

How to designate a neighbourhood area

Putting the pieces together



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1 Introduction

This resource will focus on assisting groups in designating their neighbourhood area. It will explain:

- what a neighbourhood area is
- how to decide the extent of your neighbourhood area
- how to apply for a neighbourhood area to be designated
- how your application will be determined by your local planning authority
- what your local planning authority will do when it has made its decision

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

2 What is a neighbourhood area?

Your neighbourhood area is where the policies of your neighbourhood plan will have influence. Any planning application submitted within the neighbourhood area will be assessed against the relevant policies contained within your neighbourhood plan (as well as any other relevant policies that may already be in place; such as within the [Local Plan](#)). Your neighbourhood area also determines who will get to vote in the referendum (the [default](#) position is all those who live in the neighbourhood area and qualify to vote in local council elections).

It should be noted that in areas that cover all or part of the administrative area of a parish / town council it is only the parish / town council that can progress a neighbourhood plan and therefore apply for a neighbourhood area to be designated. Elsewhere a prospective [neighbourhood forum](#) will need to be set up. Advice on this can be found in our [neighbourhood forum resource](#).

3 How do you decide the extent of your neighbourhood area?

Before applying to the local planning authority for a neighbourhood area to be designated the first job is to decide the extent of the proposed neighbourhood area. There are some key things you should be doing to help you to decide this including:

3.1 Keep an open mind

Probably the most important thing to say at this point is to start the exercise with an open mind. There are no set rules in terms of how big or small a neighbourhood area can be and they can cross multiple administrative boundaries ([local planning authorities and parishes](#)). It is understandable that you may already have an idea in your head of the extent of the proposed



area, but this should not be set in stone. You should be open to extending, reducing, omitting or amending the area as you talk to other people and work through the process.

For example when Bishop Stortford Town Council commenced their neighbourhood plan they initially were looking to designate the whole of the Parish as a neighbourhood area. Later they decided to focus on the wards of [Silverleys and Meads](#) as these were a priority for them, as they faced the most development pressure. This resulted in a neighbourhood area that did not cover the whole of the parish.

3.2 Identify the heart of the area

Many groups have found a good starting point is to identify the focal point of their neighbourhood. This will vary in any given area could be a high street, an employment hub, a transport hub, a park or even a housing estate. 'What do you consider to be the heart of the neighbourhood?' is a question you can ask of those you talk to when deciding upon your neighbourhood area. Identifying local services may also assist in understanding where the boundaries of your neighbourhood may be.

3.3 Organise a walkabout

A walkabout will allow you to work out what should and should not be included and can be much more helpful and productive than simply looking at a map. Take pictures, make notes and try to identify what should be included and why as well as what should not. The walkabout will also allow you to identify any features that could form logical boundaries to your neighbourhood area such as rivers, main roads or railway lines.

3.4 Publicise your intentions

Before deciding on the extent of your neighbourhood area you should [publicise your intentions](#) to start work on a neighbourhood plan. By doing this you will allow interested parties to come forward who will have a view on what they consider should (or should not) be included within the neighbourhood area. This will also help to raise interest in the plan and get more people involved to ease the burden on you later on.

Some groups have set up [events](#) to explain to the local community what a neighbourhood plan is and why they are starting to develop one with the view to getting people to comment on the extent of the proposed area. Other groups have; set up stalls at local events such as village fetes to gather views; put up posters; delivered leaflets through doors; or engaged with the local press to get the message out. Consider setting up a website or a [social media](#) account to ensure the message reaches as many people as possible.

3.5 Talk to people

Think about the different types of people and organisations in your community that may wish to be involved in the conversation. You may wish to talk to the following:

- **Local politicians:** Local ward councillors and MPs are elected representatives of your community - seek their advice and support. They will be able to give you an insight into



what they consider the neighbourhood area to be and may also be able to assist you in promoting the plan. They could make introductions to some of the other groups/individuals you may want to talk to or suggest some you have not thought of.

