

Beyond consultation

The role of neighbourhood plans in supporting local involvement in planning

February 2012



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About this report

On 6 July 2011 the Committee agreed to carry out a review of community involvement in planning. It sought to examine whether the new opportunities and procedures for community involvement in the planning system beyond simple consultation will be effective in London and what, if any, improvements need to be made, with the following term of reference:

- To review existing opportunities and challenges for community involvement in planning in London and possible future solutions that could enable all Londoners to get involved both in plan and policy making and in the control of development.

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Foreword



I am passionate about helping people shape their local neighbourhoods. For many years different initiatives have sought to give people a say on how their local area looks and develops. Unfortunately, for many this has in practice become a rather meaningless process of tick-box consultation.

The Localism Act has lofty ambitions to give communities a greater sense of ownership over decisions that make a difference to their lives and in this report we look at how we can begin to turn these into actions.

Neighbourhood groups need to ensure that the plan-making process is recognised by local stakeholders as legitimate, and that the communities and the boroughs have the resources to make a good job of it. With a change of approach – and mindset - within the current planning regime we believe communities' efforts to truly shape the way their neighbourhoods develop can bear fruit.

I want to generate a culture change to create the space for local communities to take the lead on drawing up a vision for their area whether in the form of some simple key objectives or a detailed set of plans. Local authorities and developers will need to play their part, too - the Committee heard from a range of different organisations and individuals who see a clear opportunity to improve the planning process by drawing on the local knowledge and technical expertise of community groups. By engaging with local communities at the earliest stage possible and developing working partnerships, local authorities can offer a more direct form of involvement that goes beyond consultation.

Our report is intended to help light the way for fledgling neighbourhood planners as they enter London's planning maze, and encourage the Mayor and local authorities to give them the support they need. Although this is about local communities, the Mayor can help by supporting a London-wide community planning network to share experiences, and by drawing up and regularly refreshing guidance based on their work.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jenny Jones".

Jenny Jones AM

Chair of the London Assembly Planning and Housing Committee

Executive Summary

The reforms in the Government's 2011 Localism Act encourage further local involvement in planning matters. Neighbourhood plans are one such reform. The Act seeks to hand more power to local communities in influencing how their local area develops and how local authorities make planning decisions. However, the localism agenda is likely to play out differently in London from the rest of the country.

The report focuses on the new opportunities and challenges facing neighbourhood plans in London. It also establishes what London boroughs, the Mayor and local communities themselves could do to enable all Londoners to get involved in making plans and policy, and in controlling development.

Our review has heard from a wide range of stakeholders. Local involvement in planning means different things to different people. Some groups want to use neighbourhood planning to shape the "big ticket" issues affecting their area. Some want to use neighbourhood plans to influence Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks, where the Mayor has influence. Others want to raise issues like street cleaning and litter collection, which the existing planning frameworks don't cover.

While their ambitions are often well defined, stakeholders still find it hard to understand the effect of neighbourhood planning as a policy. We have collected a range of views on the matter. Some of those we spoke to were concerned that more strategic plans and planning frameworks could override or undermine the influence of neighbourhood plans. Some bodies are openly sceptical about the usefulness of neighbourhood plans in any circumstances. Some contributors, in contrast, thought that engaging local communities in planning could provide a significant new resource, though potentially stretching planning departments' resources.

We want to see neighbourhoods play a leading role in place-shaping across the capital. We see neighbourhood plans catalysing a culture change local planning, from 'top-down' consultation to genuine dialogue.

Three key questions have emerged during our deliberations, which any group drawing up a plan will face. We believe that the Mayor and local authorities can help groups answer them.

- What is a neighbourhood? Defining the term in London is particularly challenging;
- How can neighbourhood planning influence the wider planning framework, given that framework's complexity and the powerful interests involved?

- How can the neighbourhood group build their skills and resources? Where can they find support?

In London, the Government's policy may be hampered by the difficulty in defining the term 'neighbourhood'. Unlike small towns and villages, London is a uniquely complex urban area, in which neighbourhoods can be defined in a multitude of ways. Both communities and boroughs will need to adopt a range of solutions to involve all the stakeholders in neighbourhood plans.

Neighbourhood groups and local authorities will also need to navigate the existing complex planning frameworks at different levels of authority. Groups will have to agree, at the outset, the parameters within which they are drawing up their neighbourhood plan. They may need guidance from the local authority to do so.

Several experts and stakeholders have told the committee that supporting community engagement can bring considerable benefits. Exploiting the knowledge, skills and experiences of town planning professionals will be essential. The Committee sees a role for London councillors to support their local communities in the neighbourhood planning process and to provide that vital link with the local authority and its strategies. **We encourage the Local Government Association to review the role of local councillors in neighbourhood planning and set out some guidelines on what role councillors can, as a minimum, be expected to play** (Recommendation 3).

There are many challenges that neighbourhood groups will need to address to be credible and successful in setting out neighbourhood plans, including:

- how they can claim legitimacy;
- how they can evaluate their own resources and gain access to external resources; and
- how they can find the support they will need to develop their plans.

Any neighbourhood group or forum will need to show that it truly represents the local community: both those who live there and those (like developers and landlords) who have a stake in the area. The process for engaging with the local authority also needs to be clear.

Any neighbourhood group or forum will also need to realistically appraise its own strengths, and what resources it needs (including funding) from external partners. Local authorities and neighbourhood forums should seek an open dialogue on how

the government grants for Front Runner schemes and other neighbourhood planning initiatives are best spent, and what additional funding or support can be provided

(Recommendations 6 and 4).

Boroughs should also consider reviewing how they can adjust their current structure and approach to support neighbourhood planning, given the constraints of resources and workload

(Recommendation 5).

The Committee sees great benefit in neighbourhood groups and forums seeking support beyond their local boundaries. They should develop relationships with other neighbourhood planning bodies across London – and even beyond. Such networks would enable groups and forums to share best practice and solve problems.

