

How to set up a neighbourhood forum

Putting the pieces together



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1 Introduction

This resource will explain:

- How to set up a neighbourhood forum including
 - involving 21 people
 - ensuring membership is representative of your [neighbourhood area](#)
 - putting together a written constitution
- How to formally apply for designation of your neighbourhood forum
- How your application will be determined by the local planning authority

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 forum designation. It will provide useful context to this resource which focuses on the 'how'.

2 What is a neighbourhood forum?

A neighbourhood forum is the body that leads on the production of a neighbourhood plan in neighbourhood areas that are not covered (either in part or in whole) by a town or parish council. A neighbourhood forum must meet certain [legal requirements](#) and can only be designated by your local planning authority. Only one neighbourhood forum can be designated for a neighbourhood area.

3 How do you set up a neighbourhood forum?

Before applying to your local planning authority to be designated as the neighbourhood forum for the neighbourhood area that you want to plan for, you will need to set up a neighbourhood forum that meets the legal requirements. This can be done at the [same time](#) as deciding on the [neighbourhood area](#) you want to plan for. You are encouraged to read this document in conjunction with our [How to designate a neighbourhood area](#) resource.

3.1 Involving at least 21 people

The first step is getting the community involved as you need a minimum of 21 people to join your prospective neighbourhood forum. To help spark interest and grow your membership you can:

- **Publicise your intentions.** This is recommended as the first action, as [raising the profile](#) of your proposed neighbourhood plan will encourage people who have a genuine interest in getting involved to come forward. You can use a variety of different methods including producing and distributing leaflets, word of mouth and social media (for example Twitter and Facebook). You can raise the profile of your proposed neighbourhood plan as you develop your thinking around the extent of your neighbourhood area.



- **Hold engagement events.** These are another good way of raising the profile of your prospective forum and to explain to people what neighbourhood planning is and how they can get involved. These can be in the form of workshops, drop-in sessions or by attending other community events that are going on in your area. **Sign up sheets** should be made available at all of your engagement events. This enables you to start gathering the contact details of those who may wish to join your prospective forum. Keep them simple. You can follow up with a survey to gather more detailed information such as where respondents live, their age, ethnicity etc. which can be used at the next stage: assessing whether your prospective neighbourhood forum is representative of the area.
- **Be open** with people, explaining why they should consider joining your neighbourhood forum, the benefits of doing so and their likely time commitments. If people know what is involved from the start it increases the likelihood of them maintaining their membership.
- **Keep growing** your membership and don't simply stop at the minimum figure of 21 people. You should always be looking to keep membership open and growing and be seeking to recruit members from backgrounds, age groups or ethnicities which may be under represented.
- **Approach those who might have the skills you need** [How to resource your neighbourhood plan](#) provides further information on the skills that may be required to deliver a neighbourhood plan.

3.2 Ensuring membership is representative

The membership of your neighbourhood forum must be open to all those who live, work and carry out business within your neighbourhood area, as well as elected members whose ward is within (either in whole or part) your neighbourhood area. In practice this means that while you do not need to secure membership from all of these [categories](#) you should demonstrate that you have made every effort to secure membership from each as well as from different geographical areas and sections of the community. In order to ensure your membership is as broadly representative as possible you should consider the following approaches:

- **Understanding the demographic profile of your neighbourhood:** It is a good idea to try to understand the age mix, ethnicity, gender split and proportion of residents to workers within your neighbourhood and seek to reflect this within your membership. You may wish to look at census data for relevant statistics. You are also advised to speak to your local planning authority as it may be able to provide you with information and advice. Knowledge of the demographic profile of the area will enable you to set targets in terms of membership; for example, you may identify the percentage of members for particular age groups or ethnicities. This approach was adopted by the Bookham Neighbourhood Forum who set their own [target criteria for membership](#) based on census and other publicly accessible data.
- **A mixture of income backgrounds** within your membership will also help to ensure your neighbourhood forum is representative. For example, having a forum that is made up of just professionals is unlikely to be representative of your neighbourhood area. Similarly, you should also seek to include both home and non-home owners.



- **A wide geographic spread** of forum members from across the neighbourhood area that you want to plan for will be required, rather than having a membership that is drawn from a small cluster such as a single street. Get a map of your neighbourhood area and start plotting out the addresses (residents) and places of work (businesses and employees) of your members. This will help you to see where the gaps are and target potential members in the areas that are under-represented. This can be achieved through a leaflet campaign, canvassing people on the street or at events in those areas.
- **Engage with businesses:** They may provide a different perspective from residents and provide useful advice and intelligence in terms of where planning restrictions may need to be relaxed or tightened (such as changes of use of shops, pubs or offices). They may also have specific skills and resources which you may wish to draw on as you develop your plan (see [How to resource your neighbourhood plan](#)). This can also offer an effective way to engage with their employees and raise the profile of the neighbourhood plan more widely.