- **Businesses:** Business is essential to a healthy economy whether it be traditional shops on the high street, a small office start up or a multinational corporation. Start a [dialogue](#) with them and gather their views on the extent of your proposed neighbourhood area.
- **Parish/Town Councils:** If any part of your neighbourhood area falls within the administrative boundary of a parish and/or town council then that is the only body that can apply for it to be designated and lead on the plan. If you are a parish/town council you may wish to investigate the potential for undertaking a [multi parish](#) neighbourhood plan. If so you should discuss this with your neighbouring parishes as early as possible.
- **Tenants and Residents Associations:** Given that these organisations act on behalf of residents they can be an excellent way of gaining access to a significant number of people who live in your area.
- **Education providers:** Talk to schools, colleges and universities within your neighbourhood to seek their views. They also have a captive audience of young people with whom many groups find it [difficult to engage](#). Although school children will not be able to vote in the referendum, your plan will cover a significant period of time and will have a demonstrable impact upon them. This can also be an effective way to engage with parents who may be hard to reach otherwise due to time commitments.
- **Other community groups:** There may be many community organisations within your neighbourhood whose views could be important whether it be the local conservation society or the community cricket team.
- **Other neighbourhood planning groups:** With over 1,200 neighbourhood areas already designated across England you are not the first to prepare a neighbourhood plan. Draw upon the experiences of others, learn from their mistakes and benefit from their good practice. Your local planning authority will have the contact details for groups that have already had their neighbourhood areas designated within their administrative boundary.

The above list is by no means exhaustive. The key point is that there are many different individuals, groups and organisations that are part of your neighbourhood who can offer you their opinion on what should or should not be included within your prospective neighbourhood area.

3.6 Keep a record

Recording all of the feedback you gather is a helpful way to reflect on what you have been told. It will also help you to demonstrate how you finalised the extent of your neighbourhood area and how the wider community was involved in that decision. Neighbourhood planning should be a collaborative process and having discussions with a wide range of people right at the start of the process will prepare all participants well for producing the plan.

3.7 Speak to your local planning authority

Having an [early conversation](#) with your local planning authority (see [How to engage and work constructively with your LPA](#)) will enable you to work through any potential sticking points prior



to a formal submission and could save you time. It can also [provide](#) you with valuable information to assist you in your thinking. Some areas for discussion could be:

- **Existing neighbourhood areas:** Neighbourhood areas cannot overlap and the existence of previously designated areas may have an influence on deciding the boundaries of your own neighbourhood area. There is nothing to prevent you from including land from an already designated neighbourhood area within your application but your local planning authority will then have to decide which of the two neighbourhood areas to include it within when determining your application (it can't be in both). If this relates to a parish council then the local planning authority can only change the area of land covered by an existing designation with their express agreement.
- **Prospective neighbourhood areas:** The local planning authority may be aware of other groups that have shown an interest in neighbourhood planning. They may be interested in the same area as you, part of it or an adjacent neighbourhood area. If this is the case you should get in touch with that group to discuss either 'joining forces' or agreeing on your boundaries together to avoid conflict at the application stage.
- **Strategic sites:** These are the key sites that have been allocated or are to be allocated by the local planning authority within their Local Plan. A neighbourhood area [can include such land](#) although there are [examples](#) where local planning authorities have omitted them from proposed neighbourhood areas when making their decision. Ask your local planning authority if there are any strategic sites within your neighbourhood and discuss any potential issues around their inclusion.
- **Local planning authority 'designations':** Your local planning authority, as part of its plan making responsibilities, will have defined some areas of interest and these could be relevant to your thinking. These will be based on coherent boundaries around areas with similar characteristics (for example physical features, architecture or land use) and could include conservation areas, settlement boundaries and district centres. These are all designations that could help you in deciding the extent of your own neighbourhood area.

3.8 Look at administrative boundaries

A parish or electoral ward boundary could be a good starting point but you should not assume that it is a fair reflection of your neighbourhood. For example a parish council may wish to focus solely on the urban part of their parish and omit the surrounding rural area (or vice versa).

It is important to bear in mind that not everyone will agree on the ideal boundary and there will be conflicting opinions on what should and should not be included. It is up to you and your group to weigh up views and settle on a logical and considered boundary that can be justified.

4 How do you apply for a neighbourhood area to be designated?

Once you have decided on the extent of your neighbourhood area you need to apply to your local planning authority for it to be formally designated. If you are seeking the designation of a



neighbourhood area that is not all or part of the administrative area of a parish or town council this section should be read in conjunction with our advice note on [neighbourhood forums](#).

4.1 Speak to your local planning authority

Give your local planning authority advance notice of your intention to submit an application and if possible agree the submission to ensure that what you are providing is what it is expecting to see. Your authority will also be able to advise on how it would like the application to be submitted.

