



Ministry of Housing,  
Communities &  
Local Government

# Keeping it Simple

**A guide to keeping your  
neighbourhood plan simple**



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April 2026

## Keeping it simple

One of the joys of neighbourhood planning is that it can be kept very simple. No-one should be put off by fear of the procedures or by thinking you need to prepare a long and complex document. It is the community's plan and needs only to deal with the planning issues that matter to you. This guide shows how to keep your neighbourhood plan simple.

Neighbourhood planning can all too easily turn from a great idea into an unwieldy monster. Even when you start off with focused intentions, these can rapidly expand and it is easy to become overwhelmed.

So, remember that a neighbourhood plan can be as simple or as complex as you like. To avoid becoming bogged down there are ten top tips to keeping your neighbourhood plan simple.

## Top tips

1. Keep your eye on the prize - a timely neighbourhood plan which addresses the planning issues that matter in your area.
2. Manage your time - never underestimate the value of a work programme and clear timetable.
3. Avoid duplication - don't worry about including issues that are already adequately addressed in the Local Plan.
4. Make a difference - good ideas count for nothing if they never get implemented so don't get distracted.
5. Be practical - every new idea requires new information and evidence to back it up
6. Embrace compromise - be honest about how much time, energy resources and skills you can all bring.
7. You can't please all the people all of the time-don't try.
8. Keep things moving - don't delay everything while you wait for information on a single issue that may never emerge.
9. Be realistic – you won't be able to address every issue raised in public consultation or by the enthusiasts in your group.
10. Enough is enough – the perfect plan doesn't exist so draw a line and win that referendum.

A neighbourhood plan is an important document with real legal force. This means it has to be clear, well prepared, and deliverable. There also needs to be an opportunity for everyone with an interest in the area to get involved. Every plan has to go through a number of steps and provide some essential content but the rest is down to you. While some early plans have run to over 100 pages with dozens of policies and fabulous colour illustrations and maps you don't have to go down this road. Remember the first neighbourhood plan in Upper Eden contained just seven policies in fewer than 30 pages.

## **Essential Steps**

There are some formal procedures through which every neighbourhood plan has to pass but they're simpler than they might appear:

1. Agree the area of your plan and who will produce it with your local authority.
2. Ask people about the issues they would like to see addressed.
3. Produce a draft plan for public consultation with evidence to back your policies.
4. Submit your final plan to the local authority.
5. Meet the "basic conditions" to gain a successful result from an independent examination.
6. Win a referendum.

## **Essential Content**

Stripped to its essentials a neighbourhood plan should:

1. Provide a clear community-led vision for the area.
2. Translate the vision into specific objectives.
3. Express these objectives as planning policies.
4. Validate this with an evidence base that includes the results of community engagement.

You can include other content and be more ambitious but always match your ambitions to the resources and enthusiasm you have available.

By keeping your plan simple and clear you can make it easier to understand and you are more likely to complete the course. By showing things don't have to be complicated or long-winded you will also encourage others to think they can take up their community rights so more people benefit from the power of neighbourhood planning.

At the end of the day your neighbourhood plan is a compromise: between the people involved, the ideas they generate and the resources (volunteers, time, money, skills and information) available. Get them out of balance and you will get bogged down. Without resources people will meet and talk but nothing will ever get done. Without ideas your plan will be empty and fail to make an impact. And without people your plan will grind to a halt. Get the mix right and you will hit the neighbourhood planning sweet spot (see fig 1). Don't be afraid of compromise. In neighbourhood planning, as in other areas of life, it is often only by compromising that you can move forward.

Neighbourhood planning is no longer new. Hundreds of communities are already involved, from the heart of the largest cities to the most remote rural areas. The plans which have been developed are as varied as the groups which have prepared them. And the experience to date suggests there are two main ways to avoid complexity: provide simple content and use a simple approach. There are also some simple tools to help you on your way.

