

## Case study

### Successful development of the Thame neighbourhood plan



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# Synopsis

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Thame was one of the first communities to get a neighbourhood plan in place. As a front runner, the South Oxfordshire District Council and Thame Town Council have pioneered the process of developing neighbourhood plans. Their experience with the process and with working together provides invaluable advice to help other councils to work effectively on translating community aspirations into plans for the future.

This case study was prepared for PAS by Navigus Planning Ltd.

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# Thame Neighbourhood Plan

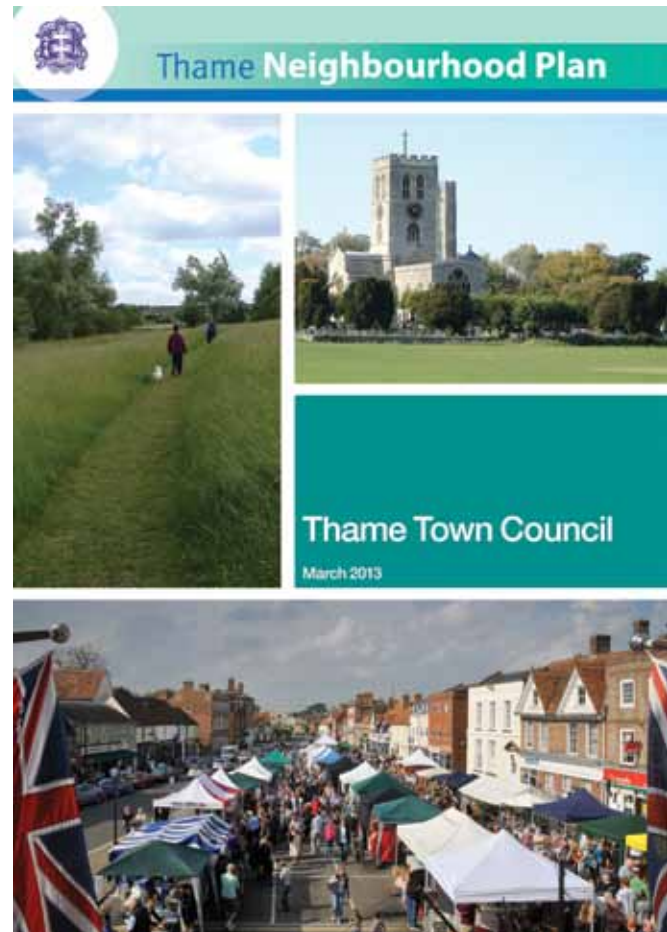
## – good practice for all

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Thame was one of the first communities to get a neighbourhood plan in place. It is an ambitious and complex plan and to many smaller communities, it may not seem immediately relevant. Yet it provides lots of good practice which can be applied across all neighbourhood plans, by officers, members and communities alike.

The Thame Neighbourhood Plan was made part of the South Oxfordshire District Council (SODC) development plan in July 2013. The process started back in the summer of 2011 so it has been a long road travelled. But now the community of Thame has a spatial strategy which reflects its view of how growth of its market town should occur. The plan provides for nearly 800 dwellings over the plan period, along with new employment land, retail, locations for community facilities, improved connections and better open spaces.

In particular, the plan provides deliverable allocations from the community's point of view, demonstrating a community-led solution to growth. So how did they get there?



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# Background to the Neighbourhood Plan

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It is acknowledged by both Thame Town Council (TTC) and SODC that the Thame Neighbourhood Plan was born out of conflict. In early 2012, TTC and SODC were both considering a positive future for Thame and its residents. What they differed on was how they would get there and what this future would look like.

The debate was ignited by the publication of the Localism Bill and the opportunity for communities to produce neighbourhood plans.

These differences came to a head at the South Oxfordshire Core Strategy examination in public (EIP) in summer 2012. SODC's emerging Core Strategy proposed an allocation of 600 homes at a single urban extension to the north west of Thame. TTC argued that it should be for a neighbourhood plan to ascertain where development should be located. The Inspector agreed, and while finding the Core Strategy sound overall, stripped out the proposed land allocation at Thame, deferring this decision instead to the Thame neighbourhood plan.

