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THE SOCIAL PURPOSE OF LAND FRAMEWORK

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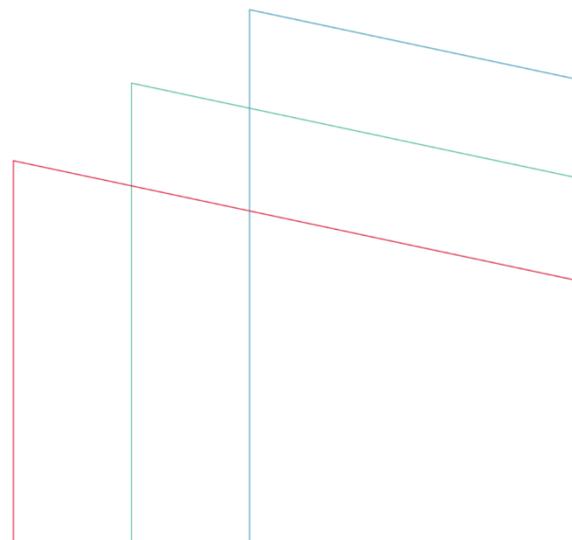
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF) reimagines how the stewardship of public land can prioritise social outcomes, community voices, and local capacity building.

BACKGROUND

Councils are stewards of the public estate. They are responsible for providing – and protecting – the key assets that make our neighbourhoods feel like home. Parks, homes, leisure centres, libraries, roads; these buildings and spaces underpin the social infrastructure that bring us meaning, connection, and wellbeing.

Yet the long tail of austerity has pushed councils across the UK to develop their commercial asset management skills. While the primary role of local governments is to delivery statutory services, significant reductions in central government funding over the last 15 years paired with growing demand for services driven by the intersecting crises of affordability, the climate emergency, an aging population, and the lasting impacts of the pandemic means that councils' property portfolios are increasingly called on to fund essential services.

This shift in emphasis for councils - from service provider to asset manager - changes our relationship to the land and buildings that make up our neighbourhoods. Under sustained financial pressure, places that once served as anchors of community life can struggle to survive within an economic system that measures success primarily by the ability to generate income.

The Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF) recognises that the value of land is defined not only by what it earns, but by what it enables. It prioritises the social, cultural, and environmental contributions that land and buildings make to civic life. The public estate is a cornerstone of community, where people come together to learn, celebrate, connect, and play. In a time of deep political division and declining trust in institutions, public land can act – literally and figuratively – as common ground.

As the largest landowner and steward of assets in the borough, Southwark Council manages these spaces as a shared inheritance. Responsible stewardship matters because once public land is sold or its purpose is reduced to revenue generation, that broader civic value can be difficult to recover. By embedding community voices early in the decision-making process, defining local need locally, and making explicit the social purposes of land, the SPLF can help build a richer more inclusive vision of what public land can offer.

METHOD

This report is the synthesis of six months of collaboration, organising, research, and policy design. We worked with a group of 14 Southwark residents who helped design and lead three participatory workshops. Findings from the workshops, along with stakeholder interviews, policy analysis, precedent review, and discussions with council officers, informed the design of the proposed SPLF.

FRAMEWORK

The SPLF is built around participatory decision-making. It aims to move beyond consultation and engagement and towards co-production, broadening participation in decisions about land use and challenging the use of technical knowledge as a method of gatekeeping. It prioritises local expertise and values all knowledge and experience equally.

It tests a more collaborative process, sharing responsibility between the council as land steward, and community members, as users of public spaces and services. It creates opportunities for meaningful input and influence early in the process of deciding how publicly owned land and buildings are used.

TEST-AND-LEARN

The ambition of the SPLF is tempered by the real constraints that the council operates within: legal duties, financial pressures, and a highly regulated planning environment. We therefore recommend implementing the SPLF through a test-and-learn approach. Test-and-learn is an iterative method of public policy and service design that tests assumptions through real world experiments and uses evidence-based learning to refine the design.

In the pilot phase, the framework will apply to a select number of sites. Drawing from test-and-learn principles, we recommend that Southwark embed review and adaptation practices throughout the pilot phase. This will allow for adjustments to be made to the process along the way. At the end of the first year, insights from a comprehensive review of the pilot will feed into a revised SPLF, to be used in the following phases.

Taking a test-and-learn pilot approach lets the council and community explore how to balance social purpose with fiduciary responsibility, while also building the trust and infrastructure needed for a more open, long-term approach to stewarding land for public good.

PILOT PHASE

The pilot phase will start with site selection. It is important to test the pilot process on a variety of sites that represent different built forms, neighbourhood contexts, and potential uses. NEF recommends starting with a pilot of five sites, seeking diversity in asset type and location. For example, a tenant hall, library, school, vacant land, and space in new development, each in a different neighbourhood.

Testing the SPLF on too few pilot sites risks undermining the ambition of this research and organising project. Beyond the economies of scale for administration and neighbourhood land panel recruitment, a pilot programme of at least five sites signifies a commitment to systemic change and mitigates the risk of the process reverting to a standard - and standalone - engagement process.

The next step is neighbourhood land panel (NLP) recruitment. Depending on the location of the pilot sites, up to five NLPs will be established. NLPs will be made up of residents, community organisations, local businesses, ward councillors, and relevant council officers. The NLPs' first task is to define the neighbourhood social purpose mission. NLPs, with support from the council, will lead community engagement in the neighbourhood of each pilot site to understand local priorities and social needs. The NLP will synthesise findings into a short statement that will shape the rest of the process.

Council officers will then draft an asset brief. This is a document that sets out the site's context and constraints and invites interested groups to express an interest in using it. The NLP can provide feedback on the asset brief before it is finalised. Interested groups – such as small community organisations, area residents, local businesses, or charities – will develop concepts in response to the asset brief. The NLP will evaluate proposals and make a recommendation to the cabinet. The council is then responsible for implementation.

FUTURE PHASES

The test-and-learn approach is deliberatively iterative and scalable. The pilot, Phase 1, applies the SPLF to a diverse mix of five council-owned pilot sites.

After learning from the pilot and updating the SPLF accordingly, NEF recommends that Phase 2 applies the SPLF to sites owned by other civic landowners (NHS trusts, housing associations, faith organisations). A partnership approach distributes the responsibility of identifying sites across multiple landowners while also defining a strong coalition of

support and interest in changing the status quo. This builds on the Southwark Land Commission's recommendation to establish a Southwark Land Partnership.

In Phase 3, NEF recommends that the SPLF is applied more widely to the council's and partners' property portfolios. Committing to a certain number of sites per year, hosting a digital map where community members can suggest sites, and offering a Community Empowerment Fund will mark a clear shift towards embedding community empowerment in the land use system.

The development of the Social Purpose of Land Framework has shown what's possible when residents and the council work together around a shared ambition. People new to thinking about land and development worked collaboratively with long time advocates and officers to shape it, showing the coalition of demand in support of more democratic and transparent land decisions. By building trust, sharing power, and recognising land as a foundation for civic life, Southwark can lead the way in showing how councils and communities can work together to shape a fairer, more inclusive borough.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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WHY IS A SOCIAL PURPOSE OF LAND FRAMEWORK NEEDED?

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Southwark Land Commission

SEPT 2022	**FEB 2023**	**SEPT 2023**	**JULY 2024**
Fairer, Greener, Safer: Delivery Plan 2022–2026 is released	Southwark Land Commission is convened	*Land for Good*, the Commission's final report, is released	Council responds to the Commission's report with an action plan
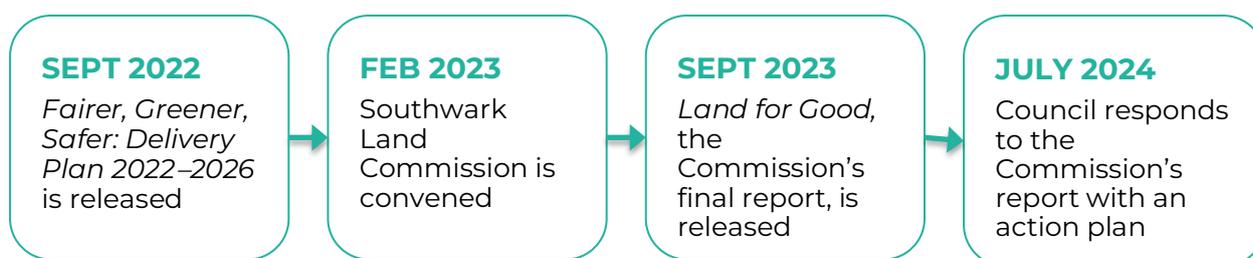
In September 2022, Southwark council published *Fairer, Greener, Safer: Delivery Plan 2022–2026*, setting out the council's priorities and delivery commitments. Included in the plan is a commitment to "deliver a Land Commission to identify how more land in Southwark can be freed up for public good".[1] In February 2023, Southwark council convened the Southwark Land Commission. An independent group of experts that met regularly over six months, the Commission was invited to provide and receive evidence and make clear recommendations for how land should be valued and used in the borough.

The Commission's final report highlighted inequalities in access to and governance of land, and called for more democratic, transparent, and accountable decision-making. It made seven key recommendations with 25 priority actions. A core recommendation was the creation of a Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF). The Commission envisioned this framework as a tool to put social purpose at the heart of all land decisions in Southwark, ensuring that land is valued not only for the income it generates but also for the social goods it creates. It recommended co-producing the framework with Southwark's diverse communities, applying it first to council-owned land, and ultimately embedding it into the council's statutory planning document, the local plan, so that decisions about land balance financial considerations with long-term community and environmental benefit.

Southwark council responded to the Commission's *Land for Good* report in July 2024, committing to take concrete steps, including co-producing the SPLF in partnership with communities and landowners.[2] In early 2025, the New Economics Foundation (NEF)

was awarded the council contract to develop the framework. NEF kicked off the research and organising project in March 2025.

Southwark's priorities

Southwark 2030, the borough's local plan, sets a clear direction for how the council intends to shape the future of the borough. At its core are three guiding principles: reducing inequality, empowering people, and investing in prevention. These principles frame the council's ambition to create a fairer, greener, and safer Southwark by ensuring that everyone has access to the opportunities, resources, and spaces they need to thrive. These priorities recognise that persistent inequalities in health, housing, and access to neighbourhood resources harm Southwark residents. Addressing these inequalities requires both shifting power to residents and acting early to prevent crises before they occur.

The SPLF builds directly on Southwark 2030, providing a practical mechanism to embed these priorities in decisions about how public land is used. By aligning land governance with Southwark 2030, the framework will help ensure that one of the borough's most significant public resources – its land – contributes to reducing inequality, enabling participation, and securing long-term social and environmental benefits.

National context

Over the past 15 years, major reductions in central government funding have placed significant pressure on local authorities, with councils expected to deliver more while relying on fewer resources. Councils' property portfolios play an increasingly integral role in supporting day-to-day council operations by generating income to support the delivery of core council services. This financial context means that land and property decisions are often framed primarily in the context of commercial logic and feasibility, even when the aim is to deliver wider social outcomes. The SPLF responds to this reality by offering a way to balance financial sustainability with the borough's long-term social mission.

Alongside these financial pressures, national policy reinforces a strong narrative of economic growth and housebuilding as key measures of success. The national planning system – through the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) and associated guidance – requires that local authorities plan for housing need and identify a pipeline of development-ready sites. While there is a clear need for more homes, the growth agenda places additional pressure on already constrained land resources, especially in

dense urban boroughs, such as Southwark, where competing demands for housing, green space, employment, and community uses are acute.

WHY IS A FRAMEWORK NEEDED?

The SPLF is a proposed approach to reimagining how the stewardship of public land can prioritise social outcomes, community voices, and local capacity building.

