

Integrated Planning Action Group

Rapid Planning Toolkit Implementation in Belize

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This report presents the findings of the Rapid Planning Toolkit 2.0 pilot conducted in Belize City by the CSCC Integrated Planning Action Group. It details the discussions, outcomes and observations of the workshops and site visits conducted in the implementation of Steps 1 and 2 of the Toolkit methodology and submits actionable recommendations to support the delivery of sustainable planning to aid urban growth and development.

Introduction

Belize City is the largest urban centre in Belize and the country's historic commercial and economic hub. Located on the Caribbean coast, the city functions as the primary gateway for trade, tourism, and maritime activity. Although the national capital was relocated to Belmopan following Hurricane Hattie in 1961, Belize City has continued to grow and remains the country's most significant population centre and economic engine.

The city's development has been shaped by coastal geography, migration from rural areas and neighbouring countries, and its central role in the national economy. However, much of this growth has occurred incrementally and without coordinated spatial planning. As a result, Belize City faces several urban challenges, including increasing demand for housing, expansion of informal settlements, infrastructure pressures, and vulnerability to flooding and coastal hazards.

In response to these challenges, Belize City Council, in collaboration with national stakeholders and international partners, convened a three-day workshop to apply the **Rapid Planning Toolkit (RPT)**. The workshop was delivered by **The King's Foundation** in partnership with the **Commonwealth Association of Planners (CAP)** under the auspices of the **Commonwealth Sustainable Cities Coalition (CSCC)** and supported by the **UK Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office (FCDO)** as part of a wider initiative to strengthen integrated urban planning across Commonwealth cities.

The Rapid Planning Toolkit is a practical planning methodology designed to support cities experiencing or anticipating rapid urban growth. The approach enables participants to quickly identify spatial constraints, development opportunities, and coordinated planning priorities, while bringing together government agencies, technical experts, landowners and tenants, and community representatives to develop a shared understanding of urban challenges and a common objective (a Charter) for the development of their community.

Applying the toolkit in Belize City is particularly timely. The city is experiencing increasing development pressures while also facing environmental risks related to flooding, drainage capacity, and the loss of natural ecosystems such as mangroves and wetlands. At the same time, there is growing recognition of the need for stronger coordination between municipal authorities, national ministries, infrastructure providers, and communities.

The workshop therefore aimed to create a collaborative platform where stakeholders could:

- establish a shared vision for Belize City's future development
- map the city's spatial structure, constraints, and assets
- identify potential areas for coordinated urban expansion
- explore practical strategies for managing growth over the next 20 years.

By applying the Rapid Planning Toolkit, the workshop sought to initiate a more coordinated planning framework that can support Belize City in managing urban growth while protecting its environmental assets and strengthening the resilience and inclusivity of the city.

1. Step 1: Writing a Charter

Date: Tuesday 24 February

Location: Belize City Council

Objective: Establish shared evidence base for urban growth and the need for a Rapid Plan.

Outputs: City vision and Charter

Participants & Agenda: See Appendix 1

1.1 Introduction and Opening Session

The Rapid Planning Toolkit (RPT) pilot workshop opened at Belize City Council with participants from municipal government, national ministries, technical agencies, community representatives, and international partners.

The Mayor of Belize City welcomed participants and emphasized the importance of the pilot as a step toward improving the city's integrated planning capacity. He framed the workshop as part of a broader effort to bring together land use, housing, transport, drainage, environmental considerations, and community priorities into a coordinated planning framework.

The Mayor noted that Belize City is experiencing increasing development pressures and highlighted the importance of moving toward a more proactive and integrated approach to urban planning. He introduced the Rapid Planning Toolkit as a practical and participatory framework designed to help cities respond more effectively to rapid urban growth.

Participants were encouraged to contribute openly to the discussions, with the intention that the insights generated during the workshop could help shape future planning approaches for Belize City and potentially serve as a model for other municipalities across the country.

1.2 Overview of the Rapid Planning Toolkit

Following the opening remarks, the Rapid Planning Toolkit methodology was introduced as a **structured, participatory framework designed to support cities experiencing rapid growth**, particularly those with limited planning capacity or outdated planning frameworks.

Participants were introduced to the four-step structure of the toolkit:

1. **Writing a City Charter** – establishing shared principles and goals for growth
2. **Rapid Growth Planning** – identifying where and how the city should grow
3. **Implementation** – translating strategy into actionable projects
4. **Neighbourhood Planning** – detailed planning for priority areas

The workshop spanning over 3 days focused on the first two steps, with stakeholder workshops aligning into decision making process. The first day of the workshop focused on **Step 1: Drafting a City Growth Charter**, which aims to create a shared understanding of the challenges facing the city and to establish guiding principles for future development.

The facilitators emphasized that the process is **participatory by design**, requiring engagement from multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, technical experts, and community representatives. The toolkit seeks to answer a fundamental planning question:

“How can cities accommodate growth while avoiding inefficient and unsustainable urban sprawl?”

Global urbanization trends were presented to contextualize the discussion. Participants were shown that:

- Urban populations are expected to increase significantly by 2050.
- Much of this growth will occur in small and medium-sized cities.
- Without proactive planning, cities risk uncontrolled expansion, infrastructure strain, environmental degradation, and increased vulnerability to climate hazards.

Participants were then invited to reflect on how these global trends relate specifically to Belize City.

1.3 Step 1A: Making the Case for the Rapid Plan - Why Belize City Needs a Rapid Plan

The opening discussion explored the impacts of unplanned urban growth and the challenges currently facing Belize City.

Several participants highlighted that unplanned development is already placing significant pressure on municipal resources and infrastructure. The Mayor noted that residents often settle in areas without basic infrastructure such as roads, drainage, and utilities. Over time, these communities inevitably require services from the city, creating additional financial and operational burdens for the municipality.

Participants emphasized that **unplanned urban expansion contributes to cycles of poverty**, as households often settle in areas that lack adequate infrastructure, services, and environmental safety. Informal settlements are frequently located in flood-prone or environmentally sensitive areas, increasing both public health risks and vulnerability to climate-related disasters.

The discussion also highlighted the **social dimension of planning**, particularly the need to consider children and vulnerable populations. Access to schools, healthcare facilities, safe public spaces, and transportation was identified as a critical component of sustainable urban development.

The discussion emphasized that Belize City’s growth is shaped not only by physical constraints but also by **social, economic, and governance dynamics**. Participants acknowledged that cities across the Commonwealth face similar challenges, and several noted that the Rapid Planning Toolkit could provide Belize City with a practical methodology for addressing rapid urban growth while improving coordination between institutions.



Impact of Unplanned development for Belize city?

Group discussion

1A. Making the case for the Rapid plan

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- Building in flood plains
- Blocked canals/drains
- Waste in waterways
- Mangrove loss → storm surge vulnerability
- Disaster management
- Hurricanes
- Flooding & sea-level rise

URBAN IMPACT

- Rapid urban change
- Narrow unsafe roads
- Drainage pressure
- No public space
- Transport congestion
- Impossible future upgrades
- Informal growth patterns
- Infrastructure pressure

SOCIAL IMPACT

- Unsafe housing
- Lack of sanitation
- Crime increase
- Poor accessibility to schools/healthcare
- Gender safety issues

GOVERNANCE IMPACT

- Difficult land surveying
- Overlapping claims
- Weak enforcement
- Corruption risk
- Fragmented infrastructure responsibility

Slide from Day 1: Making the case for the RTP

1.4 Key Planning Challenges Identified

The workshop discussion surfaced several major structural challenges affecting planning and development in Belize City.

1.4.1 Limited Access to Land

Participants noted that access to land remains one of the most pressing issues facing residents. Obtaining land titles can take many years, creating delays that push individuals toward informal settlement as a means of securing housing for their families.

For many households, immediate survival needs take precedence over formal land acquisition processes. Participants explained that residents often occupy available land out of necessity while waiting for administrative processes to be completed.

1.4.2 Infrastructure and Service Provision

The expansion of informal settlements places pressure on the city to extend infrastructure after development has already occurred. This retrofitting of services such as roads, drainage, water supply, and electricity is significantly more costly than planned development.

Participants emphasized that many settlements emerge in areas without infrastructure, creating long-term challenges for the city.

1.4.3 Transportation and Commuting

The relationship between Belize City and surrounding communities was identified as another major planning consideration. Many people live in neighbouring settlements but commute into the city daily for work, education, healthcare, and services.

This dynamic creates a broader metropolitan region in which planning decisions made within Belize City affect surrounding municipalities and vice versa.

1.4.4 Informal Settlements and Risk

Participants working in disaster management highlighted that informal settlements frequently develop in areas that are vulnerable to flooding and other environmental hazards. During dry seasons, residents may not recognize the risks associated with these locations, but during rainy seasons these areas can become hazardous.

As a result, emergency services are often required to assist residents in areas that were never intended for settlement.

1.4.5 Environmental Considerations and Land Reclamation

Environmental impacts emerged as another important topic during the session.

Participants discussed the long-standing practice of landfilling wetlands and mangrove areas to create land for housing and development. While this has enabled urban expansion in certain parts of the city, concerns were raised about the long-term environmental consequences.

Mangroves and wetlands play an important role in managing water flows and protecting coastal areas. Gradual landfilling can alter hydrological systems, potentially increasing flooding in other parts of the city.

Participants emphasized the importance of understanding the hydrological and environmental implications of land reclamation before making decisions about future development.

1.4.6 Strategic Planning vs Reactive Development

A key theme that emerged during the discussions was the difference between strategic planning and reactive development.

Participants noted that many urban improvements in Belize City have historically occurred through individual projects or donor-funded initiatives, rather than through a coordinated long-term strategy.

Participants reflected on how Belize City has historically developed through incremental and reactive processes.

In many cases, infrastructure improvements have occurred only after settlements were established. Informal communities often develop first, with roads, utilities, and services introduced later.

This approach creates long-term challenges:

- infrastructure must be retrofitted around existing buildings
- costs of upgrading are significantly higher
- environmental risks may already be embedded in settlement patterns.

Participants agreed that the city would benefit from a more proactive planning approach, where land use, infrastructure, and environmental considerations are coordinated in advance.

1.4.7 Housing and Access to Land

Another major theme of the discussion was the long-standing debate about whether Belize City should focus on increasing density within the city or developing new residential communities outside the city. Participants noted that both approaches have been attempted in the past with mixed results.

Several residential developments outside the city were cited as examples where new communities were established but did not fully develop as expected. Residents living in these areas often retain jobs and children's schooling in Belize City leading to long commuting times and limited access to services. As a result, some residents have chosen to return to Belize City despite higher housing costs.

Participants suggested that rather than choosing exclusively between expansion or densification, the city may need a hybrid strategy that includes:

- improved housing availability within the city
- better transportation connections to surrounding communities
- a wider variety of housing options across different income levels

Further discussion revealed several key structural challenges affecting the city:

- Limited access to affordable housing within Belize City
- Increasing development pressure on environmentally sensitive areas
- Incremental and reactive infrastructure development
- Limited diversity of housing options for lower-income residents
- Growing commuting pressures between the city and surrounding communities

These challenges are closely interconnected and require integrated planning responses.

The discussion also demonstrated the value of the Charter workshop as a platform for exploring complex urban issues from multiple perspectives. Participants brought forward insights from government, community experience, environmental management, and housing policy. This exchange of perspectives helped clarify the broader social and economic context within which planning decisions must be made.

