

# Neighbourhood plans: a guide

Drawing up a strategic plan in partnership with all relevant agencies and the local community is important for the longer term. It helps coordinate partnership activity across an estate or neighbourhood against defined objectives and activity areas.

Of course, the plan by itself will not achieve anything. Rather, it has to be a tool and guide to shape and show how different partners and the community can work together to make a difference and add value to the services and initiatives they each carry out on a day to day basis.

The document itself need not be overly complex: it could take the form of a charter or series of pledges. The process to reach an agreed plan does take time and investment – it's better to take things one step at a time than to rush to a conclusion that doesn't have buy-in from all partners.

The plan can include a range of "floor targets" which define minimum levels of performance on key indicators such as health and wellbeing, employment and crime. While it can have a focus on physical infrastructure, equally or more important is "people building" and "raising aspirations". Ultimately it's about ensuring that the neighbourhood prospers and becomes an even better place to live.

This short guide sets out a step by step approach to getting a neighbourhood plan up and running. We asked Pioneer Group CEO Simon Wilson for his top tips for success, based on the experience of [Castle Vale](#): they are included in each section.

# Agree to adopt a long term plan and set 'go live' date

It's a good idea to ask the question as to whether to produce a neighbourhood plan. The costs of producing a plan and the challenges that different partners have in delivering their core business are barriers to neighbourhood planning, though not insurmountable ones. The benefits in terms of shared objectives and joint working can be significant.

So if you decide to go ahead, make a formal decision and set out a timetable for each stage, including when you will flip the 'go live' switch. You will need to get buy-in from all partners, both at a strategic level and for 'on the ground' operations.

# Top tips

## No one-size-fits-all

Remember there is no one-size-fits-all. Communities and neighbourhoods are all different and will present their own unique stories. Any early steps should be more about listening and understanding than doing

## Decide on leadership

Decide and seek agreement on who is best placed to lead. This should be a partnership approach, but establishing a lead (or sharing the lead) role is important. Ask yourselves who is best placed to lead. In a housing context the long term nature of our missions helps make the case alongside the physical presence in the heart of a community (physical through homes and through the services you offer). The real anchor organisations are best placed to lead (seeing community governance as leading later doesn't necessarily mean sitting at the top of whatever structures you put in place)

## Build trust

Get off on the right foot and aim to build trust – it's hard won and easily lost so plan for your engagement and build clear feedback loops. You will find you cannot communicate too much

## Don't fast track solutions

Don't try and fast track to solutions at the early stages. The focus should be on building understanding – stakeholders need to feel engaged and listened to, not talked at. Aim to 'co-create' the model

## Heat map stakeholders

Take the time to identify and heat map the stakeholders. Your key stakeholders are most likely the tenants and residents, they are the hottest and closest to the centre of the stakeholder map. By thinking about this you can allocate time and resource to the most important stakeholders BUT keep those cooler stakeholders on the edges of the map informed. The stakeholder mapping may not be static and the 'heat' may change at various stages

- ☐ **Strengths-based mindset:** It's important to frame your engagement at the outset from a strengths-based mindset (see 'ABCD assets-based community development' model). All too often organisations identify problems in a community rather than the strengths. Communities tend to be resilient and focussing on strengths builds on this. The most deprived and challenging communities are often those that have learned to build resilience – build on what the community sees at its strengths. On Castle Vale the community would not be 'done to' when the library and local swimming pool were threatened with closure. The community came together to demand action – ultimately a community asset transfer model allowed the facilities to survive under community control. The strengths in your community will be unique to it and can be born out of adversity

Sometimes you need a 'burning platform' to generate engagement – you will not likely know the most pressing concerns in the community if you don't go out and find out and then use these issues to build engagement around. On Castle Vale the Covid pandemic opened up new relationships with community and faith groups we hadn't previously built a strong relationship with – these groups now continue to be engaged in our cost of living taskforce. Sometimes you need a crisis to open doors.

# Setting broad objectives and themes

It's helpful at this stage to set out some broad objectives or themes, to give overall direction, spark ideas and support debate. These could include, for example:

## **The local economy**

Developing learning, skills, employment and enterprise.

## **The community**

Governance, leadership, democracy, engagement and participation.

## **The environment**

Sustainability, 'green' issues, housing, community safety, transport.

## **Residents' health and wellbeing**

Improving physical and mental health, promoting wellbeing.

# Review data, needs and opportunities

Start by taking stock of what you know already. You may decide to employ community researchers, engage with a local university, or set up a team to carry out research. Dig out and analyse all relevant statistics on the neighbourhood.

## Data might include:

- Young people
- Families with dependent children
- Lone parents
- Older people
- Those with disabilities
- Poverty
- Education and skills levels
- Ethnicity
- Housing turnover rates
- Quality of schools and other facilities

## Community assets to gather:

- Strength and resilience of the community and voluntary sector infrastructure
- Level and vibrancy of social engagement through clubs and societies
- Level of resident and community representation on public and voluntary sector boards
- Depth of resident engagement and service user engagement with housing and other services

Next, undertake a preliminary assessment of the needs of the neighbourhood, both physical and social, based on the evidence gathered.

