

# Putting Burnt Oak on the map

How residents in one north London borough are using neighbourhood planning to assert their identity

**What happens when your neighbourhood spans not just one but three local authority boundaries?**

In Burnt Oak's case, residents feel their area gets forgotten about and lacks a clear and distinct identity. However, support is now growing within the community to get started with neighbourhood planning - in the hope that it will raise the profile of Burnt Oak and enable residents to have a stronger voice and real influence over the area's future.

## About Burnt Oak

Burnt Oak is a neighbourhood in North West London. Like many London areas, it is ethnically diverse, with people originally from Eastern Europe, central Africa and the Middle East settled here.

The ward of Burnt Oak is part of the London borough of Barnet, but it also straddles two other local authority areas: Brent and Harrow. Some residents feel this means the area loses out when it comes to public services and investment. "The three local authorities are all concerned with their more central problems, rather than problems they see as on the periphery", says Bob Hendley, chair of the North Road Community Centre and a Burnt Oak resident for 45 years.

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Engaging residents on the high street in Burnt Oak about neighbourhood planning



## Why a neighbourhood plan?

Not every London borough can boast a Tube station – however residents in Burnt Oak can travel into central London in less than 25 minutes via the Burnt Oak tube station. They also enjoy the area's vibrancy, diverse high street, period housing and local parks. However in common with many other urban areas residents feel that more could be done to provide affordable homes for local people and whilst they value the high street for its diversity and low prices – there is the perception that some traders clutter the pavement with stalls and equipment, which makes it unattractive and difficult to get around. They also believe there are too many betting and pawn shops in the area as well as a number of derelict sites in the roads adjoining the high street which attract fly-tipping, litter and anti-social behaviour. Residents hope that a Neighbourhood Plan will help them to tackle some of these local issues, as well as celebrate and protect what's good about Burnt Oak.

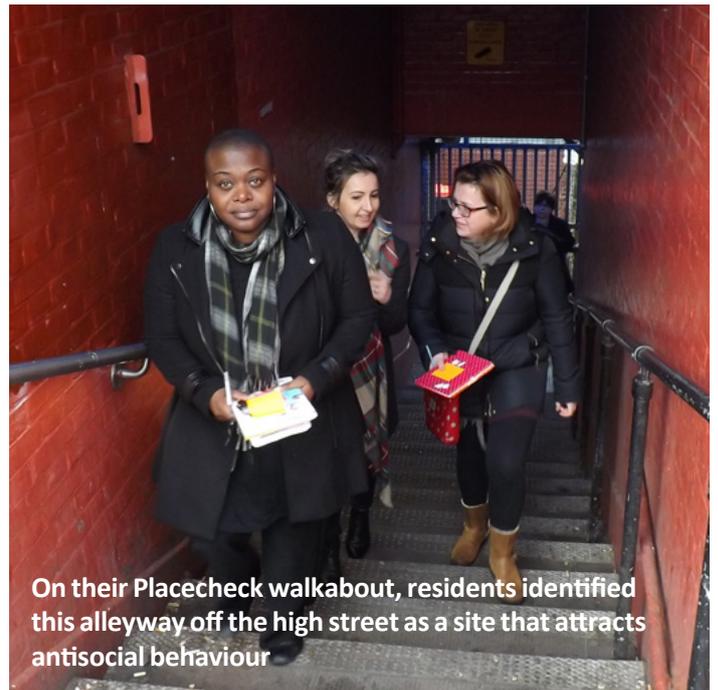
*“What's really important to me is to protect our area from over-development. Because whatever people say about Burnt Oak, it's a community, and it's about keeping that together” says Jan Brennan, local resident and trustee of Love Burnt Oak.*

As well as addressing some of their concerns about the area and protecting its assets, residents also feel neighbourhood planning provides an opportunity for them to gain a voice and organisation that represents the community.