1.5 Institutional and Legislative Context

In considering how rapid planning can support existing plans, participants explained that Belize currently operates under the **Housing and Town Planning Act of the 1940s**, which centralizes planning authority and provides limited mechanisms for local-level planning.

Several key points emerged from the discussion:

- Planning powers remain highly centralized at the national level.
- Municipalities have limited authority to develop or enforce planning schemes.
- Many plans have been developed in the past but have not been effectively implemented.



Participants also noted that a **new national Planning and Development Bill is currently being drafted**, which aims to decentralize planning authority and provide municipalities with greater responsibility for preparing and enforcing local plans.

The conversation highlighted the importance of ensuring that any planning process undertaken through the Rapid Planning Toolkit aligns with existing legislation while also identifying gaps in the current regulatory framework.

Participants highlighted the need for improved coordination between national ministries and municipal authorities. Infrastructure planning across sectors such as transport, education, and health must be aligned if new communities are to function effectively.

Several participants emphasized that Belize City functions as the economic and administrative centre for the wider region. Planning efforts must therefore consider the broader metropolitan area, including surrounding communities that depend on the city.

Strategies like infill development and social housing were addressed to respond to land shortages. The need for new housing typologies to be introduced to increase density and to accommodate various demographics was recognised, and the role of built environment professionals in creating complementary solutions was acknowledged.

The conversation also touched on the importance of **social housing and rental stability**. Some participants noted that many households in Belize City rent small units under difficult conditions due to the lack of affordable housing options. Rising rents and limited housing supply can create additional pressures on low-income families. The possibility of policies such as **rent stabilization**, incentives for affordable housing development, and public-sector involvement in housing provision were discussed as potential strategies to address these challenges. Participants emphasized that housing policy should be considered alongside land policy, as access to land alone does not guarantee access to affordable housing.

1.6 Step 1B: The Charter Workshop - Revisiting the City Vision

The afternoon session focused on reviewing Belize City's existing vision and discussing whether it adequately captures the aspirations and realities of the city today.

"Our vision for Belize City is to have all residents live in a modern, clean and secure environment. A city abounding with civic pride, patriotism, unity and opportunity for all." - Belize city vision. <https://www.belizecitycouncil.org/>

The groups were required to reflect on more than just this part of the vision; they were asked to consider whether the current vision described accurately and sufficiently the ambitions of the city administration for its future, and how to better articulate those objectives.

Several participants emphasized that Belize City has long been shaped by migration: from rural communities within Belize as well as from neighbouring countries such as Guatemala and Honduras. Over time, these communities have gradually integrated into the social and economic life of the city.

However, participants noted that the presence of multiple cultural and social backgrounds can also create tensions around questions of belonging and access to opportunity. It was suggested that planning processes should acknowledge these dynamics rather than ignore them.



The discussion highlighted that **creating opportunities for all residents**, regardless of origin, income level, or social background, should be central to the city's vision.

Participants were divided into small groups to review the existing city vision and consider potential additions or adjustments.

The exercise asked participants to reflect on several guiding questions:

- Does the current vision adequately represent the aspirations of Belize City?
- What values or priorities might be missing?
- How can the vision guide practical planning decisions?

Groups were invited to note possible additions that could help ensure the vision provides a strong framework for future planning and development decisions. The exercise emphasized that the vision does not need to be completely rewritten but may benefit from **clarifications or additional principles** that reflect current urban challenges.

Following group discussions, participants reviewed the city's existing vision and proposed refinements to emphasize three core principles:

A vibrant city - Supporting economic activity, culture, and community life.

A resilient city - Protecting natural ecosystems and improving climate resilience.

An inclusive city - Ensuring access to housing, services, and opportunities for all residents.

These principles formed the basis for the **Belize City Planning Charter**.

The workshop also led to the preparation of a draft Belize City Rapid Planning Charter, which translates these principles into a shared framework for guiding coordinated urban development. It is important to note that Belize City already operates under an existing municipal charter that outlines the city's broader governance and development commitments. The Rapid Planning Toolkit Charter builds on this foundation by translating the city's vision into a more spatially focused approach to managing rapid urban growth. It highlights the importance of protecting natural assets such as mangroves and waterways, reserving land for roads and community infrastructure, and identifying priority areas where coordinated development can take place.

Using the Rapid Planning Toolkit approach, partners and stakeholders commit to working together through three practical steps:

- **mapping** key assets and infrastructure networks
- **coordinating** with institutions and landowners to protect growth corridors and community facilities, and
- **implementing** neighbourhood scale plans in priority areas.

Participants also emphasized that culture and heritage should serve as an underlying and unifying theme across the three principles, reinforcing Belize City's identity and civic pride as the city continues to grow.

The Charter reflects the ambition of the Belize City administration and stakeholders to guide development in a way that strengthens resilience, inclusivity, and economic vitality. The full text of the Charter is included in the Appendix.

1.7 The Importance of Community Participation

Throughout the discussion, facilitators emphasized the importance of including community voices in planning decisions.

Participants were reminded that planning processes must consider not only technical and policy perspectives but also the experiences and aspirations of residents themselves.

A representative from one of the communities described the difficult living conditions faced by some households in low-lying areas, including flooding, poor drainage, and the presence of environmental hazards.

These contributions highlighted the importance of incorporating lived experiences into the planning process, as residents often have valuable insights into the challenges facing their communities.

Conclusion of Day 1

The opening discussions established a shared understanding among participants of:

- The challenges associated with unplanned urban growth in Belize City
- The institutional and legislative context shaping planning decisions
- Key themes that will inform the development of the City Growth Charter

These insights provided the foundation for the next stage of the workshop, during which participants would collaboratively draft the **Belize City Growth Charter** which will serve as a guiding document for the next stages of the Rapid Planning Toolkit process.

2. Step 2: Creating the Rapid Growth Plan

Date: Wednesday 25th February

Location: Belize City Council

Objective: Establish spatial constraints, assets, and opportunities.

Outputs: Growth Plan Workshop delivery (Step 2)

Participants & Agenda: See Appendix 2

2.1 Step 2A: Preliminary Mapping

The aim of Day 2 was to move from **diagnosing urban challenges** toward **mapping the city's spatial structure**, identifying constraints and opportunities, and developing potential growth directions.

The morning session focused on **collecting and spatially organizing available information** about Belize City. Participants worked collaboratively around large base maps to identify the city's physical and social structure.

The mapping exercise captured several key layers of information:

Infrastructure and services

- Road networks and access routes

- Water and electricity infrastructure
- Schools and education facilities
- Hospitals and clinics
- Police stations and fire stations

Community and cultural assets

- Parks and playgrounds
- Museums and heritage sites
- Religious institutions
- Community gathering spaces

Administrative and land governance

- City boundaries and jurisdictional limits
- Land ownership patterns
- Government land holdings
- Privately owned parcels

Environmental features and constraints

- Mangrove areas
- Floodplains and wetlands
- Water reservoirs and catchment areas
- Areas unsuitable for development

Participants also mapped areas of **vacant land and underutilized properties**, which were later discussed as potential growth areas and development opportunities.

2.1.1 Key Issues Raised During the Preliminary Mapping

As the maps were developed, several important spatial patterns became clear.

Uneven Distribution of Services

Participants observed that many **community facilities were unevenly distributed** across the city. Schools, healthcare facilities, and recreational spaces were concentrated in the north, leaving gaps in other neighbourhoods.

Mapping made these disparities visible and prompted discussion about **equitable service provision** in planning for future development.

Infrastructure-led Development

Discussions also highlighted how infrastructure historically influenced settlement patterns. In several cases, roads were installed before utilities were planned, leading to situations where:

- roads existed without water or electricity services
- utility companies had not included these areas in their expansion plans

Participants noted that unless infrastructure investments are coordinated across agencies, new developments may remain **partially serviced or inefficiently planned**.

The Role of Historical Development Patterns

The group discussed how Belize City's growth has been shaped by historical events such as hurricanes and national development policies. For example, Hurricane Hattie in 1961 influenced the creation of Belmopan as the capital, yet Belize City continued to grow due to economic activity and social networks.

Participants also highlighted how the city expanded organically over time, often without comprehensive planning frameworks.

Informal Settlement Patterns

A major focus of the morning discussions was the **expansion of informal settlements and squatting**. Participants explained that informal settlements often develop in predictable ways:

1. Initial occupation of vacant or unmonitored land
2. Gradual construction of housing
3. Informal extensions of electricity and road access
4. Government regularization of title and infrastructure installation

This process creates a cycle where **informal settlements gradually become formalized**, reinforcing the incentive for further squatting. One participant summarized the pattern by noting that **informal settlements often end up shaping the city's spatial layout**.

Environmental Pressures

Another concern raised during the mapping exercise was development occurring in environmentally sensitive areas, including mangroves and floodplains. These areas serve important ecological functions, particularly for flood mitigation and coastal protection. Participants stressed that encroachment into these areas could worsen flooding and undermine long-term urban resilience.

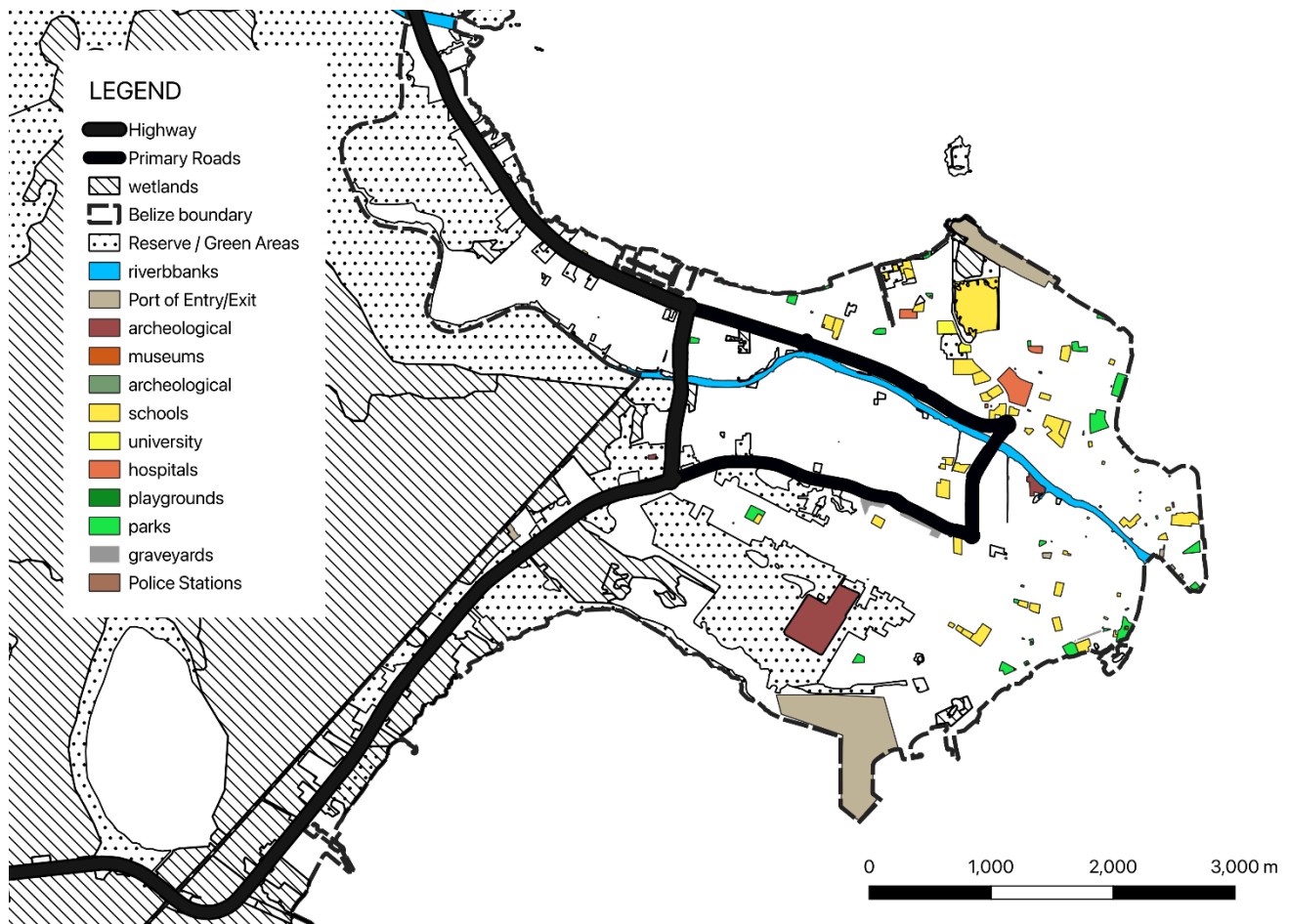
The afternoon session shifted from diagnosing existing conditions to **identifying potential growth areas** and future development strategies. Participants used the mapped information to begin drafting a **Growth Area Plan** for Belize City.

