



The
Democratic
Society



Jam &
Justice

Space in Common: Seeking better conversations about what's built where

How can we have a better conversation about the future of our places?

The ten councils in Greater Manchester are required to work together to plan how the city-region should take shape. They are making a plan – the Greater Manchester Spatial Framework – to inform what gets built where for decades to come.

In October 2016, the first draft of the plan was put out to public consultation. There were many negative responses, for many reasons, including the proposals to build on the greenbelt. Many people felt they had not had a good chance to shape the plan. In response, the authorities committed to radically revising the plan.

The Jam & Justice Action Research Collective identified a lack of forums where people across Greater Manchester could discuss the plan and exchange views on how the city region could develop.

Jam & Justice partnered with The Democratic Society to help bring together active citizens, third sector organisations, campaigners, developers, and planners to talk about large-scale planning decisions in the city region.



What did we do?

Between September 2018 and February 2019, we ran four workshops to bring together people with different stakes in large-scale planning decisions.

We wanted to:

- Learn how to build more constructive discussions.
- Help our group understand more about their differences and their common ground.
- Build relationships and explore possibilities for collaboration on points of common ground.

We were keen to involve people with links to wider groups and networks. We identified relevant stakeholders and reached out by email, social media, and through our existing networks.



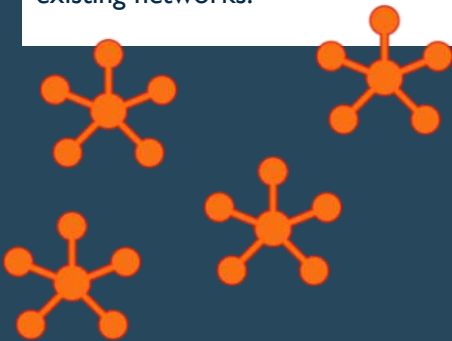
Who took part?

Our participants were people with links to:

- Housing campaigns
- An environmental charity
- A local access forum
- A development agency
- Environmental & sustainability campaigns
- Academia
- Promoters of citizen participation in decision-making
- A transport charity
- Greenbelt protection campaigns
- Private housing developers
- Farming unions
- An urban food-growing network
- A local civic society

In total 26 people took part in these workshops. Many did not know each other already. Only one person made it to every workshop.

As the programme progressed we shifted our outreach more towards community-focused and campaigning groups. Later workshops explored how these groups could collaborate.





The journey

Workshop 1: Sharing Experiences

Participants shared experiences of the previous Spatial Framework consultation and discussed what must change to involve people more constructively in deciding the future of our places. People shared the expertise from their interest groups, and identified some misconceptions about each other's perspectives. *See page 7.*

Workshop 2: How the System Works

At the first workshop we had heard that the jargon surrounding 'spatial planning' is a major barrier. At this second workshop, we invited a planner from the council to talk through how spatial planning works, where the voice of communities fits in, and what challenges local authorities face. *See page 4.*



The Town
Planner



Workshop 3: Inspiration from Elsewhere

Richard Lee, coordinator of Just Space, told us how this London-based community network has built more inclusive and constructive discussions about large-scale planning in the city. *See pages 4–5.*

Workshop 4: Ideas for Collaboration

In the final workshop, we asked for ideas about how groups trying to influence large-scale planning decisions in Greater Manchester could collaborate and support each other. *See page 6.*



What challenges do the local authorities face?



The Town
Planner

Local authorities are struggling to take a different approach, because:

1. They **lack resource** to engage effectively.
2. They feel **outgunned** by the ability of housing developers to oppose plans.
3. They feel **under siege** from public opposition to plans when communities are not engaged effectively.
4. Reaching **agreement** between 10 council leaders and the mayor is a major political challenge.

Funding cuts are also a barrier to community and voluntary organisations engaging with decisions and involving their constituents in the conversation.

What did people report as barriers to better conversations?

Reflecting on what was heard at our workshops, some key messages stand out about the perceived barriers:

1. People often feel ‘spatial planning’ is **hard to understand**, and hard to engage with.
2. Communities only have a say **once plans are drawn up**.
3. Communities **feel under threat** from plans ‘dropped on them from above’.
4. Responding to consultations is an **individualised activity**.
Groups do not usually share views with each other, or collaborate to raise collective issues.

Creative alternatives

Just Space developed training in Social Impact Assessment with University College London, creating resources to enable communities to make assessments themselves.

Just Space created a community-led plan for Greater London, drafted collaboratively through conferences and working groups.

Just Space mapped 250 community organisations through ‘Just Map’, improving the visibility of under-recognised black and minority ethnic community centres and highlighting community assets under threat.

Learning from Just Space



Just Space is an alliance of about 80 community groups, campaigns, and concerned independent organisations.

The alliance formed to act as a voice for Londoners at grass-roots level during the formulation of London's major planning strategy. It began through informal cooperation, and subsequently received a year of grant funding from Ken Livingstone, who was then Mayor of London. Members include city-wide and locally-based groups. Just Space has close links to some London-based universities, whose staff and students provide research support.

