

CELEBRATING PLANNING AID IN THE NORTH WEST 1973 - 2023



Celebrating
50 Years of
Planning Aid
Services



Planning Aid England



RTPI North West
Royal Town Planning Institute

rtpi.org.uk/northwest

Contents

Introduction	3
Neighbourhood Plans	4
Strategic and Local Plans	10
Supporting Community Voices	14
Supporting Other Community Projects	17
Conclusion	20



Introduction

Beginning in 1973, Planning Aid is built on the principle that everyone should have access to the planning system, regardless of their ability to pay. Our work in the North West is delivered by over 50 dedicated volunteers who are supported by a small staff team based at the RTPI head office. All Planning Aid England (PAE) volunteers are members of the RTPI and have a range of skills, interests, and expertise.

PAE is funded by the RTPI, a registered charity. It is separate from both central and local government and provides completely independent and impartial planning advice.

PAE offers the following services:

- A free web resource for planning guidance – www.planningaid.co.uk
- A free, volunteer-led email advice service for generally planning enquiries
- Bespoke planning support (casework) for individuals and groups, usually in areas of more severe socio-economic disadvantage.
- Community engagement, outreach and capacity building
- Workshops and training on the planning system



Planning Aid England
Engaging Communities in Planning

www.planningaid.co.uk provides over 100 pages of planning guidance, providing clear, simple explanations of how the planning system works and answers to questions people often ask about planning.

Website users can also access PAE's email advice service, which provides a limited amount of free, general planning advice by email. In a typical year advice service volunteers deal with around 1800 enquiries nationally. Some of these enquiries evolve into bespoke casework support that requires more detailed assistance.

PAE takes on between 20-25 new pieces of casework projects each year, supporting individuals and groups who meet specific eligibility criteria. These projects vary considerably in terms of complexity. They're a fantastic way for volunteers to use their skills and knowledge to help those who don't have the means to employ consultants.

Additionally, PAE also offers support for Local Planning Authorities. In particular, PAE can assist with community consultation and engagement in more economically disadvantaged areas through acting as neutral facilitators in consultation exercises (most recently via online workshops). We also deliver training on the planning system to help residents, usually in inner urban areas, engage with planning activities such as major planning applications. For further information visit <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice/bespoke-support-services/>

The rest of this document showcases some of the work we have done in the North West region over the years.

Neighbourhood Plans

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Examples of projects supporting community groups
seeking to commence and develop neighbourhood
plans for their local area

Northenden Manchester

In 2013 Planning Aid North West were approached by a group called Northenden Neighbourhood Forum. They wished to develop a Neighbourhood Plan for their area as this type of planning document had been made available to local communities through national legislation known as the Localism Act of November 2011. The group had submitted material to designate a Northenden Neighbourhood Forum to their local planning authority Manchester City Council. The City Council refused the designation and set out its reasons in the justification statement. This included the request by the City Council to exclude the business area of Northenden known as the Sharston Industrial Estate along with the main roads offering access to the estate.

Some seven years later on 18 March 2020 the City Council re-designated the group called the Northenden Neighbourhood Forum as a statutory neighbourhood forum for Northenden Neighbourhood Area.

The Northenden Neighbourhood Forum was an early example of a Neighbourhood Plan group in the North West and provided an example and learning for many subsequent Neighbourhood Forums in the North West to refer to. The Northenden group's experiences were used as training materials for PAE volunteers and staff across the region.



Levenshulme Manchester

In October 2015 members of the local community in Levenshulme applied to Manchester City Council for designation of a Neighbourhood Plan within the Levenshulme area. Local residents sought the advice of Planning Aid North West. The organisation at that time was called Levenshulme Neighbourhood Planning Forum. Despite assistance from PAE, Manchester City Council did not accept the designation of the area for a neighbourhood forum (following community meetings with councillors) for a variety of reasons but mainly because it was considered to be too large and was subsequently proposed to be reduced to a small area of land fronting the business properties along the main road through Levenshulme. This included the proposed designation of a Levenshulme District Centre as defined in the Council's Local Development Framework Proposals Map at that time.