Institutional Coordination Challenges

Participants identified institutional fragmentation as a major challenge for urban planning. Land allocation, housing policy, infrastructure development, and environmental management are often handled by different government entities with limited coordination. This can result in situations where:

- land is allocated without corresponding infrastructure planning
- development occurs in environmentally sensitive areas
- local authorities have limited visibility into national land distribution decisions.

Participants emphasized the need for stronger coordination between national and municipal institutions.



Map 1: Mapping Exercise Day 1 Outcome

Disconnect Between Institutions

The workshop revealed a significant disconnect between institutions responsible for urban development. While the municipal government is primarily responsible for operational services such as sanitation and day-to-day local management, it is rarely involved in decisions related to land distribution, housing planning, or major infrastructure investments. These key decisions are largely controlled by central government institutions, which oversee land allocation, national housing programmes, and broader planning policies. As a result, city councils are often unaware of where land is being distributed or where new developments are likely to occur, making it extremely difficult to plan and deliver the necessary infrastructure and services to support urban growth effectively.

Human and Governance Constraints

Discussions also highlighted several institutional challenges affecting urban development:

- fragmented responsibilities between municipal and central government
- limited coordination between planning, housing, and infrastructure agencies
- political influences on land allocation
- lack of transparent systems for distributing land

Participants emphasized that **land tenure issues are one of the most significant structural challenges** facing Belize City's development.



2.2 Step 2B. Rapid Growth Plan Workshop

Using the spatial analysis developed during the mapping session, participants began identifying potential areas where the city could expand in a more coordinated manner. Participants noted that previous assumptions that Belize City lacked available land were not entirely accurate. The mapping exercise revealed multiple parcels of land that could support development if planned strategically. One of the important findings of the workshop was the presence of **vacant and underused land** within the city.



Map 2: Vacant and underutilized plot identification

Parcels and plots of land were identified which were either vacant and unoccupied, contained buildings that were deemed as unsafe and marked for renovation or demolition, building sites that had been under development for an extended amount of time without any recent activity or evidence of progress, and plots where the property taxes had been unpaid or were overdue/outstanding.

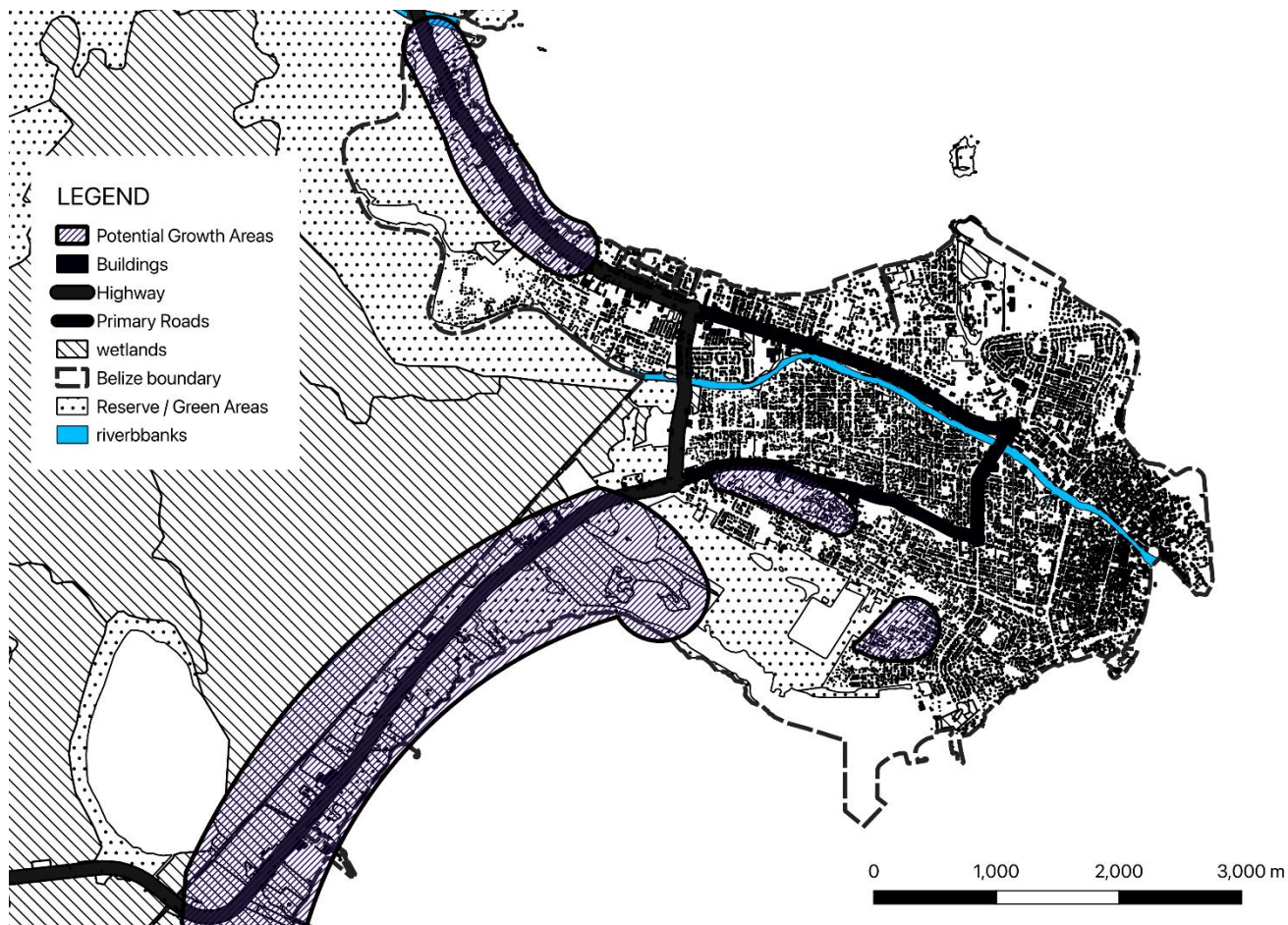
Plots were also generally considered as underutilised where they were allocated as single family dwelling plots with generous space allowances for front and back yards, and substantial setbacks to adjacent properties. With the finite area of Belize City, this approach produces a capped number of plots that can be achieved and therefore limits the amount of housing that can be provided unless a higher density approach to land allocation is introduced.

Growth areas were evaluated based on:



- environmental constraints
- infrastructure accessibility
- proximity to employment areas
- land availability. (vacant, abandoned, underdeveloped)

The last point raised the possibility of **infill development and redevelopment** and highlighted different areas where growth could potentially happen allowing the city to grow without excessive outward expansion.



Map 3: Potential Growth Areas

Community Assets Mapping

The workshop also reviewed the distribution of **community assets**, including schools, parks, health facilities, and cultural institutions. This analysis helped identify **service gaps** and **opportunities for new community infrastructure** within future development areas.

Participants agreed that new growth areas should integrate essential services from the outset, rather than relying on incremental infrastructure provision.

The Rapid Planning Toolkit approach encourages planning growth through **neighbourhood-scale development areas**, rather than attempting to redesign the entire city at once. Planning at neighbourhood-scale involves creating development briefs for the community unit, identifying the needs and requirements of a neighbourhood (defined as a residential cluster or community) and making planning provisions to address those needs. This approach would help guide development incrementally while maintaining overall spatial coherence.



Conclusion of Day 2

The mapping exercise carried out during Day 2 produced several important outcomes that helped advance the workshop discussions. Through the collaborative mapping process, participants learnt how to locate and confirm areas where land is available for potential development, identify key gaps in existing services and infrastructure, and visualize spatial inequalities across different parts of the city.

The exercise also highlighted several locations where new development opportunities could be explored. Overall, the mapping process provided a clearer shared understanding of the city's spatial dynamics and helped participants identify potential areas that could guide future planning and intervention.

3. Site Visit, Charter Signing and Action Planning

Date: Thursday 26th February

Location: Belize City Council

Objective: Develop a Key Fixes Plan.

Outputs: Action Plan

Participants & Agenda: See Appendix 3

The final day of the workshop began with participants reconvening in the morning to reflect on the progress achieved over the previous two days. Representatives from Belize City Council, national ministries, and local stakeholders were present, including the Minister of State for Public Utilities, Energy and Statistics.

The session opened with reflections on the purpose of the Rapid Planning Toolkit workshop. Participants revisited the objectives of the process, emphasizing that the toolkit is designed not to replace existing planning frameworks but to provide a practical and rapid methodology for **coordinating planning responses to urgent urban development challenges**.

Discussions highlighted that Belize City already possesses planning mechanisms, but that rapid urban growth and informal development patterns require more **integrated and implementable planning approaches**. The workshop therefore aimed to explore how spatial planning tools could support decision-making and coordination between institutions. Particular mention was made regarding the availability of GIS data about Belize City online, and how the use of dedicated agency layers on a central mapping resource could improve real-time coordination and knowledge sharing.

Participants reflected on the key outcomes of the previous sessions:

- establishing a shared **vision for Belize City**
- mapping the existing city structure and development patterns
- identifying **vacant or underutilized land** suitable for coordinated development

3.1 Review and Signing of the Belize City Planning Charter

The morning session focused on reviewing the draft **Belize City Planning Charter** developed on Day 1, which summarized the shared commitments and objectives identified during the workshop.

The charter was presented as a **symbolic agreement rather than a legally binding document**, intended to capture the collaborative spirit of the workshop and the collective commitment of stakeholders to improve urban planning coordination.

The document outlined the key challenges currently facing Belize City, including:

- rapid and uncoordinated urban development
- pressure on drainage infrastructure and coastal ecosystems
- informal settlement expansion
- land tenure and squatting issues
- environmental degradation, particularly in mangrove and wetland areas
- infrastructure gaps affecting vulnerable neighbourhoods.

Participants emphasized that Belize City's growth is driven by strong social and economic energy, but that without coordinated planning the city risks increasing environmental vulnerability and infrastructure strain.

