PLACECHECK

Placecheck is a method of assessing the qualities of a place, showing what improvements are needed, and focusing people on working together to achieve them.

If necessary, a Placecheck can start small: with half a dozen people round a kitchen table, or a small group meeting on a street corner. A Placecheck can cover a street (or part of one), a neighbourhood, a town centre, or a whole district or city. The setting might be urban, suburban or a village .The initiative can come from anyone, in any organisation or sector. A variety of types of appraisal of places are carried out already. Some define the character of a valued place. Others assess how sustainable a development is, or describe a place's visual qualities.

Placecheck (developed from the approach described in the report The Connected City, published by Urban Initiatives in 1997) attempts to contribute something new, by asking a comprehensive range of questions about the processes of change and the potential for improving the area physically. The method tries to avoid abstractions that are difficult to assess and jargon that excludes non-specialists.

How to carry out a Placecheck

Questions to consider in initiating a local Placecheck Project

How might a Placecheck help here?
A Placecheck can:
- Provide a focus for bringing people together to work in collaboration
- Identify what needs to be done to improve the place.

What area should the Placecheck cover?
A Placecheck can cover a street (or part of one), a neighbourhood, a town centre, or a whole district or city. The setting might be urban, suburban or a village.

Who will initiate the Placecheck?
The first step is for a local partnership or alliance of people with a stake in an area's future to come together and agree to carry out a Placecheck. The initiative can come from anyone, in any organisation or sector.

Who should be involved at the start of the Placecheck?
There is no need to get everyone signed up at the start: people can be drawn in later to the Placecheck process and to whatever collaboration and action follows. Potential participants at the start or later may include:
- Businesses
- Community leaders
- Developers
- Development agencies
- Faith organisations
- Housing associations
- Landowners
- Local authority officers (concerned with such matters as housing, planning, conservation, economic development, neighbourhood renewal, education, community development, transport, and environmental health)
- Local councillors
- Local media
- Partnerships
- Planning, architecture and design centres
- Police
- Professional practices
- Residents
- Residents' and tenants' associations
- Schools
- Sustainable development (Local Agenda 21) groups
- Town centre management initiatives
- Traders
- Training agencies
- Transport operators
- Universities
- Women's groups
- Youth and community groups

What resources, if any, are available for carrying out the Placecheck?
A Placecheck can be carried out with whatever resources are available, even if that is no more than a few people with a few hours to spare. A more ambitious Placecheck (which might follow that initial run-through) may require significant resources. These might include:
- People who are in a position to organize the project.
- Local programmes of which Placechecks can become a part.
- Skills such as organising, facilitating, drawing and photography.
- Financial support
- Venues
- Publicity

What might the Placecheck lead to?
People who initiate a Placecheck may have a clear idea of where it will lead to, or they may use it simply as a means of understanding the place and deciding the next step. Some Placechecks will prepare the ground for the sort of documents that councils, regeneration partnerships, developers and local communities produce to guide future development in an area:
- The review of a local authority's development plan, setting out the council's overall planning and design policies.
- An urban design framework, master plan or design code, setting out and illustrating planning and design principles to apply to an area, an urban quarter, or a whole village, town or city.
- A development brief, setting out and illustrating planning and design principles to apply to a specific site.

- A design guide, setting out and illustrating planning and design principles that relate to a specific topic for an area, or on a specific topic.
- A neighbourhood plan.
- A town, village or neighbourhood design statement, showing how development can be carried out in harmony with the local setting.
- A conservation area appraisal carried out by the local authority.
- Residents' street improvement and management plans.
- Industrial estate improvement strategies.

