

Bloomsbury Village: planning event transcript

Camden Blueprint Project

July 19th 2011



Camden Community Empowerment Network (CamdenCEN) is a network that brings together and supports the voluntary and community sector in planning and strategic decision making within the borough of Camden.

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Following a seminar about the Localism Bill hosted by Voluntary Action Camden (VAC) in March 2011 a number of attendees expressed an interest in setting up planning projects in their neighbourhoods. In response VAC is now working with some of those groups to explore how neighbourhood planning could work in Camden. The project is called Camden Blueprint. We will be trying out 'how to do things', learning, and sharing the findings. Bloomsbury Village residents are leading the way.

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Bloomsbury Village Plan: recommendations

The first Bloomsbury Village planning event took place on July 19th at St Georges Church. The aim of the event was to debate and define ‘the neighbourhood’, agree the type of forum that could lead a planning process, and start to build a bank of local skills and resources.

These recommendations are based on the information gathered at the planning event and are intended only as a means to get started. The emerging forum will need to be open and able to change.

Neighbourhood boundaries:

North: Great Russell Street.

South: High Holborn.

West: Bloomsbury Street.

East: Southampton Row, Vernon Place, Southampton Place

With option for phased planning with residential ‘village’ as phase 1.

Neighbourhood forum places:

11 residents; 1 local councillor (can rotate); 2 small business; 1 InMidtown BID; 1 major landowner; 1 community safety; 1 British Museum; 1 Bloomsbury Association; 1 friends of Bloomsbury Square; 1 Covent Garden Community Association; 1 St Georges Church. **Total 22.**

Rationale: the boundaries are based on the premise that residents and small business will have a majority on the stakeholder forum. The extended plan boundary would then give local residents direct influence over key development sites. The plan could be phased beginning with the core village and progressing southwards to High Holborn in a second phase.

The allocation of forum places is based on the most common findings from the forum workstation activities and discussion, and the relationships with the different boundary proposals. Other factors considered were opportunity for ‘doubling up’, e.g. resident and community association members, and matches between potential forum members and willingness and capacity to commit time and energy to the process as expressed via postcards and other means. In relation to these factors we would also recommend targeting some of those individuals to form the initial group.

Advisers and co-optees: a flexible group co-opted as projects progress. A database should be started with essential advisers (like borough planning officers). It might make sense in future for at least part of the advisers group to operate on a borough-wide basis. The setting up process should consider this.

Bank of resources: this started very well. This can now also be developed as a database alongside the (post)card index and grown as the project progresses. Postcards could continue to be distributed and collected by local associations and shops.

Outreach work: this could initially focus on how to involve the local Bangladeshi population.

A Museum Street design working group: the quality of Museum Street, particularly in respect of its location and linkage potential, appears to be of great importance to local residents. This would make an interesting, fun, and independently useful project to pursue in parallel with the forum and plan development processes.

Bloomsbury Village Plan: next steps

A report back meeting at the beginning of September to:

Set up the 'first try' forum: a shadow neighbourhood forum to oversee the production of a neighbourhood plan.

Sketch out an action plan: this might include deeper and wider involvement e.g. outreach work to specific groups; formation of working groups; arrangements to secure consistency with existing plans like the Local Development Framework and InMidtown BID; ideas for publicising and communicating.

And by December 31st

- ***A shadow forum – ready for approval?***
- ***An outline plan of local priorities***
- ***A neighbourhood planning blueprint***



Event overview

General

Approximately 40 people attended. This included a high percentage of local residents, some small business owners, representation from InMidtown BID / Terry Farrell Architects, involvement from Camden planning officers, and an observer from the Princes Foundation. There were no local councillors present, although one had previously said that they would try and attend. The venue, a Grade 1 listed Hawksmoor church, was being used for the first time for such an event. The size of the space presented some audibility problems (echo), toilets were limited, and the unsealed floor meant no food or drink in the space. Refreshments were provided after 8.30pm in the anteroom by the West End Women's Institute.