The charter therefore highlighted the importance of **collaborative planning across government agencies, communities, and stakeholders** to ensure that development remains sustainable and inclusive. Participants also reaffirmed that the Rapid Planning Toolkit provides a practical framework for supporting Belize City's vision through three key actions:

Mapping

Mapping roads, environmental assets, and community infrastructure to identify growth opportunities and areas requiring protection.

Coordinating

Working with landowners, government agencies and stakeholders to secure infrastructure corridors, protect environmental assets and coordinate urban expansion.

Implementing

Prioritizing neighbourhood-level planning interventions that can guide development step-by-step while preserving environmental and community assets.

After reviewing the text and incorporating minor feedback from participants, the charter was signed by representatives present as a **symbolic commitment to collaborative planning and coordinated urban development** in Belize City.

3.2 Site Visits: Jane Usher Neighbourhood and Reserve London Bridges

Following the charter signing, participants undertook a site visit to the Jane Usher area, which had been identified by the workshop participants in the preceding days as a key location illustrating the challenges and opportunities associated with Belize City's urban growth. The visit provided an opportunity for participants to observe firsthand the spatial conditions discussed during the workshop.

Participants noted several important characteristics of the area:

Informal Settlement Patterns

The visit confirmed that parts of the area had developed through **incremental informal occupation**, often referred to locally as "London Bridge" settlements. Residents frequently establish temporary structures and

gradually improve them over time, while informal pathways and access routes evolve organically between plots. These informal spatial patterns often precede formal infrastructure development.

Participants noted that in many cases residents coordinate informally among themselves, leaving space for access routes and attempting to maintain basic connectivity between homes.



Environmental Vulnerability

Large parts of the neighbourhoods are located on **low-lying or reclaimed land**, including swampy mangrove and wetland areas.

Participants observed that:

- many houses had been constructed on filled land
- drainage infrastructure was limited or informal
- flooding occurs frequently during heavy rainfall.

The loss of wetlands and natural water retention areas was identified as a major factor contributing to urban flooding. Participants emphasized that these ecosystems historically functioned as **natural drainage reservoirs**, receiving excess water during heavy rainfall events.

Infrastructure Constraints

The visit also highlighted several infrastructure challenges, including:



- limited formal road networks
- irregular drainage channels
- informal electricity connections
- insufficient waste management services.

In some cases, houses had been constructed in locations that obstruct potential road alignments or infrastructure corridors, making future grades more complex and costly. Participants noted that, in many informal settlements elsewhere, temporary or poorly constructed structures can sometimes be removed when infrastructure is introduced. In this case however, several of the houses observed were more substantial and better built, which makes relocation or removal more difficult in practice. It was explained that unless a house is positioned directly in the middle of a proposed road alignment or critical infrastructure route, authorities are often reluctant to remove it, and instead end up adjusting roads, drainage, and utilities around existing structures. Participants therefore noted that informal development often forces authorities to retrofit infrastructure around what has already been built, rather than implementing planned layouts from the outset.

The organic nature of these informal neighborhoods also makes it difficult to adhere to basic planning standards such as setbacks, access, and egress, which have guided urban planning practice in Belize since the 1950s. Houses are often constructed incrementally and without reference to formal layouts, resulting in narrow passages, irregular plot boundaries, and limited space for infrastructure corridors.

Community Dynamics

Despite the challenges observed in the neighbourhood, participants also noted a strong sense of community organization and resilience among residents. Many households were seen cooperating to improve their living conditions, maintaining shared access paths, and organizing small-scale economic activities. Examples included informal markets, home-based businesses, and community initiatives to maintain the bridges. In several cases, residents had also made small personal improvements to their surroundings, such as planting flowers, placing decorative pots, or even building small shelters for pets, reflecting a sense of care and attachment to their environment. Some stakeholders expressed that some of the residents are satisfied with their current living conditions and indicated that they did not necessarily wish to “upgrade” or relocate, highlighting the importance of understanding local perspectives when considering future interventions.

These observations suggest that informal settlements should not be viewed solely as planning problems to be replaced, but as established communities with social networks, local economies, and forms of self-organization that should be acknowledged and built upon.

Participants also emphasized that many residents had lived in the area for many years and had developed strong social ties, reinforcing the importance of working with communities in any future planning or upgrading process.

3.3 Key Issues Discussed During the Site Visit

Over the course of the three-day workshop, participants discussed several structural challenges affecting urban development in Belize City.

Land Allocation and Tenure Processes

One of the most significant issues identified was the difficulty of obtaining formal land titles through official processes. Participants noted that:

- formal land allocation procedures can take many years

- limited transparency in the process discourages applicants
- informal settlement often becomes the fastest route to securing land.

This dynamic creates an incentive for individuals to occupy land informally, with the expectation that infrastructure and legal recognition will eventually follow.

Institutional Coordination

Participants also discussed the complex relationship between local government and national ministries. In Belize, several different institutions have overlapping responsibilities for land management, including:

- the Ministry of Natural Resources
- the Ministry of Housing
- municipal planning authorities
- local councils.

This fragmentation can create situations where:

- land is designated as protected or reserved
- yet development permits are issued by other authorities.

Participants emphasized that improved coordination between agencies will be essential for implementing effective planning strategies.

Environmental Protection

Another major topic was the protection of mangroves and wetlands. Participants acknowledged that development pressure often leads to the gradual filling and occupation of these areas, which can significantly increase flood risk across the city.

Several participants stressed the importance of preserving remaining natural drainage areas and incorporating them into future urban planning strategies.

3.4 Action Planning Session

After the site visit, participants reconvened to discuss potential actions emerging from the workshop. The discussion focused on identifying practical next steps that could support the implementation of the Rapid Planning Toolkit in Belize City.

Managing Informal Growth

A large portion of the afternoon discussion focused on the challenge of informal settlements. Participants acknowledged that current practices often lead to informal settlements eventually receiving infrastructure and legal recognition. This dynamic can unintentionally encourage further informal occupation, as residents may believe that occupying land informally will ultimately lead to tenure security.

Participants discussed the importance of addressing the **underlying incentive structure** that currently encourages informal development. Several participants noted that where informal occupation is later regularized, it reinforces the perception that squatting is the most effective way to obtain land.

Several strategies were discussed for addressing this issue, including:

- improving the transparency of land allocation processes
- developing formal housing registers to track housing demand
- creating a clear and transparent system for land applications and allocation
- planning new residential areas before settlements emerge
- offering relocation options within planned communities
- strengthening enforcement mechanisms where necessary.

Participants also highlighted the **absence of a formal housing demand register**. Currently, there is no systematic mechanism to track housing needs, maintain an applicant list, or anticipate future demand. Without such a system, land allocation can become ad hoc, and informal settlements often emerge as the primary way through which housing demand is expressed. Several participants suggested that establishing a transparent housing register could help guide future land allocation in a more strategic and equitable way.

These discussions emphasized the need for **proactive planning**, where new residential areas are identified and prepared in advance, rather than responding reactively once settlements have already formed.

Priority Neighbourhood Planning

Participants agreed that a key outcome of the workshop should be the identification of priority neighbourhoods where detailed planning could begin.

Rather than attempting to address city-wide challenges immediately, the toolkit encourages planning at a manageable scale where visible improvements can demonstrate the benefits of coordinated development.

Participants suggested that focusing on a limited number of priority areas would allow authorities to test planning approaches, improve coordination between institutions, and demonstrate the potential benefits of more structured development patterns.

Relocation and Environmental Restoration

Participants also discussed potential strategies for addressing settlements located within environmentally sensitive areas. One proposal involved relocating households currently living within the wetland reserve to nearby plots located outside the protected area. The intention would be to provide residents with access to safer land within planned neighbourhoods that include basic infrastructure such as roads, drainage, water, and electricity. This approach could allow:

- restoration of the wetland ecosystem
- creation of a public ecological park
- improved drainage and flood resilience.

Participants emphasized that such an approach could help address both environmental protection and housing needs simultaneously. However, they also stressed that relocation strategies must be carefully designed and implemented in close collaboration with affected communities to avoid social disruption.

Community Engagement

The importance of sustained community engagement was repeatedly emphasized during the discussion. Participants highlighted that successful upgrading or relocation programmes require:

- continuous dialogue with residents
- trust-building between communities and authorities
- clear communication about planning objectives.

Several participants noted that informal settlements often develop strong internal networks and social structures over time. Any planning interventions therefore need to take into account the existing social dynamics within these communities. Understanding how residents organize their lives, livelihoods, and relationships is essential for designing solutions that are both realistic and socially sustainable.

Participants also highlighted the importance of engaging trusted local actors, community leaders, and civil society organizations in order to facilitate dialogue and build confidence in the planning process.

Closing Reflections

The workshop concluded with reflections on the importance of continuing collaboration between stakeholders. Participants acknowledged that while the workshop had provided valuable insights and potential planning strategies, long-term success will depend on **sustained commitment from local and national institutions**.

Key takeaways from the three-day workshop included:

- the importance of coordinated spatial planning for managing urban expansion
- the need for transparent and efficient land allocation systems
- the critical role of environmental protection in flood-prone coastal cities
- the value of engaging communities in shaping their neighbourhoods.

Participants expressed strong interest in continuing the Rapid Planning Toolkit process and exploring opportunities for further collaboration to translate workshop outcomes into practical planning actions for Belize City.

4. The Toolkit in Practice

4.1 Reflections on the Process

The Belize City workshop provided an opportunity to apply the Rapid Planning Toolkit in a real urban context involving multiple stakeholders from national government, municipal authorities, technical agencies, and local communities. Over the course of three days, the toolkit supported structured discussions around urban challenges, spatial analysis, and potential development strategies.

The workshop demonstrated both the strengths of the Rapid Planning Toolkit as a facilitation and diagnostic tool, as well as some limitations related to time constraints, data availability, and institutional complexity.

4.2 What Worked Well

Structured Dialogue across Institutions

One of the most valuable aspects of the toolkit was its ability to create a structured platform for dialogue between stakeholders who do not normally work together in the same planning discussions. Participants included representatives from municipal government, national ministries responsible for land and housing, environmental authorities, infrastructure agencies, and community stakeholders. The workshop allowed these actors to share perspectives on urban challenges that are typically addressed separately.

Discussions during the workshops highlighted that many of the challenges facing Belize City, particularly related to land allocation, infrastructure provision, and environmental protection, arise from fragmented institutional responsibilities. The workshop format enabled participants to collectively identify these systemic issues and discuss how coordination could be improved. At the beginning of the discussions, some participants appeared cautious in openly addressing sensitive governance or institutional matters. However, as the sessions progressed, several participants became more forthcoming, contributing more openly to the dialogue. In some cases, participants also engaged in smaller side discussions to express perspectives or concerns that they may have been less comfortable raising in the larger group setting. These exchanges nevertheless helped surface important insights into the institutional dynamics influencing urban development in Belize City.

Visualizing the City through Collaborative Mapping

The mapping exercises carried out on Day 2 proved particularly effective in helping participants visualize the spatial and infrastructural dynamics of Belize City.

Working collaboratively around base maps allowed participants to identify:

- environmental constraints such as mangroves, wetlands, and flood-prone areas
- locations of existing infrastructure and community services
- vacant or underutilized land within the city
- areas where informal settlement has expanded.