## The Sweet Spot

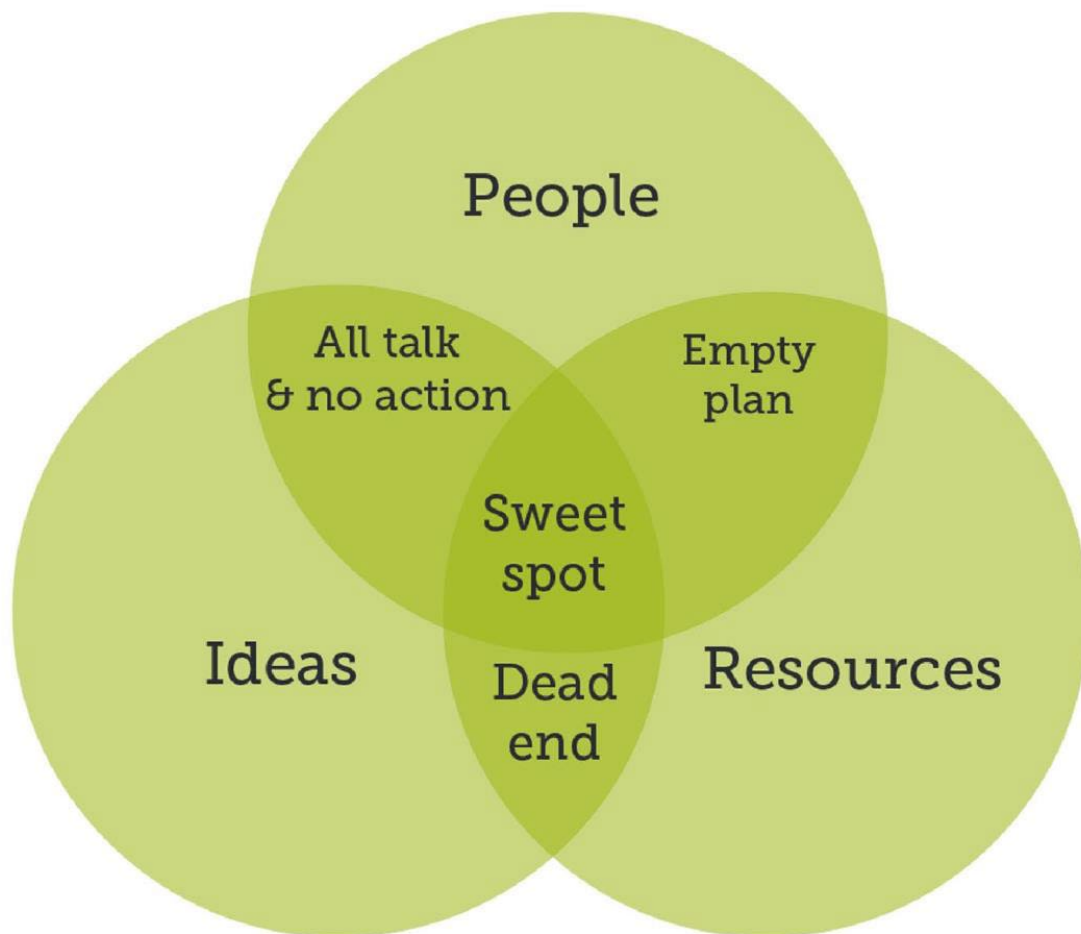


Fig 1

### Simple Content

It is too easy to lose sight of what lies at the core of a good neighbourhood plan. As soon as you begin to investigate your area you will unearth all sorts of different facts and issues. These may be interesting but they may not be relevant. So, remember that your neighbourhood plan is not a:

- history book
- guide to the local area
- source of topical facts and information
- local map
- inventory of local developments or community assets
- place to repeat existing local authority planning policies

While this information can be useful try not to lose sight of what you are trying to achieve. The test of your plan is not whether it covers all the bases but whether it provides clear and deliverable planning policies for the issues that matter to your community. You are unlikely to be short of ideas but you can't tackle them all.