Space layout and conduct of event (see photographs)

Reception desk staffed with handouts including a summary of neighbourhood planning and card to fill in and return to assist with database and skills bank. Reception adjoined by table with basic information – Camden Local Development Framework, InMidtown Action Plan, Plain English Guide to the Localism Bill

Upon entering the space: 4 workstations – each with pews (!) and chairs. Two inviting participants to define the boundary of the neighbourhood and two inviting participants to pick their own community forum and advisors to the forum. Each workstation had a facilitator. Michael Parkes (community planner) and Emma Fenton (Camden planning policy officer) facilitated boundary definition workstations. Donna Turnbull (VAC) and Alex Charles (VAC) facilitated community forum workstations. In the middle were some chairs around a table and a box for comments and skills cards to be written and posted.

The event was informal (no top table of speakers).

7pm: Basic introductions provided from the workstations by Jim Murray, chair of the Bloomsbury Association, Michael Parkes and Donna Turnbull. This covered the Localism Bill, Neighbourhood Planning and the background, aims and activities for the event.

7.30 – 8pm: 8 or 9 people at each of the workstations

8pm – 8.30pm: groups swapped over so that everyone was involved in boundary definition and forum planning.

The activities

Defining neighbourhood boundaries

The Bloomsbury Association had provided a map with a suggested boundary as a starting point for discussion. Sections of the boundary were presented as questions for the exercise.

Workstation 1 (Michael Parkes) 7.30 - 8pm

- Unanimous agreement that Bloomsbury Square should be included.
- Victoria House – Southampton Row: 4 agreed it should be included. 4 less sure – largely because it is not residential. Though a few liked the idea of using main roads to define the boundary. One person was particularly concerned, not having yet addressed the composition of the Neighbourhood Forum, that if it were included (and thus a precedent set), then residents and small shopkeepers in Bloomsbury Village would be outnumbered on the Forum by big business interests.



- Land between Bloomsbury Way and High Holborn
- A strong case was made by a resident of Lytton Court for Barter Street to be included. He and his neighbours had strong links and affiliations with the Village north of Bloomsbury Way and most other participants supported this position. This was possibly because they wanted all the significant development sites, problems and opportunities to be physically included in the Neighbourhood Plan area and thus secure direct rather than indirect influence over them. This position was strongly advocated by the Chair of Bury Place Residents Association.
- Land between New Oxford Street and High Holborn
It was broadly for this last reason plus the presence of additional residential property similar in age and affiliations to the “Village” that led almost all the participants to agree to include all this land, including the Shaftesbury Theatre and the multi storey car park, within the Neighbourhood Plan area.

Overall conclusion

General agreement that the boundary should be defined by:-

- 1 Bloomsbury Street in the west
- 2 Great Russell Street in the north
- 3 Southampton Row / Vernon Place / Southampton Place in the east
- 4 High Holborn in the south



One minority position preferred the boundary to be tightly defined to the Village itself i.e. Bloomsbury Street / Great Russell Street / Bloomsbury Square (possibly including the Gardens) / Bloomsbury Way / New Oxford Street. As such it would be characterised by neighbours and good neighbourliness: local residents and small shopkeepers who worked and lived in the area, met each other on a regular basis, and cared greatly for its well being and its future.

Workstation 1 (Michael Parkes) 8pm - 8.30pm

Significantly this group of 8 people had just come from selecting their preferred community forum and since they had deliberately ensured a majority of local residents and small businesspeople on the forum, there was very little of the previous concern about defining the boundary widely rather than tightly. Consequently the boundary 1 – 4 set out above was unanimously endorsed.

Within the little time left over, some general discussion ensued around:

- Potential for a neighbourhood planning community forum to set up a Museum Street Design Working Group. One participant, a local shopkeeper, said local businesses there were considering an arch or similar feature and tourist information / direction was needed.
- What might happen if another neighbourhood was subsequently proposed at a later stage and overlapped the boundaries 1 – 4.

