

Getting started with neighbourhood planning in Blakelaw



Welcome to Blakelaw

If you drive into Newcastle from its airport to the north west of the City you will pass through Blakelaw. The neighbourhood is an area of mixed social and private housing, mostly developed in the 1950s and 1960s as part of the post-war development of new Council housing. It is home to 12,000 people and has a fantastic community spirit with lots of parks and green open spaces. However, Blakelaw also faces considerable challenges. It is the 18th most deprived ward in Newcastle and it borders the Cowgate Estate, the most deprived area of Newcastle and the 26th most deprived area in England. The usual challenges of high unemployment, low aspiration and crime blight the area, with over a third of residents out of work.



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Why neighbourhood planning?

These challenges mean that local people in Blakelaw are all the more determined to shape their community in a positive way. When the opportunity arose to participate in a programme of training and talks about neighbourhood planning, lots of people in the community wanted to get involved.

Two 'community walkabouts' were organised so that local people could point out the things they wanted to change. It became clear through these discussions that residents want to have much more control over development in their area and to protect their local green spaces – including improving areas they feel have been neglected over the years. As Neighbourhood Plans carry legal weight, local people are hopeful that it can help them to achieve some of these aspirations for Blakelaw.



Blakelaw's shopping centre

As one of the local residents and Parish Councillors who became involved in the project, Mike Nelis, who has lived in Blakelaw since 1963, said:

“Neighbourhood planning is an essential process. I think we need to get it started for the area’s posterity. There are lots of things we really should have in writing that we need for Blakelaw, the environment, as well as local residents.”

A focus on community

A wide range of issues were identified by local people during the training sessions and community walkabouts. Not all of these can be addressed through a Neighbourhood Plan, however, so a planning officer from Newcastle City Council helped them to divide the issues into three lists:



- i) Issues that could be tackled by a Neighbourhood Plan
- ii) Issues that might be tackled by a Neighbourhood Plan
- iii) Issues that couldn’t be tackled by a Neighbourhood Plan

Residents don’t want to ignore the issues on the third list, however, so are thinking about developing a Community Plan to sit alongside any emerging Neighbourhood Plan for the area.

A Neighbourhood Plan primarily deals with planning and development issues (such as the use of buildings and land), whereas a Community Plan can address more socio-economic issues (such as services for young people or community projects that promote health). By developing both Plans together, residents in Blakelaw hope to achieve a more joined-up approach to transforming their area in the future.

Defining the neighbourhood area

An interesting thing about Blakelaw is the ward boundary itself. The first task for anyone developing a neighbourhood plan is to define the area that it needs to cover. In Blakelaw, it seemed obvious to use the existing ward boundary. However, soon after residents started discussing their ideas, they learned that the ward boundary was being reviewed, with proposals to combine it with the more deprived parts of Blakelaw, including neighbouring Cowgate. This hasn’t deterred local residents however. They feel that this change makes sense and any future neighbourhood plan should reflect this new ward boundary.

Residents discussing neighbourhood planning in Blakelaw



As Glenn Pendleton, Manager of the Blakelaw Ward Community Partnership, said:

“In everyday terms, the Cowgate area is a local community which ties in with the rest of Blakelaw although it lies outside the Parish Council area. People shop at the same shops and use the same schools and community facilities. It’s not a difficult decision for the steering group and the Blakelaw Parish Council to see the logic of including Cowgate in the proposed neighbourhood plan area.”

Working together

A lot of work still needs to be done to bring Neighbourhood Planning to fruition in Blakelaw; however the seeds have been well and truly sown. Their example shows that local people in deprived, urban areas can get excited about neighbourhood planning, because it can help them to regain some control over their local area. As one local resident that participated in the training said:

“Give it a try! It’s in the interest of the local community”

Top tips

We’ve already learnt a lot about Neighbourhood Planning in Blakelaw. These are our top tips for anyone who is thinking about getting started:

- 1. Have a can-do attitude!** You will be able to find other people who care about your local area. Try contacting schools, housing agencies, charities, or other local agencies to find other people who are interested.
- 2. Contact your Local Planning Authority early in the process.** They will be based in your local council and should be able to offer advice and support, such as the help of a planning officer.
- 3. Organise a Community Walkabout.** This is a great way to really engage and motivate local people to get involved and look at their area, and talk about things that they would like to improve.
- 4. Contact other areas for advice and inspiration.** We have reached out to other areas that are doing a Neighbourhood Plan, to learn from their stories and experiences.
- 5. Be as open and transparent as you can.** We organized open meetings in the early stages, which anyone could attend. We also made all of our resources including training materials, minutes of meetings and other files and documents available in a shared folder online.



Watch Cllr James Gill talk about his experience of neighbourhood planning

