

Neighbourhood Planning

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Technical Support Available Packages

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Technical Support Packages

If a Neighbourhood planning area meets one or more of the eligibility criteria above, subject to MHCLG sign off the following packages of support may be available:

- Setting up a Neighbourhood Planning Group (in unparished areas only);
- Housing Needs Assessment (HNA);
- Site Options and Assessment;
- Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA);
- Evidence Base and Policy Development (EBPD);
- Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA);
- Masterplanning;
- Design including Design Codes;
- Habitats Regulation Assessment (HRA); and
- Plan Health Check Review.

What is Technical Support?

Technical Support providing evidence, advice, policy direction and process support is available for early stage neighbourhood planning groups (not yet designated) or designated Qualifying Bodies (QBs- groups formally designated by a Local Planning Authority (LPA) for the purpose of leading the production a neighbourhood plan or neighbourhood development order (NDO)) which meet certain criteria set down by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Our partner, AECOM provides most of this support in the form of time-limited packages of independent advice on technical or process issues. They are designed to provide you with information (evidence) and advice (professional judgement) which will help you to:

- Decide your priorities and direction;
- Draft effective and viable policy;
- Avoid legal challenges; and,
- Engage confidently with stakeholders such as developers, councils, local businesses and of course residents, who will have a vote at the end of it all.

AECOM consultants will work with you to a clearly defined brief, helping you to produce specific documents like a Design Guide (for a site(s)), a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), a Housing Needs or Site Assessment. The evidence gathering, assessments and advice can last from a few weeks to several months depending on the complexity of your situation. All formal assessment reports go through a draft stage where there is an opportunity for you to comment and are then reviewed by Locality before a final version is issued. All reports are also accessible to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government who fund this support.

At what stage should you apply for each of the technical support packages?

Groups in unparished areas who are just getting started will be able to apply for the Setting up a neighbourhood planning group package. Groups who are at the gathering evidence and drafting stages can apply for the Housing Needs Assessment, Site Options and Assessment, Master planning and Design including Design Codes packages.

When there is enough information on the neighbourhood plan or NDO contents and where the local authority have requested it, you will be able to apply for the Environmental Impact Assessment, Strategic Environmental Assessment, and Habitats Regulations Assessment packages.

Once you have formulated a clear policy intent based on the evidence already collected you will be able to apply for the Evidence base and policy development package. When you have a full draft plan and associated Basic Conditions and Consultation statements and are either at Regulation 14 stage or post Regulation 14 stage you will be able to apply for a Plan health check review prior to examination.

Please see the following descriptions of support packages

Setting up a Neighbourhood Planning Group

(in unparished areas only)

Provides practical help to a potential Neighbourhood Planning Forum over an extended period of time to build up its early knowledge, functionality, the broadest possible membership and best structure in order to apply for successful designation as a Qualifying Body (QB) for Neighbourhood Planning purposes.

Focus of Support and Advice

The relatively slow development of Neighbourhood Planning Forums in urban areas has multiple roots reflecting the social, political and spatial nature of these areas. Complex and often multi-layered regeneration, economic development, place-making and heritage initiatives, some with long histories means there are many individuals and agencies, from different sectors who already have a stake in a given neighbourhood. New potential neighbourhood planning groups entering this arena need therefore to be organised, outward looking, able to form good relationships with statutory and private sector bodies as well as residents and local community groups.

The package will help your group move forward, develop an appropriate constitution and governance arrangement and generally get up to speed as quickly as possible. This can include the following support depending on your ambition and the complexity of your urban area:

- Skills and stakeholder audit;
- Capacity building workshop;
- Initial public meeting and/or steering group support;
- Help with boundary justification and research;
- Mediation across competing interests and motivations of those forming the QB;
- Designation application drafting comment and advice;
- A structure and rules for doing business together in an inclusive way;
- Identifying an agreed contact point with your Local Planning Authority

(LPA) and agreement as to manner in which the designation application should be presented; and

- Explanation of content and use of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the LPA if required.

Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect:

- A Steering Group that has moved through its early phase and is already working together towards ideas for a neighbourhood plan;
- To have an informed, competent and locally representative group ready to become a Forum;
- An evidenced and clearly defined boundary;
- A clear and positive starting relationship with the LPA;
- A competent application for designation;
- A basis for an MOU discussion between group and the LPA; and
- Understanding of skills gap in relation to grant and further TS support required.

Contact Points

Groups will have face to face contact meetings where necessary over an extended period if required (the period will depend on the amount of support your group qualifies for). The primary means of contact will be via e-mail, telephone and video calls (provided free by AECOM).

Housing Needs Assessment (HNA)

This assessment provides vital evidence to help you understand the expected demand for housing in your neighbourhood over your plan period. This includes generating policy options for housing, calculating a suitable housing needs figure and the type and sizes of new dwellings, together with the need for affordable housing and addressing those with specialist requirements such as older residents and newly formed households.

Focus of Support and Advice

A robust housing needs figure is the foundation of all housing policy; while local authorities are required to provide this for all designated areas, this is sometimes either not forthcoming or, where a new Local Plan is coming forward, open to some negotiation if the Qualifying Body (QB) can present compelling evidence that an alternative figure should be used. Many QBs, for example, feel a higher number is appropriate so as to support on-going settlement viability and services.

The HNA not only provides the QB with a specific number, supported by a clearly set out method and data sources, but goes much further, drilling down in to the particular requirements of the community, considering the need for affordable housing, and how this should be split into the different tenures; the type and size of dwellings required to develop a housing stock that is aligned with community needs; including the needs of specialist groups. AECOM has produced pioneering work looking at housing for the elderly, for example, and can help QBs where their area faces an aging population.

Typically the work will involve (depending on the amount of support your group qualifies for):

- A robust, independent study providing clarity as to housing demand that is consistent with Planning Practice Guidance;
- Substantial Evidence base drawing on primary and secondary data sources; and

- Policy options suited to meeting community need relating to housing type and tenure.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect:

- A clear starting point for going on to look at availability of sites and justification for using the neighbourhood plan to allocate sites;
- Better understanding by the QB and the wider community on how to act upon the housing challenges facing you; and
- A firm basis for the QB and wider stakeholders to engage with a Local Planning Authority (LPA) developing a new Local Plan, and influence the housing number allocated to them.

Contact Points

The Housing Team at AECOM will be available through the course of the project to deal with client queries and concerns, either by email or phone. We will start with a thorough dialogue to understand the specifics of the neighbourhood's housing relating issues. Once an initial draft has been prepared, the QB will be asked to comment, and, where appropriate, modifications to the draft will be carried out.

Site Options and Assessment

This technical support package will provide advice to groups who are intending to assess potential sites with a view to allocating land for development in a neighbourhood plan. Support can include help with identifying, assessing and shortlisting sites to meet an identified need for housing, employment, community uses, local green space or other land uses. It will help to ensure that the sites that are selected for allocation comply with wider national and local planning policy as well as meeting the vision and objectives of the neighbourhood plan. The support will not be able to encompass both site assessment and site allocation advice (e.g. which sites are finally included in a plan), as the preferred sites for allocation will need to be consulted on with the community before they are allocated through the plan.

Focus of Support and Advice

The package will provide independent, objective technical advice to ensure the process of site identification, assessment and selection is robust and defensible. This is usually in the form of a short report that can be used to guide decision making on site selection and, if you choose, as evidence to support the neighbourhood plan. It will help to ensure that the proposed allocations and policies align with national and local planning policy and therefore meet the Basic Conditions (legal requirements) that the plan must meet. Support can include one or more of the following depending on your development needs and the complexity of the neighbourhood area:

- Site identification (Local Plan evidence base, local knowledge, Call for Sites);
- Site assessment (based on a standard set of criteria which can be tailored to include local criteria);
- Site shortlisting based on the site assessment;
- Site selection, based on the outcomes of the site assessment and neighbourhood plan objectives;