It is important also to gather information on community assets: the strength and resilience of the community and voluntary sector infrastructure, level and vibrancy of social engagement through clubs and societies, level of resident and community representation on public and voluntary sector boards and depth of resident engagement and service user engagement with housing and other services.

# Top tips for data gathering

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## Balance statistics with lived experience

Data, data, data is of course the mantra – and that is true. But think through how you gather it and test it. Have a good balance between the statistics and the lived experience; the 'word on the street' alongside the in depth statistically reliable research. Both should carry weight and influence the plan

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## Tap into existing data sets

Here in England the government has long running data sets we tap into called indices of multiple deprivation linked to census data (as in Australia). This can be a powerful tool to identify underlying strengths and challenges in a community based on indicators measured every five years. What tools or data can you tap into?

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## Pop up where the community is

Carry out broad based surveys and research alongside talking to people in the community – where are the meeting points? Outside nurseries and schools, community centres, job clubs, on the local bus – try and 'pop up' where the community spends its time. Do not insist the community comes to you

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## Manufacture engagement opportunities

Think about how you can manufacture engagement opportunities. Run a summer event where the theme is not the engagement, but it happens alongside the fun

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## Partner with universities

At Castle Vale we have over the years joined forces with local universities to link into research, commission bespoke research and give opportunities to students to draw on the community for their studies/research. This can all present valuable insight at zero or relatively low cost.

# Review relevant plans at neighbourhood, city and state level

What plans exist to work together to produce better services and outcomes in line with your and their core objectives and priorities? Seek to connect better to key existing and emerging plans and policies to promote the case for inward investment in the neighbourhood. A review of state, regional and city/area plans of relevance should be included.

## Top tips

### Tap into existing structures

It can be tricky to fund a plan – freeing up some human resource and finding the appropriate skills isn't always easy. Tap into your existing engagement structures and link across to your data people. The key is having people at the customer facing end who can talk to people and generate and feed into the challenges and opportunities

### Link to city-wide plans

Linking into existing city-wide, regional plans can be a helpful way of sharing research, building consensus and potentially sharing resource

### Be strategic about funding

There a balance between accessing funding because its available and seeking funding that fits with neighbourhood needs. On Castle Vale we have learned to be fleet of foot around funding – we are struggling at present to source youth funding but health initiatives and fundings are more readily available. Think about how one funding pot can link to another – but try and avoid chasing funding. Be as strategic as you can be.

# **Engage partners and the wider community in developing priorities and ideas for action**

Ask local residents what they think is working well, what is working less well and what they want to see happen in the future. Conduct in-depth interviews and talk to as many local people as possible via street interviews, participation in community group events and through discussion groups. That could include older school students, locally based health service user groups and community based groups of, for example, older women.

A community workshop can also draw out in-depth views and aspirations for the area.

A workshop with partner organisations can cover the development process, the broad themes and objectives and the engagement and consultation process. It can garner views on needs and opportunities.

# Top tips for engagement

## Put in the leg work

You have to put in the leg work before you run an event or series of events. The research, the engagement, the hot topics and the buy-in are needed to generate the attendances at an event

## Work through barriers

You may well have to work through potential barriers, grievances (which may date back many years) and deal with the day to day issues before and alongside trying to draw out the big picture

## Have tough conversations

Having tough conversations and meeting some resistance is to be expected depending on the community. Find ways of dealing with issues – or setting out clear 'parking areas' can help bring focus. But you do need to circle back and close the loop to maintain trust and engagement and keep moving forward

**Think about how you maintain a sense of broad control over the process but remain nimble and able to react to emerging issues and challenges.** Be willing to give control back to the community where appropriate: a cohort of community leaders/elders may emerge. Being willing to agree alternative leadership on particular areas should be considered.

- ❏ **Castle Vale example:** On Castle Vale we knew engagement with various education establishments was important and we created an education partnership for the heads of the schools. We could quickly step away from leading the group but ensured they contributed to the plan. Other groups needed our leadership throughout the development of the plan – be flexible.

Putting together these components gives a substantive body of evidence to shape your policy priorities, partner actions and performance indicators over time. Assess the opportunities and strengths that are available among the partners to exploit to kick start the plan.

# Draft the plan in appropriate formats for community and partners, consult further and agree the plan

The neighbourhood partnership is the body that will 'own' and drive the neighbourhood plan. Having thoroughly analysed the findings from the community and partner research and written them up, consider holding an event such as a community conference to feed back what has been learnt.

