

How to structure your neighbourhood plan

Putting the pieces together



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1. Introduction

This resource will focus on how to structure your neighbourhood plan. It will explain:

- why the structure of your neighbourhood plan is important
- what should (and should not) be included in your neighbourhood plan
- how to structure your neighbourhood plan

If you are new to neighbourhood planning you are encouraged to read the [Locality Roadmap](#) which explains the process of preparing a neighbourhood plan. It will provide useful context to this resource which focuses on the 'how'.

2. Why is the structure of your neighbourhood plan important?

A clearly structured neighbourhood plan will make the plan easier for all to read, follow and understand. The neighbourhood plan also serves a number of purposes:

- you may wish to tell the story of how your plan was developed; what is important and locally distinctive about your neighbourhood area; and what its future may hold
- at the end of the process the wider community will vote in a referendum on whether the plan should be 'made' (brought into force). To encourage people to vote they will need to feel involved and understand what the neighbourhood plan is about
- a neighbourhood plan is a land-use planning document. The planning policies need to be easily identifiable. Once '[made](#)' (brought into legal force) your neighbourhood plan will form part of the statutory development plan; this is the starting point for assessing planning applications (unless [material considerations](#) indicate otherwise)

3. What should you include in your neighbourhood plan?

A neighbourhood plan must address the development and use of land. This is because if successful at examination and referendum the neighbourhood plan will become part of the statutory development plan once it has been 'made' (brought into legal force) by the planning authority. Applications for planning permission must be determined in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

The independent examiner will test your plan to ensure that the policies relate to the development and use of land. It is important that the land-use policies are clearly identified.



Some neighbourhood plans have also included community projects that cannot be delivered through the planning system and therefore cannot be included as policies in a development plan. If you want to do this the non-planning content must be separate from the main plan, for example, in another section or in an appendix.

While there is not a set list of what you should (or should not) include in your neighbourhood plan, our experience suggests that the following chapters work well for groups:

- introduction
- the neighbourhood area
- key issues
- vision and objectives
- planning policies – often by topic and including relevant maps
- appendices

We have produced a [template structure](#) which provides a further steer on how you may wish to structure your plan and the information that may be relevant to include in each chapter.

4. How to structure your plan

Here is some advice on how to structure your plan:

- **Clearly identify the plan period on the front cover** as this is one of the legal requirements. The plan period is the time-frame over which your plan policies will have affect. There is no statutory time-period that a plan must cover. It is common for plans for to look at least 15 years ahead; many groups decide to align their neighbourhood plan period with that of the Local Plan.
- **Ensure your plan is written for the appropriate stage in the neighbourhood plan process.** If the document is the pre-submission consultation and publicity version then you need to tell people that comments are invited, how to make comments and when the deadline is. If, however, you have reached the submission version of your plan then remove references to the 'upcoming examination,' 'draft plan' etc. The document submitted to your local planning authority should be the final version. Further modifications will only be made to ensure compliance with the basic conditions and other legal tests or to correct errors once the plan has been examined.
- There should be **clear links** between the issues identified by your community, the vision, objectives and the policies in the plan. The vision and objectives provide the framework to develop policies and proposals and each policy should relate to a particular objective and objectives.

The objectives should be broad statements of intent and should link back to the issues you are seeking to address. For further information see [How to develop a vision and](#)

