

## **Built environment, open spaces and public realm in the Bankside Neighbourhood Plan**

This paper outlines some of the issues that underpin the theme of Built environment, open spaces and public realm in the proposed Bankside Neighbourhood Plan (NP).

The NP will detail development priorities for Bankside, recognising priorities that might be different from those of other neighbourhoods within the Southwark Local Plan. As part of the wider system of land use planning the NP will offer a strategic vision that understands the planning context and responds to the opportunities for sustainable development in Bankside.

At this stage discussion for this theme has focussed on public realm and open spaces. The quality of public realm and open spaces plays a key role in creating a positive experience in Bankside for those who live, work and visit here. They are crucially important for the health and wellbeing of individuals and businesses alike.

This scoping paper considers the current characteristics of the neighbourhood with regards to this theme, suggests what is working and not working and identifies the evidence that we have or might still need. In section 2 it begins to explore principles or policy areas that might be included in a vision for the Bankside NP, but the drafting of that vision and objectives will follow later. Once the neighbourhood has considered what it wants to achieve – a shared vision – it is then possible to decide what mechanisms will best enable it to do this.

### **1. The current picture**

Bankside Neighbourhood Plan area is centred on the North West of Southwark. The Forum for the plan has not yet agreed the boundaries, the character of the area will be very much influenced by this decision as one of the proposed areas excludes the majority of the parks in the ward.

All the boundaries have a certain degree of permeability as they link to neighbouring areas.

Like much of central London, this NP ‘rectangle’ is characterised by areas both of dense residential development and, during the daytime, dense employment and tourism activity. However it also has some very individual amenity characteristics – in particular the river walk and a patchwork of green spaces including much loved pocket parks, small squares and churchyards. Overall there may be a deficiency of open space, but the green spaces that are here can be considered to be a remarkable resource.

The main east–west routes through the area – particularly the river walk for pedestrians and Southwark Street for motorists – can become congested at certain times of day. Much of this activity has resulted from the relatively recent commercial and cultural developments in the northern part of the NP area. The area sees an additional 60,000 people per day who work in the area, and between 6–12 million visitors a year. There are public policy ambitions to strengthen the north–south connections within the area in order to:

- relieve some of this congestion
- draw the economic benefits of the tourist activity and those who are employed in the area north of Southwark Street further south into the NP area
- encourage activity and investment into the southern parts of the borough.

This aspiration is also enshrined in Bankside Urban Forest, the long–term strategy to improve the public realm between the riverside and Elephant and Castle. Encouraging investment in public spaces through a coordinated vision that joins together individual projects aims to help spread the benefits of regeneration away from the riverside.

#### **1.1 What’s working**

- Bankside has some distinctive open spaces, from the amenity of the riverside walk and Tate landscape to the more hidden, historic courts and alleys and their contemporary equivalents now being opened up through newer development sites. New development in the area has brought some additional investment in open space and the public realm.

- Bankside has many committed individuals and organisations that champion the importance of open space and the public realm in the area, including Better Bankside, Bankside Open Spaces Trust, Southwark Living Streets and Bankside

Residents' Forum. These organisations play an important role in helping to address the deficiency of open space in the neighbourhood. They offer a valuable resource to Southwark Council for effective partnership working and encouraging/promoting sustainability in a densely packed urban environment, to local businesses in ensuring a high quality environment for their commercial activity and to residents by leading initiatives such as community and food gardens that offer opportunities to empower and educate, as well as enhancing the environment and streetscape.

Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST) has been a unique focus for the local community championing parks, gardens, and open spaces since its formation in 2000 with the vision that 'wherever you are in Bankside you will see something green'. Local people and businesses working with BOST have transformed previously run down parks into oasis of green and calm that bring respite from city life to thousands each year.

