

Business and the Bankside Neighbourhood Plan

This Neighbourhood Plan (NP) scoping paper focuses on the commercial theme – businesses large and small – in the NP area of Bankside.

As part of the statutory planning hierarchy, the NP will set out the community's views on the development and use of land in Bankside through an agreed positive vision for the future. This includes setting policies on where development should go, how development is designed, or, using a neighbourhood development order, giving permission for certain types of development without the need for a subsequent planning application. As well as being in conformity with the Local Plan, the NP should bring an additional level of detail to it, particularly for those areas on which the community wishes to focus attention.

To move towards agreement of a vision, this scoping paper will:

1. assess the current picture in the NP area – what works and what doesn't;
2. anticipate future issues;
3. suggest questions to promote discussion and agreement of a vision – what next?

Once a vision for business within the NP area has been agreed, principles and policies can be developed to support these priorities.

I. The current picture

Bankside has experienced major change and is now characterised by a mix of residential, business and cultural uses, as well as public and private sector activity. Within the business sector there is also great variety, including size of organisation, type of activity, length of time the business has been located here and the age and type of building where that business is carried out. This variety contributes to the vibrancy and character of the area.

Bankside is the main employment and business area of Southwark, with much of the commercial development focused around Blackfriars Road to the west, Borough High Street to the east and Southwark Street joining the two together. The development of Southwark Street over the past 10 years can be seen as the main driver of commercial success and is the primary office thoroughfare for the area. It acts as a commercial 'spine' that anchors the heart of the area, parallel to the largely cultural and leisure offer of the riverside, and with secondary streets running to the immediate north and south (Park Street and Union Street) and north-south like 'ribs'.

However, the quality of buildings and the environment varies considerably on Southwark Street between the more developed western section (Blackfriars Road to Southwark Bridge Road) and the less developed eastern section (Southwark Bridge Road to Borough High Street). Equally, Borough High Street has a patchy commercial offer and very mixed quality of built fabric but it is a key link towards Elephant and Castle.

What's working

- A number of major development projects are on-site simultaneously in the area, including around London Bridge and the riverside; Better Bankside works with Southwark Council, developers and their contractors in an award-winning communications programme to mitigate the impacts of these schemes on local businesses and residents.
- Transport improvements, including the new Bankside entrance at Blackfriars Station and the redevelopment of London Bridge.
- The characteristic mixture of building types and structures such as railway arches gives the area a strong and distinctive identity.

- Technological advances and locational advantages have led to a maturing of Southwark as an office location. Bankside is no longer seen as an ancillary location for the City and investors see it as a central location with competitive rents relative to north of the river. (*comparison of £/sq ft?*).
- As the spine of the area with high pedestrian footfall, mid-week at least, Southwark Street is the natural focus for the evolution of retail in the area.
- Quality accommodation is producing quality jobs. In contrast to the traditional activity of recovery centres (three of the original six remain), Bankside 123 occupiers have brought more, better paying jobs and this is to be encouraged.
- Technology, Media and Telecoms companies are locating in Bankside, confirmed by figures from 2010 when agents reported that the largest sectors locating here were media, IT& internet companies and charities & Associations.
- Bankside offers a variety of office developments and recent completions include the Harlequin Building at 65 Southwark Street, likely to be let to TMT occupiers. In contrast, the 'edgy' perception of parts of Bankside, coupled with the survival of historic, cheaper building stock, has encouraged young companies to see it as an attractive location for incubator space, either purely offices, or for activities such as artist studios. Growing businesses like the combination of proximity to the City, good rail connections and variety of space available. Occupiers have reported that they like the affordability of rents and the 'urban' feel of Bankside.
- There have been a number of new hotels in the area, which has helped to fill a gap, though there is a limit to what the area can comfortably host.
- Bankside meets many of Jane Jacobs's criteria for vitality, including: fulfilling more than two primary functions; short blocks so that streets and opportunities to turn corners are frequent; buildings varying in age and condition; a sufficiently dense concentration of people (at certain times at least).