## Top tips

### Keep testing back

As a plan emerges and key themes are developed keep testing this back with your engagement structures. No-one likes surprises so communication is key

### Make it physically engaging

Think about the details of presenting findings and try and use a model that is physically engaging (see planning for real which a great tool for physician regeneration). Talking at people is far from ideal, they want to be on their feet and engaged in some way – presentation boards, short videos produced with and in the community, people from the community sharing their stories. Have those who have co-created proposals present them, look at presenting challenges and opportunities – these are all great ways to make issues and proposed solutions come to life. If you can build in options and some democratic process this will help you build consensus and buy-in

### Keep it real

Remember to keep it real. Neighbourhood/community plans are by their nature potentially medium to long term plans – be clear, honest and realistic about timescales, goals and targets

**We have had various iterations of neighbourhood plans on Castle Vale. We have learned from our mistakes where we have over-promised or laden plans with too many hard targets and most recently been too rigid. Events happen – the most recent plan ran up against austerity, Covid and a cost of living crisis. This is when you have to flex, events will happen but if you have built a community governance structure in developing your plan you can use this to flex and pivot. We created a specific Covid response and have a cost of living task force now, built around and using the infrastructure we have created in the community.**

## Drafting process

A process of drafting the evidence and the way forward should now begin. The partnership board should start detailed discussions with partners on the delivery themes around emerging priorities and ideas. It is a good idea to organise the data and pledges into a small number of locally relevant key themes identified at stage one, such as economic improvement, strengthening community leadership, a clean green environment and so on. Housing organisations will of course want to prioritise safety and good quality homes as part of this.

This first draft of the neighbourhood plan should be seen as a consultative version. Set a deadline for completion and then go back to the community and partners with the draft plan. Allow plenty of time for people to respond and ensure you show willingness to make genuine changes based on those responses. Detailed work with partners will be needed to establish specific actions and timeframes.

The final version of the neighbourhood plan can now be drafted and published, to include any new information and aspirations. Although it is a multi-year plan, the document should include a set of neighbourhood outcome measures and key achievement indicators that can be assessed annually.

The document will coordinate and direct the partnership's actions over several years to come. Ongoing work with partners is especially required around the targets and outcomes and around the approach to tackling ingrained disadvantage and inequalities. Outcomes and data must be made freely available to the community and to partner organisations regularly.

# Staffing

The neighbourhood partnership will need support to function. This could mean appointing a neighbourhood manager or co-ordinator. Part of their remit would be the proper servicing of partnership meetings, conducting ongoing analysis of needs, funding applications and development of cross partnership initiatives and programmes.

The neighbourhood plan is not something that is set in stone. It will need to be refreshed, updated and changed according to the changing circumstances locally and nationally. The staff should ensure that this process is timely and relevant.

## Top tips

### **Allow flexibility**

You can see above our plan has allowed us to flex and mould around the cards our communities are dealt and any plan will be tested by events

### **Keep it refreshed**

Regardless of external macro and community micro factors impacting the plan it is good to keep it refreshed. If you have built a good model of engagement and considered developing some community governance structures this shouldn't be too onerous but don't short change the principles of good engagement. Listen, learn and close the loop

### **Community ownership**

You may facilitate the plan as a key anchor organisation but the community should feel it owns the plan. So any review and refresh should tap back into the community and keep this sense of ownership.

Another important function for staff is to identify resources, both to continue the work of the partnership board and to help lever in new services.

# Creating governance structures

## Bespoke structures

Like the plan itself the structures you create to ensure delivery will be bespoke to your community and neighbourhood. This may be as simple as tapping into existing community structures or it may mean creating a whole new community governance structure

## Apply good governance basics

The basics of good governance should apply to whatever structures you choose. Just the word 'governance' is enough to put many people off, so think about the language you use and warm people up and induct them slowly into any structures. Aim to demystify structures and use plain English to explain why some structure is needed. Meetings can be minuted and chaired well but they do not need to happen in a stuffy board room in your head office. Take the meetings out into the community and think about how create a safe, welcoming, informal environment

## Co-create and be inclusive

The structures need to be co-created and as democratic and inclusive as possible. You should actively understand the demographics and diversity of the community and strive to ensure appropriate representation. On Castle Vale we are moving slowly from a predominantly white British community to one that looks more like the hugely ethnically diverse wider Birmingham. Birmingham is also one of the youngest cities in the UK – how we respond to this knowledge is key to our engagement strategy and the structures we are putting in place. We have had to be more dynamic and thoughtful about the needs of a younger and more diverse population

## Identify barrier breakers

Think about stakeholders who can break down barriers. We have historically had roles for politicians/elected members in our community governance in order to give added influence. That may or may not suit your circumstances. Be careful about bringing in 'experts' without getting community buy-in – it's better to get the community to identify where they need support than to impose it on them.

- ❑ **Key takeaway:** Successful neighbourhood plans require genuine partnership, flexibility, and a commitment to community ownership. The process is as important as the final document, and ongoing engagement is essential for long-term success.