

planning aid concordat



PLANNING
aid

The Local Government Association (LGA), the Planning Officers Society (POS) and the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) have prepared this concordat to demonstrate their joint commitment to Planning Aid and to invite local authorities to share that commitment through practical action.

Planning is undergoing a fundamental change. Far-reaching reforms to the system are coupled with new approaches to practice and a growing recognition of the value of a positive and dynamic planning system. Good planning is a fundamental requirement of a successful and just society.

Planning works best when the process is accessible, not just to planners, developers and politicians, but to all those who are concerned with, or about, the futures of their area. It is local people who are most motivated to make a place successful, who suffer the consequences if poor decisions are made and who are often best informed about how to bring about beneficial change. The challenge that local communities face is how to navigate their way through the planning system's complexities. For that, they need independent advice and support.

The planning reforms in England recognise this, and the new system that is about to be introduced in this country places a far greater emphasis not only on community involvement in planning but on trying to ensure that this takes place as early as possible in the process.

The LGA, the POS and the RTPI invite your authority to join us in expressing your active and practical support for Planning Aid by signing the attached protocol and by putting into action the approaches suggested.

What is Planning Aid?

Planning Aid provides free, independent and professional town planning advice and support to communities and individuals who cannot afford to pay fees to a planning consultant. It complements the work of local planning authorities, but is wholly independent of them.

Planning Aid was started by the Town and Country Planning Association in 1973 and has consistently proved its worth. Since its inception, it has been at the forefront of engaging communities in the planning process. But now it needs to evolve and expand in order to further widen engagement in the planning process and to give an equal voice to all those involved in planning.

In 2003 the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) confirmed funding of up to £3.8 million over the next three years. The funding has started to be used to build a bigger and better Planning Aid network, to provide consistent levels of professional service across the country, and to use more innovative methods to involve local communities in the planning process.

Planning Aid is about more than giving advice. It engages communities positively in the planning process to help them manage changes to their neighbourhoods and areas. The focus for the new expanded Planning Aid service will be as an outreach service working with communities in most need.

It helps people to:

- understand and use the planning system;
- participate in preparing plans;
- draw up their own plans for the future of their community;
- comment on planning applications;
- apply for planning permission or appeal against the refusal of permission;

- appear at public inquiries.

Planning Aid helps to meet one of the key aims of the government's planning reform agenda, which is to place community engagement at the heart of the planning system.

Who needs Planning Aid's help?

Potentially everyone needs Planning Aid since planning impacts on all our lives. Yet many individuals and communities are unable to make their views known because they are baffled by the complexities of the planning system and cannot afford professional help. This is where Planning Aid helps.

In 2003 Planning Aid services dealt with over 3,000 enquiries from a range of clients including individuals, community groups, voluntary organisations, tenants and residents groups, many of whom were having difficulty making their voice heard on planning matters. All enquirers are given a limited amount of telephone advice and those not qualifying for assistance are referred to a planning consultant.

Planning Aid is increasingly targeting the service at disadvantaged, diverse and socially excluded communities and the assistance of local authorities and other agencies in achieving this aim is crucial.

How is the service organised?

Planning Aid in England is delivered through a network of 10 regional services. Nine of these are operated by RTPI branches, while Planning Aid for London is an independent charity that operates with RTPI support.

Planning Aid is unique in that it relies on over 500 volunteer planners who provide advice and support. The assistance they give ranges from helping to write letters and proofs of evidence, to attending meetings with clients and even appearing at public inquiries or hearings. All volunteers undertaking casework are fully qualified and are indemnified for the advice they give.

Planning Aid has been funded from a range of sources:

the RTPI, local authorities, government agencies, the Community Fund, charitable trusts and donations from clients. But this funding has not been evenly spread and has tended to support projects rather than core costs.

Future development

The grant aid from the ODPM and additional funding that needs to be raised from a variety of sources will finance a programme of community capacity building and to develop a more sustainable network of Planning Aid services capable of identifying, engaging and responding to community needs. The main elements of the new programme are:

- better targeting, and the use of community planning techniques to engage local communities in the planning process;
- a national, volunteer support programme, to include special training, recognition and rewards for an increased number of volunteers;
- the equivalent of three full-time members of staff in every region - supported by a staffed, national Planning Aid unit;
- a series of other projects, to include a national helpline and an interactive website.

