

Neighbourhood planning – a new horizon for who decides where we live next

The geography of future development results as much from collective as well as individual decisions. A family moving for work or a young adult deciding where to rent chooses where to live based on the availability of homes, transport, green spaces, shops and jobs as well as family and friendship networks. This availability is in turn an outcome of prior decisions over real estate investment and the planning of future land use made by private firms and public authorities.

This paper explores some of the power shifts in the way decisions are being made over where we live and the places we create. It focuses on the role of local government in the regulation of development through land use planning and the rise of neighbourhood planning in pioneering a new approach to local governance and participative democracy, especially in cities. There are lessons to learn for others looking to develop community-led governance and policy making.

The rise of neighbourhood planning

Neighbourhood planning was introduced in England by the Localism Act 2010. It provides a right for local communities to produce planning policies and allocate sites and buildings for development or conservation in their local area. These carry the same legal weight as those prepared by local planning authorities. Neighbourhood plans are prepared by town or parish councils where they exist or by neighbourhood forums which need to be set up for the role. This independence and legal weight distinguishes English neighbourhood planning from Place Plans in Wales and no equivalent approach exists in Scotland. The geographical area and, where needed, the neighbourhood forum is approved by the local planning authority. Neighbourhood plans need to be based on clear evidence and sound consultation and are subject to an independent examination of whether they meet a set of “basic conditions”, including a need to fit in with existing national and strategic planning policy. They must take a “positive” approach and are brought into force by a majority vote at a public referendum.

In its first decade neighbourhood planning has been taken up by nearly 3,000 communities and there are over 1,300 completed plans. Three quarters of local authorities in England have a neighbourhood plan in their area and only eight have failed at referendum. The average vote has been 88% support for a plan and average turnout stands alongside that for local council elections at 33%. Neighbourhood plans are directly influencing the location and design of new housing, protecting green space and heritage, revitalising high streets and bringing people together to shape the future of their area. This is the essence of local community place-making. They have been tested in planning appeals and in the Courts and are pioneering a different democratic mandate for the decisions over where and how we live and the places we create.

There is a growing research base on the nature, growth and impact of neighbourhood planning [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. It shows neighbourhood planning relevant to a wide range of public policy priorities and one which is improving local engagement, allocating more land for building than in Local Plans, improving design policy and making development sites more acceptable to local people.

Models of democracy

The democratic basis of planning decisions is on the face of it a very simple one. Individuals elect representatives who make decisions on which they are judged at the next election. For planning this

means local councillors being organised into committees and informed by professional officers when decisions on planning policies and development proposals are made.

The reality is much more complex than this. Many decisions are delegated to professionals and other voices are also required to be heard through a plethora of requirements to “consult”. Decisions need to fit in with higher order ones made by other elected institutions and a variety of appeal rights and the rule of law hold things together. Yet the principle of “representation” remains constant and underpins the planning system.

Neighbourhood planning provides a challenge to this model. It draws on participative and direct models of democracy and shifts power from local councils to local citizens. Where it is undertaken by neighbourhood forums the community takes the lead in deciding on future policy and provides a direct mandate through a public vote at referendum.

This challenge is the direct intention of public policy. Ministers spoke of the “*power shift*” and the “*right for communities to take back control*” when announcing the birth of neighbourhood planning in MHCLG’s news release of 6 March 2012. Political priorities spoke of the need for planning to be done “with” and not “to” communities. Resonant evidence of why change was needed came in 2019 when research by Grosvenor found that just two per cent of the public trust developers and only seven per cent have faith in local authorities when it comes to planning for large-scale development [7].

From this perspective neighbourhood planning is much more than a new way to make very local planning policy. It is a new way to exercise power in place making, a pioneer of “everyday democracy” [8] and part of the rise of “*collaborative, caring, creative Citizens who can shape our communities, organisations, and nations for the better*” [9]. New Local speaks of a “community paradigm” [10] drawing on the ambition and thinking of political economist Elinor Ostrom who was awarded the Nobel Prize for her work demonstrating that everyday people are capable of creating rules and institutions that allow for the sustainable and equitable management of shared resources [11].