While neighbourhood plans are by their very nature local activities there are number of ways they can be supported by the Mayor. In particular, **the Mayor should support existing networks of community and voluntary organisations, boroughs and other interested parties in setting up a neighbourhood planning network to support and encourage exploratory work** (Recommendation 7).

The report further recommends that the Mayor should produce best practice guidance, based on the results of the early Front Runner schemes and other neighbourhood planning initiatives in London, that highlights the range of ways to define a neighbourhood and explains how difficulties have been dealt with in different locations

(Recommendation 1).

The Mayor should also look to include neighbourhood planning in future Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks, and clarify how neighbourhood-level planning issues can usefully be considered within Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks in his draft supplementary planning guidance, providing advice to local authorities and communities in that regard (Recommendation 2).

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Over the past few decades, different countries have pioneered a wide range of methods to involve local people in planning matters, including visioning exercises, place-check surveys, 'Planning for Real', village design statements and participatory appraisals.
- 1.2 London is almost unique in that different kinds of community planning efforts have been tried in the same city; some successful, some not.¹ At London's Covent Garden, community participation saved most of the fabric from becoming dual carriageways and office blocks, ensuring also that the residential population was doubled. Without community action, "Tolmers Square, a socially- and ethnically-mixed and much loved area, would have been a mono-functional office plaza".² Coin Street is another example where local residents drew up a planning strategy to reverse the destruction of their community by building new homes and community facilities. The experience from these efforts provides valuable lessons to the stakeholders involved in neighbourhood planning.
- 1.3 The reforms set out in the Government's 2011 Localism Act seek to encourage further local involvement in planning matters. The aim of the Act is to give *"communities a far greater sense of ownership over decisions that make a big difference to their quality of life. They will allow for the exercise of genuine power at a local level; and put the ideals of the Big Society at the very heart of planning"*.³
- 1.4 Neighbourhood plans are one such reform. The Act seeks to hand more power to local communities in influencing how their local area develops and how local authorities make planning decisions. By providing a statutory framework, the Act opens up the opportunity for residents to create community-led plans (or neighbourhood plans) to meet local aspirations. The aspiration is that communities, rather than simply being consulted about specific planning proposals, will become proactive instigators of place-shaping.
- 1.5 The localism agenda is likely to play out differently in London from the rest of the country. A key issue will be balancing the city's strategic position at the heart of the United Kingdom's economy with the concerns of its residents and diverse communities.⁴ In particular, London's local authorities face a tough challenge in reconciling the needs of local communities with commercial needs. These challenges demand specifically tailored policy solutions.
- 1.6 Our review has heard from a wide range of stakeholders, including the Mayor's Chief Planning Officer, local authorities, academics and third-sector organisations. We also spoke to many individuals and groups who are involved in, or interested in producing,

neighbourhood plans, to capture and reflect their hopes and concerns.

- 1.7 We want to see neighbourhoods play a leading role in place-shaping across the capital. Our evidence sessions have focused largely on neighbourhood planning, because this is the latest initiative and is still evolving. Our report is designed to do two things: First, it makes recommendations to the Mayor on ways in which he can support neighbourhood planning, especially as he develops his lifetime neighbourhood supplementary planning guidance (SPG). Secondly, it sets out three principles that we believe will, if followed, give local groups the best chance of successfully shaping their neighbourhoods. But neighbourhood planning provides just one entry point for local people to influence local developments. We want to ensure that developers and local authorities learn lessons from our review to spur the cultural change we think necessary, to move beyond box-ticking consultation to a proactive process of dialogue.

2. Neighbourhood plans – what can they do?

- 2.1 During our discussions, it became clear that local involvement in planning means different things to different people. As a result, the Government's promotion of neighbourhood planning can be confusing for those who wish to get involved. Local people are seeking clarity about the different ways in which they can use neighbourhood plans; what is their "reach" and will they be effective? Some residents may be interested only in the future of a specific site (perhaps a derelict building or piece of scrub land next to a supermarket). Others may confine their aspirations to the future of their own street. Can neighbourhood plans accommodate both those who see development as a priority and those who may want to stop a development proposal?
- 2.2 A number of groups we spoke to had grander ambitions for neighbourhood plans. For example, the Bankside Residents Forum is preparing a neighbourhood plan that places the public realm at the very heart of their locale. Southwark Living Streets is an active initiative within the borough, which has been campaigning since 2008 to create better streets and public spaces for people on foot, and gaining considerable public support. The Forum hopes to build on these efforts and is aiming to get its plan adopted into the local authority planning framework, which will give it further legitimacy. Other groups are focussing on their local high street or shopping parade as the centre of their neighbourhood when developing key goals for the area, for example the Chatsworth Road Traders and Residents Association (also see 3.3).
- 2.3 Some groups expressed a desire to use neighbourhood planning to shape how "big ticket" issues will affect their area. Current examples include the impact of "The Shard" at London Bridge on the local community, and the expansion of student-only accommodation at Waterloo. Some groups want to use neighbourhood plans to influence Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks (OAPFs), where the Mayor has influence.⁵ Others want to raise issues like street cleaning and litter collection, which aren't covered through the existing planning frameworks.

What are neighbourhood plans?

Proposals for a neighbourhood plan must come from a neighbourhood forum, which must comprise a minimum of 21 people who live, work or are councillors in a neighbourhood. Such a neighbourhood forum will need to be established and approved by the local authority. The forum must be representative of the plan area and it should have an agreed constitution and membership.

Neighbourhood development plans or orders do not take effect unless there is a majority of support in a referendum of the neighbourhood. They also have to meet a number of conditions before they can be put to a community referendum and legally come into force. They must:

- have regard to national planning policy;
- be in general conformity with strategic policies in the development plan for the local area (i.e. such as in a Core Strategy or London Plan); and
- be compatible with the European Union's obligations and human rights requirements.