What's not working

- The major routes carry reasonably heavy loads of traffic very quickly through the area. This creates a less attractive environment for pedestrians (and cyclists?) and arguably for retail and other ground floor uses.
- Borough High Street is not functioning well (poor quality retail, physical environment, congested pavements, etc) and does not act as a strong enough anchor to draw development along the eastern section of Southwark Street. Blackfriars Road is arguably an even less attractive environment to walk in.
- Agents report that some retailers see Southwark as slightly edgy, though not as edgy as Shoreditch, but it is not clear whether this refers to whole borough, as opposed to the Bankside /NP area. (*more evidence?*).
- They report that offices north of Southwark Street (and Stamford Street/Tooley St to the west and east) are in an established office pitch, whereas to the south the streets are considered to be a pioneering location.
- Hotel development brings lower value employment than a comparable office development –for a similar sized development a high-end office development can bring in 5000 jobs averaging £30,000 per annum, while a hotel will only require 500 staff, paid the London Living Wage. There is room for both, but it is important that hotel and student housing schemes do not swamp the area.
- Streets that do have good physical structure and potential for greater economic uplift (e.g. Union Street, Flat Iron Square) are not yet meeting that potential.
- The relatively recent development of Southwark Street means that it has little sense of texture or 'organic' development. There is strong difference in terms of retail provision north and south of the river, especially with the recent opening of One New Change.
- Southwark Street does not meet Jane Jacobs's second criteria (above), being very long. However there is a potential to differentiate sections of the street (happening already in an economic sense), and to thus create shorter sections, with greater character and interest.
- There is still perceived to be a shortage of buildings offering 5-7,000sq ft on one floor, which appeal to the young software and media firms that the area could be attracting.
- Some office spaces are not fit-for-purpose in today's business environment.
- There a need for more affordable workspace.

- Better Bankside has investigated the potential short-term, or meanwhile, use of empty properties for cultural and commercial activities. However, several properties remain empty over the long-term.
- The broader economic climate – how are issues such as low investor confidence, lack of public funding, rising land values, a lack of finance, impacting Bankside business relative to other central London areas?

2. Anticipated future issues

It will be essential to retain a variety both of building types and occupiers

Major new development is planned in the northern section of Blackfriars Road, as well as around London Bridge, Guy's and Kings College campus and smaller sites around Bankside.

Demand for an increase in retail to match an increase in residential population

As a net importer of people, the NP area will need to set out a vision of how these new residents will be provided a retail offer. Retail success is traditionally associated with locating in clusters.

However, much new residential development is described as upmarket, and this tends to be characterised by lower occupancy levels, e.g. as much as 50% of new units are left unoccupied as approximately 70% are sold to overseas owners.

If e.g. Waitrose were to come in agents anticipate that they would need 5,000sq ft to generate sufficient sales per annum and at that size they would not be impacted by Sunday Trading Laws.

Demand for other services

As well as retail, office workers will also want recreation opportunities, from gyms to gin palaces and tonics such as galleries. There will be an increasing emphasis on high quality public realm as part of the amenity and intrinsic identity of new development.

The need for suitable space

To attract smaller companies, especially creatives and TMTs to grow new companies or to relocate here, there will be a need to match appropriate floor plates with their needs.

A company of about eight people would require 1-2,000 sq ft, 20-40 people require 5-7,000sq ft.

Increased drivers for low-carbon growth

As no one specification fits all occupiers it will be important that a variety of specifications allow different occupiers' needs to be met. Anticipating future government regulation on the long-life of buildings, this implies a need for future developments to be 'loose fit' or flexible in design, as well as low energy.

Ground floors in particular should be dual use, to be able to be refitted easily as either B1 or retail units.

Developing the Spine

The spine of Southwark Street will need to develop further to support the ribs and other secondary streets. There may be pressure for the environment of Southwark Street itself to improve, e.g. through boulevarding and active street frontages.

A need to develop further the brand and identity

10 years' ago the development of Bankside south of the riverside was almost unthought-of. The brand and identity of the area will need to develop, for example through enhancement of the public realm and more public art. But investors also need to be better informed about the changing demographics and socio-economics of Bankside.