We can consider this far reaching impact of neighbourhood planning within the Three Horizons framework supported by the International Futures Forum [12]:

First horizon – today’s dominant system, business as usual

Third horizon – long term successor to business as usual, moving from the fringe as it turns out to be much better

Second horizon – exists between the first and third horizon, an area of transition and innovation where some is absorbed back into the first horizon and some paves the way for new approaches

Neighbourhood planning is very much part of the second horizon. It is a source of disruption and innovation and we stand at the cusp of discovering whether it will be absorbed back into conventional representative ways of making planning decisions and creating places or if it will help to pioneer a new and more participative approach.

Local London

London provides one of the best illustrations of how neighbourhood planning is reshaping the way land use decisions are made. The city has one of the most complex real estate markets in the world and a very diverse (though generally impressively cohesive) population. However, the absence of town or parish councils that would normally prepare a neighbourhood plan means neighbourhoods in London must set up a new community organisation (the neighbourhood forum) to prepare the plan instead.

London is where the country's strongest neighbourhood planning network has developed, with the establishment of volunteer-led Neighbourhood Planners. London in 2016. In 2019 it reported over 120 communities have explored the concept, with 79 neighbourhood forums designated [13]. By 2022 London has 26 completed neighbourhood plans and this number is accelerating. Plans have been runaway successes at referendum. London has also led the preparation of plans for business neighbourhoods such as Ealing and Soho where separate referendums of businesses and local residents take place and a high level of collaboration between residents and business is needed.

It is, however, taking more than four years on average for forums to take a plan from designation to referendum. Some plans have taken eight years to prepare. A growing number of forums are becoming stuck after designation, and the number of new forums coming on stream has declined from a peak of 18 to a small handful each year. Nine boroughs are described as neighbourhood planning "deserts" with no designated neighbourhood forums despite efforts to have several designated.

The geography of neighbourhood planning in the capital presents a complex picture. There is no clear correlation with levels of deprivation, home ownership or borough politics. Neighbourhood plans are being prepared by areas that are less well advantaged, as well as the likes of Mayfair and Knightsbridge [14]. Camden and Westminster make up a majority of completed plans but they are being prepared in all corners of the capital.

New horizons

The experience of neighbourhood planning in London is a proving ground for whether the legal right to neighbourhood plan will challenge the first horizon of local authority-led planning, creating a second horizon which test the opportunity for a new community-led mandate or establishing a third horizon which secures lasting change.

Centre for London finds that *"The implicit 'licence to operate' from communities on which developers depend looks increasingly vulnerable, as community concerns about new development intensify"* [15] and yet Neighbourhood Planners. London's research programme reveals a host of unnecessary obstacles and a lack of support from established institutions.

A 2016 report showed that virtually no boroughs address the additional Community Infrastructure Levy available to areas with a neighbourhood plan [16]. A survey of borough Local Plans in 2017 showed that only five gave serious attention to neighbourhood planning [17]. A 2018 report concluded that only one borough (Lambeth) was meeting legal requirements to set out in its Statement of Community Involvement how neighbourhood planning would be supported [18]. A 2021 report revealed it was becoming ever harder to designate a neighbourhood forum and area

with an inconsistent approach by boroughs and examples of excessive demands and misinformation [19].

Mayor Khan's London Plan started life describing a "two tier" planning system operating in the capital, apparently oblivious to the growth of neighbourhood plans until objections were raised by the growing number of neighbourhood planners [20].

In 2018, the Commission on the Future of Localism – chaired by former Head of the Civil Service, Lord Kerslake – identified in some depth what the public see as "*the blockages and frustrations for the expression of community power*", including "*top-down decision making*" and "*lack of trust and risk aversion*" [21]. Neighbourhood planning is a case in point.

With some exceptions, neighbourhood planning volunteers giving evidence to the Greater London Assembly's Planning Committee inquiry into neighbourhood planning reported a reluctance to engage with neighbourhood planning on the part of planning professionals and local councillors. In many areas there was clear evidence of minimal or misinformation being given, and in a large minority of cases there was active hostility. Planning professionals can appear threatened by lay community planners, and many councillors appear challenged by the growth of participatory democracy alongside representative democracy. The Committee concluded that "*more support is needed to increase the level of neighbourhood planning and meet the core objectives of dispersing power and influence more widely*" [22]. Mayor Khan has not acted on the recommendations.