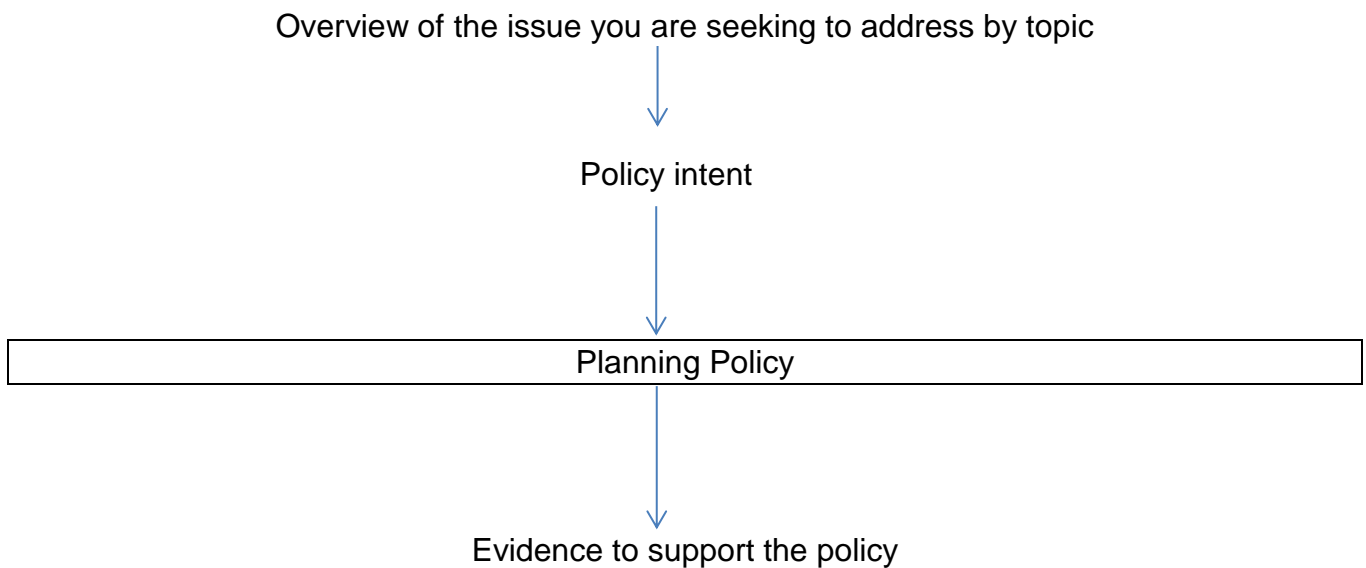


objectives.

- **Planning Policies** are the most important part of your neighbourhood plan. Independent examiners' reports have provided clear guidance on how planning policies should be structured to be effective. For example, the Tatenhill Neighbourhood Plan was commended by the examiner for clearly "*distinguishing between policies and supporting text. Policies are set out in boxes, which themselves are colour-coded, depending upon the category the policies fall into (e.g. housing and employment, landscape and countryside). This provides for a very clear and easy to navigate document*". Key points include:
 - The planning policies **must relate to the development and use of land**. If you wish to include proposals or aspirations which do not relate to land use these should be clearly separated in a section of the plan or in an appendix.
 - **Group the policies into topics** such as housing, employment, open space, heritage.
 - The **policies should be clearly numbered** and referenced. For example, you may wish to prefix the housing policies with H, E for employment and OS for open space. Sequential numbering will assist the reader and make it easier for you to cross-reference between the policies. For example, to link a housing policy to a specific site allocation.
 - The **policies should be clearly identified** and separate to the supporting text within the document. Many neighbourhood plans place the policies in a coloured text box and some have used a different coloured box for each topic.



- Each policy section needs to be **clearly structured**. Some neighbourhood plans adopt the following approach:



It is important to remember that only the planning policies will form part of the statutory development plan against which planning applications will be assessed.

Many groups find it useful to summarise the intention of a policy in non-technical language. This can assist readers to understand what the policy is striving to achieve and provide a steer to the decision maker on how you intend the policy to be interpreted if there is any doubt.

You also need to ensure that you provide evidence to support every policy in your plan. It is essential that each policy is founded on robust evidence. The evidence can be drawn upon to explain succinctly the intention and rationale of the policies in the neighbourhood plan. The [How to gather and use evidence](#) resource explains in further detail what evidence is, sources of evidence and the importance of evidence in policy development.

- You need to ensure that the planning policy itself is **written clearly and concisely and provides a practical framework within which decisions on planning applications can be made** with a high degree of predictability and efficiency; this is what the examiner will be looking for. Some neighbourhood planning groups have inadvertently included supporting evidence or other text as part of their policy or vice versa.
- Review your policies** to make sure they contain everything they need and nothing more!
- Include photographs, maps and diagrams** as the plan needs to be understandable and visually interesting so that your community and others will read it, understand it and where eligible, will vote on it at the referendum.



Using photographs, maps and diagrams will help to break up the text and allow you to attract the widest possible interest. Remember that if you do include these in the plan they need to be clearly labelled and referenced within the text.

