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The good, the bad and the ugly of neighbourhood plans

Words: [James Derounian](#)



James Derounian considers the pros and cons of community-generated plans

Set during the American Civil War, Sergio Leone's *The Good, The Bad And The Ugly* features three men in pursuit of buried gold coins. It may seem a fanciful metaphor for neighbourhood planning, but is in some ways an appropriate one – not least because gold coins are at the heart of it – in the form of CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy), the cost of neighbourhood planning, and the impact of developers – responding to national planning policy – that seem hell-bent on enabling house building as a means of digging us out of austerity.

Despite misgivings, however, I remain overall of the view that it's better to have a neighbourhood plan than none. First, the Good.

The Good

The bald statistics point to the popularity of this initiative born out of the 2011 Localism Act. The DCLG-funded My Community website celebrated 100 successful NP referendums last autumn. They mentioned, too, that “1,600 groups are currently writing Neighbourhood Plans”, that eight million people live in a designated NP area, and that “£6.7m in government grants has already been allocated to groups across England”.

Academic research also paints a broadly positive picture: A 2014 University of Reading And Locality report states that, overall, “participants view neighbourhood planning as an initiative with merit and having further potential, although it is not without its challenges”.

Furthermore, most groups reported that their local planning authority had been supportive. This certainly reflects the positive experience of Heather Heelis, clerk to

Rendlesham Town Council in Suffolk. Heather believes that its adopted NP genuinely constitutes “power to the people....the whole exercise brought together the community”.

Neighbourhood Planning: Plan And Deliver, from 2014, by Turley, notes that “some plans are openly pro-development, in some cases seeking to extend housing targets and to promote economic growth”. So, for example, Upper Eden established a housing target exceeding that identified by the local authority, raising it from 479 to 545 units. The rationale is the need to provide homes for young people. So there is some hope that NPs can promote IMBY (In My Back Yard).

Chris Wayman, clerk to Buckingham Town Council, reels off a series of gains from their plan, which has been “vision-changing... it’s changed our outlook on practically everything – dealings with developers; it’s enabled us to secure a new cemetery, self-build houses, OAP bungalows and a brand new park”.

It is also clear that neighbourhood plan preparation constitutes Big Society writ large; in terms of mass mobilisation of volunteers to contribute and influence its content. I have been involved with the Winchcombe, Gloucestershire, NP and estimate that volunteer input to the plan amounts to an equivalent of £50,000+.

Figures from the first 52 referendums published by DCLG showed an average ‘Yes’ vote of 88 per cent, but they also show an average turnout of 32 per cent, slightly above local election turnouts.

Given the strong human impulse to object, the high levels of voter support for draft plans demonstrates that they can elicit ‘ownership’ in the form of residents casting a vote. The Winslow, Bucks, plan elicited a remarkable 98.2 per cent vote in favour on a turnout of 59.5 per cent.

But what of those not turning out? Does no vote correspond to tacit agreement, apathy, failure of communication or no strong opinion?

The key theme of financial reward in The Good, The Bad And The Ugly can be seen in the way that communities with a neighbourhood plan can receive a CIL payment of 25 per cent on new build, whereas those without gain just 15 per cent, capped at £100/existing housing unit, maximum.

The Bad and the Ugly

For every silver lining, there is a cloud. In 2014, Turley observed that areas “of below average affluence are less likely to enter into the neighbourhood planning process”. What’s more, 39 per cent of designated NP areas were located in the “least deprived local authorities in England”. Turley also point to geographical distortion: “75 per cent of plans have been produced in the south of England...compared with 25 per cent of plans in the North.”

Similarly, Turley found neighbourhood planning was much more of a rural phenomenon (67 per cent of all NPs), than an urban one (33 per cent). My hunch is that parish and town councils (as 'qualifying bodies') exist in more country than city locations, giving rural communities an edge since their local councils can levy a tax (precept) to pay for plan preparation. They also operate in historically demarked parishes. By contrast, most urban communities start from scratch in establishing a 'neighbourhood forum' and the exact extent of their jurisdiction.

Then, as Reading University's Professor Gavin Parker and colleagues established, groups "underestimated the scale, complexity and time needed to produce their neighbourhood plans". In Winchcombe, a small edge-of-Cotswolds town, we are in year five of the process. Pity the volunteers taking on this burden, and pity residents trying to make sense of jargon, rules and regulations.