“TNP [Thame Neighbourhood Plan] offers an opportunity for a community-based approach to allocating the required CS housing provision”

**SODC Core Strategy inspector**

At this point the relationship between Town and District Council was clearly a difficult one, a fact that both parties openly acknowledge. Surprisingly this didn't result in relationships getting worse; in fact, quite the opposite. Crucially, SODC acknowledged that it had to accept the Inspector's decision and get on with it. The Neighbourhood Plan would be produced with or without it.

For the members' part, Angie Paterson, Planning Portfolio Holder at SODC, is clear that with more and more communities across the country now taking forward neighbourhood plans, local authorities should embrace the idea and work with their communities in partnership.



“Build bridges early in order to create confidence and respect”

**Beryl Guiver, SODC officer**

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This is one of the key messages that all councils can learn from Thame as a case study. Local authorities stand to gain more by working with local communities, supporting the development of neighbourhood plans, than they do by imposing planner-led solutions that may seem well justified, but don’t take on board the community’s priorities.

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# Creating a vision for Thame

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So how did Thame go about creating its Neighbourhood Plan? What is apparent is that the plan is structured around a strong vision, with objectives and policies being tied back to this vision.

The vision and core objectives were initially created following a consultation weekend in October 2011, at which the community identified their particular issues. Further public sessions checked whether the draft vision had captured the community's views correctly.

The question was asked where growth should be located? Suggested sites had been subject to an initial sieving exercise based on fundamental constraints by TTC's consultants, Tibbalds.

Now, participants advise that if a neighbourhood plan group wants to undertake this work themselves, they probably need some technical support from their district council on constraints and mapping them in order to aid analysis.

The community first had to accept that growth was necessary. So part of the community engagement process was about getting this message across. Only then was it possible for the community to devise its spatial strategy for Thame. Despite the difference between the community's strategy for accommodating growth in Thame and the District Council's original plan, the successful completion of the plan provides an important lesson that councils must firstly be able to trust their communities.

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# Themed options for delivering growth

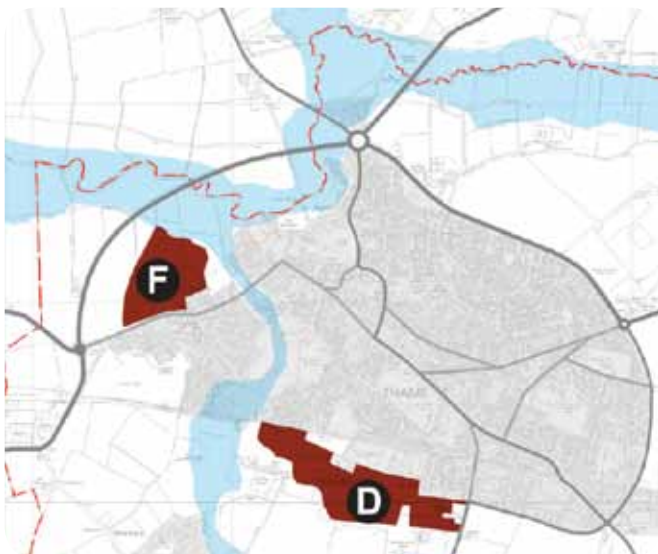
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The establishment of the vision – maintaining Thame’s character as a ‘real’ market town by keeping it compact and keeping its close relationship with the surrounding countryside whilst serving a wider hinterland – led to a series of options for determining where growth should go.

These were:

- ‘Walkable Thame’ – all development is within 20 minutes of the town centre
- ‘Public Transport Thame’ – development is more dispersed but is close to existing bus routes
- ‘Dispersed Thame’ – development is dispersed around the town.

