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it's neighbourhood planning, jim... but not as we know it

Community activist, Neighbourhood Plan examiner, parish councils' trainer, long-time community development professional and academic James Derounian peers behind the polished surface of community-based plans

'It's neighbourhood planning, Jim... but not as we know it.' This bastardisation of a phrase attributed (if mistakenly) to Mr Spock in the cult TV series *Star Trek* sums up the otherworldly feeling I experienced when reading in *The Planner* that Neighbourhood Plans are 'the poster child of localism'¹ – leading me to wonder whose poster? And in what state of health is this child of localism?

I remain a cautious optimist, or optimistically circumspect about such community-generated plans, not least because without them the wheeling vultures borne on the winds of the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) would be literally bulldozing a market-driven swathe across rural England's communities. A Neighbourhood Plan can be a shield to protect the character, integrity, assets, aspirations, rate of development and futures of communities – by which I mean that Neighbourhood Plans can be, and often are, vehicles to harness 'IMBYism' – a can-do 'in my back yard' approach to the necessary development of most places.

Returning to the question of 'whose poster', at one level Neighbourhood Plans are, of course, community manifestos, as suggested by academic Quintin Bradley. But that poster image hides a multitude of lumps and bumps. Take the matter of money: one of the early Neighbourhood Plans now 'made up' or legally in force is for Thame in Oxfordshire, a town with a population of about 13,000 people. Local politicians have confirmed to

me that it cost around £100,000 to complete – an awful lot of money in anyone's book. But, to be fair, Thame were one of the Neighbourhood Plan 'frontrunners' and had no clear guidelines or best practice to follow and so were on a steep learning curve. This, however, points to another deeper concern with localism – that it is having a biblical effect along the lines of 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.'

As Turley Associates observed in their research report *Neighbourhood Planning: Plan and Deliver*,² 'areas of below average affluence are less likely to enter into the neighbourhood planning process'. Furthermore, 39% of designated Neighbourhood Plan areas were 'located in the quarter of 'least deprived' local authorities in England'. The report also points to lumpiness in terms of geographical distribution: '75% of plans have been produced in the south of England... compared with 25% of plans in the north.'

And then there is the question of the necessity for substantial social capital to shoulder the yoke of neighbourhood planning. Neighbourhood Plans are built on the work of volunteers, whether parish or town councillors, neighbourhood fora members or willing residents. For example, in my own edge-of-Cotswolds home town of Winchcombe – a greying small town with a population of 5,000, beset with typical rural problems of high house prices, new

homes that have added about 10% to Winchcombe's population over a year, and disguised poverty among the picture-postcard affluence – the Winchcombe Neighbourhood Plan Steering Group has been able to draw on the skills of resident planners, senior managers and retired professionals.

But as the Intergenerational Foundation noted in its 2012 report *How the Localism Act Hands Power to Older Generations*,³ the legislation was intended 'to give more power to local residents but it is clear... that what it is doing is handing more power to older people. Unless the age profile of the people who engage with local democracy changes rapidly, its real effect will be to exclude young people as they are so under-represented.' Such a state of affairs is innately *unsustainable* – old people die.

This is ironic to say the least, since basic requirements for Neighbourhood Plans are to encourage sustainable development and to align with the NPPF, which itself claims 'a presumption in favour of sustainable development, which should be seen as a golden thread running through both plan-making and decision-taking'.⁴ But when push comes to shove and localism confronts national policy, and an imperative to build our way out of austerity, centralism trumps localism – as in the case of HS2.

And in another resource issue, pity the poor planners! 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'.⁵ But this is a vague and open-ended aspiration. And how can local planning authorities realistically support their communities with shrinking budgets and reducing manpower? Herefordshire Council, for example, has established a 'Service Level Agreement' mechanism which makes clear to parishes what the planning authority will do to support them and also enables Herefordshire to organise that support⁶ – with 134 parish councils it is crucial for them to manage the risk of officers facing overwhelming demands.

Whatever central government thinks it is fostering through Neighbourhood Plans, it appears to have no clue as to the human cost of community-based planning. Again taking Winchcombe as an example, it has taken over four years to lodge the draft final Neighbourhood Plan for independent examination. (Research undertaken at Reading University published in 2014 noted that '45 per cent of respondents had been involved in neighbourhood planning for over two years'⁷ – that is a lot of time and effort freely donated.) A rough calculation on the Winchcombe process conservatively estimates that there has been £50,000 of input in the form of volunteer labour alone, and consultation has involved interactive exhibitions in the local library, blogs, public meetings, surveys, a stall at Winchcombe Country Show, a household questionnaire, and phone-ins on Radio Winchcombe.

The human cost is especially apparent in a process that is often 'up close and personal', in which rumour and counter-rumour can cause individual and group distress, not least when it comes to matters of money, land and property: I know of a community in which the volunteers developing a Neighbourhood Plan were accused of being in the pockets of developers. Furthermore, people can sometimes be unreasonably selfish and deploy a cloak of community concern to argue against development near where they live. As Ipsos MORI's 'Property Snakes and Ladders' diagram⁸ showed, while '80% agree there is a 'housing crisis' in Britain', '45% agree there is a 'housing crisis' in [my] local area [but] disagree more new homes need to be built in my local area'.