In recent years, priority has been given to improving road safety and air quality in the local area for both Levenshulme and north Burnage. Also, the Manchester Local Core Organisation operates a plan entitled Gorton-Levenshulme Integrated Neighbourhood Team which is led by a local partnership. Levenshulme itself also has a community association. A Neighbourhood Plan as set out in the planning legislation is not proceeding to date.

Denton South Tameside

In 2016 the local community in Denton South (within Tameside Borough Council) became concerned about a number of aspects of local life which threatened their enjoyment of open spaces and other changes to their lives. They approached PAE and a member of the RTPI North West team attended a number of meetings locally. A particular concern arose about the future of the local secondary schools. The Council, as Local Planning Authority, had opened a comprehensive school in the local area in 2010 and another building for a community college had also opened to students in 2012. The concern at the time was that, with three secondary schools, now in close physical proximity one facility might be made redundant or scaled down.

The local community arranged meetings which brought together residents, local councillors, the Member of Parliament, a Planning officer from the Borough Council and the Planning Aid representative. During the period 2016 to early 2017, the group also discussed privately with the Planning Aid volunteer whether a Neighbourhood Plan would be an appropriate solution to local concerns.

The community continued to be concerned about the possible changes to their local environment and residential amenity, in particular that the school facilities and areas may be lost. In February 2017 the leaders of the community decided to set up the Denton South Neighbourhood Planning Forum Ltd comprising a list of their active members set out as a private limited company. The schools remain as part of the local authority and on the same site. The Denton South Neighbourhood Plan was designated in March 2017, but the limited company was dissolved in April 2019.

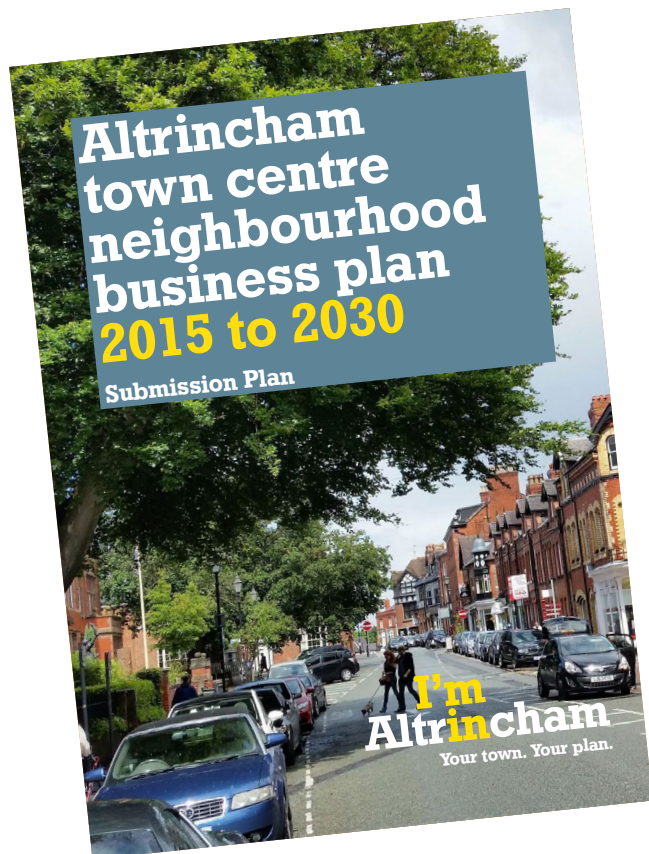
Flixton Trafford

Flixton is an urban community in Trafford in which a group of local people had the aim of setting up a Neighbourhood Forum to produce a Plan. A group approached Planning Aid after hearing what we could do from the Chair of the Altrincham Town Centre Forum. Over more than two years Planning Aid volunteers attended community workshops and the assistance culminated in helping the group achieve Forum designation status in March 2020.