Placechecks can also be used to support other specific objectives identified in the Urban White Paper (2000):
- Involving local communities in the planning and design process through architecture and design centres.
- Helping town centre management initiatives bring together property owners, residents, businesses and others with an interest in the future of the town centre by agreeing a shared vision, creating a strategy and implementing an action plan.
- Working together to put in place local projects to improve an area through a town improvement scheme.
- Developing tailor-made community strategies by local strategic partnerships involving local businesses, local authorities, community groups and other key stakeholders.
- Fulfilling local authorities' new community planning duty.
- Helping to build community capacity for neighbourhood renewal.
- Helping to form public, private and voluntary sector partnerships.

A Placecheck can also help in:
- The work of design review panels.
- Assessing development proposals.

The Placecheck method reflects the approach described in the DETR/CABE design guidance By Design. It can also be used as an aid to achieving Best Value, through testing the value of public services and enabling effective consultation.

What might our first Placecheck event be?
Options for a first Placecheck event include:
- A walkabout of the area
- A meeting or workshop event
- An exhibition
- A questionnaire
- An event at a community festival
- A combination of more than one of these.

Will a facilitator be needed to plan, organize and run the event?
A facilitator is someone who is experienced in planning and running events so they run smoothly and achieve their aims. What sort of facilitator is needed will depend on the number of people involved in the event. For a large event a professional facilitator may be useful, though there are other people (including some community workers and built environment professionals) who are good at facilitating events.

What expert advice (if any) do we need at this stage?
What (and whether) expert advice is needed, and at what stage, will depend on the aim of the Placecheck and what the initial run-through reveals. Care should be taken to avoid professionals taking over: the point of the Placecheck is to enable a wide range of people, professionals and non professionals, to set their own agenda.

How should the Placecheck be recorded?
The investigation process and the results can be recorded and presented in a variety of ways, including maps, plans, diagrams, notes, sketches, video and photographs

How can we make best use of a walkabout?
It is useful for the organisers to have thought in advance about how the walkabout will be organised and followed up. Break up into pairs or groups of no more than six people, and agree to meet again at a specified time (an hour is probably long enough). Each group should nominate one person to take notes (although everyone can take their own notes, as it helps to concentrate the mind).

At the end of the walkabout, everyone gets together and runs through the points they have raised. One person makes a note of the main conclusions. Decide on a few things that you will try to achieve in the next seven days, and agree who will be responsible for each. Also decide on a few things that you would hope to achieve in the next year.

Agree to meet again in seven days' time (in someone's house or office, in a community centre, or in a café or pub, for example). This will be a chance to report back on what people have done in the week since the walkabout, and to decide on the next steps: what to aim for and who to get involved.

What questions should we add to the checklist?

The checklist is intended to prompt you in thinking about what might be relevant to your area. There are likely to be other matters important locally that it does not cover. Think what these might be and add them to your list of priorities.

What happens if different people give different answers to the questions in the checklist?

Different people no doubt will give different answers to some of the questions. The checklist should help people understand each other's points of view, and serve as a useful starting point for discussing the issues and finding common ground. The discussions should be as wide and as open as possible. The value of the Placecheck may depend on what efforts are made to involve people who might otherwise be left out.

How should we use the checklist?

The checklist sets out some questions it might be useful to ask. Which of them are appropriate for your circumstances is for the organisers of the Placecheck to decide. You will need to take account of the size of the area, the aim of the Placecheck, and how familiar the participants are will the sorts of concepts and issues the checklist deals with. The checklist is meant to prompt thoughts, not to be a comprehensive list of what should be considered. No doubt many of the questions will not be relevant to your circumstances. Leave them out, and concentrate on the issues that seem important. Don't put people off with a daunting list of questions in the early stages of a project. Select a short list of questions first. Add more later if participants want to go into greater detail. The checklist is in three parts (A,B and C): start with whichever part seems to asking questions of the right level of detail.

Part A

The checklist starts with three simple questions. These will get people thinking, and in some cases no more prompting will be needed. The last of those questions, 'What needs to be improved?', may start people wondering what the options are.