Southwark council owns the freehold interest of 36% of the land in the borough, making it one of the largest landowners. Most of this land is already tied up in existing, essential uses – council housing, parks and playing fields, schools, streets and highways, and operational facilities – along with income-generating commercial assets that help fund frontline services. Nonetheless, this scale of ownership means the council plays a major role in shaping how land is stewarded in Southwark. With that role comes the responsibility of ensuring that decisions about the land it controls, whether directly or through partnerships, are made transparently and in the long-term public interest.

Land is inherently finite. Land use decisions, as a result, must navigate a range of often competing issues while operating within the broader governance framework set by the national planning system. Southwark, as an inner London borough, has high land values, sustained by its central location and persistent demand for housing and commercial uses. How land is used, therefore, is highly contested. Housing, commercial uses, community spaces, and public services compete for limited space. The council, in addition to navigating these competing demands, is also responsible for delivering a range of critical statutory services. Faced with austerity-induced national funding cuts and operating within an economic system and development model predicated on financial viability and accumulation, councils across the UK are leveraging their property portfolios to generate revenue to fund the key services that support residents to thrive.

For example, entering a planning agreement with a development partner on a council-owned asset could bring much needed workspace and complementary social uses secured through Section 106 agreements to a local area, along with capital receipts from the land sale which help fund critical services. Yet pursing a new office development means other policy priorities – such as green spaces, new nursery spots, or a community centre – will not be delivered at-scale on that site. These decisions, and the trade-offs that are made to get there, often feel opaque and disconnected from the people who are most affected.

The SPLF is a first step to reimagining the status quo. It aims to redistribute power, bring transparency to decisions about land and its governance, and make visible the

trade-offs in delivering long-term social purpose on public land. The proposed framework builds on steps the council already takes when it makes land use decisions, including understanding local need, assessing different land use options, considering social outcomes, and determining financial implications. While there is a robust statutory consultation process for planning proposals, there are other decisions about assets that are not governed by the council's statutory planning document, the local plan, which take place without much public oversight or clear opportunities for community involvement. The framework aims to open up these processes on a series of pilot sites, to make them more transparent, participatory, and accountable.

HOW WE CREATED THE FRAMEWORK

Residents, council officers, and researchers collaboratively developed the Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF). Through stakeholder interviews, participatory community workshops, and a review of existing council policies and best practices, we gathered insights to ground the framework in both lived experience and the council policy landscape. The approach drew on principles of community organising, with community facilitators playing a central role in designing and delivering workshops. This balance of technical research with organising and engagement built power and ownership of the framework by residents.

INTERVIEWS AND STAKEHOLDER CONVERSATIONS

NEF conducted 15 semi-structured stakeholder interviews. Interviewees were recruited using a snowball approach. We developed an initial longlist and reached out to potential participants. The goal was to have a range of perspectives represented in the interviews, from inside and outside the council, as well as with individuals familiar with the Southwark Land Commission (eg former commissioners) and people new to the project, whether officers from council teams that were not involved with the Commission, or community advocates who did not take part in engagement activities as part of the Commission. Interviewees were asked to suggest additional contacts for interviews, follow-up conversations, or for recruitment as community facilitators.

Interviewees provided informed consent, and interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity. We coded and analysed transcripts using a thematic analysis approach.

COMMUNITY FACILITATORS

A central part of the project was working with a group of community facilitators. NEF recruited 14 community facilitators through recommendations from council contacts, interviewees, and desktop research. We also issued a call-out to the Active Communities Network's Civic Leaders Programme, which provides training and support for minority ethnic Southwark residents in community leadership and advocacy. Of the 14 facilitators, 8 were drawn from the Civic Leaders Programme and 6 were recruited independently, ensuring there was continuity with existing council-led leadership development efforts while also creating opportunities for new leaders. Facilitators took part in a two-day NEF-led training based on Marshall Ganz's community organising approach, including the 'story of self' method.[3] Facilitators were remunerated for their

time, recognising that fair participation requires financial support to enable involvement from those who might otherwise be excluded.

Based on discussions in the training, NEF developed draft agendas for two community workshops. The community facilitators reviewed and suggested revisions to the agenda on planning calls with NEF, ensuring that the facilitators were involved not just with the delivery of engagement but also with its design.

The group of facilitators played an active role in the two participatory workshops. Ten facilitators took part in the first workshop and eight in the second. Working in pairs, facilitators led table discussions with residents and stakeholders and took detailed notes. Between the two workshops, we held further planning calls to refine workshop design in response to emerging insights. Towards the end of the process, we met for a debrief session, which gave the facilitators and researchers an opportunity to reflect on the process, consolidate learning, and explore how the facilitator group might continue to play a role in shaping land governance in Southwark.

WORKSHOPS

We held three participatory community workshops, supported by the group of trained community facilitators. The first workshop was held on 19 June 2025 at the Dene Community Centre. There were 35 participants representing a diverse mix of stakeholders, including council officers, Greater London Authority (GLA) staff, community activists, Southwark residents, former commissioners from the Southwark Land Commission, and staff from a range of local voluntary and community sector organisations. In addition to participants, there were 10 community facilitators and three NEF staff. The second workshop was held on 9 July 2025 at Walworth Town Hall. There were 30 participants, eight community facilitators, and three NEF staff. Many workshop participants attended both workshops, though there was some turnover between the two. The final workshop was held on 19 November 2025 at Westminster House Youth Club. There were 30 participants, five community facilitators, two NEF staff, and one council officer.

The first workshop aimed to build a shared understanding of what 'social purpose' means in practice, and to begin testing early decision-making methods. The session opened with a 'story of self' exercise, encouraging participants to introduce themselves as people rather than as representatives of their organisations. In small groups, participants discussed what social purpose meant to them and what local needs example sites could meet. They then assessed three preliminary decision-making models developed by the project team, reflecting on what worked and what didn't in each

model while considering both the council's perspective (technical and financial feasibility, legal duties) and communities' perspectives (local priorities, transparency, ownership).

The second workshop aimed to test elements of the framework and the process for how it would be applied. Participants first reviewed the draft framework principles and evaluation criteria and provided feedback. In small groups, they charted a path through a skeleton governance process, deciding who should be involved at various stages of the land governance process. Finally, they assessed two land use options against each other, scoring them against the draft evaluation criteria.

The third workshop engaged a group of 13- to 18-year-olds at a youth club in Nunhead, whose members come from 35 different schools across the borough. The session was designed to understand young people's experience of local spaces, introduce the Social Purpose of Land Framework, and explore how young people can build power and influence local decision-making processes.

POLICY ANALYSIS AND THE COUNCIL OFFICER ADVISORY GROUP

In addition to the workshops and interviews, NEF analysed existing council policies and had conversations with relevant officers about policies in development. These included:

- Affordable workspace, cabinet report and strategy
- Corporate asset management plan
- Community review panels
- Design review panels
- Neighbourhoods Programme
- Premises plan (Community Southwark)
- Right to Grow
- Section 106 and Community Infrastructure Levy supplementary planning documents
- Social Value Framework
- Southwark 2030 (Borough Plan)
- Southwark Land Commission and the council's response
- Southwark Plan 2022–2027 (local plan)
- Statement of community involvement and development consultation charter
- VCS letting approach

An officer advisory group, with representatives from key departments including property, planning, finance, procurement, resident services, and legal, also supported

the development of the framework. The group met every six weeks throughout the process to provide feedback on framework drafts, provide council context, and highlight constraints.

PRECEDENT REVIEW

NEF also reviewed relevant local, national, and international precedents to understand best practices around land use frameworks, social letting, and democratic decision-making models, and how to embed equity and social justice in land use decisions. These included:

- **National frameworks for land use planning** (Scotland's Land Use Strategy, Defra's Land Use Framework consultation)

- **Tools for evaluating trade-offs** (multi-criteria analysis, matrices, decision trees)

- **Mass engagement methods** (Streetspace Southwark, New Homes Programme, Neighbourhoods Programme)

- **Democratic and participatory methods** (Forum for Equalities and Human Rights in Southwark, citizens' assemblies, public-common partnerships)

- **Letting for social purpose** (peppercorn rent for affordable workspace, voluntary and community sector (VCS) premises policies, social value leases, partnership approaches to surplus land, embedding equity in land dispositions)

WHAT DID WE LEARN?

The following chapter distils insights from across the research methods. The insights reveal both the potential and practical limits of embedding social purpose in council land decisions, showing where progress is already being made, where the system constrains it, and how the Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF) can help bridge the gap.

- **Willingness without the system:** There is clear institutional openness to using the council's portfolio for collective social good (affordable workspace strategy (AWS), voluntary and community sector (VCS) lettings, Right to Grow) and strong site-level examples (Livesey Exchange, Mentivity). Current good practice remains ad hoc and opaque to outsiders, though, lacking consistency or transparency.

- **A culture defined by austerity:** Severe budget pressures and property revenue dependence have created a risk-averse and scarcity-steeped council culture, driven by real demands to generate near-term income, while limiting opportunities for experimentation and innovation.

- **Engagement ≠ power:** Current land use engagement approaches are mostly advisory and typically take place after key decisions have already been made; communities want to be co-producers with genuine influence, supported with appropriate resourcing (time, training, compensation).

- **Transparency builds trust:** A history of land decisions that felt opaque and extractive has eroded public confidence in council-led processes. Rebuilding trust requires being clear about what is genuinely open for input, who decides, and how trade-offs are made.

- **From combative to collaborative:** Land decisions are often contentious and defensive. The framework, as a collaborative process, aims to shift this dynamic. It will not remove conflict, but it will allow it to be channelled productively, with clear principles for process, structured dialogue, and shared accountability.

- **Outcomes over uses:** Stakeholders want to define desired impacts (eg cohesion, wellbeing, inclusion) rather than prescribing uses. Quantitative scoring can structure discussions, but should not determine decisions.

- **Act, then learn:** It is better to do something and learn from it than to do nothing. Favour activation of assets over leaving them vacant. Create paths to permanence for meanwhile users. Embed a test-and-learn approach into implementation.

- **Process, not policy change:** The SPLF is a structured decision-making process, not a new statutory policy; it prototypes a more transparent and participatory approach within existing legal and planning parameters.

FINDINGS: POLICY ANALYSIS

Reviewing key Southwark policies reveals that many of the ambitions behind the SPLF are also reflected elsewhere. Together, these policies – Social Value Framework, Corporate Asset Management Plan, the local plan, Southwark 2030, AWS, Right to Grow – demonstrate the council's strong commitment to using land and property to deliver social benefits. The review, however, also highlights gaps and tensions in existing policy that the framework can help address. (See key insights from the policy review below; a full summary can be found Appendix 1.)

While there are complementary policies, there is no overarching social framework for public land governance.

While several policies touch on the social use of council-owned assets, there is no single framework that coordinates how decisions about public land are made with social purpose as the primary principle. The Corporate Asset Management Plan (2021) sets principles for stewardship and financial performance, but focuses on internal rather than joint decision-making. Other strategies, like the AWS and the emerging VCS lettings policy, define approaches for specific asset types but stop short of establishing a borough-wide process for determining social purpose.

The SPLF is just that. Its pilot is a way to test a more structured, transparent, and collaborative process to decide how certain council assets are used. It is a practical approach for prototyping new ways of working within known boundaries.

Commercial pressures shape asset decisions.