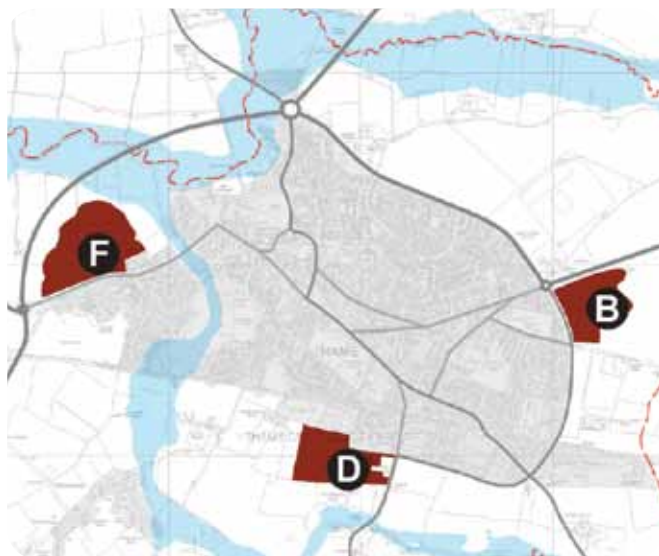




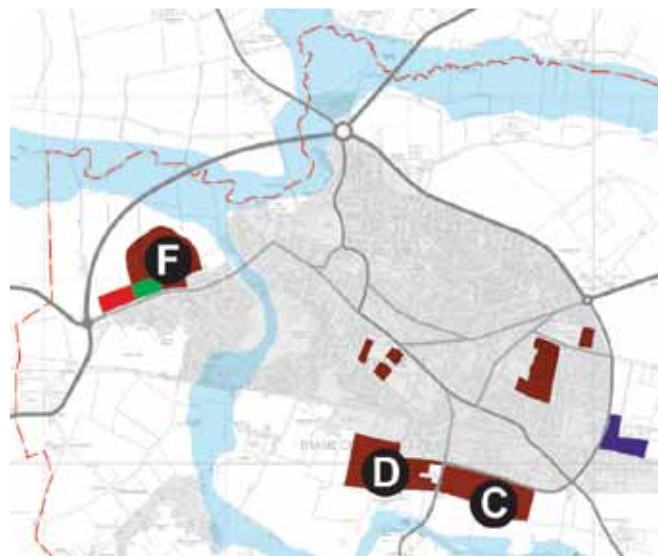
Walkable Thame



Public Transport Thame



Dispersed Thame



Contained Thame

Source: Thame Neighbourhood Plan: Consultation Statement

The fourth option – ‘Contained Thame’ where development was dispersed but located within distinct physical boundaries was developed as the preferred option. This preferred option was finally chosen following further consultation and a Sustainability Appraisal (SA) exercise.

SA is an important consideration for neighbourhood plans that are allocating sites and even if not always required, undertaking a ‘light touch’ SA helps to establish the most appropriate option. For local authorities, this is an important consideration, not least because it will help to mirror the approach that they are required to take to site selection. But it is a task that communities will likely need help with.

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# Working together – support and advice in practice

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Both parties agree that lack of guidance throughout the process caused problems. Being an early initiator in the first wave of Government Front Runners, the Neighbourhood Planning Regulations were not close to being published and so there was no guidance on many aspects of the process. In particular, it was uncertain as to what SODC's role should be. From TTC's point of view, it only saw advice coming from SODC and felt it had to do all the legwork itself. Whereas SODC took to heart the government's advice that neighbourhood plans should be community, not council, led.

Paradoxically, as the plan advanced, the lack of regulations helped to assist the relationship between the parties because the uncertainty made them work together to agree an approach. This was particularly the case when the plan moved towards examination.

From the outset, SODC is clear that it did not try to restrict the scope of the Neighbourhood Plan. It wanted the Neighbourhood Plan to cover all of the issues related to Thame rather

than picking and choosing the main areas of public interest. This suited TTC well.

“The Neighbourhood Plan was never just about the sites; the earliest consultation in October 2011 showed five themes.”