Part B

The second part of the checklist sets out 15 more specific questions. The first six ask who needs to be involved in changing the place for the better, and how they can be involved in achieving that. The other nine questions focus on how people use the place and experience it. These questions may be enough to draw out the information that is required. If not, the next part provides more prompts.

Part C

The longest part of the checklist goes more deeply into those 15 questions, listing a series of detailed questions (more than a hundred in all) under each one. This part is fairly comprehensive. It does not have to be gone through slavishly. The idea is to help you check that you have considered what issues might play a part in improving the place.

Five examples of how an initial Placecheck might be carried out

1. People meet for a walkabout of a street or other local place. They ask themselves the three basic questions (Part A). They may go on to ask other questions on the checklist, either now or on a later occasion.
2. The organisers of the local Placecheck draw up their own tailor-made checklist after selecting the questions that seem most relevant and adding any more that seem important locally. This checklist is then distributed to participants in a walkabout or a meeting. The participants can also refer to the full checklist if they need more ideas.
3. A small group reads through the checklist together, answering questions that can be answered easily, ignoring those that are not relevant, and agreeing which questions need to be looked in to in more detail.
4. The organisers of the local Placecheck select ten questions from the checklist (and, if appropriate, some that may not be on the checklist but seem important locally).These are then discussed at a meeting, with the full checklist available for people to refer to if they need more prompts.
5. At a small meeting, people choose the ten questions on the checklist that seem most important to them. They compare notes and agree a list of what seem to be the most important questions to focus on.

Placechecklist

Three basic questions

Fifteen more specific questions

The people

A   Who needs to be involved in changing the place for the better?

B   What resources are available locally to help people get involved?

C   What other methods might we use to develop our ideas about how to improve the place?

D   How can we make the most of other programmes and resources?

E   How can we raise our sights?

F   What other initiatives could improve the place?

The place

G   How can we make this a more special place?

H   How can we make this a greener place?

I   How can the streets and other public spaces be made safer and more pleasant for people on foot?

J   How else can public spaces be improved?

K   How the place be made more welcoming and easier for people to find their way around?

L   How can the place be made adaptable to change in the future?

M   How can better use be made of resources?

N   What can be done to make the most of public transport?

O   How can routes be made better connected?

THE PEOPLE

A   Who needs to be involved in changing the place for the better?

A1   Stakeholders
Who has an interest in or concern for the future of the place through living, working, playing, visiting, providing services or investing here?

A2   Local knowledge
Who has local knowledge?

A3   Finance
Who manages budgets that might be used to improve the place?

A4   Control, regulation and standards
Who controls, regulates or sets standards here?

A5   Policy
Who draws up policies, plans, briefs and strategies that affect the place?

A6   Opinion
Who shapes opinion locally?

A7   Action
Who makes things happen around here?

A8   Collaboration
How can all these people work together on the Placecheck and beyond?

B   What resources are available locally to help people get involved?

B1   Support
What resources to support people working together are already available (including information and advice services, venues for exhibitions, training programmes, grant schemes, and funded initiatives)?

B2   Skills
What skills are available to help improve the place? How can further technical expertise and professional skills be made available to people who need them?

B3   Guidance
What guidance or expertise can the local authority or other bodies provide?

B4   A focus
Is there a centre that can be a venue for meetings and exhibitions, and provide support for the improvement process? If not, might it be possible to set one up?

B5   Gearing up
Do any local organisations need help in gearing themselves up so they can become involved effectively?

B6   New stakeholder groups
Do any new groupings of people with a stake in the place's future need to be organised and given support?

B7   Appraisals
Have any useful appraisals already been carried out (conservation area appraisal, urban design assessments, or histories for example) in any part of the area?

B8   Keeping people involved
What can be done to make sure that people who are consulted continue to have a role in implementing the resulting strategy, rather than leaving everything to other organisations and professionals?

B9   Design forum
Should a design forum be set up to bring together a wide range of people to consider design issues and their common interests on a continuing basis?