The key outcomes from all these initiatives will be that local communities will be better able to use the planning system, effectively and confidently resulting in better proposals, plans and developments that meet the needs of local communities.

Benefits to local authorities

The more people know about, and understand, the planning system the easier it is for them to make a positive contribution to it. This in turn relieves local authorities of having to allay unfounded fears and misconceptions, thereby saving considerable time, effort and resources. Access to information and advice can help to turn potential positions of conflict to those where the best solution is found through co-operative working. To

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establish confidence and avoid mistrust, however, it is important that communities can access independent and impartial advice and support from bodies such as Planning Aid.

Local authorities do play a crucial role in providing information on planning, in encouraging participation in plan making and in engaging with all those who are involved in development. The reforms to the planning system will make this role even more central – and will serve to place local authority resources under greater pressure. Local government does not have the resources and, on occasion, the skills to engage in the longer-term work with the communities and the in-depth discussions with individuals, which is the hallmark of Planning Aid.

A number of local authorities have recognised this and have worked closely with Planning Aid on, for example, programmes of community involvement, Best Value and community planning exercises. The attached protocol provides some examples of this. Planning Aid does not replace the role of local authorities; it complements it. It should be noted that Planning Aid has a policy that planning authority staff cannot undertake casework in the area in which they are employed.

A major difficulty for many communities is that they do not realise early enough when their lives may be affected by planning proposals or are they aware of the opportunities that exist to have their say. For example, many communities will object to an individual planning application often where the principle for development has been established through the Development Plan. By involving local people at the outset, through techniques such as Planning for Real¹, communities can engage in developing visions and strategies for their area and develop a sense of ownership over ensuing development.

Local authorities will benefit from the existence of better informed and more engaged communities. The political processes involved with planning can become less confrontational as the degree of understanding increases. The quality of developments will increase through more co-operative working and the emphasis on much earlier

engagement in the process can often pay dividends not only in terms of better decision-making but also in terms of the speed with which developments can be dealt with once a formal application is made.

Additionally, the quality of planning within the local authority will benefit as the new skills, knowledge and experience gained through staff volunteering will be brought back into the workplace. Planning Aid gives the staff the opportunity to broaden their experience through challenging new work and can be seen as an integral part of any staff development programme. Planning Aid also provides a valuable and increasing source of examples of effective practice to which volunteers will have access.

Benefits for staff who volunteer for Planning Aid

Being a Planning Aid volunteer need not be onerous, either for the individual or the local authority – but it can be extremely beneficial to both.

Local authorities employ nearly two thirds of the current Planning Aid volunteer network, and these volunteers find Planning Aid provides extensive opportunities for professional and personal development.

Planners may seek opportunities to widen their experience through branching out into new areas of activity, eg development control staff may seek to get involved in development plan cases, or vice versa. Alternatively, planners may wish to volunteer for work in which they have expertise and further develop their knowledge and experience. The development of Planning Aid's community planning role will provide a wide range of experience for volunteers.

Whatever the type of work undertaken, volunteering for Planning Aid provides an insight into the planning system from the viewpoint of local communities and an opportunity to develop skills in communication and community engagement – skills that have been identified as critical to the delivery of the government's planning reform agenda.

Most of the work done by Planning Aid volunteers can

count towards meeting the RTPI's requirements for Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and many planners find this a satisfying and constructive way of meeting their CPD obligations.

Finally, many planners also find that volunteering boosts their prospects for career development and increases their job satisfaction in the workplace.

planning aid protocol

The LGA, the POS and the RTPI firmly believe that local authorities will benefit from a well-resourced Planning Aid service. We are therefore asking every local authority in England to commit itself to supporting Planning Aid by signing up to this protocol.

The type and level of support for Planning Aid will depend on your authority but we would stress local authorities can offer support in the following ways:

- by raising the awareness of Planning Aid among client groups;
- by engaging with the local Planning Aid service;
- by encouraging their staff to become Planning Aid volunteers; and
- by helping to fund Planning Aid.