Like all local authorities, Southwark faces severe financial constraints. Across England, years of austerity budgets have meant that funding for local governments fell by 56% in real terms from 2010 to 2020.[4] The decades-long impact of austerity, coupled with forthcoming government changes to local council funding formulas, and a worsening temporary accommodation crisis and other rising service demands, means that Southwark council faces a £70mn shortfall over the next three years.[5]

This financial context cannot be ignored when considering how the council manages its assets. With a significant projected budget shortfall, the council is increasingly dependent on generating income from its £5.4bn property portfolio to sustain statutory

services. It is pushed to take a more commercial mindset while also delivering vital services that are inherently non-commercial.

This creates a culture shaped by scarcity and risk aversion, one that encourages officers to think in terms of income maximisation and cost recovery even when the goal is to deliver social good. Decision-making under such constraints can become reactive and transactional, privileging short-term financial certainty over longer-term social purpose. It also puts real pressure on staff, straining the capacity for experimentation, collaboration, and trust-based partnerships with communities.

This challenge is not unique to local government. The Office for Budget Responsibility's public finance accounting practices distinguish between investment in capital improvements and social infrastructure.[6] Narrow fiscal multipliers devalue the longer-term benefits of public investment in social infrastructure and prioritise short-term fiscal outcomes.

The SPLF recognises these realities. It does not dismiss the need for financial responsibility but instead seeks to create a more transparent and balanced process, one that makes trade-offs explicit and enables social outcomes to be valued alongside financial ones.

Good precedents and emerging policies indicate a culture of willingness.

Despite financial pressures, it is clear that there is institutional openness and innovation within Southwark council and how it approaches land. The AWS (2025) formalises the idea of social benefit as a legitimate basis for subsidised rent. The forthcoming VCS lettings policy will bring greater consistency to how community organisations lease council spaces with discounted rent. Through the planning system, the statement of community involvement and development consultation charter set out engagement expectations for development partners.

As the first London council to adopt the Right to Grow, Southwark is committed to enabling residents and organisations to cultivate unused council land for community food growing and greening projects provided it is suitable and approved through a formal process in the process of being established. The Right to Grow policy explicitly frames unused land as a shared civic asset and places trust in residents to bring it back into productive social use. This is a significant symbolic shift from gatekeeping to co-stewardship.

There are also examples of good practice on individual sites, like the Livesey Exchange and Mentivity. These successes, however, generally rely on the initiative and relationships of individual officers, rather than taking place as part of a systematised process. Without public visibility, even though the outcomes are positive, cases like these risk perpetuating the perception that the council makes deals behind closed doors, preventing fair and equal access to opportunity.

The SPLF builds on the momentum demonstrated by these examples and provides a structured way to extend these principles to a wider range of assets.

Existing engagement processes stop short of co-governance or democratic decision-making.

Southwark is committed to broadening participation in land and planning decisions through programmatic initiatives, such as the Neighbourhoods Programme, and more place-based engagement approaches, like community and design review panels. These processes, however, remain largely advisory. Consultation typically takes place after key parameters have been set, restricting community influence to reactions rather than ideation.

The SPLF introduces a model of shared decision-making, where communities and council representatives work together from the outset to shape briefs, assess proposals, and monitor outcomes, as a step-change from engagement to co-production.

Recognising boundaries: statutory policy, council governance, legal, and financial.

The SPLF sits firmly within council policy, not planning policy. Planning policy is statutory, governed by the Southwark Plan (local plan), the London Plan, and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). These frameworks set out formal requirements for development, land use, and consultation, with the associated statutory obligations. In contrast, the council's strategic priorities inform council policies, which are determined at the cabinet level. Generally, there is less formal accountability with the delivery of council policy, compared to planning policy. While there are fewer formal levers, the council can shape practice, influence future policies, and inform revisions to statutory planning frameworks over time.

Throughout the framework's development, the officer advisory group helped clarify what financial, legal, and planning parameters must be respected. This includes compliance with the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, which provides security of tenure for commercial tenants; the council's constitution, which governs decision-making and

delegation of authority; and statutory planning processes that regulate how land use changes are approved.

The activation and application of the SPLF does not supersede existing legal or regulatory frameworks. All decisions made through the framework will continue to comply with relevant legislation and policy. Its purpose is to add transparency, participation, and consistency to how land and property decisions are made, not to alter legal duties. By working within these parameters – and making them explicit – the framework aims to expand what is possible through collaborative governance, while maintaining the council's statutory responsibilities and fiduciary integrity.

FINDINGS: PRECEDENT REVIEW

By situating the SPLF within a landscape of wider practice – looking to examples from elsewhere in London, the UK, and abroad – we can learn about different approaches to balancing social, economic, and environmental goals in land use and asset decisions. As an urban land use framework that seeks to centre social purpose in decisions about how the public estate is used, the SPLF is the first of its kind. And while a direct comparator may not exist, the approach and method of the SPLF draws from best practices tested elsewhere.

National frameworks for land use planning

Across the UK, decision-makers are recognising the need for a more strategic approach to spatial planning to balance competing demands on land. The UK's land must serve multiple objectives: support economic opportunity, meet housing needs, safeguard food security, restore nature, address climate change, and more. Land use frameworks are emerging as a policy tool to coordinate these goals, shaping decisions about who uses land, for what purposes, and how those decisions are made. They sit alongside planning policy to support greater coordination between environmental, social, and development priorities.

Scotland's Land Use Strategy

Scotland first launched its Land Use Strategy in 2011, with a mandate to update the strategy every five years; the third edition came into effect in 2021. The Scottish Land Use Strategy recognises the critical threat that the twin crises of climate change and biodiversity loss create. It also acknowledges how farming practices, natural resource management, and approaches to new development can directly contradict efforts to restore nature and adapt to and mitigate the harms of climate change. It emphasises the

multifunctionality of land, or the principle that with strategic foresight, land can deliver multiple benefits concurrently. The Scottish government has also piloted regional land use partnerships and is exploring the opportunity for regional land use frameworks.[7]

Defra Land Use Framework Consultation

In early 2025, the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra) launched a 12-week public consultation to create a national Land Use Framework.[8] The framework aims to provide a coherent, cross-sector approach to how land is managed and allocated, balancing demands for food production, housing, energy, nature recovery, and climate mitigation. It will seek to create a shared evidence base, reduce conflicts between competing priorities, and guide decision-makers at national and local levels towards more sustainable and multifunctional uses of land.

> ### Takeaways for the Social Purpose of Land Framework
> These national examples demonstrate growing interest in strategic land use planning, with a particular emphasis on the need to balance competing priorities and trade-offs. Southwark's SPLF brings the national approach to the community level, as the first local urban framework that puts social purpose at its core. By embedding community voice and social outcomes alongside environmental and financial considerations, the SPLF can be a model for local implementation that complements Defra's Land Use Framework as it develops.

Tools for evaluating trade-offs

As discussed, land use planning inherently requires navigating trade-offs between different uses and outcomes. There are several methods and approaches to decision-making that we can look to, both from within the land use planning system and other policy areas.

Multi-criteria analysis

Multi-criteria analysis (MCA) is an analytical method to help decision-makers choose between multiple policy options with potentially competing objectives. It can help make trade-offs between two or more approaches transparent. Typically, MCA defines a set of criteria or outcomes that the policy approach should deliver; then, each option is evaluated against those criteria. The evaluation is often a straightforward numerical score, sometimes weighted by relative importance.

In land use contexts, MCA can be used to compare potential development sites or assess competing land uses. For example, a Swiss study combined MCA with spatial mapping to evaluate the suitability of different parcels of land for housing, weighing factors such as transportation access, existing land use, and environmental constraints.[9] In the UK,

Defra released guidance about using MCA as part of the appraisal process for flood management and coastal defence projects.[10] The guidance suggests that MCA, compared to cost-benefit analysis, can better capture multiple environmental and social outcomes in land and water management decisions.

While MCA can bring structure and transparency to complex land use trade-offs, these analyses tend to be expert-led with a heavy reliance on numerical scoring that can overlook local knowledge, relationships, and lived experience.

Matrices and decision trees

Matrices and decision trees are a more visual way of understanding how different policy decisions or approaches interact. The Scottish Ecological Design Association (SEDA) used decision trees during its Land Conversations (2021) to help participants understand the many interlinked factors that shape how land is used, from soil health and biodiversity to ownership and governance, to macro-economic and macro-environmental influences.[11]

SEDA started by creating a matrix, listing different land uses (eg energy, farming, woodland) on one axis, and products that land creates (eg food, jobs, wildlife, wellbeing) on the other axis. Mapping the relationship between specific land uses and their outputs helped show which land uses support multiple outcomes, where tensions arose between land uses, and where gaps existed in the provision of certain products. The matrix was
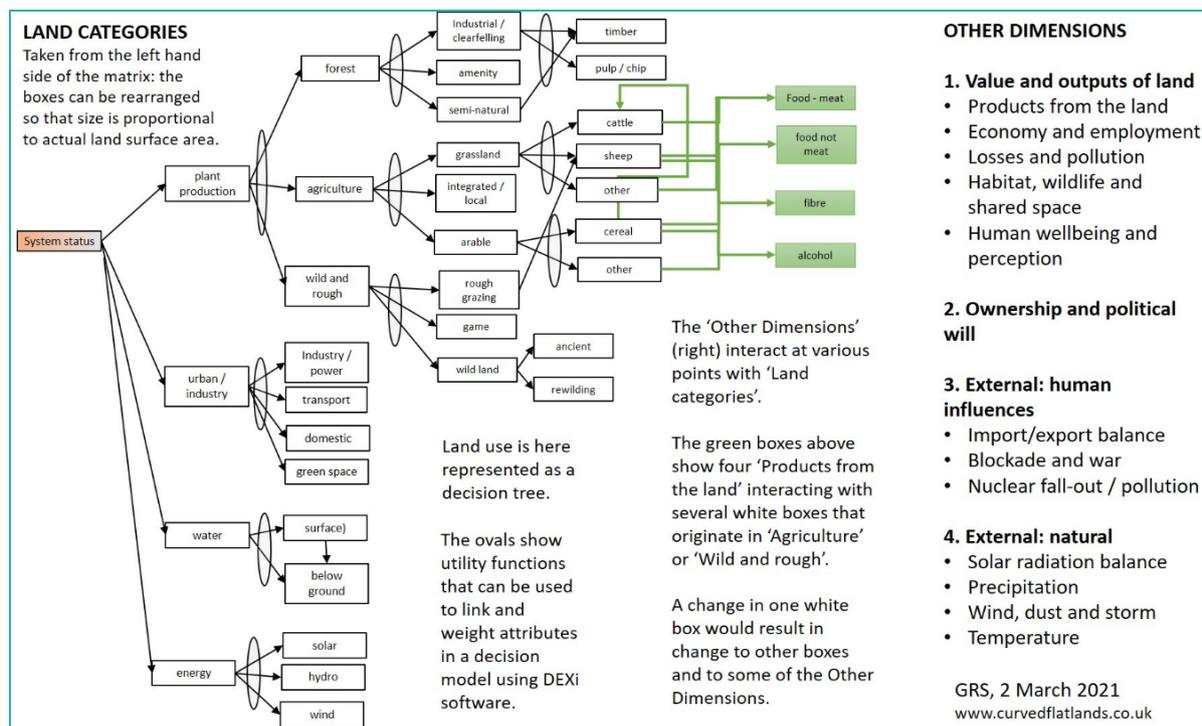

Figure 1: Scotland Ecological Design Association's (SEDA) decision tree of main land use types and 'products'.

then translated into a decision tree, a semi-quantitative assessment tool used to visualise the interactions between different parts of the system.

Takeaways for the Social Purpose of Land Framework

Methods like MCA, matrices, and decision trees can help structure complex land use trade-offs and make underlying assumptions more transparent. They risk, however, oversimplifying nuanced considerations into numerical scores that obscure local context and social realities. We tested a high-level MCA in the second participatory workshop, the results of which are discussed in Findings: Workshops. Ultimately, the lesson is that without proper guardrails, an MCA or highly detailed matrix and decision tree is an exercise in technical optimisation rather than collective deliberation.

