**Notes on setting up a Neighbourhood Forum for Lee**

What is a Neighbourhood Forum?

1. It is a community body open to everyone who lives, works or has an interest in an area
2. Can strengthen the community’s voice in local planning  (only planning issues)

These notes cover:

1. What can a Neighbourhood Forum in Lee do over and beyond what the Lee Green Assembly and Amenity groups can do?
2. How a Forum would work alongside the Assemblies, amenity groups and Lee Green’s Local Plan
3. Concerns regarding having a forum in Lee.

‘Hard’ Planning benefits

1. Forums can make Neighbourhood plans which are legally binding planning policies. A ‘neighbourhood plan’ covers planning of all sites in the area and covers anything planning related from
2. Protecting green space and views to design principles and has the same legal force as the local authority's core strategy.
3. As part of the plan, communities can design ‘site allocations’ for sites they want developed. Thame did this, including where public space should be, housing density, numbers of houses, specific space allocated for community facilities and for potential new primary school and so on. These policies were upheld when the sites were developed. It must be done in dialogue with the landowner and agreed by the council, but importantly, the community allocated differently to the developers and their vision was the one that succeeded. Site allocations are legal planning policies. It could be done here for the railway sidings for example.
4. ‘Design briefs and design usages’ can be included for plans for sites that are currently being used but which are expected to be developed within the life of the plan. For example, if the plan runs for 20 years and it is expected that Sainsbury’s, the will redevelop within that time, a design brief for the site can be included in the plan.
5. A plan can address the infrastructure implications of development. Eg Thame’s plan allocated the need for a new primary school and where it would go, working alongside the council.
6. Forums can prioritise how 25% of community infrastructure levy is spent in the area.
7. Alongside the plan, through a related process, ‘development orders’ can be made – ie giving ‘pre application’ approval to certain sites if they are developed in certain ways – again, this must be done in dialogue with landowners but it can encourage developers to develop and engage. This could for example be done for the Vauxhall Garage.
8. ‘Community right to build’ (type of development order) allows for example, the community itself to fund and build affordable housing or community facilities without needing planning permission. Communities can do this outside of a forum though sometimes the forums activities lead naturally to the desire and people being found to do it.
9. ‘Community right to bid’ allows communities to develop business plans and raise funds to buy properties and use them for community uses. It is often used for pubs and would be an option in theory for the New Tigers Head, although that has a planning application in on it now so it may be too late. It is often used for underused pubs. Communities can do this outside of a forum though sometimes the forums activities lead naturally to the desire and people being found to do it.

‘Soft’ Community benefits

1. "Soft" benefits of people coming together cross-ward and cross-boundaries to add to the excellent work already happening in each area by improving communication and catching things that fall between the cracks between boundaries.
2. Where non-planning evidence of community desires exists, it can be included in the plan as a ‘recommendation’, meaning it does not have legal weight, but at least getting into the view of councillors and planners. For example, Fortune Green and West Hampstead’s plan includes recommendations on increased air quality monitoring, increased trees and maintenance and better pre-application developer/community consultations.

How effective can forums be?

1. Plans must be realistic, achievable and not restrict future development. They must be made in collaboration with landowners and councils
2. Forums are new (2010). Some councils are suspicious of them and can make their functioning difficult, for example, delaying the validation of applications. However, other councils are grateful that the community are doing in depth planning work that they do not have time or money to do – highlighting potential sites and outreach consulting with the community for example – and being very helpful to forums.  Lewisham has an excellent reputation in supporting forums so far. Greenwich is untested, though their officers have met with us and been encouraging
3. Non collaborative landowners can make it harder - eg Persimmon homes employed barristers to make representations to Coton Forward’s plan to the examiner and got the green spaces policy changed.
4. Once a property has a planning application on it a neighbourhood plan cannot cover it so it is too late for Leegate. If a neighbourhood plan had been in place before a planning application was submitted it could have set out clear criteria to guide its future development through a site allocation or a development order or through wider area wide policies. Thame for example states where open spaces should be, density of housing, minimum sizes of garages and so on. Since Leegate is a strategic site, the plan could not clash with the council’s site allocation plans for it. The council’s site allocation was vague enough that the community could have added to it though, such in in Thame where Site Allocations specified where open spaces should be. Importantly, the existence of a forum would have allowed those in Greenwich and Blackheath have been more involved in the Leegate conversation.
5. Here are two examples of where plans have been effective:
6. Upper Eden: Plan allowed housing to be built next to existing single dwellings – something not permitted in the council’s non-strategic plans.  The building has happened, unchallenged
7. Thame: Plan specified where and how sites were to be used for new housing and amenities. These plans were different from what developers had originally planned for the sites. Building has now taken place in line with the plan.

