

# Getting down to business: lessons and tips from involving firms in neighbourhood planning

## Summary

Local planning authorities (LPAs) must consider designating areas that are wholly or predominantly made up of businesses as a ‘business areas’ for neighbourhood planning. Business areas have two referendums: one for residents and one for non- domestic ratepayers. This extra referendum provides businesses with an opportunity to vote on the neighbourhood plan or neighbourhood development order. But, for all neighbourhood planning areas the qualifying bodies should also examine how they can get the buy-in of local businesses to the process in order to be sure they represent the broad range of community interests.

## Lessons from involving businesses in neighbourhood planning

Most business areas are still at the early stages in plan preparation, and therefore the lessons emerging are more about the management of relationships than about the plan product. These relationships are critical for establishing a foundation for what goes into the plan and how deliverable policies will eventually be.

- Businesses and residents may be suspicious of each other at first, but neighbourhood planning provides a unique forum for collaboration: in business neighbourhood areas residents and businesses need to agree a plan that will pass both referendums – it is in both their interests to find ways to work together effectively.
- Some businesses see potential in being involved in neighbourhood planning, but not all: business enthusiasm will be influenced by factors such as whether traders own their site, the nature of the business, their own aspirations for development, existing relations with residents and local organisations, and their level of anxiety regarding the local environment or emerging development proposals for the area.

- Neighbourhood planning may kickstart the involvement of firms in their area and lead to solutions outside of the scope of a neighbourhood plan or neighbourhood development order (NDO). In both business and other areas, establishing a platform for collaborative discussions about what is wanted for an area is in itself valuable.
- Business referendums present multiple challenges: so far no area has progressed a business neighbourhood plan to the referendum stage, but it is clear that running two referendums will require well-organised and effective internal collaboration across a local authority.

## Tips

- Be timely and transparent: LPAs can support business involvement by regularly updating neighbourhood forums on their applications and reviewing whether they can speed up their own processes.
- Challenge parish and neighbourhood forums to create business buy-in: neighbourhood planning groups need to be clear about what the benefits will be for local businesses to get involved – the most advanced neighbourhood plans that involve firms have the commitment of at least some of the most influential local business leaders.
- Help businesses and residents work together: joint working is essential to achieve two successful referendums – LPAs can facilitate this, especially at the beginning where mutual suspicions may get in the way. Involving an objective ‘outsider’ in the process can help to mediate any issues.
- Involve elected members so they understand, trust and get involved in neighbourhood planning: business involvement in decision-making in the local area can help to meet other corporate objectives such as developing a thriving local economy.

## Introduction

Neighbourhood planning allows communities to help shape their local area by preparing neighbourhood plans or Neighbourhood Development Orders (NDOs), provided they meet a number of basic conditions, including being in general conformity with the local planning authority’s (LPA’s) strategic policies. In parished areas neighbourhood planning processes are led by parish or town councils; in other areas neighbourhood planning forums must apply to the local planning authority to be designated as the lead (qualifying body). This briefing uses the term ‘forum’ as shorthand for all qualifying bodies: parish and town councils, and neighbourhood forums.

Many areas include a range of businesses. Although people working in these businesses may not live locally, they have a stake in the future development of the area; the prosperity of some businesses will be directly affected by neighbourhood planning considerations such as the public realm, transport and housing provision.

The first step in neighbourhood planning is an application to the LPA for a neighbourhood area to be designated. Places without parish or town councils must also apply to the LPA to get a neighbourhood planning forum designated. If the area is wholly or predominantly businesses in nature then the legislation states that the LPA must consider whether they should designate it as a business area for neighbourhood planning (Section 61H to Schedule 9 of the [Localism Act](#)).

The most significant consequence of being designated a business neighbourhood planning area is that the plan needs to pass two referendums: one for residents and one for non-domestic ratepayers. This extra referendum provides businesses with an opportunity to vote on the plan. Points to note include:

- each non-domestic ratepayer has only one vote
- the area where residents and businesses are eligible to vote may be larger than the neighbourhood plan area, depending on the recommendations of the examiner
- if only one of the two referendums results in a majority in favour of the plan or order, the LPA decides whether or not the plan or order should be brought into force.