## **Less is more**

You don't have to include every idea that comes your way. While everyone in the area needs an opportunity to have their say, it is for your neighbourhood forum or parish/ town council to decide what to include. The "consultation statement" required for the Examiner only needs to show that you have properly engaged everyone with an interest in the area in developing your planning policies and how this has informed its content. You do not have to turn every idea into a policy. Your plan may end up with only three policies even if your public engagement throws up 300 ideas. Inner East Preston managed five.

## **Example- Preston simplicity**

One good example of a simple approach is the Inner East Preston Neighbourhood Plan prepared by the Friends of Fishwick and St Matthews:

### **One vision**

To improve the image and reputation of Fishwick and St Matthews and make Inner East Preston a better, safer, cleaner and healthier place for everyone to live and work in.

### **Four objectives**

1. **Local Centres** - To enhance the character and local distinctiveness of the Local Centres of New Hall Lane and Ribbleton lane, including public realm and highway improvements and to create vibrant shopping centres for residents and visitors to enjoy.

2. **Green Spaces** - To enhance and protect the existing green spaces within Fishwick and St Matthews wards which are not already protected by the emerging Local Plan, to ensure that they remain to the benefit of the community and are protected for future acceptable use.

3. **Local Enterprise** - To improve employment and training prospects for local people in the Neighbourhood Area by allocating specific sites for employment use which can be used for the purpose of local and social enterprise.

4. **Community Assets** - To ensure that community assets are protected and enhanced now and in the future, and not lost to development unless suitable accessible locations can be found.

### **Five policies**

1. Protection and Enhancement of the Local Centres Vitality and Viability

2. Retail frontages

3. Protection of Incidental Greenspace.

4. Local Employment and Enterprise.

5. Protection of Community Assets

The Inner East Preston plan started with no fewer than seven main objectives and 27 sub-objectives but has managed to reduce these to focus on the issues best addressed in the neighbourhood plan. Other issues are being taken forward in different ways, including a statement of the facilities and regeneration needs of the community.

## **Specific sites**

One of your biggest choices will be whether to include policies and proposals for specific sites. This will immediately add complexity. One of the great strengths of a neighbourhood plan is the power to earmark land for particular types of development and set standards for its quality. This is a powerful tool which has to be used responsibly.

If you want to include specific sites then there are at least three issues to remember:

- delivery - site based policies and proposals need to be capable of being delivered and to show this you will need to provide the methodology and criteria which support your choices and demonstrate there are willing landowners.
- Controversy – earmarking specific sites can be controversial – local residents may not like what you are proposing for their doorstep or a rival developer may want a different site identified.
- Strategic Environmental Assessment – you may trigger the need for a more thorough look at the implications of your plan through a Strategic Environment Assessment (or even a Habitats Regulations Assessment if sensitive wildlife sites are involved).

Site-based neighbourhood plans can be very effective but if you have limited resources then it is worth thinking of a different approach. Simple policies which set out criteria to be met by all new development can be an effective alternative.

## **Simple approach**

The *How to Create a Neighbourhood Plan Toolkit* provides an accessible summary of how to produce a neighbourhood plan. The challenge is to match your effort to the complexity of the plan. At each step of the toolkit think how you can keep things simple.

The hardest part can be managing the enthusiasm of the volunteers and your local community. Neighbourhood planning can stimulate creative ideas and generate energy and enthusiasm. The trick is to channel the energy into something productive. You need to avoid the all too familiar tale of the communities who are drowning in their own enthusiasm and have great plans which never see the light of day.

## **Drowning with enthusiasm**

Once upon a time there was neighbourhood which wanted to become more sustainable. It had the support of its local authority and a growing band of enthusiastic volunteers. Inspired by social evenings, project days, and fundraising events the community's energy began to grow. Fuelled by battles over development and traffic passions ran high. And then along came the Localism Act and the opportunity to write a plan for the area. "We want that!" said the community and quickly lined up at the head of the queue. And so it began.....meeting after meeting, fun day after fun day, brainstorm after brainstorm, consultant after consultant, display after display, walkabout after walkabout, version after version.