An independent qualified person then checks these conditions; this is to make sure that referendums take place only when proposals are workable and of a decent quality.

Proposed neighbourhood development plans or orders need to gain the approval of a majority of voters of the neighbourhood to come into force. If proposals pass the referendum, the local planning authority is under a legal duty to bring them into force.⁶

2.4 While their ambitions are often well defined, stakeholders still find it hard to understand the effect of neighbourhood planning as a policy. We have collected a range of views on the matter. Some believe the policy will shift the balance of power in planning. Others see it as only a minor addition to the existing planning toolkit. Some stakeholders fear the policy will add more bureaucracy to the planning process. The St James Conservation Trust, for example, sees no advantage in changing the existing system and adding another tier of planning control. The Trust also fears that the policy will add to the day-to-day work of council planning departments, which are already overstretched.

2.5 Some of those we spoke to were concerned that more strategic plans and planning frameworks could override or undermine the influence of neighbourhood plans.⁷ The City of Westminster feels that: *"in light of the need for neighbourhood plans to be both*

*positive and in conformity with strategic planning policies, there is little scope for neighbourhood plans to truly reflect local wishes of local residents.*⁸ The Enfield Society, similarly, does not expect neighbourhood planning to substantially change the planning process, because higher level policies will still take precedence. Professor Yvonne Rydin of University College London (UCL) stated that the draft National Planning Policy Guidelines' presumption in favour of sustainable development may override any neighbourhood plan and its implementation. The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA) speculates that the Mayor of London's new powers to designate Mayoral Development Corporations (MDCs) may undermine the process and good intentions of localism and neighbourhood planning, and that, indeed, the Mayor of London's strategic planning decisions may not recognise neighbourhood plans; issues we discuss later in this report.

- 2.6 Some bodies are openly sceptical about the usefulness of neighbourhood plans in any circumstances. The Planning Officers Society, for example, believes that *"the idea of people coming together to actively promote development in their neighbourhood is quite unusual and it is doubtful whether this would take off in many areas."*⁹ *"many planning techniques (...) are already being used by communities, many of which have a proven track record. Only a few aspects of neighbourhood plans were seen to be adding useful additional 'tools' to the community planning 'toolkit'. The time and cost involved in the [Act] hardly justified (...) the minor changes it (...) introduce[s]."*¹⁰ Likewise, The Kings Cross Development Forum suggests it would be better to invest in the resources and skills of local authority planners, to help them inform, educate and engage with local communities on planning issues and emerging plans.
- 2.7 Some contributors thought neighbourhood planning could provide an opportunity for boroughs to better draw on the range of skills and local knowledge of their community. Though potentially putting pressure on a planning department's resources, working with local communities around planning issues could provide a significant new resource. Michael Ball from the Waterloo Community Development Group believes: *"There is a huge untapped resource base in the local community"*¹¹. The Group works with Lambeth Council to consult and involve the local community in its generation of long term vision and dealing in particular with planning applications. However, the Group feels that the Council does not make enough use of resources that exist in a range of local groups and organisations such as football clubs or schools.

- 2.8 The GLA's view on neighbourhood planning is altogether more positive. A representative commented that there is *"the potential opportunity for greater engagement of local communities in shaping the areas that they live. This may bring with it a greater sense of community cohesion through increased participation in local issues. (...) The proposals may also encourage developers to engage more with local communities through a more consensual approach, particularly in relation to larger development sites."*¹²
- 2.9 We want to see neighbourhood plans provide the catalyst for a change in the culture of local engagement in planning, moving from beyond simple consultation to genuine dialogue. If local people are to actively shape and influence local development, neighbourhood planning needs support from all the tiers of government in London: both in terms of skills, resources and funding, and in terms of creating partnerships between local authorities and local people.

3. In the vanguard: “Front-Runners and other initiatives

- 3.1 The Government invited local authorities to take part in ‘front runner’ projects in advance of the legislation becoming law, to allow for feedback to be gathered and assessed.¹³ London boroughs in the ‘first wave’ of this programme are Sutton (Hackbridge) and Southwark (Bermondsey); other neighbourhoods in London have been selected during the second and third round of applications (Bankside in Southwark and Markham Square in Kensington and Chelsea). In the recent fourth wave of applications, a scheme in the London Borough of Brent (Sudbury Town) has been selected, as well as two neighbourhoods in Waltham Forest.
- 3.2 The Government is providing some money for neighbourhood plans: between £5,000 and £20,000 per plan. The Bankside Residents Forum has confirmed that the group has received most of the available grant from Southwark Council to help set up the neighbourhood forum and prepare a plan. Other local authorities – for example, Sutton – are using the available funding to cover office time, printing expenses or hiring space for meetings, and also want to ensure that sufficient funds remain to run any eventual referendum.
- 3.3 Alongside the official front-runner schemes, there are also independent initiatives and neighbourhood forums in London that are developing their own plans. The Chatsworth Road Traders and Residents Association has been working on a neighbourhood plan by collecting information about the neighbourhood and the community; the association is currently bringing all the research together to identify a number of aspirations for the area, and to help develop some projects and policies.
- 3.4 Residents at London Fields in the London Borough of Hackney are campaigning to establish a Community Council. They hope that it will enable the community to take decisions on the things that affect the immediate area in order to, improve it – the Community Council could fulfil the same role a neighbourhood forum would for an area. Outside of London, community councils (also known as neighbourhood, town, parish and village councils) are nothing new. Currently, there are around 9,000 representing over 16 million people across England. The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act of 2007 allowed community governance to be established once again in London.
- 3.5 The Queen’s Park Forum, managed and supported by the Paddington Development Trust, is currently petitioning to become

a Community Council in London – in effect, an urban parish council – hoping to better champion the interests of all Queen’s Park residents and gain the power to raise funds and carry out priority projects. In May 2012, Westminster Council is expected to give its verdict on the proposal.