**Whether a business area or not, all neighbourhood planning processes should examine how they can get the buy-in of local businesses so they represent the broad range of community interests.**

The British Property Federation (BPF) has launched a [website dedicated to business involvement in neighbourhood planning](#).

The [Planning Advisory Service](#) (PAS) has published a range of resources on neighbourhood planning.

RICS will be launching an [information paper on business neighbourhood planning](#) later in 2014.

Other resources include the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) [neighbourhood planning webpages](#) and Locality's [guide to neighbourhood planning](#).

## About the case studies

[Bankside Neighbourhood Forum \(London Borough of Southwark\)](#): Southwark designated this business neighbourhood planning area in May 2013 and approved the forum the following month. The area is a dense mixed-use neighbourhood in central London, and includes landmarks that are famous well beyond its borders: it is bounded by the Thames and Tate Modern to the north, Borough Market to the east, and Southbank to the west. The area has strong support from the Business Improvement District (BID) and landowners and developers. But the area also includes many small businesses and homes, and already benefited from strong local resident and business networks. The forum has been consulting on themes and aims that will guide future development in the area. Priorities to date include retaining a mix of employment spaces in future developments to ensure a supply of business space for small and micro-businesses, and greening the local environment. Business, residents and local community organisations are represented equally on the forum. Southwark adopted its local plan in April 2011.

[Central Ealing Neighbourhood Forum](#) and [West Ealing Centre Neighbourhood Forum](#) (London Borough of [Ealing](#)): Ealing, in the west of the capital designated Central Ealing and West Ealing Centre as two business neighbourhood planning areas in October 2012; it designated the Central Ealing Neighbourhood Forum and West Ealing Centre Neighbourhood Forum in March 2013. The Central Ealing area covers the borough's main shopping streets and business centre. The forum is run by a 12-person committee with representatives from business – including the local Business Improvement District – residents and community organisations. The west Ealing area is located around the West Ealing Town Centre and the forum proposes to have a plan ready for examination by June 2015. Ealing adopted its core strategy in April 2012 and its development sites and development management DPDs in December 2013.

[Central Milton Keynes Town Council](#) ([Milton Keynes Council](#)): Unusually for a large town, Milton Keynes is a fully parished urban area. The central area of the new town, founded in 1967, has almost 50 hectares of land that are still to be fully developed. The aim of the business neighbourhood plan is to consolidate the town's distinctive design while supporting its economic role at the centre of a growing region and balancing this with the highest rate of population growth in England. The town council set up the Central Milton Keynes Alliance as a mechanism to bring residents and businesses together to prepare the CMK Alliance Business Neighbourhood Development Plan, which was submitted for examination. A hearing for the examination was held in December 2013 and the examiner's report is expected soon. It was one of eight business-led neighbourhood planning frontrunners announced by the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) in May 2011. The steering group includes eight businesses representatives and eight public representatives, including town and local councillors. Milton Keynes adopted its core strategy in July 2013.

[Liverpool Innovation Park](#) ([Liverpool City Council](#)): The innovation park is an 80 acre area made up exclusively of businesses; there are no people living in the area. Liverpool City Council designated the innovation park as a business neighbourhood planning area in October 2013, and the park expects to get approval for the business neighbourhood forum in March 2014. It was a DCLG business-led frontrunner. Liverpool City Council is currently preparing its local plan.