4.2 Make an application

If your area covers the administrative boundary of more than one local planning authority an application will need to be submitted to each one. Although the preferred method of submission may vary between local planning authorities, every neighbourhood area application must include the following:

- **A map that identifies the area to which the area application relates**

You will have to provide a copy of a map that clearly shows the boundary of your proposed neighbourhood area. Your local planning authority may be able to provide you with a base map or you can purchase one from [Ordnance Survey](#) at a cost. Bear in mind that Ordnance Survey maps are subject to copyright which prohibits the use of photocopies.

- **A statement explaining why the area is considered appropriate to be designated as a neighbourhood area**

This is your opportunity to explain who you involved, how you decided on the extent of your neighbourhood area and how this may have evolved over time.

Including an explanation of why certain parts of an area were omitted can be as important as explaining why other areas were included. If your area covers a parish council the local planning authority is legally obliged to consider designating the entirety of the parish. Therefore if your area only covers part of your parish you must ensure that you explain why this is the case.

- **A statement setting out how the organisation or body making the area application is a 'relevant body'**

In an area covered by a parish or town council this is straightforward as it is only the parish/town council that can submit an application for such an area. If the application covers multiple parishes then one parish will have to lead and submit the application to the local planning authority. It is good practice to gain the consent of all the parishes that lie within the neighbourhood area when applying for area designation. This is because their consent is needed in order to undertake neighbourhood planning activities, for example the pre-submission publicity and consultation. You may wish to gain consent at area application stage by including a signed consent form with your application.



For a prospective neighbourhood forum you will need to put together a statement that can evidence that you are capable of meeting the [legal requirements](#) of a neighbourhood forum (see our [neighbourhood forum resource](#)).

5 How will the local planning authority consider and determine your application?

Once the application has been submitted the local planning authority will publicise your application and invite comments.

If you are a parish council and you are applying for the whole of the area of the parish council to be designated comments will be invited over a minimum four week period. In all other cases, comments will be invited over a minimum six week period.

At the end of the publicity period the local planning authority will consider and determine your application.

5.1 What will they consider?

Essentially the local planning authority will be considering if the area as submitted is appropriate. The statement you will submit with your application (see above) is your opportunity to justify this. Local planning authorities have a wide discretion in the issues they can consider, however, their decision must be based on the appropriateness of the area not what the plan may seek to deliver. They should avoid pre-judging what may or may not be included within your neighbourhood plan when making their decision

The local planning authority is also required to consider whether the area applied for should be designated as a '[business area](#)'. A business area is one that is wholly or predominately business in nature. There is no threshold test and each case will be viewed on its merits. While it is ultimately the local planning authority's decision whether or not to designate a 'business area' you can seek to influence this at the application stage by requesting they do and providing a justification for this.

In business neighbourhood areas there will be two referendums as a second referendum for non domestic rate payers will be held in addition to the referendum for residents at the end of the plan making process. The British Property Foundation has a dedicated [website](#) on business neighbourhood areas and to help businesses understand and engage in neighbourhood planning.

5.2 Who in the local planning authority will make the decision and how will it make it?

There are [set time scales](#) for local planning authorities to issue their decision on neighbourhood area applications. Once the application for designation is published and comments invited the decision must be issued within:



- 20 weeks where the area applied for relates or falls within the areas of two or more local planning authorities
- 8 weeks where the relevant body is a parish council and the area to which the application relates is the whole of the area of the parish council
- 13 weeks in all other cases

The process for determining the area application will vary from local planning authority to local planning authority. Some local planning authorities through their powers of delegation will allow their planning officers to make the final decision, other local planning authorities will only allow decisions to be made by their elected councillors (with a recommendation from a planning officer).

If the decision is to be made by a committee, these will only meet periodically, so try to establish which committee it will be taken to, and when, as well as if applicants are allowed to speak in favour of your application during the committee.

5.3 Keep in contact

Regardless of the how the decision will be made you should ask if you can have a main point of contact at the local planning authority. Programme in regular catch ups with them to discuss:

- any consultation responses raising either objection or seeking clarification
- how the decision making timetable is progressing
- whether the local planning authority requires anything further

5.4 What will your local planning authority do when it has made its decision?

Your local planning authority must designate a neighbourhood area if it receives a valid application and some or all of the area has not yet been designated. It should also aim to designate the area you have applied for. If the area is not considered appropriate the local planning authority can refuse the application but it cannot refuse the area in its entirety (unless the entirety relates to an already designated neighbourhood area) and a revised area boundary must be designated. The local planning authority will then issue a formal notice of its decision.



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