Mass engagement methods

Southwark council already makes use of digital and place-based mass engagement tools to involve residents in shaping local priorities. Platforms such as Commonplace and new neighbourhood-level websites enable residents to contribute ideas to make the places they live safe and welcoming. These methods show how large-scale engagement can capture hyper-local insights, identify patterns of community concern, and make participation accessible.

Streetspace Southwark

Streetspace Southwark was a programme of traffic reduction and safety schemes across the borough that ran through the Covid-19 pandemic. The council commissioned Commonplace, an online community engagement platform, to create an interactive map on which residents could suggest locations for investment in street improvements, to help people move around their neighbourhoods more safely.[12]

Residents could add points to the map, noting unsafe intersections or ideas for traffic-calming measures, or recommending cycling infrastructure improvements. The map elicited more than 2,400 suggestions and more than 15,000 upvotes for other residents' suggestions. This hyper-local engagement approach fed into the council's decisions about where to prioritise 'slow streets' and invest in walking and cycling infrastructure.
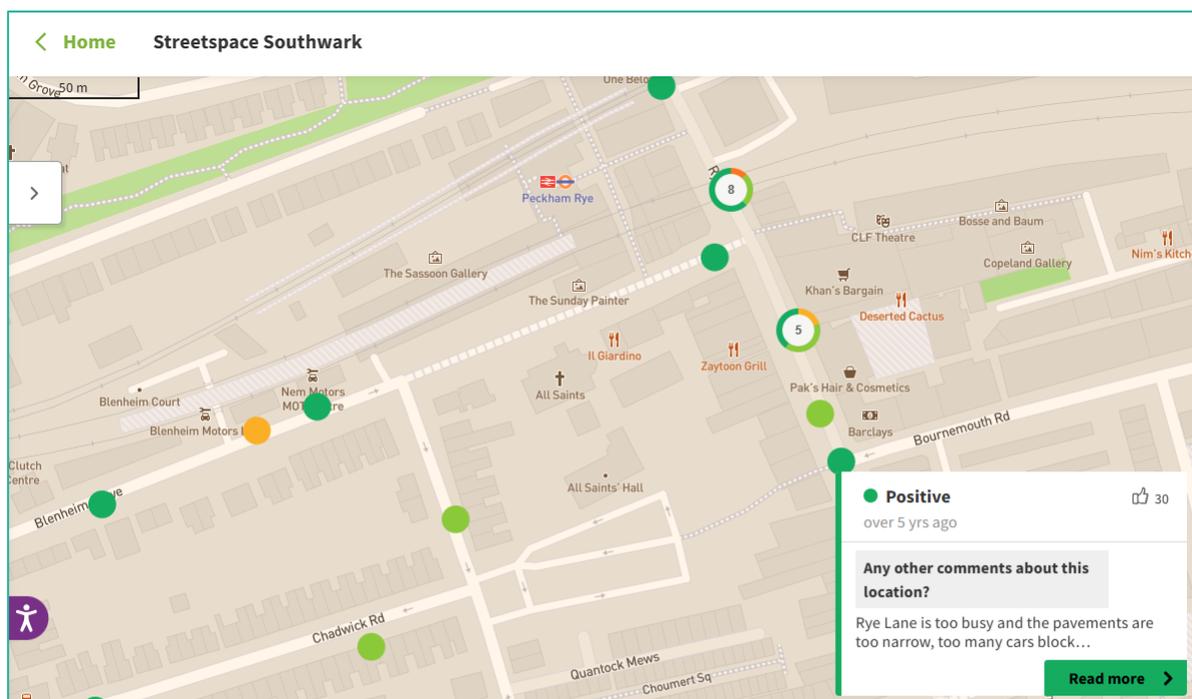
Figure 2: Streetspace Southwark user-generated map with suggested traffic and public realm improvements.

Identifying sites for the New Homes Programme (2014)

The council's 2014 New Homes Programme committed to building 1,500 new council homes by 2018. The next step in the programme was to work with community members to identify sites for housing development. On an interactive map, similar to the Commonplace platform (Figure 2), residents were asked to nominate sites for new council-led housing. The map generated more than 700 site ideas for new housing.

Neighbourhoods Programme and community plans

In summer 2025, Southwark council launched the Neighbourhoods Programme. Splitting the borough into 10 neighbourhoods, the council will work with local communities to create neighbourhood-specific community plans. Each neighbourhood has a dedicated website with information on the neighbourhood champion (the area's ward councillor), updates on the emerging community plan, and opportunities to feed into the process through surveys and feedback on draft materials.[13] (See Appendix 1 for more detail on the Neighbourhoods Programme.)

> ### Takeaways for the Social Purpose of Land Framework
> Southwark's previous experience using mass engagement, and especially spatial engagement tools, demonstrates that the council is well positioned to develop and host a map to solicit ideas for social purpose uses at a neighbourhood scale as part of the SPLF.

Democratic and participatory methods

This section reviews different models of participatory governance. We look at an existing approach in Southwark council, citizens' assemblies, and public-common partnerships (PCPs). These models demonstrate that participation needs to be representative and resourced, with clear pathways for accountability, especially if the participatory body is advisory rather than decision-making.

Forum for Equalities and Human Rights in Southwark

The Forum for Equalities and Human Rights in Southwark (FEHRS) is a council-funded initiative led by Citizens Advice that serves as a 'critical friend' to the council on issues relating to equalities and human rights.[14] Participation is open to all voluntary and community sector organisations in the borough. The FEHRS serves as the primary method of consultation for the council around the development of the council's approach to equality and human rights. The forum plays an advisory, rather than decision-making, role. It demonstrates a tested model of partnership governance – independently convened, council-supported, and a trusted avenue for local organisations to learn from each other and challenge the council.

Citizens' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies can be a deeply democratic and deliberative way to understand informed preferences on complex or contested issues. They bring together a randomly selected, but representative, sample of the community to learn about, debate, and make recommendations to powerholders on a particular social issue.

Assembly members are selected based on demographics (eg age, ethnicity, gender, class), and depending on the focus of the assembly, their attitudes towards a certain issue (eg abortion). Recruitment often takes place by sortition (ie lottery), with invitations to take part sent out to a random sample of community members who are then selected to represent the community at large. While the assembly is responsible for making a recommendation, final decision-making power typically remains with the relevant legislative authority (eg UK Parliament, local authorities).

Originating in Canada in the early 2000s, citizens' assemblies have since been adopted across the UK. The 2018 Citizens' Assembly on Social Care was the first national assembly convened in the UK, followed by the UK Climate Assembly in 2020. Local governments across the country have also held citizens' assemblies, from Southwark's own citizens' jury on climate change to the Camden Health and Care Citizens' Assembly to Newham's permanent assembly.

While citizens' assemblies can enable informed and inclusive discussion on complex issues, experience from Southwark's climate jury highlights important limitations. Despite strong commitment from participants, the process revealed how assemblies risk becoming symbolic exercises when they lack a clear mandate, sufficient time, or robust links to decision-making. Critiques from local observers noted weak accountability for recommendations, uneven facilitation, limited diversity in participation, and expert input that did not always connect to local realities or measurable outcomes.[15]

While the SPLF does not propose a citizens' assembly, community facilitators' interest in the idea underlines a shared ambition for representative, transparent, and well-resourced participation, where deliberation is meaningfully connected to how decisions are ultimately made.

Public-common partnerships

PCPs are an emerging alternative to the familiar public-private partnership (PPP) model. Instead of relying on collaboration between the public sector and private investors, PCPs propose a new form of shared governance between the public sector, workers, and the wider community. A PCP operates on the principle of commoning, bringing critical community infrastructure into common ownership rather than private enclosure. A PCP centres on a jointly-owned enterprise, such as a housing project, workspace, or utility company, that is co-governed by three partners: (1) a public body (eg local authority); (2) a Common Association made up of community members, residents, local business owners, and consumers; and (3) project-specific stakeholders (eg union reps, relevant experts).

Unlike PPPs, PCPs[16] are designed to hold assets in democratic ownership. As a non-profit, any surplus revenues generated through the joint enterprise are reinvested locally through the common association, with the explicit aim of supporting social and environmental benefits. Decisions about land, housing, or infrastructure within a PCP are guided by community needs, rather than profit extraction.

As an emergent model, PCPs are being explored through pilot projects in the UK
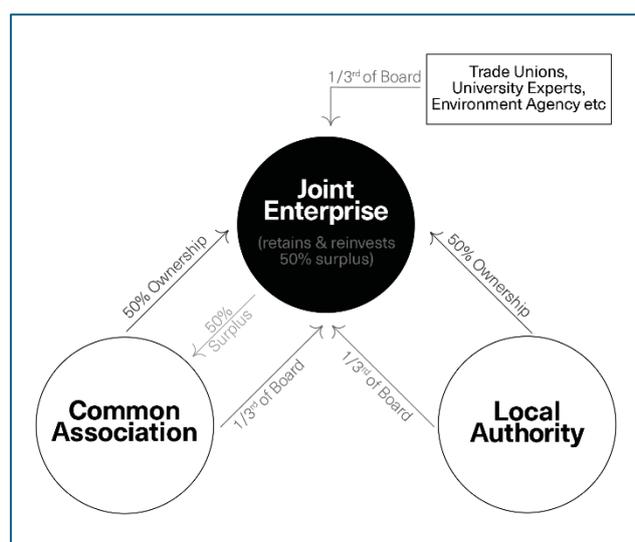

Figure 3: Abundance action research organisation's structure of a joint Public-Common-Partnership enterprise governance model.

and Europe. For example, Haringey's Wards Corner is home to the Latin Village market, one of the last such hubs for London's Latin American communities. The building and land are publicly owned (by Transport for London), and the market was recognised as an Asset of Community Value in 2014 by Haringey council. Since 2007, community organisers have iteratively developed a community plan – a community-led design process – and secured planning permission for the plan. In 2022, a coalition of community organisations founded the Wards Corner Community Benefit Society, which is responsible for restoring and running the buildings. The Community Benefit Society functions as the 'joint enterprise' in the PCP. A separate development trust plays the role of the 'common association'. By taking a PCP approach, the Wards Corner buildings will be protected as a community-controlled asset, embodying the principles that community-led must also mean community-owned.

Takeaways for the Social Purpose of Land Framework

These examples provide a snapshot of potential participatory methods that could be embedded in the SPFL. From the FEHRS, we can see that the council has experience running advisory panels made up of external stakeholders that operate with the explicit purpose of scrutinising council activities. Running a full citizens' assembly is highly resource intensive and risks devolving into a standard engagement process without adequate facilitation and critique of power structures; we can take citizens' assemblies' commitment to representation as a learning for the SPLF. Finally, PCPs chart a path towards community-led governance models that move beyond engagement towards shared ownership and stewardship.

Letting for social purposes

This section summarises a handful of operating examples of councils and other public landlords using their land and property for social purposes. We look at relevant local council policies, the NHS's Surplus Land collection, and an example from California that puts social equity at the heart of leasing and disposal decisions.

