

Neighbourhood planning: unlocking community empowerment to level up in a reformed planning system

Introduction

This briefing has been developed by leading academics and stakeholder organisations in the field of neighbourhood planning (NP), to inform Government thinking on the role and function of NP in a reformed system. The recommendations are based on participants' extensive experience of delivering, supporting and researching NP.

The 2020 Planning White Paper was ambiguous about the future of NP. While it proposed retaining it, there was no clarity on what the role and function of NP would be (other than to produce neighbourhood design codes). The strategic connection at departmental level of the levelling up and planning agendas, and the pause to review the proposed reforms, provides an opportunity to strengthen NP as a key means of community engagement in the planning system that will help rebuild public trust and drive both levelling up and building back better.

Neighbourhood planning has been shown to increase housing supply and deliver better quality, better designed developments that are better tailored to local needs¹. It also catalyses wider community action, reinvigorates local democracy and improves relations between communities and local government. It demonstrates that local communities can embrace new development at the same time as prioritising environmental quality, sustainability, place identity and social wellbeing². And neighbourhood plans have shown near-unanimous concern for the availability of affordable and accessible housing supplies, in particular rural, sustainable, and older peoples' housing³. In short, it makes places better, and helps communities to thrive.

Six key issues have been identified as essential for NP to succeed in delivering better planning outcomes as part of a reformed system, and to make a significant contribution to levelling up the country, driven by empowered communities acting on local priorities:

- Extending participation
- Scope of plans
- Status of plans
- Relationship to other elements of the system
- Process and procedures
- Resourcing & support

Raising the profile of neighbourhood planning in a reformed system in line with these recommendations would deliver on the Government's priorities, while also responding to many of the concerns raised by critics of the original proposals.

¹ Parker, G., Wargent, M., Salter, K., Lynn, T., Dobson, M., Yuille, A., & Bowden, C. (2020). *Impacts of Neighbourhood Planning in England*. MHCLG.

² Brownill, S. & Bradley, Q. (eds.) (2017) *Localism and Neighbourhood Planning: Power to the People?* Policy Press.

³ Field, M., & Layard, A. (2017). Locating community-led housing within neighbourhood plans as a response to England's housing needs. *Public Money & Management*, 37(2), 105-112.

1. Extending participation

- a) There is an urgent need to enable more urban and deprived communities to take up NP. Additional funding for deprived areas already committed by Government should be expanded to establish a capacity-building stage for groups in these areas, alongside other interventions from central and local government to assist the establishment and operation of Forums (e.g. a programme to engage communities in the most deprived areas, and live GIS data to show uptake against IMD figures). There is also a need to deepen and widen participation where NP does take place, e.g. engaging younger people and tenants. Failure to address these issues risks further entrenchment of existing inequalities and would conflict with the levelling up agenda.
- b) The onerous nature of NP stretches the limits of what can be expected from volunteers, especially in areas where there is limited history of engagement in community wide initiatives (which tend to be less affluent and more deprived areas). There should be a review of how the 'burdens' of NP can be more evenly distributed across the actors involved: communities, LPAs, consultants, support agencies (including NGOs and community-based organisations), and national government.
- c) New mechanisms should be developed to enable Neighbourhood Forums to become established as civil society organisations on a more permanent basis.