*“If we set up a Neighbourhood Forum, it's about challenging the authorities and taking them to task, and saying, we're the people, we're living and working here, we care, and we're able to come together as a community to make this work”, says Jan.*

## Getting started

Residents first heard about Neighbourhood Planning through Love Burnt Oak, a charity that works to bring together local people, businesses and service providers to improve life for local people. The charity received a small grant from central government in February 2016 along with advice and guidance from a facilitator to help



**On their Placecheck walkabout, residents identified this alleyway off the high street as a site that attracts antisocial behaviour**

them raise awareness of neighbourhood planning within the Burnt Oak community. A number of community workshops were held with residents to introduce them to neighbourhood planning and what it can and cannot be used for. Most residents who took part in the workshops were, like Bob and Jan, already involved in other community organisations, as either volunteers or trustees. However, others were simply concerned about the area and were attracted by the chance to take positive action for Burnt Oak. “I saw this as an opportunity to not just talk about problems and issues, but actually get involved in something real”, says Jan.

## Raising awareness

Only a handful of residents participated in the community workshops and so an early priority was to raise awareness of neighbourhood planning within the community and to gauge levels of interest and support for taking it forward. The residents involved were also interested in developing a shared understanding among local people of what the actual geographical area of Burnt Oak is. As Jan stated “I don't think of myself as living in Brent at all – I'm a resident of Burnt Oak, Edgware and Collindale”. The aim of this was to provide some data that might help them define and evidence their boundary as well as engage the three local councils in the future.

## “Our town, our future”

The group did a ‘Placecheck’ exercise in which they explored the area on foot, identifying the positive and negative aspects of the built environment. The exercise revealed that while there are aspects that residents really want to change, they are hugely proud of the diverse community and its history. And so residents had the idea of creating a short film to document and celebrate Burnt Oak, with local people sharing their hopes and experiences of living there. To ensure maximum exposure, residents decided to ‘premier’ the film at an event on the high street on a busy Saturday morning when many residents would be out shopping. At the event – called ‘Our town, our future’, the group were on hand to talk to people about neighbourhood planning and to capture the contact details of those who would like to get involved. They also encouraged attendees to place a pin marking their home on a map of the area, and say whether they felt they lived in Burnt Oak.

## How is it going so far?

The event was a huge success. Over 100 people attended, including councillors and the local MP, which means the group and Burnt Oak are already benefitting from some exposure and recognition.

The group also now has contact details of a further 66 residents who are interested in being involved and support the idea of preparing a Neighbourhood Plan.

To take things forward the group are now meeting approximately every fortnight, and are engaging with other residents (and local agencies) to help access support including with setting up a Neighbourhood Forum. The group’s main challenge is to involve more residents who will be able to take on some of the tasks and share responsibility for getting things done. It’s early days, but there is a lot of support.

“I like the idea that we’re going forward, but with all the good will in the world, we’re not going to be able to do it alone. We need to get other members of the community to come along and buy into this and see the benefit, and help do the work”, says Jan.

However, the group are optimistic about the potential of Neighbourhood Plan to address what they feel are some long-standing issues that come with being on local authority boundaries.

“Yes there are challenges, but we’ve got to find the answer to them and that’s what’s ahead of us”, says Bob.

“My hope is that through neighbourhood planning we can develop the community as a whole, rather than it being artificially divided”.

## Top tips and advice from Burnt Oak residents

- **Make the most of all the free resources** and information and about neighbourhood planning that is available online. Jan says, “Start the process, be realistic, and do your research – there’s so much information out there. You don’t have to reinvent the wheel”.
- **Talk to other communities** that have already started their neighbourhood planning journeys. This gives you the opportunity to address a lot of the smaller details and get advice from people who really know what is involved.
- **Involve people with strong local networks**, as this helps you to reach a wider group of residents. In Burnt Oak, group members include the curate of the local Anglican Church, and a member of Burnt Oak Residents’ Association, who also runs a Facebook group for local mums - engaging the local hairdresser has also really helped to get the word out.



**Watch** Bob and Jan talk about their hopes for Burnt Oak