This process helped move discussions from abstract planning challenges to concrete spatial considerations. Participants were able to collectively identify potential development areas and recognize patterns of inequality in service provision across the city. While many participants were already aware, at least implicitly, that a significant concentration of facilities and services are in the northern parts of Belize City, the act of mapping these assets and visualizing their distribution on the base maps had a powerful effect. Seeing the spatial imbalance represented visually helped make these disparities more tangible and prompted further discussion about equitable access to services and infrastructure across the city.

The mapping process also revealed that some previous assumptions, such as the idea that the city had little available land for development, were not entirely accurate. Participants learned through the mapping exercises how to identify several potential locations where growth could occur if planned strategically, opening discussions about how future development could be guided in a more coordinated and spatially balanced manner.

Value of Local Knowledge in the Mapping Exercises

An important strength of the Rapid Planning Toolkit process was the role played by local knowledge during the mapping exercises. While base maps and spatial data provided a starting point for the analysis, much of the most valuable information emerged through the contributions of participants who had direct experience working in Belize City.

Participants from different institutions were able to identify specific locations of informal settlements, areas prone to flooding, vacant or underutilized land parcels, and locations where infrastructure or services were lacking. In several instances, participants clarified discrepancies between official maps and the current realities on the ground, particularly in rapidly evolving neighbourhoods.

The collaborative nature of the mapping exercise allowed this institutional and local knowledge to be combined with spatial analysis, creating a more nuanced understanding of the city's development patterns. This process



also helped participants recognize how different sectors such as housing, infrastructure, environmental management, and disaster risk reduction intersect spatially within the urban environment.

The exercise also highlighted the importance of improving coordination and establishing a **central repository for spatial data**. Participants noted that information relevant to land use planning such as cadastral data, infrastructure networks, environmental constraints, and settlements patterns is currently held across multiple institutions. Developing a shared and regularly updated spatial data platform would support more informed decision-making and help strengthen land use management across Belize City.

Importance of the Site Visit in Ground-Truthing Discussions

The site visit conducted on Day 3 played a critical role in grounding the workshop discussions in real-world conditions. While earlier sessions had identified issues related to informal settlements, flooding, and infrastructure provision through maps and presentations, the visit to the Jane Usher neighbourhood and the London Bridge settlements allowed participants to observe these challenges firsthand.

Seeing the physical conditions of the area, including housing constructed on filled wetlands, limited drainage infrastructure, and informal access routes—provided participants with a clearer understanding of the environmental and spatial dynamics discussed during the workshop.

The visit also highlighted the social dimension of informal settlements. Participants observed strong community networks and small-scale economic activity within the neighbourhood, reinforcing the importance of engaging residents directly in any future planning interventions.

By connecting technical discussions with on-the-ground observation, the site visit helped participants better appreciate the complexity of urban challenges in Belize City and emphasized the importance of combining spatial analysis with community engagement in future planning processes.

Integrating Technical and Community Perspectives

The workshop also demonstrated the value of combining technical planning discussions with direct observation and community perspectives. The site visit to the Jane Usher neighbourhood and the Reserve settlements allowed participants to see firsthand the living conditions and environmental challenges discussed during the workshop sessions.

Observing informal settlement patterns, drainage conditions, and local community dynamics provided important context that could not be fully captured through maps or presentations alone. Participants also observed the local practice known as “London Bridging” where residents design and build over water structures or walkways across mangrove areas to connect dwelling units. These improvised pathways reflect how communities adapt to difficult environmental conditions in the absence of formal infrastructure.

Participants noted that informal communities often exhibit strong internal organization and social networks, reinforcing the need to approach upgrading or relocation strategies with sensitivity to community realities.

4.3 Constraints and Limitations

Time for Detailed Technical Analysis



While the three-day workshop format allowed participants to identify major challenges and potential growth areas, the timeframe limited the depth of technical analysis that could be undertaken.

The compressed workshop schedule also created logistical constraints related to participant availability. As the workshop took place over three consecutive days, not all stakeholders were able to attend every session. In several cases, participants joined only certain sessions due to professional commitments. As a result, parts of the process had to be briefly revisited or re-explained to ensure that new participants could understand the objectives and methodology of the Rapid Planning Toolkit.

While this ensured that discussions remained inclusive, it also reduced the amount of time available to move deeper into the technical aspects of the planning process. The continuity of discussions was sometimes interrupted, and opportunities for sustained collective analysis were more limited than originally intended.

Another limitation was the absence of a broader public consultation phase during Step 1 of the process. The Charter workshop primarily involved institutional stakeholders and technical representatives. Although valuable perspectives were shared, the process would benefit from additional engagement with a wider range of community members, civil society groups, and residents to further validate the challenges and priorities identified during the workshop.

Finally, the limited timeframe also constrained the ability to explore potential growth areas in greater detail. While participants were able to identify several possible locations for future development through the mapping exercise, there was insufficient time to fully assess and compare these areas against environmental, infrastructural, and land tenure considerations. As a result, the workshop was able to highlight potential opportunities for growth, but further analysis will be required to determine which areas are most suitable for coordinated urban expansion.

Data Availability and Accessibility

Another constraint identified during the workshop was the availability and accessibility of spatial data. While participants were able to contribute local knowledge and institutional data, some key datasets were either incomplete, outdated, or not readily accessible during the workshop sessions. This included detailed information on land ownership, infrastructure networks, and environmental systems.

As a result, the mapping exercise relied partly on participant knowledge and qualitative inputs rather than comprehensive datasets. Future stages of the planning process would benefit from improved data sharing and coordination between institutions.

Stakeholder Representation and Participation Constraints

Another limitation of the workshop process was the difficulty in securing consistent participation from the full range of stakeholders needed for a comprehensive planning dialogue. Due to the compressed timeframe between the preparation phase and the delivery of the workshop, there was limited time to carry out extensive stakeholder outreach and coordination in advance.

Additionally, the workshop was organized over three consecutive days, which made it challenging for some key actors to commit to attending the full process. As a result, while the workshop benefited from the presence of several institutional representatives and technical stakeholders, participation from other important groups was more limited.



There was relatively limited representation from community leaders, landowners, business representatives, and private sector actors who play a significant role in shaping urban development in Belize City. Similarly, while some government ministers and senior officials attended certain sessions, their participation was often limited to specific moments rather than sustained involvement throughout the workshop.

This fragmented attendance made it more difficult to create a continuous dialogue between decision-makers and other stakeholders. In several instances, discussions that could have benefited from direct engagement with senior authorities or landowners instead remained exploratory rather than moving toward concrete commitments.

The absence of a broader range of stakeholders also affected the ability of the workshop to fully transition from problem identification toward collective action planning. While the discussions successfully identified key structural challenges and potential development directions, the setting was not always conducive to developing a shared action plan involving the institutions and actors responsible for implementation.

Future applications of the Rapid Planning Toolkit in Belize City would benefit from a longer preparation period and more targeted stakeholder engagement to ensure stronger participation from decision-makers, community representatives, landowners, and private sector actors throughout the process.

Workshop Format and Participation Dynamics

The workshop was primarily structured around plenary discussions where participants from different institutions and levels of responsibility engaged in collective conversations. While this format allowed for shared understanding and cross-sector dialogue, it also revealed some limitations in terms of participation dynamics.

During several sessions, it became apparent that some participants were hesitant to openly express their views in the larger group setting, particularly when senior officials or supervisors were present in the room. In hierarchical institutional environments, this dynamic can make it more difficult for participants to raise sensitive issues or challenge existing practices in front of their superiors.

In some instances, participants appeared more comfortable sharing their perspectives informally or in smaller side conversations rather than during the plenary discussions. These exchanges often revealed valuable insights about institutional constraints, land governance challenges, and practical implementation barriers.

This experience suggests that future applications of the Rapid Planning Toolkit could benefit from incorporating additional formats that encourage more open dialogue. For example, structured breakout groups composed of fewer and more diverse participants within each group may create a more comfortable environment for participants to contribute their perspectives.

Working in smaller groups could also help ensure that voices from different sectors and levels of responsibility are heard more clearly, before bringing key insights back into the larger plenary discussion. Such an approach may help surface a broader range of perspectives and strengthen the overall quality of the planning dialogue.

Institutional Complexity

The discussions also revealed that many of Belize City's urban challenges stem from institutional fragmentation. Responsibilities for land allocation, housing development, environmental protection, and infrastructure planning are distributed across multiple national and municipal bodies. In some cases, these agencies operate with limited coordination.



Participants noted that local authorities are often not informed about land distribution decisions made at the national level, which can make it difficult for municipalities to plan infrastructure and services effectively.

While the Rapid Planning Toolkit can help facilitate dialogue between institutions, addressing these structural issues will require continued collaboration beyond the workshop. Effective implementation of the toolkit will also require careful alignment with existing legislation and institutional responsibilities.

4.4 Adaptations in the Belize City Context

Applying the Rapid Planning Toolkit in Belize City also required adapting the process to reflect the local context. For example, discussions on housing and land allocation expanded beyond spatial planning considerations to include issues related to land tenure systems, squatting, and housing affordability. These topics emerged as central challenges influencing urban development patterns in Belize City.

Similarly, environmental considerations such as mangrove protection and flood risk management played a prominent role in the discussions, reflecting the city's coastal geography and climate vulnerability. The workshop therefore combined the structured methodology of the toolkit with locally relevant discussions that responded to Belize City's specific urban conditions.

Participants also recognised that Belize's **finite land mass** affects how discussions about urban development are approached. Unlike inland locations where urban expansion may appear easier due to land availability, Belize City must consider growth carefully due to limited available land and the need to protect environmentally sensitive areas. As a result, discussions about urban growth are not framed solely in terms of the physical growth of the city by peripheral expansion, but also in relation to population growth, economic development, and the efficient use of land. Participants noted that improving land utilisation, identifying underused parcels, and guiding development toward serviced areas will be essential to ensuring that Belize City can accommodate future growth in a sustainable and coordinated manner.

4.5 Overall Lessons

Overall, the Belize City workshop demonstrated that the Rapid Planning Toolkit can be an effective tool for initiating strategic planning discussions in rapidly growing cities. The process enabled participants to:

- establish a shared understanding of urban challenges
- visualize spatial constraints and opportunities
- identify potential areas for coordinated development
- begin exploring practical planning responses.

At the same time, the workshop highlighted that the toolkit should be viewed as the **starting point and facilitator** for a more thorough planning process rather than a complete solution. Further technical analysis, institutional coordination, and community engagement will be necessary to translate the workshop outcomes into implementable planning strategies for Belize City.

5. Thematic Observations

5.1 Land Tenure and Access

A central observation throughout the workshop was that many of Belize City's urban development challenges are rooted in how land is accessed, allocated, and regularized. Participants repeatedly highlighted that formal land allocation processes are slow, unclear, and often difficult to navigate, particularly for lower-income households. In practice, this creates an incentive for informal occupation, as squatting is widely perceived to be a faster and more realistic route to securing land than formal application channels.

A major conclusion of the discussions was that **land tenure and land allocation systems are dysfunctional**, and that this dysfunction drives many of the city's wider urban problems. Several key issues were raised repeatedly during the workshop:

- there is no clear or transparent process for allocating land
- political influence often determines who receives land
- many people believe squatting is the fastest way to obtain land legally
- after some years, government often regularizes squatter settlements and grants titles, reinforcing the incentive.

