town Council, Councillor Simon Bishop said: "Over the last two weeks we have organised a launch event and three drop-in sessions to explain the Neighbourhood Planning process. This has given people a chance to understand what Neighbourhood Planning is all about. It's great to see local people engaging with the Town Council on issues that are important to them.

Alsager has seen a lot of development applications over recent years and this is likely to continue. Neighbourhood Plans present the first real opportunity for communities to develop their own land use planning policies. It won't solve everything but if we do decide to go ahead with a Neighbourhood Plan and local people back us, then it is our best chance at influencing future planning decisions."

There is a short survey which you can complete online by visiting:

www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/alsagernp

For further information please visit: alsagertowncouncil.org.uk

or email: john.heselwood@cheshireaction.org.uk

Ends

Alsager Neighbourhood Plan – Have Your Say!

Calling local residents and businesses!

Alsager Town Council invites you to take part in its preliminary Neighbourhood Plan consultation.

This is your chance to say what your priorities are for the Town. You will also have the chance to ask questions and tell us what you think is important for the future of Alsager.

There is a short survey which you can complete online by visiting: www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/alsagernp

Neighbourhood Plan Consultation Launch Event

Alsager Civic, Wed 24th February 2016, 6-8pm

Neighbourhood Plan Drop-in events:

Excalibur School, Wed 2nd March 2016, 6-8pm

Christ Church Hall, Thurs 3rd March 2016, 7-9pm

Alsager Civic, Sat 5th March 2016, 10-12 Noon

For further information please visit: alsagertowncouncil.org.uk



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