The seasons passed and the community talked to itself about what was needed for its neighbourhood plan. Endlessly. Never short of a new idea or the excitement of a new challenge the conversation went on.....and on.....and on.

Every time an issue was addressed, two more popped up. Every time people were asked what they thought, more great ideas emerged. Every idea had its enthusiast. Every enthusiast would not let their idea go.

The grafters did their best to deal with the ideas. They sweated over the research, compiled the evidence base and fretted over nuance of wording the policies. But there were fewer grafters than enthusiasts. And so the ideas kept coming.

Round and round it went. And time dragged on. The community began to wonder about the point of it all. The excitement faded. The controversial development proposals which drove people to neighbourhood planning received planning permission. Open spaces people had wanted protected were lost. Local shops closed down. The light at the end of the tunnel was still too distant. Faith in the power of neighbourhood planning ebbed away. Meetings were thin on the ground now. Only the very familiar faces turned up. And now, at last, the ideas stopped coming. But, it was too late. The plan was dead – drowned by its own enthusiasm.

### **Clear priorities**

Don't worry that you cannot please everybody. Choose only those issues where you can make a real difference and where you know you can gather the necessary evidence. Your core group needs the confidence to make firm decisions. Passionate enthusiasts are welcome but don't allow your plan to become bogged down. If people aren't backing up their ideas with the hard graft of researching the supporting evidence and turning them into planning policies then they can't be included and must be dropped.

### **Stick to the basics**

There are some things which are required of every neighbourhood plan. But why reinvent the wheel that others have already made or make things more complicated than necessary?

**Neighbourhood area** – while you need to explain your boundary, you don't need a cartographer to draw it – just put a red line on one of the many street maps you can find online – be aware of licensing issues but there are also open source options such as OpenStreetMap.

**Neighbourhood Forum constitution** – dozens have already been produced – why not adapt one used for a similar area elsewhere?

**Statements explaining your area and your prospective qualifying body** – why invent your own format when you can adapt others? And stick to the basics set out in Locality's Neighbourhood Plans Roadmap Guide - you don't have to answer every question your local authority throws at you.

**Public engagement** – don't skimp on this but don't go mad. You don't have to organise all the events when you can piggy back on others which are already in the neighbourhood calendar. You can also tap into other newsletters, bulletins and social media. You don't even need a website – an active Facebook and twitter presence can provide all you need. The test is whether you have made a reasonable effort to involve everyone with an interest in the area and can show what you have done with the feedback.

**Evidence** – you are not writing a PhD thesis. Your plan only needs enough evidence to support the choices made and the approach taken – in the jargon it has to be “proportionate”. The more challenging or unusual, the more evidence you need. For most plans your local authority will already have much of the information you require. This can then be backed up by the results of your public engagement. If your neighbourhood boundary doesn't match that used by the local authority when collecting data then ask for it to be digitised so you can get the information you need.

**Publication** – it's lovely to see five colour expertly designed plans with pictures, diagrams and maps – but they are not essential. You can produce a simple plan on a standard word processor with some pictures from your phone and a basic map of the area which clearly shows where any location specific policies apply. The most important thing is to set things out in a logical order and to clearly separate your policies from the supporting text

### **Avoid repetition**

There is no point repeating policies from the Local Plan if you are happy with them. Such policies already apply. You should focus your attention on the non-strategic elements of the Local Plan where you are looking for changes or a different emphasis. An important first step is to sit down and review the Local Plan to see which policies you would like to modify for the circumstances of your neighbourhood. Try and get your local planning authority involved and have it explain the Local Plan. What are the specific issues for your area which aren't covered by the Local Plan? By focusing on what is distinctive you will simplify your neighbourhood plan and avoid unnecessary duplication.