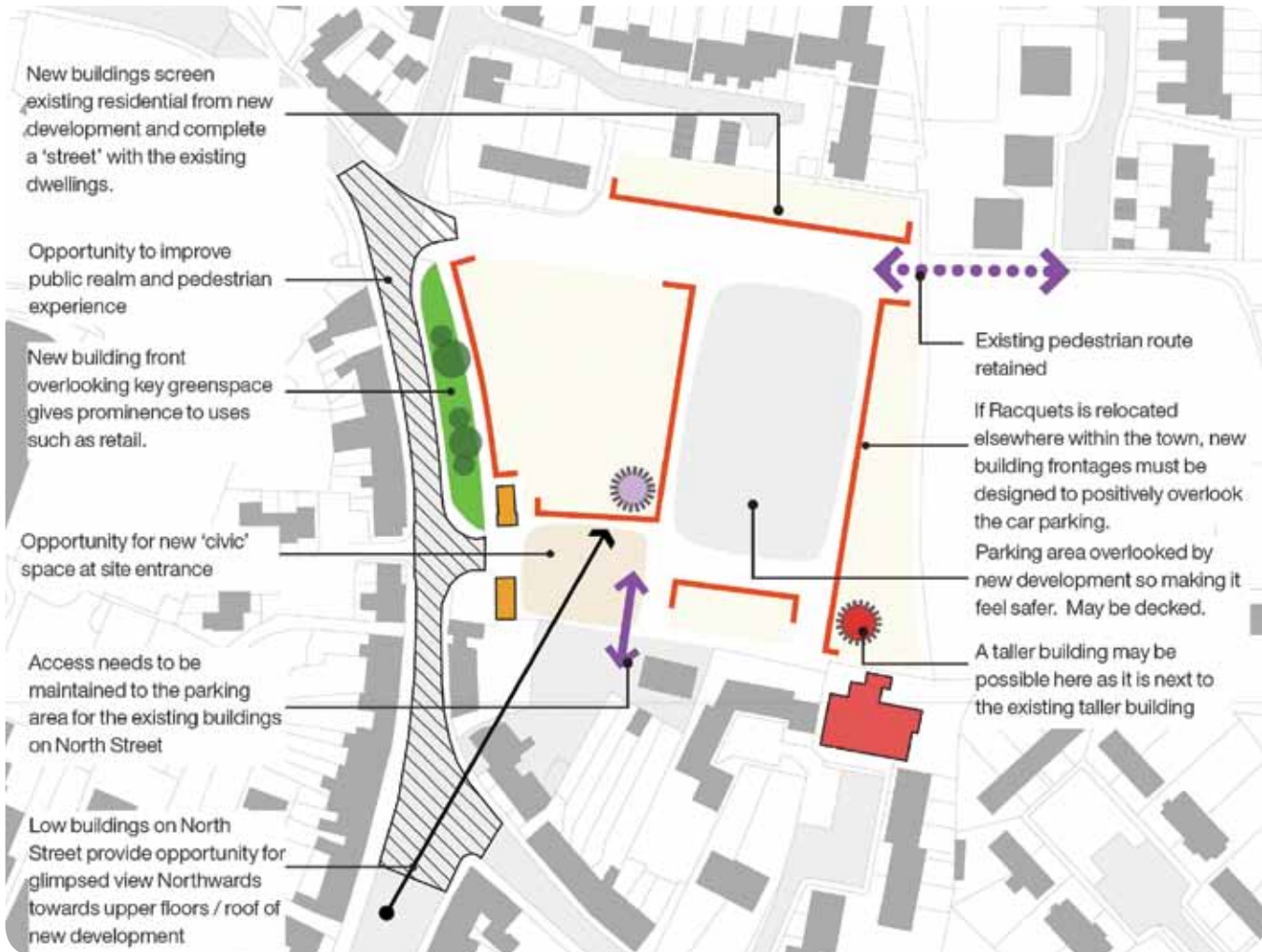
**Helen Stewart, Clerk to Thame Town Council**

The one area where there perhaps was greater tension was over town centre retailing.

SODC felt that TTC needed encouragement to address these matters; TTC felt that it was happy to do so but needed more support from SODC on the technical evidence base.

This was particularly important given that one of the key town centre sites – the Cattle Market – was at a difficult stage. There was a live planning application for a supermarket on the site which was not supported by TTC. This helped to focus minds on devising a scheme that would maximise the potential of this site for a more suitable mix of town centre uses.