- Bankside Urban Forest is an established vision for the area, encouraging the linking up both of investment in the public realm and the physical layout of streets and spaces themselves. It has already won funding to deliver on this vision and is currently working on projects across Bankside.
- Southwark Council's Open Space Strategy is setting out a welcome vision on which the NP can build, establishing an emphasis on linking key open spaces and other amenities into a network of pedestrian, cyclist and wildlife-friendly routes.
- Funded by the GLA, survey work is being carried out by Better Bankside and Team London Bridge BIDs towards the All London Grid SPD, auditing existing green infrastructure and identifying opportunities to increase it through the measures such as the retrofit of green roofs and walls.
- There has been much previous investment in strategies and studies (see below).

## **1.2 What's not working**

- Bankside has a recognised deficiency of green space, especially in terms of Local parks and open spaces up to 2ha in size, typical of a dense urban environment within central London. Southwark Council's Open Space Strategy (OSS) confirms that Bankside is one of the areas "in greatest need for good quality open space". Already well below the standard for park provision, this is expected to fall with anticipated population growth. That calculation does not take into account the additional rise in the numbers of employees in the area.

- Bankside is also deficient in access to nature – as noted in the Mayor's London Plan.

- All of the small open spaces and pocket parks are greatly used by residents and visitors. However their use comes in peaks and troughs, resulting in sometimes crowds and sometimes emptiness. Additionally, many people, particularly by local workers, do not know of the existence of parks two minutes away from their door. Furthermore, on sunny days some parks are already beyond their capacity, if there is to be an increase in usage, we will need an increase in capacity. There is a need to overcome barriers that exist to making connections between the existing open spaces and public realm, such as poorly designed and located crossing points on busy streets, poorly lit or dirty viaduct arches etc.

- Southwark's own Housing land provides important areas of green both to enjoy and to pass by however it is all categorized as ultimately being available for development along with the blocks it forms part of (LBS Character area appraisal). While not designated, the non-Southwark land is also equally vulnerable. However, new residential decent home standards mean increasingly developments will have to include green space.

There is a debate to be had around whether Housing land 'belongs' to the local residents or should be opened up to wider access (dog walkers may be an issue here). Some of the land designated as available is currently used by residents as food gardens or children's play areas. There is an aspiration to formalise some of this housing land as permanent park for the increasing resident and business population.

- Levels of car ownership are relatively low but the area suffers from high volumes of through-traffic. Within the NP area, Southwark Street is a particularly hostile environment for pedestrians and cyclists; it discourages walking and increases pressure on local public transport amongst people who choose to make journeys by bus rather than on foot. Other smaller streets (eg Gt Guildford St itself) are also vehicle dominated with an excess of carriageway which permits high vehicle speeds and creates an intimidating environment for the numerous pedestrians in the area.

- There is a lack of parking for motorbikes, which are currently categorised as motor vehicles and come within council policy for no additional provision of parking.

- Many employees in Bankside live in other areas of the borough, often to the south. It is important that funding from s106 and the CIL are not all diverted to those areas when many of their residents work in Bankside and would benefit from investment in the public realm here.

- The plethora of recent strategies and studies has not been brought together to give any coherent policy context. Need to add the list from the earlier presentation.

There is currently very little in planning policy to protect parks, or any open spaces from shading by insensitive developments to the south.

### **1.3 What further evidence might help move towards priorities for the vision?**

This is an early list of questions, following a loose discussion which we will use as a base to decide priorities for future discussion.

Some of these questions seek quantitative or qualitative answers, others enquire about the scope of policy.

- How many people visit/work in the area? (Better Bankside collects weekly data on pedestrian footfall counters on Southwark Street, the Riverside, Great Guildford Street, Union Street, etc)
- How do people who live, work and visit here use these spaces? What are the unmet needs in the current provision of open space and the public realm?
- What is the relative quality of the experience of using those streets and how does that impact the decisions people make about how/where to make their journeys through the area? (E.g. if the experience of Southwark Street is so unpleasant, would it be preferable to catch a bus rather than to walk along it?)