This creates a recurring cycle where:

- people occupy land informally
- settlements grow incrementally and without planning
- government eventually installs roads or services
- the land is later regularized
- the same pattern repeats

This dynamic has major implications for planning. It means that unplanned occupation often precedes infrastructure, and that public authorities are then placed in a reactive position, extending roads, drainage, utilities, and services after settlement has already occurred. This not only increases the cost of urban development but also weakens the authority of formal planning processes by reinforcing the expectation that informal occupation will eventually be recognized.

One participant summarized this dynamic bluntly by stating that **“the squatters are planning the city.”** While informal settlements are not planned in a formal technical sense, the remark captured a widely shared concern that the city's spatial growth is too often shaped not proactively, but reactively by informal occupation first and public planning second.

The workshop also revealed that land questions cannot be addressed solely as a technical planning issue. They are closely tied to governance, political practice, administrative transparency, and public trust. Any strategy for coordinated urban growth in Belize City will therefore need to engage directly with land administration, land tenure reform, and the relationship between formal and informal pathways to accessing land.

5.2 Political Incentives and Governance Dynamics

In addition to the administrative challenges surrounding land allocation, participants also discussed the political dynamics that influence urban development patterns in Belize City. Several participants observed that informal

settlement growth cannot be understood solely as a result of administrative inefficiencies; it is also shaped by political incentives that influence how land occupation and regularization are managed.

During the discussions, participants noted that squatter settlements often evolve into established communities that represent significant voter bases. As a result, political actors may be reluctant to enforce eviction or removal measures, particularly when such actions could generate social or electoral backlash. In some cases, informal settlements are tolerated or implicitly encouraged, while in others the regularization of settlements, including the granting of land titles, may occur around election cycles.

This dynamic contributes to weakening enforcement mechanisms related to land use and environmental protection. Even when land is officially designated as a reserve, protected area, or environmentally sensitive zone, settlements may still emerge and eventually become legalized through regularization processes.

One planner summarized this contradiction clearly during the discussions: if the reserve is important, squatters should be removed, and if titles are given, then it is no longer a reserve. This statement highlights a broader policy inconsistency between land protection frameworks and the political realities of settlement regularization. When protected areas are gradually converted into formalized residential land through repeated exceptions, the credibility of planning and environmental protection mechanisms is undermined.

Participants therefore emphasized that addressing informal development in Belize City will require not only improvements to administrative systems but also clearer political commitment to consistent land governance. Without greater policy clarity and enforcement consistency, the incentives that currently drive informal settlement expansion are likely to persist.

5.3 Institutional Fragmentation

Another major theme that emerged from the workshop was the degree to which responsibilities related to urban development are distributed across multiple institutions with limited coordination between them. Land allocation, housing policy, infrastructure planning, environmental protection, and municipal service delivery are managed by different agencies at national and local levels, each operating within its own mandate.

Participants explained that many key decisions shaping urban growth are taken outside the direct oversight of Belize City Council. For example, land allocation and housing programmes are primarily controlled by central government institutions, while the municipal authority remains responsible for the delivery of services such as sanitation, local roads, and general urban management. This disconnect can create situations where land is distributed or settlements expand without prior coordination with the city authorities responsible for servicing those areas.

As a result, municipalities are often required to respond to development after it has already occurred rather than being able to guide it in advance. Participants noted that this makes it extremely difficult to plan infrastructure networks, anticipate service demand, or manage environmental risks effectively.

The workshop also highlighted that this fragmentation affects information sharing. Different institutions hold relevant data related to land ownership, environmental protection, infrastructure networks, and development plans, but this information is not always shared in a coordinated manner. During the mapping exercise, participants frequently relied on their own institutional knowledge to fill gaps where comprehensive data was unavailable.

Strengthening coordination between national and municipal institutions therefore emerged as a key prerequisite for improving urban planning in Belize City. Without clearer collaboration mechanisms, even well-designed planning strategies may struggle to translate into implementation.

5.4 Fragmented Legislation

A further observation emerging from the workshop and internal reflections is that, because Belize lacks a fully functioning and coherent planning system, individual agencies have attempted to address planning-related problems through their own sector legislation. This has created a patchwork of partial responses rather than an integrated planning framework.

Examples discussed included the Land Utilization Act, environmental legislation related to EIAs, and the Building Act. In each case, legislation was amended or interpreted to respond to development pressures, yet without providing a complete system for coordinated development control. This has led to situations where broad land use intentions may exist, but without effective enforcement mechanisms or a clear hierarchy of decision-making.

The workshop also highlighted an important distinction regarding the use of EIAs. Environmental Impact Assessments have at times been treated as though they function as planning approval tools. However, as discussed during internal reflections, an EIA is only one instrument to inform a planning decision; it is not a substitute for a proper planning system. Where EIAs are used in the absence of robust planning powers, they risk filling a gap they were not designed to fill.

This pattern reflects a broader institutional reality: in the absence of a strong planning authority, each sector attempts to solve planning problems through its own mandate. The result is an uneven and fragmented development management environment, where agencies act defensively within their own laws but without an integrated urban strategy.

5.5 Existing Zoning and Regulatory Powers

Alongside the weaknesses in the national planning system, discussions also suggested that there may already be underused legal tools available to Belize City Council that could serve as interim planning instruments while broader legislative reform is still underway.

It was noted that under the Building Act and existing zoning provisions and powers previously conferred to Belize City Council as a Local Authority, there may be scope to reject or control certain applications where they do not comply with adopted regulations or land use provisions. While these are not a substitute for a full local planning framework, they may provide a practical interim mechanism for guiding development and establishing a clearer basis for development control.

This was identified as a potentially important “low-hanging fruit.” Rather than waiting for the full national Planning and Development Bill to come into force, Belize City Council may be able to extend, formalize, or rely more strategically on existing zoning and land use regulations in the short term. Such an approach could help create a provisional framework for development decisions and highlight, in practice, the need for stronger and more coherent planning powers.



5.6 Environmental Ecosystems and Infrastructure

Environmental considerations emerged as a central theme throughout the workshop discussions. Belize City's coastal geography and low-lying terrain make the city particularly vulnerable to flooding and climate-related hazards. Participants repeatedly emphasized that mangroves, wetlands, and natural drainage areas play a critical role in mitigating these risks.

Historically, however, many of these natural systems have been gradually altered or filled to accommodate urban expansion. While this process has enabled the creation of additional land for development, participants expressed concern about the long-term consequences for flood management and environmental resilience. Mangroves and wetlands function as natural buffers that absorb water during heavy rainfall and protect coastal areas from storm surges. When these systems are removed or disrupted, the city becomes increasingly reliant on engineered drainage solutions that may be costly and difficult to maintain.

The site visit reinforced these observations. Participants were able to see firsthand how housing has been constructed on filled or reclaimed land, often in areas that historically functioned as natural water retention zones. Limited drainage infrastructure in these neighbourhoods further increases vulnerability during periods of heavy rainfall.

Workshop discussions therefore emphasized that environmental protection should not be treated as a separate regulatory concern but as a fundamental component of urban planning. Protecting remaining wetlands, mangroves, and drainage corridors must be integrated into future growth planning in order to safeguard the city's long-term resilience.

Participants also noted that restoring certain ecological areas, particularly in locations currently affected by informal settlement within environmentally sensitive zones, could potentially improve drainage capacity while creating new public green spaces. However, such interventions would require careful coordination with affected communities and institutions.

5.7 Complex Community Structures

The site visit revealed that informal settlements in Belize City should not be viewed purely as areas of disorder or planning failure. While they clearly present significant environmental, infrastructural, and land management challenges, they are also places where people have built social networks, forms of organization, and livelihoods over time.

Participants observed evidence of self-organization in the layout of access routes, the maintenance of shared spaces, and the creation of small-scale commercial and domestic improvements. In some cases, residents expressed attachment to place and did not necessarily see themselves as squatters waiting to be "upgraded" or relocated.

This suggests that future interventions will need to be socially informed and participatory. Relocation, upgrading, or enforcement strategies that ignore existing community relationships are likely to face resistance and may fail to achieve lasting results. The workshop therefore pointed to the importance of understanding not only where people live, but how communities function.

5.8 Effective Community Engagement

A further lesson that emerged from post-workshop reflection is that meaningful community engagement in Belize City cannot be approached as a one-off consultation exercise or purely in the service of government-led intervention. Entering communities directly, particularly where there is mistrust of public institutions or political actors, may limit the quality of engagement and the reliability of the information gathered.

Experience shared during the internal discussions suggested that a more effective approach would involve an initial reconnaissance phase, followed by the identification of trusted local actors, community members, and civil society organizations already active in the neighbourhood. These actors can then help introduce the Toolkit process, explain its purpose, and build confidence among residents before any formal survey or planning discussions take place.

This approach is particularly important in politically sensitive areas, where residents may be cautious about engaging openly with government representatives. Civil society and non-political intermediaries may therefore play a critical bridging role between technical teams and local communities.

Another important lesson is that communities do not always define their needs or priorities in the same way as technical professionals. Some residents may not immediately frame their living conditions as a problem in the way planners do e.g. the layout of houses and dwellings in informal settlements does not always recognise planning setbacks and infrastructure corridors, but is responsive to accessibility concerns, familial and community relationships, and context and/or terrain and natural features. As a result, successful engagement requires not only good facilitation but also a willingness to move at the community's pace, allowing local priorities and perceptions to shape the process.

5.9 Catalyst versus Implementation

A final observation concerns the Toolkit itself. The Rapid Planning Toolkit worked well as a structured framework for bringing stakeholders together, surfacing key issues, and beginning to map opportunities and constraints. It was effective in opening conversations that might not otherwise have taken place and in making spatial problems more tangible.

However, the Belize City workshop also demonstrated that this first application of the Toolkit should be seen as the beginning of a more thorough planning process rather than a complete intervention. Additional work is needed to deepen technical analysis, secure stronger stakeholder participation, validate data, and move into neighbourhood-level design and implementation planning.

In this sense, the workshop successfully generated momentum, but the challenge now is to convert that momentum into an agreed and resourced next phase.

6. Recommendations

Following the various discussions and debates from the workshop, the issues and challenges with implementing the Rapid Planning Toolkit in its existing format in Belize City and based on our observations and the opportunities presented by the existing powers of the Planning department within the current legislation, we offer the following recommendations.

These range from suggestions on governance and government agency coordination, to land accessibility and management, housing provision and environmental resilience and infrastructure. These recommendations assume that inter-agency coordination as a given, and it is hoped that the collaborative experience of the Toolkit workshops can carry over into any future implementation plans.

6.1 Governance, Planning and Institutional Coordination

6.1.1. Establish a cross-institutional planning coordination mechanism for Belize City

A formal mechanism should be created to bring together Belize City Council, the Ministry of Natural Resources, the Ministry of Housing and Infrastructure, planning authorities engaged in urban planning, environmental agencies, utility providers, and other relevant actors on a regular basis. This group should oversee follow-up to the workshop and coordinate land, housing, infrastructure, and environmental planning decisions.

6.1.2. Clarify institutional roles and decision-making responsibilities

A short legal and governance review should be undertaken to clearly map which institutions hold authority over land classification, land allocation, planning approval, environmental protection, and infrastructure delivery. This should help identify overlaps, contradictions, and opportunities for improved coordination.

6.1.3. Use the Toolkit outputs to inform and support ongoing planning reform

The workshop findings should be used to strengthen dialogue around the proposed Planning and Development Bill and other relevant policy reforms, particularly those related to local planning powers, land management, and urban growth control.