Peppercorn rent for affordable workspace – Islington council

Islington council's Affordable Workspace Policy requires that commercial developments over 1,000 square metres provide 10% of the floorspace as affordable workspace. This space is leased to the council at a peppercorn rent for 20 years. The council sublets the affordable spaces to operators, taken from its approved list of affordable workspace providers. The policy has already led to the creation of three affordable workspace buildings, generating over £1.2m in social value to date.[17]

The council also grants peppercorn rents in exchange for the delivery of defined social value outcomes, such as for the Black Cultural Centre[18] and several youth centres

(including the Rose Bowl, Lift, and Platform).[19] These leases are excluded from Part II of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, meaning tenants do not have an automatic right to renew. In addition, the council has issued a 250-year ground lease at a peppercorn rent to a non-profit housing provider to enable the development of 11 new affordable homes.[20]

Voluntary and community sector premises policies – Lambeth, Haringey, Newham

In 2019, Newham council agreed to a new methodology for managing council-owned community centres. Central to the method was an asset review flowchart.[21] As detailed in the flowchart, when a council-owned community centre is vacated, the council goes through a process of first determining whether the building is needed as a community centre. It will then review it against the local plan policy (IFN8), which sets out the council's obligations to provide and protect community infrastructure. If the building does not meet the policy criteria, then the council will look to lease it out on the open market or offer a lease to VCS organisations. VCS organisations will complete a social value self-assessment form, which identifies the level of social value that they expect to deliver in the first year of their lease. A social value subsidy will be provided that reflects the self-assessment; the rent discount can range from 20% to 80% of the market rate. Occupiers must acknowledge that the primary purpose of the building is to serve tenants and leaseholders, which should be reflected in their delivery model.

Since 2021, Lambeth council has recognised the value of the VCS as a key part of the borough's social ecosystem. As such, the VCS Lettings Policy[22] sets out a process for VCS organisations to enter into community leases with the council at below-market rents. Premises are let out through a call for proposals, with clearly defined selection criteria against which VCS applicants are evaluated. Organisations granted community leases are required to self-report on their social value impact. Leases are granted for up to 10 years, with development break clauses, and are granted outside the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954. Rent is set at a fixed VCS rate, which does not account for market rates or the differential in property values in the north versus the south of the borough. The council is transparent about the total rental subsidy expected as part of the policy – at the time of the policy's release, they forecast it would be £850,000. Currently, Lambeth has 49 properties in its VCS portfolio.

In April 2025, Haringey council implemented a Community Assets Social Value Policy.[23] Recognising that the VCS is key to supporting Haringey residents, especially the most vulnerable, the council sought to standardise its approach to providing subsidised

lettings for VCS organisations. It proposed co-creating a social value matrix with VCS organisations that it would use to self-assess the social value they produce. VCS organisations would apply for a rental subsidy that reflected the social value created across each criterion in the matrix, up to a maximum subsidy level. The alternative explored was to try to calculate a monetary value for the social value generated. This approach was deemed too challenging, given the complexity of financially valuing the creation of social value. The council proposes using weighting criteria as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Haringey's proposed Social Value Policy weighting criteria.

Social value criteria	Subsidy value
Access (opening hours and inclusion)	25
Health and wellbeing	40
Opportunities	25
Environment and sustainability	10

The maximum subsidy is 80% of market rent, achievable if organisations fulfil every criterion in the matrix; organisations need to achieve at least 25 points from the matrix to be eligible for a social value subsidy. This model will apply to an initial tranche of 23 community centres that are currently out of lease. As other buildings in the community centre portfolio come up for lease review or renewal, they will be renegotiated under the policy.

Social value leases – Poole, Bootle, Belfast

Private asset managers are pioneering social value leases to bring vacant high street buildings back into use for community benefit.[24] Asset managers, such as Legal & General, Bywater Properties, and Ellandi, are offering below-market rents to small local businesses, artisans, community kitchens, music venues, and other occupiers that generate a clear community benefit. Occupiers get access to the otherwise vacant units rent-free for two years; this platform gives them the chance to test and grow their ideas, while bringing vibrancy, footfall, and community life to otherwise struggling high streets or town centres.

Partnership approach to surplus land – NHS, Southeast London Integrated Care Board

The NHS Surplus Land collection looks to make better use of land in the NHS's property portfolio by identifying surplus or underused sites that can be used to meet

local priorities. Disposals consider non-monetary value and encourage reinvestment into initiatives that reduce health inequalities.

Southeast London's Integrated Care Board (ICB) takes a place-based approach to developing its estates strategy. Through the Local Estates Forum, NHS organisations, local authorities, and housing partners work together to plan how surplus sites can address population health needs and local housing shortages. This collaborative model ensures that land decisions contribute to wider system priorities, including the prevention of ill health, the creation of healthy neighbourhoods, and affordable housing for NHS staff and key workers.

Embedding equity in land dispositions – City of Richmond (California)

The City of Richmond, a municipality in the San Francisco Bay Area, adopted the Equitable Public Land Disposition Policy in March 2024. The policy sets out the city's approach to developing affordable housing on city-owned land. The city owns 100 vacant sites, 14 of which were declared 'surplus land'; these surplus sites are what the policy applies to.

Richmond City Council recognised that without a clear policy guiding the process for leasing, selling, or developing surplus sites, there was a major risk that financial return rather than social outcomes would lead the process. As a city with significant pressures on land that are driving up housing costs, and a long history of environmental injustice, the council took an ambitious and active role in developing the Equitable Public Land Disposition Policy to ensure that surplus public property would be used to maximise public good.

The policy is the first of its kind, giving strong priority to development proposals that prioritise permanently and genuinely affordable homes, with a preference for development partners that can deliver these homes through community land trusts (CLTs) or limited equity co-operatives. Recognising the social value of creating and protecting affordable homes, the policy allows the city to lease land at below-market prices if proposals meet the policy criteria.

The evaluation criteria for selecting development partners to build affordable housing put social equity and racial justice at the core of the policy. An explicit policy goal is to proactively prevent gentrification and the displacement of Richmond residents, which is codified with an anti-speculation covenant that prohibits resale or subletting of property at rates deemed unaffordable to residents.

Priority is given to proposals that enable community control and resident empowerment, through governance models like CLTs or co-ops. It also favours proposals that include co-operative ownership models for any commercial or non-housing uses. Preference is given to local non-profit housing developers, with community connection demonstrated through letters of recommendation from community members and participation in local community events. The assessment process also accounts for the skills that less established, but highly local or innovative developers can bring, which is reflected in how partners are evaluated for financial capacity and developer experience. Transparency and public participation are also key to the policy. The project selection panel includes two Richmond residents who have been impacted by the housing crisis, along with city staff.

> ### Takeaways for the Social Purpose of Land Framework
>
> Many public and private sector landowners use their property portfolios as tools for equity and community wealth. Our examples show the shift from ad hoc leasing to transparent and strategic criteria-based approaches that recognise social value and community benefit as legitimate forms of return.
>
> The City of Richmond goes furthest, explicitly naming gentrification, displacement, and social inequities as challenges that public land policy should address. By prioritising permanently affordable homes, community ownership models (CLTs, co-ops), and transparency in partner selection, it reframes land disposal as an instrument of racial and economic justice. The SPLF could also factor in the different skills that partners can bring (ie emerging developers), such as By-and-For organisations.
>
> Significantly, looking at London examples shows that other councils and partner organisations are considering how to leverage their property portfolios for social good. As the Southwark VCS strategy is developed, officers should look to tried and tested approaches from elsewhere, to tap into that momentum and be bold in its support for the VCS.

FINDINGS: INTERVIEWS

Across the board, interviews show a clear shift in focus: from why social purpose matters to the harder question of how to make it work in a fiscally stressed, risk-averse municipal system enmeshed in wider London growth pressures. The interviews show both promising alliances (political-community-regional) and institutional tripwires (legal, financial, cultural) that the framework has to clear to translate aspiration into durable practice.

Key themes from the interviews are summarised in the next section.

Social benefit versus fiscal pressure: a core fault-line

While some stakeholders within the council perceive the issue as near zero-sum, with every £1 foregone in revenue resulting in a £1 cut elsewhere, others broaden the ledger,

recognising the hidden social costs that are borne by the council and community when space is lost or communities are displaced. There is a collective understanding that externalities are not priced in current asset appraisals.

Some political leaders propose an inversion: make social uses the default for council assets and only revert to commercial uses if equivalent social outcomes can be funded another way. This approach would require an explicit opportunity-cost conversation. The implication for the SPLF, therefore, would be to stage a 'social first' options appraisal before financial disposal pathways are triggered.

Officers' perspectives and actions are shaped by a culture of risk aversion and financial prudence. Community representatives are vocal in their frustration with sites sitting unused, seeing this as an unacceptable social cost unwillingly borne by residents. Academics challenge the utility of analytical approaches that attempt to assign financial values to social benefits, while ignoring social losses (eg ascribing value to the number of trees planted as part of a new development while disregarding the cost of closing a treasured community space).

Calls to transition from opaque, episodic deals to transparent, staged decisions

There were repeated accounts of sites emerging late with pre-determined proposals, fuelling mistrust of the council. Interviewees expressed that the historic and expected pattern is that the council, or a developer working closely with the council, sets the agenda behind closed doors. Residents' opportunity to respond to the agenda is too little too late.

VCS leaders report exclusion through jargon, timing, and informal gatekeeping networks. Prior high-profile schemes have inflicted reputational damage on the council when it seems like commitments post-planning are not enforced. Interviewees pointed to the experience of displaced Elephant & Castle traders, for example. Political leaders and officers alike advocate for cabinet-affirmed criteria, open calls, and structured forums to surface options earlier; regional officers believe shared criteria could reduce downstream conflict and speed up the delivery of projects and outcomes.

Complicating time horizons: 'meanwhile' activation versus long-term stewardship

Officers are wary about tying up strategic sites in long-term social purpose uses, preferring instead to issue temporary licences or meanwhile leases. Community actors countered that prolonged vacancy is a tangible social loss and that bureaucratic delay

has left small sites unused for years. There is an academic critique of cosmetic pop-ups that do not transition into more permanent community assets, and a call for pathways from interim uses to durable community assets. Political leadership is interested in using pilots to test more innovative models, but it also advocates for community involvement in early decisions between potential longer-term uses (care vs leisure, etc.) before a meanwhile default locks in inertia.

Reimagining participation: from consultation to co-production and power-sharing

Councillors and community intermediaries show that when residents are trained, informed, and brought into the process early, engagement shifts from reactive objection to collaborative problem-solving. Capacity, translation, and compensation were repeatedly flagged as barriers to meaningful involvement: communities cannot sustainably donate unpaid labour to statutory change processes. Grassroots organisers cite mixed experiences. For example, they mentioned being invited to feed into plans for a flagship regeneration scheme. While they thought their key request (a CLT) was going to be incorporated, they found out later that plans for it were dropped. Participation must connect to power.

VCS stakeholders lobby for formalised avenues to share power through forums, binding checkpoints, or open competitions. Internal reformers are sympathetic to those appeals but wary of the perceived delivery risk and governance burden that would accompany such a devolution of power. Leadership signals a willingness to devolve some power via pilots, as discussed.

Displacement campaigners and community board members show how race, migration status, and language shape who wins and who loses in land deals. For example, 'language justice' gaps impacted the participation of traders at Elephant & Castle. Faith-sector landholders explicitly request equity diagnostics in decision tools. They seek a framework that queries "Who currently benefits, and who's missing out?" as a means of disciplining negotiations.

Measuring what matters: qualitative community outcomes vs. quantified performance metrics

While officers seek quantifiable metrics to report on outcomes and assuage the perceived risk that comes with social investment, academics and campaigners warn that metrics mismeasure what matters. For example, the loss of a critical community asset, such as affordable studio space, is not counted, while less structurally impactful

corporate volunteer hours are. Faith and grassroots stakeholders want transparent value narratives backed by enough numbers to negotiate credibly without collapsing nuance.

