



SHAPING THE FUTURE OF THE GOVERNMENT'S NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING SUPPORT PROGRAMME

Views from Neighbourhood Planners.London July 2017

"the Government will make further funding available to neighbourhood planning groups from 2018-2020, so they can access the additional support they might need"

Housing White Paper 2016

1. The Government has committed to extending its Neighbourhood Planning Support Programme for at least two more years. The current programme – worth around £21.5m over three years - provides a mix of grants and technical support. It has been essential to the growth of neighbourhood planning while also attracting critical comment.
2. The future of the support programme has been identified by Neighbourhood Planners.London as the most important influence on the future success of neighbourhood planning in the capital. This submission draws on the views of those most active in neighbourhood planning in London and has been informed by:
 - The first Neighbourhood Planners.London conference held in April 2017 and attracting over 140 delegates
 - A wide ranging survey of 70 neighbourhood planners in London, including responses to a question on the future of the support programme
 - A June 2017 workshop for London's neighbourhood planners on the future of the support programme
 - Responses to a draft of this submission circulated to the Neighbourhood Planners.London community

3. Both events were attended by DCLG officials. We understand that 50 neighbourhood planning forums in London have benefitted from £0.5m support and 50 technical support packages since 2011.

4. We believe the Government support programme is essential to effective neighbourhood planning. There is strong support for grant funding which allows neighbourhood forums to decide how best to use resources. The technical support is appreciated but raises more issues about its flexibility, the range of packages available, the choice of provider and the varied quality of outputs. The packages are not well understood and it is unclear how many can be accessed. There are strong views about the need to improve the quality of customer support and simplify processes for both grant and technical support.

5. We have categorised our proposals for strengthening support into three areas – process, scope and priority - and also offer comment on the interest in the use of toolkits and model policies to support neighbourhood planning.

6. We believe the Government funds invested in neighbourhood planning support provide excellent value for money. There is a clear view that the task of producing a neighbourhood plan is bigger than the funds available and future support needs to be provided at the same level as a minimum. The challenges are greater for neighbourhood forums than parish and town councils – as evidenced by the differential take up of neighbourhood planning – and London groups face added complexities. We seek an overall national shift in support towards neighbourhood forums and the mix of support identified below. Some forums would also like to see greater flexibility in the amount of funding available so more can be provided to the larger and/or most complex areas.

Process

6. Overhaul and simplify the form filling - the application form and process for grant and technical support is not fit for purpose and should be overhauled – it is clunky, long winded and asks unnecessary and off-putting questions to groups starting their neighbourhood planning journey. We can provide a more detailed critique if helpful. It is clearly a form that has been added to over time and is written more for the assessor than the applicant. We commend a review harnessing best practice in user-led service design as recently undertaken by the Big Lottery Fund's Awards for All programme which offers a similar level of grant. This should also apply to the development of a transformed online presence for the support programme.

7. Time limits and financial years – the current programme is in effect three single year programmes rather than a three year programme of support. The financial year end provides an unhelpful barrier to sensible funding and support decisions. The future programme should be able to span financial years and offer greater flexibility for managing

the time within which grant needs to be used and the budget headings within which it is provided. We support the use of time limited grants to help maintain momentum in the neighbourhood planning process

8. Technical support – there is a need for neighbourhood forums to be able to access technical support from more than one supplier without expending grant. Many forums would like to access technical support more locally

Scope

9. Extend funding to cover administration – a strong recurring theme from neighbourhood forums is the challenge of administrative support. Forums – unlike parish councils – are almost entirely volunteer run and the ineligibility of administrative support for grant funding is a major barrier to progress

10. Digital tools – there is growing use of a variety of digital tools to support neighbourhood planning. These generally support community engagement and/or development of the evidence base. The future support programme should provide neighbourhood forums with ready access to off-the-shelf support from key digital providers by entering into a number of national arrangements for this provision. One example is the potential of the LGA's Natural Neighbourhoods to be developed into a much more effective and widely used source of information. There are also a number of increasingly popular community engagement tools which could be made easier to access

11. Mapping – a key challenge facing neighbourhood forums is the production and use of maps. The support programme should help address this by providing access to appropriate mapping services and addressing the issue of Ordnance Survey licences at a national level

12. Engagement – all neighbourhood forums are involved in community engagement and the future support programme should help avoid wasted time reinventing the wheel by offering advice on basic survey design and techniques

13. Building the movement – the lack of support for networking, peer-to-peer and face-to-face in the current programme is a substantial step back from what has been available in previous years (including the much appreciated Planning Camps). Significantly more provision should be made to provide flexible support that brings neighbourhood planners together, encourages networks and builds the neighbourhood planning movement as a specific strand of support that can be accessed