While policy looks cut and dried on paper, it is anything but when talking with residents about potential development. It becomes highly personal, drawing out NIMBY, and even venomous, reactions from otherwise reasonable people. These include accusations of neighbourhood planning groups accepting 'backhanders' and personalised attacks.

The University of Reading research concluded that "a significant number of emerging plans, especially those in rural locations, have been prepared with the aim of protecting neighbourhood areas from new development."

For an extreme, just look at the case of Spratton in Northamptonshire where councillors resigned en masse, citing "a small minority who have, since the early stages of the drafting of the neighbourhood plan, consistently and without let-up made unfounded allegations against the parish council and individuals in it".

Or what about the human cost of potential and actual legal challenges to the content and procedures adopted? At Tattenhall, Uppingham, and Newick in East Sussex, developers disputed the legality of the NP. Can you imagine the stress and cost – in all sorts of ways – when 'David' (community representatives) and 'Goliath' (developers) collide over NPs?

Returning to Clint Eastwood in pursuit of gold, neighbourhood plans depend almost entirely on the resources that a community can muster. If a place is stuffed full of social capital – in the form of retired professionals – then this must give them a headstart in understanding what is a time-consuming, highly technical sphere of activity.

Academics Bradley and Haigh have termed this a "new patchwork politics of place". They assert that NPs constitute a "spatial representation of unpaid care work", with the community serving "as a reservoir of precarious labour". Such dependence is – in the words of the Intergenerational Foundation (2012) – effectively "handing more power to older people", since senior residents are more likely to be local councillors, and have the

time, experience and inclination to get stuck in. Such a state of affairs is innately unsustainable.

I really don't think government and policy wonks have understood the reality of neighbourhood plans built on the considerable efforts and inputs of (hard-pressed) volunteers. As the Rural Services Network observes, "embarking on neighbourhood planning is a significant commitment for a typical parish council, with a small budget, a part-time clerk and relying on the goodwill of volunteer councillors".

And what about the gold? At Thame, Oxfordshire (population about 13,000) local politicians confirm that it cost around £100,000 to complete their NP. There is a further conundrum for residents as amateurs, in terms of writing a plan that is simultaneously intelligible to the citizen; robust and precise enough to withstand legal challenge; practically usable by planners; and all while not becoming so generalised as to be worthless.

While we're on resources, pity the planner. In the words of the Planning Advisory Service, principal authorities "have the responsibility to support communities who wish to engage in the neighbourhood planning process". In principle, fine; in practice this is a vague and variable aspiration. Besides, how can local planning authorities realistically support their communities with shrinking budgets?

Additionally, there is a deeper concern with the whole localism project: that it is running true to Mark's Gospel, namely "For he that hath, to him shall be given: and he that hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he hath". Turley conclude that "Neighbourhood planning is popular... But... popularity should not be confused with 'huge success', as the government suggests."

On an 'up-beat', User Experience Of Neighbourhood Planning in England by Prof Parker and colleagues "strongly suggests" that, in principle, neighbourhood planning can be undertaken by most communities if effectively supported, and in particular if the relevant local authority is supportive.

7 ways to increase the effectiveness of English neighbourhood planning

1. **Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL):** Each principal authority should be required to set a charge so that places with a neighbourhood plan really do receive 25 per cent of the sum generated.
2. **Business rates:** A portion of business rates should go to parish/town councils and neighbourhood forums, to support neighbourhood plans.
3. **The 100+ Club:** Representatives of communities with a NP in force could usefully form a social enterprise, to share knowledge with places at an earlier stage in the process.

4. **Developers:** Alongside qualifying bodies, developers should commit to constructive negotiation as part of the process.
 5. **Central and local government:** Should lift the burden of regulations and streamline systems so that neighbourhood planning can flourish.
 6. **Enable amendment:** There is no legal framework or guidelines for NP amendment, without starting the entire process over again.
 7. **Right of appeal:** Government should enable a community right of appeal against planning permissions that run counter to a neighbourhood plan.
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James Derounian is a community activist, neighbourhood plan examiner, parish council trainer, long-time community developer and academic.

Illustration | Sam Chivers