



Skills Audit for a neighbourhood plan

“your community is your resource”

Writing a neighbourhood plan can sometimes feel like an overwhelming, time-consuming and complex task. However, you – the community – are your greatest resource. Each of you will have skills that you have developed in professional, amateur or social contexts that you can bring to the process.

Taking an audit of group skills at the start of the process can be a way to work more effectively, manage time and encourage more people to take part in the neighbourhood plan process. Understanding who is involved can also be a way to draw out specific perspectives on the place where you live and the places you are planning for.

A. Time Audit

The best way to start this audit is to think about how much time you have to get involved with the process. Just a rough estimate at first. You might want to commit a few hours per week, a few hours per month or take part in specific ways. For example, you might want to undertake specific tasks, but not attend regular meetings. So, we need to start by getting a rough idea of the time people have to spend on a neighbourhood plan and the ways in which they would like to be involved.

B. Skills Audit

The second audit is to consider the specific skills that you have personally and would like to bring to the preparation of the neighbourhood plan. We have identified five key skill areas — see following pages — but you may want to suggest more.



1. The Organiser

If you are an Organiser, you will take the lead on strategic development of the plan. For example, deciding on time scales, who does what, when and how objectives can be delivered.

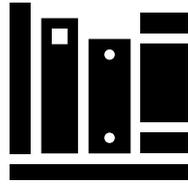
The key skills you will need are being organised generally, being able to think about how long certain tasks will take, being able to suggest who is the best person or people to complete these tasks and how to oversee the delivery of the tasks.

A good team of organisers will be able to work together, listen to feedback about how things are going and be prepared to change direction if things need to be adjusted. You need to have your own ideas but be prepared to change them.

A team organiser could be someone with experience in project management in their professional career. Or a be an organiser in their social circles too – for example, somebody on the village fête committee or the chief organiser of kids' parties! The ability to multi-task, consider several complex dynamics, whilst also being an approachable, inclusive “people person” are all skills you will use.

Target Outcome

The end point for the Organiser will be to set up and manage the running of the project, assembling the different task groups and ensuring the various parts all fit together at the right time.



2. The Researcher & Analyst

There are several key research stages in the writing of the neighbourhood plan. One of the first research tasks will be a collective mapping task, which will generate some key observations and insights.

Therefore, the first job for the research group is to look at the resulting map and begin to analyse the kinds of things people have noticed such as the repetition of themes or the regular identification of problem areas (e.g. a road junction that is difficult to navigate by bicycle or on foot being identified again and again) as well as specific positives that are picked up on (e.g. a well-loved park or civic square also being identified multiple times). A researcher and analyst will need to look at these maps and begin to identify key research elements. As a researcher and analyst, you might end up with themes or threads.

Themes and threads are general observations about how a place “feels” or what its “atmosphere” or “character” is like. There are lots of factors that contribute to our experience of a place, from personal memory and association through to history and culture to pop-up events and festivals.

The mapping exercise will give you a sense of how people feel about the place. It is the job of the research group to try and articulate what it is that people like, what draws them here, what works well and what could be improved and made to work better. Through walking and observing, you may be able to pinpoint several key themes that create an overall picture of the place.

You might then begin to ask questions like: Why are people proud of this town? What makes them stay? Where would you go to walk on a sunny day? Where would you take a stranger? What is the romantic place here? Where would people avoid?

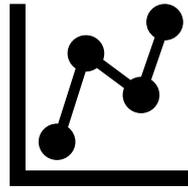
Asking these questions will underpin the key thinking in your neighbourhood plan that enables you to identify the sense of place unique to your plan. To be a “themes and threads” researcher you will need to have a natural curiosity and approach the exercise as a place detective. Be prepared to make imaginative connections between what you see on the street, a line in a book, a painting in the museum and local stories and folklore.

[Jennie writes: I am thinking about my friend who is nosey and wants to understand why something is the way it is. She asks loads of questions, she is curious about the world and always coming up with crazy theories about things. The thing is she is usually right!]

Maybe you are somebody with an interest in culture and history or architecture and can make connections between the design of a building, the context in which it was built and how it is used today? Or perhaps you enjoy walking around and soaking up the general atmosphere, just “people watching”. Well, now is the time to take those people watching skills and ask some deeper questions.