- Advice on Local Green Space designation; and,
- Advice on whether sites might be suitable for NDO, Self-Build, Co-Housing or Community Right to Build and other alternatives to market housing;
- Advice on development density and site capacity;
- Advice on what a site allocation policy could include; and
- Links with other aspects of neighbourhood planning, including housing need assessment, SEA, development viability and neighbourhood master planning.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect to have received specific tailored advice in the form of a technical report that is relevant to the stage of the site selection process you are at. This could cover the site identification process and 'Call for Sites', a full site assessment that can be used as evidence to support the site selection process, or an independent review of the site assessment and selection process you have undertaken to ensure it is sound and will meet Basic Conditions and be supported by your Local Planning Authority (LPA). It could also include specific advice on aspects of the site allocation process included on the list above.

Contact Points

You will receive an initial phone call to discuss the support required and the information requirements. There may also be a meeting with the neighbourhood planning group, as well as a site visit. The primary means of contact will be via e-mail and telephone/conference calls (provided by AECOM).

Environmental Impact Assessments (EIA)

Under this package, where a neighbourhood planning group has been told by a Local Planning Authority that they need an EIA 'screening opinion', the group will receive clear advice on whether an EIA is required under the Town and Country Planning (EIA) Regulations 2017, where a development is promoted through the following consenting routes: a NDO and Community Right to Build. In most cases, it is unlikely that an EIA will be required.

Focus of Support and Advice

Developments requiring 'screening', to determine if EIA is required, include those located within 'sensitive areas' such as Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (as defined in the EIA Regulations), and those which will exceed the thresholds set out in Schedule 2 of EIA Regulations. Most, if not all, developments that are likely to be promoted through one of the above consenting routes are likely to fall within Schedule 2 Part 10 'Urban Development'.

The package will help your group move forward with their NDOs and Community Right to Build in full knowledge of the requirements under the EIA Regulations.

This will include the following support:

- Assistance with obtaining an EIA Screening Opinion from the Local Planning Authority;
- Advice on the scope of an EIA, including the range of topics to be assessed and the method of assessment, should one be required, and assistance in agreeing this with the Local Planning Authority through an EIA Scoping Opinion; and,
- Advice on the scope of technical supporting documents required for a planning application, if an EIA is not required.

Expected Outcomes

In most cases, the likely outcome is that EIA is screened out, and the planning application can be submitted with specific technical supporting documents.

By the end of the support you can expect:

- Where necessary, an EIA screening opinion for the development, with the likely outcome that EIA is not required; and,
- A clear scope of work, agreed with the Local Planning Authority either for an EIA or a package of technical supporting documents to accompany the NDO or Community Right to Build.

Contact Points

Groups will have an initial face to face meeting with AECOM and support at a meeting with the Local Planning Authority, as required. The primary means of contact will be via e-mail, telephone and video calls (provided free by AECOM).

Evidence Base and Policy Development (EBPD)

Introduction

Aims to help Qualifying Bodies (QBs) with their most ambitious and challenging policy aspirations, and ensure the final policy wording is justified in terms of evidence, is capable of standing scrutiny at examination and proves effective when applied in the real world.

Focus of Support and Advice

Many made Neighbourhood Plans now demonstrate the ambition, power and detail of neighbourhood planning policies. However, we are also seeing examiners re-drafting policies, rejecting some as unworkable and others as not conforming. Not surprisingly, the task of drafting effective and appropriately evidenced policies can be daunting. QBs are increasingly receiving help from their Local Planning Authority (LPA) and local consultants on matters of policy refinement. However, there will be occasion when more specialist policy advice, particularly relating to ambitious, complex and/or contentious policy areas is needed.

This package provides the opportunity for QBs to put forward a policy (which may have several sub-sections) for review and advice relating to the evidence collected and draft policy objectives/intents. A QB can apply for an Evidence Base and Policy Development package at the point where they have formulated a clear policy intent based on the evidence already collected.