Raising awareness

One of Planning Aid's greatest challenges is making local communities aware of its service. Local authorities are in a position to help, and at little cost. They can:

- place Planning Aid leaflets and posters in the planning department reception area and other public offices such as libraries and housing offices;
- refer to Planning Aid on their website and provide links to the Planning Aid website;
- refer to Planning Aid in appropriate documents such as neighbour notification letters, site notices, decision notices and development plan publications;
- make sure that councillors and planning officers are fully aware of Planning Aid so that they can refer relevant groups and individuals to Planning Aid.

These simple actions could do much to bring Planning Aid to the attention of local communities.

¹ Planning for Real is a trademark of the Neighbourhood Initiatives Foundation.

engaging with planning aid

Notifying neighbours

Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council includes a reference to Planning Aid on its neighbour notification letter. This explains the type of service offered and provides contact details. This has proved to be an effective and low-cost way to promote the Planning Aid service and has resulted in a number of enquiries, particularly from elderly and housebound residents.

Planning Aid has a long track record in providing advice. The service is now seeking to be more proactive and will seek to engage local communities in the planning system through outreach, education and development work. This is in recognition that the planning system achieves most when it works with local communities to enable them to play a full and active part in the planning and management of their areas. Local authorities benefit greatly from engaging with their local Planning Aid service.

Including local communities positively in the planning process can be achieved more easily through involvement at an early stage – through the preparation of development plans and strategies.

Authorities can facilitate Planning Aid involvement by involving services in developing their community engagement strategies, including the preparation of their Statements of Community Involvement (SCIs). Although this is an area that is relatively new, some authorities are already working with Planning Aid to identify best practice and this will be disseminated in due course.

Furthermore, authorities can involve Planning Aid at key stages in the preparation of their plans and strategies in order to maximise local community involvement. Planning Aid can achieve this through, for example, providing advice and training on the development plan process, and assisting groups and individuals in the preparation of their proofs of evidence and how best to present these.

Making Unitary Development Plans (UDP) accessible

Following a joint seminar with Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council, Planning Aid successfully assisted two disability groups to influence policies in the emerging UDP. With Planning Aid's support, both groups assessed the accessibility of the UDP policies and proposals. The groups were pleased to note that the revised draft of the UDP included a number of changes in line with their comments.

A key objective of Planning Aid is to make the delivery of

local planning services more responsive to community needs. Local authorities and Planning Aid services can jointly reflect on their experiences and review their policies and practices.

Best Value reviews

As part of their Best Value reviews, some authorities have engaged Planning Aid to undertake 'mystery customer' surveys to assess the quality and accessibility of their services.

Encouraging staff to volunteer

Planning Aid relies heavily on volunteers and its ability to support local communities depends on a well trained and resourced volunteer network.

As major employers of planning staff, local authorities are encouraged to support volunteering for Planning Aid on the basis that it broadens the experience of their staff and contributes to their professional development.

Support for Planning Aid can be practical. Although most volunteers undertake Planning Aid work during the evenings and weekends, authorities could enable staff to be more flexible in their volunteering by allowing a limited amount of work time to undertake Planning Aid activities.

Equally, authorities can formally recognise and value staff participation in Planning Aid through the introduction of incentives built into their recruitment, appraisal and staff development procedures. In turn Planning Aid will provide adequate induction and training for volunteers, which further enhances their skills and development.

Planning Aid has put procedures in place to manage conflicts of interest between paid employment and volunteering, and planning authority staff are not allowed to undertake casework in their authority's area.

Funding Planning Aid

Local authorities are encouraged to provide a limited amount of grant funding for Planning Aid.

Many authorities already fund Planning Aid, and in the West Midlands region, for example, over half of the authorities already do so.

Each authority must decide how much it can contribute to Planning Aid but the following suggestion is put forward as a guide.

A guide to contributions

- over 250,000 people £750-£1,500
- 100,000 – 250,000 people £500-£750
- below 100,000 people £250-£500

Just think what Planning Aid offers for this level of funding and the excellent value for money.

checklist

The following checklist has been prepared as a reminder.

- Publicise Planning Aid in your planning department and other offices.
- Provide website links to the Planning Aid website.
- Refer to Planning Aid in relevant publications.
- Refer community groups and individuals to Planning Aid.
- Involve Planning Aid in preparing your community engagement strategy.
- Involve Planning Aid in preparing your development plan.
- Involve Planning Aid in your Best Value review.
- Encourage your staff to volunteer.
- Provide grant funding for Planning Aid.

**RTPI**

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**Local Government Association**

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