There is further evidence of problems. Neighbourhood forums have been prevented from operating in key locations such as Elephant and Castle and Old Oak and Park Royal by local planning authorities amending the boundary of neighbourhood areas put forward by local communities. Merton Council turned down an application for a neighbourhood forum in Wimbledon despite an unprecedented 1,100 expressions of support during public consultation. In other locations, boroughs have spent more than the costs of a neighbourhood plan on developing alternative approaches which they control, such as Area Action Plans or consultant-led evidence for place policies in Local Plans. Some authorities are pushing the limits of the legal timescales within which they must make decisions on key stages of the neighbourhood planning process. Others question the representativeness of neighbourhood forums or the legitimacy of their community engagement, even where their own arrangements are open to critical review. In Mill Hill and Deptford years of community investment in neighbourhood planning was brought to a halt by the local planning authority failing to renew the Forum's five year term. In Deptford this was despite significant financial support from the Government for its work on design. Volunteer neighbourhood planners describe a "*conspiracy of silence*" [23] from politicians and policymakers – with ever-greater emphasis placed on the importance of community engagement, yet a refusal to seize the potential of neighbourhood planning as a ready-made means to bring this to life.

This mixed experience extends to the way central Government has addressed neighbourhood planning in its planning reforms. Ministers wish a planning system where "*ultimately the community has a role in determining what is right*" [24] and of the need for more urban neighbourhood plans yet uncertainty remains over the future of the vital support grant on which so many neighbourhood planning volunteers depends. The Government is also piloting a new "*simpler approach to neighbourhood planning*" [25] by funding local planning authorities and not communities. This

bypasses two key principles on which neighbourhood planning is based – planning as a community right and equality of legal weight with local authority plans. New “neighbourhood priorities statements” are being proposed by the Government which can be used by local communities to inform local planning authority Local Plans. It remains unclear whether local planning authorities will take heed of these new statements and whether they will be seen as additional to or a replacement for neighbourhood plans in some areas.

Pioneering change

It is apparent that strong forces are pulling neighbourhood planning back to that first horizon of business as usual planning where decisions are made by elected representatives. Yet there is also evidence of neighbourhood planning pioneering new approaches, pushing towards the third horizon and tackling problems and issues not well addressed by business as usual.

Government planning reforms promise “*world class civic engagement*” and intend that “*local councils should radically and profoundly re-invent the ambition, depth and breadth with which they engage with communities as they consult on Local Plans. Our reforms will democratise the planning process by putting a new emphasis on engagement at the plan-making stage*” [26] but there is limited evidence that reforms will come from within existing government arrangements.

Such a radical re-invention can learn lessons from the best of neighbourhood planning and the way it can provide a refreshing alternative to the complex, text heavy, jargon ridden, turgid, legalistic, remote, slow and inaccessible approaches run by so many local planning authorities. The ways in which the best neighbourhood plans are prepared are:

- Simple to navigate
- Highly visual
- Iterative
- Responsive to rapid changes in the planning context
- Local
- Relevant to lives
- Face to face
- Using accessible language

It already offers a path for other parts of the local authority-led planning system to follow.

There are other positive signs that neighbourhood planning in cities can bring about change that stands the test of time. It is already demonstrating its value on some of the crunchiest planning issues of our time:

1. **Community consent** – London’s accommodation of eye-watering levels of housing development without spreading outwards will require the controversial transformation of many existing residential areas. Neighbourhood planning can secure the community consent on which development ultimately depends. On a broader front the evidence from a review of 135 neighbourhood plans showed they allocate land for 18,000 more homes than in Local Plan allocations [5].