Urban Vision Enterprises has produced a set of [diversity cards](#) as a prompt for groups wishing to establish themselves as a neighbourhood forum. It is a good starting point to help you think about how inclusive and representative your neighbourhood forum is.

Having established your forum, if you think there are still groups that are under-represented, such as young people, you should make efforts to continually grow your membership to rectify this. It is important to remember that although it may not be possible to be completely representative, you do need to be able to demonstrate that you have made every effort to ensure that membership is a fair reflection of your area or you risk having your application for designation refused.

3.3 Putting together a written constitution

Each neighbourhood forum must have a written constitution. This should contain the key agreements made by members as to how the organisation will work. It should be clearly written so members can understand their rights and responsibilities; leaders can understand their mandate and accountability; and members of the public understand why the organisation exists and how it operates.

There are a number of national bodies who provide advice on this including Locality, NCVO (the National Council of Voluntary Organisations) and Community Matters (a national membership and support organisation for the community sector).

Locality has produced a [template constitution](#) as a starting point for prospective forums that groups may find helpful. [NCVO](#) also offer [practical guidance](#) and support on governance arrangements including [how to write a constitution](#). The [Community Matters website](#) also has information on setting up a community group as well as online advice and guidance on a range of issues including model constitutions.

Preparing a written constitution should not be seen as a tick box exercise but as a **way to guide decision making** within your forum. The written constitution will set down how



members will make decisions; whether on planning issues, processes for spending money or how to consult and engage on the plan.

The above links will assist in understanding what constitutions are and how to put one together. The advice below is about how to tailor a constitution specifically for a neighbourhood forum. There is a lot of scope in terms of **what you can include** within your constitution. The level of detail will depend on your existing working relationships and group dynamics. If you are an existing organisation, for example a tenants association, you may be able to adapt an existing constitution, however, you need to consider carefully how decisions will be made if you do not agree. If you are new to working together you may need to give more time and consideration to how decisions will be made.

3.4 What to include within your constitution.

Working through the following list will help you develop a constitution that meets your forum's individual needs:

- Include the **name of your proposed neighbourhood forum**.
- The **purpose of your forum** should be stated. Legally any forum must be set up for the *“express purpose of promoting or improving the social, economic and environmental wellbeing of an area that consists of or includes the neighbourhood area concerned”*. In addition to this you may wish to include some overarching objectives such as what you as a forum are hoping to achieve through neighbourhood planning.
- Include details of **who can become a member** (the legislation requires that membership is open to those who live, work and carry out business within your neighbourhood, including elected members) and what is expected of any members (for example attendance at meetings). Some groups have different **membership options** such as ‘affiliate’ membership (with no voting rights) or options for organisations (as opposed to just individuals) to be members. If you decide to have different options make sure you explain the differences.
- **Governance arrangements** such as official positions should also be detailed. These do vary between forums with some opting for a hierarchical approach (appointing a Chair, Vice Chair and Treasurer) whereas other groups have preferred a more ‘collaborative’ approach and have appointed a ‘convenor’ rather than a Chair. Any appointments to positions will need to be voted in at the forum's first Annual General Meeting (AGM).
- **Working arrangements** within your forum can also be included. Many groups set up steering and working groups (see [How to make effective decisions](#) and see [How to share the workload](#)) to oversee and undertake the work. Clearly set out the function of these sub groups, how they relate to one another and how to join them. Some neighbourhood forums co-opt members into their sub groups; others request applications to be submitted outlining why members wish to be involved and what they have to offer. The decision on appointments is then put to a vote at the AGM. You should settle on working arrangements that support your group whilst allowing for some flexibility as these may need to change as the plan progresses.



- Include details of **meeting patterns and how decisions will be made**. Ensure that meetings are open to members of the public, details are published in advance and minutes are made available on your website. This will help to ensure transparency in your decision making processes. Detailed questions you may want to answer in your written constitution include; how will decisions be made - will it be a majority rules approach or will the Chair have the casting vote? How will the AGM be convened and any Extraordinary General Meeting if interim decisions are required? How often will your sub groups meet? Who will they report to and when? Again, allow for some flexibility as meeting patterns may change as the plan progresses. You should also consider including details of how you will inform the wider community of decisions.
- **Financial management** arrangements should also be included. This often involves appointing a Treasurer who will be responsible for opening the group's bank account and managing the finances. You also need to decide who will be signatories for the bank account. It is good practice to ensure that financial management arrangements are transparent with details of income and expenditure published and regularly reported at meetings.
- Setting out how potential **conflicts of interest** will be identified, recorded and managed will also be useful. A conflict of interest is a set of circumstances that creates a risk that an individual's judgement or actions regarding a primary interest (neighbourhood plan) may be unduly influenced by a secondary interest (for example, land ownership). In practice this may simply mean that in some situations certain members may have to abstain from voting if it is considered there is a conflict of interest. Look at how others have dealt with this within their constitutions or seek advice from your local planning authority as it will have its own processes in place or could advise on how similar organisations have addressed this issue.
- **Speak to your local planning authority** as it may be able to offer you some practical advice as well as directing you to examples of what other groups have done. But be careful when looking at the constitutions of other groups as they may not be the ideal solution for your particular group and way of working.