4. Three key concerns

- 4.1 Three key questions have emerged during our deliberations that could affect the ability for neighbourhood planning to have a significant role in place-shaping in London.
- **What is a neighbourhood?** Defining the term in London is particularly challenging;
 - **How can neighbourhood planning influence the wider planning framework,** given that framework's complexity and the powerful interests involved?
 - **How can the neighbourhood group build their skills and resources?** Where can they find support?
- 4.2 The Mayor and local authorities can help neighbourhood groups answer these questions and clarify the parameters within which they will draw up their plans. In particular, guidance should become available in the emerging Mayoral supplementary planning guidance (SPG) on "Shaping Neighbourhoods". The SPG is not intended to be prescriptive. Instead, it aims to help local communities identify and implement 'lifetime neighbourhood principles' (as set out in the London Plan, i.e. Policy 7.1). It will also offer practical advice on running neighbourhood forums, give sources of useful data and provide contact details of organisations who could support forums in setting up neighbourhood plans.¹⁴

Defining neighbourhoods

- 4.3 In London, the Government's policy may be hampered by the difficulty in defining the term 'neighbourhood'. Small towns and villages may have obvious boundaries, or parish council structures, by which communities define themselves. London, in contrast, is a uniquely complex urban area. Self-defined communities often cross local authority boundaries, and may be fragmented or mobile. Residents may live and work in different parts of the city. In many parts of London – particularly central and inner London – transient and highly diverse communities live in and among areas of national and international significance. Communities in London exhibit wide variations in income levels and other socio-economic characteristics, and there can be high population turnover. All of these factors can make it hard to develop a shared vision for a 'neighbourhood'. Even commonly recognised geographical neighbourhoods often cross local authority boundaries. Crystal Palace, for example, is located in four different boroughs, as is the area represented by the Highgate Society.

- 4.4 Both communities and boroughs will need to adopt a range of solutions to these problems. Local people will need to understand how they can best influence local place-shaping: what opportunities exist and which planning route is most appropriate. Some groups may find neighbourhood planning almost impossible; they may find it more effective to engage with their local borough to influence Local Development Frameworks.
- 4.5 All the stakeholders in neighbourhood planning will have to be sufficiently forward-thinking to create a forum for dialogue before plans are drawn up. As Victoria Thornton (Open City) stated: *“When the council has gone through it and everyone is engaged in it, it must not think, “I must go and ask the community”. Th[is] is not at pre-application and pre-planning. It is [in] the ‘pre-pre-brief’ [that] you actually ask the questions [to the community].”*¹⁵

Examples of neighbourhood forums in London

At Markham Square, the Markham Square Association and the Chelsea Society seek to focus their work on improving the design and execution of developments. Their aim is to reconcile the need to carry out major alterations with the desire to enhance heritage assets. The groups envisage that their work will lead to either a development plan document or a neighbourhood plan, possibly supported by a local or neighbourhood development order or design code.

In Bermondsey, the newly established neighbourhood forum has had a lot of difficulty finding an inclusive way forward. It now appears to be making progress by effectively delegating all responsibility for drawing up initial proposals to a small group within the steering committee. There are ongoing discussions about the boundaries for the neighbourhood, but concrete proposals are not expected in the near future.

Recommendation 1

The Mayor should produce best practice guidance based on the results of the early front-runner schemes and other neighbourhood planning initiatives in London that highlight the range of ways to define a neighbourhood and set out how difficulties have been dealt with in different locations.

How can neighbourhood plans influence the wider planning frameworks?

- 4.6 Neighbourhood groups and local authorities will need to work together to navigate the existing complex planning frameworks at different levels of authority. Neighbourhood plans will be required

to conform to the Mayor's strategic policies, as well as to those of their local borough (or boroughs). (See Appendix 1 for a diagrammatical representation of the planning hierarchy in London).

- 4.7 Groups will have to agree, at the beginning of the process, the parameters within which they are drawing up their neighbourhood plan. They may not be equipped to do so, and may need guidance from the local authority. They will need to decide whether their plan adds value to the existing planning framework. And to do that, they may need to consult a wide range of documents, including Opportunity Area Planning Frameworks, core strategies, development plan documents, supplementary planning documents (SPDs) and area action plans. This is a daunting list of often very technical documentation, which can put off all but the most highly motivated.
- 4.8 Many groups also felt that their space for real influence was very small. Local authorities will need to explain where the opportunities exist for neighbourhood plans to be effective, and suggest realistic timescales. This is the culture shift that many have spoken about, and which some do not think will happen: a shift from consultation to dialogue. Local authorities will need to open up a space within which they can work with local groups, rather than simply going through a top-down information-seeking process.
- 4.9 One example we discussed was how a neighbourhood could go about protecting its small shops or post office. Local borough plans can designate and protect small parades or scattered shops, but many fail to do so. If a neighbourhood wanted to have or keep a post office or particular shop, could they do so through a neighbourhood plan? Such specific micro considerations usually rely on commitments from developers and/or landlords; it's not possible to define units down to that detail in local authority policies. However, some stakeholders told the Committee that in the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, a Tesco was only allowed in the High Street if it included an existing post office, using Section 106 contributions.¹⁶ A local consideration of this kind could be set out in a neighbourhood plan before a local authority draws up its own local plan, so that it can be taken into account.
- 4.10 The GLA has commented that local planning authorities can help neighbourhood groups understand the wider planning agenda. The authorities can help groups understand how their plans need to conform generally to local plans, and also to the more strategic London Plan.