2. **Small sites** – National planning policy now puts great weight on the importance of small sites for housing land supply. Neighbourhood plans such as those for Highgate and St Quintin and Woodlands in London have identified small sites missed by boroughs and brought them forward more quickly for development.
3. **Protecting what’s special** – In the balance between accommodating development and respecting quality of life, neighbourhood plans can lead the way in protecting what matters most to local people – including local green spaces, community assets, heritage character and key views.
4. **Changing work patterns** – As the demand for new and flexible working practices grows, neighbourhood planning is well positioned to provide flexibility at the very local level of the individual street or small employment area
5. **Quality design** – In response to the growing focus on beauty and quality design and architecture, neighbourhood planning is often more able to reflect community views and introduce design codes and policies that help create great places
6. **Estate redevelopment** – With growing disquiet over plans for “estate regeneration” and expectations of residents’ ballots, neighbourhood plans can provide a way of achieving planned change with express community consent.
7. **Added resources** – With local authorities saying they lack the resources to undertake the additional workloads envisaged by planning reforms, neighbourhood planning can bring additional planning resources at low cost. Volunteers with relevant backgrounds and expertise contribute because they care deeply about their local neighbourhood and its future.
8. **Early involvement** – With declining levels of community trust in local planning authorities and developers, neighbourhood planning can make a reality of public involvement at the earliest stages of new developments, bringing principles of community engagement, collaboration and co-design to life.
9. **Delivering early innovation** – The flexibility and responsiveness of neighbourhood planning can support new and emergent planning policy on issues as divergent as air pollution, local homes, overheating and the Sustainable Development Goals.
10. **Addressing uncertainty** – In an increasingly uncertain world, major infrastructure projects may stall or fail to attract government funding, while landowner decisions may change. In view of these and similar possibilities, there is scope to exploit the speed and responsiveness that the neighbourhood planning framework allows (when not obstructed). Strategic plans, such as the London Plan and many Local Plans provide a “Plan A” running to hundreds of pages premised on optimistic assumptions about the future. As well as helping to deliver this, neighbourhood plans can help to provide a bespoke “Plan B” where events do not unfold as hoped or expected.

Neighbourhood planning is also beginning to raise questions about the lack of neighbourhood-level governance in London. As boroughs increasingly share services and merge functions, the clamour

for a more local voice is growing. Following the successful establishment of Queen's Park Community Council in 2012, which completed its neighbourhood plan in 2021, other communities are looking at the potential of this new form of local democracy. The process for establishing a town/parish council is made easier where a neighbourhood plan has been prepared, and so it is no surprise that some of the early interest coincided with neighbourhood forums in Spitalfields and Central Ealing.

Policy priorities

The experience of the first ten years of neighbourhood planning provides lessons for how it can be developed and strengthened.

First, there is a clear need for more and better financial and technical support to community volunteers. More public money for neighbourhood planning goes to local planning authorities in London than to the neighbourhood forums which prepare the plans. Research by Neighbourhood Planners.London has shown local planning authorities in the capital receive over 56% more funding than the neighbourhood forums who actually undertake the bulk of the work in producing neighbourhood plans [27]. Since 2012-13 London's local planning authorities have received £1.52m from central Government to support neighbourhood planning. By contrast London's neighbourhood forums have received just £970,366. Camden (£220k) and Westminster (£310k) alone have received more than half the funding of all neighbourhood forums. This needs to change and more peer-to-peer support would also make a significant impact.

Second, the barriers to effective neighbourhood planning need to be removed. This could include additional time limits for decisions by local planning authorities at key stages in the plan making and a stronger legal duty for them to support neighbourhood planning in their area. Communities would benefit from a right of independent appeal where progress on their plan is blocked by their local planning authority. It should be easier to designate a forum and area and to renew their term.

Third, the culture change in planning envisaged by public policy should extend to professional and local political attitudes to neighbourhood planning. First horizon, representative thinking is disrupted by the power of participative democracy and more needs to be done to embrace rather than resist the change that follows.

Neighbourhood governance

Neighbourhood planning is pioneering local level governance at the scale where communities self-identify with the place where they live. As a voluntary initiative and despite profound challenges it has proved a remarkable success, stimulating action in nearly 3,000 communities and delivering new legally binding land use planning policies in nearly half of them. Yet the biggest impact of neighbourhood planning is often seen not just in the formality of planning decisions but in the catalyst it provides for strengthening community confidence and initiative. Time and again neighbourhood planning brings communities together in shared endeavour, envisioning a different future for their local place and putting in train multiple initiatives which respond to local priorities.

As an exercise in neighbourhood decision making neighbourhood planning has moved well beyond proof of concept and demonstrated the potential of community-led place based approaches to governance. Official thinking is already moving towards "*making it easier for local people and community groups to come together to set local priorities and shape their neighbourhoods*" and a

“review of neighbourhood governance” [28] is underway. Neighbourhood planning is showing the way.