6.1.4. Prepare and adopt an interim Municipal planning control approach

Pending broader legislative reform, Belize City Council should review the extent to which existing zoning regulations, land use provisions, and building approval powers can be used more proactively as interim planning control tools. This could help establish a more immediate basis for guiding development while a fuller planning framework is being developed.

6.1.5. Extend and formalize zoning coverage where possible

Where precedents already exist for local land use or zoning regulations, Belize City Council should consider expanding this approach to additional parts of the city. Even if imperfect, this would provide a clearer interim basis for evaluating building applications and managing growth.

6.2 Land, Housing and Growth Management

6.2.1. Create a transparent city-level housing and land demand register

Belize City Council should establish and maintain a public register of households seeking land or housing within the city. This would not replace national land allocation systems, but it would create a transparent record of demand, help identify priority needs, and strengthen the city's role in advocating for fair and coordinated land distribution.



6.2.2. Identify and safeguard priority growth areas before they are informally occupied

The city and relevant national agencies should move quickly to confirm, map, and protect the growth areas identified during the workshop. Early action is essential to avoid a repeat of the current pattern whereby land becomes occupied before a planning framework is in place.

6.2.3. Develop neighbourhood-level pilot plans for priority sites

At least one priority growth area should be taken forward into a more detailed neighbourhood planning exercise. This should include subdivision logic, road hierarchy, service provision, drainage considerations, public spaces, and a mix of housing options.

6.2.4. Develop and promote a wider range of housing typologies

Future planning should move beyond the assumption that all housing must take the form of detached single-family plots. Medium-density and mixed typologies should be explored to improve affordability, increase land efficiency, and better accommodate different household types.

6.2.5. Reduce the incentive for informal occupation by strengthening formal pathways

A core objective of future reform should be to make formal access to land and housing clearer, faster, and more transparent. Unless the formal route becomes more functional and visible, the incentive to secure land through informal occupation is likely to remain.

6.3 Environmental Resilience

6.3.1. Recognize mangroves, wetlands and flood-prone areas as essential urban infrastructure

These areas should be treated as critical components of the city's resilience system. Their protection should be embedded into spatial planning, rather than left to separate environmental processes.

6.3.2. Commission targeted hydrological and drainage analysis for priority areas

Before advancing development in any identified growth area, further technical work should be undertaken to understand drainage dynamics, flood risk, fill requirements, and infrastructure implications.

6.3.3. Link future growth planning to infrastructure sequencing

Growth areas should only be advanced where there is a realistic path to providing roads, drainage, water, electricity, and community infrastructure in a coordinated way. The sequencing of development should be integral to planning decisions.

6.3.4. Prioritize ecological restoration in environmentally sensitive settlement areas

Where informal development has taken place in wetlands or protected areas, options should be explored for restoring ecological functions alongside any future relocation or neighbourhood restructuring strategies.



6.4 Community engagement and social inclusion

6.4.1. Undertake a structured community engagement process in priority neighbourhoods

A more sustained engagement process should be developed with residents in areas such as Jane Usher and adjacent informal settlements. This should include household surveys, community meetings, trust-building, and participation in design discussions.

6.4.2. Use civil society and trusted local actors as bridge partners

Community engagement should be supported by civil society organizations, service agencies, and known local actors who already have credibility in the neighbourhoods concerned. This is likely to improve trust, participation, and the quality of information gathered.

6.4.3. Sequence engagement through smaller trusted groups before wider consultation

Rather than beginning with large public meetings, engagement should start with smaller conversations involving trusted community actors and local intermediaries. This can help establish trust and allow more open discussion before moving to larger collective sessions.

6.4.4. Engage both host communities and affected communities in any relocation strategy

If relocation is pursued for households in environmentally sensitive areas, engagement should not focus only on those being moved. It should also include residents in receiving areas, in order to understand social tensions, avoid conflict, and support integration.

6.4.5. Include youth, women, informal workers, and accessibility needs in neighbourhood planning

Future planning stages should involve groups not fully represented in the workshop, particularly youth, women, people with disabilities, and those working in the informal economy, to ensure that neighbourhood plans reflect daily lived realities.

6.5 Toolkit Takeaways

6.5.1. Allow more preparation time and broaden stakeholder participation in future phases

Any follow-on or future application of the Rapid Planning Toolkit should allow for a longer preparation period in advance of in-country exercises, to ensure a proper and thorough mapping of stakeholders for participation, and to allow the targeted invitation and attendance of key decision-makers, landowners, business actors, and community representatives. This will enable preliminary engagement exercises especially with vulnerable and at-risk stakeholder groups and ensure that proper arrangements can be made to collect the views and inputs of all demographics affected by the planning process and outcomes, and a clearer strategy for sustained attendance across the workshop period.

6.5.2. Use smaller breakout groups alongside plenary sessions

Future workshops should incorporate smaller facilitated groups in addition to plenary discussions, to encourage more open participation and allow sensitive issues to be discussed more honestly.

6.5.3. Move from diagnosis to implementation through a second-phase programme

A second phase should be developed to take the workshop outputs forward into technical analysis, pilot neighbourhood planning, stakeholder engagement, and action planning with clear responsibilities and timelines.

6.5.4. Present the Toolkit in contexts and disciplines adjacent to development planning

The Toolkit process should be presented to and actively seek the involvement and participation of agencies and professionals engaged in the disaster recovery, crisis management and emergency services sectors. The planning of infrastructure corridors, evacuation routes and protocols, utility and emergency access requires experience and expertise to ensure that the factors that inhibit successful emergency and/or disaster efforts can be mitigated by integrated planning and design.

6.5.5. Position the Belize City pilot strategically within Commonwealth and national agendas

The outcomes of the workshop should be communicated to relevant national and Commonwealth actors so that the Belize City pilot can support wider conversations on sustainable urban development, including ahead of Commonwealth-level forums.

7. Way Forward

The workshop demonstrated strong commitment among Belize City stakeholders to work toward more coordinated and resilient urban development. The Rapid Planning Toolkit process helped bring together government agencies, technical experts, and community representatives to identify priority challenges, map opportunities for growth, and develop a shared direction for future planning. The following actions outline practical next steps that could help translate these discussions into implementation.

However, participants also acknowledged that advancing these steps will require sustained institutional support. Belize City Council plays a central role in managing urban development and delivering services to residents, yet the municipality operates with limited technical capacity and financial resources while addressing a wide range of operational responsibilities. As a result, implementing more proactive planning approaches, coordinating cross-institutional data and infrastructure planning, and advancing pilot neighbourhood projects may be difficult without additional support.

The workshop therefore highlighted the importance of building partnerships that can help strengthen the city's capacity to implement the outcomes of the Rapid Planning Toolkit process. Collaboration with national ministries, development partners, regional planning institutions, and international organizations could help provide technical assistance, institutional strengthening, and funding for priority pilot projects. Such support would enable Belize City Council to move from discussion toward practical implementation, demonstrating how coordinated planning can improve resilience, environmental protection, and inclusive urban growth.

The steps outlined below represent a possible pathway forward and may serve as a basis for future collaboration between Belize City Council and partners interested in supporting sustainable urban development in Belize City.

7.1 Immediate Next Steps (0–3 months)

7.1.1. Finalize and circulate the workshop Report

The workshop report when completed and reviewed by key partners, should be shared with workshop participants, Belize City Council, relevant ministries, CAP, and FCDO.

7.1.2. Establish a follow-up working group

A core working group should be convened to take the workshop outputs forward. This should comprise the Belize City Council planning department, relevant councillors or other representative of the Mayor, selected technical representatives from national ministries, and a representative from the Belize Association of Professional Planners. The King's Foundation, CAP, and other regional and Commonwealth institutional organisations may be included to provide support and capacity.

7.1.3. Consolidate workshop maps and identify the priority growth areas

The spatial outputs developed during Day 2 should be consolidated and translated into a preliminary set of agreed opportunity areas and constraint maps.

7.1.4. Prepare a summary legal and policy note on interim planning tools

A concise note should be prepared identifying what interim planning tools are already available to Belize City Council under existing regulations, particularly in relation to zoning, land use provisions, and building application review.

7.1.5. Prepare a stakeholder engagement plan for the next phase

This should identify which community representatives, landowners, business actors, ministries, civil society organizations, and technical agencies need to be engaged in follow-up work, and how.

7.1.6. Brief the key national actors on the workshop outcomes

The Mayor should consider making a formal representation to the Prime Minister and relevant ministers to ensure that the Belize City pilot is understood as part of a broader sustainable cities agenda. Foreign Affairs and relevant Commonwealth-linked actors should also be briefed.

7.2 Mid-Term Next Steps (3–9 months)

7.2.1. Undertake targeted technical studies for the shortlisted growth areas

This should include land ownership verification, drainage and flood risk review, infrastructure access, and environmental constraints analysis.

7.2.2. Map and engage trusted civil society and community intermediaries

Before wider consultation begins, Belize City Council and partners should identify local intermediaries, organizations, or service actors already trusted in priority communities.

7.2.3. Develop a transparent City-level housing and land demand Register

Belize City Council should initiate the design of a simple, transparent register of housing and land demand to support better planning and public accountability.

7.2.4. Select one pilot neighbourhood area for Step 3 of the Toolkit

One growth area should be identified and chosen for more detailed neighbourhood planning as a demonstration project.

7.3 Long-Term Next Steps (9–18 months)

7.3.1. Develop a pilot neighbourhood

The selected site should be taken through a more detailed planning exercise, including layout, access, drainage, amenities, public spaces, and possible housing typologies.

7.3.2. Test the use of interim zoning / regulatory controls in one priority area

Where possible, Belize City Council should explore applying or extending interim zoning or land use regulation tools in one pilot area, as a practical step toward stronger local development control.

7.3.3. Develop a coordinated action framework for implementation

This should set out who is responsible for which actions, what resources are required, and what the sequencing of works would be across land, infrastructure, housing, and environmental management.

7.3.4. Position the Belize City Toolkit pilot as a model for wider planning reform in Belize and the Caribbean

The lessons from the workshop and pilot planning work should be used to inform wider national conversations on integrated planning, local government capacity, and urban growth management in Belize. As the Rapid Planning Toolkit is implemented and tested in Belize City, the experience can help demonstrate practical approaches to coordinating land use planning, infrastructure provision, and environmental management in rapidly growing urban areas.

Given that Belize is a member of **CARICOM** and part of the **Commonwealth Caribbean**, where many countries face similar land use planning challenges including informal settlement growth, environmental vulnerability, limited planning capacity, and fragmented institutional responsibilities, the Belize City pilot may also offer valuable lessons for the wider region. The Rapid Planning Toolkit could therefore serve not only as a catalyst for planning reform in Belize, but also as a reference case for other CARICOM and Commonwealth Caribbean countries.