3. Questions to promote a vision for the theme

This section sets out suggested questions from which to draw out a vision for the business theme. The first questions are general, the second group relate to specific areas. It should be noted that general questions may already be dealt with in the Local Plan. The draft SPD includes strategies for Borough

High Street and Blackfriars Road, but not for Southwark Street, other than guidance on specific sites to be brought forward.

General questions

i. Local employment generation is a key benefit to the community from new development.

- *Can the NP further encourage LBS to continue to negotiate for developer contributions that will support priorities for the NP, such as opportunities for local employment; the increasing quality of the public realm?*
- *How can local employment stipulations be encouraged and enforced? And not just those for the construction period but in the employment associated with occupation too.*

ii. The mixed character of Bankside is seen as a strength to be protected and developed.

- *Does the NP have a role in formulating guidance to inform and influence the form and content of new developments as they come forward?*
- *Can the NP encourage owners of vacant buildings to bring them back into active use, either for Meanwhile or longer-term uses?*
- *Can the NP encourage new buildings to incorporate high environmental standards towards a low carbon future and the creation of high quality public realm?*
- *If some developers are not prepared to adjust their profitability model to incorporate higher standards of design, should Bankside be looking to attract a different type of developer? How can that be addressed through the NP?*

iii. Large employers are welcome, but this must not be at the cost of new enterprises and small concerns that could be crowded out without policy intervention to support innovation and appropriate premises. Different retailers require different unit sizes, as well as having the ability to pay different rents.

- *How can the NP help support a range of business and retail spaces?*
- *Can planning obligations be used to support affordable business and flexible space/affordable retail?*
- *Can the NP further support retail environment improvements?*
- *Could new office quarters be developed to target creative industries, e.g. in the eastern section of the Southwark Street spine and to the south of it, looking to other branded 'high tech' areas such as Old Street roundabout and Shoreditch?*
- *How can secondary streets, (particularly Union Street?) be supported, and how can this and 'rib' streets be communicated to potential retail investors?*

iv. The quality of the environment has a direct impact on economic well-being. Connectivity and permeability will help the area in being regarded as interesting and will help in generating retail in the lower value, secondary streets that form the ribs off the spine of Southwark Street.

Can the NP support investment in the public realm, design and art?

Can active frontages be encouraged, to bring animation to the street and a sense of human presence that can deter antisocial behaviour?

v. The well-being of employees is an important contributor to the economic health of the area.

- *How can this be supported in the NP? E.g. secure cycle parking, drying room and showers to encourage sustainable transport and good health.*
- *How can the NP support unmet demand for retail facilities from employees and residents alike?*
- *Can a greater demand for services such as GPs and pharmacies be addressed?*
- *Can public transport be made easier to use – e.g. real-time indicator boards on major bus routes along Southwark Street?*
- *Could a 'users guide to Southwark Street' incorporate a dedicated map showing how the area links into the wider transport network?*

vi. Localism has introduced a number of new initiatives.

- *How are Local Development Orders and Neighbourhood Development Orders likely to be useful in Bankside to permit change of use of a building or area, or to enable new business start-ups?*
- *How will Community 'Right to bid' (identifying assets of community value) and make positive use of vacant space, and the proposed Community 'Right to try' work in practice?*
- *How might site-specific protection – through restrictions on permitted development rights – for sites where a change of use is undesirable, be useful?*

Specific areas

“Neighbourhood plans should develop robust and comprehensive policies that set out the quality of development that will be expected for the area. Such policies should be based on stated objectives for the future of the area and an understanding and evaluation of its defining characteristics.”(NPPF) The NP should offer a relevant response to the whole area, but it should also take a more proactive position in respect to key areas of development activity likely over the lifetime of the plan.

i. Borough High Street

The quality of the built heritage on Borough High Street is high, but it is arguably unsuited to modern retail requirements. Could Borough High Street witness a retail renaissance, and if so what form might it take? Could this perceived weakness be an asset in creating a special retail environment, as has been achieved elsewhere in London and beyond? Should Borough High Street have a vision of its own so that major landowners who have historically been unengaged be encouraged to support a development framework and shared vision?