The support does not provide for a whole plan review but will include:

- Identification and interpretation of evidence relating to the specific policy area;
- Recommendations on additional evidence that could be referenced;
- Providing text that may be later 'dropped into' a NDP's Basic Conditions Statement;

- A check that the proposed policy can be realistically applied in the real world;
- Whether the plan meets the basic conditions, and recommended changes to the proposed policy if it doesn't;
- Policy advice in the form of options, refinement and/or the writing or editing of the specific policy for QBs;
- Limited use of 'model' policies where appropriate to the evidence and planning context; and
- A 3-way conversation with QB and the LPA if required.

Expected Outcomes

AECOM will work with your group to improve the credibility and robustness of the evidence material and to re-draft the policy where required to meet a proportional standard acceptable at examination and in the real world.

By the end of the review you can expect:

- A report with specialist technical input clearly identifying policy options, refinement and/or specific recommended policy;
- Specific independent help and advice and professional judgement taking a proportional approach to the evidence-policy balance;
- Greater understanding of the policy context and more robust policy wording; and
- Adequate, relevant and properly referenced evidence relating to a specific policy that is robust enough to withstand challenge.

Contact Points:

The EBPD starts with a telephone or video conference meeting with the QB as to the particular challenges they are facing in terms of the policy aspirations they have set themselves and the particular policy that has been put forward for review. Face to face

support for more complex discussions needed with the QB and/or the Local Planning Authority, is also possible. The primary means of contact will be via e-mail, telephone and video calls (provided free by AECOM).

Strategic Environmental Assessment

Where the Local Planning Authority (LPA) have confirmed a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) is required for your Neighbourhood Area, this package will provide evidence to integrate environmental considerations into the plan-making process, through a formal SEA and associated environmental report (that reports the outcomes of the SEA process)

Focus of Support and Advice

A SEA is required for Neighbourhood Plans where a draft plan has been 'screened in' as potentially leading to significant environmental effects. This is usually the case where a neighbourhood plan is allocating sites that a Local Plan has not previously identified or recently assessed, and where important environmental constraints are present locally.

The SEA technical package will organise the SEA process for your Neighbourhood Plan following screening of your emerging plan (usually when your key plan objectives have been formulated) by your Local Planning Authority (LPA).

The package not only comments on but will seek to proactively inform your plan's development process and evidence base. Therefore, in addition to undertaking a robust process which meets the requirements of the relevant regulations, the SEA process will:

- Support the environmental and socio-economic evidence base for your Neighbourhood Plan;
- Enable a range of alternative (and often contentious) site development strategies and policy approaches to be effectively considered;

- Facilitate engagement with stakeholders and the public; and
- Help enable your Neighbourhood Plan to withstand scrutiny at Independent Examination.

The two main outputs of the package will be as follows:

- An SEA Scoping Report, which will present to key stakeholders (the Environment Agency, Historic England and Natural England) the evidence base for the SEA process, and explain how the assessment will be undertaken; and
- An SEA Environmental Report, which, as the key output of the SEA process, will accompany your draft plan for consultation.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect:

- A robust and accessible SEA process which meets the relevant statutory requirements;
- An SEA process which has effectively informed and influenced Neighbourhood Plan policy development;
- Support for you to have considered alternative development strategies and enabled contentious policy issues to be explored;
- A process which helps maximise, and evidences your Neighbourhood Plan's contribution to sustainable development; and
- A process which will help your Neighbourhood Plan withstand scrutiny at Independent Examination and any potential subsequent challenge.

Contact Points

Qualifying Bodies (QBs) will have up to two face-to-face contact meetings over a period of 18-56 weeks (depending on the amount of support your group qualifies for). The primary

means of contact will be via e-mail, telephone and video calls (provided free by AECOM).

Habitats (Regulations) Assessment

Habitat (Regulations) Assessment is an assessment regarding the impact of a plan on internationally important wildlife sites. This support assists the Qualifying Body (QB) to navigate a key regulatory process by providing the local planning authority with the evidence they need to draw conclusions regarding effects on internationally important wildlife sites. It will also assist the Qualifying Body with removing any clashes) with such sites (e.g. an adverse water quality effect on an international wildlife site from a proposed allocation in a draft neighbourhood plan) before they submit their plan to the Local Planning Authority (LPA).