  Funding available

1. Forum funding;
2. Locality funding of £8k per forum plus another £6k for some forums (Lee likely to qualify\*) Funding is available to bodies that are or will become forums and parish councils. Locality funding available for anything a forum can justify it needs in its application, eg website design, engagement events, technical advice, hiring consultants. We are currently in a three year £22.5m 3 year funding programme and the current government has said it plans to continue support to neighbourhood planning.
3. Forums can also apply to Big Lottery Fund's Awards for All.

We have already utilised the support at no cost to us of Tony Burton an expert on neighbourhood planning, forums and community engagement and been on free training courses. There are also networks that we can engage with.

1. Council Funding: The Council can apply for funds of up to £30,000 per forum from central Government to cover things like the cost of the referendum and independent examination. It also appears able to claim up to £100,000 for area designations and  £25,000 for forum designations for up to 20 designations pa.

\* Eg High growth areas, Deprived areas, Populations of over 25,000, Groups preparing a neighbourhood development order

Lewisham’s planning department has said that Lewisham has sufficient funds to cover their costs.

Technical Advice available from AECOM in a manner most appropriate to what’s needed eg

* Housing Advice and Assessment
* Heritage and Character Assessment
* Site Options and Assessment
* Strategic Environmental Assessment
* Environmental Impact Assessment
* Habitats Regulations Assessment
* Urban Design and Masterplanning
* Viability of Proposals
* Evidence base and policy review
* Facilitation support
* Plan health check prior to examination.

Democracy
It’s a democratic process

1. Area designation is consulted on by councils within the area, and also to those just on the borders of the area
2. Membership is open to everyone who lives, works or has an interest in the area including elected representatives
3. Steering group aim to be representative and voted in yearly
4. Plans go to independent examination to assess whether they are in line with national and local strategic policies and evidence gathered from the community of what they want. Examiners also assess whether the plan contributes to the achievement of sustainable development
5. Plan goes to area-wide vote, same as local election

Local councillors work hard to engage the community in local democracy and the forum will need to do the same. As with local and general elections there is no minimum turnout required, however the examiner will not pass a test that does not show community engagement and those plans that have gone to referendum so far have had high levels of voter turnout.

Regarding boundaries, the amount of community consultation on forum boundaries compars favourably with the amount of community consultation done when political boundaries are drawn up.

Regarding planning legislation, compare the list above to the way current planning legislation is written: For example, Leegate’s site allocation was drafted by planning officers and circulated for comment in 2010 to those who had registered themselves as consultees. Few people in Lee Green and Blackheath wards have registered and nobody in Sutcliffe and Middle Park has. No local people made representations on the plans. Two people who were registered to be consulted said they did not submit representations because the draft site allocation was vague and suggested Leegate would be developed 2021-2024. The result was that the site allocation, the document that St Modwen was obliged to adhere to in developing its plans, had little/no local input compared to the amount it could have had under a forum.

What are the concerns about having a forum in Lee?