Workstation 2 (Emma Fenton) 7.30 - 8pm

This group appeared to unanimously agree to the inclusion of Bloomsbury Square and extension of the neighbourhood planning boundary to Southampton Row, thereby including Victoria House. Likewise they supported extension of the boundary south of New Oxford Street, including both the Shaftesbury Theatre, the car park, the major development site east of Museum Street, and land south of Bloomsbury Way including the existing Ministry of Defence premises. There was some debate as to whether the neighbourhood might be even larger, and at least two participants suggested extending it to Southampton Place. One person preferred Dyott Street as the western boundary rather than Bloomsbury Way

Workstation 2 (Emma Fenton) 8pm - 8.30pm

This group had discussions similar to Michael's 7.30 – 8pm session i.e. whether to tightly define as the residential Village or to extend wider – even to the whole of Bloomsbury. Some felt that the plan could be phased concentrating first on improving the amenities in the Village before moving further and wider, to address the major development sites south of Bloomsbury Way and east of Museum Street. A resident of Parnell House preferred Dyott Street as the western boundary rather than Bloomsbury Way.

Building a neighbourhood forum

Participants in this activity were asked to choose 21 cards representing neighbourhood stakeholders and another 6 cards to represent advisers and co-optees the forum and planning process might need. Blank cards were available for people to include additional or different stakeholders and advisers.

Workstation 3 (Alex Charles) 7.30pm - 8pm

- **26 Stakeholders to include:** 13x residents from Gilbert Place, Little Russell Street, Stedham Chambers, Coptic Street, Russell Chambers, Russell Court, Pied Bull Yard, Museum Chambers, Great Russell Mansions, Bedford Court Mansions, Friends of Russell Square, block on corner of Bury Place and Great Russell Street (Greek residents). 3x residents associations: Bloomsbury Association, Bury Place Residents Association, Friends of Bloomsbury Square. 1x major landowner (Duke of Bedford). 1x local councillor. 1x Safer Neighbourhoods Team. 1x Community Police Officer. 1x local faith group. 1x Shaftesbury Theatre. 1x British Museum. 1x non BID small business. 1x Ministry of Defence. 1x University of London.



- **14 Advisers / co-optees to include:** Dragon Hall Community Centre (youth interests). Arts and heritage adviser. Conservation officer. Borough planning officer. Mayor's office. Local Housing Associations. Camden Federation of Council Tenants. Voluntary Action Camden. Borough housing officer / cabinet member. Environment and sustainability adviser. Disability in Camden. Education, employment and skills adviser. Legal adviser. Public health officer.

Discussion and comments

The group found it difficult to decide who should be in the forum because they felt there were so many potential stakeholders. Bulk of discussion focussed on how to represent resident interests with general consensus that forum should start big and shrink as interests and ability to commit becomes clearer. It was felt that 50% of the forum should be residents, and this should be flexible allowing representatives from each association or area to take their turn. It was felt that this would boost attendance at meetings and lead to shared responsibilities. Ideally everyone living or working in the area would be represented.

The group hadn't yet completed the boundary exercise and residents from some areas outside the Village boundary were included in the forum. Another 5 residents groups or streets were added to the cards including one block which houses a mainly Greek community. Participants questioned why they couldn't pick 'one of everything' and have a huge forum. This raised questions about management and whether size would alter perceptions about credibility. It was agreed that it would be difficult to manage multiple agendas and too many conflicting viewpoints, but also recognised that Bloomsbury has a very mixed population and a forum would need to reflect that. It will be a challenge to collectively represent local interests.



It was noted that some associations represent 100+ people whilst others represent only a few residents. Forum membership needs to be proportionate. There was discussion about defining the areas people belong to as some areas have overlapping boundaries e.g. Coptic and Little Russell Streets could merge and have more representation. Instead of representation through tenants and residents groups it was suggested that it could be done by street. Time and commitment for meetings would be a major influence on the make up of the forum. It was noted that the most active groups would pursue greater involvement, and some people are better at getting things done, so one good representative might be better than two useless ones! Rotation was also an option.

