

The Bloomsbury village plan

A promising early neighbourhood planning exercise is underway in Bloomsbury. *Planning in London* plans to follow its progress starting with this 'blog' by Jim Murray of the Bloomsbury Association

The enactment of the provisions set out in the Localism Bill will, for the first time in my professional life, "mainstream" community planning into the statutory processes of Town Planning. Previously, community based initiatives ranging from the Calthorpe Project on Grays Inn Road, to major initiatives such as the Westway and Coin Street Community Development Trusts, have been "one – off" campaigns. For every such success, I know there were many times more partial or total failures.

The right of local communities to prepare their own Neighbourhood Plan recognises the obvious stake many communities, rich and poor, right across London, have in the future of their local streets, shops, and other facilities. At last planners and developers will not be able to ignore the legitimate interests of the voluntary and community sectors (VCS). Hopefully genuine involvement and partnership working will be at the heart of local development plan and control. And as a result, fewer disadvantaged communities and small businesses will find themselves "squeezed out" of their neighbourhoods.

In Camden, Voluntary Action Camden's Community Empowerment Network in partnership with the Bloomsbury Association, have decided to try to learn how this might work. Over the period June to December 2011, they will, in commendably pragmatic style, develop a "Camden Blueprint" learning lessons along the way as they, with my volunteer help, attempt to set up a "first try" Community Forum and outline Neighbourhood Plan. This may well be the first such initiative in the UK and this blog will chart our progress on this project.

Our first meeting was held in St Georges Church, Bloomsbury Way on July 19th. A full record is available on both the



Camden Community Empowerment Network and Bloomsbury Association websites.

The meeting was designed to secure local resident and other input into:-

- Building a database and skills bank
- Getting agreement on a specific boundary for the Neighbourhood
- Getting the elements of a Neighbourhood Planning Forum clearly established.

Early lessons learned around what / how to do and not to do, have been logged in to the Blueprint. Certainly, based on the experience on the day, and from subsequent feedback, I think we can definitely say it was a signal success.

Approximately 40 people turned up, the large majority being local residents. Other attendants included local business interests, officers from Camden Planning Dept, Inmidtown BID, Farrell Associates.

As an event organised not by the public or private sectors addressing matters of relatively local interest, this project has

already demonstrated VCS ability to publicise / mobilise credible local attendance, enthuse and motivate, and secure a very prestigious venue (Hawksmoors St Georges church) for a local event. As a matter of principle, it was deliberately designed to be far more genuinely participatory than is conventionally the case.

Skillsbank / Database

As is typically the case in any part of London the range of skills volunteered ranges from cake making to film making. This is just the beginning and already we have links to the Bartlett School and many other independent sources of advice and assistance