Altrincham Town Centre

Work on this Neighbourhood Plan started as early as 2014 and is a rare example of having been produced by a Business Forum, as opposed to a resident led forum. PAE provided assistance at various stages of the Plan's preparation including at the 2016 draft Plan consultation stage where a team of our volunteers worked alongside volunteers from local businesses and Forum members. The Plan was made in its final form in November 2017.



Neighbourhood Planning in Liverpool

Early enthusiasm amongst several community groups across Liverpool to embark on the Neighbourhood Plan preparation journey frequently stalled. In an effort to restart Neighbourhood Planning a combined initiative involving a local community leader, Urban Vision, Liverpool University, a locally based planning consultant and PAE volunteers culminated in a stakeholder's workshop promoting the virtues of community-led planning initiatives.



Halewood Knowsley

Community concerns were expressed about the proposed sell-off of parks and green space across Halewood in 2018/19. Following elections in May 2019 the elected Town Council set an objective of drafting a Neighbourhood Plan to be adopted by the people of Halewood through an eventual referendum. The Halewood Town Council then began to lead the co-ordination of the Neighbourhood Plan on behalf of the township.

In September 2020, the Town Council commenced a series of consultation events to ask the people of Halewood whether they wished to help in the development of a Neighbourhood Plan. Events were held mostly online due to COVID restrictions in the period 2020-21. The virtual meetings drew a wide range of interest from local people with over 35 residents registering their interest at the events. Many of these residents were keen to assist the Town Council with the next stage of developing the Plan. Two volunteers from PAE North West attended the virtual meetings and provided planning advice and guidance.

In October 2021 the Town Council invited interested parties to an in-person event in Halewood which was well attended. A series of other consultation events have been held in the last year. A local PAE member is now supporting the Town Council which has a steering group of town councillors and other members. A Neighbourhood Plan Survey has been subject to public consultation in order to help shape the next stages of the plan.

A Neighbourhood Plan
for Halewood . . .

Birkenhead and Tranmere

This was another early starter Plan embarked upon by a Neighbourhood Forum in a very deprived part of the Wirral.

A total of 11 Planning Aid volunteers assisted with two rounds of consultation involving three public drop-in events in 2017 and a further nine in 2018. Unfortunately, work on this Plan was later abandoned, proving how hard it can be for local community groups to produce statutory plans.



Bacup and Stacksteads

Starting in February 2021 Planning Aid volunteers have provided email and telephone support for this East Lancashire Neighbourhood Forum through the difficult period of the COVID-19 restrictions and as they grapple with the challenges of producing a Plan. More Recently Bacup and Stackstead Neighbourhood Forum were successful in their bid for Pathfinder Design Code funding and are actively working on preparing their Design Code. PAE North West have stayed in touch to let them know we are available to assist when needed.



Coppull Chorley

Coppull is a large former textile and coal mining village in Lancashire where the Parish Council has established a Steering Group to help enable the production of a Neighbourhood Plan. Planning Aid volunteers have provided training and on-going support for the Group which has now completed its initial community engagement stage with local residents and businesses.

Embarking on the NP Journey 2021



By the People and for the People

Strategic and Local Plans



Examples of projects supporting communities in their involvement in strategic and local planning processes

Greater Manchester Spatial Framework

At an early stage of the production of the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework (GMSF), since renamed Places for Everyone, there appeared the likelihood that extensive areas of Green Belt land would be needed to meet development requirements, especially for housing.

Various ‘Protect the Green Belt’ groups formed across Greater Manchester and wanted to effectively engage with the plan preparation process; some of these groups were also interested in preparing Neighbourhood Plans. Given the lack of prior planning knowledge and expertise it was decided to offer representatives of these groups a training session on the planning process overall and explain where Local and Neighbourhood Plans fitted in. The resulting capacity building exercise would enable the groups to better appreciate how they could meaningfully participate in the making of the Spatial Framework and also help them decide whether to embark on the production of Neighbourhood Plans.

A Saturday in-person event was held at Manchester Metropolitan University which combined presentations from Planning Aid volunteers and facilitated workshops with feedback sessions. Approximately 30 community group representatives attended assisted by five Planning Aid volunteers.