Just Space aims to improve public participation in planning, to ensure that policy reflects communities' interests. Just Space helps share information and learning between members through workshops and publications. Members work together on combined statements, focusing on points of consensus. Together Just Space's members help scrutinise planning policy in their city, drawing in traditionally under-represented voices.

What's different about Just Space's approach?

- They focus on issues that matter to communities, and then relate these to planning policy and decisions
- They aim to work horizontally, without a management committee or board. Organisers focus on amplifying the voice of others and getting new people involved.
- Their network brings together communities to determine their own needs and develop tools to be effective.
- They have developed beyond a reactive to a proactive and creative role in engaging with planning in London.

Over time Just Space's expertise has become recognised by decision-makers. Community groups have been drawn to Just Space's knowledge of how to push for change. They have brought new voices into large-scale planning decisions, helped people understand how these decisions work, and shifted policy.

What can be done differently?



A shift in approach is needed. Action can be pursued inside and outside local governments:

Involve communities early

Deliberating across different interests about a common vision for Greater Manchester is better than consulting on finished plans. Exploring the uniqueness of local places should be part of this. Neighbourhood planning has built a more collaborative approach for local plans. This has not yet been translated into larger scale plans.

Campaign together

Those pushing for change should seek ways of collaborating on common ground and supporting each other, including bringing new voices into debates. There is already promising activity in Manchester where greenbelt campaigners have shared their understanding of spatial planning.



Recognise everyone's contributions

Activists and community groups can bring new voices into decision-making in a constructive way, as shown by Just Space. Small investments in sharing knowledge and initiating relationships can catalyse cooperation and allow activists to play a more effective and constructive role.

Ideas for collaboration

The ideas below are some of those put forward by participants in our final workshop. Could they inspire a different approach to conversations about planning?

A Local Link: Groups that are already active and more knowledgeable can help others get involved (including under-represented groups), translating the plan into tangible chunks and using existing relationships to bring the local level into wider decisions.

A Citizens Alliance: A coalition of different voices campaigning for, and making use of, a chance to review the Spatial Framework in five years' time.

Guidance for Collaborative Activism: There is a need for more understanding about what evidence makes a difference. Useful resources would include guidance on making decisions as a group, and examples of good practice.

What did Space in Common achieve?

It was valuable to give people space to find out more about spatial planning, be inspired by different ways of engaging, and build new contacts.

“It felt a very inclusive process with everyone encouraged to contribute and share and shape discussion.”

“I felt it was a new kind of forum. It wasn't the usual individuals or groups that I come across and the format was one that combined offering insight and information with a space to discuss reactions to that and ideas and challenges.”

“Communities must have their own infrastructure and research support if they are to influence decision making in planning.”

Richard Lee, Just Space

What would we do differently?

The workshops built a constructive environment in which people learnt about other perspectives, via facilitated discussion and a focus on how decisions are made rather than the issues themselves.

We also created a space for a council planning officer to share some of the challenges councils face.

This meant it was possible to discover misconceptions and think about how to reconcile differences.

The project responded to a clear need for forums where people across Greater Manchester can discuss matters of common concern. While many of those attending said they found it valuable, we only reached a small number of people who came and went throughout the workshops.

People are at very different stages of understanding about spatial planning. If we repeated this project, we might focus on targeting specific groups in a more accessible way and thinking how we could support them, before exploring how more diverse groups could be brought together.

There is no good reason to build on greenbelt land when brownfield sites are available.

But brownfield sites often provide the only open ground in urban locations. Must every space be built on?

When asked what part of Space in Common was most interesting or valuable participants said:

“The contacts I made with other campaigners as we have been able to share knowledge.”

“Bringing such a range of interested parties together and then enabling productive discussion”

“Hearing from the planner demystified the system...”

Jam and Justice is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council to explore new ways of governing cities, with additional support from Mistra Urban Futures. Space in Common was one of ten learn-by-doing projects commissioned by Jam and Justice.

The Democratic Society (DemSoc) is a not-for-profit organisation that exists to get people more involved in decisions that affect their lives.

Space in Common was co-initiated by the Jam & Justice Action Research Collective, with Adrian Ball, Bert Russell, and Beth Perry. Co-researchers at The Democratic Society included Mat Basford and Michelle Brook. Mat Basford and Iona Hine led on the production of this report.

Get involved

Some changes we describe in this report require commitment from local government, but change can also be built outside government. If you are interested in collaborating to build better conversations about the shape of the Greater Manchester city region, The Democratic Society can connect you with other people working toward the same goal. To join a dedicated email group or simply find out more about Space in Common and the issues covered, contact Mat: Mat@demsoc.org

Readers may also be interested in *Whose Knowledge Matters*, a research project investigating and valuing citizen-based knowledge in spatial planning processes in Greater Manchester: whoseknowledgematters-rjc.org, whoseknowledgematters@sheffield.ac.uk.



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