[Mayfair Neighbourhood Forum](#) ([Westminster City Council](#)): The Mayfair Neighbourhood Forum describes its residential population as a 'melting pot of communities' intermingled with the biggest concentration of five star hotels in the capital, and a host of internationally renowned shopping precincts (such as Oxford Street and Bond Street). Westminster designated the Mayfair business area in central London in April 2013 and the neighbourhood forum in January 2014. The forum is currently a partnership between the Residents' Society of Mayfair & St James's, Mayfair Residents' Group, Grosvenor Britain & Ireland and the Crown Estate. The forum will establish a more formal footing now that it has been designated. Westminster adopted its local plan in January 2011 and revised the strategic policies in November 2013 to ensure they comply with the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

[Trafford Park](#) ([Trafford Metropolitan Borough Council](#)): Trafford Council designated Trafford Park – an area that is home to 1300 businesses and a DCLG business-led frontrunner – as Manchester's first business neighbourhood planning area in April 2013. Since then the Trafford Park Shadow Management Board has decided not to prepare a neighbourhood plan; instead, it is working with Trafford Council to embed elements of the board's growth strategy into a borough land allocations plan. Trafford adopted its local plan in January 2012.

[Uppingham Town Council \(Rutland County Council\)](#): Located midway between Leicester and Peterborough, Uppingham is a small, bustling market town with a population of about 4,500. The Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan is the one example in this case study of a neighbourhood planning process that has a significant level of business involvement without being designated a business neighbourhood plan. The business-led community partnership Uppingham First created a town centre task group, which Uppingham Town Council incorporated as a working group to prepare the neighbourhood plan to cover the whole parish. Uppingham First provided the working group's secretariat and chair, who is both a local businessman and a county councillor. Two town councillors joined the working group to represent the council's views. The town council consulted on a draft plan in the summer of 2013, and on a final version at the end of the year. Rutland adopted its local plan in July 2011 and is currently .

The case study was written by Andrew Ross of [Final Draft Consultancy](#). Many thanks to all the representatives from neighbourhood forums and local authorities who agreed to be interviewed. The Bankside photos are courtesy of [MediaMixer UK](#).

## Lessons from involving businesses in neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning processes that have involved businesses are characterised by a diverse range of approaches. However, some common lessons are emerging from these varied experiences.

### **Businesses and residents may be suspicious of each other at first, but neighbourhood planning provides a unique forum for collaboration**

The case studies demonstrate a high level of consensus about the value of the neighbourhood planning process for creating a mechanism that allows interested businesses to work alongside residents and other local groups. Maresa Molloy, an independent consultant and one of the DCLG's 41 neighbourhood planning champions, echoed the sentiments of many interviewees when she said:

'The process is a rare opportunity to get everyone – communities, landowners, businesses, planners – into the same room, often for the first time.'

Getting everyone into a room is one thing; getting them to work together is potentially a lot more arduous. But there is a significant incentive built into business neighbourhood planning. A neighbourhood plan in a designated business area needs to pass two referendums: one for residents and one for business. If the vote is hung then the LPA decides the outcome. In this scenario it makes little sense for a forum to prepare a plan that doesn't have the endorsement of both residents and businesses. However, achieving this consensus can take time. Tim Wood, Chair of the Bankside Forum and Director of local business Forge Architects, recalls that:

*'We had a kind of argy bargy early on for the first 3 or 4 months – but that's gone now and there is a really good working relationship.'*

Nigel Hughes, Estate Surveyor at Grosvenor Britain & Ireland, convened an interim working group split between business representatives and residents in Mayfair, London, ahead of the forum achieving its designation. He says that:

*'There were some suspicions and concerns between both sides but that group is now working well and there is a surprising degree of consensus.'*

What has facilitated this evolution from mutual suspicion to constructive joint working? Both Tim Wood and Nigel Hughes believe that it is vital to build a process that pushes participants towards talking positively about their area rather than getting stuck on what they want to block. This can help move everyone towards developing a plan where all participants have a stake in getting it adopted.