Focus of Support and Advice

When a Neighbourhood Plan is submitted to the relevant local planning authority they will need to undertake an assessment regarding its impact on internationally important wildlife sites. This is important because the plan cannot legally be 'made' if there are adverse effects on such sites and no adequate mitigation solution. This process is known as Habitat Regulations Assessment. The formal assessment is the legal responsibility of the local planning authority (known as the competent authority) but they can request a technical report from the Qualifying Body to inform their decision. It is also advantageous for the Qualifying Body themselves to understand the potential implications of their plan.

Before initiating this package, the following questions will be asked:

- Has the local planning authority or Natural England stated that HRA is required and requested a technical report?
- Will the scale of development in the Neighbourhood Plan be greater than that allowed for in the submitted or adopted Local Plan?

- Will the Neighbourhood Plan allocate sites?

If the answer to any of the above questions is 'no', then either the QB or AECOM will have a brief initial conversation with the local planning authority will seek to confirm the need for a technical report and/or whether the plan's impacts can be adequately covered by the over-arching Local Plan HRA. If the HRA decision-making process is straightforward, the local planning authority may not require a technical report, in which case this package would not be required.

Once initiated, this package will involve:

- Liaison via phone/email with the Qualifying Body to understand their plan and any advice they have had already from Natural England or the local planning authority;
- Scrutiny and evaluation of Natural England/local planning authority requests for a technical study to inform the HRA decision-making, in order to confirm it is necessary and useful;
- Assembling the baseline with regard to those internationally important wildlife sites that may need consideration and any other plans or projects that may operate cumulatively ('in combination') with the plan;
- Undertaking the technical analysis of each policy and allocation in the Neighbourhood Plan to confirm whether effects on European sites will result and how to avoid such effects;
- Advice to the Qualifying Body regarding the steps they need to take (if any) to address any potential conflicts with internationally important wildlife sites; and
- Liaison with the local planning authority, and Natural England if required, via email/phone to confirm they concur with the report.

Note that several iterations of HRA may be required in order to identify any measures for inclusion in the plan and confirm the local

planning authority is content with the technical report. This package caps the number of iterations at three.

Occasionally, modelling or survey can be required to inform the technical report. The need for these elements will need to be discussed on a case-by-case basis and are not a standard part of the package.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect:

- A Neighbourhood Plan that avoids or mitigates conflicts with European sites;
- A positive relationship with LPA and Natural England;
- A technical report to inform Neighbourhood Plan development (particularly when allocating sites); and
- A technical report that assists the local planning authority in making their decision regarding legal compliance of the Neighbourhood Plan.

Contact Points

In general, meetings are not required to inform this package. Day to day contact will be via e-mail, telephone and video calls (provided free by AECOM).

Masterplanning

The masterplanning package provides a high level spatial plan for part of your neighbourhood area, setting out how you would like to see development or regeneration come forward.

Focus of Support and Advice

Masterplanning provides an opportunity for you to look at the bigger picture for a part of or your entire neighbourhood and proactively influence how it changes and which parts of it stay largely as they are. It allows you to map out the scale and nature of development that could occur in your area, whilst taking into consideration the needs and wishes of the community.

Masterplanning takes a bird's eye view of a neighbourhood to understand its future development, assessing how an area will

evolve based on established thematic areas and policies. Its focus can include town or village centres, parts of a neighbourhood, parks or mixed use area – or sometimes a whole settlement.

Themes that could be tackled include how best to make linkages between parts of your neighbourhood and surrounding areas, how to help local centres to flourish, how to bring life back to tired employment areas, how to strategically focus growth in the most appropriate places or how to make the most historic assets.

Outputs will be tailored to meet the specific needs of the Qualifying Body (QB), but may include:

- Neighbourhood masterplans;
- Public realm improvement schemes, where these can be influenced by neighbourhood planning;
- Community regeneration plans;
- Land use plans;
- The results of any community planning engagement exercises carried out; and
- Plans, drawings, illustrations and mapping.