2. Scope

- a) Design is an important element of NPs, and NP groups should be included in the National Model Design Guide pilot scheme. However, to realise the full benefits of NP and to motivate communities to undertake it, NP will need to cover the full range of planning issues, in a way which fits seamlessly with reformed local plans. E.g. NPs should be able to:
 - i. make decisions about land use, i.e. allocate land for development and protection. If the zoning proposals are progressed, NPs in protected areas should be able to zone / allocate land for growth / renewal to meet community needs such as affordable housing. NPs in renewal or growth areas should be able to designate local green spaces for protection.
 - ii. specify criteria and development management policies that add value by tailoring development requirements to specific local needs and circumstances.
 - iii. reflect the holistic spatial vision of the community, not be limited to housing or design.
- b) NP's role in catalysing and coordinating other placemaking activities and community action (in particular in urban areas where there is often no existing loci for place-based community action) and the positive outcomes of these actions should be recognised, and *either* incorporated more fully into the formal role of NPs, *or* parallel routes developed, resourced, and supported.
- c) The potential for implementing wider national policy agendas in alignment with local spatial priorities should be recognised and encouraged (e.g. delivering low traffic neighbourhoods; improving public health; identifying capacity for and bringing forward renewable energy projects and other local climate mitigation and adaptation policies or projects). The unique position of NPs in civil society and their potential to foster informed public consent for the radical changes needed in response to the climate crisis should be acknowledged and developed.

3. Status

- a) Communities need to be confident that the statutory elements of their Plans will be given full weight in decision-making for a substantial period of time after they are made. Guidance and support should be provided to help NP groups monitor and update plans to ensure that they do not become out of date. Retaining status as a part of the statutory Development Plan is vital.
- b) The principle of subsidiarity should apply: all decisions that are capable of being made at a neighbourhood level should be taken at that level, while recognising the need for strategic policy to be co-produced on a larger scale and with full involvement of the wider community.
- c) Policies, allocations and designations in existing NPs should be given full weight during the transition to a reformed system, while both national policy and Local Plans are revised, with clear guidance and support from Government on updating them to comply with the new system.
- d) Tensions were recognised between the need for robust NPs that can withstand legal challenge and the desire for easier, simpler, quicker processes that are less burdensome and can more fully express community ambitions and experience. These will need to be addressed as the policy framework is developed further.

4. Relationship to other elements of the system

- a) NP is an important element of public engagement with the planning system. A democratically accountable system must also have a wider participatory ethos running throughout it.
 - i. There should be statutory requirements for meaningful community engagement during Local and Neighbourhood Plan-making, at the point of decision-making on individual proposals, and at intermediate stages (e.g. through masterplanning, LDOs, supplementary planning documents, pre-application discussions). In some cases an NP Group may provide a locus for this. If the zoning proposals are taken forwards this principle would apply across all zones, commensurate with the different consenting regimes.
 - ii. LPA Statements of Community Involvement should set out how communities will be engaged at each of these stages of LPA plan-making and decision-taking, including the support that will be provided for NP. The robustness of community engagement in and beyond Local Plan-making, and the treatment of NP, should be integral to whether a Plan is considered to be sound.
- b) If the proposals for zoning are taken forwards, NPs in different zones would have different roles and functions commensurate with the different consenting regimes. These should be clearly established in national policy. NPs are unlikely to be wholly contained within a single growth zone, but growth zones may constitute part of their designated areas. In relation to each zone, NPs should be able to engage with the full range of planning matters, in support of local strategic planning and other objectives, e.g. Local Nature Recovery Strategies.
- c) NP Groups / NPs should have a relation of mutual influence with Local Plans. As well as NPs supporting the strategic aims of national and local policy, the allocations, designations and policies in NPs should inform the preparation of Local Plans. NP Groups should work with LPAs on site identification / fine-grained zone boundary setting, criteria / requirements for development and/or locally-specific development management policies.

- d) As the Government's flagship community-led placemaking initiative, NP should be better connected to other policy agendas such as community rights, levelling up, building back better, local recovery and devolution, recovering nature, decarbonisation and climate adaptation. It should be linked into mechanisms for setting up Community Land Trusts and Development Trusts. NP should be promoted as a vehicle to link up with, leverage and steer funding from the Community Ownership Fund, the Levelling Up Fund, the Towns Fund, the Community Housing Fund, the Big Lottery Fund, and other place-based and regeneration funding streams (including in support of CLTs and DTs), as well as guiding LPA spending and use of the proposed Consolidated Infrastructure Levy (CIL) in the area. Neighbourhood Forums should have a more direct say over CIL spending priorities.
- e) The systemic shift away from a plan-led system (through the extension of Permitted Development Rights and the increasing range of circumstances in which Plan policies are afforded only limited weight) should be reversed, ensuring the genuine primacy of the Development Plan in shaping and guiding development. The opportunity for proper public scrutiny at the point of decision-making should be guaranteed, to ensure public trust that the democratically-agreed stipulations of the Development Plan are being properly adhered to.