- 4.11 The Mayor's Opportunity Area planning frameworks (OAPFs) present an opportunity to further articulate the relationship between London-wide high-level policies and their likely impact at a more local level.¹⁷ Some stakeholders suggest that all OAPFs and neighbourhood plans could be closely integrated. OAPFs, they say, should be developed as neighbourhood plans, or be based on them. They might contain a number of neighbourhood plans. Given that budgets for OAPFs tend to be several times larger than those of any of the piloted neighbourhood plans, it should be possible, according to these stakeholders, to fund the neighbourhood plan element by rebudgeting an OAPF, rather than having to find extra money.¹⁸
- 4.12 However, even in an Opportunity Area, the relationship between new and existing planning frameworks remains complex. Both boroughs and local communities will need to take into account the planning hierarchy when drawing up neighbourhood plans in the context of an OAPF. They will also have to consider the impact of their plans on the timing of other plans. If new plans are being developed in parallel to an OAPF – or if the OAPF is already well advanced when the new plans appear – then boroughs and local communities will need to cooperate and take the higher level objectives into account, to avoid frustration at a later stage.
- 4.13 The Committee heard vivid examples of such cooperation – and of the consequences when it is lacking. We were told how *“Southwark in fact drew up a draft SPD and then withdrew it so that Andrew [Richmond] from Bankside can get on with doing it [his neighbourhood plan], do it properly and then that should inform the final product of the supplementary planning guidance (SPG) and the opportunity area.”*¹⁹ However, for Michael Ball (Waterloo Community Development Group), *“we have lost that opportunity because we have [already] had our opportunity area planning framework.”*²⁰
- 4.14 Several experts and stakeholders have told the committee that early community engagement can bring considerable benefits. In particular, telling local residents about prospective development allows them to contribute proactively to planning proposals, rather than reacting – often negatively – to finalised planning applications.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should look to include neighbourhood planning in future OAPFs, and clarify how neighbourhood level planning issues can usefully be considered within OAPFs in his Draft SPG, providing advice to local authorities and communities in that regard.

The capacity gap in neighbourhoods

4.15 The knowledge, skills and experiences of town planning professionals will be central to supporting neighbourhood planning. Stakeholders have identified a number of barriers that hinder local involvement in planning generally, and the creation of neighbourhood plans in particular.

- Planning processes are bureaucratic and multi-layered, demanding a level of technical expertise, time and resources that many communities do not have or cannot find.²¹
- Communities and local authorities often lack mutual trust: planning officers may be pessimistic about the positive effects of participatory planning; communities may feel that consultations are merely tick-box exercises when local authorities have already made planning decisions.²²
- Planners often lack the skills or knowledge to help them work with communities. The rapid turnover of staff, many of them with limited knowledge of a local area, can contribute to this problem.²³
- Boroughs, especially in inner London, sometimes fail to consult with local communities at the pre-application stage, and increasingly rely on private sector investment.²⁴

4.16 Where neighbourhood plans have taken off so far, they have benefited from having a team of highly motivated individuals, often able to draw on relevant skill sets (such as a knowledge of the planning system or experience of design or regeneration projects). But neighbourhood planning must not be the preserve only of the initiated. If neighbours wish to come together to draw up a plan but lack the skills to do so, they will inevitably look to the local authority for support.

4.17 Local councillors will have a particular role to play. Indeed, the London Civic Forum thinks that local authorities should encourage

ward councillors to act as champions for their local communities, and support them in working closely with neighbourhood groups. Likewise, the Local Government Association (LGA) and the Planning Advisory Service (PAS) argue that neighbourhood planning puts all councillors centre stage in the planning process, making them a first port of call for communities in their ward who want to prepare neighbourhood plans.²⁵

4.18 We have heard of a number of important local authority initiatives to support neighbourhood planning.

- In Southwark, the Bermondsey Neighbourhood Forum is delegating all responsibility for drawing up initial proposals to a small group within a steering committee. Southwark officers are in close and regular contact with the key members of the steering group, providing advice and guidance whilst allowing them a free rein.
- At the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, a 'Neighbourhoods Team' has been set up, partly in response to neighbourhood planning and the wider localism agenda, but partly also for budget-saving reasons. This team will manage area-based planning in the borough, including SPDs for strategic sites, reviewing the Conservation Area proposal statements and taking forward neighbourhood plans as they emerge – for example, with the Chelsea Society and Markham Square Association.

4.19 The Committee welcomes these early initiatives. We would encourage all London councillors to support their local communities in the neighbourhood planning process and to provide that vital link with the local authority and its strategies. We are concerned, however, that local authorities may find such work difficult to support. At the Assembly's recent consultation event, many participants were concerned that local authorities might lack the resources to implement their own statutory plans, let alone support community-led plans.

Recommendation 3

As neighbourhood planning places additional demands upon stretched local authority resources, we recommend that the Local Government Association review the role of local councillors in neighbourhood planning and set out some guidelines on what role councillors can, as a minimum, be expected to play.

Recommendation 4

Local authorities and neighbourhood forums should seek an open dialogue on how the government grants for front runner schemes and other neighbourhood planning initiatives are best spent, and what additional funding or support can be provided.

Recommendation 5

London Boroughs should also consider reviewing how they can adjust their current structure and approach to support neighbourhood planning, given the constraints of resources and workload. Once the impact and results from examples become evident – for example, the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea’s new planning team structure – these could be used as best practice.

5. Ensuring successful local involvement in neighbourhood planning

5.1 The Committee welcomes the flexibility that the Government's neighbourhood planning proposal offers neighbourhoods to cast their plans in their own way. Part of the attraction of the proposal is the lack of an imposed, centrally determined template. Instead, a process framework is emerging, by which local people can draw up plans and actively engage in place-shaping. More importantly, the government is seeking to create a space within which local people can seize the initiative and become partners with the local authorities and developers who have traditionally determined the spatial development of an area.

5.2 However, through our deliberations, a number of issues have emerged that we think all neighbourhood groups need to address if they are to gain credibility and intervene successfully in the planning process. Whether that intervention is a neighbourhood plan or not – whether they wish to intervene in other parts of a Local Development Framework, or influence development in some other way – a neighbourhood forum will need to consider three key issues:

- Legitimacy: does the group demonstrably represent its community?
- Resources: does it have the skills and capacity to do its work?
- Support: where can the group find help if it needs it?

