

Getting started with neighbourhood planning in the Wirral

How being part of a Big Local area has given residents on the Beechwood Estate on the Wirral a head start

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About Beechwood

Beechwood is a housing estate on the Wirral Peninsula, across the River Mersey from Liverpool. Built in the 1960s, most of the estate is former council property. It consists of low-rise; mostly two-storey homes and has a suburban feel, with plenty of trees and green spaces. On its western edge, among a swathe of greenery, the M53 motorway forms a boundary between the estate, the greater part of the peninsula and the River Dee and Irish Sea. The area has a really strong community spirit and a tradition of local activism, spurred on by the volunteerism of a number of well-respected and active residents with strong ties to the area.

The focus of much of this is the Beechwood Community Trust (BCT) a charity based on the estate which works to create a stronger, safer community. The estate has also been part of the Beechwood, Ballantyne and Bidston Village Big Local area since 2013. This means it is benefiting from £1 million in Big Lottery funding over ten years to support resident-owned and led initiatives to make the community a better place to live.



Beechwood residents hearing about neighbourhood planning

In 2015, assets on the estate previously owned by the local Beechwood and Ballantyne Community Housing Association were transferred to the Liverpool Housing Trust. This was opposed by some residents, who were concerned that the community's interests would be less well served, and has galvanised many in the community into taking a greater interest in planning issues.

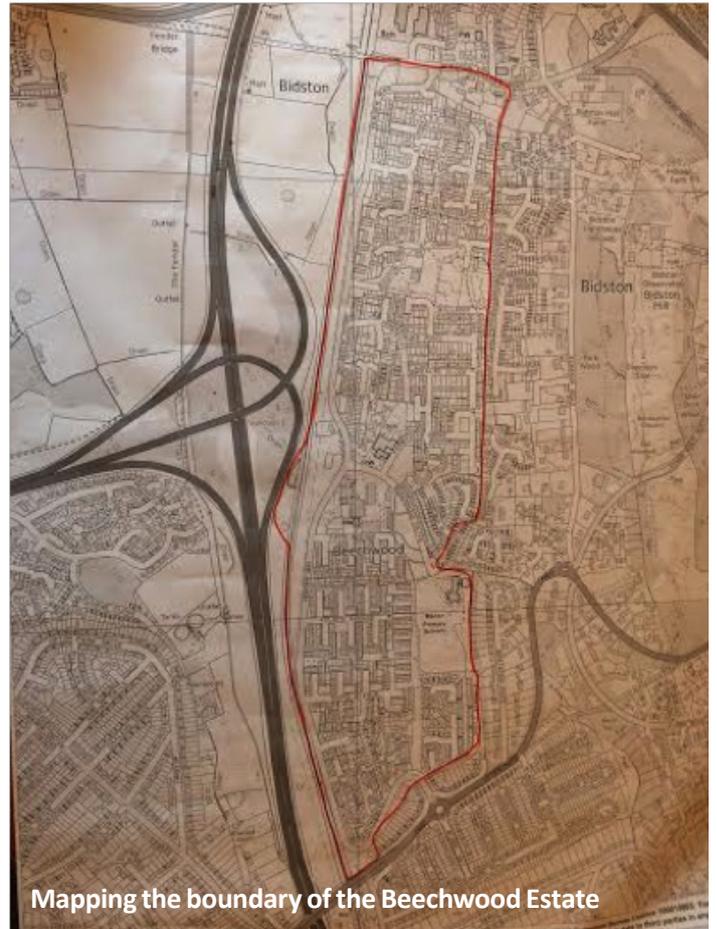
Why a neighbourhood plan?

There are a number of changes planned for the area, and residents are keen to ensure that existing infrastructure is protected and any future investment and development meets local needs. They would like to have a say in the location of a potential new train station, and protect community spaces and assets, such as Beechwood Recreation Centre and the local library, which may close.

Residents also have a number of ideas to improve the built environment and make use of existing buildings, such as a new healthy living centre in the recreation centre site. They hope that a neighbourhood plan will strengthen their voice in negotiating with the council and other players to ensure their needs and desires are realised.

Getting started

Being part of a Big Local area gave Beechwood a good head start when it came to neighbourhood planning. In February 2016, BCT received a small grant from central government to help them engage residents about neighbourhood planning and what it could achieve for the area. A number of community workshops were held to introduce residents to the idea. There was some concern initially that instead of complementing the existing Big Local plan - a neighbourhood plan could divert residents' energy away from it. However to it soon became clear that the two initiatives would complement each other. For example, a neighbourhood plan could support the Big Local plan's ambition to improve local people's health and wellbeing by encouraging the development of new spaces for healthy activities.



Mapping the boundary of the Beechwood Estate

The importance of local champions

BCT's approach to raising local awareness successfully focused on co-opting local people and organisations with strong existing networks and influence, to help get the message out about neighbourhood planning. Residents who had been involved in Big Local were already well-known and respected in the area and their strong networks and profile helped to ensure wide participation from the community in deciding whether or not to take forward a neighbourhood plan. The residents even secured a slot at the Bingo night to talk to them about neighbourhood planning.

Participants in the workshops were also given 'homework' – i.e. they each had to invite other residents to participate in future sessions. These sessions focussed primarily on furnishing the group with additional skills and experience to support their vision for the area and which led to additional involvement of people who also had health, housing and transport experience.

BCT also worked with local primary schools to help get the message out to parents.

"I attended three training sessions and have spoken to many residents and community partners to get them involved. All feel that this is a very exciting opportunity for our community".

SHELLY, BEECHWOOD RESIDENT

How is it going so far?

Residents were so convinced of the ability of a neighbourhood plan to complement their Big Local plan – and so successful in engaging more local people to get involved – that they quickly decided to set up a 'Fledgling' Neighbourhood Forum and create a Plan. They succeeded in electing an influential community leader – the pastor of Beechwood Chapel - who has agreed to chair the Forum during the initial phases of the process, and have been meeting each month to keep up momentum on key aspects of the plan. These include consulting residents about the proposed neighbourhood boundary, and a draft application for Locality funding.

Top tips and advice from Beechwood

- **Make the most of available resources** in your neighbourhood. Communities always have a range of existing assets that can be vital in helping to get a plan off the ground. While not all communities have Big Local initiatives, there are likely to be groups, like BCT, who are already working to improve the area – or perhaps faith groups with strong networks and community standing. They can help build trust and secure engagement with key parts of the community
- **Find local champions.** Beechwood was also able to strengthen its approach to engagement by getting influential residents – such as the Bingo grandmothers – involved. Similarly don't forget schools. They are often at the heart of communities and can really extend engagement.
- **Engage your local council early.** Wirral Borough Council (WBC) was incredibly helpful, sending two planners to the workshops to answer any queries. This proved very popular with local residents and helps to build constructive relationships. They also supplied large maps of the area which supported boundary discussions.