ii. Blackfriars Road

By crossing the railway the redevelopment of Sampson House and Ludgate House will be on the scale of Bankside 123 and Palestra (*not More London?*). The targets for new jobs identified in other Plans could conceivably be met by the development proposals being advanced for the length of Blackfriars Road from the river to the viaduct. How do these proposals relate to one another and address the wider community? Whilst the employment created is welcome, what more could they contribute to enrich the neighbourhood?

iii. Southwark Street

A focus on Southwark Street as the backbone of the NP area will help to balance the over-congestion along the river and to encourage the spread of activity along the north-south ‘ribs’ of the secondary streets. However, although it has a moderately strong retail and leisure offer, there is not enough to retain that activity outside of the working week. The lack of active frontages in the eastern section of Southwark Street is even more marked.

The conversion of older buildings on Southwark Street, including the Hop Exchange, has the potential to retain the mixed character of the area and contribute to the quality of the built environment. One of the largest development sites on the street, Landmark Court, lies at the heart of the NP neighbourhood, and along with the on-going development around the market and Hop Exchange, its future use will help define what Bankside becomes over the next generation. Is this a pivotal decision too important to be left to the market? How can owners who are holding onto empty properties that face the street be encouraged to bring them into active use? How can Southwark Street be developed as a week-round destination, not just weekday?

iv. Principles for characterised areas

As well as specific policies for the areas above where development activity can be assumed or is desirable, the NP can also develop principles for development of other areas, e.g. the north-south streets described as the ‘ribs’ or secondary parallel streets such as Union Street. ‘Characterising’ these areas focuses on context and character rather than individual sites or their fabric, but provides development principles that the NP would like to see applied to sites in these areas. Characterisation is recommended by English Heritage as a useful planning tool in historic areas, and could be useful in Bankside, which has several Conservation Areas.

The Forum needs to be clear on what constitutes a ‘presumption for development’ on sites that do not have specific policies identified in the NP. However, the NP needs to ensure that the overall vision for Bankside cannot be compromised by speculative applications because those aspirations were not specified in sufficient detail.

- *How can the activity on Southwark Street percolate further south?*

- Which economic as well as geographical areas should be included in such a typology and what are the major principles included? e.g. Even without ground floor retail uses the design should lend itself to flexible future use, such as A1 or A3 uses.

4. What next?

It is difficult to deal with the commercial future of Bankside as a single entity. Many of the general points and aspirations that have been raised in the discussion so far will be dealt with in the Local Plan and we must be clear what additional detail the NP will add to this. There is also the question of time. The timescale for much of Bankside's recent commercial development has been relatively quick and it is important to consider what timescales the NP envisions for future development. When do we expect different sites or areas to come forward, and how does that timing impact what happens to other areas within the NP area?

Discussions have so far identified an aspiration for Southwark Street to act as a driver to take the area forward, acting as a spine to carry activity and regeneration benefits to the ribs further south. It would appear that Southwark Street has not so far been addressed as a separate strategy area in the Local Plan. The future of Borough High Street is also a key driver to achieving the future potential of the NP area (including driving change in the eastern section of Southwark Street) and may require a separate planning document within the NP. Although it is identified as a strategy area in the draft SPD little progress seems to have been made in Borough High Street.

The main focused of current development activity is Blackfriars Road. Here the scale of the developments will have an enormous impact on the way the whole area develops over the next ten years. With development moving at a pace it is clearly very important that its promoters are involved in and inform the NP process.

A methodology is now needed to develop principles and policies for the NP. A cross-cutting theme might be the sustainability of the area, which would encompass quality of developments (including high environmental and design standards, permeability and the public realm, retention of a quality historic fabric as an intrinsic element of the area's identity and offer). This requires deeper research into the three specific geographical areas identified and also the character types, so that the NP can offer a combination of specific policies and general principles for the NP area.

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Southwark Council, Bankside, Borough and London Bridge draft SPD