FINDINGS: WORKSHOPS

While the first two participatory workshops focused on specific sites and testing specific skeleton decision-making models, the facilitated table discussions raised broader concerns and aspirations for how land is managed and who gets to take part in the process. Testing high-level decision-making models on simulation sites in the workshops allowed participants to articulate their expectations for the SPLF. Most notably, participants challenged the assumption that the framework could include a quantitative evaluation with weighted criteria. The youth workshop highlighted the young people's interest in understanding and influencing land use decisions, especially when they are met where they are; it revealed the need to demystify power and create clearer pathways for youth involvement.

The following workshop insights distil these discussions.

'Social purpose' must be defined contextually.

Participants discussed a range of outcomes and uses that could be considered as meeting a social purpose. Spaces should be open, welcoming, and accessible. They should be places to gather and socialise, providing a platform for community care and cohesion and facilitating intergenerational interactions. They can be cultural and educational spaces, or places to celebrate local heritage. They can support local creatives and enterprises, and enable positive health and wellbeing outcomes.

Participants debated whether social purpose inherently means not-for-profit use; while the group identified a clear need for more free or low-cost spaces throughout Southwark, some participants also highlighted the significant social purpose and community cohesion outcomes generated in spaces such as cinemas and pubs. There were discussions about how community uses and revenue-generating uses, rather than being construed as sitting in opposition to one another, could be combined for cross-subsidisation.

Social purpose can also be understood in terms of control and decision-making power. Participants discussed how residents should be empowered to have a degree of ownership over spaces, which could be cultivated with long leases and governance models that enable autonomous management. To decide what social purpose(s) should be delivered on a site, participants flagged that a significant evidence base about the

specific needs and demographics of the communities living and working nearby is needed.

The workshop discussion made it clear that developing a unified definition of social purpose would be challenging, as it is highly contextual and must reflect local needs.

Because trust is fragile, the process must be genuinely open to community input.

During the exercise, some participants expressed a fear that a nominally participatory process could be undermined if the council is perceived to have a pre-determined outcome in mind. This risk is especially acute if the council retains veto power in the future governance of the framework. There was also a strong view that communities should be involved in shaping decisions from the outset, rather than reacting to council-produced concepts.

These discussions highlighted a wider mistrust of council-led processes, rooted in past experiences of regeneration, land use decisions, and neighbourhood change. This structural mistrust reinforces the need for new approaches that prioritise openness, collaboration, and accountability, and that value community members' ideas.

Participants from within and outside the council recognised that not all needs can be met at once on the same site. They called for more open discussions about the trade-offs between different uses; transparent criteria and processes around how decisions are made between providing housing, green space, or workspaces on a site, for example, would help communities understand how and why priorities are set the way they are.

Participants also called for more information about land ownership and how land use and operational decisions are made. Much of this information, however, is already publicly available (eg, the Greater London Authority's (GLA) public land map[25], the council's commercial property lettings[26]); so while transparency is important, it must be matched with skills development and awareness raising to ensure residents can engage with the information shared. Facilitators noted a promising level of willingness among stakeholders to participate, with council officers showing greater openness than expected.

One group also pointed to Kingswood Arts as a positive local example that could inform the SPLF. Workshop participants highlighted how important it was that the council was not overly prescriptive about the uses and operating model of the building, instead setting broad parameters and leaving room for flexibility to be proposed by interested operators. (See more details on Kingswood Arts in Appendix 1.)

Doing something is better than doing nothing.

Participants expressed frustration at seeing buildings and parcels of land sitting empty or underused for years. There was support for 'meanwhile uses' as a way to activate sites quickly, create visible community benefit, and build momentum while longer-term plans are developed. These short-term and often lower-cost initiatives were seen as a potential path towards more permanent community stewardship.

In addition, while Section 123 of the Local Government Act sets out the obligation for local authorities to achieve "best consideration", or market value, for land disposals, best consideration does not apply to short-term tenancies. This means that for any council-owned asset that is leased for a period of less than seven years, the council has more flexibility around who they lease it to and the tenant's ability to pay market value.

While this creates a real opportunity for more social purpose uses on shorter-term tenancies, there are also limitations to this approach: short leases make it hard for organisations to access grant funding or invest in staff and infrastructure, projects can take years to become established, and the risk of displacement just as initiatives begin to succeed can undermine both community trust and long-term sustainability.

Participants also emphasised the need to balance innovation with pragmatism. There were collective concerns about the resources, training, and sustained engagement required to make highly participatory models work, as well as the challenges of scaling them or integrating them with existing legal frameworks. Councils also face the need to justify any potential loss of income from land and to align with national policy priorities, including housebuilding targets.

Overall, the group emphasised that some action – even if it's temporary or partial – is preferable to prolonged inaction. Testing ideas in practice allows for learning, adaptation, and trust-building in a way that endless consultation does not.

Representation matters.

Participants raised concerns that even well-designed participatory processes risk being dominated by the loudest or most resourced voices. Highly educated, articulate individuals are often privileged in public forums, leaving many local needs unheard. There was a strong call for diversity in representation, ensuring voices from across ages, neighbourhoods, and income groups are included in any governing body established to oversee the implementation of the SPLF.

Participants questioned whether small governing bodies could ever be truly representative, with some advocating for the use of citizens' assemblies or sortition-

based panels to ensure fairness and inclusivity. How members are selected was seen as crucial: without careful design, representation risks reproducing existing inequalities.

Participants also highlighted the need to properly resource participation. Meaningful involvement requires not just paying people for their time but also investing in training and capacity-building so that community members can take part confidently and effectively. Participants noted that residents are often time-poor, while councils have more staff capacity. At the same time, some noted how tiring it can be to be continually asked for input without seeing tangible change, which reinforces the importance of respectful design, fair recognition, and visible follow-through.

Scepticism towards quantitative scoring.

Participants felt that reducing social purpose to a numerical matrix risks oversimplifying complex social outcomes. Rather than scoring specific uses (eg youth centre vs. affordable workspace), the emphasis should be on comparing desired impacts – such as community cohesion, inclusion, or wellbeing – and allowing flexibility in how those outcomes are achieved. The process should start with the ambition for the site, not a predefined building type, leaving space for creativity from designers and operators. While scoring can help structure discussion, it should not drive decisions. Participants called for a more qualitative, deliberative approach, supported by a community empowerment fund to resource meaningful community participation and capacity-building.

Young people's experiences of place reveal critical social purpose needs.

The youth workshop brought forward perspectives that were distinct from – but complementary to – those raised in the adult workshops. Young people spoke with clarity and honesty about how safety, belonging, and access to free "third spaces" shape their everyday experience of Southwark. They identified parks, streets, and community facilities where they feel welcome or unwelcome, often highlighting issues that adults overlook, including gang activity, lack of lighting, territorial boundaries, and the scarcity of safe places to spend time after school in the winter months. Their reflections underscored that social purpose cannot be detached from lived experience: a space that is technically "public" is not socially accessible if young people do not feel safe or invited to use it.

The session also demonstrated young people's appetite to understand and influence how land decisions are made. While they were mostly unfamiliar with the council's

governance structures, they showed sophisticated insight into power, and a keen interest in learning how to exercise influence collectively. Facilitators noted that youth engagement is most effective when it happens in familiar, youth-centred settings where participants can speak freely and build confidence together. This suggests that ongoing youth involvement in the SPLF would be better delivered through sustained engagement in youth clubs and peer-led spaces than through expecting individual young people to sit on formal governance bodies. The youth workshop highlighted the importance of designing participatory processes that feel accessible, grounded in place, and attentive to the needs of younger residents who experience public land differently.

SOCIAL PURPOSE OF LAND FRAMEWORK

APPROACH

The Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF) translates research insights into a practical model for decision-making. It seeks to move from a combative to a collaborative land use system, where social purpose can be negotiated openly and delivered jointly. While the framework is about giving voice to people who have historically been excluded from decisions about land, it also recognises the real constraints that the council operates with: legal duties, financial pressures, and a highly regulated planning environment.

Participatory decision-making

The framework is built around participatory decision-making, going beyond consultation and engagement towards genuine co-production. This is easy to say, but difficult to do. As one Southwark council officer reflected in the Future of London's report *Making the Case for Co-Production*[27]:

> We're not very good at being transparent about what's up for grabs and what's not. We need to be braver and more honest about our aims, what's possible to be co-created and where we can share power.

At the core of the proposed framework are neighbourhood land panels (NLPs). These standing groups will bring together residents, community organisations, and council representatives to shape how certain council-owned assets are used. These panels will define local social purpose outcomes, co-develop briefs, evaluate proposals, and make recommendations.

Test and learn pilot

Critically, implementation of the framework is intended to be phased and iterative. We recommend implementing the SPLF through a test-and-learn approach. Test-and-learn is an iterative method of public policy and service design that tests assumptions through real world experiments and uses evidence-based learning to refine the design.

In the pilot phase, the framework will apply to a minimum of 5 sites. Drawing from test-and-learn principles, we recommend that Southwark embed review and adaptation practices throughout the pilot phase. This will allow for adjustments to be made to the

process along the way. At the end of the first year, insights from a comprehensive review of the pilot will feed into a revised SPLF, which will be used in the following phases.

Taking a test-and-learn pilot approach lets the council and community explore how to balance social purpose with fiduciary responsibility, while also building the trust and infrastructure needed for a more open, long-term approach to stewarding land for public good.

Sites included in the pilot phase must be varied, representing different built forms, neighbourhood contexts, and potential uses. NEF recommends starting with a pilot of 5 sites, seeking diversity in both asset type and location. For example, a tenant hall, library, school, vacant land, and space in new development, across 5 different Southwark neighbourhoods.

Testing the SPLF on too few pilot sites risks undermining the ambition of this research and organising project. Beyond the economies of scale for administration and neighbourhood land panel recruitment, a pilot programme of at least 5 sites signifies a commitment to systemic change and mitigates the risk of the process reverting to a standard - and standalone - engagement process.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Southwark's SPLF is guided by the following principles. These set expectations for how power, expertise, and accountability are shared and sustained. They are also a stress test: if the principles are not upheld, the process is not working. These should be reviewed as part of the framework's iterative implementation.

The principles align with the borough plan, Southwark 2030, which is a place-based strategy that sets a vision for a fair, green, and safe Southwark where everyone can live a good life as part of a strong community.[28] The principles behind Southwark 2030 are to reduce inequality, empower people, and invest in prevention.

- **Transparency:** Decisions about how public land is used must be made in the open, recognising legal constraints. This means sharing information in clear and accessible formats, explaining how decisions are made and by whom. Relevant information, including trade-offs, data, and legal or financial constraints, should be shared in accessible and non-technical language. The framework must make it possible for someone outside the room to understand how and why a decision was made. This aligns with the Southwark 2030 principle to empower people and reduce inequalities, as openly sharing accessible information enables more residents to take a direct role in shaping their neighbourhoods.

- **Democratic participation:** The application of the framework must start with mutual trust and a commitment to collaboration between stakeholders. Involvement should be compensated and designed to include those typically left out. Greater transparency and participation can also build accountability and help bring underused assets back into productive, socially valuable use. Again, this principle supports the broader borough plan principle around empowering residents by creating real opportunities for active participation and leadership in decision-making.

- **Power-shifting:** The SPLF is about widening who has influence over public land within the scope of the framework. It seeks to include communities that have historically been excluded from these decisions, particularly minority ethnic groups, underrepresented residents, and those affected by large-scale major development. Community proposals must be taken seriously, with real weight in the decision-making process. The framework must avoid reinforcing the loudest voices. Widening community engagement will support the Southwark 2030 principle of reducing inequality by ensuring that access to opportunities and resources is more fairly distributed.