How can we explore the importance of light to our population?

- What is the preferable methodology for assessing the quality of parks and public realm? How qualitative is the perception of quality? (Bankside Urban Forest is working with LSE Masters students to assess the ways in which residents and employees value the qualities of public spaces and streets in Bankside.)
- How do people of all ages use the open spaces and public realm? What particular issues and facilities might affect/benefit children or older people? Did we say that? I would rather ask – ‘Where are there play facilities in the area, and where are there gaps in the provision?’
- How many people travel from within other parts of the borough to work in the Bankside NP area?
- What are the priorities for property developers and commercial tenants in the design and delivery of public space? What value do they perceive in it and what constraints, if any, do they perceive from public access?
- Will increasing green space also increase the revenue burden? How might this be addressed through new opportunities for revenue funding such as the Community Infrastructure Levy?
- How can we be more creative in our definition of what constitutes ‘green space’, to bring more streets and housing green spaces into a coherent open space / public realm network?
- How can connections between these places and spaces be improved to maximise their benefits?
- What is the projection for levels of car ownership and how should this impact the vision for the NP?
- Is there an appetite for tackling the impact of motor vehicles? (E.g. enforcing more 20mph areas? Narrowing or closing some streets temporarily or permanently?)
- Is there an opportunity for a local change to the standards of road design, e.g. kerb heights, and materials to allow for greater road sharing within the NP area? Is there an opportunity to use road spaces more flexibly – e.g. close some streets to through traffic on weekends or at certain times during the day?
- If it is difficult to slow down traffic, can ways be found to reduce the reason for the journeys?
- Is it possible to show evidence of need for shared spaces /slowing down of traffic in the NP area that is unique within the borough for having increased pressure from daily/seasonal influx of visitors and workers?

There are opportunities to turn further streets into pedestrianised garden areas following the success of Gambia Street Garden and Flat Iron Square. Which streets should we consider? Possibly use some of the ‘infrequently used routes’ in the Character area appraisal as a start? Particularly to the south?

- How many residents not currently engaged would be interested in communal food growing activities (*so that they can benefit from development taking place elsewhere in the neighbourhood*)? BOST are working at the moment on evaluating the benefits of local food growing.
- Are there issues around dog ownership and exercise that could be addressed in the NP?
- Are there examples from other places of successful partial closures e.g. weekday only? [*E.g. Copperfield St*]
- What are the opportunities for cycling and walking in the NP area? What is the future role of the car? E.g. what has been the impact of the introduction of bollards to allow cyclist and pedestrian-only access on Sumner Street?

*Other questions may need to be formulated that relate to the built environment.*

## **2. Towards a vision for the Bankside NP area**

In summary, if Bankside is deficient in green space then the NP could aim both to use what we have already more effectively, and, through enabling sustainable development, to create more of it.

This would benefit businesses and well as residents and would contribute to the aspiration to strengthen connections between Bankside and Elephant and Castle, to encourage people in the south of the borough to access the cultural facilities in the north of the borough and employees to explore streets (and businesses) further south.

One underlying principle could be the ambition to create ‘**meaningful green links**’, so that the emphasis (particularly in the delivery of public space around new developments) is not just on the creation and management of public realm *per se*, but on the additional value of that new space to the overall distinctiveness and identity of the network of open space and public realm within Bankside.

Great, but I think we should set this alongside ‘creating a sense of place’. Need to make sure we have places for people to stop in as well as to walk through...