All outputs will be produced with a view to then being able to be directly included in Neighbourhood Plans, as policies, supporting text or evidence base documents.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect:

- A community-led visionary masterplan, with options for to provide a starting point for a sub-neighbourhood or site(s) specific spatial objectives;
- Clearer understanding of challenges and opportunities relating to a given site, a part of your neighbourhood or series of sites depending on scenario; and
- New ideas and perspective for your group, and any development partners.

Contact Points

Depending on the amount of support your group qualifies for, you can expect one or two meetings with the technical specialists,

including an initial site visit. QBs qualifying as 'complex' will see their consultant three or four times, possibly including workshops and design exercises.

Design including Design Codes

Urban Design seeks to understand, shape, improve and plan for our places and spaces, ensuring that our neighbourhoods work well and look great. In this package, AECOM's professional urban designers will work alongside Qualifying Bodies (QBs), harnessing their ideas and local knowledge, to produce bespoke urban design guides or codes for potential development or regeneration sites.

Focus of Support and Advice

It is sadly too easy for bad development to take place. This package is designed to ensure that any development is influenced by and reflects the views of the local community – for example, that homes are designed in the local vernacular and respect existing assets, that schemes encourage walking and cycling and reduce the impact of traffic, and that open space is provided to benefit the wider neighbourhood and its biodiversity. To make sure that development in your neighbourhood is attractive, interesting and in-keeping; something local people are proud of.

This is a flexible package of support with a tailored approach to suit the particular requirements of your group, but we include a range of hands-on engagement techniques to establish a high level vision and start to detail up the designs that would be welcomed.

The focus of this package (as opposed to its sister Neighbourhood Masterplanning package, which considers the wider area) is usually a single site or set of sites.

Outputs will be tailored to meet the specific needs of the QBs, but could include:

- Site development briefs;
- Design guidance and codes;
- Site feasibility studies;
- Land use plans;
- The results of any community planning engagement exercises carried out; and
- Plans, drawings, illustrations, 3D sketches and mapping.

All outputs will be produced with a view to then being able to be directly included in

Neighbourhood Plans, as policies, supporting text or evidence base documents.

Expected Outcomes

By the end of the support you can expect:

- quality and viable design advice that can be embedded into your neighbourhood plan as expectations;
- Proposals enabling you to shape, and for potential development to be more acceptable to local stakeholders;
- Proposals that put the community at the heart of the development and regeneration process relating to specific site(s);
- Proposals allowing you to engage with the full range of stakeholders as appropriate: the wider community, landowners, developers, local planning authority, housing providers, utility companies, neighbouring communities; and,
- Proposals that facilitate and guide development that is of community benefit.

Contact Points

Depending on the amount of support your group qualifies for, you can expect one or two meetings with the technical specialists, including an initial site visit. QBs with more complex situations will see their consultant three or four times, including any workshops and design exercises.

Plan health check review prior to examination

The review (or health check) will look into whether the draft plan meets the basic conditions and provide advice on any potential amendments required to ensure the conditions are met, prior to submission of the plan to the local planning authority (LPA). This will not involve the rewriting of policies, but general advice on what changes need to be made. This process has been developed to help Neighbourhood Planning bodies approach the independent examination with

greater confidence. All the examiners used are members of the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors NPIERS panel (Neighbourhood Planning Independent Examiners Referral Service).

In order to receive this support you will need to be towards the end of the neighbourhood planning process and to have produced:

- A completed draft plan;
- A draft Basic Conditions Statement; and
- A draft Consultation Statement.



The Locality network is for community organisations that believe in the power of local communities to transform lives. We have hundreds of members across the country all supporting local people. We know the place, the people, the needs and we care. We also support groups to develop neighbourhood plans led by local people so they have a say over new affordable housing, the high street, local spaces and more. Unlock the power in your community and build a fairer society with us. For information on neighbourhood planning support please visit neighbourhoodplanning.org

Unlock the power in your community with us

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For formal Government guidance on Neighbourhood planning please visit gov.uk