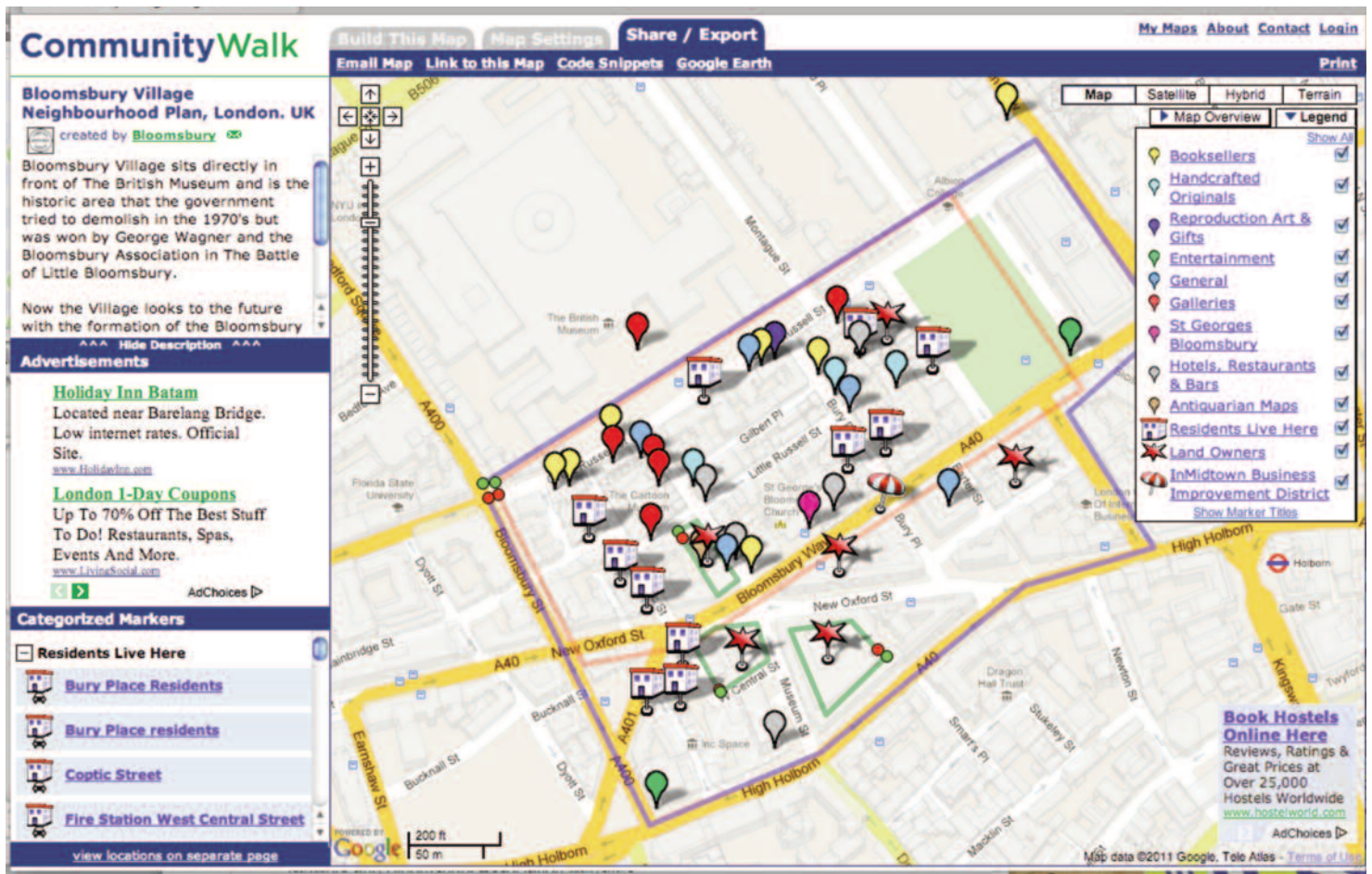
Neighbourhood Boundary Definition

This clearly, is critical. Through local contacts / membership, the Bloomsbury Association had already identified Bloomsbury Village as the notional site for this planning project. This is because it is a distinctive, tight knit area of housing

Contact: bvillage@bloomsburyassociation.org.uk

Web site: <http://tinyurl.com/BloomsburyVillagePlan>

Web Map: <http://www.communitywalk.com/map/index/186842>



(including much social housing) and small shops and other businesses, mostly lying between the British Museum and Bloomsbury Way. Immediately to the south of Bloomsbury Way are a number of major medium / long term development sites

The Village seems to me to be of a sensible, credible, manageable, representative, size and character to undertake this project in the time and with the extremely limited resources available.

Four workstation opportunities allowed all the attendants at the event to participate in drawing up an agreed boundary for the Neighbourhood. Questions were asked around a large scale plan of the Village and surrounding area as to how, where and why, the boundary should be drawn.

The product of this work is included in the Report of findings / recommendations to be put to the next Project Meeting early in September. I was initially surprised and then impressed at the outcome and the logic behind it. Put simply, as long as local residential and small business interests are in the majority on the Community Forum they wanted to include non-residential development sites south of Bloomsbury Way / New Oxford Street to High Holborn. As a result the Forum would have direct (in partnership with the local planning authority) rather than indirect influence

over future development of these sites. A first neighbourhood planning phase might well, however, address the immediate needs and priorities of the Village itself.

Neighbourhood Planning Community Forum

The same 4 workstation arrangements were provided for this part of the Event. We had fun with a game! "Pick your own Community Forum" involved participants picking their own hand of Potential Forum Membership Cards up to a total of 21 out of a possible maximum 60. Cards covered all the local stakeholders - residents, small business, councillors, landowners, community safety, Inmidtown, British Museum, Bloomsbury Association etc. Once they were satisfied with their total 21, their pack was secured with a rubber band and placed in the Bloomsbury "bull's-eye". A similar exercise was carried out for possible advisers and co-optees such as Planning Officers. In general however many participants felt this might well be left until the project was further advanced and specific needs for advice and assistance became clearer.

Not unsurprisingly and, given the "bottom - up" nature of the project, quite fittingly in my opinion, the Forum make up which will be recommended to the next meeting provides for resi-

dents and local small business interests to be in overall majority. Even though no councillors attended, it was still considered desirable to have one councillor on the Forum - possibly on a rotating basis.

Next steps

A second meeting was held in September. We hope to set up a "first try" or shadow Forum which can then oversee a 3 - 4 month Action Plan of

- wider and deeper involvement e.g. specific outreach, place check and possibly a planning for real type exercise
- formation of Working Groups e.g. Museum Street streetscape design
- regular liaison with borough planners and Inmidtown officers to ensure conformity with their Development Framework and Plan. ■