Appendices

1. Workshop Attendance

No	Name	Organization
1	Alrick Flores	Belize City Building Unit -Technical Manager
2	Augustine Choc	Belize City Council (BCC) Planning-Asst. to the City Planner
3	Burnell Jones	BCC
4	Carla Patnett	BCC
5	Carol Archer	Commonwealth Association of Planners (CAP)/University of Technology Jamaica
6	Carolyn Trench-Sandiford	Belize Association of Professional Planners
7	Charles Miranda	Neighbourhood Representative (Port Loyola)
8	Chelsea Perera	Coastal Zone Authority Management
9	Cllr. Allan Pollard	Works, Infrastructure, Urban Development, Labor Relations
10	Cllr. Edmund Kwan	Municipal Court, Enforcement, Internal Security
11	Cllr. Sherwin Garcia	Parks & Playgrounds, Beautification
12	Cllr. Stephanie Hamilton	Tourism & Diaspora Relations, Foreign Affairs & Sister City Relations
13	Dr. Candice Pitts	City Administrator
14	Erin Garnett	BCC
15	Florence Goldson	Belize Association of Professional Planners
16	Fredrick Hunter	Belize Red Cross
17	Gianie Staine	Neighbourhood Representative (Port Loyola)
18	Hon. Gilroy Usher	Minister - Port Loyola Area Representative
19	Keisha Rodriguez	Director Ministry of Natural Resources MNRPM
20	Lea Haddad	The King's Foundation
21	Leslie Ohomele	The King's Foundation
22	Martin Carlos	Ministry of National Resources MNRPM
23	Mayor Bernard Wagner	Belize City Mayor
24	Melony Dawson	BCC / CEMO
25	Monica Usher-Quich	Port Loyola
26	Norman W. Usher	Port Loyola constituency
27	Philip Jones	Bus operator President BBA
28	Ramon Menjivar	BCC
29	Roman Nicholson	Development Finance Corp
30	Vasni Pech	BCC
31	Vidal Bernadez	Belize Forest Dept

2. The Charter

Rapid Planning Toolkit

for Urban Expansion

The Charter for a Rapidly Growing City

INTRODUCTION

Belize City is experiencing rapid urban development across many neighbourhoods. New homes and businesses are emerging quickly as communities grow and opportunities expand. This positive energy also brings pressure on drainage systems, infrastructure, housing, and coastal environments. Across Belize City, partners have already identified the importance of coordinating development so that neighbourhoods remain safe, resilient, and vibrant. Informal settlement expansion, environmental pressures on mangroves and waterways, and infrastructure gaps highlight the need for shared planning. By working together through coordinated spatial planning; protecting mangroves, reserving land for roads and community assets, and upgrading neighbourhoods. Belize City can continue to grow in a way that is inclusive, vibrant, resilient, sustainable, and safe. This Charter sets out a shared vision and collective commitments to guide the Rapid Planning Toolkit pilot in Belize City and ensure unplanned developments does not happen.

THE PROBLEM

Rapid and uncoordinated urbanisation can create challenges that partners across Belize City are working together to address:

- Pressure on mangroves and coastal ecosystems
- Squatting and Land titles issues
- Management of informal settlements with limited services
- Poverty, health risks, pollution, and safety concerns in vulnerable neighbourhoods
- Land erosion and storm surge exposure in low-lying areas
- Limited serviced land for future development

Addressing these challenges together will strengthen Belize City's resilience and quality of life.

THE PEOPLE

Coordinating urban development requires partnership across all levels. In Belize City this includes:

- Belize City Council
- Ministry of Infrastructure & Housing
- Ministry of Local Government
- Ministry of Tourism
- Department of Environment (DOE)
- Utilities agencies: water, sewerage, electricity providers, Waste Management Authorities Hydrology and Drainage Units
- NEMO / CEMO
- disaster management agencies
- Financial institutions
- Businesses and market associations
- Residents, community leaders, and youth groups
- Landowners and developers

Together, these partners will help map and coordinate to help achieve an integrated planning solution for urban expansion and development in Belize City

THE SOLUTION :

To support Belize City's vision, the Rapid Planning Toolkit provides a practical approach that builds on the opportunities identified during the workshop. Participants highlighted a number of vacant or under-used plots and available lands that represent opportunities for coordinated development. The most prominent areas identified include:

- The Jane Usher neighbourhood
- Vacant land along the South Strip corridor
- Under-utilized plots in the Northern expansion areas

These locations demonstrate how planning policies and targeted investment can help guide development toward serviced land, reduce pressure on vulnerable areas, and revitalise existing neighbourhoods.

To support Belize City's vision, the Rapid Planning Toolkit provides a practical approach.

1. **Mapping:** By mapping primary and feeder roads, new connecting routes can be identified. By mapping the natural assets land to be protected can be identified. By mapping existing community assets, locations for further assets can be identified.
2. **Coordinating:** By working with landowners, government agencies and relevant stakeholders, infrastructure corridors, roads and growth areas can be protected.
3. **Implementing:** By identifying priority neighbourhoods, plans can be implemented at a manageable scale. By marking out routes, protected areas and sites for community assets, rapid growth can be managed neighbourhood by neighbourhood.

THE COMMITMENT

We commit to achieving this together with the support of Belize City Council, the FCDO supported Integrated planning action group, the Commonwealth Association of Planners, and The King's Foundation.

Signatures:



Rapid Planning Toolkit
for Urban Expansion

3. Legal Framework for Planning in Belize

- There are two levels of government: central government and local government.
- The Housing and Town Planning Act (HTP) is the primary planning legislation. It was enacted in 1947.
- The HTP provides for the Minister to appoint a Central Housing and Planning Authority (CHPA) to administer the Act.
- Part III of the Act provides a discretionary power for the CHPA to pass a resolution to prepare a scheme with respect to Belize as a whole; or prepare a scheme with respect to any land within the area specified in the resolution; or adopt, with or without variations, a scheme proposed by all or any of the owners of any such land; or adopt, with or without variations, a scheme proposed by a local authority or by one or more local authorities acting jointly.
- The CHPA, may, with the approval of the Minister, come to an agreement with a local authority so named in a scheme and in consequence thereof assign to such local authority duties and functions in relation to the enforcement and carrying out of such scheme. (Dangriga and Corozal Town Planning Schemes)
- The CHPA may also appoint a committee for any of the purposes of the Act, which, in their opinion, would be better regulated and managed by means of a committee and may with the approval of the Minister delegate to the committee with or without restrictions or conditions as they think fit, any of their powers under the Act. (Ambergris Caye Planning Authority)
- The CHPA declared the Belize City Council to be a Local Authority for the purposes of the Act.
- No CHPA has been operational for over 20 years
- Over time, new legislation was introduced or existing legislation amended to address development challenges or to meet Belize’s commitments to global agreements.
- Consequently, the landscape for planning spans multiple ministries, is centralized and archaic, and is characterized by duplication and conflict.
- Proposed National Planning and Development Bill seeks to replace Part II of the HTP and address these issues.

Legislative Provisions

Ministry and Legislation-Regulate and Develop

1	Power to prepare land use plans, planning schemes, coastal zone plans and development plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Housing and Town Planning Act – Planning Schemes-MIHD ▪ Land Utilization Act –Development Plans-MNRPM ▪ Special Precautionary Plans-Disaster Preparedness Act (Subject to HTPA)-MPSDRM ▪ Planning Schemes-Reconstruction and Development Act-MFIETCAEG (powers of HTP conferred by Act-Belmopan)
2	Power and duty to prepare land use plans, planning schemes and coastal plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Integrated Coastal Zone Plan – Coastal Zone Management Act-MBEMC
3	Power to enforce land use plans, planning schemes, coastal zone plans and development plans	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Planning Schemes-Housing and Town Planning Act-MIDH ▪ Planning Schemes-Reconstruction and Development Corporation Act-MRTCDLLG ▪ Planning Schemes-Corozal Town Council and Dangriga Town Council by authority of S54 of HTPA

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Development Plan-Belize Infrastructure Ltd.-MIHD by authority of Land Utilization Act, MNRPM-Lake Independence, SI No. 49 of 2019
4	Power to subdivide land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Land Utilization Act-MNRPM ▪ Belize Land Development Authority -MFIETCAEG
5	Power to regulate construction/ruinate buildings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Housing and Town Planning Act-MIHD ▪ Belize Building Act-subject to land use and zoning plans-MIHD ▪ Village Council Act-MRTCDLLG but subject to HTPA-MIHD
6	Power to give permission for the erection of structures on seabed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Private Works Construction Act-MNRPM
7	Power to declare town boundaries/towns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belmopan, Belize City and Town Council Acts-MRTCDLLG ▪ Land Tax Act – MNRPM for the purpose of the Act ▪ Reconstruction and Development Corporation-MRTCDLLG
8	Power to issue license and permits for water extraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Water Industry Act-MPUEL ▪ Integrated Water Resource Management Act-MNRPM
9	Power to appropriate land and develop land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public Roads Act-MIHD ▪ Belize Land Development Authority -MAFSE ▪ Forest Act-MSDCCSWM ▪ North Ambergris Caye Development Corporation-MFIETCAEG
10	Power to issue license or permit for mineral extraction/dredging	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Mines and Minerals Act-MNRPM
11	Power to extract sand/stone/quarrying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public Roads Act-MIHD ▪ Forest Act-MSDCC
12	Power to issue permit to remove mangroves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Forest Act-MSDCC
13	Power to cut overhanging trees in along riverways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public Roads Act-MIHD
14	Belmopan, Belize City, Town and Village Council	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Power to make by-laws for the purposes of the functions of the Act ▪ By laws utilized for land use and zoning regulations (Belize City Council, Belmopan City Council inherited from Reconddev Act)) ▪ North Ambergris Caye Development Corporation-MFIETCAEG -Not subject to the HTPA

15	Power to issue liquor license and trade licenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Intoxicating Liquor License Act-MRTCDLLG ▪ Trade License Act-MRTCDLLG
16	Power to enter into compliance agreements of projects meeting criteria for Schedule I and II activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Environmental Protection Act -MSDCCSWM
17	Petroleum and natural gas extraction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Petroleum Act-MNRPM
18	Power to declare reserves/zone for reserves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ National Protected Areas System Act-MSDCCSWM ▪ National Lands Act-MNRPM ▪ Land Utilization Act-MNRPM ▪ Fisheries Resource Act-MSDCCSWM ▪ North Ambergris Caye Development Corporation-MFIETCAEG ▪ Housing and Town Planning Act-MIHD
19	Land clearance by fire	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Agriculture Fire Act-MAFSE ▪ Forest Act-MSDCC
20	Declaration for aerodromes, airports heights of buildings etc.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Civil Aviation Act- MFIETCAEG
21	Traffic Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Belize City Council, Belmopan City Council, Towns Councils-MRTCDLLG with authority of the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act-MYST
22	Power to develop land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Designated Processing Area Act- MFIETCAEG ▪ North Ambergris Caye Development Authority Act-MFIETCAEG ▪ Belize Land Development Authority-MAFS ▪ Housing and Town Planning Act-MIHD ▪ Forest Act-MSDCCSWM ▪ Public Roads Act-MIHD ▪ Civil Aviation Act- MFIETCAEG ▪ Reconstruction and Development Act-MRTCDLLG

ACRONYMS

MAFS - Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security

MBEMC - Ministry of Blue Economy and Marine Conservation

MFIETCAEG - Ministry of Finance, Investment, Economic Transformation, Civil Aviation & E Governance

MIHD - Ministry of Infrastructure and Housing Development

MNRPM - Ministry of Natural Resources, Petroleum and Mining

MPUEL - Ministry of Public Utilities, Energy and Logistics

MRTCDLLG - Ministry of Rural Transformation, Community Development, Labour and Local Government

MSDCCSWM - Ministry of Sustainable Development, Climate Change and Solid Waste Management



**COMMONWEALTH
SUSTAINABLE CITIES
COALITION**