Warrington Local Plan

Our volunteers attended two of the several public walk-in events held across the Borough which offered exhibitions of the draft Local Plan proposals. The events were held in the afternoon and early evening, one in suburban Appleton and the other in the Town Centre. It pioneered the use of a background information template for local authorities to use to brief Planning Aid volunteers who then went on to advise public visitors alongside Council planning officers.

Afterwards Michael Bell, Planning Policy and Programme Manager at Warrington Borough Council expressed his satisfaction for the help received:

“
We found it very useful to have Planning Aid volunteers acting as impartial intermediaries at community engagement events held for our Local Plan public consultation.
”



WARRINGTON
Borough Council

Development Plan Progress Monitoring

Another initiative that started with Liverpool University involvement was the tracking of Neighbourhood Plan preparation progress across the North West. This planning students' task was then taken on by Planning Aid volunteers on an annual basis and extended to include Local Plan making progress. The key aim of the exercise was to identify Neighbourhood Plan groups in more deprived areas who might need Planning Aid assistance and local planning authorities with upcoming Local Plan consultation stages where our volunteers may be needed to help to engage with local people.

The information on plan preparation progress also became a useful pointer to where Planning Aid England's (PAE) national initiatives could focus their attention, notably for the Blackburn with Darwen and Stockport Local Plans.

Wirral Local Plan

As many in the Region will know, the Wirral Local Plan has been a long time in the making, reaching its 'Publication' stage in 2022 but back in 2019 it came to the PAE group's attention that many Wirral based community groups were concerned about what the Plan would cover and unsure how best to engage in the process. As a result, representatives of these groups were invited to attend a Planning Aid volunteer facilitated capacity building workshop held in Birkenhead to learn about the workings of the planning system and how they could become effectively involved in shaping the forthcoming Plan.



Blackburn with Darwen Local Plan

Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council decided to pursue community engagement for a newly emerging Local Plan that was based around the then draft Government proposals of there being only three types of planning 'zone' – Growth, Renewal and Protection.

Two PAE facilitated workshops with three of our volunteers at each were held and useful comments were received from the community group representatives involved. The administrative arrangements for the workshops were carried out by PAE central staff who also recruited a couple of additional volunteers from other RTPI Regions. The staff at the local authority were well pleased with the outcomes:



Planning Officers within the Growth Team at Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council are very grateful to have had the support of Planning Aid England as part of its recent Regulation 18 Local Plan Consultation Draft. The PAE support offer provided organisations and individuals with an excellent opportunity to discuss their concerns about the proposals in the Local Plan with independent planning advisors. The workshop events organised and facilitated by the PAE volunteers were run very professionally and they complemented other consultation activity being undertaken by the Council very well.



Stockport Local Plan

Following the successful support provided at Blackburn with Darwen PAE were keen to find another local authority with areas of deprivation to assist at the early stage of Local Plan engagement. Using our local knowledge North West PAE volunteers suggested Stockport. Although generally quite affluent Stockport contains some contrastingly disadvantaged inner urban area populations, and it was agreed with the local authority that these would be the focus of Planning Aid's assistance.

Again, PAE provided the logistical support and in this case the Council helped with non-planner neighbourhoods' staff to help give the local community representative the confidence to be involved. A total of nine Planning Aid volunteers were involved over three workshops and these provided a wealth of constructive comments for the planners to consider who have since asked for further assistance at the next stage of the Local Plan.



Supporting Community Voices

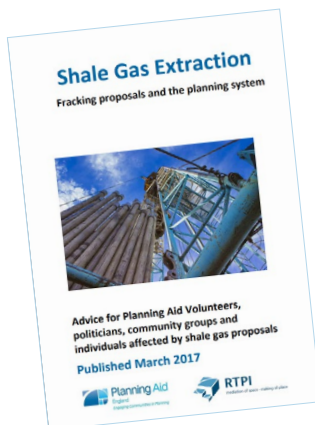
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Examples of projects supporting community groups
in responding to major planning applications.