# Principles for redevelopment of the Cattle Market site



Source: Thame Neighbourhood Plan

A viability assessment of potential uses on the site was required and TTC considered that SODC (as the landowner) should pay for at least some of this work. However it was TTC that ultimately paid for and undertook the work in its entirety. The cost of bringing on board technical support is an area of difficulty for ambitious neighbourhood plans that are addressing land use allocations which were previously covered by a district council.

For their part, TTC appreciated that officers had a full in-tray with the ongoing work on the Core Strategy and that cuts meant the planning department was at full stretch. Helen Stewart recognised that the support provided to Thame would set the benchmark for others.

“From the District Council’s point of view, Thame was setting the precedent so caution had to be exercised. If it provided a lot of support to us, then other neighbourhood plans would quite reasonably expect the same level of support.”

**Helen Stewart**

Again the participants have some useful advice to other local authorities in this situation. It is important to consider what technical assessment work will be required given the scope of the NP and be clear about what you can and can’t provide by way of input into this.

One helpful piece of support on retail matters provided by SODC was the drafting of a framework for the retail section of the Neighbourhood Plan. Through the Core Strategy, the District Council provided new floorspace requirements and ideas as to how they might go about delivering this quantum of space. Many communities may struggle in getting to grips with complex topics such as retail and do not have a clear idea of how to structure a neighbourhood plan, so such help will support the development of stronger, deliverable policies.

The ongoing involvement of Tibbalds meant that SODC felt the Neighbourhood Plan to be in safe hands. But it is also true to say that the consultants were finding the whole process as challenging as everyone else. In retrospect, they consider that it is most unlikely that a plan as complex as Thame’s could be done without external support to deliver it.

“We felt that there was little need for our help, particularly on community involvement where the consultants are strong. We spoke to them and were happy with their approach”

**Beryl Guiver**

The message from this experience is for local authorities to offer to play a reasonably active part in the process, even if all appears under control. It should not be forgotten that neighbourhood planning is challenging, not least because it is so new for everyone.

Despite the numerous challenges, the day-to-day relationships between officers at TTC and SODC were growing. Beryl Guiver attended Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group meetings from the start – even before the Core Strategy examination – although her inputs were largely restricted to helping to work through and clarify matters of process.

“We always sought to keep the lines of communication open which was vital”

**Beryl Guiver**



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# Drafting the Plan

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SODC increased its direct involvement at the drafting stage of the Neighbourhood Plan. Both parties agree that council officers' inputs to this stage were very helpful. The nature of the examination process – not testing for soundness – means that getting the draft right is a key factor in producing a neighbourhood plan that will provide a robust framework for determining planning applications.

In total there were six drafts of the plan and yet neither party saw this as a bad thing. For such a complex plan (“a mini Core Strategy” observed Angie Paterson) heading into new territory, it was inevitable that there would need to be a lot of careful consideration to the policies. SODC, because it was slightly distanced from it, could be objective.

The number of re-drafts also built up the trust between the parties because both had their sleeves firmly rolled up at this stage. Beryl Guiver recognised that the plan policies would have to be interpreted by her colleagues in Development Management, so the wording had to be unambiguous and able to deliver

the ambitions of the local community.

TTC saw the value in the changes being suggested and accepted that SODC was not trying to use its involvement in the drafting to influence the plan.

Help in plan writing is something that local authorities will have to provide support to their communities on and it must be recognised that this could take time.

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# Examination of the Plan

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At this stage, with a neighbourhood plan ready for consultation (at the publicity stage) and then submission, there is an interesting twist – the plan was no longer in the hands of TTC.

“Once our plan was submitted [to SODC] it was then the District Council’s plan – we had effectively lost control of it.”

**Helen Stewart**

The spotlight was on SODC to undertake its responsibilities in respect of the publicity stage, the examination and the referendum correctly. Lucy Murfett, the SODC planning policy officer who oversaw the process, says that the amount of work required should not be under-estimated.