For example, the Uppingham Neighbourhood Plan is built on collaborative working between residents and business representatives. A key objective has been to highlight the benefits that a neighbourhood plan could bring to both businesses and residents, and to set up a transparent process where people feel they will miss out if they don't get involved. One example of the success of this approach is the inclusion in the plan of a 30-metre mast that will enable the town to increase its wi-fi and other IT capacity. Surprisingly, the mast received no objections from the community. Ron Simpson, Uppingham Neighbourhood Forum Coordinator, member of the Uppingham Town Council and chair of the Uppingham Business Forum, believes this is because:

*'Neighbourhood planning has been able to demonstrate benefits to business and to the community, and help them to understand what is in their collective interest. Making the mast happen will assist local businesses to stay here.'*

## **Some businesses see potential in being involved in neighbourhood planning, but not all**

Many of the case studies revealed widespread enthusiasm for the way that neighbourhood planning can – and should – include businesses. Nigel Hughes, , explains that:

*'Neighbourhood planning is a real opportunity for businesses to have their say – usually planning is much more to do with what the residents want.'*

The level of involvement that businesses desire varies significantly based on factors such as:

- whether traders own their site
- the nature of the business
- their own aspirations for development
- existing relations with residents and local organisations
- their level of anxiety regarding the local environment or emerging development proposals for the area.

For example, businesses in the most advanced business-led neighbourhood planning area – Central Milton Keynes – saw the process as providing a constructive way out of brewing

local tensions. Dr Rebecca Kurth, Chair of the Central Milton Keynes Council, recalls the situation at the beginning of their process:

'The town council and business leaders were facing a lot of difficult planning applications that we were very unhappy with. We were looking at spending a lot of our time fighting and being oppositional, or we could try and be proactive and help create a planning environment that we could all get behind and be more forward thinking – so we decided to embrace this fully.'

Although the Uppingham neighbourhood planning process is led by the town council, it has collaborated closely with the business-led organisation Uppingham First, which secured front runner status for Uppingham. The town council regarded business involvement as crucial to the success of its plan and used its links with businesses to sustain their involvement. Businesses wanted a process that they understood and that would contribute to their own profitability and viability. To help achieve this, the council ensured a significant voice for business throughout the preparation of the plan. Ron Simpson believes that the plan, which is now ready to be examined, will demonstrate that neighbourhood planning 'can deliver profitability while still being in the community interest'.

Bankside Neighbourhood Forum has seven of its 21 steering group places reserved for business representatives. Tim Wood has observed that some businesses see participation in the forum as a way of smoothing tensions between them and residents and local organisations:

'The forum is a place where we can thrash things out and get deals done – it is amazing, because there is no other setting where this happens.'

However, Peter Smith, Chair of the Ealing Broadway BID Company, which is part of the Central Ealing Neighbourhood Forum, stresses that the neighbourhood planning process will fail to attract the interest of many businesses:

'Neighbourhood planning doesn't come very high up on the list of priorities for many businesses. They are not passionate about doing it and the process of attending meetings and joint participation doesn't sit naturally for them.'

For others, it may require a shift in thinking from reacting to LPA plans to getting involved in writing them.

## **Neighbourhood planning may not be the tool that best addresses the problems businesses want solved**

One finding from the experiences of business neighbourhood planning so far is that it may not be the most appropriate vehicle to help solve the concerns that some businesses have.

Trafford Park was a business-led neighbourhood planning frontrunner that had its area designated in April 2013. As part of the initial work on the neighbourhood plan, the Trafford Park Shadow Board commissioned a Trafford Park Growth Strategy, which identified the key issues that it wished to pursue. This revealed a number of priorities that could be addressed outside of a neighbourhood planning process, such as creating an electronic platform for engaging businesses at Trafford Park, determining future training requirements and other

business support, and devising great business interactions within Trafford Park to support cross selling, collaborative procurement and customer identification.

As a result the board has decided to halt its preparation of a business neighbourhood plan. It will work with Trafford Council to embed the relevant aspects of its growth strategy into a land allocations plan that the LPA is preparing.

Other case studies report that the process of creating a forum has led to some positive results that lie outside of what a neighbourhood plan can do. Steve Barton, Planning Policy Manager at the London Borough of Ealing, observes that both business forums:

‘...discuss all sorts of matters that have nothing to do with planning, or plan making – but they are topics where resources are being committed by different bits of the public sector so it is an opportunity for them and us to get progress on these projects, including finding match funding.’