Shale Gas Extraction

In the mid-2010' there were fracking proposals coming forward in various parts of England with notable schemes in Lancashire at the forefront. Not surprisingly, local communities were becoming concerned with the impact of the proposed projects and found themselves in need of professional planning advice.

However, PAE North West volunteers lacked the expertise in this very specialised area of minerals planning which was new to the United Kingdom. Planning Aid North West invited four experts in the field to contribute to a training workshop for our volunteers and the knowledge gained contributed to the production of a RTPI Advice Note for use in the North West and across the UK. The knowledge gathered was put to use by one of our volunteers in assisting community groups in Derbyshire and Ellesmere Port where fracking proposals went to public inquiries (see below). The Advice Note was published in March 2017 and is available on the RTPI's website. The advice contained within the note remains relevant and may be put to use further in coming years following a potential change in government fracking policy.



Ellesmere Port Cheshire West

A gas extraction company made an appeal against the decision of the Council in refusing planning permission for the testing of an existing well at Portside North in Ellesmere Port for the extraction of oil or gas. The planning application was dated July 2017. A Local Action Group made contact with PAE in the North West region in order to support their concerns about the potential adverse impacts of the proposed development on the communities which lived within the area. A public inquiry was spread over a three month period in 2019 which was held at Chester Town Hall. PAE was involved in briefing the opposing barrister and helping them with the appeal documents.

The appeal was one of the first oil and/or gas proposals which focused on climate change and greenhouse gas emissions as a material consideration. The Planning Inspector concluded that:

“
the material considerations in this case indicate a decision which is not in line with the Development Plan
i.e. the refusal of the permission
”

The then Housing Minister Stuart Andrew agreed with the Planning Inspector's decision that the appeal should be dismissed. That decision by the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities was made in June 2022 almost exactly five years since the planning application had been made to the Council.

Eckington Derbyshire

A global chemical company submitted a planning application to Derbyshire County Council (as the appropriate planning authority) in May 2017 to erect a 2.4 km deep vertical coring well using a rig 60 metres in height. The company wished to explore for shale gas reserves in the area near to Eckington, north Derbyshire. The company appealed against what it said was an unacceptable delay to the making of any decision on the application by Derbyshire County Council. The County Council voted by nine votes to one to oppose the application.

The local community formed a campaign organisation **“Eckington Against Fracking”** and began raising funds to support their opposition to the application site which lies in the countryside adjacent to some local communities. The local action group made contact with PAE in the North West as a local volunteer knew the local site and area of the application quite well.

An eight-day public inquiry took place in Chesterfield in June 2018. An active group of residents with local knowledge were supported by the volunteer in preparing their evidence. As well as the County Council, the Planning Inspector heard from representatives of the company, technical experts on the subject matter and the local campaign group, Eckington Against Fracking. More than 20 local residents and other organisations made statements against the proposals. These included both current and former MPs of different political parties who raised their concerns.

Within three months of the close of the inquiry, the Government issued its moratorium on fracking. Planning permission was subsequently granted in August 2018 but came with a planning condition that work must begin on the site within three years i.e., August 2021. As such work could not begin, the planning permission lapsed in August 2021. It is understood that the chemical company has not been in further contact with the Planning authority.



Supporting Other Community Projects

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Examples of projects supporting other community
projects and activities

Merseyside Domestic Violence Service 'Lift the Lid' Project

A Liverpool charity working with families affected by domestic abuse approached Planning Aid England on the advice of the Local Planning Authority. The charity sought assistance with an application for planning permission to open a café in a disused shipping container.

Lift the Lid is a project by Merseyside Domestic Violence Service (MDVS) that proposed transforming a shipping container to create a Coffee Pod where every 'cuppa' served would 'lift the lid' on domestic violence so that it is no longer a hidden crime.

For the past 20 years, MDVS has been helping the most vulnerable families in Liverpool. Its main aims are to safeguard women, children and young people through education, empowerment, and prevention by tackling the root cause of the problem. The voluntary organisation offers support, advice, and educational programmes and in doing so breaking the cycle of abuse and aiding the recovery process.