There are broader lessons to learn from the neighbourhood planning experience about how community-led governance and policy making can best flourish. Three of the most important are:

- **Transfer true power** – community-led planning initiatives have been around for many decades and well before neighbourhood planning began in 2010. Parish plans provide one leading example. Their take up was mixed and their impact limited. Neighbourhood planning is different. A neighbourhood plan carries legal weight when making planning decision and it exercises real power over future development. It is clear that communities know this and it is vital to securing their long term, voluntary, commitment. It is also clear that not all communities wish to take up this power. Communities will respond best when meaningful power is transferred to them at a neighbourhood level and it is their optional right to exercise it
- **Tackle inertia** – disrupting the status quo and transferring power is rarely possible without tackling those who benefit from business as usual. A combination of legislative tools and cultural change is needed. With neighbourhood planning legal time limits have been set for local planning authorities making key decisions and Ministers have spoken out strongly about the benefits neighbourhood planning can bring. Significant change requires strong leadership. Breaking down these cultural barriers remains challenging and there is work still to be done
- **Provide support** – neighbourhood planning is completely dependent on the formal and informal support that has developed around it. The Government funded support programme has been vital and highly cost effective. As important has been the ability of the neighbourhood planning community to help itself, build networks and offer practical and moral support. Neighbourhood planners are now part of a movement for change. Support and peer-to-peer learning should be built into the design of community-led governance from the start.

Bibliography

- 9 Alexander, J., & Conrad, A. (2022). *Citizens*.
2. Bradley, Q. (2017). Neighbourhood planning and the impact of place identity on housing development in England. *Planning Theory and Practice*.
- 23 Burton, T. (2019). Managing growth: The role of neighbourhoods in London’s planning process. *Act Local: Empowering London's neighbourhoods*. Centre for London.
- 15 Centre for London. (2019). *Developing Trust*.
- 8 Demos. (2005). *Everyday Democracy*.
- 28 DLUHC. (2022). *Levelling Up the United Kingdom*.
- 25 DLUHC. (2022). *Urban and deprived areas among those chosen for planning pilots*.

- 22 GLA Planning Committee. (2020). *Neighbourhood planning - progress and insights*.
- 24 Gove, M. (2021). House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee.
- 7 Grosvenor. (2019). *Rebuilding Trust*.
- 21 Locality. (2018). *People Power - Findings from the Commission on the Future of Localism*.
- 26 MHCLG. (2020). *Planning for the future*.
- 3 NALC. (2018). *Where next for Neighbourhood Plans?*
- 16 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2016). *Neighbourhood element of the Community Infrastructure Levy - the London experience*.
- 17 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2017). *London's Local Plans - are they supporting neighbourhood planning?*
- 18 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2018). *Statements of Community Involvement - are London's working for neighbourhood planning?*
- 20 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2018). *The New London Plan - why so little support for neighbourhood planning?*
- 14 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2019). *Neighbourhood Planning in London - investigating its potential in areas experiencing high levels of deprivation*.
- 13 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2019). *State of Neighbourhood Planning in London*.
- 19 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2021). *Designation decisions - London's neighbourhood planning experience*.
- 27 Neighbourhood Planners.London. (2022). *State of Neighbourhood Planning in London - 2022*.
- 10 New Local. (2021). *Community Paradigm*.
- 11 Ostrom, E. (1990). *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*.
- 1 Parker, G., & Salter, K. (2016). *Five years of Neighbourhood Planning - a review of take up and distribution*. Town and Country Planning.
- 12 Sharpe, B. (2020). *Three Horizons - the patterning of hope*.
- 5 University of Reading. (2020). *Impact of Neighbourhood Planning in England*.
- 4 Wargent, M., & Parker, G. (2018). *Reimagining neighbourhood governance: the future of neighbourhood planning in England*. Town Planning Review.
- 6 Yuille, A. (2021). *Neighbourhood planning: unlocking community empowerment to level up a reformed planning system*.

Tony Burton CBE is a community activist and neighbourhood planning practitioner with a background in environmental and community charities and campaigns

@Tony4Place

tony@tonyburton.org.uk