

Key Principles for managing a Local Plan

A brief guide for practitioners, councillors and senior officers

Investing sensibly in your place

A local plan is a really expensive, serious investment of time and money. That makes it sensible to routinely pause, reflect, listen and think. And then get on with it.

Performance management of local plans has begun

Councils will have until the start of 2017 to produce local plans or face central government stepping in and doing it for them. There are penalties ahead.

Be absolutely clear about the purpose of your plan

Begin with “why?” not “how?” What is the purpose behind the work you are about to do? If you are not clear about the problem your plan is trying to solve / what the plan is trying to achieve, the risk is that you start with a list of regulations and work through satisfying them rather than satisfying the aims of the plan.

Plan-making is a political not a technical process.

Understand the different roles occupied by planners and councillors. Get political cover for the plan and award yourself bonus points if it has cross-party support.

It's the Council's plan (1).

Make sure that it connects with the plans and strategies of housing, economic, and transport colleagues. Be prepared for quite a tricky (and ongoing) task of trying to eliminate the most obvious inconsistencies when reconciling the various plans and strategies inside the council and with its partners.

It's the Council's plan (2)

Try to avoid the Plan being too ‘boring’ and ‘difficult’ to connect with senior officers. The Finance Director needs to understand the role the plan has in delivering investment and growth. And just how big the gap is between the value of development done well (to everyone's long-term advantage) and it done badly.

Be outward-facing

While connecting the plan properly inside the council, take care not to get trapped on the treadmill looking down and inwards. Be outward facing. Try not to do anything by yourself. Understand the strategies of others and always be on the lookout for evidence or tasks that you can use or repurpose.

Take control and be disciplined about the evidence base

The evidence base gets a lot of the blame for cost and delay. Understand what you need and know (in advance) when you'll have enough. If you treat it as a “black box” you will never be in control. Remember projections are not facts. You can prevent many problems from ever appearing by commissioning evidence in line with functional geographies rather than council boundaries.

The NPPF is the starting point for plans.

Understand what your plan needs to add to it, and don't try to swim against its direction. Even if you think it is wrong.

Be careful about language

It is easy to create big problems when “populations moving around to meet their own needs” becomes portrayed as “us taking *their* growth”.

Risk increases the longer a plan takes to produce

Planning a plan is more difficult than it sounds, and requires much more detail than an Local Development Scheme (the timetable for the preparation of the local plan). Try not to get wrong-footed by environmental changes (e.g. a new set of ONS population projections). Balance your approach – don’t be overly optimistic but don’t allow things to take the maximum time. Remember the correlation between duration and risk.

Risk is a fact of life

It’s going to be bumpy. No matter how hard you try you can’t eliminate the risk of your plan being delayed or work needing to be redone. Your risks increase a lot with the longer you spend making a plan. Make sure your timetable is savvy but don’t aim for perfection.

Challenge is inevitable

It is unlikely that the plan will pass through unchallenged, but don’t let this likelihood derail your progress. Be confident in your evidence, if it was the right evidence to support your plan, then it is the right evidence to defend a challenge.

Don’t ignore monitoring

Plan-making and monitoring are companion pieces. Monitoring is a really good way of demonstrating a plan’s value. This year’s monitoring is next year’s evidence.

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