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Sticking with resources, I agree with Tony Burton (who describes himself as a 'Freerange consultant'): Neighbourhood Plans can be 'positively disruptive' and are 'here to stay'. The interest in community-based planning traces way back to the 1969 Skeffington Report and shows no sign of disappearing. That being so, parish and town councils – as Neighbourhood Plan 'qualifying bodies' – have to lead community-based action by precepting to finance such plans. If the local council won't, then why should more distant bodies help?

But there should also be follow-through in terms of benefits for the same local councils. For example, why not allocate a portion of business rates to parish and town councils and neighbourhood fora to finance the implementation of Neighbourhood Plan policies? After all, a chippie, pub or other business has a direct impact on its immediate surrounds (in terms of noise, litter, traffic, etc.), so, logically, the immediate locality should receive some of the rates to offset such local effects – as opposed to the current set-up whereby, for example, rates for businesses in Winchcombe go entirely to Tewkesbury Borough Council, to re-distribute as it wishes and across its entire jurisdiction.

And then there is the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL), a charge 'introduced by the Planning Act 2008 as a tool for local authorities in England and Wales to help deliver infrastructure to support the development of their area'.⁹ Places with a

Neighbourhood Plan should receive 25% of relevant CIL payments – but there is a big fly in the ointment, since, as the Planning Portal notes, CIL payments will be made only ‘if your local planning authority has chosen to set a charge in its area’.¹⁰

And finally, since this piece majors on ‘resources, resources, resources’, there is the conundrum of writing a community-based plan that is simultaneously intelligible to the citizen while being sufficiently robust and precise in terms of wording to withstand legal challenge; practically usable by planners in deciding individual permissions; and not so generalised and anodyne as to be worthless.

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There are also resource issues stemming from the need to deal with the highly jargonised, technical and legalistic framework that Neighbourhood Plans inhabit. Take, for example, production of a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA). *Planning Practice Guidance* hedges its bets:

‘There is no legal requirement for a neighbourhood plan to have a sustainability appraisal... However, a qualifying body must demonstrate how its plan... will contribute to achieving sustainable development. A sustainability appraisal may be a useful approach for doing this and the guidance on sustainability appraisal of Local Plans should be referred to.’¹⁰

And good luck with that...

But let’s end on an upbeat note. *User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England*, produced by Professor Gavin Parker and colleagues for Locality, 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

● **James Derounian** is Principal Lecturer in the Department of Natural and Social Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire. The views expressed are personal.

Notes

- 1 T. Burton, quoted in M. Read: ‘How goes the neighbourhood?’. *The Planner*, 18 Dec. 2015. www.theplanner.co.uk/features/how-goes-the-neighbourhood#sthash.VholpfWz.dpuf
- 2 *Neighbourhood Planning: Plan and Deliver?* Turley Associates, Mar. 2014. www.turley.co.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/news/Turley_%20Neighbourhood%20Planning_March_2014.pdf
- 3 J. Leach and D. Kingman: *How the Localism Act Hands Power to Older Generations*. Intergenerational Foundation, Sept. 2012. www.if.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/Localism_IF_defin.pdf
- 4 *National Planning Policy Framework*. Department for Communities and Local Government, Mar. 201, para. 14. www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/6077/2116950.pdf
- 5 ‘Neighbourhood planning’. Webpage. Planning Advisory Service. www.pas.gov.uk/neighbourhood-planning;jsessionid=F7BCC6E0434AA78A36B844A603749B6Ftomcat2
- 6 See the sample agreement set out in *Neighbourhood Planning: Service Level Agreement*. Herefordshire Council, Jan. 2014. www.herefordshire.gov.uk/media/6383003/sla_master.pdf
- 7 G. Parker, with T. Lynn, M. Wargent and Locality: *User Experience of Neighbourhood Planning in England Research: Executive Summary*. University of Reading, for Locality, Sept. 2014. <http://mycommunity.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/User-experience.pdf>
- 8 B. Marshall: ‘Property snakes and ladders’. Ipsos MORI, Mar. 2013. [www.ipsos-mori.com/newsevents/blogs/datafizz/1336/Property-Snakes-and-Ladders.aspx#gallery\[m\]/0/](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/newsevents/blogs/datafizz/1336/Property-Snakes-and-Ladders.aspx#gallery[m]/0/)
- 9 ‘Community Infrastructure Levy’. Webpage. Planning Portal. www.planningportal.gov.uk/planning/applications/howtoapply/whattosubmit/cil
- 10 ‘Strategic environmental assessment and sustainability appraisal’, para. 026. *Planning Practice Guidance*. Department for Communities and Local Government, updated 6 Mar. 2014. <http://planningguidance.communities.gov.uk/blog/guidance/strategic-environmental-assessment-and-sustainability-appraisal/sustainability-appraisal-requirements-for-neighbourhood-plans/>