- **Shared and valued expertise:** Acknowledging the differences between community and professional expertise, the framework values them equally and resources them accordingly. Council officers, residents, and community organisations may have access to different legal and technical resources, and residents and community organisations, along with council officers, will bring lived experience, cultural insight, and local understanding to the application of the SPLF. The framework aims to create space for all forms of expertise to inform decisions and help make them legible to one another, and is well-aligned to the borough plan's commitment to empowering people.

- **Enforceable:** Land use decisions made through the SPLF will include a written explanation of how public input was considered, how final choices were made, and who is responsible for action and by when. Without these commitments, trust cannot be rebuilt, and power cannot genuinely shift. This supports Southwark 2030's principles of empowering people and reducing inequality.

- **Deliverable and pragmatic:** While the SPLF is ambitious, it must also be usable. That means working with existing council tools and programmes when possible (eg aligning with the Neighbourhoods Programme engagement process). It is also better to try something and learn from it, iterating and improving, rather than waiting for a perfect path to present itself. Developing a framework that is deliverable and pragmatic works in tandem with the borough plan's principle of investing in prevention, as acting early to secure better long-term outcomes helps avoid costly problems later.
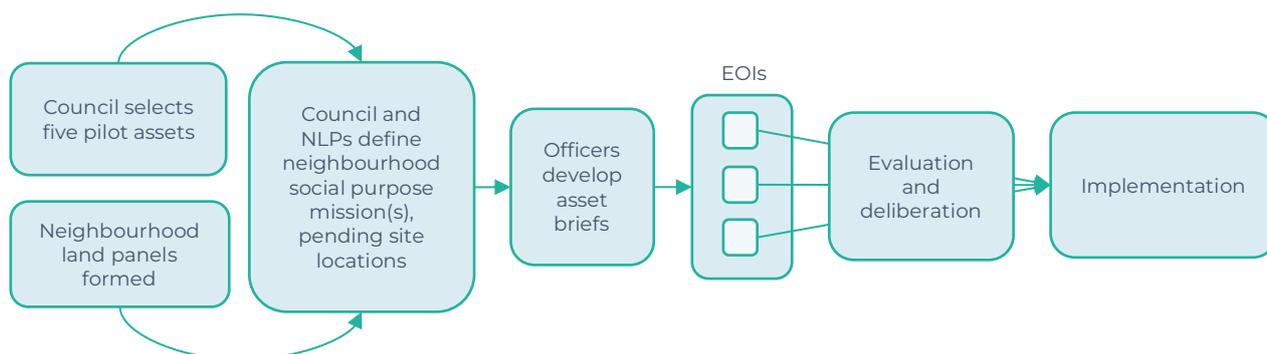
PILOT PHASE PROCESS

Figure 4: Pilot phase process.

To start with, the SPLF will apply to 5 council-nominated pilot sites. Table 2 details the step-by-step process for implementing the framework in its initial pilot phase. The left column in the table sets out who is involved, what decisions are made, and when each step takes place. The table includes two worked examples on the right-hand side, to illustrate how the framework could be applied to real sites.

Table 2: Step-by-step process for implementing the SPLF.

	Pilot phase process	Worked examples	
1.	**Site selection** The council will identify five pilot sites to achieve relative geographic distribution across Southwark's 10 neighbourhoods. A more detailed proposal for how sites could be selected in later phases, after the pilot, is outlined in Recommendations for Future Phases, subsection Methods for Identifying Assets (pg 53).	A **school** has closed in the borough's urban centre. The council will retain ownership and the option to re-open it in the future, but it is available for social purpose use in the meantime.	A **community centre** in a housing estate in the south of the borough is underused. It's been sitting vacant for many years. Estate residents are keen for the space to come back into use.
2.	**Neighbourhood land panel formation** Five pilot NLPs will be established, made up of residents, community organisations, local businesses, ward councillors, and relevant council officers. The NLPs provide structured forums for dialogue, evidence gathering, and shared decision-making between the council and communities. The panels are responsible for defining the neighbourhood social purpose missions, reviewing and feeding back on council-drafted asset briefs, evaluating expressions of interest (EOIs) received in response to the	Panel members are recruited through open call and targeted outreach. Some priority is given to panel members with a connection to the former school (teachers, parents). The council will coordinate training and support for induction.	Panel members are recruited through open call and targeted outreach. A minimum of two panel members must live on the housing estate; at least one must live in social rented housing. The council will coordinate training and support for induction.

	asset briefs, and making a recommendation on the preferred delivery partner or operator. More detail on the member recruitment process and panels' terms of reference is noted in Appendix 2.		
3.	**Setting neighbourhood social purpose missions** The NLPs, with support from the council, will host a public workshop and walkabout in the neighbourhood of each pilot site to understand local priorities and social needs. Notification of the site walkabout and design of deeper engagement methods – such as canvassing, mass communications, or training in citizen science – can be coordinated with the Neighbourhoods Programme, community engagement, and resident participation teams. At this stage of the process, the NLP will: - Review quantitative evidence (Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, local plan evidence base, neighbourhood community plans, resident insight survey results, housing needs, etc.). - Develop qualitative insights (collected during the workshop and walkabout). - Define neighbourhood social purpose mission(s). The neighbourhood social purpose mission will be a short statement of locally defined social outcomes that public land and assets in that area should contribute to, grounded in community evidence and used to guide the asset brief. The mission will be integrated into neighbourhood community plans and will shape downstream decisions.	*Neighbourhood social purpose mission:* We will use local spaces to nurture learning, creativity, and connection across generations. Our goal is to create places that help young people grow in confidence, develop skills, and find support. Assets should contribute to youth development, lifelong learning, and community belonging. *Core social outcomes:* Improved youth confidence and access to opportunities, greater access to affordable learning and making spaces, and stronger intergenerational connections. *People who should benefit:* Young people transitioning between school and work, older residents with skills to share, and local educators and community groups.	*Neighbourhood social purpose mission*: We will use community spaces on and near this estate to rebuild local connection, care, and opportunity. The neighbourhood has strong social roots but limited access to places for residents to meet, eat, and organise. Community assets should support community wealth generation and retention. *Core social outcomes:* Reduced social isolation, improved food security, and more opportunities for resident leadership. *People who should benefit:* Estate residents, older adults and single parents, local social enterprises, and mutual aid groups.
4.	**Asset brief development** The project team will draft a baseline asset brief for each pilot asset, drawing from the neighbourhood social purpose mission, site constraints (viability, planning,	*Asset brief summary:* Seeking a medium-term operator with a	*Asset brief summary:* Seeking a long-term operator with an initial

	legality), and relevant borough-wide policies (local plan, asset strategy). The NLP will then review and amend the brief. The panel must endorse the brief before it is released. If the NLP cannot come to a consensus and endorse the asset brief with a two-thirds majority within six weeks, the brief is considered invalid and cannot proceed. The council will re-initiate the process by drafting a new brief, following a working session with the NLP to understand the core challenges with the initial brief. Alternatively, if no agreement can be reached, the council may withdraw the asset from the process. Once the NLP endorses the asset brief, the final document is published alongside any call for EOIs or other pathways to concept development.	break clause for educational uses. Proposals should show how they'll deliver community connection and learning outcomes, in line with the mission.	five-year lease and option to renew. Proposals should show how they'll support connection through food or cultural heritage, in line with the mission.
5.	**Concept development** Based on the neighbourhood social purpose mission and asset brief, the council will invite EOIs that align with the asset's defined social purpose. Proposals have to demonstrate high-level financial, legal, and technical viability. The spirit of this stage is not to set applicants up to fail but to help them succeed. To reduce barriers for less-resourced groups, such as By & For organisations, community groups or new social purpose businesses: • Proposal formats will be light-touch (eg, 2-3 pages, no detailed business plans) • Council officers and panel members will offer optional support or Q&A sessions • Signposting provided to potential delivery partners, including non-profit partners. The NLP will shortlist submissions. Where appropriate (eg for complex or strategic assets), the council may convene a design lab. This short, facilitated design sprint will invite applicants, officers, and local	Proposals: *1. Youth development and mentoring centre* Partnership of education charities and social enterprises offering youth mentoring and wellbeing programming. *2. Neighbourhood hall and shared workspace* A local operator combines affordable workspace for non-profits with a hall for events and assemblies. *3. Community workshop* A collective of creatives provides affordable access to tools and training, offering classes to all ages in repair, design, and craft.	Proposals: *1. Community kitchen* New social enterprise will open a community kitchen, hosting cooking classes and food sharing. *2. Neighbourhood living room* Partnership between the Tenants and Residents Association (TRA) and a local charity to create a drop-in hub – café, meeting area, after-school space, and other community programming (lending library, language classes, plant workshops). *3. Event venue* Low-cost event rentals, with bar and sound system.

	stakeholders to collaboratively refine ideas.[a]		
6.	**Evaluation and deliberation** Once shortlisted proposals from the EOI stage are further developed, they are reviewed and deliberated on by the NLP (see Evaluation Matrix, page 47). This process can be self-facilitated or with support from a trained community facilitator. External facilitators may be particularly useful in the first phase while the process is still being refined, with the expectation that the NLP will self-facilitate in later phases. The deliberation process has to be transparent: any scores, rationales, and trade-offs will be documented and published on the council's website. The NLP will make a formal recommendation on the preferred proposal to the responsible senior officer and cabinet member. The council retains final decision-making authority but must publish a formal response to the NLP's recommendation, including reasons for acceptance or rejection. If the recommendation is rejected, the NLP has the right to request an independent review, potentially led by another NLP. For qualifying framework assets seeking planning permission (eg new development), it is anticipated that the SPLF will precede the planning application, though planning committee reports should reference the framework's evaluation and recommendation.	Using the desirability/feasibility evaluation matrix, the NLP recommends that the council move forward with the **community workshop** proposal. During the Neighbourhood Mission-setting stage, the Panel heard that there aren't many options for skills development and continuing education in the area. Young people in the neighbourhood take part in nearby Mentivity's programmes, and adults aren't lacking for affordable workspace. They want more options for creative outlets. The Panel is confident in the business model - the collective includes people with experience running maker spaces elsewhere, along with local creatives. The tiered fees help cross-subsidise programmes, ensuring lower-income locals have access.	The NLP recommends the **neighbourhood living room.** Because the TRA is involved, the space will prioritise outcomes for estate residents, a key consideration in the desirability/feasibility matrix. The local charity, while relatively new and without asset management experience, has a board member with demonstrable experience in property management. The charity also has deep ties to the local community and potential partners for programme delivery. With a 10-year grant commitment from a private funder, the charity, in partnership with the TRA, does not present a major financial risk.

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[a] A design sprint, or charette, is a short, intensive, hands-on workshop where local people, prospective operators, and council officers co-design viable options for a site. Over one to two days, participants work in mixed teams to: (1) translate the neighbourhood mission and site brief into clear concepts; (2) rapidly test feasibility (planning, finance, operating models); and (3) iterate towards two or three publishable options with draft governance models and delivery routes. It is a structured way to surface trade-offs, blend community and technical expertise, and produce comparable, realistic proposals that can move straight into evaluation and deliberation.

7.	Implementation	
	After a proposal is accepted by the NLP and the council, through a typical decision process (eg cabinet decision), the selected provider, operator, or developer will be onboarded. This includes finalising lease terms that reflect the agreed social purpose and outcomes, such as clauses around affordability, accessibility, or community use. To ensure continued accountability, a 'decision audit trail' will be created and made public, detailing how the decision was made, who was involved, and what commitments were set. This will include a measurement capability against which social purpose outputs will be assessed, with the ability to terminate an agreement that fails to perform.	The panel facilitator, chair, and council officers will work together to publish the decision audit trail. This will include a summary of what was heard through public engagement, notes from NLP meetings, a record of how the proposals were evaluated, and the final recommendation and cabinet decision.