Bankside Neighbourhood Forum is working with Southwark Council to help implement the authority’s existing policies on creating more affordable housing. This has included identifying suitable sites where the council can spend existing commuted sums to build affordable units, including above a redeveloped doctor’s surgery.

## Business neighbourhood planning referendums present multiple challenges

The planning and regeneration commentator [Chris Brown](#) contends that:

‘The horrendously complex and expensive challenge of setting up and running a business referendum seems certain to persuade local authorities to avoid this route unless the businesses fund the extra costs.’

The LPA is responsible for the cost of running the referendum(s) for neighbourhood plans and orders and there is no legal power to charge the forum for the cost . None of the case study LPAs have sought contributions to the costs from local businesses, although Ealing Council estimates that it may cost up to £90,000 to run both referendums. The government has agreed to provide [an extra £10,000 per business referendum](#) to help cover the costs to councils of organising an additional referendum in business neighbourhood planning areas.

However, the participants in the case studies readily identify with the complexities that are involved with running a business as well as a resident referendum (see the ‘Introduction’ for an explanation of business referendums). The cost and uncertainties of undertaking two referendums concerned the Trafford Park Shadow Board, which has opted not to proceed with a business neighbourhood plan.

The business neighbourhood planning area that is closest to holding referendums is Central Milton Keynes: Milton Keynes Council aims to run the referendums at the same time as local and European elections in May 2014. But the exact area to be included in the referendums is subject to the recommendations of the examiner – not least because the examiner may make recommendations about the extent of the referendum area depending on their perception of the issues, policies and impacts. This makes it difficult to plan ahead until after the examiner’s report is published and accepted.

If the resident and business referendums have different results then it is up to the LPA to decide whether or not to bring the plan into force. Diane Webber, Senior Planning Officer at Milton Keynes Council, says this is further complicated by other local uncertainties, including the outcome of forthcoming local elections:

'We've started to consider what the council would have to do in the event of a split vote on the two referendums. Members are aware that the decision would fall to them, but it is not possible to pre-empt what the outcome of that decision would be.'

It is vital that planners work closely with elected members, democratic services and the department that is in charge of the non-domestic rate paying register to agree early on the information that will be required for the business referendum and how to assemble it.

## Tips

A range of organisations have published recommendations for running effective neighbourhood planning processes, all of which apply to business neighbourhood planning too. What follows is advice that is targeted more specifically at forums involving businesses in neighbourhood planning.

### Be timely and transparent

LPAs should review internal processes to see if they contain checks and balances that are unnecessarily onerous, as lengthy timescales can discourage business involvement. The consultant Maresa Molloy suggests that:

'LPAs should look hard at their processes and only do what has to be done – this can save time and help to maintain momentum.'

This could include delegating more of the LPA's neighbourhood planning responsibilities to officers. Milton Keynes Council is proposing to review its process later in 2014 to look again at what can be done by officers now that members know how the process works and how they can get involved.

Another area of concern for prospective neighbourhood forums in business areas is the time it takes to designate areas and forums. For example, Nigel Hughes has supported two forum applications within Westminster (including Mayfair). He believes that the timeframe has been too long (at least 18 months in one case):

'It is really difficult to keep people interested for that long when there is nothing to report.'

Westminster City Council has had more than 25 applications to launch neighbourhood planning processes. It has tried to take a sequential approach by designating neighbourhood areas first, and then establishing neighbourhood forums at the second stage in an endeavour to reconcile the large number of competing interests even at neighbourhood level within in the borough.

Tom Kimber, Principal Planning Officer at Westminster City Council, argues that there are a range of factors that influence how long it takes the local authority to designate some areas/

forums such as applications lacking sufficient representation, overlapping boundaries, competing applications and so on. However, he says that:

'I do take the point that local planning authorities can do more to communicate with neighbourhood planning groups, as well as in terms of the information we provide, and we are certainly doing our best to improve on this.'