5. Process

- a) Introduce an initial discovery or 'triage' process for groups considering NP to discuss options (NP or other forms of community action), decide the most appropriate route, and signpost to sources of support and guidance. This should be led by LPAs and/or community development organisations that are properly resourced and skilled for the task, with input from qualified planners, and with clearly defined roles as part of a wider programme of promoting NP. This should help to bring groups forward, not be a barrier to participation, but ensure that community effort is most effectively directed. The final decision should remain that of the Qualifying Body.
- b) The volunteer-led nature of NP and the extensive community engagement on which it is premised must be recognised when determining the timescales on which NPs should be prepared and updated. While there are clear advantages to synchronising with Local Plan production timescales, NP groups which do not do this should not be penalised, and NPs should not be automatically considered out-of-date when a new / revised Local Plan is published.
- c) Reviewing and updating plans needs to be easier and quicker, with communities offered continued support and guidance – this should be made a much more straightforward and streamlined process than initial plan preparation.
- d) Increased use of digital technologies needs to enhance and complement, not substitute for, other forms of engagement. There is particular scope for digital technologies (e.g. map-based and mobile) to better capture community knowledge and experience of place.
- e) Accurate and up-to-date information should be used to help inform the development and review of NPs, incorporating evidence from the LPA and other established sources, and bespoke evidence generated from within the neighbourhood and engaging the whole community.
- f) The policy and support frameworks for NP should ensure that creative and innovative community approaches are able to flourish; that productive differences between communities are not flattened by a one-size-fits-all approach; and that a better balance between the expertise of professional planners and the local knowledge and experience of communities is achieved.

6. Resourcing / support

- a) LPAs need to have a more highly-specified 'duty to support' NP development and be adequately resourced upfront (before designation of NP areas) to fulfil it, with NP mainstreamed as a core function of all LPAs. One of the main determinants of take up of NP is the approach of the LPA.
- b) Funding and support for NP needs reviewing, with stakeholder input, to ensure that best value is achieved and that support can be readily tailored to the specific needs of individual groups and areas. This may include more diverse third-party support for NP (and for participation more widely) from NGOs, community-based organisations and smaller consultancies.
- c) Resourcing and support for the continued engagement beyond plan-making of NP groups, particularly Forums, (e.g. in masterplanning and pre-application discussions, reviewing and updating plans, and co-ordinating wider place-making projects) also needs to be considered.
- d) Clear success criteria for NP should be drawn up, in consultation with stakeholders, and measures developed to assess its social value (including impacts on planning outcomes and community impacts) beyond a reliance on simplistic metrics such as numbers of plans produced or additional housing land allocated.

Participating organisations and researchers

This briefing has drawn on the extensive experience and expertise of the following organisations and academics. However, it does not necessarily represent a formally agreed policy position for participating organisations.

Organisations

- ACRE
- Centre for Sustainable Energy
- Civic Voice
- CPRE
- Green Alliance
- Groundwork
- Living Streets
- Locality
- National Association of Local Councils
- Neighbourhood Planners.London
- North West Neighbourhood Planning Network
- Open Spaces Society
- RTP1 / Planning Aid England
- Rural Housing Alliance
- Wildlife & Countryside Link

Academics

- Dr Quintin Bradley (Leeds Beckett)
- Professor Sue Brownill (Oxford Brookes)
- Dr Mark Dobson (Reading)
- Professor Simin Davoudi (Newcastle)
- Professor Gavin Parker (Reading)
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