“The process was very full-on. I had to collate representations, undertake the fact-check, organise the examination hearing, attend the hearing, look at examiners report and then consider whether the Neighbourhood Plan should move forward. This took nearly all of my time over a period of a number of weeks.”

**Lucy Murfett, SODC officer**

The examination was also a very enlightening process. Lucy Murfett explains that she was somewhat surprised by the approach of the examiner when commencing a new topic area because he always turned to SODC first to give its opinion as to whether the plan met the basic conditions. She had rather expected, as with Core Strategy examinations, for TTC to introduce the matter and defend its plan. However this was not a major issue as the

two parties had agreed to form a united front at the examination. This was because there were no matters relevant to the examination on which they disagreed.

District councils under-estimate at their peril the amount of work and responsibility required from the publicity stage onwards.

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# Member involvement

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Generally, the involvement of SODC members was very hands-off, with the obvious exception of ward members who were on the Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group.

“Why would non-ward members have been involved?”

**Angie Paterson, SODC Planning Portfolio Holder**

The issue for other members of the District Council was that they didn't appreciate the extent of the power that had been given to communities. On planning matters, members have always given input across the district. Although it was well known among members that Thame was developing a Neighbourhood Plan it was not until it came to Cabinet and Council that the extent of this power devolved to the community was fully apparent to many members.

On bringing the Plan to Council for adoption as part of the suite of planning policy documents, some members wanted to question the content. Angie Paterson said that their vote had to be explained at the public meeting at which the plan was to be adopted. She believes that it was only then that some members realised this power of localism. “You could have heard a pin drop at the time” she recalls.

With hindsight, it's agreed that keeping members in the loop is important. Chances are that it is not on their radar if one is not being produced in their area, so giving them an understanding of the process will help if and when their communities are interested.

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# Community-led planning in South Oxfordshire today

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Today SODC is taking an extremely proactive approach to neighbourhood planning. The Council was delighted to be invited to be part of the team that received the prestigious Royal Town Planning Institute's Award for Planning Excellence 2013 in the innovation in plan-making category for the Thame Neighbourhood Plan.

It has a number of communities taking plans forward and it is providing support to them. Equally however, it is changing the way it involves communities in its own plan making processes. Particularly for those communities not wishing to undertake a neighbourhood plan, it has set up a more community-led process for determining important matters such as site allocations so that communities are able to shape the future of their places.

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# Top tips

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This reflects SODC's positive learning experience and willingness to trust TTC and those involved in its neighbourhood plan to bring forward a plan that would benefit a growing and thriving market town.

## Preparing for neighbourhood planning

- 1 Set aside past differences as these will not help anyone. Communities will be more prepared to enter into a positive dialogue with their local authority if they are on an equal footing, i.e. their neighbourhood plan is not seen as 'inferior' to the Local Plan.

This will ensure a better working relationship and that neighbourhood plans get off on the right foot.

- 2 Trust communities and seek to build bridges early.

This way Neighbourhood Plans can fulfil their potential and that LPA officers have

a clear framework for determining planning applications.

## Guiding the process

- 3 Always stay involved in the process, even if everything appears under control.

This helps to ensure the plan does not go off course or stray into areas it should not.

- 4 Keep members informed and get them to understand the power that has been granted to communities.

This avoids awkward situations later on and helps to ensure good advice is provided when communities, potentially interested in neighbourhood plan, approach their councillors.



## Resourcing and areas of technical support

This ensures that a plan can get through the statutory process without delay and incur further officer time.

- 5 Try to establish the resourcing needs of a neighbourhood plan at the earliest stage and be clear on what support you can and can't provide.

There is less likelihood of awkward disagreements later on and the neighbourhood plan group can cut its cloth accordingly.

- 6 On certain technically complex topics, e.g. retail, suggest a framework for that chapter of the neighbourhood plan in order to focus community efforts in the right areas.

This ensures a coherent plan is produced that can address complex matters.

- 7 The main involvement of local authority officers is in plan drafting.

This ensures that the plan will provide a clear framework for planning officers to determine applications and also builds trust.

- 8 Allow plenty of officer time at the submission and referendum stage for preparation and undertaking the local authority's statutory duties.



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