Legitimacy

5.3 It's widely recognised that representing all a community's stakeholders in local decision-making is difficult. The challenge increases with the length of time required to develop a plan or vision document – compared, for example, to commenting on a planning application. It intensifies further in areas with a high turnover of residents or community members.

5.4 Living Streets sees a risk that neighbourhood forums may be unrepresentative, unaccountable and at risk of excluding certain groups from participating. Usually, only a small minority of the local population have the time, motivation and capacity for regular intensive involvement; but these people may not represent the views of all local people. Indeed, even a representative group of active participants may encompass conflicting ambitions for their area. In these cases, a group may need some kind of facilitation or

mediation to resolve such disagreements and achieve a common vision.

- 5.5 The challenge then for a neighbourhood group or forum is to show that it truly represents the local area, both in terms of who lives there and those (like developers and landlords) who have a stake in the area. The group or forum will have to be smart to find accessible ways of capturing the thoughts of this wide range of local people about the things that matter to them. We heard, for example, how engaging local young people in the early “visioning” process could produce new and stimulating results. On a related issue, the London Borough of Southwark is concerned that, if a neighbourhood forum seeks to prepare a neighbourhood plan without involving developers and landowners, there is a strong possibility that they would produce a wish list that cannot be implemented.²⁶
- 5.6 The process for engaging with the local authority also needs to be clear. How will a group or forum capture the views of local people and represent them to the local authority? How will the authority deal with these views? As Michael Ball stated to the Committee: *“The key issue I think is legitimacy. If a community feels there is a legitimate process then it might not like all the outcomes but it will accept it. It is when it feels it is illegitimate that it will not, and that is a critical issue I think - all the time, it is trying to establish legitimacy.”*²⁷

Resources

- 5.7 Any neighbourhood group or forum will need to realistically appraise its own strengths and weaknesses, and what resource it needs from external partners. Stakeholders have set out the kind of skills and knowledge they may need help with to enable them to get involved in neighbourhood planning. They include:
- **leadership and effective facilitators** (aside from local authorities and Planning Aid, planning students could also help with this);²⁸
 - **knowledge of the planning processes**, and also economic, social and environmental patterns (if there is a lack of such skills and knowledge in the local community, local planners could be asked to fulfil a research function);²⁹
 - **access to information and statistics** on a range of topics, including planning, economic, social and environmental data;³⁰

- **the communication and interpersonal skills needed** to develop and maintain relationships between communities and professionals and elected members³¹, to create a continuous process of engagement instead of project specific consultation.³²

Recommendation 6

We recommend that all groups and forums should assess their own strengths and weaknesses against a number of factors including leadership skills, planning knowledge, access to information and communication skills.

- 5.8 Groups and forums also need funds to help them pay expenses. Small amounts are needed for simple needs: printing leaflets, access to photocopiers, or space for meetings (which could be shared office space). Groups need cash, especially for administrative support, which is essential to build a foundation for any forum and support its day-to-day running. Funding of this kind is often difficult to find. Local authorities may be able to offer support in kind, in the same way that they can offer school governing boards help with clerking meetings.
- 5.9 A more ambitious approach would be for a neighbourhood forum to set up a community fund, as has been achieved in Bermondsey. Such a fund could gather money from landlords, occupiers, local residents and businesses, for long-term endowment.³³
- 5.10 It should also be noted that not all local communities will be able to or want to create a neighbourhood plan that aims to cover everything and in a format similar to local authority plans. It may well be that a local group simply wants to express some key objectives for the immediate area in written form to influence future planning decisions without the need for a large budget or a time consuming and technical process. Local authorities and developers should give all neighbourhood plans the same weight irrespective of their scale or level of detail included.

Securing levels of support

- 5.11 The Committee is interested in encouraging neighbourhood groups and forums to seek support beyond their local boundaries. Many stakeholders have argued that both borough planners and ward councillors will need to provide on-going support and advice to local communities. We accept this need, and see further benefit in

groups and forums developing relationships with other neighbourhood planning bodies across London – and even beyond.

- 5.12 Such networks would enable groups and forums to share best practice and solve problems. Andrew Richardson of the Bankside Residents' Forum sees potential in having borough-wide planning networks, as in Southwark, through which all small community groups in the borough could meet and exchange information.³⁴ Dean James, Planning Officer at Sutton confirmed that: *"Members of the Hackbridge Community group would definitely find it useful to speak to other people in a similar situation and discuss in which way they are bringing their plans forward"*³⁵.
- 5.13 The Just Space Network is an example of a network of voluntary and community organisations with an interest in planning. They contributed to the review of the London Plan and provided evidence to this Committee's investigation. They could also provide advice and share their experience in developing a network of neighbourhood forums.
- 5.14 We have heard other suggestions on how to support the exchange of information, skills and experience across London. Two ideas in particular stand out:
- creating a central and easily accessible "first point of call" website, providing information and resources for neighbourhood groups in London; and
 - seminars or community conferences, where groups could share ideas, best practice and support.³⁶
- 5.15 The Committee also wishes to promote the development of a London-wide Neighbourhood Planning Network (NPN), drawing on the example of the network in Bristol. The NPN was set up in 2006, when the Bristol Development Framework Statement of Community Involvement was being drawn up. There were initially about 35 groups involved; five volunteers set up and maintained the network. Most of Bristol is now covered by residents' planning groups.
- 5.16 The Bristol network is the first point of contact for developers, who are required in Bristol to carry out pre-application community involvement on major developments. Private developers, although initially concerned that they would find themselves being told what to do by unqualified residents, have now become used to working with the residents' planning groups. They have agreed that the pre-application involvement process has helped them to

identify major issues of contention before they have gone too far with finalising a design.