In February 2021, a Liverpool based Planning Aid England volunteer submitted an application for full planning application for the siting of a shipping container in Great George Square, Liverpool, near to the Chinese Arch, to be utilised as a café kiosk. The Coffee Pod will be run by volunteers who will gain skills, increase confidence, and improve their career opportunities. All profits will be used to help families across the city experiencing domestic violence.

Through their experience working in Liverpool, the PAE volunteer was also able to secure the services of an architect and tree consultant, who offered their services on a pro bono basis for the charity.

Ayla Nasuh, MDVS Service Manager reflected:



It's been uplifting to see the number of businesses and experts who have jumped on board to help us, we can't thank them enough and we couldn't have done it without them.

We are all well aware that incidents of domestic abuse have sky-rocketed during Covid lockdown, and now more than ever we are excited to move our Lift the Lid campaign forward – it will make such a difference to so many people's lives.



Ayla added that the project will:

- **Provide a service** – selling quality, affordable coffee to the public.
- **Develop skillsets** – giving volunteers the opportunity to gain training, increase their skills and enhance their career opportunities.
- **Offer advice** – providing a safe space for people to open up and discuss their personal experiences of domestic violence.
- **Provide support** – all money raised will be used by MDVS to help provide the best support to individuals and families affected by domestic violence.

Feedback Global

Throughout 2021 and on into 2022, Planning Aid England in the North West has been assisting Feedback Global with their Stanley Grange project in Knowsley.

Stanley Grange was previously the Home Farm for the Knowsley Estate and was one of the mid-Victorian “model” farms, popularised by Harold Littledale of Liscard Hall, Wallasey. Most of the farm has now been converted into tenanted business spaces but there is still a run of stables and a cow byre and several barns which have been left unused since the 1980s.

Feedback Global has been gifted the stables and cow byre by the Knowsley Estates (the Earl of Derby) to convert into workshop spaces and a cafe, which will be used to continue their work exploring how we can change the food system and create opportunities for the residents of Knowsley.

Volunteers from PAE in the North West have been assisting with the Heritage Lottery fund bid and pre-planning stage. The expertise of PAE volunteers called upon included project management services and securing input from architects, structural engineers, M&E consultants, heritage and conservation consultants and cost consultants.



Conclusion

In October 2022 Planning Aid England volunteers visited the two planning schools in the North West region – the University of Liverpool and the University of Manchester. The volunteers delivered an introduction to Planning Aid England to undergraduate and postgraduate students studying a variety of RTPI accredited courses. The volunteers came from backgrounds in consultancy, enforcement, and Local Plan writing and had a range of experiences on a variety of Planning Aid England projects.

The volunteers were also able to offer insight into different sectors of the industry and advise on career options. The visits showcased the variety of work Planning Aid England is involved in across its four workstreams, and how opportunities exist for planners to get involved no matter what sector they pursue a career in.

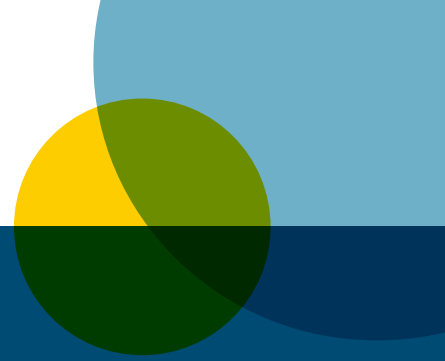
The volunteers have been invited back to both planning schools to talk to other classes in the next semester. It is likely Planning Aid England will seek to repeat the presentations each year to students who are about to enter the planning workforce. This will hopefully help maintain an enthusiastic intake of early-career volunteers and provide some vital experience to help volunteers choose their career direction.

Throughout this document we have set out the varied and exciting work we have done in the region over the past decade or so. We would encourage anyone interested in getting involved to reach out to us to find out more.

- To register to volunteer visit: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice/volunteer-with-planning-aid-england/>
- Find out more about PAE and our services: <https://www.rtpi.org.uk/planning-advice/>
- Visit PAE's dedicated advice website: www.planningaid.co.uk



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