C   What other methods (apart from Placechecks) might we use to develop our ideas about how to improve the place?

C1   Sharing visions
Should events be organised to identify common interests, discuss ideas, share information and experience, and enable people to organise themselves into continuing working groups focusing on specific topics?

C2   Design workshops
Should workshop sessions be organised to bring a wide range of participants together to explore design ideas for an area?

C3   Action planning
Should action planning events be organised to enable local people and invited teams of professionals to explore design ideas together over one or several days?

C4   Deciding priorities
Should residents and others make a simple model of their area to help in deciding priorities for action?

D   How can we make the most of other programmes and resources?

D1   Council programmes
How can we help the local council to focus its own programmes and resources on improving this area?

D2   Education and training
How can links be developed with education and training programmes locally?

D3 Sustainable development
How can links be made with local authority sustainable development initiatives (such as Local Agenda 21)?

D4 Economic development
How can links be made between economic development and environmental improvement strategies locally?

D5 Transport
How can links be made with walking and cycling initiatives, and other initiatives such as Travelwise, Safe Routes to School and Quality Bus Partnerships?

D6 Grants
What sources of grants are available locally?

D7 Social inclusion
How can links be made with neighbourhood renewal and social inclusion initiatives?

D8 The market
What knowledge is available about how the local economy and property market are likely to influence what development is possible?

E How can we raise our sights?

E1 Inspiration
How can local leaders (in local government, business, education, faiths and the voluntary sector) be introduced to inspiring examples of urban regeneration?

E2 Study visits
To where should study visits be organised?

E3 Environmental education
How can environmental education in schools be promoted, focusing on the neighbourhood, town or city, to help the next generation of decision-makers and civic leaders understand how places change and can be changed?

F What other initiatives could improve the place?

F1 Local management
Should a town centre management or neighbourhood wardens initiative be set up, or is there an existing one that can be further developed?

F2 Design initiative
Should a design initiative be launched, involving people and organisations that shape the built environment in a linked series of events, exhibitions and publications?

F3 Networking
How can local networks be developed to link people with a common interest in shaping the place, and who can benefit from being in contact with each other?

F4 Youth council
Should a youth council be set up to develop a programme of events, exhibitions and exchanges involving young people in environmental issues?

F5 Ideas competition
Should an ideas competition be launched to attract interest, explore new approaches and inspire action?

F6 Awards scheme
Should an awards scheme be organised for the best contributions to improving the area?

F7 Celebration
Should local festivals and other events be organised to celebrate the area's distinctive character?

F8 Self-help
How can self-help initiatives by tenants' and residents' associations, amenity societies, traders' associations and other interest groups (individually or in partnership) be launched and supported?

F9 Facilities
What facilities does the place lack?

The place

G How can we make this a more special place?

G1 Valued buildings
Which buildings and structures are important to conserve? Are they already protected, or should they be?

G2 Local style
Are there local building forms, practices and materials that should inspire what is built today?

G3 Scale
Does the area have a general scale of building that should be followed for most new development?

G4 Identity
Are there particular streets or spaces whose special character is vital to the identity of the whole area?

G5 Highlights
How can the setting or appearance of the best buildings and spaces be improved?

G6 Skylines
Are there distinct skylines (or opportunities to create them) that development should respect?

G7 Public art
Are there places where works of art (such as sculpture, paving, water features and lighting) could enhance the place's character and sense of identity?

G8 Reflecting the past

What information (such as maps, published history or oral reminiscences) is available about how the place has developed? What aspects of the place's history might be reflected in new development?

G9 Protection
Is any of the area protected (as a conservation area, for example)?

H How can we make this a greener place?

H1 Natural features
Which natural features are important to conserve and emphasise?

H2 Planting
Where can trees, shrubs or hedges be planted to form views, provide shelter, give spaces a sense of enclosure, soften or screen unattractive buildings and other structures, provide seasonal variety, and attract wildlife?