Some suggestions to achieve this:

- Be more creative in our definition of what constitutes ‘green space’, to bring more streets and spaces into the public realm network. Introducing greening to the road space will link the public realm into the network of green spaces, increase permeability by bringing lesser-used streets into wider use and slow down traffic;
- Work with developers to open up routes through sites, e.g. Allies and Morrison connection through to Lavington Street, to increase permeability to smaller parades of shops, schools etc., building on a network of little streets and spaces;
- Where tree-planting opportunities are limited due to underground services we can support green links through living roofs and green walls, and also imaginative measures such as rain gardens, which can help slow down rain water run-off and improving visual amenity along streets;
- promote the multi-functionality of our green spaces and green infrastructure, and establish the value which that multi-functionality brings to the neighbourhood – e.g. improved air quality, improved health and well-being, flood risk management, reduction of the urban heat island effect, education, recreation etc. How can we make business case so that developers and others can’t afford not to invest in green space / green infrastructure?
- As part of a planning application, identify a number of roads around the development as an opportunity to create new public space [*perhaps delivered in partnership between the developer and BOST/Southwark Living Streets/BUF as appropriate?*]. Space might be identified on the site itself or a selection of streets in the neighbourhood that could aim, for example, to unlock permeability in an area where that is currently lost by the railway viaducts, etc. [*e.g. BUF’s current work to increase permeability on Great Suffolk St*]. *Could investment also be made off-site through CIL, for example in supporting food and community gardens?*
- Encourage the principles of sharing road space to be translated more explicitly into the sharing of space around both residential and commercial buildings;

*SJ 11/05/12 – First draft, for comment by theme group*

– Challenge the use of currently underused public realm by bringing it into wider use through planting, events or interpretation;

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There is a patchwork of open spaces around thoroughways and two schools including the Marlborough, Red Cross Garden, Little Dorrit and the roads and alleys between, there is a need for some creative and well informed masterplanning and detailed dialogue with the schools and other stakeholders to assess future potential to turn these into a more coherent group.

Additionally, some specific areas might be identified in the NP as areas of focus:

e.g.

- Redcross Way Corridor – from Park Street to Marshalsea Road, including Cross Bones, Marlborough Playground and sites on Southwark St – e.g. Landmark Court site (cross bones) and site beside Menier Chocolate Factory.
- Great Suffolk Street corridor – including links to Blackfriars Road and elephant and castle
- Borough High Street, Borough Market and the London Bridge interface – particularly the inns and yards, and junctions with St Thomas' St, Railway approach, London Bridge Street, Tooley Street and Southwark St.

The vision for each of these would need to be discussed, The recent work focussing on Great Suffolk Street may provide a useful precedent for this.

*Further questions to consider in relation to this theme:*

- *We have been talking about both green space and public realm (which tends to be hard surfaces?). Do we need to define/differentiate the two? Some initial thought on this:*
- Parks (old Public Open Space) – these have a presumption to be open during daylight hours, to have bylaws, may be closed at night. Often but not always, green. A key aim for these is to help them develop an identity with a cohesive boundary.
- Housing Land, including green, and open courtyards, includes a number of community gardens.
- Community Gardens (which may be on housing land, private, or any other) includes food gardens, eg Diversity Garden, Secret Garden at Tate Modern. Some of these may have only temporary agreements.
- Play areas – which may be on housing land, parks, or in closed youth provision, and hence have different accessibility
- Streetscape or Public Realm – open 24 hours a day, no additional bylaws. Might include streets, squares, café seating etc. Seldom green, Might include opportunities to make community gardens or planting areas like Gambia Street.
- Thames Path and Tate lands – I think there are different bylaws for these areas – a law unto themselves!
- Permeable areas within the built landscape. eg Borough Market,
  
- *Would there be specific policy/guidance for trees and other planting (green infrastructure), to add to the area's distinctiveness and identity?*
- *Which theme is looking at environmental standards of construction, promotion of renewable energy projects, etc? (This is often cited as an area than an NP might include.)*
- *Biodiversity/wildlife as a specific policy aspiration?*
- *Safety, gate-locking – public vs private access; defensible space?*
- *While clearly a key priority for Southwark Council and other organisations, is it certain that the aspiration to spread benefits/investment from the north to the south of the borough is a focus for this Neighbourhood Plan?*