14. High quality & accessible advice – the range of written advice and materials has mushroomed in recent years. While much is useful, there is a lot that is of mediocre quality and unnecessarily complex. Despite recent efforts, there remains considerable difficulty in navigating what's available. We are also concerned by the risk of losing sight of the

essential simplicity of the neighbourhood planning process. The variety of advice is described as a “snowstorm” or a challenge of “separating the wood from the trees”. We support efforts to reduce the amount of advice and improve its quality, including through peer review ahead of publication of new advice. As part of a wider reform of access to support there is an urgent need to improve the quality of online access and transform the programme’s web presence. Some forums would also welcome development of strategic relationships with universities to provide support and training, including the potential of a relevant NVQ. We also believe there is more scope to support advice provided by volunteers.

15. Responsive advice - There is a need to provide more advice on-demand to address hot topics and plug gaps ranging from issues like websites, graphic design, digital skills and social media through to viability, policy writing, local green space and the long term role for neighbourhood forums beyond plan preparation. There is a call for agile “barefoot planners” able to respond to issues as they arise.

16. Defining a neighbourhood area – neighbourhood forums face a more significant challenge than most parish or town councils in defining the neighbourhood area. This has proved to be especially challenging in some parts of London, particularly where there is a lack of local authority support. Yet, the relevant AECOM package is not able to provide a methodology for engaging with a local community to define the most appropriate boundaries. This should be available in the future support programme

17. Consultants fees – As well as providing for a greater diversity of sources of technical support we believe there is merit in a single daily rate being used for all those contracted to support Qualifying Bodies through the programme

18. Specialist support – We have identified two areas in need of more specialist support – development economics and legal advice. Understanding the complexity and economics of the development process is a significant barrier to effective neighbourhood planning and limited advice and support is available. There is also a widespread demand for legal advice and a mechanism whereby a group wanting an answer to a question of wide interest could access some advice. This might provide opinions in relation to, for example, dealing with a local authority asserting that all its policies are 'strategic' or acting unreasonably on a designation or stage that is 'stuck'. The support programme would be greatly enhanced by having access via a pro bono or low cost service from one or more of the major planning chambers or other sources of advice

19. Made plans – there will be a significant increase in the number of made plans during the next period of Government support. The future programme needs to provide support on issues such as monitoring, evaluating policy delivery and plan review

Priority

20. Equality for Forums – we ask that a guiding principle of the support programme should be to deliver equality for neighbourhood forums. This reflects the added complexity of establishing and running a neighbourhood forum compared to a parish or town council and the reality of the more complex urban environments with much greater disparities in land prices and levels of deprivation and environmental quality. Neighbourhood planning is a community right and the support programme should ensure it is universally available

21. Early support – a significant weakness of the current programme is the more limited support available to individuals and organisations at the very beginning of their neighbourhood planning journey. Earlier iterations of Government support provided more of this, including through the original Milestone 1 programme. One conundrum which needs addressing is to provide support for completing the grant application which then releases the (retrospective) funding for the support that has been provided

22. Marketing neighbourhood planning - more emphasis should be placed on communications and marketing to attract people into neighbourhood planning which is not yet reaching key audiences and local organisations who are not focused on land use and development. We would also wish to see better marketing of the “Health Check” facility to encourage greater take up by groups.

Toolkits and model policies

23. We are aware of the interest in the role of toolkits and model policies in accelerating the spread of neighbourhood planning. We share the need to avoid re-inventing wheels and benefitting from the work that has already been undertaken across the country. Nevertheless, we urge great caution in providing ideal typical planning policies and one size fits all toolkits as the way forward. Cookie-cutter neighbourhood planning is anathema to the principles of localism. While processes may be shared, the circumstances of every neighbourhood area are different. This extends to the culture and dynamics of different neighbourhood forums and the variety of learning styles and personalities involved.

24. We urge an approach which provides:

- Greater access to a searchable directory of existing neighbourhood plan policies and Examiners reports
- Greater emphasis on networking and strengthening the neighbourhood planning movement - offline as well as online
- Shared resources on common issues – such as survey methods and mapping
- Agile “barefoot planners” available to offer responsive advice and support, including at the earliest stages of neighbourhood planning

25. Looking ahead we ask that a full evaluation of the effectiveness of the support programme and how it might best be strengthened is undertaken during 2017 ahead of final decisions being made. This should include input from Qualifying Bodies and the variety of organisations and consultants which they have used to support them in neighbourhood planning for their area. We should be happy to help with this undertaking.

Neighbourhood Planners.London

Neighbourhood Planners.London exists to support neighbourhood planners in London and raise the profile of neighbourhood planning in the capital. We're a voluntary initiative in response to direct experience of the first wave of neighbourhood planning in London.



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