Business areas could be an important tool for councils to stimulate economic development in their town centres and as such should be an integrated part of any economic development strategies. Maresa Molloy suggests that LPAs can help reduce the time it takes for business designations by anticipating what their business neighbourhood areas might be:

'Councils should talk proactively with their local Chamber of Commerce and Business Improvement Districts. Although applications have to come from communities and businesses LPAs need to have some idea of the neighbourhood planning areas they would prefer to see.'

For example, Ealing Council took its decision to designate business neighbourhood forums across Central and West Ealing because together they constitute one of ten metropolitan centres in the London Plan. This means they should be developed to 'function as the significant retail and employment focus of the area'. The council agreed this approach prior to receiving applications for the neighbourhood areas as it wanted to provide a clear steer to prospective forums.

## Challenge forums to create business buy-in

The case study has already identified the constraints on businesses participating in neighbourhood planning. However, to ensure that neighbourhood planning is sufficiently representative LPAs should encourage forums to attract as much business buy-in as possible.

One element that the most advanced business neighbourhood plans have in common is the commitment of at least some of the most influential local business leaders; LPAs should check for this involvement, perhaps by identifying whether the local business improvement district (BID) or other established business group is a part of the forum. Planners can work with their the council's economic development officers or equivalent to help facilitate links between their local business contacts, initiatives to support the local economy, and neighbourhood planning processes.

Conventional neighbourhood planning forums should also examine how they can get the buy-in of influential local business leaders. The Uppingham process is led by the town council, but there are excellent links to local business: for example, the chair of Uppingham Business Forum is the neighbourhood plan coordinator.

LPAs should also encourage forums to create transparent processes that make it clear how businesses can get involved, and the influence they may miss out on if they don't. For example, Uppingham worked hard to establish a group that brought together the town council, businesses (via Uppingham First) and residents. Ron Simpson says the aim was to set up a process where:

'businesses stood to lose out if they didn't get involved... now and again there will be a dissenting business, but if there is an agreed framework and plan then the majority view will prevail.'

Focusing on delivery can help to keep businesses involved. Tim Wood believes that the most influential element of the Bankside Plan will be the practical delivery of the Community Infrastructure Project List, which will set out the forum's priorities for spending its share of the Community Infrastructure Levy once the plan is adopted.

## Help businesses and residents work together

The more advanced case studies have business and resident involvement written into their constitution, and report that over time trust has developed between both sets of stakeholders. Some authorities have taken steps to proactively build up this trust. For example, Ealing has contracted Tony Burton, an [independent consultant](#), to act as an intermediary between business and resident interests within the Ealing Central Neighbourhood Forum and West Ealing Centre Neighbourhood Forum. Trusted and respected by all sides, he is 'inscrutably impartial' according to Peter Smith, Chair of the Ealing Broadway Business Improvement District. The role has included helping all participants – residents and business representatives – to find a common language for communicating with each other.

The Bankside Neighbourhood Forum has seven representatives each for businesses, residents and community/cultural organisations. Tim Wood reports that the community organisations have been the 'glue' between residents and businesses:

'Organisations such as Bankside Open Spaces Trust work with businesses all the time, but their perspective is a little bit wider and that has been really helpful for getting [businesses] to understand the wider picture.'

Remember that in designated business neighbourhood planning areas the most effective incentive for business representatives and residents to work together is written into the process: for a neighbourhood plan to have real credibility with the community it needs to pass both the business and the resident referendums. It may be wise to regularly remind forum members of the need to compromise. Rebecca Kurth says that:

'We had big debates. A lot of our business members wanted policies to be as flexible as possible, and town council members wanted policies to be as restrictive as possible. What we ended up with was a compromise that was satisfactory to all.'

## Involve elected members so they understand, trust and get involved in neighbourhood planning

The involvement of [at least one elected member is expected](#) in a neighbourhood forum. Cabinet members/portfolio holders also have a role that includes deciding the processes by which the council will designate areas/forums, adopt neighbourhood plans and so on.

The biggest frustration that cabinet/portfolio members can address is the time it takes for the council to take decisions. One way to tackle this is to review whether they can delegate

more decision-making to officers so that neighbourhood planning processes do not get delayed unnecessarily by council timescales.

