

“Making Better Places to live...”

Enabling Neighbourhood Planning in Urban Areas through an Integrated Community Planning and Involvement Approach

Birmingham City Council

Introduction

Birmingham City Council has been a pioneer in community involvement, most notably through its extensive Urban Renewal Programmes in the 1980's and the redesigning of its municipal housing estates in the 1990's / '00'sand is firmly supportive of Neighbourhood Planning.

However, it is conscious that with its diverse populations, gaps in grass roots community activity could be holding back real engagement - ***the starting point for this project.***

Even in reasonably articulate communities, there exists a confusion, or apparent lack of awareness between their understanding and expectations of the Neighbourhood Planning Right (as contained in the Localism Act 2011), and that of Government's who see communities supporting and promoting its housing growth agenda. If less well connected communities fail to comprehend or grasp the fundamentals of the exercise, they will feel even more distant from the process.

Although funding is available to employ consultants to assist Neighbourhood Forums and Parish Councils in the task of leading (and producing) a Neighbourhood Development Plan, for less well organised communities, or those without access to technical planning skills, just getting to that stage can be quite onerous. This may in part be why the number of Neighbourhood Development Plans coming forward in urban areas is significantly lower than in rural parishes.

Existing Neighbourhood Planning road maps, such as those produced by Locality, have their use in demystifying the Neighbourhood Planning process for informed lay people. The technical on-line Forums work in the same way for practitioners undertaking individual plans. However, a gap exists in the guidance where less-informed groups are beginning to 'think' about community planning. This is particularly so in urban multi-cultural neighbourhoods, such as the inner city areas of Birmingham, where English may not be the first language of many, but spatial issues are common to all.

This project has created a web-based **Toolkit** and **Folder** as an introduction to community learning, which it is hoped will contribute to reducing the knowledge gap, and be helpful to those individuals / groups at the first stage in community / Neighbourhood Planning. Although openly accessible to all, it is hoped that communities in urban areas, where 'neighbourhoods' may not be as obvious or clearly defined as in rural parishes, will find the resource especially useful. It will help guide users to a greater understanding of the possibilities (and limitations) of community engagement, as well as signposting the way to other spatial planning tools, that may be more appropriate to achieve their objectives.

The online package inevitably assumes a level of literacy, but initial parts of the **Toolkit** have been translated into common community languages found in Birmingham, to encourage greater interest from minority ethnic communities whose mother tongue is not English. A verbal introduction (You Tube) to both parts of the project will also help those who find web-based reading a challenge.

The project

When Nick Bowles MP was Under Secretary of State for Planning, he was keen to emphasise that Neighbourhood Planning was a 'light touch' approach to land use plan making. He also regarded it as but *one tool* in the planning toolkit. This pilot provided us with the opportunity to explore and develop web based information systems, that would increase participation across the diverse communities in the city - in a simple to understand, user friendly way.

Working with two well respected local community organisations (Moseley CDT and the Chamberlain Forum), the project reviewed the findings of the first two community led planning projects in the city, in Moseley and Balsall Heath. This reinforced the belief that the key to effective resident involvement is to provide an integrated process, that is, enabling residents to express what they think should be done, and get their buy-in for *what they are willing to do*, to make a better place in which to live.

In order to do this however, the knowledge base and involvement rate of the disparate communities (especially in multi-cultural inner urban areas, or former municipal estates on the outskirts of the city) needs to be increased.

The two elements of this project are stand alone, but are also cross referenced, to enable the user to make best use of its combined resource.

The Toolkit; <http://www.communityplanning.cooperative.website/>

- A multilingual, online, 'integrated community /neighbourhood planning toolkit', which will be of specific value to those seeking to engage diverse communities in general, and in spatial planning in particular, especially in multicultural urban

neighbourhoods. Development of the online 'toolkit' has been based on the experience of practitioners - community activists, Town Planners, elected members, and includes video interviews with those having direct involvement in community and Neighbourhood Planning exercises in Birmingham. The 'toolkit' provides a robust template (and practical approaches), for organising local activity which brings together wider community planning with spatial planning.

The Folder; <http://www.wardexplorer.com/>

- Ward Explorer is an innovative way to help community groups gather and organise the information they need to undertake community or neighbourhood planning projects. An electronic 'folder,' owned and managed by community partners and capable of updating, it has the potential to be used widely across Birmingham and many other local authority areas. The 'folder' has been designed with an "open source" approach to make it accessible to all, thereby enabling an area's background facts, statistics and assets to be assembled in one local directory. In this way, issues, needs, opportunities, actions, projects, campaigns and an overall vision for the area can be constructed – a comprehensive data evidence base which could be used to support the production of a community or Neighbourhood Plan. This publicly accessible database could also keep a record of all decisions taken in, or affecting the area. It highlights community groups, services and facilities, as well as a "who's who" of campaigners and community champions leading on local initiatives.

The information contained within the **toolkit** and **folder** relates to the Moseley and Balsall Heath Districts of Birmingham, but the templates can be applied to any community or area across the country. The **toolkit** has already proved successful in one of the outer municipal estates in Birmingham, with a new **folder** currently being populated with material for part of the Quinton Ward (the Welsh House Farm area), which intends to prepare action plans over the next 10 years as part of the Lottery funded 'Big Local' initiative.

Post Submission.

It is envisaged that in the autumn, a seminar will be held to publicise the initiative to local community groups, as well as other planning authorities within the West Midlands Combined Authority area, to introduce the **toolkit and folder** and celebrate the involvement of local communities across the wider city-region.

Because the completed resource(s) is a web based entity, its future success and application will depend upon the commitment of local people and community

organisations, to ensure that it remains live and relevant for their part of Birmingham or in a deployment elsewhere. For it to be relevant to other areas or as a national tool, a similar commitment to maintaining it on the part of whoever wishes to use the site will be paramount.

It is envisaged that once the issue of future maintenance is resolved (to keep the resource up to date with changes in legislation / policy etc.), the **toolkit and folder** will join the suite of way-finding documents on the Locality / My Community web sites as an Open Source product.

In developing the web based resource it has become clear additional 'layers' could be added to enrich the functionality and purpose e.g. a 'Heathy Neighbourhood' layer, (which could identify walking routes, children's trails, 'active parks' etc; education/training and employment signposting, etc). This has not been included as part of the remit of this project, but others using the resources could adapt them for their purposes.

We trust these resources are useful to other areas and we would welcome discussions on how they might be further developed and deployed.

Please note. the sites have not been optimised for mobile access, this could be achieved should additional resources be available.

The successful launch workshop for the Community Planning and Involvement Toolkit and the Ward Explorer took place on October 19th, 2016 at Stirchley Baths with participants from BCC, other public agencies, Community organisations and Councillors and DCLG.

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