It is strongly advised that you agree your constitution and make internal appointments at your first AGM. Ideally the first meeting should be held prior to formally applying to the local planning authority for designation (see below). Many groups have found the process of putting together a written constitution and arranging the initial AGM extremely beneficial as it has required them to work closely together, provided a focus and helped in developing strong working relationships.

Always bear in mind that you cannot plan for every eventuality and that, if required, the constitution can be amended at a later date and changes voted through at your next AGM (or if this is too far away an Extraordinary AGM).



4 How to formally apply to be designated as a neighbourhood forum

Once you have set up your neighbourhood forum and are confident that it meets the legal requirements, the next stage is to formally apply to your local planning authority for designation. If you are applying for your neighbourhood area to be designated at the same time, then this section should be read in conjunction with our resource on [neighbourhood area designation](#). It should be noted that a neighbourhood forum is designated as the neighbourhood forum for a particular neighbourhood area. It cannot be designated [in advance](#) of the neighbourhood area.

4.1 Speak to your local planning authority

Give your local planning authority advance notice of your intention to submit an application to be designated as a neighbourhood forum. If possible agree the submission with your authority in terms of content and how much detail they are expecting to see. It will also be able to advise how they would like the application submitted.

4.2 Make an application

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

- the name of the proposed neighbourhood forum
- a written constitution for the proposed neighbourhood forum
- the name of the neighbourhood area to which the forum relates and a map identifying that area
- contact details of at least one member of the proposed neighbourhood forum
- a statement explaining how the proposed neighbourhood forum meets the [legal requirements](#)

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

Once your application has been submitted to your local planning authority, the authority will first check that it has all the information required. It will then publicise your application and invite representations from the wider public and those with an interest in the area for a minimum of six weeks. It then considers and determines your application.



You should ask your local planning authority to identify a key point of contact (this is likely to be an officer within the planning policy team) with whom you should liaise and programme in regular catch up discussions to:

- discuss any consultation responses either objecting to your application or seeking clarification
- ensure that the decision making timetable is progressing
- see if the local planning authority requires any further information.

5.1 What will they consider?

The local planning authority will consider whether or not your forum meets the [legal tests](#) which in practical terms means:

- whether the forum has been set up for the express purpose of promoting or improving the environmental, economic and social wellbeing of your neighbourhood area
- whether membership is open to all those who live, work and carry out business within your neighbourhood area as well as elected members
- whether membership includes a minimum of 21 people who either live, work or carry out business within the neighbourhood area as well as elected members.

In addition to the above tests your local planning authority is required to consider whether or not you have made reasonable attempts to secure membership from the [specified categories](#) as well as from different places and from different sections of the community.

The majority of applications to be designated as a neighbourhood forum are being approved by local planning authorities. However, where this has not been the case, reasons have centred around concerns over the representativeness of the prospective forum; both geographically and demographically.

Local planning authorities can withdraw an organisation or body's designation as a neighbourhood forum if they consider it is no longer meeting the legal requirements. For example when considering Northenden's forum application [Manchester City Council](#) proposed to include a requirement to review the forum designation in 2016 to "take account of the efforts made by the Neighbourhood Forum to expand its membership to include members aged under 25".

It is important to remember that designation should not be the end of the process. You should continue to seek new members and in particular those from areas and cross sections of the population under-represented, particularly when members leave.

Neighbourhood forum designations only last for five years so you may have to reapply for designation if you want to maintain your forum beyond this.

5.2 How will they make the decision?

This will vary from local planning authority to local planning authority and it is therefore important to ask them how decisions are made on neighbourhood forum applications. Some local planning authorities use their powers of delegation to authorise planning officers to make



the decision. Other local planning authorities will only allow decisions to be made by their elected councillors (with a recommendation from a planning officer). If this is the case ask your local planning authority which of its committees will determine the application and when.

Committees may only meet periodically, and not all authorities will allow applicants to speak in support of their application during the meeting. You are encouraged to check this with your local planning authority.

6 Conclusions

Seeking designation as a neighbourhood forum need not be complicated and it is achievable. A lot of the work that goes into setting up your forum will stand you in good stead for plan production. It will help you to agree constructive working practices as well as having a forum that is representative of your neighbourhood.

The Highgate Neighbourhood Forum, whose neighbourhood area falls within the administrative area of two local planning authorities within London, has provided a useful [explanation](#) of how it went about setting up its forum.

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