1. Since we first suggested the forum a lot of the sites we were considering have already started to be developed  or appear about to be – the Tigers Head, London and Quadrant building, Greek Taverna, Vauxhall Garage, and so are too late to include in a plan.
2. London is in unprecedented building right now – if we leave it too long, it will be too late to have a say.
3. Having a forum that was not cross ward or cross borough would reduce the benefits since the improved communication benefit would be lost and also there could not be a coordinated approach to land and sites that sit on the ward edges, such as everything in Lee Green town centre, Lee High Road, Hither Green sidings. We believe it’s a good to have different forum and ward boundaries because no boundary is perfect – but each body can help the other where there are issues that fall through the cracks. For example, people in Greenwich and Blackheath were not leafleted by Lee Green Assembly flyers of St Modwen about Leegate’s negotiations and so were largely unaware of what was being proposed. Equally, where issues fall through the forum’s boundaries they can be caught by the wards. Wards and the Forum must work closely together.
4. It is a huge amount of work – do we want to do it/ can it be resourced? This will be helped by groups pooling resources and working together
5. How can existing groups ensure their work is not being repeated or overridden by the forum? By members of the group joining and inputting to the forum and lines of communication being open between groups
6. How does the forum interact with the Local Plan?
7. Where the local plan relates to planning, it can be incorporated into the plan, giving it more legal weight
8. Where the local plan does not relate to planning it can be incorporated as ‘recommendations’ in the plan, giving it a place in a document that will be read by planning officers

What a Forum has to do

1. Have the neighbourhood area recognised
2. Have the neighbourhood forum recognised
3. Engage with local people and businesses to establish priorities and identify volunteers
4. Build the evidence base
5. Draft the plan – vision, objectives, policies, proposals, sites, projects
6. Prioritise – and avoid the plan becoming AOB
7. Engage the community in a referendum

We have already achieved a great deal:
We have clarified why a plan is needed, Publicised the intention to produce a plan, Identified and contacted key local partners, Spoken to the two relevant Local Planning Authorities and we continue to engage people in the forum at every opportunity

We have started to identify the neighbourhood area and are consulting on it.

Once the formal application is submitted to Lewisham and Greenwich Local Authorities they have 20 weeks to complete the process.

Here are some milestones to set up a forum:

**Neighbourhood area**
Consult on and determine Neighbourhood Area, Submit Neighbourhood Area application
Local Authority to Consultation on Neighbourhood Area  (6 weeks)
Decision on Neighbourhood Area (within 20 weeks)

**Neighbourhood forum**
Set up and promote Neighbourhood Forum, Submit forum proposal to Local Planning Authority
Local Authority to consult on Neighbourhood Forum     (6 weeks)
Decision on Neighbourhood Forum by Local Planning Authority (within 20 weeks)

**Community engagement and involvement**
Publicity, Engage local partners, Pre-submission consultation,

**Independent examination**
Local planning Authority appoints examiner, Examination, Examiners report published

**Referendum**
Publication of pre-Referendum information and documents, Referendum
Publication of Referendum decision, Neighbourhood plan is ‘made’

Next Step: Have the area Recognised
Consultation to date:

Meetings:

1. 26 local groups invited plus councillors. 53 people from 18 groups came. Asked for feedback on map – majority chose cross-ward and borough
2. Second meeting advertised through local groups and assembly – 59 came - majority favoured the forum and the proposed boundaries. However some points were raised which we’ve tried to address:
	* Going too far into/ must include all of Lee Green ward
	* Need to go further north towards Blackheath/don’t include Cator estate

We have further consulted by walking the boundaries, and attending meetings of Blackheath Assembly, Hither Green Community Association, Sutcliffe & Middle Park and Lee Green and Blackheath councillors, Lee Manor Society, Manor Park users, Local Plan group, Courtland Estate residents, Friends and Users of Manor House Library, Blackheath Society, Page Estate residents and Manor House Garden Festival and the Lee Green Assembly.

**Let us know if you want to find out more or get involved**

1. Give us your feedback – email leeforum@outlook.com

2. Be informed via email, website, twitter, facebook, assemblies, local events, updates to amenity groups and assemblies

3. Email us leeforum@outlook.com

4. Be a proposer

6. Be a member of the steering group

To find out more: www.mycommunity.org.uk