The group thought it should be possible to have any number of advisers depending on the type of project they would like to run and what they hoped to achieve. It wasn't necessary to include everyone at the beginning as they could be drafted in as and when specific expertise was required. It was felt that BME interests would be represented by residents groups. The involvement of Dragon Hall in Covent Garden was suggested to advise on youth interests.

Workstation 3 (Alex Charles) 8pm – 8.30pm

This group did not use the cards to choose the neighbourhood stakeholders– instead the centre of the chart was divided into portions representing different stakeholder groups. Some cards were used for advisers, but it was felt that it was too early to be specific.

- Stakeholders to include: 50% residents (no quotas, whoever has the energy). 20-25% small business (2nd biggest priority) and some representation from InMidtown BID. 20-25% to include local health interests, other local professionals (for expertise and voluntary services), employees, councillor, British Museum, and police / safer neighbourhoods team.

- Advisers / co-optees: it was felt it was too early to be specific but should include advice / representation from legal experts, councillors, police, business, arts, conservation, and local landowners. Cards added were: Bloomsbury Square residents, Great Russell Street residents, employees, local professionals.

Discussion and comments



General consensus that 50% of forum should be residents to ensure their interests are represented. Participants struggled to define which resident groups to include but concluded that those who tended towards greater involvement would probably be more desirable representatives. Ideally each street would have some form of representation either through an association or from the street itself. It was noted that the most active residents don't necessarily represent the views of the majority of the resident population.

There was discussion about inclusion of landowners. The group were not initially keen to include larger landowners in the stakeholder group. However a local landowner participating in the exercise persuaded the group that it was better to engage with local landowners than ignore them. Successful engagement could have many potential benefits. A discussion followed about business interests and representation. It was felt that big business would be represented through the BID, but this representation should be limited to ensure residents and small business could maintain influence. One of the participants was suggested as a good person to lead on ensuring small business interests were well represented.

Initially participants didn't include the British Museum in the stakeholder group as they assumed their interests would be represented through the BID. After some debate, and despite the museum lying outside the boundary they had defined, it was decided their influence over the area was huge and could add credibility to the forum.

Local health interests were added as many doctors had moved out of the area. Local professionals were added as stakeholders because it was felt they could bring expertise. It was also noted that these professionals would probably be represented through the resident and business members of the forum. Police or safer neighbourhood representatives were felt to be important but there was concern about how much time / resources they would contribute. It was also considered important to have sufficient legal representation but some participants questioned how this would be paid for. One participant suggested there may be opportunity to involve legal sector professionals in pro bono type community work which would also benefit their corporate social responsibilities.

Workstation 4 (Donna Turnbull) 7.30pm – 8pm

- 21 Stakeholders to include: 7x residents. 1x local councillor. 1x council cabinet member for Communities, Regeneration and Equalities. 2x small business (non BID). 2x Bloomsbury Association. 1x St Georges Church. 2x major local landowners. 2x higher education establishments. 1x British Museum. 1x Shaftesbury Theatre. 1x community police.
- 7 advisers / co-optees to include: Borough planning officer or cabinet member. Environment and sustainability officer. 1x Covent Garden Community Association. 1x tourism and hotels. Conservation officer. Arts and heritage adviser.

Discussion and comments

The group stuck to 21 stakeholders but chose 7 instead of 6 advisers. They wrote 2 of their own stakeholder cards. One to replace the specific resident groups on the cards as it was felt that 7 resident places should be allocated but they should be responsible for nominating or choosing who. Bury Place Residents Association was also understood by some participants to cover other local streets. Their meetings are attended by people without their own residents associations. The other card was for 2 non specific higher education places. There was discussion about the diversity of education providers in the area, the inclusion of students as well as institutions, and who would be most appropriate. This was inconclusive.



Local councillors were seen as an important part of the stakeholder group because they had power. But it was noted that none of them had turned up to the event. The cabinet member for Communities, Regeneration and Equalities was felt to be important and was included as a stakeholder rather than an adviser.