The structure of [Thame Neighbourhood Plan](#) was praised by the Examiner “...*the layout of the Plan is logical and user-friendly. Its overall design, content and inclusion of plans and photographs, creates a Plan which is interesting and easy to read.*”

- **Keep the plan succinct** as a lengthy plan may put people off reading the document and it may lose focus. While the plan should tell a story there is no need to include lengthy descriptions. Background information that sets the context for the plan should be summarised and if necessary more detailed information can be included in an appendix.
- **There is no need to repeat national policy or policies in the Local Plan** as these will be taken into consideration regardless of whether or not they are included in your neighbourhood plan. Once ‘made’ the neighbourhood plan will form part of the statutory development plan which also includes the Local Plan. Your neighbourhood plan should add value to the existing policy framework and should include policies that are distinctive to your local area.
- **Use maps.** You should include a map that shows the extent of the designated neighbourhood area to which the plan will apply.

You should also show on a map (or a series of maps) where all the policies and proposals in your neighbourhood plan apply. For example, the specific parcels of land that you are allocating for housing or designating as [Local Green Space](#). The [independent examiner](#) of the [Much Wenlock Neighbourhood Plan](#) recommended a number of modifications to the plan to ensure that the geographical extent of the area that the policies applied to was clear and annotated on a proposals map (for example the core retail area).

This will make it easier for members of the community to understand what you are proposing and for others to understand where particular policies apply or combine and how their interests may be affected.

When producing maps you need to ensure that they are legible and accurately reflect the boundaries of any land that policies will apply to. The [examiner](#) of [Rolleston Neighbourhood Plan](#) noted that the “...*map is unhelpful in that it includes a wavy boundary extending significantly into adjacent and nearby land*”.

Some groups have used a map to illustrate their [vision](#), an approach commended by the examiners of the [Broughton Astley](#) and [Ascot, Sunninghill and Sunningdale](#) neighbourhood plans.

Here are some tips on including maps in your neighbourhood plan:

- speak to your local planning authority. It will probably be able to provide your group with maps you can annotate (for example to show sites allocated for



housing) or information you may wish to include on your map, for example, existing settlement boundaries or conservation areas.

- use an [Ordnance Survey](#) base map of an appropriate scale. Readers need to be able to clearly see the streets/areas that will be affected by the policies in your plan
 - include a north arrow
 - include a scale bar
 - include a title
 - include a key to any annotations
 - use distinctive colours or hatching to make sure that each element is clear (these might also be the colours used in the text)
 - if you are identifying parcels of land for a particular use then insert the policy reference from your plan.
- **Manageable file size:** You need to ensure that people can open electronic copies of your plan and that it can be circulated via email. It is recommended that the file size does not exceed 5-6MB. If you are including photographs, images, plans and illustrations you will probably need to compress these to reduce their size for website/email use.
 - **Use appendices sparingly:** You may wish to include additional information within appendices. Before doing so you should consider if a hyperlink could be used as this is a good way to direct people to further background information.

If you use appendices then make sure you cross-reference the reader to the relevant appendix within the text.

You may wish to consider including the following within an appendix:

- further detailed information that has been summarised in the main text, for example, the characteristics of the area and emerging issues
- the full references for material used as evidence (this can save repetition and overuse of footnotes in the text)
- glossary explaining acronyms and technical terms included in the plan (if not included at the front of the plan)
- the methodology used e.g. how sites were assessed as suitable for residential development
- technical background information e.g. landscape or historic character assessments or a hyperlink to these documents
- non-land use policies such as community projects or proposals. Some neighbourhood planning groups include non-land use policies within a separate document, for example, Inner East Preston are to produce a 'Big Local Plan' specifically focussed on regeneration issues in the area to supplement their [neighbourhood plan](#) which has been made.



5. Conclusion

A well structured and laid out neighbourhood plan is key to giving direction to applicants and decision makers about the opportunities for development and clear policies on what will or will not be permitted and where. It will also help to explain the neighbourhood plan to the wider community who will be voting on the plan at a referendum. The community needs to be able to navigate the document to identify each of the land use planning policies and where they will have effect. The community also needs to understand the rationale behind each of the policies.

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