- 5.17 The network has also been a key partner in selecting and supporting the Front Runner schemes for neighbourhood planning, and has developed a template to help groups take the first steps in drawing up a plan.

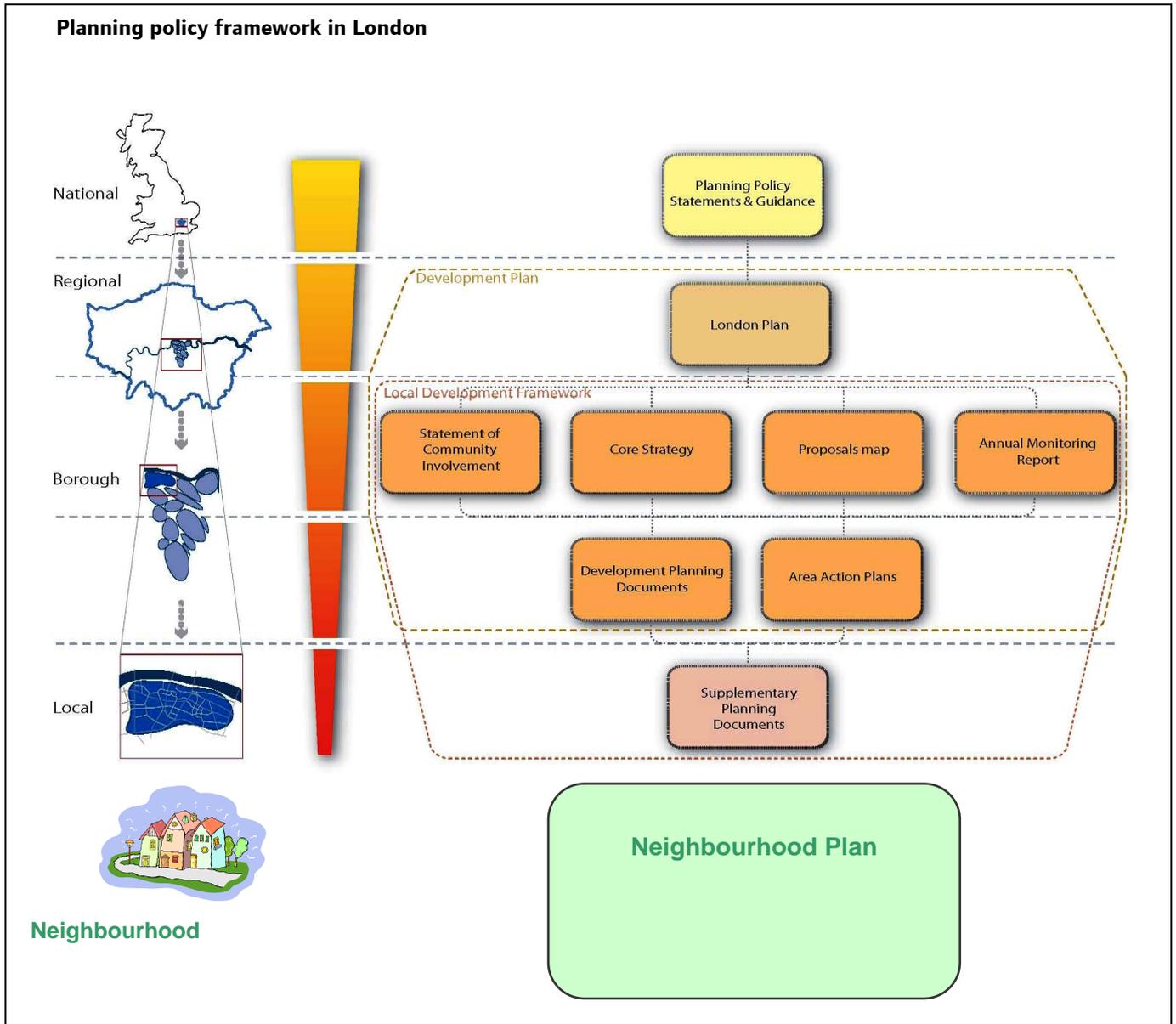
Recommendation 7

The Mayor should support existing networks of community and voluntary organisations, boroughs and other interested parties in setting up a neighbourhood planning network to support and encourage exploratory work. A scoping meeting to discuss steps forward should take place after the Mayoral election.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The Committee's report seeks to signpost a way through the complex planning maze that many people find themselves in as they try to engage in local place-shaping. The multitudinous planning documents; the jargon; the dual roles of the local authority as both promoter of development and protector of residents' quality of life; and the unaccountable commercial developer; all these can seem to conspire against local people having a real say in the evolution of their neighbourhood. The Localism Act seeks to give a shot in the arm to neighbourhood power; expectations have been raised as to what communities can achieve. The reality may be slightly more sobering. Interest is high at this early stage; but the eventual number of neighbourhood plans in London may, as Giles Dolphin, the former Chief Planner at the GLA, said, "*not be that many*". We want to see successful neighbourhood plans develop quickly, to create a positive dynamic that will encourage others to get involved.
- 6.2 Our report has set out recommendations to the Mayor that we would like to see picked up in his supplementary planning Guidance on Shaping Neighbourhoods. We have also set out the three core issues that we argue neighbourhood groups and forums must address as they organise themselves. As this Assembly term comes to an end, we would propose to the future Assembly that the evolution of neighbourhood planning should be reviewed in 2013 to build on lessons learned and to see if any further support is needed.

Appendix 1 Planning policy framework in London



Appendix 2 Recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Mayor should produce best practice guidance based on the results of the early front-runner schemes and other neighbourhood planning initiatives in London that highlight the range of ways to define a neighbourhood and set out how difficulties have been dealt with in different locations.

Recommendation 2

The Mayor should look to include neighbourhood planning in future OAPFs, and clarify how neighbourhood level planning issues can usefully be considered within OAPFs in his Draft SPG, providing advice to local authorities and communities in that regard.

