

The Felling Neighbourhood Audit

Community participation exercise



Engaging Communities in Planning



Felling residents are all urban designers in their neighbourhood

Background to the Felling Neighbourhood Audit

During 2007/8, Planning Aid North has been working with Gateshead Council on the Gateshead Neighbourhood Area Action Support project. The project, funded by the Council, was a programme of community awareness and learning for residents in neighbourhoods affected by Housing Market Renewal (HMR) in the Felling, Teams and Bensham and Saltwell areas of the Borough. The aim of the project was to help local residents change how the environment was shaped and to put forward ideas for re-inventing Felling. This was achieved by raising the residents' level of awareness and understanding of urban design.

Urban design can be said to be the process of shaping the physical setting of a town, its neighbourhoods and communities. It is how professional designers and local residents make places together - places that will be used and enjoyed by a wide range of different people for different purposes, not only now but in years to come.

Towns like Felling are constantly changing, and in ways that are unpredictable. How will the people of Felling be living, working, shopping or enjoying themselves in 10, 20 or 30 years time? We don't know. That does not mean that we can not plan and design. What it does mean is that we need to plan and design flexible frameworks that can accommodate change.

In thinking about change and the future, Planning Aid North suggested to the Felling residents that an understanding of the past history and physical characteristics of Felling is required, and a knowledge and understanding of the local economic and market conditions. Residents need to know about the people who live there - how they live, how they work, how they move about the Felling area and what they hope for the place's future.

The Planning Aid Service provides a programme of community planning, which includes a range of awareness and planning education activities, aimed at helping groups and individuals, particularly in disadvantaged areas, to understand the planning system and to play a more effective role in the future planning of their neighbourhoods.

Planning Aid North has partnered with Gateshead Council to play a key role in building links with communities affected by regeneration initiatives within the Bridging NewcastleGateshead Pathfinder Area. The initial target areas include the communities of Bensham and Saltwell, Teams and the Brandling area of Felling, which are each the focus of Neighbourhood Action Plans approved by the Council in 2006.

This information sheet reviews the Felling Neighbourhood Audit which was undertaken by local residents in Spring 2008.



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Urban Design Learning Programme

The Felling Audit

As the Felling residents discovered during their learning programme, sustainable urban design involves the appearance, shape, character, texture and colour of buildings or groups of buildings, their history and their spatial setting, how they are connected by vehicle and pedestrian links and how landscapes fit into the open spaces that link the buildings together. Residents also learned about the processes that make successful development possible. Planning Aid North staff were keen to emphasize that the best urban design projects were achieved where groups work with professionals from a wide range of complementary skills, and with residents who have their own considerable local knowledge and expertise.

The most recent phase of the Gateshead Neighbourhood Area Action Support project has involved working with local residents from Felling to undertake an urban design analysis of their own neighbourhood. The report, owned by the local residents, consisted of desktop mapping work, reinforced by walking tours of the area. Discussions en route or in the local community hall drew attention to how residents perceived or "felt" about their social and economic environment, their distinctive residential and civic spaces and what action might be taken in the future to improve them, to make them good and secure places to live in, and attractive to visit. The group further considered how good design, in its widest sense, could help to deliver better public services, to achieve value for money in new developments, to make good use of scarce resources and contribute to a reduction in crime and anti-social behaviour. Better-designed localities attract more businesses.

The culmination of the field sessions, group neighbourhood walks and community hall discussions during March 2008 led to the production of the residents report entitled the "The Felling Audit". The document contains an audit of the work carried out by the residents in the general Felling area from an urban design perspective, together with their aspirations for its future regeneration. From suggestions of what the future town could like the residents came up with the following statements:

- "Felling - a warm place with strong community spirit"*
- "Felling - A new place to work and bring up the children"*
- "Felling - An improved community - come and give us a try"*
- "Felling - a place of pride and new beginnings"*

Planning Aid North Information Leaflets

We have a range of information leaflets on our advice service, communications, community planning, education initiatives, progress and resources, good practice, planning knowledge, seminars, topical tasks and volunteers.

Residents apply urban design skills to their local neighbourhood

Next Steps

The Felling report is to be presented to Gateshead Council's Members and Officers and representatives of Bridging Newcastle Gateshead by residents on 29th April 2008 in the Brandling Community Centre. The main aims of the event are:

- For residents to demonstrate how they have applied the skills and knowledge gained through the programme of design training to an analysis of their own area
- To provide a platform for residents to express both their current perceptions of, and future aspirations for their area to key stakeholders
- To provide a residents perspective of the key design ideas and framework that future development should 'fit into'

Wider Outcomes

It is hoped that the Felling residents will now have the necessary skills to be proactive in making Felling a better place to live, work and bring up a family, by demanding better local design briefs that clarify expectations for major sites in the town and to challenge and encourage developers to try harder. Being proactive means that residents are now better informed in anticipating development and can help steer the layout concept of new buildings, working with developers to aim for the right solution for a particular site. The residents are now able to strive and persevere for developments that are at once fit for site and purpose, accessible, safe, sociable, healthy, inclusive and look good.

The key message from the residents is that they now have the skills to change not only their town but mindsets - shaking off the habitual reactive attitudes and being proactive by thinking through what makes sustainable places work.

The Audit Process

On 11th March 2008 Planning Aid North organized an initial meeting in the Brandling Community Centre in the heart of the HMR area. This introduced the residents to the project and set out the audit process as follows:

- Desktop mapping exercise - using questions to analyse the routes, areas and features that describe the way Felling works.
- A series of walks around Felling where residents discussed the appearance and character of streets and spaces to build up a broader picture of life in Felling. The walks also allowed a more detailed character appraisal to be undertaken.
- Later in the month, residents went over the draft audit report at a special meeting and made further observations, amendments and suggestions to ensure that the report was comprehensive and correct.
- The final session for residents was held on 22 April to provide an opportunity for residents to prepare for a presentation event to the Council.