H3 Parks
Are there places where a park or green space needs to be created or improved?

H4 Green corridors
Are there places where green corridors (for people and/or wildlife) could be created along natural features or roads, rivers and canals?

H5 Ecology
What local schemes are there to improve habitats and support wildlife? What else needs to be done to attract or protect living things (flora and fauna)?

H6 Large-scale planting
Where would large-scale planting usefully provide shelter from the wind or shade from the sun?

H7 Streams and rivers
Are there any streams or rivers (on the surface or underground in pipes or culverts) that could be made more of?

I How can the streets and other public spaces be made safer and more pleasant for people on foot?

I1 Feeling safe
Are there places where people feel unsafe during the day or at night? What can be done to make them safer?

I2 Facing the street
Are there places where the street would be livelier and feel safer if a building or buildings (existing or new) had windows or doors on to the street, rather than presenting a blank facade?

I3 Back gardens
It is generally safer for the rear gardens of houses to back on to other gardens, rather than side roads or

service lanes. Are there places where new development or other improvements could contribute to that?

I4 Public or private space
Is it hard to tell whether some pieces of land are public or private space? If so, how can the distinction be made clear (for example, by maintaining the line of buildings along a street, or by walls, fences, railings, gates, signs and paving)?

I5 Gap sites
Are there places where a gap in an otherwise continuous line of building frontages along a street detracts from the street's quality? If so, how might the gap be filled? Alternatively, how might a usable, attractive space for pedestrians be created there?

I6 A sense of enclosure
Pleasant streets, squares, parks and other spaces are often enclosed by buildings (of a scale that feels right) and/or trees. What opportunities are there to create that sense of enclosure?

I7 Taming the traffic
Are there streets and street junctions that could be made to feel more like public spaces (by traffic calming, for example), rather than just traffic routes?

I8 Overlooking
Are there places where streets, footpaths and open spaces would feel safer if buildings overlooked them?

I9 Lighting
Are there places where lighting needs to be improved, or light nuisance (such as lights near bedroom windows) reduced?

I10 Living over shops
Is there potential for living over shops to provide inhabited rooms overlooking streets and to encourage evening activity?

I11 Ground Floors
Can ground floors be made livelier by providing entrances, windows and active uses (giving interest to passers-by and allowing the street to be overlooked)?

I12 Car parks
Are there places where a car park provides the immediate frontage to a street, and where the street would be improved in appearance and for pedestrians by a more active use?

I13 Detail
Which buildings lack interesting detail, particularly at ground level where people see it close at hand?

J How else can public spaces be improved?

J1 Open space

Is there any public or open space that is not used for anything? How can it be made usable?

J2 Shelter
What places are unnecessarily windy (due to down-draughts from tall buildings or a lack of shelter)? What can be done about it?

J3 Art and craft
Are public art, craftwork and well-designed street furniture needed to give identity and interest to public spaces?

J4 Street life
Do public spaces need to be adapted (or made adaptable) to accommodate local economic, social and cultural life (such as markets, festivals, tourism, night life, eating, entertainment, sport, sitting out, promenading, religious practices and retailing)?

J5 Contamination
Are there places where rubbish or ground contamination needs to be cleared up?

J6 Pollution
Are there places where air or water pollution needs to be tackled?

J7 Noise
Are there places where the impact of noise needs to be reduced?

J8 Graffiti
Are there places where graffiti needs to be removed or protected against?

J9 Clean streets
Are the streets and other spaces well cleaned and maintained?

J10 Fly-tipping
Are there places where fly-tipping needs to be prevented or where dumped rubbish needs to be cleared?

J11 Maintenance
Is it clear who is responsible for caring for and maintaining each piece of public and open space? If not, how can it be cared for?

J12 Vermin
Are there problems with mice, rats, pigeons or other vermin?