Recommendation 3

As neighbourhood planning places additional demands upon stretched local authority resources, we recommend that the Local Government Association review the role of local councillors in neighbourhood planning and set out some guidelines on what role councillors can, as a minimum, be expected to play.

Recommendation 4

Local authorities and neighbourhood forums should seek an open dialogue on how the government grants for front runner schemes and other neighbourhood planning initiatives are best spent, and what additional funding or support can be provided.

Recommendation 5

London Boroughs should also consider reviewing how they can adjust their current structure and approach to support neighbourhood planning, given the constraints of resources and workload. Once the impact and results from examples become evident – for example, the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea’s new planning team structure – these could be used as best practice.

Recommendation 6

We recommend that all groups and forums should assess their own strengths and weaknesses against a number of factors including leadership skills, planning knowledge, access to information and communication skills.

Recommendation 7

The Mayor should support existing networks of community and voluntary organisations, boroughs and other interested parties in setting up a neighbourhood planning network to support and encourage exploratory work. A scoping meeting to discuss steps forward should take place after the Mayoral election.

Appendix 3 Orders and translations

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Greek

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Punjabi

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Hindi

यदि आपको इस दस्तावेज़ का सारांश अपनी भाषा में चाहिए तो उपर दिये हुए नंबर पर फोन करें या उपर दिये गये डाक पते या ई मेल पते पर हम से संपर्क करें।

Bengali

আপনি যদি এই দলিলের একটি সারাংশ নিজের ভাষায় পেতে চান, তাহলে দয়া করে যোগাযোগ করুন অথবা উল্লিখিত ডাক ঠিকানায় বা ই-মেইল ঠিকানায় আমাদের সাথে যোগাযোগ করুন।

Urdu

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Arabic

الحصول على ملخص لهذا المستند بلغتك، فراجع الاتصال برقم الهاتف أو الاتصال على العنوان البريدي العادي أو عنوان البريد الإلكتروني أعلاه.

Gujarati

જો તમારે આ દસ્તાવેજનો સાર તમારી ભાષામાં જોઈતો લેખ તો ઉપર આપેલ નંબર પર ફોન કરો અથવા ઉપર આપેલ ટપાલ અથવા ઈ-મેઇલ સરનામા પર અમારો સંપર્ક કરો.

Endnotes

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- ¹ Evidence submitted by Planning Aid for London
- ² Evidence submitted by Michael Edwards
- ³ The Rt Hon Greg Clark MP, Minister for Decentralisation, on 'Participation in planning', 30 November 2010
- ⁴ <http://www.futureoflondon.org.uk/2011/05/06/localism-in-london-3>
- ⁵ Opportunity areas are the capital's major reservoir of brownfield land with significant capacity to accommodate new housing, commercial and other development linked to existing or potential improvements to public transport accessibility.
- ⁶ <http://www.planningportal.gov.uk/inyourarea/neighbourhood/>
- ⁷ Notes taken by staff at "Community involvement in neighbourhood planning - Stakeholder consultation event", City Hall, 7 October 2011 (facilitated by the London Assembly and the London Civic Forum)
- ⁸ Written evidence submitted by City of Westminster
- ⁹ Written evidence submitted by Planning Officers Society (POS) London Branch
- ¹⁰ BDOR limited (2011): Communities, planning and localism. A research report for CPRE (The Campaign to Protect Rural England) Gloucestershire
- ¹¹ Michael Ball, Waterloo Community Development Group; October meeting
- ¹² Written evidence submitted by the GLA
- ¹³ <http://www.communities.gov.uk/planningandbuilding/planningsystem/neighbourhoodplanningvanguards/>
- ¹⁴ Evidence submitted by the GLA
- ¹⁵ Victoria Thornton, Open City; October meeting
- ¹⁶ Notes taken by staff at "Community involvement in neighbourhood planning - Stakeholder consultation event", City Hall, 7 October 2011 (facilitated by the London Assembly and the London Civic Forum)
- ¹⁷ Written evidence submitted by the GLA
- ¹⁸ Notes taken by staff at "Community involvement in neighbourhood planning - Stakeholder consultation event", City Hall, 7 October 2011 (facilitated by the London Assembly and the London Civic Forum)
- ¹⁹ Michael Ball, Waterloo Community Development Group; October meeting
- ²⁰ Michael Ball, Waterloo Community Development Group; October meeting
- ²¹ Written evidence submitted by London Civic Forum; Just Space network; Putney Society
- ²² Written evidence submitted by London Civic Forum; Just Space network
- ²³ Written evidence submitted by Planning Aid for London; London Civic Forum; Just Space network
- ²⁴ Written evidence submitted by Planning Aid for London
- ²⁵ *Local Government Group (2011): Neighbourhood planning: a guide for ward councillors.*
- ²⁶ Written evidence submitted by LB Southwark
- ²⁷ Michael Ball, Waterloo Community Development Group; October meeting
- ²⁸ Written evidence submitted by Stan Gono, Mott Macdonald
- ²⁹ Written evidence submitted by Prof Yvonne Rydin, UCL
- ³⁰ Written evidence submitted by London Forum of Civic and Amenity Societies; Brackenbury Residents Association/The Hammersmith Society; Chatsworth Road Traders and Residents Association; Bloomsbury Association/West End Community Network;

Camberwell New Road Regeneration/Southwark Planning Network; Bankside Residents Forum; Living Streets

³¹ Written evidence submitted by Jeff Bishop, BDOR

³² Written evidence submitted by Just Space network

³³ Notes taken by staff at "Community involvement in neighbourhood planning - Stakeholder consultation event", City Hall, 7 October 2011 (facilitated by the London Assembly and the London Civic Forum)

³⁴ Andrew Richardson, Bankside Residents Forum; October meeting

³⁵ Dean James, London Borough of Southwark; November meeting

³⁶ Various at P&H Committee 18 October; various written evidence

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