Discussion about inclusion of the 'local BME interests' card resulted in it being put into the advisers group. Participants described difficulties in engaging local Bangladeshi residents which in the past has included working with other organisations in the borough and through outreach workers. Nothing had been successful. It was felt that advice, and different activities and methods were needed to engage those residents were required. Separate targeted activities were suggested to gather their views on the project.

The Shaftesbury Theatre was included as a stakeholder because it could potentially provide access to useful resources and connections, and work to promote the project. A 'tourism and hotels' card was written for the advisers group as these were seen as important elements of the area. Other elements seen as specific to planning in the area, and requiring advice and guidance, were conservation, arts and heritage.

Workstation 4 (Donna Turnbull) 8pm – 8.30pm

- 24 stakeholders to include: 1x Great Russell Street residents. 1x Museum Mansions residents (Great Russell Street). 1x Great Russell Mansions residents. 1x Little Russell Street flats. 2x Bury Place Residents Association. 2x Tavistock Chambers residents. 1x Pied Bull Yard residents. 1x Coptic Street residents. 1x Stedham Chambers residents. 1x Barter Street residents. 1x Grape Street residents. 2x Bloomsbury Association. 1x Friends of Bloomsbury Square. 2x local councillors. 1x small business (non BID). 2x local business in 7 Acres. 1x InMidtown BIDS. 1x British Museum. 1x Safer Neighbourhoods Team.
- 1 adviser / co-optee: University of London. This card was placed at the beginning of the discussion and it was later decided that it was too early to decide on advisers and co-optees.

Discussion and comments

The group focussed on stakeholders. 1 adviser card was placed early on but there was not enough time to return to this. It was also thought that the stakeholder group could decide their own advisers 'as they go along'.

The group were strongly in favour of a resident dominated group and added a number of other residential areas to the cards already on offer. 13 of 24 places were for residents with another 3 for neighbourhood groups run by local residents. The group had already participated in the neighbourhood boundary exercise and continued to discuss boundaries in relation to the forum needed. It was noted that there were development sites along the boundaries that would impact on the neighbourhood and this needed to be considered.

Business inclusion was thought important, particularly small businesses, but large local landowners were considered then excluded.

Setting up a bank of resources

People were asked to fill in postcards with 'offers' and deposit them in the 'bank'.

The resources gathered included: leafleting, spreading the word, taking responsibility for specific areas of the neighbourhood, general offers of help where needed, teaching skills, art and design skills, public art experience, commitment, in depth knowledge of the area, bright ideas, a meeting room, architecture skills, film making.....



Some of the lessons learned for Camden Blueprint

- Venue not ideal but valuable in terms of the precedent and status afforded to the event.
- Well attended, 35 – 40 people which is a manageable number, and testimony to the tremendous efforts of the Bloomsbury Association and Bury Place Residents Association (300 emails and 500 leaflets) and word of mouth.
- Outreach is required to missing or underrepresented groups and interests.
- Genuinely participatory / independent / impartial – encouraged involvement.
- Ideally all 4 facilitators should have been from the voluntary and community sector.
- Conflicting interests and ideas were sometimes apparent but overall cooperation and consensus characterised the activities. Independent facilitation for activities, and guidance / enabling for the project is essential i.e. no vested interest in the project area.
- Absence of any local councillor – not ideal.
- 8 at each workstation is an excellent number allowing for good discussion, reflection and the full participation of all involved. Layout and organisation worked well.
- Clear concern that the neighbourhood plan should be in the overall control of local residents and small businesses and not be dominated by big business interests.
- On this assumption / premise, participants preferred to define the neighbourhood boundary relatively widely to ensure direct rather than indirect control over existing and possible future (MoD ?) development sites and other problem / opportunity areas.
- May be some argument for the plan addressing how to improve amenities in the Village (between Great Russell St and New Oxford Street / Bloomsbury Way) first, before going on to look at the wider area to High Holborn and Southampton Place / Southampton Row.
- Clear local enthusiasm and support for the project. The offers in the resource bank illustrate this brilliantly.
- There should have been a re assembly for thanks and next steps.
- The idea of neighbourhood planning was new for some attendees and they did not find the introduction explanatory enough.



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