## Don't be daunted

You will hear lots of talk about what has to be included in a neighbourhood plan and what isn't required. Viability assessments, the Habitats Directive, Strategic Environmental Assessment, screening, consultation reports, even the Human Rights Act. Sometimes it can seem like a foreign language. Certainly, it is confusing and not a little scary. Whenever neighbourhood planners get together they enjoy nothing more than sharing anecdotes of the latest conflicting advice from their local authority or gossip about the latest Examiner's report. In these early years people are still finding their way. There are often no clear cut answers to what a plan requires but there's no need to be put off.

Here are six things which should be less daunting than they appear:

**Sustainability Appraisal** – this is not required although your local authority may want to produce one.

**Strategic Environment Assessment** – your plan should be “screened” by your local planning authority at an early stage to see if an SEA is required – this will only be in limited circumstances such as where significant or sensitive sites are being earmarked for development.

**Habitats Regulations Assessment** – this is even rarer and Natural England will be quick to let you know once your plan has been screened.

**Human Rights Act** – this is about making sure everyone who wants to participate has opportunities to do so, including landowners and developers, and that you have considered the impact on different parts of the community. By following the essential steps it is unlikely to become an issue and you could ask your local authority to undertake a simple Equalities Impact Assessment if you want some backing ahead of the examination.

**Viability assessments** – this is only one way of showing that your proposals are realistic within the time frame of your plan and you can use other evidence to show how you have looked at different options and based your decisions on clear criteria - it is worth asking your local authority to share the viability assessment for its Local Plan where it exists.

**Five year housing land supply** – while you should plan positively for your area and show how you are meeting local development needs in the wider area it is up to your local planning authority to demonstrate there is sufficient building land in the pipeline.

## Simple Tools

There are some helpful tools you can use as a group to help ground your thinking if things start to feel overwhelming. These don't have to be complicated and can be used in a variety of different ways – from prioritising the issues raised in public consultation to managing your group's activity over the coming year.

**SWOT** – A simple way of breaking things down according to whether they are helpful or harmful in achieving your objectives and whether they originate from within your group/area or externally. By listing the different Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats it is possible to identify where to focus your efforts. One use of a SWOT analysis is to review your own group and how it is working at least once a year.

	Helpful	Harmful
Internal	Strengths	Weaknesses
External	Opportunities	Threats

**SMART** – This is an ideal tool for sifting different ideas and deciding which to focus on. It takes each idea and applies a common set of questions which allow it to be compared to others.

S - *Specific* – is it clear what you are trying to do?

M - *Measurable* – will you be able to tell if it has been a success?

A - *Achievable* – are the people, time, money, skills available?

R - *Relevant* - is it worthwhile and does it fit in with other things we are doing?

T - *Time-related* – when will it be completed?

**Work programme** – It may seem like extra bureaucracy but if your group can agree a clear work programme then you will save time and effort and be much more likely to achieve results. The trick is to keep things simple. You don't need complex spreadsheets or to draw up a Gantt chart. The main elements you should set out are:

- Key stages – why not use those in the Locality roadmap?
- Tasks – what are the main things that need to happen at each stage?
- Responsibility – who will do what?
- Resources – do any of the tasks need money or extra volunteers?
- Outcome – what will you achieve/produce for each task?
- Indicative timetable – what order do things need to happen in and by when?
- Risks – what are the main threats to the timetable and what will you do to address them?

It is best to discuss and agree your work programme as a group so everyone is signed up to it and knows who is expected to do what and by when. Your local authority will also have an important role to play so try to establish a regular dialogue and agree your work programme with them.

## **Acid Test**

Remember, the acid test of a neighbourhood plan is whether its policies affect planning applications in your neighbourhood. This requires it to meet the “basic conditions” at independent examination and win a majority vote at a referendum. Once these are passed then it will carry real legal clout when development comes forward. Keep your eye on the prize, match aspirations to resources, stick to the essentials and don't allow others to tempt you into complexity. Before you know it, your community will have its own neighbourhood plan and a real say over your area's future.

For more information on neighbourhood planning please visit: [Neighbourhood planning toolkits - GOV.UK](#)