K How can we make the place more welcoming and easier for people to find their way around?

K1 Landmarks
Are new landmarks (buildings, works of art or other features) needed to create or improve views, and help people find their way around?

K2 Views

Are there places where views (of local landmarks, for example) need to be opened up?

K3 Corner buildings
Are there places where a new corner building could provide a useful landmark?

K4 Gateways
What can be done to mark places that act as gateways to particular areas?

K5 Civic buildings
Are there public spaces that would be visible and accessible locations for public and community buildings?

K6 Entrances
Do the entrances to public buildings need to be made more welcoming?

K7 Lighting
Are there places where better lighting is needed to improve safety, help people find their way around, highlight landmarks, show off attractive buildings, or disguise eyesores?

K8 Signage
Are there places where better signs are needed?

K9 First impressions
Do the signs give the right impression of the area?

K10 Names
Are street and building names clearly visible?

L How can the place be made adaptable to change in the future?

L1 Flexibility
What can be done to ensure that new buildings are not tightly designed to a very particular use, so that they can be adapted later to any one of a variety of future uses? (Floor-to-ceiling heights, building materials, and the design of ground floors and street-corner buildings may be important.)

L2 Mixed uses
How can new development or other improvements make possible a mix of compatible uses and tenures to help make the place one where people live, work and play? (This might include flats above shops, or workshops in residential areas.)

M How can better use be made of resources?

M1 Energy
How can new and existing buildings minimise their use of energy? (This may involve matters such as how buildings face the sun, how they are sheltered from the wind by the slope of the land, trees, and other buildings, and how they are constructed.)

M2 Land
Are there buildings, sites or areas that are underused? What would help bring them into use, and what might they be used for?

M3 Building materials
What suitable building materials are available from local and/or sustainable sources?

N   What should be done to make the most of public transport?

N1 Density
What can be done to ensure that the density of development is highest where access to public transport is best?

N2 Bus stops
Are there bus stops that need to be more conveniently sited, made safer and lit better?

N3 Bus priority
Can higher priority be given to buses on main transport corridors?

N4 Shared bus lanes
Can bus lanes be adapted to accommodate cyclists as well?

N5 Railways stations
Are railways stations accessible by foot from all directions?

O   How can routes be made better connected?

O1 Connected spaces
Are there public spaces that need to be better linked in to a route that is well used by people on foot?

O2 Streets for people
Are there streets that seem to have been designed solely with vehicles in mind, which need to be adapted as places for people on foot (by calming traffic or widening pavements, for example)?

O3 Pedestrian routes
Are there pedestrian routes that need to be made more even and non-slip, clearer to recognise, better lit, less cluttered by street furniture and more interesting?

O4 Connected routes
Are there roads or footpaths that need to be better connected into well-used routes, so that the presence of more people makes them feel safer?

O5 Cycling
What needs to be done to encourage cycling, and to make cycling safer for cyclists and pedestrians?

O6 Junctions
Are there junctions that should be made to look more obviously like the way into an area, helping to give the area identity and making it easier for people to find their way around?

O7 Boulevards
Are there places where buildings turn their backs on a main through route, and where a continuous frontage could be created if the road were turned into a boulevard?

O8 Barriers
What barriers to movement (walls and fences, for example) would be better removed?

O9 Direct routes
What places that pedestrians go to and from need to be connected by more direct routes?

O10   Pedestrian crossings
Are there road crossings that are not well positioned, or places where new road crossings are needed?

O11   High streets
Are there streets where some of the qualities of a traditional high street could be encouraged by allowing for stopping, parking and slow traffic, and providing wide pavements?

O12   Traffic speeds
Are there places where the layout of new development (using smaller corner radiuses, rather than wide sweeping curves, for example) could encourage low traffic speeds?

O13   Parking
Are there places where parking needs to be improved, controlled or reduced?

O14   Deliveries
Are there places where arrangements for deliveries need to be made safer?