EVALUATION MATRIX

The evaluation matrix is a simple framework that helps evaluate proposals or concepts by balancing two dimensions: desirability and feasibility.

It is not a rigid scoring matrix. Instead, it provides a shared structure to guide discussion, assess competing interests and issues, and support transparent, consistent decision-making. It can be used by the NLP throughout the evaluation and deliberation stage of the process, as set out in Pilot Phase Process starting on page 42.

Desirability

Does the proposed concept meet **local needs?**

Does the proposed concept meet a **strategic need?**

Feasibility

Is it **financially viable?**

Is it **legal**?

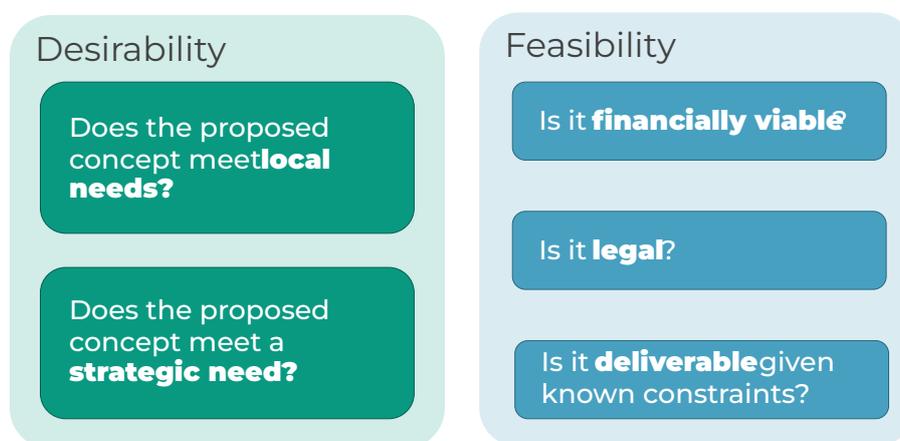Is it **deliverable** given known constraints?

Figure 5. Evaluation matrix.

Desirability

Desirability is about whether a proposed concept serves the public interest, both in terms of local needs and wider strategic priorities.

- **Local need:** Does the concept respond to specific unmet needs in the neighbourhood? These should be defined through the neighbourhood social purpose mission process and may relate to youth inclusion, access to care, everyday affordability, safety, or other priorities identified by residents and stakeholders.

- **Strategic need:** Does the concept help address broader social, economic, or environmental goals for the borough? This might include supporting groups historically excluded from land use decisions, delivering long-term affordability or stewardship of assets, or strengthening climate resilience.

A project doesn't need to meet both local and strategic needs, but concepts that do should be prioritised.

Feasibility

Feasibility considers whether the proposal can realistically be delivered, given legal, financial, and operational constraints. It helps ensure social purpose is pursued in ways that are viable and sustainable.

- **Legal viability:** Is the proposed use compatible with land ownership, planning policies, equality duties, and other statutory obligations? Does it require changes to land use classifications?

- **Financial feasibility:** Is the concept deliverable with available funding? Does it have a clear pathway to financing? Is the proposed use and user able to demonstrate financial sustainability? Proposals need to be resourced, fundable, and have reasonable assumptions about costs and revenue.

- **Deliverability**
  Can the proposal be implemented within a reasonable timeframe, given the capacity of the partners involved? Does it help build local capacity to support the delivery of future projects?

Using the matrix

The matrix is embedded in the broader participatory process. During the evaluation and deliberation step, the NLP can use it to structure dialogue. For example, the panel can compare concepts not just by technical merit but by the proposals' alignment with community priorities and borough-wide aims. Even if decisions are not made numerically, the evaluation matrix ensures a transparent and reasoned basis for choice.

Importantly, the matrix helps make explicit the trade-offs between different proposals. For example, a concept that ranks high on desirability but medium on feasibility may still be pursued, but would likely require additional council support, investment, or flexibility to bring it to life. These negotiated trade-offs – such as choosing depth of impact over speed, or innovation over certainty – should be documented and shared publicly as part of the audit trail.

A note on legal compliance

The activation and application of the SPLF does not supersede existing legal and regulatory frameworks. All decisions made through the framework will continue to comply with relevant legislation and policy, including the Landlord and Tenant Act 1954, which provides security of tenure for commercial tenants, and statutory planning processes. The framework is designed to add transparency and participation to land decisions, not to alter legal duties. It will also operate in line with the council's constitution, ensuring that statutory responsibilities and governance requirements remain intact.

ACTION PLAN

RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS

Participant remuneration

Remunerating community participants is a critical step to ensure that engagement is accessible and fair. Without compensation, participation risks being limited to those who already have time and financial flexibility, reinforcing existing inequities. Paying participants recognises the value of their expertise, helps overcome barriers such as childcare, caring responsibilities, or lost income, and ensures that people who have historically been marginalised by housing and land policies can play a meaningful role.

Council officer

Successful delivery of the Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF) will require a dedicated officer responsible for coordinating and overseeing its implementation. This role should act as the central point of contact between council teams, neighbourhood land panels (NLPs), and external partners. It should be a new mid/senior (principal) officer role, likely within the sustainable growth team. This new post will manage the pilot process, maintain documentation and decision audit trails, support learning and evaluation, and champion the approach internally (see job description and person specification in Appendix 3).

External facilitation

The council can consider commissioning independent facilitation to support the set-up and early operation of the pilot. The external role can add value through impartiality, as a neutral presence that can navigate tensions and build trust among stakeholders. There are many organisations with experience in convening and running citizen panels and other deliberative civic processes that the council can tender services from.

External facilitation should be time-limited; the goal should be to build capacity among panel members and move towards a model of self-facilitation or peer support, where trained members from other NLPs take turns to facilitate sessions.

Training and other resources

The dedicated officer, working with external facilitators, will coordinate access to relevant training and resources to support panel members to participate fully. These might be introductions to the planning system and asset management approach or skills in deliberation and conflict resolution.

GOVERNANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The SPLF will sit within the council's existing governance structures. Cabinet will retain ultimate decision-making authority over the use of council-owned land and property, based on recommendations from the NLPs.

Day-to-day coordination of the framework will be led by the dedicated officer post. They could be supported by an internal officer advisory group (eg continuing the one convened for the development of the framework) to ensure compliance with statutory and policy requirements.

Each NLP will operate under agreed terms of reference, setting out its remit, membership, and decision-making processes. To ensure transparency, summaries of panel discussions, site briefs, and recommendations will be made public, creating a clear decision audit trail from initial proposal to cabinet approval.

Regular reports to cabinet should summarise activity across all participating sites, progress against key outcomes, and lessons learned to date.

LEARNING AND EVALUATION

As discussed in 'Test and Learn' within 'APPROACH' (page 39), the pilot should be approached as a test-and-learn process, embedding reflection and adaptation from the outset. Evaluation should capture both process learning (how well the framework supports transparency, participation, and collaboration) and outcome learning (whether social purpose assets deliver tangible community benefit).

The dedicated officer, supported by the independent facilitator, will coordinate regular feedback loops, or short reflective sessions, after key milestones and a formal evaluation after 12 months of operation.

Learning should be shared internally across departments and externally with partners through the Southwark Land Partnership, helping to shape the potential expansion of the framework. The final evaluation will inform recommendations to the cabinet on whether and how to scale the approach across additional sites or institutional partners.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE PHASES

EXPANDING THE PILOT

The decision going to the cabinet seeks approval for the pilot phase only. The Southwark Land Commission, which was the impetus for the creation of the Social Purpose of Land Framework (SPLF), set an ambition that was far bolder than a time-limited pilot. As such, the proposed pilot should be used to experiment, evidence, and refine a new way of making land decisions. Learning from the pilot should inform not only future sites brought into the framework, but also wider policy development around asset management, social purpose and value, and neighbourhood planning.

If the pilot demonstrates value and feasibility, the council should plan for a second phase of implementation, expanding the framework to a broader set of assets and exploring partnerships with other civic landowners, such as the NHS, faith institutions, and housing associations.

TYPES OF ASSETS FOR INCLUSION

In future phases, the SPLF may apply to qualifying assets such as:

- **Vacant parcels of council-owned land** that are not in the land assembly pipeline for new housing, commercial, or operational delivery, as identified in the current or future local plan.

- Identified council-owned **commercial assets** (eg ground-floor retail units). These will likely be either vacant and commercially unviable to let and/or not suitable for new homes provision, and therefore well suited to being repurposed for social purposes rather than being disposed of. The property team would identify a list of potential assets each year. More coordination is needed with the property team to understand what a reasonable annual target number of assets would be. Assets can be identified from the General Fund and/or the Housing Revenue Account (HRA), recognising that assets in the HRA will need to meet the financial rules of the HRA; the rules for the General Fund are broader.

- Identified **surplus operational assets** (eg schools, leisure centres, office space), capable of potential repurposing with community involvement, whether temporarily unused or assets that are no longer required for core council functions.

- Designated **quantum of space within new major development[b] schemes** where the council is the landowner or delivery partner. If the council is entering into a development agreement or joint venture with a third-party delivery partner, there is an expectation that the delivery partner will engage with the NLP prior to entering a section 106 agreement to seek input on the scheme's provision of community facilities or other social infrastructure, subject to an identifiable need and prospect of use by appropriate viable organisations. This process should align with the community review panel (CRP) if the scheme falls within a CRP catchment area.

- **Tenants' halls** and other community-managed assets on housing estates (on an opt-in basis). The aim is not to reduce or commercialise these spaces, but to work with residents to expand access to the social purpose these valuable community assets can provide and ensure these spaces are well-used.

It does not apply to:

- Existing housing, as it is governed by a separate regulatory system.
- Commercial assets with existing leases or those that will be commercially re-let.

METHODS FOR IDENTIFYING ASSETS

Assets can be identified through a mix of council review and community suggestions:

- The council can maintain a publicly accessible map of eligible assets.
- Members of the public can also suggest specific assets for social purpose use on the map. The council has extensively used this engagement method ('Mass engagement methods', page 24). While suggestions carry no automatic obligation, they will be logged transparently and reviewed by the NLP.

Each year, the NLPs can work with council officers to review the list of eligible assets and community suggestions and prioritise one to two per neighbourhood for activation under the framework. Prioritisation could consider:

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[b] Per the Southwark Plan 2022, "major development" means development involving any one or more of the following:
- the winning and working of minerals or the use of land for mineral-working deposits; or
- waste development; or
- the provision of homes where the number of homes to be provided is 10 or more; or the development is to
- be carried out on a site having an area of 0.5 hectares or more; or
- the provision of a building or buildings where the floor space to be created by the development is 1,000
- square metres or more; or
- development carried out on a site having an area of 1 hectare or more.

- Alignment with unmet needs identified in the neighbourhood social purpose mission.
- Level of community interest or readiness.
- Timeliness (eg upcoming lease breaks or planned disposals).
- Deliverability within council capacity.
- Planning suitability.
- Financial and legal constraints.

This prioritisation step ensures the process is both strategic and realistic, while remaining responsive to local knowledge and opportunity.

WORKING WITH PARTNERS

Successfully implementing a follow-on phase of the framework will be supported by the establishment of the Southwark Land Partnership, another recommendation of the Southwark Land Commission. This platform can be used to identify sites held by other civic landowners – such as NHS trusts, housing associations, and faith organisations – that could be piloted for social purpose uses. Several partners have already expressed interest in more transparent, participatory models of land governance, and many are pursuing related initiatives, such as surplus land strategies or community asset transfers. Expanding the framework collaboratively would share responsibility and opportunity across institutions.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Policy review

Appendix 2: Terms of reference for NLP recruitment

Appendix 3: Principal social purpose officer - job description and person specification

ENDNOTES

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