Target Outcome

The end point for the Researcher & Analyst will be able to talk about the place with confidence, how it has developed, how it feels now and how they would like it to feel in the future.



3. The Facts & Stats Person

You work quite differently to the two types of people above. You are somebody who needs to deal with the facts, what you see in front of you. Your research will underpin the evidence needed for the writing of the neighbourhood plan as your work will help ground the more poetic aspects of place with accurate data.

For example, whilst the threads and themes might talk about all the beautiful trees, you will provide a factual analysis of how many trees there are and what varieties. You can provide robust evidence about the place that you collect from online research, official council statistics and other published documents.

The factual research you will undertake will use the initial collective mapping exercise as a starting point. It will then follow up on specific questions, for example looking at biodiversity, heritage, building density, population, planning permissions, house prices, housing need and so on.

Do we need to tell you, the facts and stats people, what characteristics you have? Of course not... you know who you are.

Target Outcome

The end point for the Facts & Stats person is to produce a range of detailed documents that tell us what is happening in your plan area now, ranging from elderly care needs through to primary school provision, biodiversity through to heritage and culture. And everything in between.



4. The Engager

The Engager will focus on talking to the public. This is the third part of the research process: The Researcher & Analyst identifies themes and threads that reveal the big picture and the Facts & Stats person grounds these ideas and presents some robust evidence. Now, the Engager tests these emerging theories out on the public.

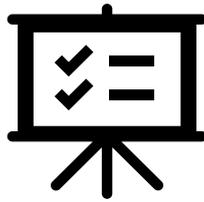
The Engager could be involved in tasks such as one-to-one meetings (either face-to-face or online), organising public events that invite participation to help test out the research.

The work of the Engager is to reach out to people, listen and record a range of voices and perspectives. You will also deliver the ideas that the team are working on. You will be good at talking to people. You will also be able to do a bit of public relations and marketing so that you can get people to turn up and take part.

You might be the person who knows everyone locally. You might work in a busy shop or cafe and hear all the gossip and be able to spread the word about events. Or you might be somebody who is a good listener, is able to talk to people one-to-one and feedback their thoughts and responses.

Target Outcome

The end point of the Engager is to be able to reach out and communicate the neighbourhood plan to the wider community and gather feedback and responses. Your research will add the voices of those living and working in the plan area to the draft and final document, giving a human element to work and substantiating what is being proposed by the group. It is also your responsibility to bring the wider community with you on this journey.



5. The Presenter

The job of the Presenter is to oversee all the work listed above and understand the evolving process. The presentation element of a neighbourhood plan involves combining photographs, diagrams, maps, plans and other illustrations with text. The results from the Researcher & Analyst, the Facts & Stats person and the Engager will all be fed towards the Presenter who will package and assemble the work into a coherent and compelling story.

The Presenter will help structure the document using chapter headings (perhaps based around the threads and themes?) and support these individual sections of the document with data (from the facts and stats team) and with evidence of public support (from the work of the engagement team).

The Presenter will identify where a visual graphic is needed to support the document. This is important as a very wordy neighbourhood plan with little visual interest will fail to capture the imagination of the public. So, places in the document where a picture, a drawing, a map or a plan can help communicate the ideas will be another job for the Presenter. Is there a local visual artist that can contribute existing works for inclusion in the plan? Or even prepare bespoke images?

A key role of the Presenter will be to write the policy text – the bit that really matters in a neighbourhood plan – in a robust manner, formulated in a way that can pass examination. The policy text is a critical component of the plan as it is these sections that will be used to manage development proposals in the plan area following the plan's making after referendum. By “manage the development proposals” we mean how the plan is used to determine whether a planning application gets refused or approved.

Target Outcome

The end point for the Presenter will be to have a draft plan in place and ready for the first major milestone of the project, the Pre-Submission Consultation (Reg. 14). This will include a front cover, a contents pages and a schedule of draft planning policies, each supported by plans, maps and photos as appropriate.

It is also likely that there will be an associated set of evidence papers (e.g. “working” documents that capture the research data, the engagement surveys and all other background materials, as appropriate) that will underpin the plan as a whole.