Elected members should also be proactive about business involvement, not least because business participation can sometimes provide extra capacity for neighbourhood planning processes.

LPAs want high quality neighbourhood plans; in areas that include businesses their participation is key to achieving this and may unlock ideas for achieving council objectives such as investing in and improving the local economy. Councillors can use their knowledge of resident and business interests – and their desire to satisfy the aspirations of both – to help mediate between different parties to achieve a workable consensus. In two tier areas county councillors may be able to undertake this role effectively. In Uppingham a councillor from another ward sits on the neighbourhood planning forum.

PAS has produced a [guide to neighbourhood planning for councillors](#).

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## Resources

Business Neighbourhood Planning website (British Property Federation)

[www.neighbourhoodplanning.biz/](http://www.neighbourhoodplanning.biz/)

Planning Advisory Service

[www.pas.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning](http://www.pas.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning)

Notes on Neighbourhood Planning (Department for Communities and Local Government)

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/notes-on-neighbourhood-planning>

Guide to Neighbourhood Planning (Locality)

<http://mycommunityrights.org.uk/neighbourhood-planning/>

Neighbourhood Planning: involving businesses and landowners (draft) (RICS)

[https://consultations.rics.org/consult.ti/Neighbourhood\\_Planning](https://consultations.rics.org/consult.ti/Neighbourhood_Planning)

## **Acknowledgements**

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### **Bankside Neighbourhood Forum (London Borough of Southwark)**

Tim Wood, Chair, Bankside Forum, [tim@forgearchitects.co.uk](mailto:tim@forgearchitects.co.uk)

Juliet Seymour, Planning Policy Manager, London Borough of Southwark,  
[Juliet.Seymour@southwark.gov.uk](mailto:Juliet.Seymour@southwark.gov.uk)

### **Central Ealing Neighbourhood Forum and West Ealing Centre Neighbourhood Forum (London Borough of Ealing)**

Peter Smith, Chair, Ealing Broadway Business Improvement District, [peter@urban-city.co.uk](mailto:peter@urban-city.co.uk)

Steve Barton, Planning Policy Manager, London Borough of Ealing,  
[bartons@ealing.gov.uk](mailto:bartons@ealing.gov.uk)

### **Central Milton Keynes Council (Milton Keynes Council)**

Dr Rebecca Kurth, Chair, Central Milton Keynes Council, [rebecca.kurth@cmktc.org](mailto:rebecca.kurth@cmktc.org)

Diane Webber, Senior Planning Officer, Milton Keynes Council,  
[Diane.Webber@Milton-keynes.gov.uk](mailto:Diane.Webber@Milton-keynes.gov.uk)

### **Liverpool Innovation Park (Liverpool City Council)**

Maresa Molloy, Director, MMPA, [maresa@mmpa.co.uk](mailto:maresa@mmpa.co.uk)

Mike Eccles, Development Plans Manager, Liverpool City Council,  
[mike.eccles@liverpool.gov.uk](mailto:mike.eccles@liverpool.gov.uk)

### **Mayfair Neighbourhood Forum (Westminster City Council)**

Nigel Hughes, Estate Surveyor, Grosvenor Britain & Ireland,  
[Nigel.Hughes@grosvenor.com](mailto:Nigel.Hughes@grosvenor.com)

Tom Kimber, Principal Planning Officer, Westminster City Council,  
[tkimber@westminster.gov.uk](mailto:tkimber@westminster.gov.uk)

### **Trafford Park (Trafford Council)**

Rob Haslam, Head of Planning, Trafford Council, [rob.haslam@trafford.gov.uk](mailto:rob.haslam@trafford.gov.uk)

### **Uppingham Town Council (Rutland County Council)**

Ron Simpson, Coordinator, Uppingham Neighbourhood Forum, [rons@clara.net](mailto:rons@clara.net)

Brett Culpin, Senior Planning Officer, Rutland County Council,  
[BCulpin@rutland.gcsx.gov.uk](mailto:BCulpin@rutland.gcsx.gov.uk)

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